

THE PROBLEM
OF INCLUSION
UNDER THE
TRANSGENDER
UMBRELLA:
THE CONFLICTS
BETWEEN
TRANSSEXUAL VS.
TRANSGENDER
MEN

Purpose/Goals

The purpose of this research is not only to bring attention to the multiplicity of identities that fall under the 'transgender umbrella,' but also to critically assess the reification of these categories, and locate how this creates conflict among individuals in the trans* community.¹ This paper will investigate several research questions; what are the different categories of identity under the transgender umbrella, how and why do they conflict each other? As demonstrated in this paper, transsexual men and transgender/ non-binary men are at the centre of this conflict. This conflict can be divided into two opposing beliefs, first, there are those who believe that being transgender is a medical condition (transsexual), while others believe that there are many different identities under the transgender umbrella. This paper seeks to explore this conflict and distinguish between the different experiences of transsexual men and transgender/non-binary men. My research will attempt to fill a void in contemporary academic discourse, and give importance to trans* individuals' narratives by exploring their attempts to define and navigate their and others trans* identities online.

Literature Review

Wojdowski and Tebor (1976) give us a better understanding of the dominant definition of transsexual.² The article explains it to be a medical condition and something to be regarded as serious. The authors explore the emotional state of transsexuals while they are in the 'passing stage' of their transition.³ There is no regard towards 'identity' in this article and no mention of the word 'transgender.' This is problematic because it excludes many who do transition, but do not take on the "transsexual" label. In her book, *Sex Change, Social Change*, Viviane Namaste (2011) does not exclude transgender people from her discussion of trans life, but does make a distinction between the two groups which helps situate both definitions.⁴ For her, transsexuals have a medical condition and do not step out of the gender binary.⁵ The "stepping out of the gender binary" is the beginning of the conflict between the two. However, prior to addressing this, we need to first understand the different definitions of 'transgender.'

There are those who understand 'transgender' as an umbrella term and as a form of identity. For example, according to Riggle et al. (2011), being transgender is strictly an identity and an umbrella term which includes many different aspects within it: "[t]he term 'transgender' is an umbrella label that includes many different self-identifications."⁶ These authors are not alone in defining it in these ways, Johnson (2007), Morgan and Stevens (2008), Beemyn and Rankin (2011) and Davidson (2007), also take multiple identities and puts them under one word, transgender. Since

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transgender is viewed as an umbrella term, many different authors have different definitions for what should and should not be included. This is where the main issues arises within these two separate terms. Some authors might include identities that are not welcomed by others under the umbrella. Davidson (2007), in her article *Seeking Refuge Under the Umbrella: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Organizing Within the Category Transgender*, explains transgender as having “no singular, fixed meaning.”⁷ This mean she views it as an all inclusive term and identity which can encompass a variety of different people and experiences. She includes such terms as: gender-variant, gender-blending, gender-or-sex-changing and gender-bending people.⁸ She also describes transgender people as: “transsexual people, cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, genderqueer people, gay men and lesbians who queer gender line (such as butch lesbians), the partners of trans people.”⁹ She believes anyone who has a “non-normative gender identity” and is a “gender variant” is transgender.¹⁰ This would situate people who abide by the gender binary and transition to male or female and do not deviate gender norms. An author with similar views is Johnson (2007) who explains transgender as people who, “want to reside outside of the categories altogether.”¹¹ It would also include people who do deviate and can change their gender presentation at any time. Since this definition positions transgender as an identity, it puts many all these other identities under it all as such which is a problem for transsexuals who view it as a medical condition.

There are four sources that do not mention transgender as an umbrella term, but they still use it as such. Johnson (2007), Morgan (2008), Kuper et al. (2012) and Fraser (2009) discuss in length the experiences of only transgender people. There are no definitions of what transgender means so it is up to the reader to decide. There is no mention of the term transsexual, but using the term transgender implies multiple identities under which transsexual would be categorized under since there are no other terms mentioned. This is the main source of the conflict for transsexuals interviewed in this research, being put under a category, which has been explained as having multiple identities where they do not feel they belong. This is a major point of conflict for these individuals.

