RESEARCHING TRANS SEXUALITIES

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Workshop content

- Overview of the historical approaches to researching transgender sexualities (20 mins)
- Transgender Studies’ approaches to researching transgender sexualities (10 mins)
- Ethical dilemmas in researching trans communities (10 mins)
- Group work (reflections on what we think we know about transgender sexualities) (15 mins)
- Break (10 mins)
- Feedback to the group about how what we think we know might influence our research questions, methodology, analytical approach and discussion of transgender sexualities (20 mins)
- How might we think about combining methods or using new mediums to explore transgender sexualities? (large group discussion) (20 mins)
- I will round up with some interesting research going on that illustrates a number of fruitful avenues for contemporary studies of transgender sexualities (10 mins)
Historical approaches (A Rough Timeline)

- Circa 1880-1930s: The pathological invert
- Circa 1950s: The construction of the transsexual in sexology (1950s+)
- Circa 1980s: Advent of Transgender Studies
- Circa 2000: Medicolegal construction of transsexual bodies (UK)
Circa 1880s-1930s

- Krafft-Ebbing's Psychopathia Sexualis: With special reference to contrary sexual instinct (1886)

- Magnus Hirschfeld set up Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee) 1897
Circa 1880s-1930s

Sexual inversion

Gender inversion

‘mannish women’
‘Feminine men’

On a sexual/biological continuum between masculine men and feminine women
Circa 1880s-1930s

- *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall was published in the UK in 1928 but was banned under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act.
Havelock Ellis argued that all human beings possess both ‘male’ and ‘female’ characteristics, and that some have more of a mixture than others (Ellis, 1918: 80).

‘eonism’ = gender inversion
Circa 1880s-1930s

- the most important perversion, homosexuality, hardly deserves the name. It comes down to a general disposition of bisexuality [...] All humans are capable of making a homosexual object choice and have made one in their unconscious (Freud, 1905: 147).
Circa 1880s-1930s

- Magnus Hirschfeld supervised the early genital reassignment surgery on Lili Elbe in Denmark (1931)

- Lili Elbe died following her 5th operation when they tried to transplant ovaries into her body.
Circa 1880s-1930s

- [m]asculinity and femininity [...] are not to be thought of as lending to it merely superficial coloring and flavor; rather they are one of a small number of cores around which the structure of personality gradually takes shape. The masculine-feminine contrast is probably as deeply grounded, whether by nature or by nurture, as any other which human temperament presents (Terman & Miles, 1936: 451).
Circa 1950s The construction of the transsexual in sexology (1950s+)

- Roberta Cowell had surgery in 1951 in England

- male-to-female ‘sex change’ may have entered wider public consciousness in 1953 due to Christine Jorgensen, an American soldier, who had a highly publicised ‘sex change,’ in Denmark
Circa 1950s The construction of the ‘true transsexual’ in sexology (1950s+)

- Western sexology drew on biological notions of sex differences:
  - 1. chromosomal sex
  - 2. gonadal sex
  - 3. hormonal sex, which happens at the prenatal and pubertal stages of development
  - 4. reproductive structures of the body (morphology)
  - 5. genital sex (Money, Hampson, & Hampson, 1955).
Circa 1950s The construction of the transsexual in sexology (1950s+)

- True transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex, they want to be and function as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such. For them, their sex organs, the primary (testes) as well as the secondary (penis and others) are *disgusting deformities* that must be changed by the surgeon’s knife’ (Benjamin, 1966: 11 emphasis added).
Circa 1950s The construction of the transsexual in sexology (1950s+)

- Autogynephiliacs usually have a ‘transvestite career’ (Bailey, 2003; Blanchard, 1991; Lawrence, 2004).

- ‘Homosexual transsexuals’ have a ‘homosexual career’ prior to transitioning (Bailey, 2003; Blanchard, 1991; Lawrence, 2004),
Circa 1950s The construction of the transsexual in sexology (1950s+)

- Sexological research is evolving (slowly), with new researcher/practitioners coming to the field (May, 2002; Wren, 2005).

- Their sexological work is influenced by feminism, queer and postmodernism.
Transgender Studies’ approaches to researching transgender sexualities

- ‘posttranssexual’ (Stone, 1991)

- The writings of Virginia Prince (1980), Kate Bornstein (1994), Riki Ann Wilchins and colleagues (Nestle, Howell, & Wilchins, 2002; Wilchins, 1997) and Susan Stryker (1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2008), amongst others, addressed the importance of sexuality for transwomen.
Transgender Studies’ approaches to researching transgender sexualities

- Similarly, there were transmen writing from a sociological or anthropological perspective (Califia, 1997, 2001; Cromwell, 1999; Devor, 1997; Rubin, 2003).
Transgender Studies’ approaches to researching transgender sexualities

- Many early transgender studies depicted post-transition ‘heterosexual’ sexualities and very rarely considered the spectra of desire Stone called forth.

