

REVIEW ESSAYS

Carving Out a Niche or Finding a Place at the Table? The Sociology of Transgender Studies

STEF SHUSTER
Michigan State University
sshuster@msu.edu

Over the last decade, transgender studies has benefited from an explosion of interest within academia. Sociology is not immune to these developments in a field of inquiry that has existed for some time. But what does it mean for sociologists to become immersed in a topic that claims no disciplinary boundaries, no agreed-upon methodological strategies, and even a lack of consensus on how to define “transgender”? Further complicating this field is the fact that it is quickly moving. As Barbara Risman shared in a recent Author Meets Critic session during the 2019 Southern Sociological Society conference, her book was “dated” before it even hit the shelves because in the time between data collection and publication so much had already changed in trans studies. Echoing this thought, by the time this essay goes to print, there likely will be new books out in the field that challenge the observations shared here, thus making this essay a tad dated, too.

Coupled with the quickly moving nature of the field of trans studies, to refer to one’s self as a sociologist of trans studies is still risky business. Often subsumed within the sociology of gender studies, trans studies shares affinities with sexuality studies in that these areas of inquiry are treated as boutique topics reserved for the occasional sociologist who might be interested in quirky areas of study (see also Gamson and Moon 2004). Consider the leading journals in sociology—*American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*. As of this writing, *ASR* and *AJS* have each published one article that centralizes trans people or trans studies.¹ This

¹ Danya Lagos’s recent article appeared in the October 2019 edition of *ASR*. Carla Pfeffer has published the only trans-specific article in *AJS* to date.

Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America, by **Miriam Abelson**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 282 pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9781517903510.

The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) Are Creating a Gender Revolution, by **Ann Travers**. New York: New York University Press, 2018. 263 pp. \$18.95 paper. ISBN: 9781479840410.

Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century, by **Tey Meadow**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 300 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520275041.

Queering Families: The Postmodern Partnerships of Cisgender Women and Transgender Men, by **Carla Pfeffer**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 248 pp. \$55.00 paper. ISBN: 9780199908059.

Understanding Trans Health: Discourse, Power, and Possibility, by **Ruth Pearce**. Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2018. 255 pp. \$45.95 paper. ISBN: 9781447342359.

Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity, by **Arlene Stein**. New York: Penguin Random House, 2018. 339 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN: 9781101972496.

provokes questions about what it might mean for generalist sociologists to embrace trans studies as something other than an off-beat topic. Yet not all sociologists agree upon a basic premise that defines the field: trans

people matter to how we understand broader patterns in social life. It is a misunderstanding that trans people or topics *should* be relegated to the margin, as recent works by trans studies scholars in sociology have much to offer the discipline in studying the emergence of identities that propagate new inequalities and—sometimes—even joy.

In this essay, I want to puzzle through some of the insights garnered from more recent work in the sociology of trans studies. In so doing, my major aim is to introduce readers who may be unfamiliar with the sociology of trans studies to what this field has to offer broader disciplinary conversations around contemporary gender practices, methodological challenges, and potential pathways to conjoin trans studies with other areas of inquiry in sociology. First, I examine the question of paradigm in/coherence, borrowing from Kuhn's ([1962] 2012) discussion of knowledge-building and the degree of consensus around theory, methods, and techniques. In this section I ask whether there is coherence in the field of trans studies in sociology, what it means to be a sociologist of trans studies, and whether trans people need to be included in a study for it to be defined as work that falls within trans studies. Next, I turn to key themes that are emerging in recent work in the sociology of trans studies, themes that cohere around questions such as these: What is gender? How might findings from trans studies expand our understandings of gender in sociology? And is gender changing, and if so, to what consequence? Finally, methodological conventions abound for most subfields in sociology. While sociology in general has been riding the quantitative turn for over one hundred years (Au 2017), trans studies scholars typically employ qualitative methods. But what are the consequences of these patterns in methodological tools for our knowledge base and our understandings of gender? I conclude with brief recommendations for further advancements in the field.

Paradigm Coherence?

