Barkin, Janna. (2017). He's Always Been My Son: A Mother's Story About Raising Her Transgender Son. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Reviewed by: Kate Spink, MacEwan University

Janna Barkin's book, "He's Always Been my Son: A Mother's Story about Raising her Transgender Son" is a memoir that brings light to the topic of gender in regards to family relations. The book follows the journey of a family's experiences with the upbringing of Amaya Barkin, their transgender son. According to Barkin, one in every 200 people in the United States identifies themselves as transgender, and Amaya a transgender male, is one of them (p. 75). From birth to adulthood, the book, told through the personal experiences of Amaya's loved ones, follows Amaya's life from birth to adulthood and the transition from female to male. Barkin's book aims to educate, support, inspire and celebrate, through the exploration of two themes: (1) challenges faced by transgender people and their families; and (2) the role that family plays in gender.

In the book's introduction, the word transgender is defined by Barkin as a term "used to refer to someone whose gender identity is the opposite of their natal sex..." (p. 19). Barkin brings light to the many challenges' individuals face (like her son) whose gender identity does not align with their sex at birth. Throughout the book, the most significant recurring challenge faced by transgender people is acceptance. Transgender individuals face the challenges of acceptance within their community/peers, family, and most importantly themselves.

Barkin describes numerous situations where her son Amaya faced these challenges. One

specific challenge Amaya faced concerning community/peer acceptance was bathroom use at school during his transition. According to Barkin:

Because he [Amaya] looked like a boy, it was challenging for him to use the female bathroom or locker rooms without being noticed. Though he had been using male restrooms outside of school for a few months now, he was not ready to make that shift at school. I think it was very overwhelming and scary to him. He had known many of the kids in his school for so long, and he just didn't want to be judged, or made fun of, or to have to deal with whatever other reactions people might have in response to him using the male facilities (p. 162).

Expanding on the challenge associated with washroom use, Barkin points out that the possibility of confrontation, embarrassment, harm, and harassment from lack of community/peer acceptance often causes transgender individuals to avoid public washroom use (p. 158).

When discussing the challenges regarding family acceptance, the writer expresses certain times during Amaya's transition where she wishes she had been more accepting and understanding towards her child. In her memoir, Barkin mentions that she should have been more accepting as a mother when Amaya was three years old and was corrected by her after saying that he wishes to be a grampa. Barkin believes that if she had handled that situation more appropriately, it could have created one less challenge for Amaya to have faced.

Self-acceptance typically causes challenges for transgender individuals and creates dysphoria, depression, and anxiety. Gender dysphoria, as defined by Barkin is, "A profound, persistent state of unease or dissatisfaction, anxiety, or depression that occurs when a person's internal sense of who they are does not align with the sex assigned at birth..." (p. 22). According

to Barkin, gender dysphoria is a widespread experience for transgender people, which can be experienced at different levels or degrees over time (p. 104). She also goes on to describe dysphoria as typically presenting in layers, where an individual resolves one layer of dysphoria and others may be revealed (p. 104).

As most families want the best for their family members, the challenges mentioned above can be a challenge for the families of transgender individuals. Throughout the book, Barkin, and other members of Amaya's family, expressed stress regarding the challenges that he faced... "It's very painful for a parent to watch one's child struggle and not know how to make it better" (p. 119). Also, some families have trouble accepting their transgender children. Families of transgender individuals are sometimes prevented from acceptance because of gender norms and/or religious beliefs. Another challenge that families of transgender individuals may face is confusion. This sense of confusion may be caused by a lack of knowledge or understanding. At many points throughout her memoir, Barkin expresses her feelings of confusion.

The exploration of the role that a family plays in gender identification is also a recurring theme throughout the book. Barkin introduces her audience to three components of gender:

(1) Gender biology: What we typically mean when we use the term "sex" to describe the gender of the newborn. Body parts, DNA, chromosomes, hormones, brain functions; the body a person is born with... (2) Gender expression: The way one presents to the outside world. This includes choices in clothes, style, hair, activities, communication style. (3) Gender identity: A person's deeply-felt inner sense of who they are (p. 18).

Barkin questioned her role as a parent in regards to Amaya's gender at many points throughout the

earlier sections of the book. Barkin described situations such as correcting people when they referred to Amaya as a boy. She stated this was because she and her husband Gabriel did not understand their role as parents in regards to Amaya's gender and did not understand the three components to gender (p. 72). At the time Barkin did not realize that when people were referring to Amaya as a boy, they were right in regards to Amaya's gender expression and identity (p. 72). At that time, Barkin and Gabriel did not understand there was more to Amaya's gender than just gender biology and she felt that her role as a mother was to correct people who mistook him for a boy (p. 72). According to Barkin:

As parents, we often feel it is our job, our role, to tell a child who they are and how they should behave. 'You are a boy.' 'You are a girl.' 'You are smart.' 'You are pretty.' 'You are athletic.' Whatever the words, what we say to our children about who we think they should be has a great impact on their developing sense of self. What if, instead of telling my child he could pretend to be a grampa, I had said, 'You can be whoever you want to be,' and left it at that? Perhaps he would have continued to tell me he was a boy, rather than internalizing the budding sense of knowing. Perhaps he would not have had to go through some of the inner confusion that contributed to his depression during his tween years later on (p. 71).

Barkin eventually learned the three components of gender and was able to understand the role of a family member is to provide support. Barkin demonstrates the importance of a family's role of providing support when stating: "A 2012 survey of transgender youth, conducted by Ontario Canada's Trans Pulse, revealed that the number one factor trans kids feel leads to their happiness and self-acceptance is parental support..." (p. 120). The role that any parent should play in their child's life is to love, accept, support and empathize despite any individual differences, as "being transgender is just one more beautiful normal variation of being human" (p. 14).

After reading Janna Barkin's book, "He's Always Been my Son: A Mother's Story about Raising her Transgender Son" it is quite clear that sociology and psychology disciplines will benefit from reading it. Her memoir does an excellent job at reaching the academic audience of sociologists and psychologists, specifically the fields that specialize in family, sexuality/gender, or mental health. Barkin's book should not be limited to only these academic disciplines, as it can provide important takeaways to anyone who reads it, including LGBTQ+ individuals and the families of LGBTQ+ individuals. Within the book's introduction, Barkin states the purpose of her book is: "to educate, support, inspire and celebrate" (p. 16). After reading "He's Always Been my Son: A Mother's Story about Raising her Transgender Son" Barkin can be assured she was able to educate, support, inspire and celebrate. Barkin's memoir was emotional, engaging, informative and overall an excellent read that every person should read at least once in their lives.