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## TEACHING TRANSGENDER\*

*The recent visibility of transgender lives demonstrates the dawning of a new period in the potential to include transgender topics in sociology courses. The focus on transgender individuals, communities, and inclusive initiatives are gaining momentum on many public and private college and university campuses, awakening old and new curiosities, igniting student activists and advocates everywhere. Such developments provide an important opportunity for instructors who are motivated to create trans-friendly syllabi, courses, and classrooms. In this article, we briefly explore how transgender people have been used to teach sociological concepts and provide strategies to positively integrate transgender communities into the classroom. Ultimately, we intend this article to show new and more sensitive ways to include transgender experiences into a wide range of sociological courses.*

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THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION began publishing *Teaching Sociology* in 1973. The first piece with “sex” in its title was published in 1976 (Levinson, “An Encounter with Sex Discrimination”). The first articles with “gender” in their titles were published in 1983 in the same issue (Curry and Clarke’s “Developing Visual Literacy: Use of Magazine Advertisements Depicting Gender Roles” and Hess and Grant’s “Prime-Time Television and Gender-Role Behavior”). These early articles reflect the contemporary conceptualization of sex and gender as role based, while later articles place gender in the context of social inequality and/or a social constructionist perspective.

By the mid 1980s, reflecting changes in the field, “gender” had largely supplanted

“sex” in titles (or was used in combination, as in Berheide and Segal’s “Teaching Sex and Gender: A Decade of Experience” [1985] and Harvey’s “Some Reasonable Goals for Sex and Gender Roles Courses” [1986]). In total, the journal has published 30 articles about teaching sociology of sex/gender in 33 years (through volume 35 [2007], issue 3). “Women” or “men” appear in the titles of fewer than ten additional articles in this content area. Surprisingly, few—just four if we include those with “sex,” “gender,” “men” or “women” in the title—have been published since 2000.

While transgender<sup>1</sup> individuals and issues have become increasingly visible in contemporary U.S. society, as well as in other sub-

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\*Without the promotion and support of transgender inclusion by Professor Betsy Lucal, the Teaching Transgender workshop presented at ASA and this article would not be possible. Please address all correspondence to Tre Wentling, Department of Sociology, 302 Maxwell Hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244; email: [tlwentli@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:tlwentli@maxwell.syr.edu).

<sup>1</sup>Transgender is an umbrella term that describes many people who transcend “normative” embodiments of masculine and feminine, including transsexuals, crossdressers, drag queens and kings, genderqueers, and other gender variant people. Most misuse transgender synonymously with transsexual, which identifies people whose gender identity conflicts with their ascribed gender, and they may take hormones and/or undergo surgery.

fields of sociology, this change is not reflected in sociologists' scholarship on teaching. No articles with "transgender" or "transsexuality" in the title or abstract have ever been published in *Teaching Sociology*. Similarly, until 2007, topics related to transgender were invisible at ASA's meetings. The 2007 workshop is the source of the content for this piece, and it was the first organized and delivered at the ASA meetings that explicitly focused on teaching transgender.

In this article, we briefly explore how the lives of transgender people historically have been used to teach sociological concepts. We then provide pedagogical strategies for integrating transgender representations into the classroom. Ultimately, we intend to show new and more sensitive ways to include transgender experiences in a wide range of sociological courses.

### FOUNDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

#### *Earlier Sociological Conceptions*

Historically, transgender persons have been included in sociological curriculum to demonstrate the social construction of gender (Garfinkel 1967; Lorber 1994, 1996, 2005), explain the differences between the binary categories of sex and gender (Kessler and McKenna 1978), the concepts of "doing gender" (Messner 2000; West and Zimmerman 1987) and "gender display" (Goffman 1976). Most recently, the inclusion of medicalized intersexed<sup>2</sup> bodies has furthered the argument that sex and gender categories are social constructs (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kessler 1990; Preves 2003), while deconstructionist techniques posit gender performativity to expand and challenge these theories (Butler 1990; Halberstam 1998). Yet transgender inclusion in these areas warrant close examination in the classroom, where

<sup>2</sup>Intersex, replacing the term hermaphrodite, refers to people born with sex characteristics (i.e., chromosomes, reproductive organs, and genitalia) that do not "fit" standard definitions of "male" or "female" sex categories.

it is important to first examine personal attitudes, and second be familiar with evolving terminology before introducing transgender topics.