- Exceptional studies did begin to emerge that depicted trans sex workers (Kulick & Klein, 2003; Namaste, 2000), gay identified transmen (Cromwell, 1999) lesbian and bisexual transwomen (Bolin, 1988; Bornstein, 1994) and ephemeral sexualities of trans people of color (Munoz, 1999; Valentine, 2003).
I faithfully reported each foray in heterosexuality to the hospitals noncommittal therapist, desperate to be the good patient upon whom she would confer surgery when my waiting time was up. I finally informed her that I could not be straight [and] that the only thing which still gave me my somewhat limp, estrogen impaired erections were other women (Wilchins, 1997a: 142).
I fucked his pussy with the dildo and gave his dick a hand job while he vigorously frigged his clitoris. It was so far out to see a man frig his clit. When he came, it sounded like a woman’s orgasm, but with a man’s voice. He was, of course, capable of multiple orgasms (Sprinkle, 2006: 23).
‘for a longtime after that fuck, I knew I mattered in the world. I knew I had something good about me [...] my counterpart was real and not some insane figment of my damaged sexual fantasies’ (Patrick Califia, 2006:70).
Researching transgender sexualities and ethics (Hale, 1997)

1. Approach your topic with a sense of humility: you are not the experts about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans ____. Transsexuals are.

2. Interrogate your own subject position: the ways in which you have power that we don't (including powers of access, juridicial power, institutional power, material power, power of intelligible subjectivity), the ways in which this affects what you see and what you say, what your interests and stakes are in forming your initial interest, and what your interests and stakes are in what you see and say as you continue your work. (Here's what Bernie Hausman, p.vii, says about how her initial interest was formed: She had been reading about transvestism and ran across library material on transsexualism. "Now *that* was fascinating." Why? "The possibilities for understanding the construction of 'gender' through an analysis of transsexualism seemed enormous and there wasn't a lot of critical material out there." Remember that using those with less power within institutionalized, material and discursive structures as your meal ticket (retention, tenure, promotion) is objectionable to those so used.)

3. Beware of replicating the following discursive movement (which Sandy Stone articulates in "The Empire Strikes Back," and reminds us is familiar from other colonial discourses): Initial fascination with the exotic; denial of subjectivity, lack of access to dominant discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation.
Researching transgender sexualities and ethics (Hale, 1997)

4. Don't erase our voices by ignoring what we say and write, through gross misrepresentation (as Hausman does to Sandy Stone and to Kate Bornstein), by denying us our academic credentials if we have them (as Hausman does to Sandy Stone), or by insisting that we must have academic credentials if we are to be taken seriously.

5. Be aware that our words are very often part of conversations we're having within our communities, and that we may be participating in overlapping conversations within multiple communities, e.g., our trans communities, our scholarly communities (both interdisciplinary ones and those that are disciplinarily bounded), feminist communities, queer communities, communities of color. Be aware of these conversations, our places within them, and our places within community and power structures. Otherwise, you won't understand our words.

6. Don't totalize us, don't represent us or our discourses as monolithic or univocal; look carefully at each use of 'the', and at plurals.

7. Don't uncritically quote non-transsexual "experts," e.g., Harry Benjamin, Robert Stoller, Leslie Lothstein, Janice Raymond, Virgina Prince, Marjorie Garber. Apply the same critical acumen to their writings as you would to anyone else.
Researching transgender sexualities and ethics (Hale, 1997)

8. Start with the following as, minimally, a working hypothesis that you would be loathe to abandon: "Transsexual lives are lived, hence livable" (as Naomi Scheman put it in "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer").

9. When you're talking about male-to-female transsexual discourses, phenomena, experiences, lives, subjectivities, embodiments, etc., make that explicit and keep making it explicit throughout; stating it once or twice is not sufficient to undermine paradigmaticity. Don't toss in occasional references to female-to-male transsexual discourses, phenomena, experiences, lives, subjectivities, embodiments, etc., without asking what purposes those references serve you and whether or not those purposes are legitimate.

10. Be aware that if you judge us with reference to your political agenda (or agendas) taken as the measure or standard, especially without even asking if your agenda(s) might conflict with ours and might not automatically take precedence over ours, that it's equally legitimate (or illegitimate, as the case may be) for us to use our political agenda(s) as measures by which to judge you and your work.
Researching transgender sexualities and ethics (Hale, 1997)

11. Focus on: What does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or transsexual _____ tell you about *yourself*, *not* what does it tell you about trans.
12. Ask yourself if you can travel in our trans worlds. If not, you probably don’t get what we’re talking about. Remember that we live most of our lives in non-transsexual worlds, so we probably do get what you’re talking about.
13. Don’t imagine that you can write about the trope of transsexuality, the figure of the transsexual, transsexual discourse/s, or transsexual subject positions without writing about transsexual subjectivities, lives, experiences, embodiments. Ask yourself: what relations hold between these categorial constructions, thus what implications hold between what you write about one and what you don’t write about another.
14. Don’t imagine that there is only one trope of transsexuality, only one figure of "the" transsexual, or only one transsexual discourse at any one temporal and cultural location.
15. If we attend to your work closely enough to engage in angry, detailed criticism, don’t take this as a rejection, crankiness, disordered ranting and raving, or the effects of testosterone poisoning. It’s a *gift*. (And it’s praise: there must be something we value about you to bother to engage you, especially since such engagement is often painful, as well as time-consuming, for us.)
• Small Group discussion (15 mins)
• What is it we think we know about trans and how might this influence our research questions, methodology, analytical approach and discussion of transgender sexualities?

• Comfort break (10 mins)

• Large Group Discussion (20 mins or until we run dry)
• Think about methodology, methods, analytical approach, and references that might move the debate forward about trans sexualities.

• I will type a document that I can send to you via email after the session.
New research on transgender sexualities


Concluding remarks

- Finding new mediums to study trans sexualities
- Pornography
- Erotica
- Set up Wiki discussions
- Move the focus away from gender identity
- Ethnography BDSM
- Think beyond binary sexualities (hetero/homo/bi)
- How might affects of bodily aesthetics figure?
- How might non-trans and trans sexual partners accounts refigure our conceptualizations?