

**Transgender Experiences: Using Media To Highlight the Complexities of Gender**

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### Abstract

The growing visibility of the transgender population acts on and challenges the social-structural constraints of the gender binary. In a culture that subscribes to a gender binary, transgender bodies and transgender expressions exist outside the boundaries created by the binary.

Discrimination, harassment, and violence are used to ensure the maintenance of the gender boundaries. The transgender experience often shines a light on these boundaries and the conflict around them. The primary objective of the project is to show the complexity of gender through the experiences of the transgender individual. The project consists of monthly columns published in two newspapers, blog posts and a video series. The project combines a heuristic inquiry of the author's own experience as a trans man with a meta-analysis of degendering and transgender literature for the methodology.

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### **Transgender Experiences: Using Media to Highlight the Complexities of Gender**

*Time Magazine*'s June 2014 cover read "The Transgender Tipping Point," beginning an onslaught of media coverage about the transgender experience. In April 2015, former Olympian Bruce Jenner revealed he was transgender in an interview with Diane Sawyer (Gachman, 2015). The interview drew nearly 17 million viewers. It generated more tweets than any other Friday telecast, excluding sporting events (Gachman, 2015). The next month London Chanel, a black transgender woman, was stabbed to death in Philadelphia. Her death was added to a growing list of transgender women murdered in 2015. In October 2015, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that he would issue regulations that would prohibit discrimination against transgender people (Ring, 2015). However, the next month in Houston voters defeated a law that would have extended civil rights protections in housing, employment, and public facilities to sexual orientation and gender identity (Ross, 2015). "Right now, we're experiencing a Dickensian time, where it's the best of times and it's the worst of times at once," explained transgender advocate Masen Davis in an interview with *Time Magazine* (Steinmetz, 2015a). While transgender people are experiencing more visibility, they are still experiencing high rates of murder and discrimination.

Gender is a social structure that shapes interactional expectations, institutions, and social groups (Risman, 2004). The growing visibility of the transgender population spotlights the social-structural constraints and complexities of gender. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory argues that people act on social structures as social structures act on people. Transgender and gender-nonconforming people are acting on the social structure of gender by identifying with genders outside their birth assignment.

Limiting socially acceptable gender expression to a binary; e.g., masculinity equals man, femininity equals woman; creates a rigid concept of gender. Transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals challenge the principle of the gender binary by transitioning from one gender to another or not identifying with either gender (Lorber, 2005). Expressing gender outside the binary or outside the birth assigned gender discredits the individual's experience and paints them as someone outside the social norms. Butler (2004) expressed how gender is a crucial component in personhood:

What does gender want? To speak in this way may seem strange, but it becomes less so when we realize that the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms. (p. 2)

As transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals bring their new identities and bodies to social interactions they create new expectations about gender. These interactions and actions act on the gender social structure. The bodies, interactions, and actions of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals often fall outside the social norms.

In a culture that subscribes to a gender binary, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals exist outside the boundaries created by the binary. Violence is sometimes used to ensure the maintenance of these boundaries (Schwalbe et al., 2000). Transgender people experience higher rates of murder than the general population (Grant et al., 2011). By inflicting violence or death on transgender individuals, non-transgender individuals incite fear around not conforming to the binary. Transgender people experience higher rates of poverty, discrimination, and harassment. The National Center for Transgender Equality's survey of transgender

individuals revealed 90% of their respondents experienced harassment or discrimination on the job (Grant et al., 2011). They were twice as likely to be unemployed. Fifty three percent of respondents reported being verbally harassed in public spaces (Grant et al., 2011).

The primary objective of the project is to show the complexity of gender through the experiences of the transgender individual. This project aimed to strengthen one transgender person's narrative through distribution on mass and social media. This project explored activism guided by theory and filtered through a personal lens. The transgender experience is used to show the depth and variety of gender. The project consisted of monthly columns, blog posts, and videos. Each asked the reader or viewer to think beyond the traditional gender markers of male or female.

The columns are published monthly in two Gannett newspapers and on social media accounts. The column was an informative look inside the transgender experience. The author acted as a reference point for readers. The target audience was the average newspaper reader, which is white and educated according to a Pew Research Center survey (2015).

The blogs were published on *The Huffington Post* Queer Voices blogging website, the author's personal website, and social media accounts. The blog was written toward a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) audience. It was intended to give individuals seeking transition advice a broader definition of gender, as well as publish transition stories beyond the before and after transgender narratives.

