



Finding Genders: Transmasculine Crossdressers in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey

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In the opening to her seminal 2003 memoir and manifesto, *My Husband Betty: Love, Sex, and Life with a Crossdresser*, Helen Boyd describes a scene of a wife dressing up in her husband's clothes. The wife smells the fabric of his shirt, thinking of him. She admires the way it looks in a full-length mirror. She watches herself buttoning it, before grasping another shirt still on the hanger and then falling onto their bed, relishing the moment.

It could be an ad for sheets, cotton, or cologne. It could be the beginning of a porn film. In any case, it does not seem sexually deviant. We decide that the woman is missing her husband or boyfriend – wherever he is – and never consider the fact that she might be enjoying the clothes for the power they imply. It never crosses our minds that she could be single and trying these clothes on secretly just for a thrill. We give the whole scenario a comfortable meaning even when we are given nothing more than the images.ⁱ

Boyd notes that this scenario would inspire shock in very few, and, of course, goes on to describe the alternate scenario that very much would – a scene in which the genders are changed, a man admiring and dressing up in women's clothes. But what if we linger on this first image longer? Boyd correctly suggests that we tend to “give the whole scenario a comfortable meaning,” but what if that meaning is, in fact, incorrect?

Today, unlike in the early twentieth century, women can be seen wearing pants in virtually every part of the United States. Furthermore, the anti-crossdressing laws that allowed for the oppression of queer women and other feminists found wearing fewer than three women's garments are entirely invalidated or repealed. Nonetheless, a line in the sand still remains about acceptable and unacceptable dress for those

assigned female at birth in the US and transmasculine crossdressers, female-assigned-at-birth genderqueers, and trans men all cross that boundary as expressions of their gender identity. Within this group, transmasculine crossdressers are perhaps the least visible.

Unlike their transfeminine counterparts, transmasculine crossdressers do not have a major national social, education, and advocacy organization like Virginia Prince's Society for the Second Self, Tri-Ess.ⁱⁱ They do not hold conferences, as such, or maintain as significant a web presence, but when asked to articulate their gender identity in the first four questions of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), 192 female-assigned-at-birth respondents identified themselves strongly as crossdressers, living part of their lives as women and part either as men or crossdressed on a masculine spectrum.ⁱⁱⁱ

This has called attention to the research gap that "Finding Genders" seeks to fill. This paper seeks to create a foundation for the critical exploration of crossdressing among female-assigned-at-birth people, shedding light on an all too often forgotten group under the transgender umbrella. The paper will examine the demographic patterns of transmasculine crossdressers in the study as well as the patterns of discrimination reported by transmasculine crossdressers in the areas of health and healthcare, housing and homelessness, education, employment, and family life.

Finally, this essay is a call to action for researchers and activists in the ongoing movement to recognize the full range of gender identity/expression in our communities and research.

Methodology

The National Transgender Discrimination Survey was developed and fielded by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality. Links to the online NTDS survey instrument were distributed through a network of 918 trans-serving and trans-led advocacy and service organizations, support groups, list-serves and other social networks around the United States. Nearly 2,000 paper surveys were distributed to hard-to-reach transgender and gender non-conforming populations. A total of 6,456 completed questionnaires were included in the final data set, 192 of whom fall into the category of transmasculine crossdressers.

In question three of the survey – “What is your primary gender identity today?” – these 192 respondents distinguished themselves from transmasculine genderqueers and trans men by marking the third option, “part time in one gender, part time in another” and marking “strongly identify” for the term “crossdresser” in question four – “For each term listed, please select to what degree it applies to you (not at all, somewhat, strongly).”

The demographic and discrimination patterns explored in this paper would not be demonstrable without the nuanced five question opening of the questionnaire, which sought to engage and support respondents in articulating their full selves. We have reported elsewhere the ways in which similarly complex gender questions can continue to serve the trans movement from a grassroots research perspective.^{iv}

In this paper, we employ Pearson's chi-square tests of independence to assess relationships between variables. Pearson's chi-square tests are only generalizable when used with random samples, which the NTDS is not. However, we use the test here in order to crudely measure a statistical relationship between two variables within this sample and lay the foundation for future research.^v

Literature Review

Although this paper is distinct in spotlighting the experiences of transmasculine crossdressers, it does contribute to a growing body of research on those who do not identify simply or completely with their birth sex nor the "opposite sex" of that which they were assigned. It also provides the first quantitative analysis to stand alongside work in the humanities on crossdressing, female-assigned-at-birth masculinity, and subjectivity.

