

A “Transsexual Versus Transgender” Intervention*

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Abstract

Over the last year or so, I have read a number of blog entries and Facebook rants about the so-called “transsexual versus transgender” issue. For those who are unaware of this debate, it stems from a subset of transsexuals who feel that the transsexual community is not served well by being included under the transgender [...]

Article

Over the last year or so, I have read a number of blog entries and Facebook rants about the so-called “transsexual versus transgender” issue. For those who are unaware of this debate, it stems from a subset of transsexuals who feel that the transsexual community is not served well by being included under the transgender umbrella (some even go so far as to insist that there is a mutually-exclusive dichotomy between transsexual and transgender people). Along similar lines, these transsexuals also argue that inclusion under the LGBT umbrella does a disservice to the transsexual community, as it conflates two very different issues (i.e., sexual orientation and gender identity), and emboldens many cissexual LGB folks to appropriate trans identities and experiences, and to claim to speak on our behalf.

I have purposefully tried to avoid entering into this debate, primarily because many (albeit certainly not all) of the umbrella critiques that I have read invoke horrible stereotypes, and sometimes even hate speech, to help bolster their case. I have seen blatantly homophobic and biphobic remarks made by some anti-umbrella advocates. One post I saw described bisexuals as sexual predators who fetishize and prey upon transsexuals - this comment draws on a long history of monosexist stereotypes of bisexuals as “sex crazed” and desiring “anything that moves,” and it deeply offended me as a bisexual trans woman.

Along the same lines, anti-umbrella advocates often self-describe themselves as “real transsexuals” and dismiss those who support the transgender and LGBT umbrellas as being posers and mere fetishists. Some even cite Ray Blanchard’s sexualizing and scientifically incorrect theory of autogynephilia to make their point. It is one thing to disagree with another person’s views about whether or not transsexuals should seek inclusion under the transgender and LGBT umbrellas. But when people stoop to the level of sexualizing those they disagree with, or dismissing them as “fakes,” then they are engaging in name calling rather than intellectual debate, and I want absolutely no part of it.

So like I said, I have mostly avoided this debate because of the name calling, disparaging stereotypes

and nonconsensual sexualization that are sometimes associated with it. But recently, I read a post where someone referred to me as being firmly in the “transsexual” (rather than “transgender”) camp. This was the second time that I had seen such a claim, and frankly, it surprised me. Granted, in my book *Whipping Girl*, I argued that the transsexual experience is different from other transgender trajectories, and I also decried the manner in which some cissexual gays and lesbians appropriate transsexual identities. But I never once advocated that transsexuals should completely split off from the transgender or LGBT communities. Rather, my intention was constructive criticism - I hoped to make those alliances more aware and respectful of transsexual voices and perspectives.

So, for the record, I am in the pro-umbrella camp, even though I acknowledge that sometimes umbrella politics are messy and less than equitable. In other words, I believe that the pros of umbrella politics outweigh the cons. But, of course, that is my opinion, and others may disagree. If we are going to have a serious discussion about this issue (i.e., one that does not sink into the abyss of sexualization, stereotypes and name calling), then it seems to me that there are at least three major issues that need to be addressed, but which have been largely absent from the debate thus far.

1) Activism requires alliances.

Anyone who has ever been an activist for any social justice issue can tell you that minority groups, on their own, are never able to fully achieve the positive change they seek in the world without first forming alliances with those who do not share their experience. This becomes even more crucial when the minority group in question is especially small. Even the most liberal of estimates suggest that transsexuals make up about 0.2% of the population; more conservative estimates suggest that we are far rarer than that. Therefore, it is simply not possible for us to challenge deeply entrenched and institutionalized societal cissexism/transphobia without enlisting cissexual allies.

One of the most constructive ways to build alliances is through umbrella groups, where several marginalized groups that share similar concerns band together to work on their shared issues. After all, there is strength in numbers. Transgender activism came about as a way bring together transsexuals with other gender-variant groups (e.g., crossdressers, intersex people, two-spirit people, genderqueers, butch women, femme men, etc.), not because we are “all the same,” but in order to fight together against a mutual problem we share: The way in which our society marginalizes all people who do not conform to gender norms. While not perfect, that coalition has positively impacted most of our lives. One could even make the case that none of us would even be here openly having this debate in a public forum if it were not for the last two decades of transgender activism.