The videos were published on YouTube. They revealed the personality behind the columns and blogs. The audience is undefined.

All the content published is aggregated on the author's website. This allowed for a wider audience across multiple platforms. Over three months the website had 19,961 unique visitors

and 30,258 page views. The largest age group was 18-34 year-olds accounting for 63% of the audience. The United States, Canada, and Australia were the top three nations in page views. The top states within the United States for page views were California, New York, and Texas. The majority of traffic came from Facebook.

An overview of the literature focused on three key areas: sex and gender as social structures, reflexive trans embodiment: the Caitlyn Jenner effect, and the narrative body and visibility politics. These areas laid the foundation for the need to explore the complexities of gender. The specific objects used for the project; such as heuristic inquiry, social media, and traditional media; are outlined. The paper concludes with the limitations of the project and suggestions for further research.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Sex and Gender as Social Structure**

Wilchins (1997) makes this observation about sex and gender:

The more we look, the less natural sex looks. Everywhere we turn, every aspect of sex seems to be saturated with cultural needs and priorities. ... Gender is not what culture creates out of my body's sex; rather, sex is what culture makes when it genders my body.

The cultural system of gender looks at my body, creates a narrative of binary difference.

(p. 58)

The separation of sex and gender is an established concept within sociological research. However, how we define sex and gender is still up for debate. Sex is defined by several components including chromosomes, anatomy, and hormones. Yet only anatomy is used to determine sex at birth. An issue arises when the genitals appear ambiguous. In some cases a determination is made for the infant and the genitals are altered to fit a socially accepted version

of a penis or a vagina. If an XY individual has an “inadequate” penis the individual is turned into a female even at the risk of destroying reproductive capabilities (Greenberg, 1999). These individuals fall under the umbrella term *intersex*.

Kaneshiro (2013) defines intersex as “a group of conditions where there is a discrepancy between the external genitals and the internal genitals (the testes and ovaries)” (para. 1). While the Intersex Society of North America (2008) defines intersex a bit differently:

A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types — for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics, so that some of her cells have XX chromosomes and some of them have XY. (para. 1)

There is discrepancy between how the medical field identifies intersex individuals and how they self-identify. The intersex conditions provide evidence that sex is not biologically limited to two categories. The intersex child is transformed through surgery to fit into the binary. Girshick (2008) points out that these genital surgeries are not to prevent harm or to provide a better functioning body. The child undergoes surgery because the genitals threaten the child's culture. There is not a universal standard on what constitutes a biological male versus a biological female. As Intersex Society of North America (2008) confirms, “So nature doesn't



decide where the category of ‘male’ ends and the category of ‘intersex’ begins, or where the category of ‘intersex’ ends and the category of ‘female’ begins. Humans decide” (para. 6).

The intersex condition is evidence that sex is a structure built and maintained by humans. While nature provides evidence that sex is not limited to two categories, the social structure of binary sex is continually studied and reinforced as a natural and unquestionable fact. Our society goes as far as genital reconstruction to keep the sex binary narrative alive. Rothblatt (2005) says using the genitals as gender indicators is a burden that limits humanity. We derive our social gender categories of women and men from this unnaturally limited biological sorting system.

Gender has been understood as socially constructed for decades. Gender is created through culture, language, institutions, and interactions. However, gender as a performative act is a relatively new idea. Sociologists West and Zimmerman (1987) contend,

that the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’ (p. 126)

These gender performances maintain gender norms. The repetition of socially acceptable gender acts creates and reproduces gender day to day and decade to decade (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The norms of gender are built on human interaction and history. Every day we enact our gender through our presentation, our mannerism, and our language.

Butler (1988) frames the acts of gender as guided by historical representations and expressions of gender. The representations and socially acceptable norms of gender change from generation to generation. The next generation either holds onto or disregards previous gender

stereotypes and expressions. These recursive acts construct the historical institution of gender (Martin, 2004).

Gender norms are shaped and created by each of us every day. Butler (2004) calls gender performance “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (p. 1). Because there is no objective gender ideal these constricted performative acts build the structure of gender. Gender is in no way a stable identity but is instituted by the repetitive acts of the body (Butler, 1988).

Waskul and Vannini (2006) expand the power of interactions and actions not only to creating the institution of gender, but the body as well.

