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Is There a Transgender Canon?: Information Seeking and Use in the Transgender Community

Abstract: Because transgender issues are not often openly discussed, little is known about the transgender community and its information needs. Yet, people who are dealing with transgender issues may have pressing needs. In ongoing focus group research we are exploring the ways in which members of the community have sought to meet their own information needs.

Résumé : En raison du fait que les problèmes transgenres sont rarement abordés ouvertement, on connaît peu de choses sur la communauté transgenre et sur ses besoins informationnels. Cependant, les individus qui sont confrontés aux problèmes transgenres peuvent avoir des besoins pressants. À l'aide d'un groupe de discussion permanent, nous explorons les méthodes utilisées par les membres de cette communauté pour combler leurs propres besoins informationnels.

1. Introduction

Even with the current rhetoric in society and in many disciplines about GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) issues, oftentimes little, outside of the sensational, is said about issues of transgender. Therefore the transgender community is one about which little is known in general. Perhaps even less is known about the information needs of this group. Because the issues are not as openly discussed as some others, those who are members of this community may have especially pressing information needs. In ongoing pilot research we are exploring the gender experience and information needs of this group.

The experiences of those transgendered persons with whom we conducted interviews and focus groups were very similar in nature to one another. They also responded to questions regarding the ways in which they made sense of their particular life situations in very similar ways. Many of the same sources, as well as the same information strategies were revealed.

2. Theory

In essence this research was concerned with questions of how the individual respondents were able to understand themselves and their lives in light of basic differences between their own perceptions of their gender and those of the world outside. This situation apparently caused a fundamental knowledge gap, and a number of smaller gaps along the way.

While we did not use the same interview techniques as those used by other researchers, we found that the philosophical and practical underpinnings of both Brenda Dervin's (1983) sense-making theory, and Leon Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance were appropriate to this study.

1

According to Dervin the objective of sense-making research is defined as …"behavior, both internal (i.e. cognitive) and external (i.e. procedural), which allows the individual to construct and design his/her movements through time-space." (1983, p.3)
The philosophical foundation of sense-making theory rests on the assumption that there is a condition of *discontinuity* prompting humans to take steps to construct sense in changing life situations. Discontinuity is assumed to be a part of all existence. It is from this foundation of discontinuity or "gappiness" that the need for sense-making arises.

The theory of cognitive dissonance reveals a particular kind of gap or discontinuity, that is, when a person has discrepant or dissonant cognitions he or she is said to experiences an unpleasant tension and a drive to reduce the dissonant sensation. There are several ways proposed by Festinger that these sensations could be reduced to a relatively consonant state.

In either case it is assumed that an individual desires to be in that state of consonance or continuity, however temporarily. And trying to reach that state is a "natural and recurrent thing in human life" (Savolainen, 1993, 16). The language may be different regarding these two theories, but discontinuity or dissonance in both cases requires a problem or problems to be solved.

Dervin conceives of the problem as a "gap" that must be "bridged." She describes the point of reaching the gap in this way, the routine thinking no longer works effectively; the movement is stopped (e.g. by lack of relevant information, confusion, uncertainty, etc.) and says, "step taking turns from free-flowing journey to stop…This stop does not permit the individual, in his/her own perception to move forward without constructing a new changed sense." (Dervin 1989, 14)

Festinger also refers to changing one's sense of things, although not in the same terms. He suggests three ways that cognitive dissonance (a far more complex phenomenon than is being presented here), can be resolved. One can change one or more cognitions to make the resulting cognitions more comfortable. One can add some consonant cognitions to reduce the magnitude of the dissonance. Or one can alter the importance of one or more of the cognitions.

Whether speaking in terms of bridging gaps or altering cognitions, both theories depend upon the drive toward continuity and coherence. Thus there is at least some overlap between them. They have been brought together here because as will be noted in the findings, in some cases the respondents tried desperately and without success to change their cognitions, while in other cases confusion, uncertainty and lack of information led to the attempt to make a new sense of their position.

