

Dispelling Trans Myths: Trans-101 Handout

Trans women think about things other than make-up! Not all people who have penises are men! Hormones are often more important than surgery! Some people don't even want surgery! Some trans people have non-tragic lives! Come and have your mind blown.

Since this is not a "Trans 101" panel, we are providing some basic information on paper so that we can refer the audience to a handout and not take up panel time rehashing foundational issues.

Definitions and Terminology

The issue of truly inclusive trans terminology is far from settled; it a matter of active controversy within the community. Most especially, there is heated debate over what part of speech 'trans' or 'transgender' should be used as (noun, verb, adjective), and no matter which you pick, there are trans activists and members of the community who will find how you're saying it deeply offensive. General rule: If you know someone who's gender-nonconforming, ask them what terms they'd like you to use and what pronouns they prefer.

That said, here are some points of fairly wide agreement, for background.

Assigned sex at birth: The M or F on an individual's birth certificate. This is the gender identity decided for them by others before they were old enough to speak for themselves.

Bigender(ed): a person who does not necessarily identify as either a 'man' or a 'woman', but as some combination of both, and whose lived gender role embraces aspects of both masculinity or femininity in a blended way.

Body dysphoria: pain/discomfort/wrongness felt while looking at/inhabiting one's own physical body. Sometimes related to gender dysphoria, but also experienced by anorexics and others.

Cisgender(ed)/Cissexual: someone who lives full-time in the gender role assigned to them at birth, and feels no gender dysphoria while doing so. Often cisgender(ed) people have never had cause to question their gender identity, because their internal sensations of gender and the external societal expectations made on them are in agreement.

Cissexism/cissexist: a policy or mindset that enforces a strict gender binary, or that privileges cisgender strongly over transgender. Some womyn's safe spaces have policies (like "womyn-born-womyn") strictly excluding trans women but allowing trans men; this kind of policy is cissexist because it defines someone's sex or gender FOR them instead

of allowing them to define it for themselves based upon their own subconscious sex. Some activists also use the term 'cissupremacist'.

"Cotton Ceiling", the: some who consider themselves accepting of trans* people often still feel discomfort at the thought of having a romantic or sexual relationship with a gender-nonconforming person. The 'cotton' in the trope name refers to underwear.

Crossdresser: A person who enjoys spending time dressed as or portraying one gender while living most of their lives as a different gender, including drag queens/kings and heterosexual men who feel fulfilled living an evening or weekend at a time 'dressed' en femme, among others. Many crossdressers have no desire to live full-time in their 'other'-gendered role.

Enthusiast/(Tranny-)Chaser/Admirer/Transfan: a person who actively seeks out trans* people as sexual or romantic partners. They are usually cisgender(ed), but not always. Their behavior can be perceived as objectifying or creepy by trans* people.

Gatekeeper: a person with power over an individual's transition, usually a medical or mental-health professional. Gatekeepers often get to determine whether someone's desire to transition is 'genuine' or 'justified'.

Gender binary: the belief that all humans (and, in the extreme case, all human behaviors/preferences) fall into one of only two mutually exclusive boxes: masculine and feminine.

Gender dysphoria: pain/discomfort/wrongness felt by someone living in a gender role they feel to be incorrect for them. Many transgender(ed) people suffer from gender dysphoria until they complete a transition and live in their desired gender role full-time.

Gender/sex: terms used to describe whether someone is a man or a woman. Within the trans* community, some people use 'gender' to describe one's internal truth or sense of oneself and 'sex' to describe one's bodily appearance, but others find this distinction offensive or cissexist.

Genderqueer: someone who identifies as genderqueer is usually gender-nonconforming in their daily presentation, but feels that less broad terms of identity do not fit them, for whatever reason. This can include butch heterosexual women and goth bois who like eyeliner and lace-cuffed shirts, to give just two concrete examples. Some genderqueer individuals consider themselves trans; others define themselves explicitly in a nonbinary way outside the trans* umbrella.

"Genetic" sex: A term sometimes used to describe a trans person's 'original' sex/gender identity; the term is considered derogatory by many trans people, both because it privileges 'genetic' reality over lived reality, and also because it implies that

all cisgender(ed) people have 'genetic' sexes that match those they were assigned at birth, which is not always the case. Similar terms: bio-girl/bio-guy, GG (genetic girl).

Intersex: people born with 'ambiguous' sexual anatomy, outside textbook definitions of purely male or female. Some individuals have both a penis and ovaries, for example, or lack a vaginal opening. A doctor or other professional must sometimes make a judgment call as to which legal sex to assign an intersex child at birth. Although they sometimes transition in adulthood away from the sex they were assigned, many intersex people do not feel they belong in any way to the trans* community.