### **Reflexive Transempodiment: The Caitlyn Jenner Effect**

Waskul and van der Riet (as cited in Waskul & Vannini, 2006) describe the body, not as a static object, but as being “subjectively embodied in a fluid, emergent, and negotiated process of being” (p. 3) and suggest that social interactions, self, and body are interrelated. The body is often seen as an object; an individual has a body rather than embodies it. But if the body is viewed as fluid, then gender becomes a piece that can be negotiated (as cited in Waskul & Vannini, 2006). The embodiment of the self relies on unexamined feelings that the body is simply there. However, the cultural legibility of a body relies on history. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work (as cited in Butler, 1988) proposed the body as historical and as possibilities to continually be realized. This felt sense of self and historicity of the body is the location of being (Salamon, 2010). While the body is created through historical social contexts, it is continually realized through interactions.

The *looking-glass body*, derived from Cooley’s looking-glass self (as cited in Waskul et al., 2006), says that bodies are seen and the act of seeing is reflexive. We gaze upon bodies and interpret what we see, at the same time we imagine what others may be seeing or feeling gazing

upon our bodies. We continually imagine how our bodies are constructed through the eyes of others. In this ritual of reflexive construction, the body becomes a performance continually responding to the audience. The *dramaturgical body* builds on the looking-glass body and says we do not just have a body but we do a body (Waskul & Vannini, 2006). We perform the body within the appropriate social context of cultural and historical institutions and with each new performance we wait for the audience's reaction. Our bodies and our gender are created from these performances and feedback.

Lorber (2005) points out that gender displays are not created through biological representations but rather through clothing and mannerism. We assume the body underneath matches the display. The transgender person often begins their transition by transforming these gender displays. A transgender person modifies their dress, mannerism, and body to gender norms of their preferred gender. They perform their new gender then manage reveals and gauge feedback and adjust accordingly. Shrock and Boyd (2006) explain this process as *reflexive transempodiment*. The process highlights "the embodied nature of transition and the central role of reflexivity" (as cited in Waskul et al., 2006, p. 51). In order to assimilate into the desired gender, the transgender person goes through repeated loops of performance, reveals, and feedback.

The tabloid media scrutinized Jenner's changing appearance before she came out as transgender. Jenner experienced extremely public loops of reveals and feedback because of her celebrity and her appearances on the television show *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. Despite her celebrity, Jenner's experience with reveals of her new gender and the feedback from family and friends is similar to the reflexive transempodiment process described by Shrock and Boyd (2006). However, many of the early reveals of her transgender identity were created through the

invasion of privacy. In a *Time Magazine* article (Steinmetz, 2015b) Jenner described when she was forced to come out to her family because *TMZ* called to ask about her tracheal shave consultation. Since her interview in April 2015, Jenner's appearance has been groomed and revealed to create a stunning before and after story. Her body became one of the biggest stories in 2015. She embodied and performed a culturally created version of womanhood.

Jenner used "cultural notions of gender to construct a biography that overwrote" her previous gender (Shrock et al., 2006, p. 63). She wore clothes that were culturally appropriate for a woman. She spoke of wearing dresses in private moments. Jenner's actions and words aligned with the gender norms of being female and not male. Lorber (1994) observes that often in the quest for normality transgender individuals reinforce gender norms. By undoing their assigned gender, the transgender individual often reproduces the gender binary by assimilating to gender norms.

The transgender person assimilates not only to become a member of their new gender, but also to maintain safety by not revealing their transgender status. Max who identifies as a transgender stone butch, a combination of a transgender identity and a masculine lesbian identity, explains passing:

Passing must be done sometimes, in order to be safe. But I can't imagine living a stealth life where no one knows I'm trans. I think it's important for there to be people who are visibly challenging the gender binary. But I don't think it's every transperson's responsibility to be a gender crusader. Sometimes safety has to come first. ... As for me, I pass as a man at one job and as an out TG stone butch at another. I never feel safe because I never know how I'm being perceived. (Girshick, 2008, p. 110)

The idea that passing creates safety is a common theme within transgender literature. Even Jenner endorses the idea of assimilation in her *Time Magazine Person of the Year* interview:

Jenner says it's important for her 'to try to project a good image for this community' and starts by defining a good image as the way she looks. 'I think it's much easier for a trans woman or a trans man who authentically kind of looks and plays the role,' she says. 'I want to dress well. I want to look good.' Here she's wading into charged territory. When it isn't obvious that a transgender person is transgender, they're often said to 'pass.'