#### *Assessing Pedagogical and Personal Values*

As a whole, academics' uses of transgender subjects to illustrate gender theories have been problematic and often tokenizing. Frequently, transgender people are held more accountable for upholding the gender binary than non-transgender, or cisgender,<sup>3</sup> people. A first step in teaching about transgender is to honestly assess personal viewpoints by critically examining the ways we construct and teach our courses. For example, consider what texts have been useful in the preparation to teach transgender, how they have discussed transgender topics, and if they were authored by transgender people. Perhaps more insightful is exposure to transgender communities. Minimally, identify personal acceptance of gender fluidity and diversity within transgender communities. The short essays, "How to Be an Ally to Transgender and Intersex People" (Beemyn N.d.) and "Action Steps for Being a Trans Ally" (Lurie 2007) provide tips for increasing transgender sensitivity and are useful aids in ascertaining familiarity with basic transgender issues.

#### *Terminology(ies) and Identity(ies)*

Teaching transgender presents numerous opportunities to explore issues related to defining terminology and identity. Of course, no universal resource exists with finite and uncontested transgender classifications. The increasing visibility and political gains of transgender communities have sparked evolutions in language used to describe this diverse group. Any discussion that attempts to define the terms beneath the transgender umbrella should first offer the caveat that putting labels on and creating boundaries around identities is a politicized practice that can be a difficult, awkward

<sup>3</sup>Cisgender refers to a person who is not transgender.

and exclusionary process. For a simple compilation of terms beneath this umbrella, which is by no means exhaustive, see “Transgender Terminology” (Beemyn N.d.). In the classroom, it makes sense to introduce such terms by explaining that they are also reifying.

When incorporating transgender terminology, it is important to recognize current contextualizations of these terms. Scholars have documented gender-bending behaviors and practices throughout history and across cultures (Feinberg 1996; Lev 2004), which can be helpful for students to read about. However, it is inaccurate to impose a retrospective “transgender” label on these pre-modern and non-Western practices (Cromwell 1999; Feinberg 1996). Remember, transgender identities can be “raced” and “classed” like other aspects of gender studies. Avoid relying exclusively on the stories of white transwomen<sup>4</sup> by seeking out texts that emphasize experiences reflecting the diversity within transgender communities. Recent works on under-represented communities such as transmen,<sup>5</sup> gender-queers, crossdressers, drag kings and queens, and trans people of color provide refreshing perspectives (see “Supplemental Bibliography for Teaching about Transgender Topics” [hereafter referred to as SBTTT] at <http://mypage.iusb.edu/~blucal/transgender.html>). In addition, queer and trans youth have created innovative terms (Marech 2004). Students may be more familiar with this less formal language and can greatly contribute to this discussion.

Above all, when teaching transgender it is imperative to avoid stereotyping transgender people. Transgender communities and lives are as diverse and heterogeneous as any other population, and should be taught accordingly. Transgender people’s gender expressions are no more responsible for the persistence of the gender binary than the gender expressions of cisgender people.

<sup>4</sup>Transwomen are people who were assigned male at birth but identify as female.

<sup>5</sup>Transmen are people who were assigned female at birth but identify as male.

Consider discussing the ways that transgender language, identities, expressions, and communities contribute to and challenge mainstream gender studies.

### *Who Is a Transgender “Expert”?*

There are no hard and fast rules about who counts as a transgender “expert.” However, it is important to include works by actual transgender people, rather than relying only on sociological and psychological studies. Since the mid 1990s, there has been a sharp increase in academic and non-academic texts by transgender people (see SBTTT). Many of these works critically evaluate the theoretical conceptions of gender that use transgender gender crossing as their building blocks, such as Prosser’s (1998) critique of Butler’s theory of performativity or Namaste’s (2000) critique of Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological theory of gender. These critical assessments provide a much-needed counter opinion to theoretical work that draws on the concept of transgender people with little consideration of their actual lived experiences. Students can learn a great deal about power, theory construction, social movements, and identity politics from reading these opposing views.

When assigning social science research about transgender people, consider the time period in which the research was conducted, the framing of transgender lives that appears in the research, and the position of the researcher toward transgender people. Assigning historical texts can be constructive to student learning, as they illuminate how academic and popular conceptions of transsexual and transgender people have shifted. However, much of the social science research on transgender (or, at the time, transsexual) people that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s can be construed from today’s perspective as pathologizing. A good example of this is Raymond’s *Transsexual Empire* (1979), an argumentative diatribe which states that transwomen are attempting to colonize women’s bodies in order to take over women’s spaces. Raymond is espousing a particular construction

of transsexual people that is linked with some branches of 1970s lesbian feminism (see Rubin 2003). If using Raymond (1979), we recommend assigning a transsexual response, such as Stone's (1991) article, "The Empire Strikes Back."

