

Thinking About the Unthinkable: Transgender in an Immutable Binary World

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Abstract: This essay discusses ways in which people attempt to reconcile or resolve their own cognitive dissonance engendered by transgender people in a society in which gender is perceived as both binary (male OR female) and immutable (an unalterable state or condition). The author suggests these cognitive dissonance reduction methods may be utilized in other situations where an adult is exposed to information that “doesn't fit” what they already know.

Much, if not most, of the time we seek to teach someone something new, they already have the cognitive scaffolding for it. It's possible to teach someone a new recipe because they've followed recipes before; this is a simple add-on, a logical expansion, to what they already know. Or take a new software program: if someone has already used a computer keyboard and function keys or pull-down menus, it isn't too hard to learn additional ways those can be used.

What's much harder to do is teach someone something that seems to contradict what they already know. When your organization is courting an age discrimination suit because one of your managers is certain that “you can't teach an old dog new tricks,” how do you budge that certainty to make room for other possibilities?

It's in the latter arena that all of my work takes place. For the past 15 years, I've communicated with literally thousands of transgender people. “Transgender” is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of gender identities and expressions, including:

1. People assigned female at birth who are now living as men (FTMs).
2. People assigned male at birth who are now living as women (MTFs).
3. People who view themselves as neither women nor men.
4. People who view themselves as both women and men.
5. People who sometimes present as the other sex, such as cross-dressers and drag queens.
6. People born intersex and thus hard to categorize. (Intersex people may be born with “ambiguous” genitalia, too small for a penis, too large for a clitoris; or a mixture of genitalia. Other types of intersex people have “normal”-looking genitalia at birth, but turn out to have “opposite sex” internal reproductive organs, an inability to process a key hormone, or an unusual chromosomal pattern. *Hermaphrodite* is an old, out-of-favor term for some intersex patterns); and
7. Just about anyone else who doesn't fit the social rules about what men and women are supposed to look like, identify as, or do (Lev, 2004).

Yet despite this wide and complex gender diversity, society teaches and continuously reinforces the belief that gender is both binary, that is, “something made up of two parts or things” (Yourdictionary.com, 2009), and immutable, that is, “an object whose state cannot be modified after it is created” (Wikipedia.com, 2009). In our society, every single one of us has a gender. Which gender we are is settled at literally the moment of our birth, if not before: one of the first things out of the doctor’s or attendant’s or other parent’s mouth is the declaration “it’s a girl!” or “it’s a boy!” Our gender is so firmly entrenched that most of us never question it (at least beyond the age of 2 or 3). Indeed, it usually doesn’t even occur to us that our gender is a label; instead, it’s what we *are*—inherently and essentially, which is one of the many reasons why transgender people fascinate and horrify so many. How can someone not be the gender they are? Isn’t that like saying you’re not human? It’s obvious, isn’t it, at least with your pants off?

Because gender in our society is ubiquitous and believed to be both binary and immutable, coping with the idea of a transgender person (even for transgender people themselves!) necessarily involves changing or sidestepping a very strongly–reinforced belief set that we’ve been hearing literally our whole lives. In this essay, I explore some of the ways people typically resolve this tension. My hope is that readers who are engaged in teaching ideas that go beyond “new” to “contradictory to what I know is true,” will recognize some of the ways their own students accept, reject, or explain away information that doesn’t “fit.”

UPHOLDING THE SYSTEM

One of the most common strategies for handling the cognitive dissonance created by transgender people in a system that insists that gender is both immutable and binary is to deny that transgender people present a contradiction. There are multiple tactics people use in order to leave the binary system firmly in place.

It’s a Birth Defect

Perhaps the most common status quo tactic used by transgender people themselves is to assert that gender is made up of more than just genitals and that one of those other (usually invisible and/or internal) components is the “real” gender marker. Exactly what the “real” component is varies. Some people believe the brain itself is gendered, describing themselves, for example, as having a “female mind in a male body.” Other people believe their spirit or soul’s gender trumps the genitals they were born with. More scientifically-inclined explanations include unusual in utero hormonal and/or medication exposures (including diethylstilbestrol), the presence of human-made hormones in the environment and/or food supply, and genetic anomalies (Ettner, 1999; Etiology of Transsexualism, 2009). Transgender people who hold the “birth defect” belief often are not comfortable living in a body that doesn’t line up with the classic binary; they want to “fix the mistake” by using hormones and undergoing surgery to bring their genitals and/or secondary sex characteristics back in line with what society says is appropriate for their gender.