3. Respondents and Methodology

Transgender is a blanket term for any person whose internal gender identity differs from his/her apparent physiological gender. Below are a number of categories of transgender

Transsexual	A person who wants to change his/her physiological gender and live permanently in the new gender role.
Transgenderist (or non-op transsexual)	A person who is living full time in a new gender role but does not intend to have surgery.
Transvestite/crossdresser	A person who enjoys dressing in the clothes of the opposite gender.

Table 1 terms used to distinguish members of the transgender community

Our research respondents were transsexuals and transgenderists, not by design, but because these were the participants who were identified and became available as we used a snowball sampling technique.

We began our research with people we knew, primarily family members and members of a very liberal church that we both attend. Once we had conducted focus groups with them, we asked for their help in finding more respondents. Eventually we expanded our respondent pool to include some e-mail interviews as well as the face-to-face focus groups. Included among our respondents are women[i] ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties and a man in his sixties. Although we hope to conduct one or two more interviews or focus groups, we have essentially reached data saturation.

The interview/focus group guide is as follows:

1. What experiences did you have that led you to believe you were born in the wrong body?

2. We're socialized from birth that games, activities, clothes, subjects in school etc are gender specific. What experiences with any of these did you have that made you aware you were different?

3. How did not feeling like the "right" gender affect you and did you do anything to cope?

4. What has surprised you about living as the other gender?

5. What have you had to deal with living as a woman/man that you didn't expect?

6. Women are still considered second-class citizens. How has this affected you?
Do you think it affects you more b/c you didn't start out that way?

7. Where did you get information on being transgendered? What has been helpful and what has not?

Themes did emerge along a number of lines, including attempts to resolve specific information needs in moving through life, but also in terms of the particular information sources that were consulted.

4 Findings

In our findings we would like to present some of the anecdotes shared by our participants that suggest gaps, discontinuities and dissonances and the ways participants handled them. These anecdotes are thematic and a vast majority of our respondents had similar stories to tell. Finally we will briefly discuss what we think might be almost canonical in terms of information resources for and about transgendered people given the number of our respondents who mentioned them as important in their individual journeys.

Nearly every one of our respondents was aware from an early age that "something was wrong." In the early school years most didn't know what it was, except that people were subtly and not so subtly encouraging them to behave in ways that were less than comfortable to them. It was at this early age that confusion and questioning began, even if it wasn't at the level of a "gap" or cognitive dissonance at this point.

M, a female to male transsexual told the following story, "When I was about 5 or 6 I was with some neighborhood kids. And we were in the garage, taking our clothes off and comparing notes, as kids will do. And when I saw the boys I was shocked, as said 'Hey where's my hangie-downie!?' It was a strange thing to me…but one of the others said. 'It probably just hasn't grown yet. That was enough of an answer for me at that point." M had met with an information gap that stopped him in his tracks momentarily. But he was given the information he needed at the moment.

It was at puberty or in adolescence when the body was changing in ways that made it seem more unalterably one gender or the other, that things became critical in terms of cognitive dissonance and gaps needing to be bridged. D, a male to female transsexual describes how she began her journey to bridge the gap.

> So, that year (when I was 12) I asked my mom if I could go out on Halloween as a girl. "No", she said. I persisted. She continued to say no. I pressed her for a reason. Finally, she yelled at me. "NO! It's just not appropriate!!" I was crushed.
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> That single incident, as innocent as it probably seemed at the time, was to shape my life for years to come. It became apparent to me that this wasn't something that I could let anybody know about – especially my parents. It was important to me to live up to the expectations that my parents had for me. But, at the same time, I had to find some answers. I knew that something was wrong so embarked on a secret "other" life to explore the "other" side of me.

Many of our respondents decided to forego such exploration (aside from a few dabblings at cross-dressing or cosmetics) and embarked on a concerted effort to change their cognitions to suit society's expectations. M, for instance, got married at 17 and become a keypunch operator instead of a mechanic. D became an athlete. Two other of the male to female transsexuals, G and T took on high tech jobs, not then common for women.

All but one of the respondents tried to convince themselves that they could overcome the problem, if they just tried hard enough. The attempts to control or eliminate the cognitive dissonance they felt were often harmful, resulting in drug use and other kinds of withdrawal. The single one who did not express feeling that way has very supportive family from the beginning. She says, "they knew there was something different, but my mom particularly was very indulgent about letting me try to go my own way."