Scholarship in the construction of knowledge consistently demonstrates how

paradigm-building activities become imbued with norms about how one should build knowledge (Kuhn [1962] 2012). In the emergence of a new wave of trans studies scholarship in sociology, there are norms emerging that set the stage for future knowledge-building and areas of inquiry. Frequently, scholars examine the interactional and structural processes through which trans people and those closely tied to them (e.g., coworkers or relational partners) make sense of their lives, employment, families, and communities. Situated in efforts to respond to social inequalities scholars, trans studies scholars often examine multiple axes of oppression in their work to highlight how people negotiate social life within a constellation of identities they inhabit. For example, Miriam Abelson's *Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America*, which discusses how place, race, and class matter to shaping trans men's experiences with masculinity, shows that black trans men face more scrutiny upon physically transitioning—because of the systemic racism that black men in the United States experience—compared to white trans men, who often gain access to masculine-based privileges. Through this work, Abelson further demonstrates how feminist principles infused in scholarship on marginalized groups can build stronger analytic frames and yield richer insight by studying people as multidimensional selves. Without such intersectional lenses, Abelson's analysis would revert to singular accounts of how people move through social life. It is the intersections she takes up that make this work so provocative in exploring trans masculinity (and masculinity more generally) in contemporary society.

In addition to centralizing intersectional analyses, many of these recent works in the sociology of trans studies prioritize multisited research designs to examine how trans people interface with people across institutional domains. Tey Meadow's *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* examines how parents, educators, and providers make meaning of trans youth. Each site within the project offers varying degrees of structural constraint and potential for gender-expansive change. Trans youth, as Meadow discusses, have easier

4 Review Essays

access to health care through the help of parents who marshal their resources to help their kids navigate various institutions. But these findings conflict with results in *The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) Are Creating a Gender Revolution*, by Ann Travers. Using a similar multi-sited study design, Travers interviews trans youth and comes to different conclusions about how institutions respond to this growing population of people seeking safe harbor in institutions that typically foment hostile environments. Travers cautions that what might be perceived as trans-affirming practices may be undergirded by still-troubling elements of institutional actors mandating compliance with a normative and binary gender system. As Travers notes, "I am concerned that the current neoliberal context means that access is restricted to relatively resource-rich trans children" (p. 172). These works show the importance of study site and the fact that different conclusions may result when different perspectives are included in the research design. Yet both Meadow and Travers show that it is important to reconcile the ways various social actors and institutions come together to differentially shape the experiences of study participants.

One contentious point that has emerged is whether or not one needs to study trans people to be a sociologist of trans studies. Consider, for example, Carla Pfeffer's *Queering Families: The Postmodern Partnerships of Cisgender Women and Transgender Men*, which centralizes the experiences of cisgender women who partner with trans men. Pfeffer's work fills a gap by showing how definitions of family may be changing—and not only for queer communities—and how queer families tell us much about the restrictive norms that heterosexual families continue to experience in contemporary society. One of the key findings of her work is that in spite of their best efforts to resist traditional family dynamics, cisgender women continue to experience gendered constraints in family life and put in more than their fair share of emotional labor to support their trans partners. By studying queer family formations, Pfeffer's work documents how even in emergent social relationships, patterns of

inequality continue to persist. Pfeffer may not have interviewed trans men specifically, but her work still illuminates the experiences of people in relationship with trans people and is situated in contributing to trans, queer, and family scholarship.

In contrast, Ruth Pearce's *Understanding Trans Health: Discourse, Power, and Possibility*, which is about trans people's experiences with the U.K. health care system, centralizes the experiences of trans people. Pearce offers insight into the prevailing logics that guide health care systems and policy. Without trans voices, the work would be a disingenuous attempt to examine in detail how trans people experience health care and the ways formal documents symbolize deeper commitments by institutional actors in power to mandate conformity to their ways of understanding marginalized groups of people. Similarly, Arlene Stein's *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity* immerses readers in the lives of trans men by following four individuals through physical transitions, their relationships, and experiences with the medical system. Without their voices present in the study, readers would not be exposed to such rich narratives and might surmise (as so many sociologists who studied trans people in the 1980s did) that trans people will go to great efforts to obtain medical interventions through subterfuge. These older ways of understanding people as tricking the system—which squarely placed trans people in the category of "deviant"—can be left behind, Stein shows, by centralizing trans people's narratives. Stein meticulously documents how fraught these decisions really are for trans people and how much deliberation trans people engage in to find strategic work-arounds, given the restrictive norms governing gender in medicine.

