Author: Spencer Garrison (University of Michigan — Ann Arbor)

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Agree to Disagree, or Disagree to Agree? A Response to Vega, Holzman, Zhao, and Risman

Last summer, I published a research brief in *Gender & Society* (Garrison 2018) about the narrative work that trans-identified teens and young adults take on in their efforts to account for (and to legitimate) their claims to trans identity. In this article, I examine the identity narratives produced by two cohorts of trans-identified respondents — respondents that identified within the context of the existing gender binary, and respondents that did not — and assess the narrative strategies that respondents within these two cohorts employed in order to establish themselves as “authentically” trans. Since the release of this article, I’ve been fortunate enough to receive commentary on it from peers all around the country — some celebratory, and some critical. Most recently, this commentary has come in the form of a critique posted by a group of concerned colleagues to Psychology Today.¹

I am always grateful to receive constructive feedback on my work, and this critique is no exception: I appreciate that Dr. Risman and her colleagues have found the work's contribution significant enough to merit such thoughtful and direct engagement, and I thank them for their consideration and their time. Indeed, the substance of the critique suggests to me that there is a great deal about which we *agree* here: while my critics allege that my approach to this research

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/gender-questions/201903/man-woman-and-in-between-or-beyond>

“contradicts” their own, I suspect that the differences between our approaches are not nearly so profound or so totalizing as my critics have proposed. That said, however, I fear that the core principle anchoring this particular critique — namely, the claim that this research unjustly defines and asserts ALL non-binary persons as transgender — rests on a fundamental mischaracterization of the article’s argument and purpose. Below, I attend to the two most salient critiques highlighted by Risman’s research team — the elision of critical distinctions between binary-identified trans people, non-binary trans people, and non-binary non-trans people, and the methodological concerns associated with the project’s small sample size. I then close with some final thoughts, along with a suggestion or two on how we might fruitfully continue this (clearly much-needed!) conversation.

Elision of the Distinction(s) between Binary Trans, Non-Binary Trans, and Non-Binary Non-Trans Identities

The central argument presented in this critique — namely, that there exist many non-binary individuals that actively resist the label “trans,” and that these individuals’ experiences and perspectives are worthy of study — is an important argument, and one with which I wholeheartedly accord! There is no question that non-binary people who do not identify as trans *exist*, and to elide the distinction between trans-identifying and non-trans-identifying non-binary people would be highly problematic, both methodologically and politically. Risman’s (2018) research confirms this, as do my own interviews with non-binary teens and young adults that do not identify as trans (collected as part of a separate research project, the results of which are forthcoming).

ing). Others working in the subject area have done much to clarify these myriad distinctions, too (see, for example, Darwin 2017; Harrison-Quintana et al 2015; Factor and Rothblum 2008).

However, by framing this piece as a study (primarily) of how non-binary people compare to binary-identified trans people, the authors misrepresent the study's core objectives. This is, first and foremost, a paper **about self-selected trans people** — it is *not* a paper about gender non-conformity writ large. It is a study of how (and whether) the accounts of gender experience produced by binary-identified trans respondents differ from the experiential narratives produced by non-binary trans respondents. As stated in the text:

This work [examines] how trans-identified respondents approach the process of composing (and revising) accounts of their gender experience. I find that in order to claim public identities *as trans*, non-binary respondents are often motivated to present accounts that closely reflect prevailing understandings of trans experience...even when these accounts fail to capture the nuance of their experiences. (Garrison 2018, p. 615; emphasis in original)

