

Transphobia, truth and faux statistics

In this article I am going to pick up in more detail some particular claims being made by some of those who signed the recent trans-critical letter in the Morning Star referred to in my previous article . The first of these relates to suicidality among trans people. The second relates to claims that trans critics are ‘speaking truth to power’ or ‘battling for reality in a post-truth world’ as one writer has recently put it.

Transgender suicidality

First, the issue of trans suicidality. An article from the transphobic website *Transgender Trends (A Scientist Reviews Transgender Suicide Stats)*¹ seems to have been quite widely shared and quoted online.

It claims that unwarranted conclusions from a particular study of LGBT suicide, the 2014 survey by Pace², a mental health charity for LGBT people, in conjunction with three universities, were uncritically adopted into the government’s transgender survey.

The author points out that when the survey results from the 2078 respondents in the Pace study are disaggregated the number of trans respondents under 26 years old was only 27, and it is from this small statistical base that the figure of 48 percent who had attempted suicide is claimed. The unidentified author of the article also claims that there is no evidence from this survey of any link between delayed treatment for gender dysphoria and greater risk of suicide.

27 trans respondents in one survey is clearly not a sufficient sample size to draw any meaningful or statistically significant conclusions about the trans population. It may even be that some trans advocates have mistakenly made unfounded claims from this survey’s results. But it is one thing to draw attention to inappropriate conclusions drawn from one study and quite another to cast doubt on the general claim that suicide, suicide attempts, or suicidal ideation occur at much higher rates among trans people than the background population.

It is also quite another thing to suggest, as some commentators do, that suicide attempts by trans people, especially young people, are ‘not serious’ or are intended to blackmail family or clinicians into delivering support. Is there any other group of people in need about whom this might be claimed?

Some transphobes have even made misinformed claims that gender reassignment does not reduce, and can even increase, susceptibility to suicide and mental distress later in life.

¹ <https://www.transgendertrend.com/a-scientist-reviews-transgender-suicide-stats/>

² <http://www.queerfutures.co.uk/rare-research-report-lgbt-mental-health-risk-resilience-explored/>

Trans writer Cristan Williams discusses this in an interview³ with Cecilia Dhejne, lead author of a 2011 Swedish study of the long-term follow up of transsexual people after sex reassignment surgery. To their great frustration the Swedish team's results have been repeatedly misrepresented by transphobes to suggest that in terms of mental distress and suicidality sex reassignment does not alleviate gender dysphoria.

What is pretty disgraceful and unethical of sites like *Transgender Trend* is that by rubbishing the possibly erroneous use made of data from one study they want to cast doubt by association on all the other studies which show similarly high levels of suicidality among trans people. However, there have been many studies internationally on trans people's susceptibility to suicide in the past decade or so which demonstrate that the Pace study's outcome was not far off the mark.

Thus a 2014 study of over 6000 trans people in the US by the National Transgender Discrimination Survey⁴ found a lifetime risk of suicide attempts by trans people of 41 percent compared to a background population figure of 4.6 percent.

The abstract below is from another US study, the 2006 survey by Clements-Nolle, Marx and Mitchell⁵ in San Francisco of over 500 trans people:

"The prevalence of attempted suicide was 32% (95% CI = 28% to 36%). In multivariate logistic regression analysis younger age (<25 years), depression, a history of substance abuse treatment, a history of forced sex, gender-based discrimination, and gender-based victimization were independently associated with attempted suicide. Suicide prevention interventions for transgender persons are urgently needed, particularly for young people. Medical, mental health, and social service providers should address depression, substance abuse, and forced sex in an attempt to reduce suicidal behaviors among transgender persons. In addition, increasing societal acceptance of the transgender community and decreasing gender-based prejudice may help prevent suicide in this highly stigmatized population."

A meta-analysis of 42 studies of trans people over 19 years carried out by three Canadian institutions and published in 2017 in *Transgender Health*⁶ found that:

"Suicidal thoughts and attempts are higher among transgender teens and young adults, though they are significantly higher for all transgender people across society".

"The analysis of the studies showed that on average, 55 percent of respondents thought about suicide and 29 percent had attempted suicide in their lifetimes. The numbers

³ http://transadvocate.com/fact-check-study-shows-transition-makes-trans-people-suicidal_n_15483.htm

⁴ <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf>

⁵ [Kristen Clements-Nolle PhD, MPH, Rani Marx PhD, MPH & Mitchell Katz MD](#) *Attempted Suicide Among Transgender Persons: The Influence of Gender-Based Discrimination and Victimization, Journal of Homosexuality, Volume 51, 2006, Issue3, ps 53-69*

⁶ Adams Noah, Hitomi Maaya, and Moody Cherie. *Varied Reports of Adult Transgender Suicidality: Synthesizing and Describing the Peer-reviewed and Gray Literature*, *Transgender Health*. April 2017, 2(1): 60-75.

changed to 51 percent thought about suicide and 11 percent had attempted suicide in the past year.”