In terms of quantitative research, the experiences of transfeminine crossdressers and genderqueers of all birth sexes have been explored in *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, "A Gender Not Listed Here: Genderqueers, Gender Rebels, and OtherWise in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," and the forthcoming collaboration between the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, NCTE, and Tri-Ess, "Injustice at Every Turn: A Look at Crossdresser Respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey."

Among these, "A Gender Not Listed Here," provides the most important extension of the research in this paper because more work must be done to compare and contrast the unique demographic patterns as well as patterns of discrimination of transmasculine genderqueers and those who identified as crossdressers in the NTDS.

In *The Lives of Transgender People*, Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin (2011) also examine respondents and interviewees whose identities challenge the constructed male-female gender binary. In referring to these respondents, they proposed the term female-to-different-gender and male-to-different-gender to complement the transgender-identified constructs of female-to-male and male-to-female.^{vi} Accordingly, there is a great deal more diversity of experiences around nonbinary gender identity and experiences of discrimination to be explored in both data sets.

Also notable is the related work in the humanities especially conducted by Jack Halberstam in *The Drag King Book*, *Female Masculinity*, and the debates the latter sparked in transmasculine and queer women's discourse, including in "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum" and "Butch/FTM Border Wars: A Note on Collaboration." In communities of color, Daniel Peddle's film, *Agressives*, does the crucial work of qualitatively exploring masculine gender expression across a number of classed and raced, culturally-situated identities.

Demographic Patterns

[[TABLE 1]]

In this section, we discuss the demographic patterns exhibited by transmasculine crossdressers in the areas of age, race, and visual conformity. Overall, transmasculine crossdressers were young, white, and visually non-conforming.

Age

The vast majority (91.81%) of transmasculine crossdresser respondents fell between the ages of eighteen and forty-four years old. This is younger than the overall NTDS sample, and younger than the transfeminine crossdresser respondents.

Race

The overwhelming majority of transmasculine respondents identified their race as white (83%). The next largest racial cohort was multiracial (12%). This mirrors the racial makeup of the overall sample of white (83%) and multiracial (11%) respondents. Despite the white majority, each of the racial identities specified on the survey questionnaire were represented among transmasculine crossdressers.

Visual Conformity

Transmasculine crossdresser respondents were far more likely than the respondents in the overall sample to exhibit visual conformity. Close to half (49%) of the transmasculine crossdresser respondents were categorized as visual non-conformers, meaning that others were routinely able to tell they were trans without being told. The term is meant to be inclusive of both the visual as well, potentially, auditory recognition, based on the respondent's voice.

This rate of 49% compared with a full NTDS sample rate of 22%. However, compared to other cohorts who reported high rates of visual non-conformity, this did not correspond to high rates of employment and housing discrimination for transmasculine crossdressers.

Transition-related Care

[[TABLE 2]]

In the health chapter of the original publication, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, statistics were given for various forms of desired and received transition-related care only for transgender men and transgender women. However, it is notable that many cohorts of non-binary respondents such as transmasculine crossdressers also sometimes desired or sought medical care in order to navigate the process of identity development and align aspects of their bodies with their felt sense of a gendered self.

The portrait this analysis paints illustrates the individual nature of the decisions non-binary trans people make about their transitions. It also clearly reveals policy implications for making the varied forms of transition-related healthcare more accessible by removing financial and gatekeeper-related barriers. The high costs of transition-related surgeries and their exclusion from many health insurance plans in the US render these life-changing, in some cases life-saving, and medically necessary procedures inaccessible to most transgender people. Furthermore, additional barriers can block the way of non-binary people's ability to tailor their transition-process to their individual desires and needs. Gatekeepers often express hesitancy and skepticism about appropriate treatment of transmasculinities that fall outside of a full and unchanging male identity. This is despite the current version of the WPATH's "Standards of Care for

the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People”^{vii} making clear that gender fluidity should not be a barrier to care.