Neutrois: people who identify as neither male nor female, but actively neuter; they often seek to minimize the appearance of traits that make them appear to be strongly one sex or the other.

Nonbinary: a person who doesn't identify with the male/female binary, but still considers themselves under the trans* umbrella. This can include androgynous people, (some) genderqueer people, bigender(ed) people, etc. Nonbinary people feel that the gender binary is inadequate to describe their lived reality, and often also feel they don't fit neatly inside the labels trans, homosexual, etc.

Physical sex: the exterior appearance of an individual's crotch anatomy. Often believed by those outside the QUILTBAG community to be a clear-cut issue of "Penis or vagina," but not always so easy to delimit in practice.

QUILTBAG: an acronym, like LGBT or LGBTQIA, that attempts to be inclusive of a wide range of people outside the heteronormative/kyriarchal mainstream. Stands for Queer/Questioning, Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Trans*, Bisexual, Asexual, Gay.

Stealth: to transition and not come out about one's previous gender, living 'closeted'. Many people who pursue a stealth lifestyle do so to avoid transphobic responses and backlash. Also called 'woodworking'.

Subconscious sex: a person's innate sense of their own gender identity. Also called the 'mental compass', 'internal gender', or 'brain sex'. In people who choose to transition, the gender role they seek to live daily is one consistent with their subconscious sex.

Tragic Tranny, the: the myth that all trans* folks are doomed to a life of pain and persecution. In reality, trans experiences vary widely, and a lot of us find humor in its everyday embarrassments or incongruities.

Trannier-Thann-Thou: a cissexist behavior experienced in trans-centered settings in which trans people (sometimes viciously) police non-gender-stereotypical behavior in other trans people, like telling a trans man he "can't" like cooking, knitting, or childrearing anymore, or shaming a trans woman for not putting on makeup, jewelry, pumps,

and a skirt every day of her life. Trans people are often held to a higher or more stringent gender standard than their cisgender(ed) peers, and if they fail to live up to stereotypical kyriarchical gender assumptions, they can be told they're not acting like a REAL man/woman – even by others in their community.

Trans Panic: a sensation experienced by some cisgender(ed) people upon discovering suddenly that a friend or romantic partner was originally assigned a different sex at birth than the one the panic-er had assumed. In extreme cases, this can fuel transphobic violence; variants of "But I thought she was a real woman!" have been used as justification in murder cases for the accused's actions.

Trans(*): an umbrella term intended to embrace the widest possible subset of people with nonstandard gender presentations or identities. The asterisk, when used, is intended to indicate how expansive the term is: trans(everything), not just trans(-gender, -sexual).

Transgender(ed): someone who lives (or desires to live) in 'another' gender role from that which they were assigned at birth. This term can be used broadly to include everyone from casual crossdressers to those who transition permanently, and many middle cases between.

Transition: the process of changing the gender role in which a person lives their life. "Social" transition involves getting the people around you to treat you as the role you desire to live in; "Medical" transition involves doctor- or therapist-mediated treatments to your body; "Surgical" transition involves surgery to the body or the face to make your appearance better fit your identity.

Transman/Trans man/Transgender(ed) man: a person assigned female at birth who is living or desires to live full-time in a masculine gender role.

Transsexual: a term used to describe a subset of the transgender(ed) community. Used by some to mean individuals who have taken medical or surgical steps to alter their body to more closely resemble their desired gender identity; or who have changed their legal sex; or who have permanently transitioned and live full-time in their desired gender role.

Transwoman/Trans woman/Transgender(ed) woman: a person assigned male at birth who is living or desires to live full-time in a feminine gender role.

Two Spirit: a variety of traditions among Native American and other non-European cultures that encompass a gender identity not completely unlike bigender(ed). People who identify as two-spirit usually have a strong spiritual or religious association attached to their gender identity.

Basic Topics

Sexuality

An individual's gender expression and their sexuality are, so far as can be determined, independent variables: not all lesbians are genderqueer, and many guys who like wearing dresses want to sleep with women. Good rigorous data sets do not exist, but case histories of therapists who have been working with trans* patients for decades appear to support the assertion that, statistically, trans sexuality distributes similarly to cis sexuality: most trans men are attracted to women, and most trans women are attracted to men. Interestingly, some trans people discover that their sexual preference changes during transition: if they were 'straight' before they may be 'straight' afterwards as well, because their objects of desire have changed.

