



Original Research Article

Portrayals of Transgender in University Textbooks at the Beginning of the Millennium

BJ Rye¹, Amanda Chalmers^{2,3}, Sarah Tsiang³ and Glenn J Meaney¹

¹Departments of Psychology and Sexuality, Marriage, and Family Studies, St. Jerome's University at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

²Sweet Birch Counselling and Wellness, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

³University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

The authors present a discourse analysis of textbooks in the fields of gender studies and human sexuality with an eye to transgender portrayals in those textbooks. Textbooks comprise a body of knowledge that is seen as authoritative and, consequently, may heavily influence how transgender issues and transgender people are viewed. This analysis examines definitions of transgender, the myth of a “true transsexual”, the complexity of sexual orientation applied to transgender individuals, and the “medicalisation” of transgender. Common problems found in textbooks include the perpetuation of myths, inaccuracies, and over-simplifications. Some textbooks offer valuable insight into transgender and suggest possible solutions to the problems found in other textbooks. Suggestions are made to promote fair and inclusive treatment of transgender issues in textbooks addressing gender and human sexuality.

Keywords: Transgender, Sexual Orientation, Textbooks, Human Sexuality, Discourse Analysis

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Correspondence should be addressed to:

BJ Rye

Departments of Psychology and Sexuality, Marriage, and Family Studies
St. Jerome's University at the University of Waterloo

290 Westmount Road North

Waterloo, Ontario

Canada, N2L 3G3.

Phone: 519 884-8110 x 28219.

Email-bjrje@uwaterloo.ca.

Portrayals of Transgender in University Textbooks

The very first thing that was ever said about you was, very likely, “it's a girl/boy”. This initial identification has been with you ever since and has shaped, in many ways, your entire life. Most people quickly adapt to their assigned gender and gender role and learn readily to be a boy or a girl. Some, however, never make this adjustment. Being transgender presents a complex array of challenges in a world where gender identity is expected to be firm and unchanging. Historically, there is little awareness regarding transgender issues: In the popular media, for example, transgender people have often ignored or were the subject of ridicule (cf. M*A*S*H; also see Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Negative attitudes toward transgender people are pervasive in our gender-specific culture (Grant et al., 2011).

Negative attitudes may be reinforced by inaccurate, cursory, and prejudicial portrayals of transgender in textbooks; textbooks are perceived to be an authoritative source of information and are often taken as “the truth” by those who read them. Not only a source of information, but textbooks also influence attitudes toward people who are transgender by painting an implicit picture of these individuals. Textbooks, then, should strive to give an accurate, value-free representation of the information they convey. To the extent that this goal is achieved, textbooks may be an important source of information and can communicate a sense of social justice.

Complimentary textbooks are provided by competitive academic publishing companies to university professors to convince the instructors to adopt the publisher's book for their courses. Consequently, books provided to professors in an interdisciplinary family studies department teaching specialised courses in gender and human sexuality, up to the beginning of the millennium, were analysed; our examination suggests that these textbooks often failed to present accurate, non-prejudicial transgender portrayals. In particular, transgender issues could be organised into four central issues based on what information was included or excluded from existing textbooks (see Appendix for a list of the textbooks we reviewed).

Our four central concepts include 1) definitions of “transgender”, 2) the “true transsexual”, 3) sexual orientation and transgender, and 4) “normal biology”.

Definitions of Transgender

Within the transgender community and academic and medical circles, transgender defines individuals who do not, for some reason, fit within the rigidly defined boundaries of conventional gender. Many textbooks, however, largely ignore transgender or provide confusing definitions. In particular, the terms “transsexual” and “transvestite” are often (incorrectly and inappropriately) used interchangeably as synonyms of “transgender”. Such a presentation misleads readers as to the nature of transgenderism and potentially

ignores or denigrates many transgender individuals.

The ‘True Transsexual’

The conflation of the terms “transgender” and “transsexual” often leads to a second, related problem: Many textbooks portray and, therefore, implicitly promote the concept of a “true transsexual”. That is, transgender people are categorised to the extent that they undergo hormonal therapy and sex reassignment surgery. The “true transsexual”, or the person who opts to undergo complete sex reassignment surgery (also called sex realignment surgery), is then presented as the only “legitimate” form of a transgender person. This portrayal again denigrates or ignores the many transgender people who do not opt for sex reassignment surgery, or who choose limited reassignment procedures, and pressures them to pursue full sex reassignment surgery, even when they would prefer other alternatives. Further, this emphasis on genital surgery serves to reinforce the pervasive view of the duality of gender based on biological sex; in this sense, the presentation of complete sex reassignment surgery as the only “true transsexual” alternative denies the legitimacy of variations of transgender persons.

Sexual Orientation and Transgender

Sexual orientation is a complex and multi-faceted concept, especially when applied to transgender individuals. Defining sexual orientation in the context of people

who are transgender is itself difficult because the very concept of sexual orientation assumes a clear, binary distinction of gender. Perhaps, as a result, textbooks frequently ignore sexual orientation or, when it is discussed, are inconsistent in their treatment. Some texts, for example, emphasise the biological sex at birth as the determinant of sexual orientation: For example, a male-to-female trans person who is attracted to Men would be considered 'homosexual'. Note that this approach focuses entirely on natal genital sex and completely ignores the person's self-identification. Other texts use post-operative identity as the determinant; a female-to-male trans person who is attracted to women would be considered heterosexual. A few texts are less presumptive, stating that transgender individuals can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual; that is, they constitute the same range of sexual orientations as cisgendered persons. The biggest problem, however, may be that the entire abstraction of sexual orientation necessarily imposes a dichotomous view of gender and, in itself, does not allow for the diversity of possibilities that transgender may entail. Rather, it reduces sexual orientation identity to a matter of two biological sexes.