Non-binary people that did not *also* identify themselves as trans were excluded from this study — and quite intentionally so, for this is a project about the social construction of *trans identity*, and it does not seek to make claims about the behavior or the accounts of non-binary people that do not identify as trans. In no way does this methodological decision serve to refute

or deny the existence of non-binary people that do *not* identify as trans; it simply acknowledges that the experiences of such respondents fall beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Just as there are many non-binary individuals that do not identify as trans, there are many *binary*-identified men and women who have pursued medical transition, but who nevertheless reject self-definition as trans (for instance, some of the respondents featured in Rogers' (2018) recent article on drag-kinging). These respondents, too, would have been excluded by the recruitment criteria set for this project — and rightly so! As this paper is about the interactional burden that those seeking to claim a trans identity label assume by disclosing their identities to others, to recruit respondents that didn't identify as trans would have made little methodological sense (and certainly wouldn't have made the most effective use of the limited research funding accessible to me, as a then-first-year graduate student). Indeed, it would likely have proven *more* presumptuous and damaging to open recruitment to non-binary and genderqueer people universally, only to inquire within the context of the interview about what their trans identity meant to them!

I made a similarly intentional decision to recruit only respondents who had disclosed their identities to at least one other person at the time of the interview, as those who have had to “convince” others of the change in their gender status are held *accountable* to prevailing cultural narratives about gender — both those about masculinity/femininity, *and* those about trans experience — in ways that those who have not disclosed their identities are not. Elsewhere in the available literature, we find ample evidence that what people *think* they are doing to challenge or

resist norms may not actually bear out in social life. Indeed, this is an idea that many cultural sociologists have empirically documented (e.g., Pugh 2013). This difference in alignment between what we *think* we are doing and what we *actually* do has offered tremendous insight elsewhere in sociological trans and queer scholarship, such as that found in Orne's (2017) work on how people re-create normativity within queer spaces (in spite of their best efforts to resist!) and in Lamont's (2017) work on the persistence of structural constraints that limit queer people's ability to "recreate" cultural scripts that eschew norms. I believe that the tension between the strategies that trans-identified non-binary people use to actualize their commitment to gender deconstruction and the strategies that they employ to render themselves socially intelligible *as trans people* is worthy of further study, and this tension could not have been empirically accessed or analyzed without the use of these scope conditions.

Scope conditions are a fundamental necessity in research of this type: they keep our research tractable, focused on the questions that we're attempting to answer. Without these conditions, we commit the same fundamental error that it has been suggested I've committed here: we collapse identities, behavior, and beliefs into composite packages, obscuring the rich differences between them. I do *not* believe that this elision has occurred in the article under critique, and I believe that part of the reason why it *hasn't* is *because* of the clarity of the scope conditions I've enforced.

At the same time, I willingly recognize that the *impact* of my research (and not my *intentions*, necessarily, as the architect behind it) is what matters most centrally here. While I assured-

ly haven't *intended* to conflate non-binary and trans identities in this piece, this feedback confirms that more explicit attention to the differences between these two cohorts may have been necessary to clarify my interpretation of the findings. I'm deeply indebted, again, to my critics for helping me to better understand where I may have fallen short in this regard. My forthcoming work on gender non-conforming teens and young adults — which attends more explicitly to this question of the differences between respondents that identify as trans, and those that do not — will incorporate a more intentional elaboration of these distinctions, and I am confident that this added attention will do much to clarify my arguments and their purpose.

On the Issue of Sample Size

I also wish to attend briefly to the concern about sample size spotlighted in the first half of the critique. Concerns regarding sample size are perennial in qualitative sociology, as many who conduct research on “hidden” or marginalized populations are uncomfortably aware! While the content and the quality of these critiques has varied, one of the most enduring arguments concerns the (legitimate!) hazards inherent in constructing grandiose, generalizing claims about samples that are unable to support this kind of generalization.

This is a worthy concern, and one that has been attended to at length by other scholars (see, for example, Small 2009; Ambert et al 1995; Savolainen 1994). However, to suggest that *this* study purports to speak for the experiences of *all* non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-fluid people once again conveys a fundamental mischaracterization of the study's aims and conclu-

sions. My purpose is not, and has never been, to argue that my findings can be generalized to represent all non-binary people (or, for that matter, even to all non-binary persons that identify as trans!). This kind of generalizability — what we might be inclined to think of as “statistical generalizability” (Small 2009) — is virtually unattainable in small-scale, interview-based research. Although I do identify some notable differences between the two cohorts of respondents under study (and suggest that these differences mark out generative avenues for future research), at no point do I contend that the differences identified are universal, or that they can be generalized to larger populations.