### *Be Prepared to Answer these Questions*

Introducing students to transgender subject matter for the first time is likely to generate a great variety of questions. Even if students have some familiarity, it may only be drawn from scattered images of transgender people in popular culture—particularly from sensationalistic talk shows. One of the most difficult tasks is sorting through the questions to determine those that are valid versus those that are exoticizing or voyeuristic. As transgender students may be in the class (whether this is known or not), it is important to create and maintain comfortable and safe classroom environments for all students.<sup>6</sup>

One particularly troublesome area is questions about transgender bodies. A strategy for addressing this interest is to provide a detailed, clinical overview of the possibilities for transgender surgical interventions. Students are then armed with a cursory knowledge of the bodily transformations that some transgender people make. Students also can be given a list of resources for learning more on their own, such as the books *Body Alchemy* (Cameron 1996) and *The Phallus Palace* (Kotula 2002). There should be, however, an end point to the discussion about transgender bodies—unless this is the focus of the lecture—so students realize that further questions will be considered unconstructive contributions to class discussion.

If instructors intend to bring a transgender guest speaker to class, discuss with the guest beforehand what types of questions, if any, are appropriate to ask about the guest's

own body or transgender bodies in general. Then, prepare students before the lecture, letting them know what questions are appropriate or inappropriate for the speaker. If you, as an instructor are transgender or genderqueer, consider your own willingness to answer these types of questions. Articles about coming out as a gay/lesbian/bisexual instructor offer a variety of perspectives on self-disclosure from which transgender or genderqueer instructors might benefit as they consider their own classroom practices (e.g., Gibson, Marinara and Meem 2000; Khayatt 1999; Lucal and Miller 2007; Silin 1999). Setting up the confines of the discussion in this way can eliminate "other-izing" transgender people by focusing exclusively on how their bodies may differ from cisgender people. MacNevin's (2004) piece on "Embodying Sociological Mindfulness" provides a useful discussion of issues and opportunities related to bringing a sociological perspective on bodies into the classroom.

How gender identity relates to sexual identity is another area frequently broached by students learning about transgender lives for the first time. Before entering a discussion that addresses transgender topics, be sure that students have a clear grasp on the distinctions between gender identity (what gender you feel yourself to be) and sexual identity (who you are attracted to). Students often want to know how to define transgender people's sexual identity after a gender transition. A typical question is, "If a heterosexual man transitions to become a woman, is she a lesbian?" The answer should highlight sexual categories as social constructions and their lived complexities. Perhaps it also points to the arbitrary nature of sexual categories, making room for sexual identity as a personal decision. These questions certainly raise the potential to address identity politics, identity categorizations, and heteronormativity. However, like the body questions, these should have a clear ending point so the entire class period is not spent answering questions about the sexual identities of different, hypothetical

<sup>6</sup>Rosenbloom and Fetner's (2001) "Sharing Secrets Slowly" examines how student self-disclosure with respect to sensitive issues can be managed in the classroom.

configurations of transgender people.

A final area of questions concerns the etiology of “gender identity disorder.” Students typically ask questions about whether decisions to transition are biological or cultural—the nature vs. nurture argument. The honest answer is that these are on-going debates with little scientific evidence on either side. A better strategy, however, can be to bring this question back to a sociological perspective. The question becomes how transgender people are treated in society and how they socially accomplish the transition from their birth gender to their desired gender. This technique also works with questions about how transgender people fit within christianity. Drawing on social construction frameworks, clarify that students will be examining transgender lives from a sociological perspective, not debating whether transgender people have a right to exist.

#### **TRANSGENDER TOPICS IN A VARIETY OF COURSES**

There is a plethora of opportunities to integrate transgender topics in general sociology courses. For instance, teaching about subcultures and countercultures provides an opportunity for students to investigate how transgender communities fit into these core sociological concepts. Using transgender websites for this topic is helpful, actively engaging students in their pursuit to identify values, norms, and traditions. Assign students to compare and contrast a transgender community with another subculture. Similarly, teaching about formal organizations presents an excellent occasion to involve different transgender organizations for analysis (see SBT TT).