Many transsexuals also feel that the LGBT umbrella is another useful alliance. After all, it is the common assumption that a person’s sex, gender and sexuality should all nicely and neatly align that lies at the root of the oppression that all of us face. Transsexuals who want to secede from the LGBT umbrella keep citing the fact that sexual orientation has nothing to do with gender identity. This may be true, but this point has nothing to do with the rationale behind why trans people were initially included in the umbrella - specifically, because LGBT individuals are all discriminated against for similar reasons (i.e., because, in one way or another, we challenge the assumption that sex, gender and sexuality should all be perfectly aligned). This is evident in the way that gays, lesbians and bisexuals are often targeted for discrimination for their gender nonconformity, and in the way that transsexuals are often targeted for discrimination because people fear that sleeping with us might “make them gay.” In other words,

while sexual orientation and gender identity may be different things, homophobia and transphobia are very much intertwined.

That is the argument for transsexual inclusion under the transgender and LGBT umbrellas. Those transsexuals who oppose those umbrellas must answer this: If we secede from those alliances, then who should we ally with? What new umbrella groups should we form in order to collectively fight the marginalization we face?

To date, I have only ever seen one opponent of the transgender and LGBT umbrellas suggest an alternative alliance that transsexuals should work toward. That person is Vivianne Namaste, an amazing Canadian trans activist, writer and theorist who is sadly underappreciated here in the States. In her book *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions and Imperialism*, she claims that transsexuals have not been well served by the transgender and LGBT alliances, and she argues that transsexuals should instead forge “alliances with advocates for the homeless, activists working for the decriminalization of prostitution, and those who work on prison reform and/or abolition.”

While I find her argument to be very reasonable, I have a sneaking suspicion that most anti-umbrella advocates posting on the web these days would not embrace such an alliance. Indeed, an underlying sentiment in a lot of their posts seems to be that in order for transsexuals to be considered “normal” or “desirable,” we must dissociate ourselves from the undesirable sexual deviants and fetishists that supposedly reside within the transgender and LGBT umbrellas. So it is hard for me to envision these same anti-umbrella advocates whose posts I have read suddenly deciding to join forces with sex worker, prison reform and homeless activists.

It is never in the interest of the powers-that-be to simply give some minority group equal rights or to treat them as fully legitimate individuals. Anyone who has spent any time doing front-line activism can tell you that, in order to create positive change for transsexuals in this world, we need to band together with other disadvantaged groups to fight for our mutual interests. If anti-umbrella advocates want to be taken seriously, then they must move beyond simply decrying the transgender and LGBT alliances, and instead propose serious alternative alliances that are both realistic and which will help us achieve our collective goals. Other than Namaste (who, as far as I can tell, has not been involved in the recent umbrella debates on the web), I have yet to see any such alternative offered from anti-umbrella advocates.

2) Transsexual is an umbrella too

Most of the critiques that I have read arguing that transsexuals should abandon the transgender and LGBT umbrellas seem not to take into account the fact that transsexual is an umbrella too! We are a disparate group of individuals who share one thing in common: We all identify and live as members of the sex other than the one we were assigned at birth. Other than that, we differ in almost every way. Some of us are conservative while others of us are liberal. Some of us are middle- or upper-class while others of us are poor. Some of us are white while others of us are people of color. Some of us are straight while others of us are queer. Some of us are vanilla while others of us are kinky. Some of us are out as transsexual while others of us are stealth. Some of us are able to “pass” or “blend in” as cissexual while others of us are not. Some of us are very feminine, or very masculine, while others of us are less conventional in our gender expression. Like the population as a whole, transsexuals are highly diverse,

and we should respect that diversity within our own community.

Some of the anti-umbrella posts that I have read presume that transsexuals are one monolithic group, and that we *all* want out of the transgender and LGBT umbrellas, when this is clearly not the case. A lot of us prefer to work toward making these umbrellas function better for transsexuals, rather than abandoning them entirely.

Without a doubt, the most disturbing aspect of this debate is that some anti-umbrella advocates try to erase this diversity in perspectives and experiences in our community by arrogantly claiming that they are "real" transsexuals, and that those who take a pro-umbrella position must be "fake" transsexuals. As I alluded to in the beginning of this post, this "real"/"fake" distinction is often policed via homophobic remarks and blatant sexualization, although it is often times policed in other ways.

The most devious way in which this "real"/"fake" distinction is enforced is through a redefining of the word "transgender." Anti-umbrella advocates often use the term transgender, not as an umbrella term that includes transsexuals and other gender-variant people (i.e., the traditional definition of transgender over the last two decades), but rather as a pejorative to describe people who are merely "gender benders," "drag queens," "crossdressed men," "fetishists" and/or "queers." In other words, this use of the word transgender implies that transgender-identified transsexuals are "fakes" - people who pretend to be transsexual, but who are actually something else entirely. This wordplay allows anti-umbrella advocates to outright dismiss any pro-umbrella sentiments on the grounds that the person voicing that opinion is merely "a transgender" rather than a "real transsexual."