Moreover — and perhaps more importantly — to seek after this ephemeral generalizability is often to ask the wrong questions. To *expect* broad-scale applicability from small-*n* qualitative research, or to suggest that the absence of this generalizability undermines the potential utility and significance of the research findings, is also in error. As queer scholar D’Lane Compton has recently noted, the critical question here is less often “How many cases do I need?” than “What question is this paper working to address?” (Compton 2018). While small samples can’t always make big claims, they *can* and often *do* generate important insights and highlight avenues for future research.

Many of the most influential pieces of scholarship on trans and gender non-conforming people to come out of *Gender & Society* in recent years have featured similarly modest sample sizes: for example, Elizabeth Rahilly’s excellent piece on how parents frame and interpret children’s gender variance (2015), which speaks to the cases of 16 gender-variant children, or Cati

Connell's germinal piece on the workplace experiences of trans people (2010), which features 19 cases. Casting a broader lens to encompass cases that make inter-group comparisons between multiple populations of respondents, Baker Rogers' exceptional recent piece on drag-kinging in the American Southeast incorporates the experiences of 10 non-binary respondents (some of whom identify as trans, and some of whom do not), fourteen respondents identifying as trans men or transmasculine, and eight men that have pursued social or medical transition in order to live as men, but for whom "trans" is no longer a relevant or personally fulfilling identity label. While the claims made in each of these papers are unavoidably limited in scope by the size of their samples, it would be just as egregious to trivialize the significance of their findings as it would be to overstate them: each of these studies makes an important contribution to our understanding of trans and/or non-binary lives, and each helps to illuminate the agenda for future research.

Some Final Thoughts

As Kristen Schilt and Danya Lagos have noted in their excellent survey of the field, trans studies — once relegated to the periphery of sociological research — have come to assume an increasing centrality and significance in recent years. While inquiry into the lives and livelihoods of trans and otherwise gender non-conforming people was once considered to be the exclusive province of gender scholars, recent work in the field has done much to highlight the salience of these questions for sociologists of health and health care (shuster 2016; Windsor 2017), social movements (Ghaziani et al 2016; Westbrook 2008), demography (Westbrook and

Saperstein 2015; Compton 2015; Tobin et al 2015), the family (Meadow 2011; Rahilly 2015; Pfeffer 2010; Hines 2006), work and organizations (Schilt 2010; Connell 2010); and the law (Spade 2011; Westbrook and Schilt 2014; Meadow 2010). The pool of researchers working either directly or indirectly with trans and non-binary populations is growing exponentially, and this tremendous theoretical and methodological diversity has the potential to serve as both a blessing and a curse.

One thing I'm certain that my critics and I can agree upon is the incredible amount of *work* that's yet to be done in this space. The need for a large-scale disciplinary conversation about the parameters of this evolving research agenda has never been more urgent, or more self-evident. If we are to do productive, generative work in this space, it is absolutely paramount that we begin to work toward establishing a common language, a shared foundation for discourse: there is little space in this rapidly-evolving movement for "talking past" one another, or for undermining and discrediting the work of those that *share* our views. This tension should *enhance* and *enrich* our work: it is precisely these moments of disagreement that warrant consideration of how unexpected finding might lead to new research avenues, and new theoretical insights. Engaging in careful dialogue around the similarities and distinctions within meaningful categories of gender, linguistic practices, and methodological strategies will enable *all* of us to better make sense of the various interactional and institutional constraints that trans, non-binary, and otherwise gender non-conforming people confront in social life. It is my hope that this exchange can serve as a stepping stone into a more nuanced and dynamic conversation: one that can help us to work towards the construction of a research agenda that center trans and gender non-conforming

people in the years to come, and to more effectively negotiate the form that this agenda should take.

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