

# Transgender Expression as Productive Disruption

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- When my teenager Alex was 14, his dad and I attended his first meeting at an Auckland gender clinic. We were there to discuss his emerging identity as non-binary (a transgender category: neither boy nor girl. Alex, now 16, currently identifies as transmasculine).
- Alex, who was assigned female at birth, explained his long-standing desire/need for top surgery. He also expressed uncertainty, at that time, about going on testosterone (or 'T'). He was sure he wanted most of T's effects, but at that point he was not sure about all of its effects.

- To our surprise as parents, when Alex left the room for a health check with the doctor, the nurse immediately said to us that Alex's uncertainty was a 'worry'. She said maybe Alex's views would mature over time, and he would move from 'they/he' pronouns to just 'he' pronouns.
- We questioned why Alex's open exploration of his needs, and any gender 'ambiguity', was seen as problematic. After all, the clinic had provided literature to us assuring that there is no one 'right way' to be transgender.



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- Three months later at the clinic, Alex asserted that, after much thought and research, he had decided T was right for him.
- What followed was a barrage of sceptical questioning about what had changed ‘so fast’, and about areas of Alex’s life that still appeared ‘insufficiently’ masculine.
- It has taken us some time to recover as a family, and my partner and I have had to assert strong advocacy for our very thoughtful and sincere teenager. And Alex and his dad and I know that, relatively speaking, Alex has it easy (as a middle-class Pākehā transgender person in Auckland).



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- People who are transgender have always challenged binary assumptions about gender: the idea that there are two genders only – man and woman, rooted in biological differences between male and female bodies.
- In my work over time as a Gender Studies scholar, and now as Alex's mum, I am keenly aware of the 'productive disruption' transgender experiences present to sex/gender systems.



- Since the mid twentieth century, feminist and gender studies scholarship has worked to disrupt long-standing assumptions that gender is a binary category (Butler, 2004; 1990).
- Underlying this scholarship is a distinction drawn, particularly in earlier feminist work, between sex and gender.
- The thinking goes: if sexed bodies and sexual difference are rooted in nature, gender is a social and cultural phenomenon, changeable and variable across cultures and contexts (Lighty, 2018; Lorber, 1994).



- As Simone de Beauvoir (2011/1949) famously declared: “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 330). [also man].
- Further, abundant anthropological evidence demonstrates that there are more than two categories and experiences of gender (e.g. ‘third gender’ categories).
- In sum, the view here is that while sex is naturally dimorphic, gender is socially constructed and multifarious.

- However, there is a largely unacknowledged ‘pre-history’ of the sex/gender distinction, with very different implications for understanding sex and gender. Here’s where transgender experience, and responses to it, come in.
- In the 1950s, sexologists and psychologists, and in particular John Money, actually first created the sex/gender distinction – through their work with transgender individuals and with the phenomenon of intersexuality (Lighty, 2018; Meyerowitz, 2002).



- Notably, for Money and his colleagues, a distinction between sex and gender was a response to calls for *sex change* – or, in the case of intersexuality, calls for surgical sex assignment.
- The idea here was that gender constructs, or a person’s gendered desires/identity, can override the ‘natural’ or natal ‘givens’ of sex; indeed, can legitimately guide changes to the physical reality of sex (e.g. through hormone therapy).

- As Lighty (2018, p. 9) notes (using the now-dated term ‘transsexual’): when feminist scholars adopted the sex/gender distinction, they:

often used it in the opposite manner than transsexuals had up until that point.

Feminists argued for the artificiality of gender and immutability of sex, while transsexuals argued that their gender was innate, and their sex had to be changed to match their gender (Meyerowitz, 2002, p. 128).



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- In spite of their revolutionary thinking, I suggest that both Money and his colleagues, and early constructionist feminists, continued to reify sex and gender (as binary).
- Gender studies scholars forfeited ‘sex’ to the realm of untouchable (and dimorphic) nature, in an effort to show how ‘gender’ is, in contrast, constructed. As a result, transphobia was (and is) supported in some quarters. Arguably binary gender constructs were not sufficiently dismantled, either (in 1994, Lorber wrote that trans individuals “do not become a third gender. They change genders” [pp. 17-18]).

- As for Money and his colleagues: they explicitly framed gender in binary terms, as social influences constituting the identities of boy or girl, man or woman. For them, when a person's transgender identity called for a sex change, the change was understood as a 'switch' to an 'opposite' sex.
- While some transgender experience does fit a binary mode, this mode is not applicable to all; and medicalised formulations that are binary, in particular, are supercharged with power relations.

- Until very recently, and also still today to a significant extent, transgender individuals seeking body alteration are subject to the same binary thinking and pressures/policing (shuster, 2021) that, ironically, their own experiences have helped to destabilize over time.
- For a long time, transgender requests for sex change were denied in the absence of consistent and strong desire to become the ‘opposite’ sex.
- Consider too that clinical analysis about the ‘appropriateness’ of sex change often used to include determining whether heterosexual desire would be fulfilled thereby (use of normative sexual orientation as a way to ‘assess’ whether gender identity claims were ‘authentic’ – in keeping with hegemonic, binary sex/gender assumptions which conflate gender and sexuality).

- However, more recent practice within transgender medicine – and also more recent gender studies theorizing – come closer to disrupting gender binaries in ways that meet and support a wider range of transgender expression.
- These shifts are urgently needed at a time of greater transgender visibility and political/social backlash seeking to reinstate binary sex and gender norms.



- In spite of the experience my teenager Alex had in the clinic, increasingly transgender medicine does affirm that there is no one 'right way' to be trans (Alex is now on T, FYI)...
- There is also increasing understanding that a person's gender expression (e.g. dress, pronouns) might not fit a normative picture of what is desired physically – which can itself be a range of possibilities (e.g. through the micro-dosing of hormones).

- Also, it is no longer the case that ‘true’ or ‘complete’ sex change is understood in black and white terms, with genital transformation as the ‘gold standard’ (i.e., as applicable to every transgender person) (Plemons, 2017).
- More and more, gender identity change is not only about particular forms of embodiment, but also about how one is perceived and wishes to be perceived. As many feminist theorists have argued for quite some time, gender is – for everyone – fundamentally a social construct.

- Transgender and intersexual experience, and activism, have helped facilitate a gradual appreciation that gender construction applies to the physical body as well.
- A number of gender studies scholars today challenge the sex/gender distinction (Butler, 2004; Fausto-Sterling 2000). These scholars consider that sexual dimorphism excludes a range of human bodies, including bodies for which medical intervention is not taking place; and is itself shaped by socially hegemonic, binary gender concepts.



- As I learned early on in my experience as Alex's parent, the notion of gender 'transition' applies aptly to a person's receiving (social) context. How can we all 'transition' our understanding, perception and embrace of a range of genders?
- It is past time for us to stop asking transgender people to carry the burden of proving or justifying anything about gender – while cis(normatively)-gendered folks proceed largely unquestioned with their own gendered performances, convictions, and body modifications.

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