Hormones

All humans naturally produce both 'male' and 'female' hormones in varying proportion. Some people receive hormone therapy to change their body's physical appearance pursuant to transition. Most commonly, testosterone injections are used to masculinize and estrogen/progesterone cocktails (injected, or delivered via pill, cream, or transdermal patch) are used to feminize; there are also hormone-blocking compounds used (in puberty or later) to lessen the biological effect of the hormones produced by one's own body. Hormonal therapy rearranges one's baseline body fat distribution and usually causes changes to hair-growth patterns, vocal timbre, grip strength, mood, and sexual desire. Contrary to stereotype, going on testosterone injections does not universally make one more 'angry' or horny; rather, temper outbursts can be a sign that one's hormones are improperly balanced (and a reason to talk to your endocrinologist).

Surgery

Some transitioners use surgical interventions, above and below the shoulders, to alter an individual's body and make it less incongruous with their lived gender role. Aside from facial alterations and hair removal, common discussion divides the surgeries into "top surgery" and "bottom surgery", with mainstream-world opinion holding that someone who hasn't had "bottom surgery" (often abbreviated SRS [Sexual Reassignment Surgery] or GRS [Genital

Reconstruction Surgery]) isn't REALLY transitioned yet, but some flavor of faking it/deluded. However, many trans* people feel no need for bottom surgery, and in some cases no need for any surgery at all, to support their social and legal transitions in society. Asking any trans* person about surgeries they have or have not received is universally considered rude, and sometimes viewed as offensive. You don't need to know what's in a trans person's underwear unless you think there's a strong chance you're likely to get to inspect it closely soon – and sometimes not even then.

Trans narrative

The story of an individual's personal journey with gender and self-acceptance. A widely-believed, but untrue, myth holds that all (or all 'real') trans* people have identical narratives: they felt "trapped in the wrong body" since a very early age and engaged since childhood in non-standard behaviors for their assigned sex. There are at least as many ways of being trans* as there are of being gay, Christian, or a person of color, and each individual's journey is unique (though many of us find when we open up to each other that they rhyme). Just because you know one trans* person well you don't automatically know what all other trans* people think/believe/grew up with. Historically, gatekeepers of the transition process have delineated 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' trans narratives, so the publicly-available life stories of trans people have tended to cluster around what those gatekeepers thought made them 'real' transsexuals.

Bathrooms

There is often controversy in the mainstream world regarding which bathroom trans people will be required/allowed to use, with inflammatory speech about 'men in dresses' molesting children in the women's washroom. Trans people forced into the bathroom associated with the sex they were assigned at birth face a range of personal safety issues, but many in the mainstream have strong emotional issues relating to what happens in bathrooms and who is permitted into them, so it remains fraught.

Derogatory language

Offensive terms historically aimed at trans* people include: tranny, shemale, he-she, chick(s) with dick(s), dragzilla, trap, transvestite, ladyboy. Some people accept these terms, but don't use them unless you're sure the person you're referring to doesn't mind.

Further Reading

Evolution's Rainbow: diversity, gender, and sexuality in nature and people, by Joan Roughgarden A fascinating, thorough, readable, and evidence-based look at the way the real world isn't nearly as binary in regard to gender, sexuality, and sexual anatomy as human culture describes it to be. In three sections: animals, humans, and human embryology.

Whipping Girl: a transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity, by Julia Serano A very readable work of feminist theory, from a trans perspective. Includes some of the very best definitions for thinking about misogyny, femininity, and sexism in a world that also contains trans people.

How Sex Changed: a history of transsexuality in the United States, by Joanne Meyerowitz
An interesting historical overview, starting from a lot earlier than many people now might assume, covering social, societal, medical, and psychological aspects of what transsexuality was seen to be by both trans and cis Americans, and how successful methods of treatment were discovered and implemented.

Questioning Transphobia (<http://www.questioningtransphobia.com>)
A news-roundup website for trans-related items, plus longer commentary articles.

The Intersex Society of North America (<http://www.isna.org/>)
An advocacy and support organization by and for intersex people. Site contains great FAQs and ways to take action.

"Beyond Inclusion" (<http://takesupspace.wordpress.com/beyond-inclusion/>)
An essay that "starts from the assertion that trans and cis women are equal in their determination of feminism, yet trans women's agency is systemically marginalized within it. It critiques cissexual feminist entrenched positions about the relations between trans women, male privilege, and women's space, showing how taking trans women's perspectives and herstories seriously dramatically alter the terms of debate, providing new insights and making room for a new generation of feminists." The same site also contains many other interesting theory pieces.

T-Vox (<http://www.t-vox.org/>)
A comprehensive informational site aimed at the full range of trans* issues. Includes a wiki, forums, podcasts, and a chat room. Covers definitions, advice, legalities, and much more.