



Research Paper

Conceptualisation of Transgender

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The term 'Transgender' is often referred to a person who experiences their gender as a man or woman, despite having been assigned a male or female at birth based on anatomy. It is used as an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity doesn't correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth in the socially expected way. Many people's identities could be best understood as transgender and/ or third gender (in the Indian context), in that transgender is an all-encompassing term that brings together many of the other gender identities together. Thus, it can be understood as an umbrella term as it can be used in a constructive way to bring together all of the diverse gender identities and create a sense of group cohesion as it can be instrumental in obtaining civil rights as they can be much more effective than another identity (so is the case in India where we now have the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019).

However, the identity label "transgender" is troublesome because it's often mischaracterized as describing "a woman trapped in a man's body" and vice versa, which is not only a damaging way to view gender and sex, but also an incredibly generalizing way to convey a term that is used to describe people of diverse gender individual identities and experiences.

As an identity label, individuals who solely identify as transgender (or trans) have many different interpretations of what this means. For some, it's interchangeable with the identity label "non-binary" (meaning a person who neither identifies as man nor woman); for others, it has elements of genderfluid or genderqueer (another label that is often interchangeable with transgender, when used as a specific identity label). (Killermann, 2017)

Thus, it is key to understand that the anthropological and ethnographic studies of gender dovetailed with the emerging feminist thought in the mid-to-later part of the Twentieth Century not only to present gender as culturally contingent or an object of social construction, but also served to denaturalise the notion of gender as commonly known, and critique the articulation of power as gender is enacted on a daily basis. The framing of transgender remains nevertheless underpinned by the compulsion of gender.

Richard Ekins and Dave King employ a different approach grounded in theory to provide not only what appears to be an objective, but also a comprehensive study of transgender. With data gathered from mostly urban Western contexts, they conceptualise transgender as a social phenomenon, consisting of a multitude of transgenerating processes. They name these modes and processes "transgenerating", vis-à-vis gendering, believing it is "useful to think of gender not as something which people have, but to see the production of a gendered social identity as an on-going accomplishment; something which is constantly being done," which explains the continuous suffix-ing. Gendering thus refers to the "processes whereby a person is constituted as gendered on an everyday basis". Cultures which recognise only two genders see two processes of gendering – maling and femaling. Such a culture of gender would normally expect a correspondence of biology and behaviour. Ekins and King favour the term transgenerating to represent the contravention of this rule when a male „females“ or when a female „males“.(Ekins & King, 2006, pp. 33)

With gendering and transgenerating derived from this binary model, Ekins and King propose four modes of transgenerating. Their grounded theory approach, comprising in-depth interviews over three decades, confirms that the various processes of transgenerating occur within and between these four modes. (Ekins & King, 2006, pp. 34). They rename these transgenerating modes as stories – stories of migrating, oscillating, negating and

transcending. In each mode of transgenering, all the five processes of erasing, substituting, concealing, implying and redefining are said to be present and varyingly overlapping. Among these five processes, one would be the most dominant and definitive of the mode of transgenering. They are captured in Table 1.

Table 1: Modes of Transgenering

Story	Erasing	Substituting	Concealing	Implying	Redefining
Migrating	Present	Dominant	Present	Present	Present
Oscillating	Present	Present	Present	Dominant	Present
Negating	Dominant	Present	Present	Present	Present
Transcending	Present	Present	Present	Present	Dominant

Ekins and King’s taxonomisation of transgender accounts for most processes of transgenering, including transsexing. Each mode of transgenering accounts for how one’s gender identity is managed and defined. In the mode of migrating, one’s gender and sex is most noticeably substituted for that of the opposite (e.g. a male-bodied person having a penectomy, breast implants and vaginoplasty). This mode could also involve, in varying degrees, one, the erasure of the identity markers of sex (via hormonal and surgical intervention) and gender (via clothes and behaviour); two, the concealment of one’s sex, gender and past as a means to pass; three, the implication of one’s sex and gender identity (via clothes and behaviour); and four, the redefining of one’s identity with respect to his/her original physiology. Most post-operative transsexuals who live permanently in one gender (i.e. living as a man or woman) would tell a story of migration.

Stories of oscillation would be told mainly by different varieties of crossdressers, who temporarily occupy other gender categories. Stories of negation are, according to Ekins and King, more difficult to detect, but best describe the process of “un-gendering” which precedes gender migration. (Ekins & King, 2006, pp. 142–180) These are the stories that trouble binary gender as subjects nullify their masculinity/femininity and maleness/femaleness. Persons who are androgynous, pre- or non-operative transsexuals, and those who adopt and embody an ambiguous and indistinguishable collage of mix-gender/sex markers, present examples of “un-gendering”, whether temporarily or permanently. The story of negation also overlaps the story of transcending as “un-gendering” is present. The story of transcending slightly differs as it characteristically involves the redefinition of gender, or “re-gendering”. Ekins and King single out Kate Bornstein’s Gender Outlaw as a prime example of the story of transcending. These are stories of people who identify with and embody new sets of behaviours, roles, attitudes and aesthetics, which otherwise do not find any place within the binary gender divide. They not only occur as narratives, but also in performance, theory and politics, with a view to address and resist “gender oppression”. (Ekins & King, 2006, pp. 180–184)

