
Understanding Transgender People and the Discrimination They Face Today

In recent years, a group of people have garnered more mainstream attention and while society has more or less been understanding, they are still met with ridicule and a general lack of understanding or refusal to understand. These people I'm talking about are transgender people. Today I will discuss what it means to be transgender, the discrimination they face today, and how our language affects discourse relating to transgender people. My hope is that this will help you get a better understanding of transgender people and how gender and biological sex is viewed in order to better accept transgender people and sympathize with what they may experience in life.

First of all, while I disagree with some of the language used in the article entitled "Transgender People" published in 2015 in the Opposing Viewpoints Online collection, I will admit that the general understanding of trans people are somewhat similar to this. To quote the article, "Transgender people identify themselves as being members of a gender that is different from their birth biology." The article goes on to elaborate that "biological" women who identify as men are trans men and "biological" men who identify as women are trans women. Transgender as a term in itself is basically an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth, according to "What Does It Mean to Be Transgender?" published in 2015 by the American Psychological Association. This article also goes further into detail about how it's actually your sex is assigned at birth, referring to your biological status as either male or female and is associated primarily with physical attributes such as chromosomes, hormone prevalence, and external and internal anatomy. However, gender is actually a social construct referring to gender roles, behaviors, activities, and other characteristics that a given society might deem appropriate for boys and men or girls and women which influence the ways that people act, interact, and feel about themselves. I will address why I disagree with some of this language later on, but for now hopefully you have a tentative grasp on the general understanding of what transgender is in today's society.

Moving onto the discrimination transgender people face today. According to a graphic published in 2015 by Gale Opposing Viewpoints in Context, a report created by the U.S. Census Bureau used records of changes to first names and sex-coding with the Social Security Administration to create estimates of people who are likely to be transgender and this report actually found that transgender populations tend to be higher in states with laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual identity, such as Washington, Oregon, and Vermont. However, 90% of

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transgender people who were surveyed reported experiencing harassment, mistreatment, or discrimination on the job and 26% percent reported they had lost a job due to being transgender or gender nonconforming. This data was collected by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Apart from workplace discrimination, transgender people still face great amounts of social stigma which has resulted in a body count. According to NPR Weekend All Things Considered published in January of 2015, a study from UCLA found that 41% of transgender people had attempted suicide. Shifting the focus to just young transgender people, more than 50% will have had at least one suicide attempt by their twentieth birthday. In February 2015, a transgender woman by the name of Melonie Rose from Maryland committed suicide at 19 years old after dealing with an already difficult life and emotional problems.

The discrimination Melonie face only served to exacerbate her situation. At her memorial her identity was not even acknowledged and was only known by her friends. Her own family referred to her by her birth name rather than as Melonie and referred to her as a he rather than a she. A similar story, albeit more well known took place in December of 2014 in Ohio. A transgender girl named Leelah Alcorn committed suicide after her Christian parents' 'extremely negative' reactions to her identity and desire to transition since she was designated male at birth. In her suicide note she claims that life isn't worth living because she's transgender and began to suffer from depression when she attempted to come out to her mom at 14 years old to which her mother responded unsupportively. Her parents also began isolating her by taking away her phone and laptop, forbidding her to use social media and see her friends who were aware of Leelah's identity, and taking her to undergo abusive "conversion therapy" in an attempt to convince Leelah she wasn't actually transgender. Her last words were a plea to have gender be taught in schools, to have her death be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide in that year alone, and for someone to look at that number and say there is something very wrong about it.

Finally, she begs for society to just be fixed so another story like hers wouldn't take place. To this day it seems her parents still deny her transgender identity, referring to her as their son and even barred her friends from attending her funeral. While Leelah's story received the most coverage, it actually is not unique. Many young transgender people have been shown to have a tendency towards other mental illnesses brought on by discrimination or through gender dysphoria, basically meaning an extreme unhappiness with the gender role they were assigned at birth and by society and desire to have a body that more matches the gender they identify with. Additionally, family rejection, discrimination, and violence have actually contributed to a large number of transgender and other LGBTQ-identified youth who are homeless in the United States, an estimated 20 to 40% of 1.6 million homeless youth. Many social service and homeless shelters often fail to culturally and appropriately fail to serve transgender homeless people and often deny them shelter based on their gender identity, inappropriate housing them

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in a housing space of the wrong gender, and failing to address issues facing transgender homeless youth and adults. Just before Christmas 2008, the Salvation Army in Austin Texas denied transgender woman Jennifer Gale shelter on the grounds that her genitalia was incongruent with her gender presentation. She was found dead sleeping on a sidewalk outside a shelter run by the Salvation Army due to a heart attack brought on by the unseasonably cold weather reaching near freezing temperatures.