Topics of social inequality and social stratification can highlight employment discrimination among transgender persons (Broadus 2006); for example, consider that only 37 percent of all people live in U.S. jurisdictions that ban discrimination based on gender identity or expression (National Center for Transgender Equality, [\[quality.org\]\(http://quality.org\)\). These subjects can also address gender visibility and privilege at work \(Schilt 2006\).](http://ncte</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

The video, *Toilet Training* (2003), easily fosters an in-class discussion and writing assignment concerning the routine discrimination, harassment, and violence that gender variant people face when accessing public bathrooms. Try an experiential project that requires students to use single-occupancy or all-gender bathrooms for one day. Students should then write a paper describing the experience (e.g., finding and using them, responses from peers, co-workers, and family) as well as explaining the roles social institutions play in sex-segregated facilities. (De Welde and Hubbard’s [2003] discussion of heterosexual students’ emotional responses to a “coming out” project provides a useful examination of the issues associated with such experiential assignments.)

Social institutions, particularly the family and health care, can regularly incorporate transgender communities. Sociology of Family courses can embrace transgender youth (see Beam 2007 for a journalistic account), transgender families (Califia-Rice 2000; Howey 2002), the policies affecting transgender parents (Flynn 2006), and the ways transgender sex/gender classifications challenge laws against “same-sex” marriage. The activity devised by O’Brien and Foley (1999), which demonstrates the primary models of mate selection, can simply be adapted by asking students to imagine a transgender-identified partner for the exercise. As suggested by the authors, require students to describe their participation in the activity and the reaction of their classmates in a formal written assignment. Finally, Sociology of Health and Medicine courses can address the barriers that transgender persons experience within the health care system (Hussey 2006). Concerning medical transition, these classes may also interrogate the disparate regulatory processes that transgender consumers of medical body modification must endure compared to cisgender people. Also, courses can raise the struc-

tural forces shaping the high rates of HIV/AIDS among transgender people (Clements-Nolle et al. 2001; Kenagy 2002, 2005).

Issues of social control and social regulation present the promise of adding transgender literature and experiences. For example, Joan Nestle et al. (2002) and Mattilda, a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore (2006), have published edited volumes presenting examples of agency, resistance, and subversion employed by some transgender people. These texts highlight the formal and informal sanctions some gender variant persons experience. And to elaborate on transgender resistance to social control, inform students about the transgender involvement in gay liberation.

One outcome of social control and regulation, particularly for transgender communities, is physical violence. Lombardi et al. (2001) document both alarming rates of harassment and physical violence, as well as strong associations between economic discrimination and incidents of violence. Discussions may address whether the U.S. fosters a transphobic environment and how the culture itself, structurally, poses health risks for transgender communities (Clements-Nolle, Marx and Katz 2006). Challenge students to investigate the (potentially) fatal realities of transgender existence, and why certain crimes against populations go undetected, unreported, and not officially recorded (see *Remembering Our Dead*, <http://www.rememberingourdead.org/>).

Finally, another outcome of formal social control is imprisonment. Many transgender people experience economic discrimination and some may participate in "criminal acts" to survive. Poor and low-income transwomen of color, in particular, are routinely imprisoned (see *Trans/Gender Variant in Prison Committee* <http://www.prisons.org/TIP.htm> and *TGI Justice Project* <http://www.tgijp.org/>). Consider the social constructions of crime and their impact on particular communities. Facilitate debates about transgender prisoners' rights, raising the right to be housed in a facility consistent with one's

gender identity, the right to access hormones or surgeries, and the right to safe sleeping accommodations while incarcerated. Question whether or not transgender-sensitivity training should be required for all prison guards and staff (see *Cruel and Unusual* 2006). Finally, require students to create a hypothetical interview schedule for a local jail or prison representative about the policies regarding transgender inmates.

These suggestions present only a starting point to the numerous opportunities there are to integrate transgender lives into sociology curriculum. Transgender communities are applicable and relevant to any course.

## CONCLUSION

Depending on the context and course within which instructors decide to teach about transgender, be sure to refer to the wide variety of articles and notes published in *Teaching Sociology* about teaching specific courses, using particular pedagogical techniques and so forth. Given space limitations, we do not review those in this article. However, the literature in *Teaching Sociology* about dealing with and responding to student responses to difficult and controversial topics is useful. Davis (1992), Hedley and Markowitz (2001) and Haddad and Lieberman (2002) all provide advice for overcoming student resistance in such contexts. Bach and Lucal's (2002) edited volume on *Managing Hostility in the Classroom* can also help to prepare instructors for the challenges of teaching about transgender issues.

The focus on transgender individuals, communities, and inclusive initiatives is gaining momentum on many public and private college and university campuses, awakening old and new curiosities, igniting student activists and advocates everywhere. We believe the numerous strategies and topics offered to integrate transgender lives and communities in positive ways will not only be rewarding for students, but for instructors, too. It is an exciting time to introduce or expand transgender curriculum in sociology courses.

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