An important comparison of terms in regards to separation is offered by Factor and Rothblum’s (2008) who distinguish transgender from genderqueer.¹² The authors mentioned above maintained that genderqueer is a part of the transgender umbrella, however Factor and Rothblum see them as separate. This is very problematic as there is no simple definition. First, there is no consensus on what qualifies as “transgender” and when you exclude someone’s identity, it creates conflicts. Lane (2009)

describes a different sort of separation in regards to terms of identity. She discusses the difference with “subversive transgender” and “conservative transsexual.”¹³ Lane explains this dichotomy is created because of activists creating “an apparent polarization between ‘queer/ transgender’ and ‘people of transsexual origins.’”¹⁴ People who are queer/ transgender or “subversive transgender” are regarded as “gender out-laws” while “conservative transsexuals” are not.¹⁵ The difference in terminology used by each author is vital to this research in situating it in the center of the conflicts between transsexual and transgender/ non-binary men.

Since the definitions of transsexual and transgender/non-binary have been established loosely by multiple authors, we need to explore the conflicts between these two. Using Namaste’s (2011) book *Sex Change, Social Change*, Davidson and Patricia Elliot’s (2009) article *Engaging Trans Debates on Gender Variance: A Feminist Analysis* I will illustrate the major conflict between these two groups.

Elliot (2009), has two main objectives in her paper, to explain the transsexual and the transgender/queer aspects of this conflict. For the transsexual aspect, she uses Namaste’s book and arguments. Elliot discusses Namaste’s view that transgender persons are privileged and represent a more dominant group within the trans community¹⁶. Elliot emphasizes the term transgender as an umbrella term explaining that transsexual falls under this.¹⁷ Because of this, ‘transgender’ enforces dominance, which takes visibility away from transsexuals and their problems and makes their lives invisible.¹⁸ Elliot explains that transgender people are seen as taking a more transgressive stance on identity, which is more valued in society than conservative transsexual identities.¹⁹ Elliot explains this stance to be attacking the transgender identity because most transgender people want to undo the gender binary and are seen as not wanting to abide by rigid gender boundaries, which devalues transsexuals lives because they abide by these.²⁰ The second aspect Elliot focuses on is the transgender/queer viewpoint, which she demonstrates does not undermine transsexuals. By her definition, transgender/queer people celebrate gender variance (being ambiguous).²¹ To discuss this gender variance and this conflict further, two theorists will help shape this issue.

Butler and Halberstam hold theories within gender and sexuality to elaborate on this. Butler discusses Gender Identity Disorder (GID – now called Gender Dysphoria) diagnosis as being both ‘enabling’ and ‘restrictive.’²² Elliot argues on behalf of Butler that removing the GID diagnosis would allow more freedom for non-conforming transgender people, but funding for hormones and surgery from insurances and government would disappear.²³ According to Butler, the aim of GID diagnosis is to normalize

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gender variant populations.²⁴ Elliot uses Butler to emphasize her point that the experiences and desires of many transsexual people do not make sense to her, Butler believes society should understand gender as being more fluid and fluctuating.²⁵ The second theorist Elliot uses to illustrate her point is Halberstam who explains the conflicts within FTMs (female-to-male transgender people who change sex) and butches (who 'retain' sex).²⁶ The view between these communities is from a lesbian feminist perspective, FTMs are betraying feminism and from a transsexual aspect, butches are failed transsexuals.²⁷ This position views transsexuals as superior to transgender/queer people because they are seen as being more radical.²⁸ Halberstam explains that 'transsexuality is set up as the solution to gender deviance' whereas they are trying to distinguish FTMs from butches.²⁹ These two theorists are brought up by Elliot to demonstrate that transgender people do not undermine transsexual individuals. Transgender is a term that is more inclusive and encompasses everyone. Elliot argues the attack from transsexual individuals that transgender people undermine transsexuals is poorly represented. In all, Elliot's main argument is that transsexuals are becoming increasingly weary of transgender people who try to equate themselves as being the same.³⁰

