

I am who I am

MEDIA, IDENTITY, AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH

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This article attempts to explain some of the terms used within the transgender community and developmental attributes of gender cognitions as well as examining the implications of transgender representation in contemporary media.

Childhood is a time of discovery and growth – to learn about yourself and about others. One way in which children learn about themselves is through their identification of their gender. For most children, this process reflects societal expectations, and they find themselves comfortable with the label of girl or boy given to them based on their sex. For others, this title brings great angst and discomfort. These children identify as transgender and experience a disconnect between their biological self and the set of gender norms assigned to them. These children are often invisible in social structures because they do not conform to the expected binary classification of gender. Furthermore, transgender representation in the media is sparse, which makes each depiction even more important.

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

Today, the term transgender “typically serves as an umbrella term for a range of identities that refuse the link between biological sex and a set of socially acceptable gender norms.” (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015, p. 12). It is important to distinguish between sex and gender.

Sex is determined most commonly by biological characteristics including sex chromosomes and is assessed at birth based on observation of external genitalia (Garofalo et al., 2006; Diamond, Pardo & Butterworth, 2011).

Gender, however, refers to the characteristics and behaviors socially constructed and associated with one’s sex. This includes stereotypes, gender roles, and expressions of masculinity and femininity (Diamond, Pardo & Butterworth, 2011).

Transgender individuals are often classified as male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM) (Garofalo et al., 2006) and experience persistent discomfort between their biological sex and gender identity, often causing extreme distress. Members of the transgender community developed the term *cisgender* to refer to individuals whose biological sex aligns with their expressed gender (Hilton-Morrow &

Battles, 2015). While transgender individuals may not feel like they fit into a dichotomous sex structure, this is not to be confused with either sexual orientation or a desire for surgical or hormonal reassignment (Meier & Labuski, 2013).

Sexual orientation relates to the gender identity of persons to whom individuals are physically or emotionally attracted, not one’s psychological sense of identity (Garofalo et al., 2006; Meier & Labuski, 2013). It should also be noted that “gender variance is not learned, not chosen, not due to emotional or mental disorder and not determined by parenting” (Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, 2015). As such, it is important to consider how gender knowledge and identity develop in childhood and what implications this may have for both media representation and audience perception.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER

Two distinctive gender cognitions – basic gender identity and gender stereotypes – play a significant role in the organizational structure of children’s behavior and thinking about gender (Martin, Ruble & Szkrybalo, 2002). Basic gender identity involves both knowledge of gender groups and labeling of genders. Gender stereotypes involve categorization of individuals into groups, in this case associating attributes of femininity to females and masculinity to males including activities and interests, and personal and social attributes (aggression, dependence, and gentleness, for example).

Gender-based knowledge and perception start very early in child development. During the first year of life, infants can discriminate voices (6-8 months) and faces (9-11 months) of males and females (Martin et al., 2002). By 22 months, children are able to verbalize gender labels (use words such as boy, girl, lady, guy) and some can even self-label (correctly use “girl” or “boy” to identify one’s own gender (Zosuls et al., 2009). Production of labels (use of words such as boy, girl, woman, lady, man) can serve as indicator of children’s knowledge of gender categories for others and for one’s self. Furthermore, there is a connection between self-labeling and sex-typed play – that is, sex-typed play with trucks and dolls (two of the most highly stereotyped toys of gendered play) increases between 17 and 21 months in children and was related to knowledge and use of gender labels and self-labeling (Zosuls et al., 2009). As such, self-labeling and sex-typed play serve as key indicators of gender-based knowledge of others and self which develop and are expressed very early in life.

Moreover, it is important to note that “children actively seek out and construct their own rules about gender at an early age” (Martin et al., 2002,

p. 924). This has particularly important implications for transgender youth since children can recognize early on that what they feel and experience does not coincide with the label given to them based on their biological sex. Children who experience discomfort with their gender begin to express their transgender identity between the ages of 3 and 4 years; however, some children as young as 2 years of age can make statements about their gender not matching their biological sex (Boskey, 2014).

