

TRANSADVOCATE

A trans advocate's perspective on Trans 101 questions

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Abstract

Sometime back, a reporter asked me some Trans 101 questions, so I decided to publish that Q&A as a trans advocate's nuanced perspective on Trans 101 questions. What does "transgender" mean? Much like queer, there are a lot of ways to be trans. For folks with minimal contact with the trans community, transgender and transsexual will [...]

Article

TransAdvocate's Trans 101

Sometime back, a reporter asked me some Trans 101 questions, so I decided to publish that Q&A as a trans advocate's nuanced perspective on Trans 101 questions.

What does "transgender" mean?

Much like queer, there are a lot of ways to be trans. For folks with minimal contact with the trans community, transgender and transsexual will mean basically the same thing, in the same way, someone who's had minimal contact with the queer community might think that gay and queer mean basically the

same thing.

Trans is short for transgender and can be used as an umbrella term that can encompass a variety of self-identities. Some intersex, transsexual, crossdresser, drag king/queens, bigender, androgynous and or non-gender individuals may identify with “transgender.” Transgender, came into common usage during the 1970s. While the earliest known use of the term was in 1965 to refer to transsexuals[1] who wanted genital reconstructive surgery, the term was used as an umbrella term as early as 1974[2]. Today, the term is most commonly used in the media to refer to individuals who have both medically and socially transitioned from their sexed identity assigned to them at birth to the sexed identity that most closely matches their gender identity; which is to say, the term is most commonly used to identify people who are not cisgender.

A transsexual is a type of trans person whose phenotype aligns with or is in the process of aligning with male sexed attributes if assigned female at birth (and is, therefore, a trans man) or female sexed attributes if assigned male at birth (and is, therefore, a trans woman).

Cis is short for cisgender. The cis- prefix is Latin for “on the same side [as].” The trans- prefix is Latin for “on the other side [as].” In other words, cisgender is a term that generally describes non-transgender people and transgender is a term for describing non-cisgender people. In the same way, one might say “trans women” (for transgender women) one might say “cis women” (for non-transgender women). Cisgender generally refers to a person who didn’t have to transition because their gender identity already matched up with the sexed identity they use in our culture. While the cis and trans dichotomy has been used to describe gender behavior since at least 1914, most people are encountering cis as if it were a retronym. Somewhat similarly, ipso (ipsogender) is a term some intersex people use to note that they identify with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Each trans person - assuming that they are the type of trans person interested in physical transition - will make choices about what’s right for them. Thankfully, there is no policy or law forcing all trans people to transition in only one way. Generally, body autonomy is a significant issue for trans people because for most of our lives trans people have experienced a lot of disempowerment around that issue.

Lastly, it is as appropriate to ask a trans person to describe their genitalia as it is to ask a non-trans person to describe their genitalia.

What’s up with Transgenderism, Transgendered and Transgendering?

Transgendered isn’t a word generally found within the contemporary trans community in much the same way homosexualized isn’t a word generally found in the gay community. Transgender is generally an adjective or (much less commonly) a noun and not a verb. Likewise, transgendering and transgenderism are terms generally only found in anti-trans literature in the same way that homosexualizing and homosexuality are generally only found in anti-gay literature.

LGBT people aren’t an ideology, philosophy, or dogma, and so framing LGBT people as an ism is generally frowned upon. Likewise, we are LGBT people, not people who engage in an LGBT lifestyle. Therefore, when talking about LGBT people, I tend to not add ing or ed to the end of our identity terms.

What's the difference between "sex" and "gender?"

People can struggle with this distinction. It's important to recognize that there is a distinction between physical phenomena and our mental contextualization of that physical phenomena. In other words, "sex" is phenotype and genotype. However, all our thoughts about what our "sex" attributes mean is "gender."

Socially, gender is the mental contextualization of a human body as a sex attribute which, consequently, must fit into a binary mold. Socially, we don't simply note that each body has X number of male and/or female sexed attributes; instead, we contextualize the entire body itself as a sex attribute. We might say that he was born a man because he was born with an acceptably long phallus. In our culture, an acceptably long phallus equates to male and thus, we culturally regard the entire body as itself "male."