There is what is called 'passing privilege,' referring to the easier, safer, more accepted lives that such transgender people can often lead. (Steinmetz, 2015b, para. 22)

While assimilation provides some sense of safety, it creates invisibility around the transgender status of a person's identity. Pusch (as cited in Catalano, 2015) notes this invisibility reinforces the gender binary. Like Caitlyn Jenner, some transgender people reflexively embody the gender norms and erase the transition piece of their narratives (Catalano, 2015).

### **The Narrative Body and Visibility Politics**

The transgender narrative simultaneously upholds and breaks down gender norms. Catalano (2015) described passing as creating "a forced or desired reabsorption into the gender binary" (p. 422). Visibility for transgender individuals both embodies and disembodies the gender binary. When the transgender person shares their story publicly they lose their ability to assimilate to their preferred gender. Prosser (as cited in Catalano, 2015) noted "in coming out and staking claim to representation, the transsexual undoes the realness that is the conventional goal of transition" (p. 423). Even when transgender individuals present their "new" gender in a normative way, their story and body become othered.

What are the benefits of coming out? Gender theorist Kate Bornstein (1998) explains,

“It’s worth telling our stories and asking our questions because if just one more person can become aware of the intricate system of gendered chains and gendered punishment in this world, we’ve made some headway” (p. 276). The transgender individual’s body becomes an integral part of the storytelling process. The narrative body is “situated in the stories we tell *to* ourselves and stories others tell *about* their own bodies and the bodies of others” (Waskul & Vannini, 2006, p. 12). The transgender body makes visible the stories we tell to ourselves through the strong inner desire for physical transformation. The transgender body also reflects the stories others tell about their bodies via embodying gender norms. Transgender bodies tell the story of gender norms by either reinforcing them or ignoring them.

Media coverage about transgender individuals has grown tremendously from transgender actress Laverne Cox, star of the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, appearing on *Time Magazine*’s cover to the reality show *I Am Jazz* starring Jazz Jennings, a transgender youth. This new attention has offered a spotlight on transgender narratives. Irvine (as cited in Waskul et al., 2006) says, “Personhood is more than the sum of its part, and narrative is what allows it to be more” (p. 12). The media coverage has provided a space for a national discussion on gender and offers visibility to an underrepresented community. These transgender narratives in the media not only generate visibility to a population once largely invisible but also have the ability to reinforce or disassemble the gender binary.

Visibility is important because the media has the ability to shape culture and often legitimizes current social structures, such as gender (Sarnavka, 2003). The media not only reinforces social structures but can shape them as well. The recent upsurge in coverage of the transgender experience provides a unique opportunity to further the discourse of gender. The media’s ability to shape social structures can be used to break social constraints such as those

created by the gender binary (Gauntlett, 2008). Gauntlett (2008) proposed that a two-pronged attack of popular media and everyday life could destabilize the traditional binary divide of gender. Visibility helps move the transgender community's narratives out of the shadows and into the public light. While the transgender body's visibility may have started a discussion about gender, it must still work within the dominant cultural discourse of the gender binary. The insertion of vulnerable physical bodies into public discourse causes them to give up bodily abstraction (Rand, 2013). Therefore, visibility requires the transgender body to be read within the binary to be understood within the public conversation. This means that even when a transgender person decides to tell their story they are subjected to being understood or read within the social norms of gender.

A review of the literature indicates the socially constructed ideals of sex and gender are binary concepts. The transgender narrative often reproduces these conceptions by implementing gender norms to assimilate into culture and provide safety. The literature indicates maintaining these norms and assimilating may provide safety but it erases the transgender piece of their narrative and identity. By transgender people and gender-nonconforming people coming out they highlight the variety of gender expressions. It is important that transgender people and gender-nonconforming people tell their stories and come out because the power of media can be harnessed to examine the complexities of gender and boundary maintenance.