Complicating matters for many of the respondents was the fact that they had no name for what they felt. G had never heard the word transgender or transsexual until she got to college, M remembered when the Renee Richards and Christine Jorgenson stories came out. He was intrigued, but thought it didn't quite connect to him personally. "I didn't want to be changed from a man…I wanted to be a man. I thought it could only go one way."

Every respondent questioned at one time or another if they were gay. To some this was a terrifying thought because they knew that it was unacceptable at the time and place they were in. M, tried reading the rather lurid butch lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s, but found they did not describe his experience. L, a normally very strong savvy woman (presenting as male at the time) described her horror and fear about even going to a library or bookstore and looking at materials on gay and lesbian issues, much less transgender issues. "What if somebody saw me?!" M, too, finally tried libraries, but was unable to find anything and unwilling to ask for help.

Of the sources of information mentioned by our responds, the Internet ranks highest on the list. It was cited for its anonymity and the ability to browse in private unlike bookstores and libraries.

D, believes the internet is vitally important important. She says,

> I feel confident saying that the development of the internet is the single-most important tool fueling the development of the transgender community, and in fostering empowerment within it. When we realize that we're *not* alone, that there *is* hope for a fulfilling life, that others have already walked this path and have shared their experiences – that's an incredibly powerful thing.

Everyone agreed that the Internet was a good resource but not everyone was so enthusiastic. L commented "The Internet is filled with information and mis-information—frightening!" and R complained that if you searched for transgender information you often get lots of porn sites.

Other non-text resources mentioned were the films "Rocky Horror Picture Show" and "Princesa" The first is, of course a very campy view of transgender, the other is described by R as a "very touching foreign film." Television was also mentioned, including "Lots of good stuff on the Discovery Channel" and "some stuff on Jerry Springer before he got 'all weird'"

Support groups were also mentioned as a resource. One specific group was TRI-ESS, was mentioned more than once, but dismissed by one respondent as "men in dresses." All the same, several respondents cited the transgender community in general as a practical help, as well as a support. As D says, "I went to my first support group

meeting because I needed to actually meet some of us, but also to get information. [about changing my name…]"

Finally there were numerous print resources that were mentioned within the focus groups and interviews. Each of the following titles was mentioned one or more times as a book that people, both transgendered and non-transgendered should read to gain understanding. Starting from the most commonly mentioned.

1. "True Selves" by Mildred Brown and Chloe Rounsley.

2. "Wrapped in Blue" by Donna Rose

3. "Crossing" by Deirdra McCloskey

4. "Transformations" by Mariette Pathy-Allen

5. "Body Alchemy" by Loren Cameron

6. "Stone Butch Blues" by Leslie Feinburg

7. "Trans Sister Radio" by Chris Bohjalian

As an aside there was one book that our respondents claimed was entirely misinformation and should be avoided. When it was brought up in one focus group, everyone groaned. That book is "The Man Who Would Be Queen" by J. Michael Bailey.

Incidentally a list of media resources judged to be "good" or "bad" by a GLBT media watchdog is available at http://www.GLAAD.org

5 Conclusions and further research

This work provided us with a rich source of information, not only regarding the information sources and behaviors set forth here, but also regarding other attitudes and aspects of gender among those in the transgender community. This research project is ongoing, although nearly at an end.

While we found strong themes regarding the information behaviors of the transgender community in this research, the above findings could well be strengthened and supplemented by research using Dervin's time-line interview technique rather than relying on thematic inferences. Such continued research would make more explicit how the individuals thought and felt about the information gaps and cognitive dissonances and how they had (or hadn't) overcome them. We suggest that more direct study is warranted along these lines.

Most of the respondents in this study were old enough that the Internet was not an available resource when they began to seek information. Now that the Internet is a major force in people's lives, it would also be interesting to examine the information seeking behaviors in this community, using different theoretical underpinnings, such as Elfreda Chatman's small worlds theory.

[i] In the course of this research all respondents will be referred to in their preferred gender, regardless of whether they have transitioned to living in that gender full time or not.

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