

FOREWORD

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This groundbreaking study by Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin is the first to examine the full diversity of the transgender community—not only those who are transsexual but also the growing number of individuals who identify their genders in nonbinary ways. Through surveys and interviews with a huge sampling of transgender people from across the country, it is the first major study to combine methodological rigor with an insider's grasp of the nuances and complexities of transgender lives. As a transgender attorney who has spent the last seventeen years advocating for transgender people, I have often wished for a book like this on my shelf.

With their fresh and sophisticated approach, the authors have uncovered a treasure trove of eye-opening data. They present vital new information about how transgender people discover their identities, how they forge viable life paths even in the face of great hostility, and how those life paths are changing dramatically for young people coming of age in a world that has been transformed by the Internet and other new social media. This information is

essential for policy makers seeking to protect and include transgender youth in schools and other settings.

Beemyn and Rankin bring impressive credentials to this project. Beemyn is a national expert on how to develop and implement supportive policies for transgender students in higher education. Rankin is a leading researcher on campus climate and diversity issues, with an unparalleled record of scholarship about discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in college and university settings. Their collaboration has set a new benchmark for research in this area.

This study is the first to explore the process of identity development in different transgender groups and across different generations of transgender people. Prior studies in this field have been based on samples that were limited by size, geography, age, race, gender, and narrow definitions of who is counted as transgender. To ensure a more representative view, Beemyn and Rankin recruited a large, diverse sample of transgender people from across the country. They surveyed 3,474 participants by drawing on contacts with transgender groups and individuals from throughout the United States. In addition, they conducted interviews with 419 of the survey respondents.

Beemyn and Rankin also break new ground in their approach to determining who qualifies as transgender for purposes of empirical research. Past studies of transgender people have generally failed to include people with nonbinary identities, perhaps in part because the task of definition is so daunting. Beemyn and Rankin recognized that attempting to define who counts as transgender would hinder, rather than advance, their ability to study a community in which new identities are rapidly emerging. As a result, this is the first large-scale study that includes “not just MTF and FTM individuals and cross-dressers but also genderqueers, androgynes, bigenders, third genders, transgenderists, and other transgender individuals who describe their genders in nonbinary ways.”

To cast the widest possible net, Beemyn and Rankin permitted survey participants to self-identify and specifically explained that the survey included those who do not identify simply as either men or women. The resulting diversity was startling. The authors report

that “the 257 participants who characterized themselves as ‘other’ (rather than female, male, or transgender) used 119 additional descriptors for themselves, of which 101 were unique responses.” For example, participants described themselves as “fluid,” “neutral,” “queer,” “two-spirit,” “somewhere between transsexual and cross-dresser,” “FTM TG stone butch drag king,” and “no easy definition, some other kind of man.”

In the hands of less savvy researchers, this proliferation of terms and identities might have defied meaningful analysis. But Beemyn and Rankin handle this potential dilemma masterfully, elegantly drawing out key threads. They propose a useful new term, “different-gender,” to describe those who do not identify as men or women. Thus, as counterparts to the terms “female-to-male transsexual” and “male-to-female transsexual,” they employ the terms “female-to-different-gender” and “male-to-different-gender” in describing individuals who do not identify with their assigned gender yet who are not transsexual. These new terms are a welcome scholarly addition to the more colloquial term “genderqueer.”

Beemyn and Rankin’s new framework and terms also enable them to examine important gendered differences among those who do not identify as either male or female. For example, the study found that the vast majority of the respondents who identify as something other than male or female were assigned female at birth, which may reflect “the overall greater leeway in gender expression experienced by the respondents who were raised as women.”

The study also found important differences between cross-dressers and individuals who identify as some type of male-to-different-gender identity (such as “genderqueer,” “gender fluid,” “bigendered,” “third gendered,” “androgynous,” or “boi”). Those who self-identified as cross-dressers often saw themselves as “having a second, female self that is separate from their male gender identity.” In contrast, those who identified as male-to-different-gender saw themselves “in ways that challenge conventional static, binary constructions of gender.” In addition, whereas survey respondents who self-identified as cross-dressers were substantially older on average than the other transgender people surveyed, those who described their gender in nonbinary terms were substantially

younger. Based on this trend, the authors suggest that “fewer young people today are choosing to refer to themselves as cross-dressers” and that the term “cross-dresser” itself may be passing out of common usage.

The study also uncovered striking patterns in how transgender identity develops in different groups within the transgender community. For example, most of the participants reported feeling “different” from other children from an early age. But the respondents’ experiences of how they responded to those childhood feelings of difference diverged sharply based on whether they were assigned female or male at birth. More than 80 percent of the female-to-male participants (FTMs or transsexual men) were able to express their internal feelings of masculinity as children “by taking on traditionally male roles in play and in relationships with other children.” In contrast, only 37 percent of the male-to-female participants (MTFs or transsexual women) dared to express a sustained interest in feminine activities or clothing as children. Most who did were physically or sexually assaulted, sent to therapists, or physically or emotionally abused by their families.

The study also found that transsexual men were more likely to have been traumatized by the experience of puberty than transsexual women—a fascinating discovery that has not previously been documented. After enjoying greater latitude to express their gender identities as children, many FTMs lost that freedom when they entered adolescence and faced the more rigid gender norms imposed on young women. “With the onset of menstruation and breast development,” many FTM participants were devastated that they “no longer fit in as just ‘one of the boys’ . . . ; as the line between male and female became more strictly drawn, these individuals realized that they were being placed on the ‘wrong’ side.” In contrast, many transsexual women were already accustomed to hiding and suppressing their identities because of the punishment inflicted on feminine boys.