### **The Project**

Many of the transgender men interviewed in Rubin's (2008) book *Self-Made Men* said their transition required a spiritual kind of consciousness. While Girshick (2008) explains she has intentionally privileged transgender voices over the work of gender theorists and academics in her book *Transgender Voices*. Ekins' and King's book *Transgender Phenomenon* (2006) is built

on transgender individuals' stories. The transgender narrative is essential to understanding the transgender experience. Many transgender individuals express that to understand the transgender experience you have had to live it. The writing in this project was born from the need for more transgender narratives beyond the before and after story. This project was built through the phases of the heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). These phases require self-inspection, and the exploration and interpretation of experience. The phases are said to have a transformative effect on the user's own experience (Hile, 2008). Through the creation of this project, I have experienced a shift in my identity as well as my philosophies. I am beginning to shift my identity away from masculinity and philosophically my view of gender has shifted away from the spectrum.

Moustakas' (1990) approach is divided into seven phases of research: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis, and validation of heuristic inquiry. I have outlined my process within each of these phases and how they have informed my final project.

The initial engagement phase begins when the writer has an interest in a question or concern that has important social and personal meaning (Moustakas, 1990). I began the initial engagement phase when I privately questioned what it would mean to live outside my assigned gender. I wrestled with the social implications of a life outside the binary:

I am a person with a penis that no one but I can see. I am a person who has a vagina that can be touched. I am a person who has thoughts that objectify women. I am a person that is a woman. I am a person that hates men. But is one. (Leo Caldwell, personal communication, October 2004)



In this phase, I was afraid to come out as anything beyond queer. I sensed something within myself but was not emotionally ready to explore it further. I wrote about these feelings and thoughts but rarely spoke of them.

The immersion phase is when the writer's life is filled with material related to the question (Moustakas, 1990). The immersion phase began with my involvement in a female-to-male online community. At this stage I wanted to find relatable transgender representations. This is when I began to immerse myself in transgender culture. When I was in this phase, the transgender community was not as visible. I would read and watch anything related to the transgender experience. I found online communities, watched movies, and bought books, such as Leslie Feinberg's book *Stone Butch Blues* and Matt Kailey's *Just Add Hormones: An Insider's Guide to the Transsexual Experience*. Eventually during this phase I began talking about my discomfort with my gender. I attended panels and support groups. Through my interactions and the expectations of others, the concept of being genderless did not seem like an option for me. I felt like the gender binary was inescapable and I had to pick one of the two options. When I began taking steps to physically alter my appearance the pervasiveness of the gender binary became clear to me. "The boy that never was, is. A boy so near. He is boy forever. Never fully understanding what a man is. He lives now to learn himself. His masculinity always in question by strangers. And sometimes by himself" (Leo Caldwell, personal communication, January 2007).

I reached the incubation phase when I was fully emerged in my transition. At this point I was taking testosterone, going by a masculine name, and using male pronouns. The writer begins the incubation phase when they pull away from intensely focused attention on the question (Moustakas, 1990). The incubation phase allows for introspection and reflection of the question

without direct attention. During this time I moved to another state and did not disclose my identity as a transgender man. This allowed me to deeply immerse into masculinity. I pulled away from the online communities and transgender acquaintances. I became Leo. From my journal, “Once you’ve altered yourself to the point of becoming a totally different person, you lose home” (Leo Caldwell, personal communication, November 2011). The discomfort in the incubation phase led me to the illumination phase.

The illumination phase is a breakthrough of intuition fostered by the immersion phase and the incubation phase (Moustakas, 1990). I had spent a portion of my life socially as a woman and as a man. I was unable to relate to either identity. This is when I realized identities outside the binary were valid, and needed to be visible:

This road has been a lonely one, to travel the inbetween. No longer able to relate to women as a woman but not being fully a man. One thing I take with me is I can, I will, do anything to live my truth. We’ve all been dealt a hand. I’ve just decided to walk away from the table. (Leo Caldwell, personal communication, January 2012)

The explication phase begins when the writer examines the realization created by the illumination phase. The writer expresses the core themes of the realization in the creative synthesis phase (Moustakas, 1990). In the explication phase, I examined these feelings of genderlessness and began research on the subject of degendering. The creative synthesis phase was this project. I have created blogs, columns, and videos discussing my genderless illumination:

The self relies on the body to communicate with the world but the self knows its truth beyond the body. It seems that the gender dysphoria diagnosis does more than stigmatizes a person within society. It declares to them that the self truly is at the mercy of the body.