About two years ago, on a trans-related email list, I was having an argument with another trans woman about some unrelated issue. And suddenly, out of the blue, she suggested that I was not a "real transsexual" because I still had a penis (she mentioned being on my website, so I presume that she figured this out from viewing the video of me performing my spoken word piece "Cocky"). Even though I have pretty thick skin, the accusation that I must not be a "real transsexual" really got to me. It stung bad. Like most of us, I have had to deal with so much shit in my life, first as an isolated trans child, then later as an outspoken transsexual adult. And to have someone, in one swift comment, try to take that all away from me, to invalidate my identity and life experiences, felt like a violation. In writing my response to her, I found myself wanting to mention that, after many years of not being able to afford it, I was finally scheduled to have SRS later that year. But I quickly decided against it for three reasons: 1) it is nobody's fucking business what I do with my body!, 2) it would simply reinforce the fucked up notion that one has to live up to other people's stupid criteria - whether it be surgery, or a diagnosis from a psychiatrist, or "passability," or heterosexuality, or conventional femininity - in order to be deemed a "real transsexual," and 3) it really wouldn't have mattered what I said. She was trying to discredit me, to make the argument we were having about me, rather than the subject we were initially arguing about. She would not be satisfied with merely voicing her side of the argument - she also wanted to delegitimize me because I disagreed with her.

People who wish to discredit those they disagree with, rather than engage in honest and serious debate with them, always seem to play the "real" card. This is why right-wing conservatives claim that Obama is not a "real American," or that liberals are not "real patriots." It is why people will claim that hip-hop, or rock-and-roll, or any other music they do not like, is not "real music." And it is why any person who does not conform to conventional assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality - whether they be

transsexual, transgender, LGB or feminist - will inevitably be accused of not being a “real” woman or man.

Transsexuals are people. And like people more generally, we differ with regard to our sexualities, our gender expressions, and our perspectives and opinions. Therefore, we must stop referring to this debate about umbrellas as the “transsexual versus transgender” debate, as that is a misnomer. This is a debate between transsexuals who support transsexual inclusion within the transgender and LGBT umbrellas and those who do not. And anyone who attempts to play the “real transsexual” card should be summarily dismissed, as they are merely engaging in name calling rather than serious debate.

3) What this debate is really about

When I hear anti-umbrella advocates claim that transsexuals don’t want anything to do with the LGB community, it always strikes me as odd given the fact that so many transsexuals are LGB- and/or queer-identified.

Most modern studies examining the prevalence of LGB orientation claim that less than 5% of the (predominantly cissexual) population identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The numbers can get higher--up to 15% of the population--when same-sex attraction or experiences (rather than identity) are measured. In contrast, in virtually every survey and research study I have seen (and I’ve seen quite a few), the percentage of LGB-identified transsexuals is somewhere between 30% to 60%. About ten years ago, I was on a large email list that focused on MTF transitioning, and in a survey there, about one-third of the transsexual women identified as heterosexual, one-third as bisexual, and one-third as lesbian.

There are always problems with measuring the prevalence of sexual orientation, so I would not claim to know exactly how many transsexuals are LGBQ-identified. But I think it’s safe to say that the percentage is way higher among transsexuals than for the greater cissexual population, and that it may even approach or surpass the 50% mark.

On top of this, there are many heterosexually-oriented transsexuals who identify as queer, often because they spent their formative pre-transition years within the lesbian/gay/queer communities. For instance, many trans men who are exclusively attracted to women (and therefore heterosexual in orientation) nevertheless identify as queer and continue to participate in queer communities, usually because they were a part of those communities pre-transition and/or because they are partnered to, or have a preference for, queer-identified women. There are also some heterosexually-oriented trans women who spent their pre-transition years in the gay male community, although this admittedly seems to occur far less often than trans men who spend their pre-transition years in lesbian/dyke communities.

This last point may shed some light onto the proverbial “elephant in the room” in this whole umbrella debate: It is almost exclusively a trans woman phenomenon. Now, I am not saying that there aren’t any trans men out there who want to secede from the LGBT umbrella, but frankly, every single anti-umbrella post that I have read has been penned by a trans woman. Now, there may be a number of factors that contribute to this disparity, but I suspect that a major reason is the fact that, in both gay male communities and lesbian/dyke communities, masculinity is celebrated and femininity is dismissed. This generally leads to greater acceptance of transsexual men (who express themselves and/or are perceived as masculine), whereas transsexual women (who express themselves and/or are perceived as

feminine) are often ignored or shunned.**

Many transsexual women I have talked to who explored dating in gay male circles during their pre-transition days have told me that they received very little interest from gay men because they were seen as too feminine. In contrast, pre-transition transsexual men do not typically have such a problem dating within lesbian/dyke communities, where butch and trans masculine gender expression are often celebrated.