As adults, transsexual women were also considerably more likely than transsexual men to try to hide or suppress their transgender identities by conforming to traditional gender roles. Many of the transsexual women in the study reported seeking out hypermasculine occupations, such as military service or becoming husbands

and fathers, in an effort to disguise or change their internal feelings. Only when they faced a life crisis were they compelled to give up that struggle, come to terms with their female identities, and begin to live as women.

In contrast, few FTM interviewees tried to adopt conventionally feminine gender roles as adults; yet many identified as lesbians for an extended period before realizing that gender transition was an option. In fact, “nearly half of the FTM people (as compared with about a quarter of the MTF people) reported initially lacking information about others like themselves—including knowledge that transitioning was possible.” Thus, whereas many older MTFs were aware they could transition but still struggled to suppress their female identities until a life crisis propelled them forward, a key developmental milestone for many older FTMs was discovering transition as an option and meeting other transsexual men. For many, meeting other FTMs sparked a process of self-recognition, eventually allowing them to self-identify as transsexual and live as men.

It is notable that at least some of these gendered differences in the lives of transgender people may be diminishing because of the Internet, which has dramatically increased access to information for all sorts of elsewhere marginalized subcultures. Increasingly, transgender individuals of all types are likely to have information and contact with other transgender people at a much earlier age. Regardless of their assigned gender at birth, “the younger the [study] participant, the more likely that person was to have had access to transgender people and resources at a young age.” More than two-thirds of the eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds surveyed knew other transgender people by the time they came out as transgender, compared with only about a third of the respondents in their forties and a quarter of those fifty and older. In another study cited by the authors, a remarkable 54 percent of self-identified transgender youth in New York City reported socializing with other transgender people on a daily basis.

The study also found that transgender individuals are coming out at increasingly younger ages. Only four of the twenty-one interviewees between eighteen and twenty-one years old reported trying to deny or suppress their sense of gender difference as children

or adolescents. Most learned about the possibility of gender transition and about the range of transgender identities at a relatively early age, as adolescents or even as children. Having that information enabled them to understand their internal feelings of gender difference and come to terms with their transgender identities without years of confusion, concealment, or shame. This data confirms the anecdotal experience of many parents, teachers, and school administrators, who report increasing numbers of children and youth who are self-identifying as transgender and as gender nonconforming.

Yet even in this new world of vastly increased access to information, most of the college-aged participants went through a process of exploration before settling into an identity that felt most comfortable. Unlike many of the older participants, who “seemed to use other identities as a means to avoid facing their ‘true’ selves, sometimes for years or decades,” most younger participants “experimented relatively briefly with different identities before arriving at one that felt right to them.” For example, many of the younger female-assigned participants identified as butch lesbians or as genderqueer before coming out as transsexual men. But unlike many of the older FTMs, they did so only briefly and not for an extended period.

As an FTM who struggled to live as a lesbian for many years before coming out as transsexual, I am fascinated by the stories of younger transsexual men who are able to bypass those years of internal struggle and find their path more directly. It is intriguing, and even a little poignant, to imagine a future in which most transsexual men will no longer have the experience of identifying as lesbians for any significant period. But it is also exciting to realize that we are on the brink of a world in which transgender children and youth can be embraced and supported for who they are.

Unfortunately, the greater visibility of transgender issues has not brought an end to gender-based harassment and discrimination. More than a quarter of the respondents surveyed had experienced harassment because of their gender identity or expression within the past year. Nearly one in five had lost a job or been denied employment or advancement as a result of being transgender. Many reported sometimes or often hiding their gender identity in an effort to avoid violence or discrimination. In fact, the greater visibility of

transgender youth has likely increased their exposure to mistreatment in some respects. Younger participants in the study reported markedly higher levels of harassment because of their gender identity or expression within the previous year.

At the same time, transgender youth have made incredible progress by coming out. In Massachusetts, a transgender girl won a landmark legal ruling that her high school must permit her to wear female clothing. The court refused to “allow the stifling of plaintiff’s selfhood merely because it causes some members of the community discomfort. . . . Defendants are essentially prohibiting the plaintiff from expressing her gender identity and, thus, her quintessence.”¹ In Mississippi, Ceara Sturgis courageously battled her school for the right to wear a tuxedo in her senior yearbook photo. And in Washington, DC, Kye Allums became the first NCAA basketball player to publicly identify as a transsexual man, paving the way for countless other transgender athletes.

Beemyn and Rankin have also made an important contribution to scholarship on transgender identity by beginning to document how other facets of a person’s identity, when combined with being transgender, affect life experiences. For example, in addition to the study’s findings on age, Beemyn and Rankin found that transgender people who identified as heterosexual were less likely to report harassment than transgender people of other sexual orientations. Transgender people of color were more likely to face harassment, with American Indian respondents reporting the highest rates.

Like the other information presented in this groundbreaking study, the findings on race, sexual orientation, age, and other factors represent milestones in our understanding of the experiences of transgender people. But even more importantly, these findings represent a critical beginning: they provoke new questions and push us further along the path to understanding more fully, and thus better serving, every person in the multiple communities that make up the entire spectrum of transgender lives.