Each of these authors demonstrates a deep commitment to upholding ethical principles in studying marginalized groups while considering the intersections of institutional domains, actors, and identities. There remains a lack of consensus on what, precisely, qualifies a work to be trans studies in sociology. Perhaps borrowing from their genealogy-of-knowledge sibling, queer studies, the task of trans studies scholarship is to not only describe trans people, but to

analyze how trans experience reflects broader areas of social life and the practices and processes that are (re)created upstream in structural constraints and downstream in on-the-ground interactions.

Key Patterns

Perhaps the point seems obvious, but all of these recent works take up questions related to the feedback loop between structural- and interactional-level gendered practices. In studying trans people or topics, two important questions set the stage for each of these works: What, precisely, is gender? And how does it matter to the various social actors and institutions these authors examine? Each of these authors offers insight into whether or not gender is changing, staying the same, or proliferating, given the many identities that have come out of trans and nonbinary communities over the last decade and given what the proliferation of identities may mean in our contemporary society.

What Is Gender?

More than four decades of sociological research has consistently offered revisions of how we come to understand our own gender and how gender structures interactional, organizational, and institutional contexts. The authors of this body of work show readers that gender is not a monolith: not static, immutable, or always-already coherent to ourselves and others. Furthermore, all of these authors point to how gender has been, and remains, a powerful basis for social control over trans people. Yet they offer glimpses of how, at certain moments, gender can be a source of liberation from the far-reaching gendered structures that entrap us all.

Abelson suggests that coming to understand our gender is a social process mediated through social contexts and the role of place in shaping our gendered selves and interactions. A trans man in an urban area with a thriving trans community might be read as trans because there exists a recognition and understanding that trans people are present in social life, but that same person in a rural space might experience social life read by others as “simply a man.” As

Abelson notes, the situational rules that guide our expression of gender are mediated by social actors, and expectations are crafted from all interactants on how to be gendered. Furthermore, Abelson finds that gender is a becoming and concludes that trans men teach us that you can still be a man, even when you fail, or refuse, to meet the expectations for hegemonic masculinity. There are norms guiding gender for the trans men in her study, but they have agency to negotiate these norms, within the limitations of broader social structures. Most men desire a Goldilocks masculinity—not too feminine, nor too masculine, but somewhere in between. In moving toward a masculinity that aligns with one’s principles, Abelson shows how gender is a site of negotiation in interactions that is contoured by place.

Pfeffer leans toward gender as a becoming, like Abelson, but her work documents how gender is constituted through our relationships with others. As partners go through physical gender transitions, these transitions may call into question other identities for relational partners. Cisgender women who identify as lesbians, a sexuality label that presupposes one’s partner is also a woman, have to go through their own process of reformulating their sexual identities as their partner’s gender identities shift to a more masculine presentation. Thus, in addressing the question “what is gender,” Pfeffer grounds the analysis in the interactional mechanisms of gender and shows how identities shift over the lifetime as people accumulate experiences. These identity shifts are not seamless, and Pfeffer shows the invisible and systemic costs that gender exacts through power, even in those relationships that we might expect to be freer from the constraints of gender in family dynamics.