Patterns of Discrimination

[[TABLE 3]]

In this third section of the study, we discuss the patterns of discrimination and negative life outcomes experienced by transmasculine crossdressers in the areas of health and healthcare, housing and homelessness, employment, and family life.

Health and Healthcare

Rates of negative health outcomes for transmasculine crossdressers mirror those of other female-assigned at birth respondents. The rate of being HIV positive is zero among transmasculine crossdressers. This represents a major distinction between transmasculine crossdressers, transfeminine crossdressers (1.01%), and the overall NTDS sample (2.64%). It is also much smaller than the general US population rate of .6%.^{viii}

The lifetime suicide attempt rate among transmasculine crossdressers (44%) is higher than that of transfeminine crossdressers (21%), as well as the overall sample (41%). Here, both rates are higher than the general US population rate of 1.6%. Transmasculine crossdressers reported high rates of smoking (48%) as well as alcoholism and drug abuse to cope with mistreatment (30%).

Housing and Homelessness

The lifetime rate of homelessness is quite low among transmasculine crossdressers (4%) compared to transfeminine crossdressers (7%) and all NTDS respondents (19%). Similarly, transmasculine crossdressers' rates of eviction (3%) and being refused a home or apartment due to bias (6%) were lower than those of the overall sample (11% and 19% respectively).

Employment

Both transmasculine and transfeminine crossdressers were exactly half as likely (13%) to be fired from a job due to bias as the overall sample (26%). Further, transmasculine (24%) and transfeminine (18%) crossdressers were less likely not to be hired due to bias than those of the overall sample (44%). Similarly, the rate of unemployment among both transmasculine (12%) and transfeminine (7%) crossdressers was lower than that of the overall sample (14%).

Transmasculine crossdressers were twice as likely (14%) to work in the underground economy as transfeminine crossdressers (7%). Additionally, transmasculine crossdressers were more likely to be harassed at work (37%) than transfeminine crossdressers (34%), but less likely to be harassed than those in the overall sample (50%). Finally, transmasculine crossdressers were less likely to be physically assaulted at work (3%) than transfeminine crossdressers (4%) and those in

the overall sample (7%), but more likely to be sexually assaulted (7%) than both transfeminine crossdressers (6%) and those in the overall sample (6%).

Family Acceptance

Transmasculine crossdressers were accepted by their families at a rate of 56%. This was slightly less than the 60% rate for transfeminine crossdressers but higher than the overall sample rate of 43%.

Conclusion

Existing trans discourse focuses too narrowly on transgender men and transgender women. It is widely assumed that those living in two or more genders and those who split their time and their aspects between gendered worlds do not experience discrimination and do not need or want transition-related healthcare. But this analysis dispels those myths by providing a more nuanced portrait of a particular identity cohort based on self-reporting in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. Demographically, the 192 respondents that created the foundation for this essay proved first that they exist and second that their experiences are worthy of further study.

ⁱ Helen Boyd, *My Husband Betty: Love, Sex, and Life with a Crossdresser* (Seal Press, 2003). <http://www.amazon.com/My-Husband-Betty-Love-Crossdresser/dp/1560255153>

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.tri-ess.org> for more information.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jaime M. Grant et al., *Injustice at every turn: A report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Washington, DC: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011). http://www.thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/ntds

^{iv} Grant et al.

^v Konrad Lájer, "Statistical tests as inappropriate tools for data analysis performed on non-random samples of plant communities," *Folia Geobotanica* 42, no. 2 (2007): 115–122.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF02893878>

^{vi} Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin, *The lives of transgender people* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). <http://www.amazon.com/Lives-Transgender-People-Genny-Beemyn/dp/0231143079>

^{vii} The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) publishes Standards of Care, which are guidelines for mental health, medical and surgical professionals on the current consensus for providing assistance to patients who seek transition-related care. They are intended to be flexible to assist professionals and their patients in determining what is appropriate for each individual. Version seven of "Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People" is available at http://www.wpath.org/uploaded_files/140/files/IJT%20SOC,%20V7.pdf.

^{viii} Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and World Health Organization (WHO), "AIDS Epidemic Update," http://data.unaids.org/pub/epislides/2007/2007_epiupdate_en.pdf.