The ‘Normal Biology’

A deterministic or essentialist view of gender holds that gender is determined by genetics and other biological sources. While there are many variations of essentialism presented in textbooks, we found

only one textbook that specifically questioned this formulation of gender. An essentialist viewpoint is often implicitly presented through the use of terms like “normal”, implying that there is one “proper” path to gender identity. All other conceptions, then, are abnormal or deviant. The word “normal” does have a scientific and unbiased meaning: That which is average or most common. But the general public may not interpret the word scientifically unless the terms are clearly defined; that is, “normal” may be seen as “good”. The implied deviance of transgender can be seen clearly in cases where references to a person's chosen identity are placed in quotation marks when it does not match physical identity, or when people are described as having “...*the proper complement of XX or XY chromosomes.....*” (Crooks & Baur, 1999, p. 57) or when heterosexual relationships are discussed as being normal.

An outgrowth of biological determinism is the medicalisation of transgender: Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is classified as a psychological disorder by the widely-cited Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While the DSM-IV-TR recognises all disorders as the abnormal extreme of a continuum of normal-to-abnormal behaviour, the medical classification may encourage stigmatisation. Released in 2013, the DSM-5 changed the diagnosis to gender dysphoria in an attempt to reduce the stigma associated with

the disorder as well as align with the distress associated with the incongruence of biological sex and psychological identity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The ICD has moved transgender out of the mental disorders section and retained gender incongruence as a sexual health diagnosis (World Health Organization, 2018). Regardless of these more recent changes, gender dysphoria or gender incongruence as medical diagnoses are likely to be communicated by textbooks that present a deterministic, essentialist view of transgender origins.

These social science human sexuality/gender-related textbooks have been conflating the experience of gender dysphoria with being transgender; transgender is a normal variation within gender whereas gender dysphoria is a state of psychological distress at the perceived incongruence between gender and biological sex. Textbooks have typically portrayed transgender as a disorder, or a diagnosis leads to the common presentation of sex-reassignment surgery as the best viable “treatment.”

Few of the textbooks reviewed suggested hormones alone or limited surgery as options; when hormonal treatment was discussed, it was often presented only as a precursor to genital surgery. In most texts, other alternatives –such as adopting garb consistent with the psychological identity solely– were ignored or presented in a stigmatised fashion (e.g., often described as a

cross-dressing fetish). This type of presentation, again, reinforces the myth of the “true transsexual” – it suggests that gender is biologically determined, dysphoria must be treated, and everyone must conform to the gender dichotomy.

Transgender individuals may then seek sex-reassignment surgery not because it is what they want, but because they see it as the only alternative. Or, non-trans readers may view those who do not seek medical intervention or surgery as not “complete” in their transition. This depiction is a narrow, one-sided view of transgender that can cause a great deal of unnecessary pain for trans people and potential confusion for cisgender readers.

Discussion

Fortunately, many textbooks do not focus on any one theoretical explanation to the exclusion of others; rather, transgender is presented as arising from a variety of causes or forces. For example, social learning theory, psychodynamic (Freudian) theory, and social constructivist theories (including post-modern feminism) are frequently used to explain transgender and gender dysphoria. In particular, most textbooks acknowledge that no one theoretical account can reasonably explain the complexities of transgender. However, presenting alternate viewpoints while privileging an essentialist perspective may not be enough. A fair presentation of transgender may require a general re-conceptualisation of gender. While such a re-

conceptualisation is emerging in the academic literature, this is not necessarily reflected in textbooks. It is important to consider textbook presentations as these writings help form the knowledge base of future health care professionals, social service workers, policy makers, etc. The texts reviewed herein probably influenced many of the professionals who make important decisions today.

The academic literature on transgender is far from reaching consensus on how to portray transgender issues fairly, and there is evidence of this disagreement in the treatment of transgender in textbooks about gender and human sexuality. However, textbooks often present this information in a narrow, one-dimensional format. The richness of the academic debate, in itself, could do much to engender a more trans-positive atmosphere. Rather than presenting the complexities surrounding transgender, however, many textbooks omit transgender topics, discuss it obscurely or judgmentally, or lump it in with paraphilic or otherwise abnormal (or deviant) behaviour. Readers of the textbooks, however, are likely to view what they have read as accurate, comprehensive, and value-free information. In this way, many textbooks may serve only to reinforce the general social stigma associated with being a transgender person and with promoting a rigid and dichotomised view of gender.

If they are constructed with care, textbooks can provide an avenue for

education and attitude change. In particular, the complexities of transgender could be integrated with information about gender and sexuality throughout the text. At the same time, care should be taken to be respectful of transgender persons. Perhaps the simplest way to accomplish this goal is to respect individual self-identification: Refer to male-to-female using she and her; refer to female-to-male as he and his; Or, use gender-neutral pronouns such as hir or they. When in doubt, ask the person what pronoun they prefer. It should be remembered that not all transgender persons have rigid gender identities and may prefer to remain fluid or to choose to live some point between feminine and masculine. Similarly, sexual orientation may be complex and not confined to the biological sex of the persons a transgender person finds attractive.

Conclusion

Since there is little agreement in the research literature, textbook writers should encourage readers to be open-minded and critical of the material. Given the complicated nature of gender and sexuality among transgender individuals, general discussions of gender and sexuality should not be focused tightly on a dichotomy of gender but should respect the variety of possibilities that include all people.

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