Working within a revision of West and Zimmerman’s (1987:126) now-classic “doing gender” theory, which articulated how gender is a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment, Meadow describes gender as a “being.” Meadow suggests that studying the ways that parents, educators, and medical providers sort trans youth into gender categories can teach us a great deal about the social process of being a gender and especially about how gender expectations are placed on youth. From Meadow’s

work, readers learn how gender is not simply an identity, but—in Meadow’s words—“an industry” (p. 5). Gendered practices are solidified by other social actors working on behalf of trans youth (for better or worse). Parents, in making sense of their trans youth, opt to help their kids transition; but some of their advocacy might be to the detriment of trans youth. Supportive parents, most of whom are cisgender, keep trans kids away from older trans adults, as they are convinced that adult trans people are bad role models. Parents who hold themselves up as advocates for their trans kids may unintentionally perpetuate the very bias they seek to counter on behalf of their kids by normalizing trans youth while rendering the trans aspects of their identities invisible. Mediated through parents, educators, and medical providers, Meadow’s work shows that being a gender for trans youth is not simply about realizing one’s gender. It is a process fraught with anxieties built from cultural expectations that continue to rely on stereotypes of “good” or “bad” (trans)gender expression.

How (trans)Gender Practices Reflect on Broader Sociological Areas of Inquiry

In the changing landscape of U.S. gender ideologies, many scholars have begun to document an increase in gender egalitarianism in the labor force while traditional gender ideology remains thoroughly entrenched in the home (Thébaud and Pedulla 2016). How might trans people shift our understandings of gendered practices as they confront and negotiate different institutional contexts, such as the workforce or healthcare? Recent work in trans studies scholarship demonstrates how gendered practices in one institutional domain often spill over into other institutional practices. In this way, recent work in the sociology of trans studies is moving beyond studying trans people for the sake of studying trans people. Instead, newer work examines how trans people’s experiences might help sociologists better grapple with lasting social issues in contemporary society.

Studying trans people in contemporary society draws attention to cultural changes afoot in the United States. Stein’s work

shows how many people are challenging and are challenged by changing meanings of gender. The proliferation of gender categories is not only about gender but rather signifies how many previously held cultural expectations surrounding careers, families, friends, and relationships are being called into question and are less rigid than in the past. These major areas of life, as Pfeffer also demonstrated, ebb and flow over one’s lifetime. As Stein concludes, while each generation makes a mark on ideological expectations and culturally based norms, something about the upcoming generation’s desires about the way life is lived is fundamentally changing in the United States. Studying trans men shows us the beginnings of new cultural norms taking root. Fluidity in gender is not simply about gender. It is reflective of fluidity across major domains of social life.

But not all social actors know how to respond to these cultural changes, and sometimes they completely bungle it. Travers shows how school systems have a range of possible actions to take on behalf of trans youth. Because the design of the educational system prioritizes resource-rich youth, policies alone will not catalyze the wide-scale support that precarious youth need in order to thrive. Given that demands on teachers are increasing while resources are dwindling, the systems approach that Travers employs in analyzing the experiences of trans youth demonstrates how schools’ adopted policies may not translate to practice. Travers suggests that creating safe environments for trans youth can percolate to broader changes in education to the benefit of all youth in precarious positions.

Finally, one change in our social world that is particularly ripe for sociological investigation is the role of social media in facilitating relationships. As most sociologists are aware, social media are changing the basic premise for possibilities in collective action and mobilization against social problems or grievances. Pearce examines how trans people mobilize knowledge while navigating the U.K. health care system. As people reach out to each other for information and support, Pearce’s work demonstrates how gendered expectations can be bypassed as people link into broad supportive networks

of information-sharing through social media. For trans people working within insufferable systems of bureaucracy that are premised on blocking access to the very resources they purport to offer, she shows how social media platforms facilitate crucial knowledge-sharing practices, as trans people teach each other how to negotiate health care agencies. While a culture of cisgenderism has emerged in health care to create restrictive boundaries around who may access health care and under what circumstances, social media offer trans people a mechanism for bypassing some of the regulatory practices of medicine. In sum, her work offers a vantage point for understanding the strategic use of social media by social actors; we can expect that marginalized groups will increasingly use social media in these ways.

Taken together, new work in trans studies shifts the framework from studying trans people as exotic others to leveraging the experiences of trans people to make meaning of broader social processes, change, and values. While sometimes marginalized on the outer banks of social life, these authors implore us to consider how studying the margins also reflects attention on more centralized social issues and groups—much like the situation of queer studies in the 1990s.

Studying Each Other or Others?

