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## Society's Acceptance of Transgender Identity

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# Society's Acceptance

An episode of *This American Life* entitled "Somewhere Out There" features a segment on two young girls who are anatomically male but identify as females ("Tom Girls"). In modern scientific terms, the two girls suffer from "Gender Identity Disorder," a diagnosis used by psychologists and physicians in order to describe people who experience significant gender dysphoria. The dialogue within this episode reflects the complicated issue concerning society's nonacceptance of transgendered people.

In the episode, the two girls, Thomasina and Lilly, share their experiences as individuals who are sometimes alienated from their peers because they do not fit into a male/female gender category. In the episode transcript, the father of one of the girls says,

A lot of our friends [say] "so your kid is gay, right?" And that would actually be a blessing...at least our society has a structure in which you can understand... where gay people fit. Once you say OK, now I want this transgender person to be part of your world, someone says I'm not even sure I even believe that's really true.... If you'd stop letting your kid dress like a girl, it wouldn't act like a girl. ("Tom Girls")

It should be noted how difficult it is to obtain an accurate percentage of Americans who are homosexual. While the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau finds that homosexual couples make up less than one percent of U.S. households, the Family Research Report estimates a

higher number, finding that two to three percent of all men and two percent of all women are homosexual or bisexual. In contrast, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates that three to eight percent of both sexes are homosexual (Robison). An even smaller percentage of the population can be identified as transgender. Thomasina's father implies that those who grapple with issues of transgender identity are a small minority of society. Due to this, they are rarely part of the larger discussions. The general U.S. population is only just now starting to accept people who are homosexual. It is likely that society will take even longer to become more accepting of transgender people.

The word "transgender" did not appear until the publication of Harry Benjamin's seminal publication, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. In his 1966 work, Benjamin creates three categories of transgendered people: those who "merely want to 'dress,' go out 'dressed,' and to be accepted as women," those who find themselves in a "more severe stage of an emotional disturbance," and those who are fully transsexual (13). In describing transsexuality, Benjamin notes the alienation from society that transgendered people experience.



Benjamin finds that the third category, which constitutes individuals with “fully developed transsexualism,” as having a greater number of clashes with various aspects of society, including with the law and with the medical profession (13).

This phenomenon of people who identify as another gender is a relatively new concept in the scientific world and an even newer concept to society. As one of the fathers in the episode described, society’s resistance in accepting the concept of a transsexual identity is arguably stronger than the clash between society and homosexuals.

This conflict is also described by Alissa Quart in her article about a young man named Rey who prefers to identify as male in spite of the fact that he is anatomically female. In Quart’s essay, “When Girls Will Be Boys,” she notes how trans students often feel excluded at college and are often insulted by their peers (Quart). Quart describes Rey’s first week of his freshman year at Barnard, a women’s college, when he learned that his roommates had com-

plained to the housing director because they did not want to share a room with him. Quart goes on to say that “as Rey saw it, he was sim-

ply shut out by his two roommates—and by the rest of the school” (Quart).

What Quart does not discuss at length is the fact that college is only one of the many places where Rey can expect to experience discrimination. In fact, according to the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey* conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in 2009, transgendered people are regularly targeted. It was found in the survey that people who are transgendered experience “double the rate of unemployment...near universal harassment on the job...significant losses of jobs and careers” and “high rates of poverty” (1). Such challenges reflect what Quart calls “a natural part of being a minority that is still fighting for acceptance.” The difficulties which are substantiated by the survey arise because transsexuality is a relatively new concept for many people.

In “Tom Girls,” Lilly’s mother says, “Honey, you know, I don’t think God did this. I think nature has ways of messing up. There are children born with one arm. There are children born with a larger nose. And everybody has something that they feel insecure about.” By saying that nature has ways of “messing up,” Lilly’s mother implies that transsexuality is a defect or mistake of birth. This reflects society’s approach to conditions of gender and sexuality for which there exists little precedent.