Bernice Hausman critiques Ekins and King’s work, pointing out that the concepts of “maling” and “femaling” are premised on established categories of sex, gender and sexuality. Hausman believes such grounded theory and sociological work should be “steeped in a critical cultural perspective”, and that the structure of transgenering should be understood “through a critical lens that uses (these) categories to raise questions about social structures and identities.” In short, she was less than convinced their grounded theory approach to transgender could be used, if at all, for social critique. (Hausman, 2001, pp. 468) Nevertheless, Ekins and King should be noted for their contributions to the sociology of transgender. While they may have replicated ontological views on gender and sex (as Hausman charges), with observations of transgender enframed by the insistence on binarism, they make transgender studies accessible to transgender people and laypersons alike.

Echoing Stone’s call for authentic transgender articulation of identity, Susan Stryker recounts her self-conscious performance of queer gender at an interdisciplinary conference, a reflection that opened her paper “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.” (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, pp. 244–256). She identified as – and also embodied – a male-to-female transsexed leatherdyke lesbian. The fact that there remains a single noun that could capture and explain her identity reveals how problematic (the English) language is in accommodating gender variant queer identities and traits. Stryker provides a conscious literal interpretation of Judith Butler’s concept of performance. As gendered traits are normalised and naturalised through social processes, wherein certain known combinations infer a culturally recognised gender, a social order is created based on this dichotomy. In Stryker’s case, not to be mistaken for an attention-seeking act, she threw a spanner in the gender works and jammed the conventional discourse on

transsexuals.

Stryker likens the transsexual to that of the literary Doctor Frankenstein's monster. The Mary Shelley story follows the journey of the man-made monstrosity who is more than what its creator has intended, resulting in its rejection and exile. It is during the period of its exile that the monster acquires the ability of language, communication and an understanding of culture from observations of human society. It becomes self-aware through its observations of the De Lacey family, and attempts to befriend them. However, its appearance frightens the family and they attack him. This fills the monster with rage as it seeks vengeance against its creator. It eventually returns to confront its creator and tell its story to him, not before killing those who are close to him.

Like the monster, the transsexual is an unnatural creation of the biomedical establishment. The transsexual is diagnosed, described, medicalised, pathologised and labelled by "experts" whose labels are taken up by society, and who is well aware of his/her difference from earliest memory. The transsexual is dehumanised through these frames and labels, but acquires his/her sense of identity and being from observing the gendered behaviours and mannerisms of the society that oppresses him/her/them (c.f the monster's acquiring its sense of humanity by observing and learning the ways of society). Similar to the case of the monster and its relationship with the human community, the very tools and cultural cues of normal society required for the articulation of transsexual/transgender identity and the potential for liberation are located well within an oppressive gendered domain they inhabit. Stryker inserts herself into the role of the monster and explains, like monster, she now knows the history of her creation – the transsexual biomedical creation – and how the scientific convention continues to "contain and colonize the radical threat posed by a particular transgender strategy of resistance to the coerciveness of gender." (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, pp. 249).

As with Frankenstein's monster, the transsexual monstrosity has to deal with its pathologisation, having its lived experiences and feelings dismissed as "emotional disorder" and "diseased", a sentiment shared by Stone on the perceived emotional and intellectual inferiority of transsexuals. Furthermore, it is the seemingly inescapable nature of language that restricts and perpetuates the articulation of material reality, from which emerges what Stryker coins "transgender rage". It is the inability to follow the norms of gendered embodiment plus society's rejection that drives this rage. However, this rage also provides the means for the "disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions." (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, pp. 253).

Stryker's metaphor of the monster also resonates with the realities faced by transgender people within wider LGBT communities dominated by gay/lesbian/bisexual-centric politics and discourses, privileging and prioritising narratives of normalised sexuality built upon the emphasis and insistence of gender as the indivisible denominator. This has resulted, in carefully calibrated transgender articulations within the LGBT community, indicative of the transgender monstrosity observing the codes of the community and acquiring the "culture" and "language" necessary – accurate or not – for articulation of identity.

Combining theory and activism, Stryker suggests that transgender, gender variant and gender queer people should seize the opportunity to rearticulate themselves and (dis)associate/identify with their respective gendered milieu. The inescapability of this discursive order can be negotiated with the transgender mobility through it. Like Frankenstein's monster, the transgendered has long observed the workings of gendered society and it is now time for them to speak up. (Sam & Hoofd, 2010, pp. 87-90)

Thus, even with the wide range of its conceptualisation through theory, it is key to understand as Telyn Kusalik suggests in Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman's book *Gender Outlaws* that one can feel uncomfortable in identity-based spaces, even spaces that make a particular effort to be inclusive of one's identity. Hence, she emphasises on creating a culture which focuses on gendered experience rather than identity. She also suggests that we could talk about our sexual orientation in terms of what gender presentations we are attracted to rather than what identities we are attracted to. We could describe our friends and acquaintances to others using their experiences rather than using identity categories they belong to and move away from thinking about things in terms of identity, towards a paradigm based upon experience. (Bornstein & S Bear Bergman, 2010, pp. 53-58).

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