How might sociologists study trans people in a way that acknowledges the power differentials between researcher and researched? And what are the ethical principles that scholars who work in trans studies employ to circumvent power differentials? As each author makes clear, these questions remain a prominent feature of all of the works examined in this essay as each comes to different conclusions about how to negotiate the tension between producing scholarship and honoring the groups of people who are the subject of inquiry by taking care to avoid exoticizing trans experience or producing scholarship that others trans people. Additionally, by using multi-sited studies, these authors emphasize structural constraints and on-the-ground negotiations in a way that avoids exclusively privileging the perspective of high-power actors.

Working within the new technological capabilities that many trans people use to find each other, Pearce's innovative approach in using online ethnographic methods enables Pearce to mirror in her work the rapid changes in trans knowledge-formation and to show how policy shapes health encounters. Pearce's methods provoke important questions for social scientists about the strengths and limitations of studying people online. Ethical issues abound that are similar to those encountered by scholars on the ground. For people whose social media content is publicly available, does a researcher need to obtain consent from participants? In what instances do scholars know how to verify the authenticity of people's accountings of their everyday lives? Pearce may not have all the answers, but her study design demonstrates the value of thinking carefully about how to reach difficult-to-find groups of people and meeting them on their own terrain, and it highlights the increasing role of social media analysis in contemporary sociological methods.

While sex and sexual behavior have consistently been demonstrated to be socially contextualized, many sociologists shy away from asking people to share experiences and insights on this topic. Pfeffer's work shows the simple but profound fact that asking people to share parts of themselves involves a vulnerability that necessitates reciprocity. Her frank attitude with participants recognizes that these can be difficult (and joyful) conversations to have but acknowledges that to tap into the central concerns that abound in families and relationships, we cannot avoid asking people about sex and the day-to-day experiences people accumulate in their intimate relationships. One way to show research participants that the researcher is committed to honoring their stories is through using continuous consent. Pfeffer reflects on how this was a crucial element to her interview space when asking cis women about their sexual lives and relationships with trans men.

Another key challenge that sociologists studying trans people confront is how to become immersed in the lives of the people we are interested in studying. As Stein reflects, "writing about a group one is not

a member of, especially when it is a vulnerable one, can be a risky endeavor" (p. 295). To work around these potentially fraught relationships, she leans on critical empathy to place herself in the shoes of others while also upholding the task of sociologists to observe more broadly how social and cultural contexts pattern the lives of those we study. And in so doing, she leads with an understanding across differences. In our contemporary society of cancel-out cultures, fears around political violence, and a return to neoliberal nation-states, perhaps Stein's words are even more enlightening for how we can all cultivate a critical empathy for those whose experiences may differ from our own and an openness to how people can teach us something about themselves and ourselves.

The concern with group membership and whether or not a researcher is an in- or out-group member abounds across these recent works. Abelson, like Stein, reflects on how although she is part of the broader LGBTQ community, that doesn't mean she has a shared identity with trans people. In spite of her own gender identification, Abelson became an object of scrutiny as her research participants made assumptions about who she was and why she was interested in studying the lives of trans men. Drawing on similarities in the experience of gender misrecognition, Abelson echoes Stein's critical empathy by describing how she approached the topic with "a sense of humility and interrogated her own subject position" (p. 237). In this way, where previous scholarship on trans people may have gone horribly awry in otherizing and exoticizing trans people's experiences, recent work reflects a promising shift in stance where scholars who may not identify as trans (even if they are sometimes misrecognized as such) are reflective, empathetic, and humble in their negotiation of power differentials between researcher and researched.

These observations on research design, ethical considerations, and mindfulness of power dynamics are often buried in the back matter of books. But they can offer sociologists insightful ways of exploring topics and researching groups of people that could be given more attention. And each of these authors, as they describe establishing such

rich relationships with research participants, also gives voice to how researchers learn quite a bit about ourselves as we explore the experiences of people in social life.