Now that we have two of those points out of the way, I will now address why I disagree with some of the language used in the articles “Transgender People” and “What Does It Mean to Be Transgender?” and discuss how language affects transgender discourse. First of all, these two articles seem to place an emphasis on the idea that there are only two sexes and two genders which not only erase the existence of nonbinary trans people and also intersex people. To elaborate, the idea that there are only two genders is called gender binarism, therefore those who do not fit into either category of male or female, or the gender binary, are said to be nonbinary. Now before you act like nonbinary is some modern, made up online trend or whatever. There have been numerous cultures throughout the world and history that have accepted the idea of a third gender. In south Asian countries including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, there are a group of people called the Hijra that are people who were assigned the male gender at birth but have a very feminine gender expression, in other words they present themselves very femininely but they are recognized as a gender other than female or male.

The Bugis people of Indonesia actually divide their society into five genders which are oroane, men, makkunrai, women, calabai which are comparable to transgender women, calalai which are comparable to transgender men, and bissu. To be considered bissu, all aspects of gender are combined. It's a cultural belief that all five genders must harmoniously coexist. In Japan, the third gender is called X-gender, in China yinyang ren are people who have an equal amount of both feminine and masculine qualities, usually meaning gender nonconforming individuals. In Samoa, there is a subculture called the fa'afafine who were assigned male at birth but do not identify as either male or female, however they dress as women. In Germany, a third gender has actually been recognized on its official documents according to The Humanist in 2014. Even in Native American, First Nations, and Aboriginal culture, there exists the idea of a third gender called “two-spirit”. While the term two-spirit was actually coined in Winnipeg in the late 80s-early 90s, the concept itself has existed for much, much longer according to the article Two spirit in Aboriginal culture published in 2009 in Canadian Dimension. Two-spirit generally comes from the belief that a two-spirit individual has two spirits within them, one male and female and they would often perform the work of both men and women and had relationships with same-sex partners.

Additionally, in many tribes such as the Navajo, Mohave, and Lakota Sioux, two spirit people were highly respected and were believed to possess special spiritual powers according to an

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article entitled “The Native American Traditional of Acceptance” published in 2005. Written in a Liberty Press article in 2010, native cultures and many native nations traditionally have had alternate genders but when Spanish and French missionaries and settlers first encountered these beliefs and practices, they were deemed barbaric and resulted in the deaths of the practitioners because they did not adhere to Judeo-Christian beliefs. This forced the two-spirit movement underground. European contact also led to the decline of the reverence for two spirit people, replacing veneration with European views that homosexuality is sinful and repulsive. So now that leaves the issue of the idea of biological sex. If you take into consideration the existence of intersex humans and hermaphroditic animals in nature such as snails, slugs, barnacles, many families of fish, and some insects one could argue that the idea of biological sex being a strict dichotomy sometimes isn’t all that accurate in the first place.

So what are intersex people though? Simply put, intersex means that a person was born with ambiguous genitalia and an individual may be born with a mix of what are generally considered male and female biological features, according to a Maclean’s article published in May 2003. With this in mind, referring to a trans person as biologically male and biologically female seems not only unnecessary but also invalidating because it still somehow treats their assigned sex with as much importance as one’s gender identity when it is not needed to be noted. Such language also places emphasis on transitioning. To quote a Liberty Press article published in March of 2016, “I believe our language promotes the idea that transgender people go from being male to female...It’s about the way we process our language, subconsciously, “Transition” means that we go from something, to something. When applied to transgender lives, that means we go from male to female.” Or female to male, somewhere in between. This kind of language does not help in discourse pertaining to transgender people because it does not address the issue of gender as a social construct rather it treats being transgender as someone born as a member of a certain sex “trying” to be a member of a different one instead of someone who has found for themselves they are best suited as a member of a certain gender rather than the one assigned to them.

I know I talked about a lot of things and a lot about a very nuanced and complex issue. However, I hope that I have enlightened you a little bit more about transgender people, the struggles they face today, and how to talk about them. And maybe, you will be a bit more understanding and accepting of them.

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