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Are non-binary people really essentialist?

A response to Garrison's 2018 article "On the Limits of 'Trans Enough': Authenticating Trans Identity Narratives." *Gender & Society*, Vol 32(5).

Very little research exists about people who identify between or outside of the gender binary, as neither women or men. We applaud the research interest evidenced by a recent article by Garrison (2018) in *Gender & Society* which analyzes data based on genderqueer respondents. It is one of the first research articles, in a sociological journal (for another, see Darwin, 2017 and Barbee, 2019 forthcoming), that includes non-binary respondents and analyzes them as a distinct social group. This paper offers important theoretical arguments for the cultural intelligibility of non-binary identities. Beyond this however, and the importance of new research on the topic, this paper is seriously flawed in its conceptualization, recruitment strategies and findings.

Garrison offers a useful analysis of how cultural discourse provides the tools for anyone to make identity claims. The respondents in this research who identified as non-binary transgender had fewer cultural tools to describe their identity, and so were less intelligible to others. They stood on more unstable terrain than transgender respondents who had crossed the binary rather than tried to straddle it. Garrison's argument that everyone uses preexisting cultural tool kits to construct their gender identity is an important contribution to the field. Garrison's finding that transgender non-binary respondents use the binary cultural toolkits available to them to account for their gender is useful addition to the field. He goes on to analyze how transgender

and genderqueer people construct narratives about their identities. He finds that the transgender respondents who move from one binary category to the other (e.g. intend to pass) problematize gender and sometimes consciously challenge the essentialism of the gender binary. In contrast, the non-binary participants in his study do not challenge gender binaries as they tell their life history stories. Instead, they use the stereotypes embedded in binary thinking to explain their non-conformity to sex ascribed at birth. They do so to explain and legitimize their non-binary identity. According to this article, non-binary respondents feel so misunderstood during social interactions that they call upon narratives that rely on their non-conformity to gender stereotypes to explain their rejection of categories. In so doing, they implicitly give essentialist meanings to gender categories. Binary transgender respondents are more easily understood by others and so are more likely to shatter gender stereotypes.

We challenge the validity of Garrison's argument. We suggest that he makes claims far beyond the evidence. Indeed, the evidence itself is biased by sampling technique and a tiny sample size. Our major critique is that the selection criterion assumes that non-binary people necessarily identify as transgender narrows his findings to comparisons between binary and non-binary transgender respondents, and from such data there can be no valid claims about non-binary people more generally. Thus, the claim that non-binary people use more essentialist beliefs than binary transgender people who hope and expect to pass after their transition cannot be supported by the data. Below we make three distinct and significant critiques of the research. Our first critique focuses on the bias implicit in the recruitment strategy. The second critique is about big claims from a far too small sample size. Our final critique is that the methodological problems lead to a faulty analysis. The article obfuscates far more than it clarifies, and we fear its

publication in the early moments of sociological research on non-binary respondents begins to build a new research tradition upon a faulty foundation.

Issues of Sampling and Recruitment

The recruitment for respondents whose interviews are analyzed in this paper was limited to only those individuals who identify as transgender. His recruitment strategy presumes that non-binary people are necessarily within the trans umbrella. He states that

“All participants identified as transgender, had disclosed their trans identity to at least one other individual at the time of the interview, and reported taking at least one step to bring their physical or social presentation into closer alignment with their perceived gender identity” (2018, p. 623).

In other words, Garrison’s recruitment strategy targets participants who identify as both trans *and* gender binary or trans *and* non-binary and therefore excludes from the research the population of non-binary people who do not identify as transgender. He then makes claims about all non-binary people. We know from recent research (Darwin, 2017; Risman, Myers and Sin, 2017) that some, but not all, genderqueer respondents consider themselves transgender. Garrison’s research omits all people who identify between and/or outside the gender binary but not as transgender from the possibility of being represented in the sample. Such persons do indeed exist (see Risman, 2018; Risman, Myers and Sin, 2018). In the “Growing up in in the 21st Century” data now being collected by Risman and colleagues, there are participants who identify as genderqueer and/or non-binary *and* transgender, but also those who identify as genderqueer and/or non-binary who *do not* identify as transgender. Such respondents reject trans and cis labels for themselves and used terms such as “gender fluid”, “gender queer”, and “non-binary” to describe their gender. Garrison’s recruitment strategy would have disqualified any genderqueer person who was not trans identified. His recruitment strategy omits people who identify as non-binary but are not interested in changing their physical bodies and/or do not identify as

transgender. It is precisely those genderqueer people who might be most likely to be critical of gender essentialism. Indeed, the philosopher Dembroff (2018) argues that a genderqueer identity is a critical gender kind, and can be best defined as including both a critique of the gender structure, and an ontological feeling of not belonging within the binary gender categories as now defined. For one of the first sociological studies to incorporate genderqueer respondents to exclude any that do not both identify as transgender and have to some extent transitioned their bodies either physically or in terms of social presentation is a serious error. By recruiting only those between or outside the binary who identify as trans, Garrison effectively denies the existence of non-binary people who do not identify as transgender. He has rendered them illegible (Butler 2004).