Remaining Gaps

Sociologists continue to make advances in knowledge about gender as a category that organizes much of social life. But in recent years, in spite of methodological and theoretical innovations from those in trans studies, the discipline has not been quick to respond to the changing landscape of gender. As Westbrook and Saperstein (2015) remark, in spite of theoretical advancements in understanding the proliferation of gender categories, sociologists still remain tethered to binary ways of thinking about gender, with the occasional acknowledgment that trans people exist. What they and other scholars suggest is that in seeking to document the experiences of people in social life, we need to keep our methodological tools nimble and responsive to cultural and social change. Each of the works in this essay demonstrates how sociologists might learn new methodological tools or approaches by looking to the work of trans studies scholars. These scholars conduct intersectional analyses and multi-sited studies, and they prioritize strong methodological designs and integrity when collecting data on marginalized groups.

Similarly, one of the key themes that emerges from these recent works in the sociology of trans studies is that institutions and institutional actors continue to have a heavy hand in daily life. These authors have done an extraordinary job homing in on key sites of social control such as families, medicine, and education and investigating how these areas interface with trans people, often around gender transitions. However, there are many institutional spaces that have not received the attention warranted by their power in our contemporary world. With the increasing datafication of rituals, routines, and just about every area of social life, new institutional spaces and actors have emerged. For example, with their meticulous documentation of health, nutrition, and movement, new technologies that count people's daily habits are built on algorithms

that take categories of sex and gender at face value and as scientific “fact.” These new technologies have emerged in a moment when cultural norms are becoming more fluid around sex and gender categories, and they provoke sociological questions about how knowledge solidifies or shifts in response to broader cultural change.

Sociologists of trans studies might also benefit from thinking carefully about how topics that are seemingly unrelated to trans people present opportunities to theorize more broadly and in ways that speak to additional areas of sociological inquiry. Recently, for example, there has been increasing attention on questions of citizenship. These conversations are situated in matters of documentation, values around who is a “productive” person, and patriotism. While citizenship is often framed in terms of who has access to the rights and privileges afforded by nation-states, theoretically, these conversations are also about “unruly” bodies and how different institutions surveil and control Other peoples. Thinking through how trans people might fit into these conversations, or how they are punished in particular ways situated in gender, can reflect more broadly how new arrangements perpetuate old inequalities and social control over many marginalized people.

Finally, as these recent works in the sociology of trans studies make clear, race, age, class, sexuality, gender, and ability still matter. It is up to sociologists to determine, given their research questions, *how* these factors matter. If the last five years on the national political landscape have taught us anything, it is that “progress” is neither linear nor

coherent. As sociologists, we have the tools to anticipate cultural change and to theorize how and why inequality persists. Including trans people in these projects refines our analyses and enables new pathways for understanding the persistence of inequality on the ground and in social structures.

References

- Au, Anson. 2018. “Sociology and Science: The Making of a Social Scientific Method.” *The American Sociologist* 49(1):98–115.
- Gamson, Joshua, and Dawn Moon. 2004. “The Sociology of Sexualities: Queer and Beyond.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:47–64.
- Kuhn, Thomas. [1962] 2012. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, fourth edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lagos, Danya. 2019. “Hearing Gender: Voice-Based Gender Classification Processes and Transgender Health Inequality.” *American Sociological Review* 84(5):801–27.
- Pfeffer, Carla A. 2014. “‘I Don’t Like Passing as a Straight Woman’: Queer Negotiations of Identity and Social Group Membership.” *American Journal of Sociology* 120(1):1–44.
- Risman, Barbara. 2019. Author Meets Critic Session, *Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure*. Southern Sociological Society, New Orleans, LA, April 12.
- Thébaud, Sarah, and David S. Pedulla. 2016. “Masculinity and the Stalled Revolution: How Gender Ideologies and Norms Shape Young Men’s Responses to Work-Family Policies.” *Gender & Society* 30(4):590–617.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. “Doing Gender.” *Gender & Society* 1(2):125–51.
- Westbrook, Laurel, and Aliya Saperstein. 2015. “New Categories Are Not Enough: Rethinking the Measurement of Sex and Gender in Social Surveys.” *Gender & Society* 29(4):534–60.