Namaste's book, *Sex Change, Social Change*, she discusses her stance within this transsexual vs. Transgender/non-binary conflict, which she is a main part of. She discusses the issue of how transgender people (excluding transsexuals), or 'gender radicals' cannot have the same experiences as transsexuals.³¹ She argues that the government sees it this way, which takes transsexuals experiences and needs out of the equation since it is the dominant ideology in society, according to her.³² She believes transgender or people who believe they do not have a gender are not something that is acceptable.³³ She agrees that anyone can state they are not women and men, but completely disagrees with it and explains this is the dominant ideology that has come into society. As previously stated above with Elliot's article. Namaste believes transgender is the main ideology and the lives and problems of transsexuals are erased because of this. Her main argument is that society thinks what transsexuals want is the same as what transgender people want, but this is not the case. Namaste backs this up by explaining what transsexuals *really* want: "[t]hey would situate themselves as 'men' and as 'women', not as 'gender radicals' or 'gender revolutionaries' or 'boyzzz' or 'grrrrrrls.'" ³⁴ She also states that transgender people do not want to fit into specific binary categories like transsexuals.³⁵ Namaste says "contemporary transsexual/ transgender politics can be characterized by two things:

identity and health care."³⁶ This ties into my research because I am looking at how each individual identifies and thinks of others who aren't the same and with using Elliot and Namaste theories, I am better able to localize the individuals identity and understand how they view others who may not identify the same and compare it with these theories.

There are many sociological theories that work well with this topic. Butler and Halberstam have already been mentioned above but I believe Goffman's concept of passing is important. In the article by Wojdowski and Tebor's, Goffman is mentioned and the discussion of passing as well as "the phenomenon of keeping unapparent stigma secret."³⁷ This theory will help me when I am examining the data collected in regards to passing and identity. The concept of passing is very important for transsexuals since it seemingly makes them invisible in society as "others."

This debate between transsexual vs. Transgender is important to contemporary academia and the individual. A concept that is important for my overall research question is to understand when this conflict started and how long this phenomenon has existed. Has it always occurred or is it now just emerging? According to Califia (1997) in *Sex Changes*, transgender people have only recently started to question the gender binary.³⁸ This means transgender people call onto transsexuals to try to change the notion of 'women' and 'men' instead of trying to fit into these categories and passing.³⁹ This book was written in 1997, which means, this conflict has been occurring for years. In Viviane Namaste's book, *Sex Change, Social Change*, the author does not go into detail as to when this conflict started but does talk about different theorist and writers such as Butler, Halberstam, Henry Rubin, Max Valerio and Feinberg, who started writing about similar conflicts before the 1990s.⁴⁰ Max Valerio critiques Feinberg's book *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), which takes place in the 1960s and forward.⁴¹ Valerio claims this book to be a lesbian book and not so much as a transgender one because the main character stops taking testosterone and, in Valerio's view, goes back to the lesbian life.⁴² This situates the conflict between transsexual and transgender/non-binary people much earlier than 1997 but also demonstrates the conflict as being more relevant today based on more recent sources.

This debate does not touch upon the online sphere and this is why my research is important. Tumblr is a place where trans* men are able to share their experiences, give advice and have a sense of community. The chapter *The Emergence of New Transgendering Identities in the Age of the Internet* by Ekins and King in *Transgender Identities* edited by Hines and Sanger demonstrates how important the internet has become for trans* people. The text demonstrates online communities helping others

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who feel the same in not feeling alone.⁴³ It also demonstrates a strong bond and being able to accomplish anything with information,⁴⁴ This works well with my research because it is about formulating identities online, discussing the conflicts within a community and comparing.

Methods

I sought out my participants from a blogging website called Tumblr. I asked for individuals who were American, as they tend to be more American trans* men who are out online that I have witnessed over the years. The participants also had to be over 18 years old, be part of the online trans* community and were available for interviews through Skype. I contacted each research participant over email and scheduled interviews for the week of February 18–22, 2013. The interviews were done over Skype and each one lasted an hour and a half. All the participants were at home in a quiet place when the interviews took place. On the consent forms, I asked them to choose a name to be referred to during this research for their confidentiality to be protected.

The interviews were semi-structured, I had important questions to ask pertaining to my research and if the participant started talking about something related to the topic, which I did not ask for, I would let them talk. I asked for some information about their experiences about being trans to relate it to the narrative analyses aspect of this research. This was also an icebreaker where I was able to share some information as well. By doing this, I believe the participants felt more comfortable and were better able to give accurate details about the questions I asked later on in the interview about topics which were very personal. After the interviews were over I transcribed them all.