It stigmatizes their body to themselves. It confirms that you must physically alter your flesh to display your truth. But is that really the case? If you've felt your whole life that you weren't a female, isn't that the truth? Despite what clothes you wore or how your body developed, because wearing a dress and having breasts doesn't make you female if you've never felt that way yourself. Will we ever be able to take back the self from the body? Maybe not as a whole society but individually, yes. Through self-care, self-understanding, self-exploration. You are not at the mercy of your body. You are who you say you are. (Caldwell, 2016c)

The validation phase is a continual process of returning to the data to check its validity against the greater meaning of the question and seeking responses of outsiders (Moustakas, 1990). The validation phase is the last phase. I have experienced this phase through feedback from social media and through continually researching gender. As I share my columns on social media, my viewpoint is challenged and I am asked to defend and re-evaluate my work.

Throughout all of these phases I documented my experience. This documentation and self-inspection was the foundation for this project. Without my consistent recordings of my feelings and physical changes, I would not have been able to so fully describe my struggles with the gender binary.

The heuristic inquiry approach creates a story and is intended to capture the essence of the human experience. It made me reconsider and change my proposal of a gender spectrum. Beyond the creation of my blogs, columns, and videos, this approach led me to examine how I identify.

The project was distributed through traditional media and social media. The columns ran in two newspapers, the blogs ran on a personal website and *The Huffington Post*. In all three

instances the work was shared through social media. The videos were published on YouTube. Social media was the primary location of feedback and interaction. Social media helped amplify the messages that were distributed via traditional media. It provided an opportunity for feedback loops that were not possible in traditional media (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012). The strength of social media is the ability to disseminate ideas quickly amongst networks. However, the networks are often weak ties and cannot be used for high-risk activism. The activist cannot expect much from these ties beyond interaction via the platform (Gladwell, 2010). The social media platform worked because the project sought only to disseminate information quickly and did not require anything beyond reading, processing, and considering that gender was a complex and varied piece of identity. The project's objective required the blogs and columns to be spread efficiently with the ability to interact with the author. Social media was an adequate platform to accomplish these goals.

While social media has dissolved traditional media's singular power in agenda setting, traditional media still remains the leading force (Meraz, 2009). Traditional media's agenda setting power was harnessed by the project to start the conversations about the pieces published in traditional media. Topics are often introduced in traditional media, and then blogs, social media, and online communities continue the conversations (Meraz, 2009). In 2015, we have seen an influx of transgender coverage in traditional media and we have seen that roll into social media via blogs, Facebook posts, and tweets. Diane Sawyer's interview with Bruce Jenner, presented on a traditional media platform, had a record number of viewers and multiple months of pre- and post-coverage. This coverage created a transgender reference point for society. It also created a tidal wave of media coverage of transgender issues and a huge response on social

media (Gachman, 2015). The project harnessed the agenda setting force of traditional media and coupled it with the speed and interactivity of social media to obtain its objective.

### **Feedback**

Through the creation of this project readers influenced my perspective. When I began this project I believed a gender spectrum would be the best way to be inclusive of all gender expressions. But as I received feedback I realized a spectrum was still too limiting. I received real-time feedback from my columns and blogs. This feedback would influence the next blog or column. It would either change how I viewed certain terms or make it clear what needed to be addressed next.

As noted earlier, social media provides for feedback not possible in traditional media. This access to feedback from the readers is the primary reason I published the blogs and columns on social media. I received a wide variety of feedback through social media from those who had little to no exposure to transgender narratives to those who identified as transgendered.

In some instances the feedback indicated a need to further educate the reader. In particular I had a commenter who insisted that our identities as female and male are based on our chromosomes. I addressed this commenter one-on-one and wrote a response column about the complexities of determining gender:

So, if you're reading this and you are a man because you have a penis, then you are assuming you have XY, right? Well, you might not. The article includes the example of 'sex-reversed XX men, rare individuals who look like men but have two X chromosomes instead of one X chromosome and one Y chromosome.' Until you have your chromosomes tested, you can't determine that you are, by scientific standards, a man.  
(Caldwell, 2016c, para. 7)

Whenever it felt that the comments could lead to a teaching moment, I would respond.

In addition to educating others, I was educated by the transgender and gender-nonconforming community. As I discussed earlier, I started this project thinking a gender spectrum would do justice to the variety of gender expressions. But after many emails and private messages with the community in response to my works and videos, I realized it did not encompass identities such those people who identify as agender. I no longer prescribe a gender spectrum as a solution.