Children as young as 3 and 4 years may express discomfort with their biological sex

Moreover, cross-gender behaviors (behaving like children of the opposite sex) have been found in 2.6-6 % of young boys and 5-12 % of young girls and such behaviors may develop a transgender identity (Möller, Schreier, Li & Romer, 2009). However, not all children that display cross-gender behaviors experience a transgender identity. Cross-gender behaviors may express adherence to a stereotype such as a “tomboy” (a girl or woman who engages in “masculine” activities) rather than a deep-set form of discomfort due to an incongruence between gender identification and biologic sex (Martin et al., 2002). Furthermore, 80-95 % of prepubertal children with gender identity discomfort no longer experience this in adolescence while some individuals experience a “pattern of extreme cross-sex identification from toddlerhood” (Cohen-Kettenis, Delemarre-van de Waal & Gooren, 2008, p. 1894). Therefore, as with cisgender children, transgender children can feel, experience, and express gender identification and gender stereotypes early in life with a continued and sustained identification over time.

As children mature, their convictions about gender-typing wax and wane over time. While gender stereotyp-

ing emerges early, it reaches a peak of rigidity between 5 and 7 years of age, shows more flexibility in middle childhood, but then intensifies again during adolescence (Martin et al., 2002). These shifts in the rigidity of gender categories are also suggestive of moments of learning about gender moving from awareness (construction/information gathering) to rigidity (consolidation and schema confirmation) to flexibility (integration and schema deployment) (Martin et al., 2002). As such, this wave of gender typing presents opportunities for education and instruction during awareness and flexibility as well as moments of rigidity when change may be more difficult and transgender youth may experience more harassment and less acceptance, particularly from peers.

TRANSGENDER MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND USE

Concepts of gender are socially constructed through a variety of influences, and the media often serve “as instrumental sites for regulating the boundaries of gender and sexual identities” (Moscowitz, 2010, p. 26). Both through television, film, and now online, the transgender community is beginning to be more visible in entertainment media. In the United States, of the 271 regular and recurring LGBT characters on scripted broadcast, cable, and streaming programming, only 7 (2.6 %) are counted as transgender. Of these, 6 are transgender women and one is a transgender man (GLAAD, 2015). Of these characters, none were present on broadcast television. Only one character, Cole of ABC Family’s *The Fosters*, is a teenager. Furthermore, the only transgender pre-adolescent children that appear on television in the United States have appeared in news programs, news magazines, or talk-show programs in individual segments – not as recurring characters in a scripted program (Kelso, 2015).

Two other North American shows, *Glee* (US) and *Degrassi* (Canada), have each featured a transgender teen, although their representation enhances transgender stereotypes rather than destigmatize or demarginalize transgender youth (Sandercock, 2015). In the UK, on CBBC, a documentary series, *MY LIFE: I am Leo*, follows the journey of a 13-year-old transgender boy named Leo and has just recently won the 2015 British Academy of Film and Television Art (BAFTA) award in the Children's Factual category (see interview with Margie in this issue).

Transgender characters on TV are few and far between

Beyond the limited number of transgender characters visible on TV, how transgender lives are depicted and represented on television is equally important. Concerns have arisen that representations of transgender individuals have been negative (GLAAD, 2015; Sandercock, 2015). In an analysis of 10 years of transgender characters in US shows, only 12 % were considered groundbreaking, fair, and accurate (GLAAD, 2012). Transgender characters were cast as a "victim" (40 % of episodes and storylines) and also as killers or villains (21 % of episodes and storylines). The most common profession for transgender characters was that of a sex worker (20 % of transgender characters). Finally, anti-transgender slurs, language, and dialogue were present in over half (61 %) of the episodes and storylines (GLAAD, 2012). Interestingly, despite these negative portrayals, media provides lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth a means to buffer discriminatory experiences in 4 ways: 1) coping through escapism, 2) feeling stronger, 3) fighting back, and 4) finding and fostering community (Craig, McInroy, McCready & Alaggia, 2015). Through television depictions, LGBT youth were able to escape from daily stressors and

feel stronger through positive storylines or visibly resilient characters. Online media provided a means for more proactive coping by challenging negative experiences by fighting back. Finally, both TV programs and online media provided opportunities for community building by having a common text to discuss with others (TV programs) and by sharing information with others online (Craig et al., 2015). Transgender youth build community online through daily communication with other LBG youth. Transgender youth exhibit the highest frequencies of speaking with other LGBT people online with just over a quarter of transgender youth (26 %) reporting using the internet to connect every day or almost every day (GLSEN, CiPHR & CCRC, 2013).

TELLING THE STORY OF TRANSGENDER YOUTH

Media can help nurture the development of children by making the invisible visible. Increased and accurate depictions of transgender youth can promote healthy acceptance of these vulnerable youth. Stories of transgender characters who are defined by more than their "transition narrative" can strengthen our depth of understanding of others and of ourselves. What story are you going to tell? ■

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