Data Analysis

The question asked at the beginning of the paper was “what are the different categories of identity under the transgender umbrella and how do they conflict each other?” The data I have collected indicated a very real phenomena within the trans* community. With assistance from the participants in my research, I have been able to locate the node of this conflict and analyze it with previously existent theoretical approaches. This conflict affects an already marginal community and needs to be explored further to understand the underlying effects.

In the interviews, the definitions of transsexual and transgender/non-binary were established by my research participants and in the literature, it was established by academics. This step in understanding is crucial to my topic because I cannot distinguish each side (transsexual

and transgender/non-binary) without defining them. In the literature, the term transsexual was deemed a medical condition by Wojdowski and Tebor's article *Social and Emotional Tensions During Transsexual Passing* (1976). In the interviews, all my participants viewed it as a medical condition as well. One even said though it was an "outdated" term that could be true based on the year of the article's publication in 1976 and almost all other sources found do not talk about transsexuals as a medical condition. The only sources which discuss being transsexual as a medical condition are the authors who believe transgender/non-binary people make them look bad. The main author who believes this is Namaste, who says transgender people are more accepted within society and their experiences are viewed over transsexuals.⁴⁵ All other sources take a more inclusive term, such as transgender, to apply it to these groups of people.

According to my research participants and to the literature reviewed, transgender is seen as a term, which can be interpreted in many different ways. It seems as though the definition can be changed by whoever is discussing this topic. It can be seen as including 'everyone' and only certain types of people. Some believe it only to be appropriate to use if a person "identifies" as transgender. Since the word transgender is used as an inclusive term and puts many different sorts of people in, this is where the problems begin. This is what Adam and Dillon have discussed in their interviews. If people do not feel comfortable being attached to a label they do not like, they are going to fight for it and this is where the conflict comes from.

The main reason for this research is to discuss the conflicts between transsexuals and transgender/non-binary men. I have two research participants who are transsexual and two who identify as transgender/non-binary. These two transsexuals descriptions of the conflicts between transsexuals and transgender/non-binary goes with the literature. What does not reflect the literature is how they think of the other side (transgender/non-binary). Throughout this paper it has been established that the conflict is transsexuals believing transgender/non-binary or gender non-conforming people give them a negative image. The literature demonstrates this with Namaste, Elliot and Davidson's work on this. The two individuals I interviewed also have conflicting views. Jake believes it to be an opportunity for education when someone steps out of the gender binary. Whereas Dillon believes the people who "dress up" and change their name are not doing any harm, it is when the individual takes hormones without thinking about it for a long time that affects the image of transsexuals. This lays a negative image on transsexuals

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according to Dillon. Although Dillon and Jake identify as being transsexuals, their viewpoints are not the same. This proves that not everyone who identifies the same has the same viewpoints in regards to this. This means that not the entire transsexual community believes that transgender/non-binary people negatively affect transsexuals.

The two individuals who identify as transgender/non-binary have very similar views in regards to the literature found. Adam believes that "cis people" (people who are not trans) are going to "hate you regardless if you pass and fit into male perfectly and if you say 'I love my boobs.'" This means if trans* men transition and fit into the gender binary without deviation or fall within the cracks of the binary, they are still going to be hate. Whereas Steven feels transgender people do not delegitimize the experience of transsexuals because they do not represent the same thing.

For the author, Namaste, she argues for transsexual people by explain all transsexuals feel as though transgender/non-binary people are above transsexuals. She also believes transsexuals will not be taken seriously if transgender/non-binary people are held under the same definitions as transsexual because they tend to "genderbend." My research has proved the point she makes wrong. Even though one of the transsexual participants explains transgender people who take hormones without thinking about it make transsexuals look bad, anything else that transgender people do is acceptable and he does see it as an umbrella term. All other participants, regardless of their personal identity, agreed with each other and many other authors in explaining transgender as an umbrella term. They also all collectively agree that transgender/non-binary people do not make transsexuals look bad or reflect negatively on them.

In regards to the data collected surrounding the online sphere, the Internet is supposed to be a community that helps people out. By helping, people are better able to understand their identity and accept themselves. The chapter by Ekins and King (2010) explains this in details in regards to blogs and websites about being trans* and how people were better about to find each other.⁴⁶ This sense of community is extremely important for the trans* community but is lacking because of these internal conflicts. With my participants, I asked each of them why they were online. Dillon, Steven, Jake and Adam had identical reasons for participating in the online trans* community. Each wanted to provide more information to others who were just finding themselves. They all felt

as though when they started to realize they were trans* and transitioning, they sought out information on these sites that was not divided and confusing.