The community would often analyze my word choices. Through their feedback I no longer use the word “lifestyle.” It implies that being transgender is a choice when the consensus is that it is not. In addition, I was nominalizing the word transgender and using the term “transpeople” instead of “transgender people.” The feedback indicated this othered transgender people.

Because the blog was published on website specifically targeting the LGBTQ audience, I wrote using transgender vernacular such as top surgery, binder, T, passing, and many other terms. I was able to write about my fluidity in identity. However, I did face the most criticism on this platform. I felt pressure by the LGBTQ community to represent the transgender experience in a positive light. I felt policed about how I should write about my own experience. There was a sense the LGBTQ readers wanted to force their perspective on my transgender experience. When writing for the newspapers I had to be concise. I did not bring as much emotion into the writing and I did not include any fluidity about my identity. It felt like I had to present the transgender experience as a true before and after narrative and not a journey. I could leave no doubt in the readers’ minds that I had made the right decision with my transition. I felt this way because I

wanted the reader to understand the experience before they judged it. I wanted to find a common ground before giving a deeper and more detailed version of my narrative.

The digital piece of my project was key to my understanding, as well as my connection with my audience. While traditional media provided a space and platform to launch my work, the blog and social media interactions created the feedback needed to understand the impact of my project. I was able to interact with the audience and provide them with new information and expand on ideas. I connected with many transgender and gender-nonconforming people, not only learning from them, but also providing support.

I received many emails and personal messages via Facebook and Twitter. They will not be included in this the paper because of the expectation of privacy in such communication. However, they should be acknowledged because they deeply affected the project and myself. I received emails and messages from parents of transgender kids who were encouraged by my success and my story. I received emails from people who were not familiar with a transgender narrative and felt changed by my columns. The majority of the messages and emails I received were from people who were either transitioning or questioning their gender identity and wanted guidance. A large portion of my time was spent responding to emails, messages, and comments.

The blogs and columns created for this project have been published on my personal website, the *Huffington Post*'s website, the *Huffington Post*'s Queer Voices Facebook page, the *Courier-Post*'s website and the *Pensacola News Journal*'s website. The following comments were pulled from a mix of these locations.

### **Comments**

The comments included a reliance on the gender binary even when discussing identities outside the binary. Rothblatt (1995) points out that the gender apartheid developed with the

evolution of language and the binary infects every aspect of our lexicon. Even to identify outside the binary requires an acknowledgment of the binary. Some comments that expressed a transgender identity used the binary to explain their new or wanted identity. They relied on the binary notions of gender to explain that they experienced discomfort in their current identity. Andrew said, “This was a really good insight to what’s awaiting behind taking T. I’m nervous to say the least, but I know it’ll only make me more of the gentleman that I am” (Andrew, 2016). Andrew says they are waiting to take T, an abbreviation for testosterone. This indicates they could be transgender. This particular blog post included the closing line, “This isn’t a man’s world and it ain’t a woman’s. It’s our world. Bodies with differing amounts of hormones racing toward the sun” (Caldwell, 2016b). These statements hinted at the absence of a gender binary. Yet after reading, Andrew used the word gentleman, relying on a binary understanding of gender.

Regarding the epilogue, I do think medical society mostly sees gender as binary because as scientists, they understand men and women are fundamentally different with regards to how the human body is made and how it naturally functions. There’s no escaping hard core scientific facts and biological truth. Unless of course it doesn’t agree with the political agenda and the trans movement. (Velasquez, 2016)

Velasquez’s comment is a good example of the pushback I received from my work. The comments that argued gender could be biologically proven were most often on the newspaper websites.

Thank you for sharing this. This is the first account of top surgery I've read where someone has experience the feeling of regret before having that turning moment. I had the same feelings of regret and a lot of dysphoria after my surgery and I was panicking



silently because, who could I talk to about it and have understand? But after reaching that moment of peace I have never been happier when I look into the mirror. (Silva-Barajas, 2016)

Silva-Barajas (2016) did not directly come out as transgender but talked about dysphoria and surgery. In this case, the commenter probably meant gender identity dysphoria. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2013) definition of gender identity dysphoria is when a person's gender at birth is contrary to the one they identify with. Silva-Barajas' (2016) comment is a good example of the type of personal messages I would receive from other transgender or gender-nonconforming people. There was a common thread that the reader had not heard my version of the transition narrative.

This is *\*exactly\** what I needed to read. I am pursuing this path myself - hopefully having top surgery in April 2016 and I am genderfluid-genderqueer.

