

Research-Based Attention to Lived Experiences and Real-World Challenges of Trans People

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THE GROWING AWARENESS of gender diversity in the late 1990s and the cultural shift towards gender identities beyond the categories of men and woman seem to have been accompanied by an ever-increasing moral panic around the so-called ‘trans issue’ (Alm & Engebretsen 2020). These debates tend to take what can be referred to as an outsider perspective, trying to make trans experiences fit within predetermined frameworks and normative language that comes from a majority perspective. As a researcher within the field, I have often noticed a significant discrepancy between the discussions that take place in mainstream media and the issues that emerge in interviews with young trans people themselves. The publication of an anthology that aims to present and disseminate empirical investigations on a wide array of issues relevant to trans people is therefore laudable and courageous as well as highly necessary.

The thematic breadth of the anthology is impressive, spanning from chapters on sexuality and sexual health, parenting as a trans person,

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non-binary genders and detransitioning. The first chapter gives a pedagogical introduction to useful definitions and the historical development that has led up to our time. Perhaps paradoxically, as one of the editors, Edward Summanen, notes in this first chapter, improvements in trans rights seem to have been accompanied with increased vulnerability and widespread coverage in mainstream media. Moral panic around trans issues has, in fact, emerged as an electoral mobilizer in country after country in recent years, characterized by sensational headlines and misinformation. It is impressive that the authors have not shied away from contentious topics often used to delegitimize trans people's experiences in mainstream discussions, such as detransitioning and the relationship between radical feminism and trans issues (Alm & Engebretsen 2020). On the contrary, they tackle these topics head-on by clarifying concepts. The authors appear firm in their belief that disseminating research is essential for fostering informed public debate.

The chapters are pedagogically structured, beginning with a general introduction to relevant definitions and concepts, followed by a discussion of relevant empirical research and theoretical frameworks. At times, the style becomes somewhat formalistic, such as when discussing the importance of trans communities or introducing non-binary gender identities, with definitions that occasionally feel removed from everyday language. Yet, the presentation of concepts and definitions is usually followed by the introduction of relevant topics that emerge from empirical trans research, especially within psychology and social science. Additionally, each chapter includes a conversation with a person who has lived experience related to the topic presented. These conversations about everyday life experiences are both illustrative and capable of engendering empathy among readers, demonstrating both the complexity and the humanity of trans lives.

Moreover, the interplays within the texts between academic definitions and theoretical perspectives, together with the engagement with lived experiences, creates a fruitful dialectic that improves the understanding of trans people's various realities. The chapter on minority stress, for example, explains pedagogically the main assumptions be-

hind this oft-used explanatory framework for understanding the mechanisms that drive mental health difficulties in trans minority groups. It also introduces concepts such as microaggressions and intersectionality to better understand how stigma and discrimination impact trans people's well-being. But the introduction to how activists use these concepts to inform their work to help people handle transphobia gives us a much clearer understanding of the value of the minority stress theory. The chapter on detransitioning further illustrates the importance of the interplay between concepts and lived experience. The concept of detransitioning, perhaps a bit intangible for people without personal experience, and its various definitions, is pedagogically explained. However, detransitioning becomes more real and easy to grasp after the conversation with 30-year-old Alice about their experiences with detransitioning and their journey of exploring what gender means for them. The introduction of theories such as minority stress and the conceptual clarification of detransitioning paved the way for better discussions, but they need to be accompanied by lived experiences to make the viewpoint of a minority – in this case, trans people – more understandable to a wider public.

Furthermore, several chapters offer solutions to real-world problems that have emerged from disclosures of challenges that many trans people face on a daily basis. The chapter on trans communities, for example, is based on research into trans people's quality of life and highlights the importance of finding support among other trans people to prevent loneliness and mental health difficulties. The research literature review is followed by concrete examples from a Swedish context, focusing on trans communities that have developed over the years. Unsurprisingly, the chapter reveals that there is much more diversity and disagreement among trans people than is suggested by the portrayal of a monolithic 'trans movement' often found in mainstream media. Consequently, efforts to create inclusive trans communities should address the norms within these communities and potential hierarchies among trans people. In this way, the chapter highlights real-world challenges that often go unnoticed in mainstream discussions about trans issues.

Another example of this solution-based approach is the chapter on clinical encounters with trans people. The authors directly address what exploration means in mental health work with trans individuals. Conservative commentators have increasingly argued that gender-affirming care should include so-called 'exploration' of gender as an alternative to social and medical transition before clinicians affirm trans people's sense of self, without specifying what this implies in terms of clinical meetings between help-seeking trans people and health professionals. Furthermore, this suggests an implicit dichotomy between affirming trans people's gender identity and the exploration of gender norms. By concretely discussing what exploration and affirmation mean in different therapeutic settings, the authors demonstrate how far-removed from real-world problems the debate about gender exploration is. The devil is in the details, and the authors highlight the opportunities and dilemmas that should be considered to make gender-affirming care more effective. Thus, it is more fruitful to discuss concrete strategies to improve clinical interactions between trans clients and health professionals than to engage in abstract and unanswerable discussions, such as the argument made by conservative commentators that gender-affirming care for trans people is responsible for maintaining gender norms.

Together, the dialectical movements involving the clarification of concepts circulated in mainstream media and academic literature, along with empirical investigations and conversations with people with lived experience, provide detailed descriptions of trans realities and the challenges that trans people encounter. Research that aims to produce practical solutions to real-world problems should attend to lived experiences of oppressed people, as these can reveal dimensions that are otherwise difficult for mainstream society to grasp. Furthermore, such research-based descriptions of diverse lives in context can be sources of empowerment if communicated to policy-makers and other political actors to initiate a dialogue (McNay 2022). By highlighting concepts and perspectives that emerge from empirical and inductive investigations into trans lives – such as forming supportive trans communities and strategies to promote gender euphoria, a concept developed to balance the

medical focus on suffering – the anthology suggests solutions that could bring society closer to including trans people. The mismatch between the overly negative focus on trans people’s lives in mainstream media and the topics presented in the anthology is striking. By bringing academic work into dialogue with lived experience, the authors and editors have succeeded in laying the groundwork to transcend the stymying effects of grand-sweeping ‘trans debates’ about public restrooms and other issues that are best addressed by real-world solutions tailored to specific contexts.

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