There are at least three big benefits to the birth defect model. First and foremost, it accepts the transgender person’s sense of their gender. Second, it lays the groundwork for legal rights on much the same basis as rights based on race: you can’t help what you’re born as, and people should not be treated differently based on things they can’t control. Third, it preserves the “immutability” of the gender paradigm: yes, the transgender person may change his or her outward looks, but she or he has to do that in order to show who they “truly” are. The “mistake” was a discrete, human one of accidentally putting someone in the wrong gender box, not any failing of the way we conceptualize gender.

However, the birth defect model's usefulness is limited. If a transgender person can't afford to get genital surgery or--even more confusingly--does not *want* genital surgery, is she or he still the gender they claim to be? Some answer "yes", others answer "no". The birth defect explanation also does not accommodate those who don't believe they fall neatly into either the "female" or "male" camps. Indeed, these binary renegades may be incomprehensible and even reprehensible to transgender and non-transgender people who fully endorse the binary gender system.

The Penis Trumps

A variation of the above tactic is to choose one visible body part as the marker of gender and ignore the rest. A remarkable number of individuals, both transgender and non-transgender, use the penis. Both MTF and FTM transgender people (and their partners) are routinely asked whether the transgender person does or does not have a penis. (This, by the way, is a *very* rude question that should never be asked of a transgender person or their partner, unless you are negotiating a sexual encounter and/or are willing to "show and tell" yourself.) While some people are willing to accept penis-less (trans)men and (trans)women who still have a penis, the fact that this question seems to be the one most commonly asked of *both* MTFs and FTMs points to the penis being an extremely important--perhaps *the* most important--gender marker. To have one is to be male; to not have one is to be female. Breasts, vulvas, vaginas, facial hair...no other gender marker carries the same discriminatory weight.

Interestingly, the dialogues on transgender listservs are replete with MTFs who adhere to this belief set, stating that MTFs aren't "really" women unless and until they have their genitals surgically altered. In part because the surgeries to create penises are not yet very satisfactory visually or functionally, FTMs are far less likely to view the presence of a penis as the marker of their maleness. Instead, FTMs tend to view the removal of breasts and creation of a male-looking chest as their physical marker of maleness. Either way, undergoing surgery in order to validate your gender is problematic, not least because most transgender-related surgeries are not covered by insurance, thereby shackling this marker to income and class. In addition, the surgery-as-gender-marker approach invalidates those transgender people who believe their gender identity is not threatened by body parts that aren't congruent with social expectations (i.e., who don't *want* surgery).

You Are Not in Your Right Mind

Another tactic for "explaining" transgender people while leaving the gender binary unquestioned is to simply believe that transgender people are mentally ill or at least deluded, a situation some describe as "confusing mental illness with rights" (Kineke, 2007, 1). Regarding a recent high-publicity case, one commentator said, "there is no 'pregnant man' ... there is only a confused and unsettled woman who proclaims that surgery, hormones and clothing made her a man, and is clinging to that fiction even as the baby growing in her womb announces her womanhood to the world" (Rogers, 2008, 8). A religious variation is to label the transgender person "possessed" (Arrishie, 2007, 8). Particularly if the transgender person is young, observers may call their gender identity a "stage" or "phase," believing the child or youth will "grow out of it" (Laura's Playground, 2009, 1).

Obviously, this approach completely invalidates the transgender person's gender identity. However, it also has more global consequences: it tends to invalidate *everything* about the transgender person. After all, if you're so crazy you don't even know your gender, everything you say or do may be wrong or untrustworthy. The potential implications of this stance are easy to imagine.

You Don't Exist

A more forceful and permanent way to eliminate the cognitive challenge presented by transgender people is to banish the transgender person, excluding him or her or *hir* (a pronoun sometimes used by people who do not see themselves as *either* male or female) from one's life and/or thoughts. Many transgender people report "losing" family members, friends, and jobs when they announce that they are transitioning to be the other gender or are adopting an androgynous or "third" gender presentation and/or identity. In general, family and friend relationships are valued and believed to be long-lasting, and most seem to survive changes of wardrobe and name. So why is it that transgender people cannot count on ties of blood and affection to keep their loved ones attached to them as they go through a gender change? The likely culprit is the distressed loved one's allegiance to the gender binary. They may be unwilling to have a same-gender partnership or an opposite-gender friendship. If they are a parent, they may be unwilling to see their "son" become a "daughter." If they are the transgender person's child, they may be unwilling to trade their "mother" for a "father." More generally, they may be unwilling to engage in the cognitive work of resolving the identity of their loved one with the societal dictum that gender comes in two unchangeable flavors.