I have struggled with the dysphoria but also the 'calm' that makes me feel like it might not be a necessity — and yet, I also understand that feeling frantic seldom makes life altering decisions easy. And so, I push forward even in spite of all the fear. I can, without a doubt say that many of the things you have expressed here will be felt by me as well. (Cee, 2016)

Cee identifies themselves as genderfluid-genderqueer. This type of comment helped me to continue to write in an open and honest fashion even when it became difficult.

I think it also takes courage to share how you felt when your experience didn't seem to be as positive as other's experiences right away. There seems to be some - I am sure unintended - pressure on transitioning people to speak in a positive manner, to share each step in a light that 'proves' a surgical choice was 'the right decision'. But no one should

have to 'prove' that everything went perfectly in order to be accepted and validated. Your journey is valid for you, and your wisdom in giving yourself time to heal emotionally while healing physically may speak to someone out there who has fears or worries on their own journey. (Hosley, 2016)

Hosley points out the “pressure” felt to tell a positive transition story. I felt the same pressure during the course of my writing.

Intersexed is a RARE occurrence. In virtually ALL cases, even intersexed will have the XX or XY chromosomes. The times you find a person with XXY or XYY, they are an abnormality. In nature, when that occurs, the animal born with it, usually does not make it to adulthood. The same with any other deformation. You do not use the exception as the rule. The exception is not the rule. All this attempt in the article is an attempt to confuse the issue from the reality. You are either MALE or FEMALE. Until there is the ability to replace EVERY chromosome to the opposite, YOU ARE ONE OR THE OTHER, NO IFs ANDs or BUTs. (Carithers, 2016)

Carithers frequently commented on my articles. I eventually addressed their concern expressed in a column.

### **Conclusion**

The project's primary objective was to show the complexity of gender through the experiences of the transgender individual. The objective's success can only be measured in a qualitative way. The messages and comments received during the course of the project conveyed a sense that the project reached a wide variety of people and many were deeply touched by the writing. The project gave visibility to my transgender identity and can be viewed as a piece of the whole transgender visibility movement.

What are the implications of visibility for the invisible? Adrienne Rich (as cited in Girshick, 2008) explained:

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition.... When those who have the power to name and socially construct reality choose not to see or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (p. 111)

The stories of transgender people are crucial to understanding the breadth and depth of the transgender experience. This project adds to the growing number of transgender narratives to create a description of the world that includes the transgender individual. Visibility humanizes the transgender person. Visibility creates community. I had several transgender men reach out to me and indicate they had never heard my version of the transgender narrative, especially when I talked about a conflict in identity. They often spoke of relating to my feelings and being grateful that they were not alone. Visibility also creates constituents that elect and lobby for transgender rights. Human Rights Campaign (2015) survey of likely voters found that if the voter knew someone who was transgender they more likely to have a favorable opinion of transgender people. Despite the increased visibility transgender people still face an onslaught of anti-transgender bills, violence, and discrimination. It is more important than ever for transgender voices to be heard.

The project's limitations include limited research on the transgender population's effect on gender complexities, the limitations on capturing the entirety of gender expression, and the inability to capture detailed data about the readers of the project.

The transgender population's effect on the gender binary is mostly speculation. Research primarily focuses on how a transgender person deviates from the gender binary but not how this deviation affects the binary itself. There are theories on how the transgender experience both reinforces and disassembles the binary but quantitative studies have not been conducted.

The identities researched in this project were limited to transgender individuals and gender-nonconforming individuals. These identities do not encompass that wide range of gender expressions.

The project was distributed through websites. This meant not every reader's response could be captured. The only responses that were examined were feedback through comments.

The recommendations for next steps would be a quantitative study to examine the effects of transgender visibility on the gender binary. Information about the transgender community lacks quantitative results. This study could be conducted by analyzing instances of transgender individual's presence in the media and surveys of the general impression of these individuals. Another study suggestion would be research on the current climate of the gender binary in America.

The overall conclusion from this study, while transgender narratives are crucial during this time of political change the narratives themselves will not have a great effect on the binary for some time. The pervasiveness of the gender binary in our language, our culture, and our institutions is hard to penetrate. But "to create a true revolution, you have to confront the dominant discourse" (Lorber, 2005, p. 2). Despite the binary's stronghold, I will continue to try to shine a light on the complexities of gender.

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