Subjectively, gender is the sexed labels we utilize, the emotional states and contextual memories associated with those labels, our mental embodiment of self as being related to those labels, the way we subjectively experience our body, the way we communicate - express - these understandings, our understanding of the way our society responds to these expressions and our awareness of the normative sexed-designated cultural structures that are collectively reinforced. ALL of this (and more) is how we mentally contextualize sexed attributes, which is to say, how we do or perform gender.

When do kids begin to identify with their gender?

Here, you seem to be talking about the experience of gender identity. Gender identity can mean one of three things. These are:

- A.) One's subjective experience of one's own sexed attributes;
- B.) One's culturally influenced sexed identification within the context of a social grouping; or,
- C.) Both A and B.

Trans people who will probably contemplate transition at some point will experience anything from annoyance to profound and crippling suffering regarding any of these 3 issues at some point. Generally speaking, for transsexuals, one will begin experiencing significant issues with Category A at a very early age. It is common for these children to experience depression and even suicidal ideation concerning their bodies as early (or earlier) than 5. When speaking explicitly of Category A - the subjective experience of one's own sexed attributes - that awareness is sometimes referred to one's gender orientation.

Generally, trans people transition because they've tried everything they can think of to force their gender identity into being male if assigned male at birth or female if assigned female at birth. Unfortunately, due to our culture, it is not uncommon for trans people to experience extreme hardship regarding their self-acceptance process. Some are lucky enough to be able to rely on economic privilege to insulate them from some of the worst of it. Even so, each trans person knows that they may be risking everything if they told the truth about their gender identity, once they've figured out that they are trans.

Because we each live subjectively experienced lives, I think many trans kids think that all the other

kids are also privately struggling with gender in ways that are at least somewhat similar to their own experience. For me, I thought everyone must consciously monitor each body movement, each expression, and every act of communication so that it would meet the gender expectations assigned to them in the way that I did. I was in my early teens when I began to realize that not everyone was consciously forcing each social interaction as if they were actors; for them, it seemed that they had internalized our culture's gender proscriptions and was subjectively experiencing gender as being "natural." To put it another way, while the kids who were boys were male, I was a kid who was consciously aware of being male in the way an actor is someone who is consciously aware of being the role they're performing. It had always been like this for me and it was only when my vocabulary expanded to the point that I could begin to contextualize and articulate my experience with nuance that I became truly aware that my experience with gender wasn't like everyone else's.

Most trans people are hyper-aware of gender roles, stereotypes, and demands. For many of us, our childhood is experienced as little anthropologists stuck in the wilds of gender, trying to decode the various rituals gendered people engage in. I think that for most people, the subconscious social indoctrination of gender role stereotypes greatly depends upon one's subjective experience and identification with their sexed attributes from their earliest memories.

For me, I was highly aware that my body wasn't right at a very young age. By five I was already suicidal due to it. That didn't change until I was finally able to get help. The process of transition can be difficult. I immediately lost my job, home, family, and friends and became homeless within a society that barred trans people from shelters and social services. That was the price I paid, in our culture, for not maintaining the lie about my gender identity. However, no matter how bad it got -and it got really bad at times- being truthful and honest about what my medical needs were was an enormous weight lifted off my shoulders.

Trans people and violence, what's up with that?

There's a reason that the trans community's one international event - the Transgender Day of Remembrance - is a memorial. Trans people are generally well aware that about half of us are raped and that around a third are beaten. We know that, regardless of education, about half of us are unemployed and that about half of us experience homelessness. We -on a visceral level- get that we live in a culture that, in no small part, hates trans people.

We - personally and collectively - develop strategies for dealing with the hate. Some pretend to be hard, acting as if the enmity thrown at them doesn't hurt. Some pretend to be indifferent and some are consumed by the hate they face. Pushing the pain away doesn't work in the long run; the trick to dealing with abuse is to deal with it. As a community, we reserve one day to come together and grieve -with the support of community- those we've lost to violence and to face the hate collectively as a community, instead of trying to deal with it alone.