Variations of this tactic include banning the transgender person from family gatherings unless the person dresses and grooms in line with their original gender assignment. Some families compromise by allowing the transgender person to see adult relatives, but not children, who would be "confused" or "corrupted" by knowing someone who changed genders or does not fit into one of the two gender boxes. The irony of banning transgender people from contact with children is that those of us who actually have children universally report that young children have no problem whatsoever accepting the fact that a person has changed or is changing from one gender to the other, is a "girl in a boy's body," or even is "part boy and part girl." While even very young children have been taught to distinguish one gender from another, it takes many years to understand that girls are always supposed to grow up to be women and vice versa. It is always the adults, struggling with reconciling a transgender identity with their beliefs about gender, who are the confused ones. (Adolescents are a different case. Dealing with their own gender, sexuality, and separation issues, they often struggle with a parent who is newly "out" about being transgender.)

This tactic is among the most painful to the transgender person and robs the loved one of not only the chance to wrestle with the cognitive complications transgender people pose, but also of the guidance and support of the one person who may be most helpful in that endeavor. It also may set up a whole chain of negative effects, including providing a model or encouragement for other people to abandon the transgender person, contributing to a society in which it is viewed as normal and permissible to discriminate against transgender persons (after all, customers may decide to take their business away if it becomes known the business employs a transgender person), validating the perception that "being different" is (or should be) a cause for rejection and loss of rights and depriving everyone of life-saving human connections and support. It may also contribute to the high rate of suicide among transgender people.

SIDESTEPPING THE QUESTION

Another major strategy for handling the tension created by a transgender person when measured against the immutable binary paradigm is to refer to a *third* value or party and let that person or value decide the issue.

I Bow to Authority

Some people yield their opinion to a higher authority. These individuals may say a person's "real gender" is recorded on their birth certificate or driver's license or ask what a "doctor has determined." By using this strategy, the person essentially argues that the issue is too complex for mere mortals: an expert or official should have the last word.

Interestingly, medical doctors who follow the widely-used Benjamin Standards of Care for transgender people (Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, 2001) bow to the higher authority of mental health therapists: doctors who prescribe hormones or perform gender-related surgery are urged to obtain and review one or two letters from mental health professionals. These letters detail how long the professional has treated the patient and reassure the doctor that the mental health professional concurs with the patient's desire and suitability for hormonal and/or surgical treatment.

Step Outside the System

Another way people resolve the transgender/immutable gender binary contradiction is by stepping outside of it and referencing another culture's belief system. There is thus a lot of interest in the transgender community in learning about cultures that have (or had) more than two genders, such as the *Hijras* of India or the *berdache* of certain Native American tribes (Lev, 2004). A growing number of transgender people describe themselves as *two-spirit*, another Native American concept that permits a person to contain both female and male "spirits." In a somewhat related way, some transgender people call their gender exploration a "spiritual journey," suggesting that matters of spirit or soul trump more mundane, culturally-bound concepts like binary gender (Lev, 2004).

Trumping Values

Some individuals, particularly young people or activists who have long histories fighting prejudice, reflexively resolve the transgender dilemma by choosing the individual over the social norm. The cognitive structures these individuals may use include celebrating self-actualization (the transgender person is clearly living out their personal values), self-determination (people have a right to identify themselves however they want), and celebrating diversity (of course people come in a wide variety of flavors!). In the case of my (FTM) partner's parents, their acceptance was complete and immediate due to their guiding value that family is forever, and good parents support their children: if this made him happy, they were on board.

Role Models

Having a “transgender” category and/or role models—for example, the entertainer RuPaul, Sonny and Cher’s child Chaz Bono, or one of the small but growing number of transgender characters in movies and television shows—can also foster quick acceptance. One of the reasons why young adults are more likely to grant immediate acceptance is that gay-straight alliances in high schools and colleges often talk about transgender people. Therefore, learning that someone you know is transgender is no longer as shocking as it might be to someone who’d never heard of someone changing their gender.