Our research offers some evidence that not all non-binary people identify as transgender, although some indeed do. In Risman and colleagues' past research (Risman, 2018, Risman, Myers, and Sin, 2018) we interviewed non-binary respondents who did not identify as transgender, as well as binary and non-binary transgender young adults. In on-going research (17 interviews thus far) we have found a great deal of variation: non-binary identified persons interested in physical transition without identifying as trans and others who identify as non-binary with no interest in physical transition at all. One of our respondents, Graham, who now identifies as non-binary explains how they considered identifying as transgender but then discovered the idea of non-binary and chose that as an identity instead. Graham does not consider being non-binary synonymous with identifying under the trans umbrella. Graham shares,

"I did question in college whether I was trans. I talked a lot about that with my girlfriend at the time who knew a lot about that, transition and everything. [...] I am a woman who feels weird about her gender. But then there was a shift towards the end of college. I dated someone who was non-binary. I learned more

about what that means and how it can mean different (things) for different people. And so that sort of opened my eyes more to that even though I still didn't identify as non-binary at that time. "

We suggest that it is far too early in the gathering of research evidence to know the distribution of variation in experiences of those who are non-binary. What we can tell from Risman's past research and our own on-going study is that the desire to physically transition and identify as transgender are not inherent or necessary components of non-binary gender identity. We also have interviewed non-binary respondents who reject gender essentialism and do not use it in their own narratives. Some have adopted non-binary identities after reading about social constructionism and gender fluidity.

Our critique is not that there are no non-binary individuals that identify as trans but rather that Garrison generalizes about non-binary people from a small sample of six and does so while conflating trans and non-binary identities. Bergman and Barker (2017) have identified the harm of combining trans and non-binary identities because non-binary people are often the ones left marginalized by the conversation. In this article, non-binary people without a transgender identified are not only marginalized, they are explicitly excluded.

Sample Size

Beyond our concern for the exclusion of genderqueer people who do not identify as trans from the possibility of participation in the study, we also have serious concerns about the size of the sample upon which the analysis is based. Recruitment occurred with flyers were posted at 156 LGBTQ-focused community organizations and with online social networking sites and gender focused messaging boards. The full sample size is 17 participants but only six of the respondents identify as non-binary and transgender. Perhaps the requirement that genderqueer respondents also identify as trans and have experienced transitioning can at least partly explain

such a small sample size. It is preposterous that the author theorizes about non-binary people from a sample size of 6 trans identified non-binary respondents. Garrison uses interviews with 6 non-binary individuals who also identify as transgender and have begun a physical or social transition as evidence to claim that genderqueer people tell more essentialist stories about their personal histories than do binary transgender respondents.

Conclusion

These two serious research errors, recruitment strategies that define non-binary as transgender, and require they have begun to socially or physically transition, and a sample size of six lead to serious analytic shortcomings. By only including non-binary individuals who also identify as transgender, the author creates the condition that limits the comparative analysis. While the six non-binary transgender respondents provide a personal narrative, which describes not fitting into the binary, it may be that non-binary people who do not identify as trans would have a different story. Some non-binary respondents work hard to present themselves as androgynous, but others hold a non-binary identity even as other mis-gender them because of their appearance. There is no reason to suspect that they are not also doing the hard work of “undoing” gender.

In a political context in which trans and genderqueer individuals are marginalized, and research evidence on alternative gender identities is necessary, we think it is very important that sociological analysis attends to the complexity of gender identities. Non-binary individuals and communities should not be simply subsumed without distinction into the research on transgender experiences. What proportion of non-binary people identify as transgender is an empirical question, and to omit genderqueer people from research because they do not so identify excludes members of this community. Gender identity is complex and language and social norms are

constantly shifting. It is our responsibility as researchers to ensure that we do not render identities invisible in too early attempts to theorize with small samples. One danger of conflating the trans and non-binary communities is that it renders some invisible and therefore diminishes the ability of sociologists to understand trends in the gender structure. Perhaps even a more important danger is that it deprives individuals, who may indeed be trying to undo gender by moving beyond categories, from visibility in American society. While Garrison's article does bring non-binary people to the attention of gender sociologists, we think it is very important to problematize the analysis based on a sample of six and a recruitment strategy that defines non-binary as simply one kind of transgender rather than another critical kind of gender (e.g. Dembroff 2018) altogether.

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