Conclusions

The conflicts between transsexual and transgender/non-binary men are real and affect the people under these labels. The literature provided an explanation as to how these categories conflict with each other. For some transsexuals, people who live outside the binary are negatively affecting them and undermining their legitimacy. Transgender/non-binary people do not believe this, and instead provide an umbrella term to be inclusive of all identities, including 'transsexual.' All four participants agreed that transgender is a positive, inclusive term that could be used by anyone in the trans* community to describe any of their identities. However, these individuals need the opportunity to continue to nuance their identities with further terminologies so as to mitigate conflicts within the trans* community online. Unfortunately, there will continue to be conflicts within this community brought upon by some transsexual individuals who feel they are "right," and as such do not like others to place them under the transgender umbrella. Therefore, it does not matter how one identifies themselves, there are still going to be conflicts because of a few transsexuals thoughts. This is what the research shows, an interesting aspect to explore further would be the percentage of transsexuals and transgender/non-binary men who feel that transgender should not be an umbrella term and if they believe this conflict is a problem. I believe the social implications of this conflict for the transgender community are very real especially for the transsexual individuals who believe society will deem them as not serious because of transgender/non-binary people. After examining these four interviews, we must acknowledge that current terminologies being used are unable to accurately represent the trans* reality, and through more participatory research with individuals who belong to this community we can hope to move towards the collective development of new terms, labels and identities.

Endnotes

- ¹ Asterisk to provide a more inclusive term where all transgender and transsexual people fit into.
- ² Pat Wojdowski and Irving B. Tebor, "Social and Emotional Tensions During Transsexual Passing," *The Journal of Sex Research* 12, no. 3 (1976).
- ³ Wojdowski and Tebor, "Transsexual Passing," 195.
- ⁴ Viviane Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism* 2nd Ed. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2011).
- ⁵ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*, 26–27.
- ⁶ Ellen D. B. Riggie et al. "The Positive Aspects of a Transgender Self-Identification," *Psychology & Sexuality* 2, no. 2 (2011): 148.
- ⁷ Megan Davidson, "Seeking Refuge Under the Umbrella: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Organizing Within the Category Transgender," *Journal of NSRC* 4, no. 4 (2007): 60.
- ⁸ Davidson, "Seeking Refuge," 60.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63–64.
- ¹¹ Katherine Johnson, "Fragmented Identities, Frustrated Politics," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2007): 109.
- ¹² Rhonda Factor and Esther Rothblum, "Exploring Gender Identity and Community Among Three Groups of Transgender Individuals in the United States: MTFs, FTMs, and Genderqueers," *Health Sociology Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 235.
- ¹³ Riki Lane "Trans as Bodily Becoming: Rethinking the Biological as Diversity, Not Dichotomy," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 136.
- ¹⁴ Lane, "Trans as Bodily Becoming," 136.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ¹⁶ Patricia Elliot "Engaging Trans Debates on Gender Variance: A Feminist Analysis," *Sexualities* 12, no. 1 (2009): 8.
- ¹⁷ Elliot, "Engaging Trans Debates," 9.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²¹ Chase Ross, "The Internal Division: One Umbrella, Two Conflicts," Unpublished. Department of Sociology, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec (2012): 3; Elliot, "Engaging Trans Debates," 13.
- ²² Elliot, "Engaging Trans Debates," 14.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 15–16.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21; Ross, "Internal Division," 3–4.
- ³⁰ Elliot, "Engaging Trans Debates," 6.
- ³¹ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*, 26–27.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ³⁷ Wojdowski and Tebor, "Transsexual Passing," 195.
- ³⁸ Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*. (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 1997), 245.
- ³⁹ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 245.
- ⁴⁰ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*, 24–25.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ Richard Ekins and Dave King, "The Emergence of New Transgendering Identities in the Age of the Internet" in *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, ed. S. Hines and T. Sanger (New York: Routledge, 2010), 31.
- ⁴⁴ Ekins and King, "New Transgendering," 31.
- ⁴⁵ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*, 26–27.
- ⁴⁶ Ekins and King, *The Emergence of New Transgendering Identities in the Age of the Internet*, 31.

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