Interestingly, acceptance of a transgender person’s identity may even be seen as confirmation of gender stereotypes. One of my correspondents said that in her experience, her transgender friends all fit the stereotypes. Even before they transitioned from one gender to the other, FTMs liked “guy” things like sports and fast cars and MTFs liked “girl” things like the color pink, dressing up, and cooking.

Choosing One Binary Over Another

For many people, gender and sexual orientation are joined at the hip. Men are attracted to women, and women are attracted to men. If you are gay or lesbian or bisexual, something is wrong with you. People who subscribe to this paradigm often choose to see a gender transition as a “correction” that brings gender and sexual orientation back into their correct alignment. These people – some of who are themselves transgender – cannot understand an MTF who is attracted to women (and therefore appears to be lesbian) or an FTM who is attracted to gay or bisexual men. This assumption actually guided professionals’ approach to transgender people for many decades: people were denied access to hormones and/or surgery if they were attracted to people of the same gender they were becoming (Meyerowitz, 2002).

Image is Everything

Another group of people value appearance over identity. These people accept FTMs as male if they are balding and have a beard and reject the femaleness of MTFs if they have large hands or Adam’s apples. The power of appearance can be tremendous: one FTM reported that his co-workers said they literally “forgot” he had carried a child to term. He seemed so masculine that they could not “remember” the information that he had once been female. Other people, learning of a transperson’s gender history, fixate on physical characteristics they are convinced are leftovers from the transperson’s original gender. In some cases, these observers begin having problems with pronouns and the like, even if they never knew the person before their gender transition.

Follow the Leader

Many people, confronted with something totally new, look first to others’ reactions, checking to see if others seem to think there’s danger, something to laugh at, or something to ignore. This reflex is often pointed out to those who are planning how to “come out” (disclose) that they are transgender: “model the reaction you want them to have.” People tend to follow the emotional cues displayed by the confider. If the confider is confident and happy, people are likely to be congratulatory. If, on the other hand, the confider conveys fear or distress (even if their fear is that the listener will disapprove), their listeners are more likely to respond negatively. This seems particularly true for the close loved ones of transgender people, who are routinely cautioned to be very careful in choosing with whom to discuss their early, conflictual feelings

about their loved one's recent transgender disclosure. Friends of partners, parents, or adult children of transgender people are far more likely to be negative about the transgender person's identity if they have witnessed the news upsetting someone they care about. This is often the origin of the "how can you do this to your family?" allegations sometimes thrown at transgender people.

It's important to note that many of these strategies accommodate only those transgender people who move from one of the two boxes to the other one. People who carve out a new gender for themselves instead of choosing one of society's two available boxes often evoke even more distress and opposition. There are simply fewer tools available to "make sense of" them short of dismantling the whole binary gender system. This is why people who are visibly transgender--who don't clearly fit into either the "female" or "male" category, whether they choose to be visibly different or are forced to because of circumstances beyond their control--are far more likely to be the victims of hate crimes.

OVERTHROWING THE SYSTEM

A third, and probably the least-used, strategy for resolving the transgender/binary gender dilemma is to throw out the social norm altogether. In my case, my partner's transition from female-to-male hit hard. Despite our nine years together, my ideology and background (which included an undergraduate degree in women's studies and a decade and a half's experience as a lesbian activist) trumped. When I imagined my partner as male, I saw not the person I'd been living with for all those years, but a strange man created wholly out of my own stereotypes. Realizing that this viewpoint was causing us both much trouble, and fueled even more by the subsequent birth of a "male" child, I was motivated to begin systematically questioning and dismantling every gender stereotype I came across. This process, now 16 years along, has gotten to a point where even "male" and "female" restrooms incense me, evoking the same rage and horror most of us now feel about "coloreds" and "whites" restroom and water fountain signs. Like those who have repudiated the old belief set that "races" of people are inherently different, I've come to believe there are no inherent differences between men and women, and that research studies that "prove" the opposite are emphasizing the tail ends of bell curves and ignoring the vast majority of us in the middle bulge, who vary from each other on individual bases far more than on gender ones (Eliot, 2009).

But then I've always gone against the majority grain, which is part of the point of this essay. How individuals choose to handle new ideas or examples that contradict widely-held cultural "givens" depends on many factors, including the availability of other schemas or role models, how much they value or reject conformity with social norms, and how the information is initially presented to them. Reconciling the existence of transgender people with the dominant immutable binary construct is just a particularly vivid and compelling example of the much more mundane process that everyone must go through to integrate information that--initially, at least--seems to contradict what they already know.

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