Up to the 1970s, the scientific community viewed homosexuality as a mental illness. It wasn’t until 1974 that the American Psychiatric Association voted through a small majority



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to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Herek). Although some authorities such as the British National Health Service do not classify gender dysphoria as a mental illness, currently, people in the United States who identify as a different gender are categorized as suffering from a mental illness in the DSM. This reinforces the assumption that identifying as the opposite gender is abnormal and suggests that there is a “cure” to this phenomenon. Recently, in 2010, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) prepared a statement for the purpose of amending the DSM. The WPATH asserts that having a transgender identity should not be viewed as an illness. In the eyes of WPATH, changing the DSM's definition is the first step towards initiating a constructive dialogue concerning this issue (see Corneil, Eisfeld, and Botzer).

In *This American Life*, the two girls, Thomasina and Lilly, describe a catharsis that television gives them, allowing them to forget that they are considered abnormal by others. Thomasina says, “Sometimes, when I’m watching TV... I don’t really think about it, or I just feel like a normal kid...and I’m not even a boy or a girl” (“Tom Girls”). Later in the episode, Thomasina expresses her desire to be “normal.” She says, “Now I actually have this one friend who doesn’t know a thing about (my gender identity), and I actually, kind of, like that. She doesn’t know a thing about it, she just thinks I’m a normal person” (“Tom Girls”).

By saying this, Thomasina acknowledges the popular assumption that she is not “normal.” However, it becomes evident through such dialogue that Thomasina and Lilly do not have an inherent sense of abnormality; rather, this sense of abnormality and alienation is something that is taught to them by the society into which they were born into. The fact that Lilly and Thomasina describe

themselves as feeling gender neutral while watching television provides an interesting insight into the quality of gender identity.

Is gender identity an innate quality or a learned social construct? Quart argues that the conventional way of thinking that transgendered people are “born into the wrong body” needs to be reevaluated. She says that “many students who identify as trans are seeking not simply to change their sex but to create an identity outside or between established genders” (Quart). In a way, these scholars seek to deconstruct the very concept of gender.

According to Paula S. Rothenberg, gender is an abstract concept that is socially constructed. In her essay, “Race Class and Gender in the United States,” Rothenberg writes:

For the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth. Then the babies are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category because parents don’t want to be constantly asked whether their baby is a girl or a boy. A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. (55)

Rothenberg introduces gender as an interesting dilemma when she states that “gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives.” “[O]ne way of choosing people for the different tasks of society,” she notes, “is on the basis of their talents, motivations, and competence—their demonstrated achievements. The other way is on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity—assigned membership in a category of people” (55). Thus, gender becomes a major tool for social categorization within society. Thomasina and Lilly are presented with a confusing and paradoxical

condition when it comes to the mixed messages that they are given by society concerning their gender.

In “Tom Girls,” Mary Beth Kirchner describes Lilly and Thomasina as looking distinctly female based on their dress. According to Kirchner, Lilly has pierced ears and “loves wearing her pink sneakers with her all-pink summer dresses.” Kirchner says that Thomasina “has long, wavy brown hair and delicate facial features. She wears kick skirts, and headbands, and two-piece bathing suits” (“Tom Girls”). Although the two children desire and are allowed to dress as girls, they are constantly reminded by their peers and society in general that they are males. Thomasina’s father describes his daughter being bullied, saying,

...[t]his child would take her on recess and say, “I know your secret. I know your secret.... And if you don’t do what I say, I’m telling everybody your secret.” And then she went up into her ear and said, “And I’m telling everybody your secret, boy.... And now, you’re going to push me on the swing set.” (“Tom Girls”)

A clear explanation for society’s negative reaction to the idea of transsexuality can be understood through the frame of Rothenberg’s comment: In many cultures, gender is the most essential and fundamental category of identity classification. Once the concept of gender loses its tangibility and is questioned, traditional social roles and customs also become objects of discussion and criticism. When the father of one of the girls in “Tom Girls” states that “society has [no] structure in which you can understand [transsexuality],” he is standing at the tip of an iceberg. The discussion of transsexuality is the doorway to a much larger discussion about gender as a social construction and as a tool of human

classification that is intrinsically woven into the fabric of our society.

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