A recent Australian Trans Pathway survey⁷ (2017) had 859 trans youth participants. It concluded that:

“Trans young people are at very high risk for poor mental health, self-harming and suicide attempts. Around 3 in every 4 trans young people have experienced anxiety or depression. Four out of 5 trans young people have ever engaged in self-harm, and almost 1 in 2 trans young people have ever attempted suicide (48%).”

In the UK the 2017 Stonewall School Report⁸ looked at the experiences of 3,700 LGB and T school students and found that:

“For trans pupils in particular, the findings are alarming: nearly two in three trans pupils are bullied for being LGBT at school, one in ten have received death threats, and more than two in five have tried to take their own lives. While a growing number of schools are supporting their trans pupils, too many are not equipped to do so. It is vital that this is remedied as a matter of urgency.”

Quibbles about one study of suicidality should not detract from the plethora of evidence referred to in these studies and others which show very much higher levels of suicide, suicide attempts and suicidal ideation among trans people compared to the background population, even relatively high risk groups within those populations.

Now, could it be that the demonstrably higher suicidality among trans people may be the result of the level of oppression suffered? How, then, would refusing to take measures to reduce the obstacles trans people face help reduce that susceptibility?

Reality in a Post-Truth world?

I want to turn to an article by Jeni Harvey called *“A Battle for Reality in a Post-Truth World”*⁹ which has also been quite widely shared and praised among trans-critical individuals and groups in recent times.

It purports to offer a logical argument for opposing self-identification by trans people, and thus a logical justification for their exclusion from women’s spaces. The argument is presented in a tone which implies that any rational person ought to be able to see and accept the obvious truth. It is based on a repeatedly stated putative premise:

“A male person is a female person on the basis of nothing more than their say so.”

⁷ <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/our-research/brain-and-behaviour/mental-health-and-youth/youth-mental-health/trans-pathways/>

⁸ <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/school-report-2017>

⁹ Jeni Harvey, <https://medium.com/@GappyTales/a-battle-for-reality-in-a-post-truth-world-31fa0bc66690>

In other words, we're asked to believe that this is the stripped down assertion behind calls for self-identification, and because the author sees the assertion as obviously wrong (since people cannot change their biological sex, can they?) then the whole logical basis for self-identification must also be false.

One of the important things about logic and the process of deduction, however, is that you have to make sure your premises are sound. If not, you are on a fool's errand.

In this case Jeni Harvey's premise is wrong. Apart from the implicit anti-trans bias in the wording she uses, trans women are not 'male persons claiming to be female persons on the basis of nothing more than their say so'.

Actually, they may be genetically/biologically male persons who are **women** (leaving aside non-binary people for the time being). They identify as the gender 'woman', or aspire to this gender, not on the basis of their chromosomal, endocrinal, biological sex but on the basis of their gender identity.

We now know that at the cellular level a person's genetic sex may be a lot more equivocal than used to be believed¹⁰. We know there are many intersex conditions in which a person's sex cannot be unequivocally assigned to one pole of binary sex. We also know that there are technological means to convincingly alter a person's sexual characteristics (though not their chromosomes), often to the extent that a person may become externally and to all *socially relevant* intents and purposes except childbearing itself (so far), indistinguishable from the gender to which they may aspire.

Where exactly would people like Jeni Harvey, who appear at heart to want to police a clear biological, essentialist division between men and women, draw the line? *How* would this be assessed and policed?

Clearly biological sex (however defined) is material, though nowhere near as binary or as purely biological as some people believe. In a (broadly) sexually bi-morphic species like humans sex is both a biological pre-requisite and a socially/historically influenced indicator of who bears children and reproduces the next generation of labour power. But it says little or nothing about who *could* nurture and socialise that next generation, *how* that might be accomplished, and for what purpose.

Biological sex has socially ascribed characteristics and values applied to it including in capitalism the ascription of detrimental values reflecting historically contingent societal sexism and misogyny such as the objectification, devaluation and commodification of female bodies.

Gender can be understood as having two elements: It is both socially applied (ie as something which exists as external to the person) and it is also an internal sense of self. It varies enormously from one society to another, one historical period to another. But

¹⁰ See for example: <https://www.nature.com/news/sex-redefined-1.16943>

both elements of gender are material factors in the social relations of class societies like capitalism: think about social status, gender related pay, educational access, reproductive rights. Hence Marxists seek to understand both sex and gender through the lens of historical materialism and recognise that the relationship between them is a complex dialectical interaction.

Gender identity, like sexuality, is much more than a feeling. It is not simply innate (and in any case 'innate' does not mean 'fixed') but is the outcome of a dialectical relationship between the person's self-perceived body, the social perception of their body by others, social factors like gender values and expectations, and the person's development as a sexual being (their sexuality). It has a certain mutability or plasticity as a result of these interactions but also has persistence in the face of social pressures to confine us within binary and sex-ascribed gender expectations.

The bottom line for Harvey and others is that trans women can never be women and therefore should have no access to women's spaces. Strip away the spurious logic in her article and that is what it comes down to. Hers is not a 'battle for reality' and truth. Her argument, like the distortions of survey outcomes on suicidality, is being deployed as part of a long-running campaign to promote trans exclusion on the basis of false premises.