Here is a thought experiment: Imagine gay men en masse warmly welcoming and celebrating heterosexually-oriented post-transition transsexual women into their communities. Sounds quite farcical, doesn't it? And yet, heterosexually-oriented post-transition transsexual men are very much welcomed and celebrated in many contemporary queer women's communities.

Given all this, I think that it might be useful to reframe this debate. Arguing that LGBT folks are inherently anti-transsexual (and therefore, transsexuals should secede from that umbrella) is patently untrue. While some LGBT individuals may express anti-transsexual sentiments, other LGBT folks downright embrace certain transsexuals. Instead, a more accurate description is as follows: Negative attitudes toward trans female and trans feminine individuals runs rampant throughout much of the cissexual queer community. As a result, many heterosexually-oriented trans women never feel welcome in, nor do they ever associate themselves with, the queer community (whereas heterosexually-oriented trans men often do). And queer-identified trans women typically have to work hard to be seen as legitimate members of the queer community (whereas queer-identified trans men are often celebrated within those same queer circles).

This leads to one final point: As a trans woman who has had to fight tooth and nail to try to get the greater cis queer women's community to acknowledge and embrace their trans sisters, the idea of removing transsexuals from the LGBT umbrella greatly concerns me. If it were to happen, I believe that it would severely undermine the modest gains that queer-identified trans women have made thus far. So we are left with a dilemma: Heterosexual trans women don't feel like they are a part of the queer community, and so they understandably want to remove transsexuality from the LGBT umbrella. Yet, if such a move were to occur, it would have a strong negative impact on queer-identified trans women who still to this day struggle to be acknowledged, accepted and appreciated within LGBT circles.

Reconciling this debate

Unfortunately, these umbrella debates have created rifts (or exacerbated previously existing rifts) between heterosexual and queer-identified trans women, and between transsexual women and non-transsexual transgender people on the trans female/feminine spectrum. I think that there are a few things we can do to reconcile these debates and heal the rifts that currently exist within our communities.

First, we should respect the diversity of identities, sexualities and life histories that exist among those of us on the trans female/feminine spectrums. We should recognize that many transsexual women have been, or currently are, crossdressers, drag performers, androgynous, butch, or genderqueer-identified--such life experiences do not make a person any less transsexual. Furthermore, cissexual women vary in their sexualities and identities, so we should expect transsexual women to vary in these respects too. Heterosexual transsexuals should stop trying to convince the world that all

transsexuals are straight and want out of the LGBT umbrella. Similarly, queer-identified transsexuals sometimes play up the idea that transsexuality is inherently subversive and super-duper-queer in order to gain acceptance within queer circles (I should know, as did quite a bit of that during the first two years after my transition)--this erases the life experiences of our straight-identified trans sisters.

Second, rather than pitting trans female/feminine communities against one another, we should all stand together to challenge our shared problem: trans-misogyny within the greater cissexual LGBT community.

Finally, we should recognize that umbrellas exist, not because all of its members share the same identity, but rather because its members are marginalized in similar/related ways by society, and have formed an alliance to challenge the mutual problems they face. I believe that transgender and LGBT are useful alliances in this regard, but they need not be the only ones. I am a big proponent of creating alliances between cis and trans women to challenge the traditional sexism/misogyny we mutually face. Many people (including myself) think that transsexuals should ally ourselves with intersex activists, disability activists, and fat activists to challenge the cultural belief that certain bodies are "better," more "natural," or more valid than others. And Namaste's suggestion that transsexuals should ally with other groups who have been criminalized by society (e.g., sex worker, prison reform and homeless activists) is another potentially productive one.

If the goal is forwarding transsexual and/or trans women's rights and perspectives, then we should focus our energies on creating more and stronger alliances, rather than tearing down existing ones.

-julia

*note: I called this piece an "intervention" as a shout-out to Vivianne Namaste, who often uses that phrase to describe her own writings and activism.

**to be clear, I am not claiming that all trans women are feminine, or all trans men are masculine. But people do tend to perceive trans women as being feminine, or attempting to be feminine (even when we are not), and vice versa for trans men.

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