There's nothing I can say about practical strategies for personal safety that's not covered in just about every self-defense class taught across the country. What's not covered in these practical defense classes is how to deal with the effects of violence, oppression, and subjugation. How did Chrissy Polis deal with being beaten unconscious by two cis women, while a group of cis people looked on and laughed? How do trans people deal with the fact that a cis politician felt it appropriate to openly

talk about “stomp[ing]” a trans person into a “mud hole” for the perceived ‘crime’ of buying clothes the way cisgender people do? In our culture, transition tends to be about so much more than simple medical care; it’s also about skillfully and compassionately addressing the abuse that many of us face.

How can a parent help their trans kids?

Your child’s gender identity - that is, the way they subjectively experience their own body - is probably set. While I strongly support having a competent, experienced, and compassionate therapist in your family’s corner, it is generally beneficial that you find a support group and that your child meets other types of trans kids their own age.

While it might feel like it, nobody is losing a child. In fact, what parents lose are their expectations, their security in their social standing, and their presumptions about sex and gender - any of which can be a traumatic experience. What parents can discover is a deeper kind of love and courage and a stronger family bond that can share in the joy of a happier child.

There are both national and local groups that can and will help your family. An experienced therapist will most likely have the resources you’re in need of. WPATH is a good place to start looking for an experienced professional who might point your family in the right direction. Additionally, if you are a trans kid or parent of a trans kid, you can reach out to a group of moms who are supportive of their gender-diverse kids.

Why is gender such a big deal to society?

Gender is a foundation upon which people create a social persona. For many, the experience of gender feels innate, but it’s not exactly as simple as all of that. While gender identity - the way we experience our own bodies - seems innate from our earliest memories, the stories we tell each other about that experience aren’t. Those stories are culturally influenced and the stereotypical gender roles we are taught to assume are social constructs governed by cultural norms. A girl subjectively experiences her sexed attributes to be female and thus she easily accepts the stories our culture tells her about what that means in our society. This indoctrination system is in no small way, part of the bedrock of our culture.

For centuries the stories we told each other about what role each gender could perform were prescriptive in that, for instance, until 1974 it was taboo in our own culture for a woman to open her own bank account without a man. Did banking have anything to do with one’s sexed attributes or was this taboo really about forcing women to conform to the stories we told each other about what it means to occupy a female role in our culture?

Intersex and trans people disrupt this system in that we are living proof that the cultural stories we tell each other about what it means to live in a body that is sexed by our culture aren’t prescribed by a God or by nature. It is the trans and intersex outliers of our culture that question the cultural assumption that there is any single-sexed “essence” that one might point to which is innately characteristic of all males or all females. There are women who give birth with XY chromosomes, trans girls who are tomboys, trans women who are Dykes, effeminate trans men, and practically every conceivable body/sexuality type one can conceive of.

Culturally, we believe that a phallus is the locus from which “maleness” derives, regardless of how one might experience their own body. We witnessed just how flawed this assumption was with the tragic case of David Reimer. Reimer was sexed male at birth, but a botched circumcision removed not only his foreskin but the entire phallus itself. Since there was no longer an acceptably long phallus present, doctors - conflating gender identity with gender role - believed that if Reimer was given vaginoplasty, hormones and was socialized as a girl, Reimer would be a girl. As it turned out, Reimer experienced his body as male regardless of what our culture had to say about his body.

If you could make 3 wishes for the trans community, what would you wish for?

I would wish that our culture would support the right of body autonomy and the right to equality for all. I would also wish for the end of prescriptivism situated around sexed identities.

NOTES:

[1] When transsexual was used in 1965 and in that particular context, transsexual people were seen as very extreme transvestites. When transgender was suggested as a better term for transsexual, in this 1965 context, the author was noting that it was gender and not sexuality (as in, transsexual) that was the drive behind being transsexual. At that time, the Magnus Hirschfeld trans paradigm held sway in some respects and for Hirschfeld's sexology lexicon, transvestite was an umbrella term inclusive of several types of trans people, including transsexuals.

[2] “[In 1974] some of the terminology used at the conference would take some twenty years to become widespread. As far as we are aware, the first use of the term trans.people (sic) was when Julia Tonner referred to “the two worlds of the trans.people” (ie transsexuals and transvestites). In addition, there was also talk of transsexuals seeking ‘gender alignment’ and of ‘trans-gender’ also used as an umbrella term.” - (2007) Gendys Journal, D King & R Elkins

“Transies” was also used as an umbrella term in 1974.

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