

How have trans identities been expressed and experienced in the past?

Gender and sexuality have been so entwined in the public psyche through centuries of religious teachings, an abiding trust in medical institutions and scientists, as well as those who stand in public office to represent the views of their constituents. From the mid-nineteenth century, as our society became more medicalised and less accepting of non-conforming entities, this twining fostered great misunderstandings in relation to same-sex couples and transgender individuals.

A tale preserved in script during the second century tells us of Thecla, the daughter of a wealthy family who does not want to be married (Clark 2019, p. 47). Thecla eventually takes to wearing the clothes of men as she travelled across the Middle East (Clark 2019, p. 48). Who would know if the decision to wear men's clothing was to perhaps protect herself from the unwanted attentions of men she encountered (Stryker 2017, p. 45). It is clear in the mention of Thecla that she was not a passive female, making her the antithesis of the respectable norm (Clark 2019, p. 48; Holt in Hallett & Skinner 1997, p. 50). Do these points provide enough evidence to lead us to the conclusion that Thecla was transgender?

Chevalière d'Eon was born in 1728 as Charles Geneviève Louis Auguste André Timothée d'Eon de Beaumont and died in 1810, having lived the latter half of her life as a woman (Morris 2019, p. 78). At the beginning of the 1990s, history professor Gary Kates raised doubts as to the veracity of d'Eon's status as a transgender individual but suggested that they were more likely gender-fluid in a time when 'breeches and skirts' were as compelling as 'hormones for transforming appearances' (Morris 2019, p. 79). That is not to say that society was not aware of what we call transgender individuals.

An 1857 edition of the magazine *The Knickerbocker* published an anonymously written story titled *The man who thought himself a woman*. It is a tale about the Colbones family and the oddities of the men in the family, particularly the youngest son Japhet. It transpires that Japhet had been stealing clothing from his mother and sisters for many years, having them altered to fit his body. At a point late in the story, his wife and sisters discover his secret, but before they find it in themselves to confront Japhet, he commits suicide, leaving a note that reads 'I think I am a woman. I have been seven years making me a perfect suit of garments appropriate for my sex. As I have passed so long, falsely, for a man, I am ashamed to show myself in my true colors; therefore, I hang myself.' This published works illustrates that although there may have been a lack of adequate language, there was an awareness that it was possible for a person to feel alien in their body and the ability for that to be translated into a belief that they were the opposite gender that they generally presented to society in their manner of dress.

From the mid nineteenth century and into the mid to late twentieth century, a raft of municipalities across the United States passed laws that prohibited wearing clothes of the opposite sex in a public place (Stryker 2017, p.47). These laws were indicative of a greater concern that brought alarm to society at large. According to Innes (1995, p. 15) there was concern that access to university education in particular was feminising men, making them soft and foppish, raising fears that they would be unable to act as leaders in their communities or be suitable fathers. Women, it was feared, were becoming more masculine, more athletic, and started to develop aspirations beyond getting married and having children (Innes 1995, p. 16). This discomfort with the idea of cross-dressing or disguising your public self (Stryker 2017, p. 46), fed into a greater fear around how gender was being represented in public spaces, and the changing social conditions where women sought

greater freedoms and participation in society outside the home. In addition to this potential disruption to the social order that privileged men, it was generally thought that men who were attracted to men tended towards femininity, and women attracted to women were more masculine (Stryker 2017, p. 50; McLaren 1999, p. 88), so dressing in gender inappropriate clothing gave cause for alarm.

According to the Macquarie Dictionary ‘transgender’ is an adjective *of or relating to a person whose gender identity is different from their physiological gender*. By this definition, transgenderism has nothing to do with sexuality, and the two should be seen as distinctly separate. Whereas historically being transgender was equated with homosexuality (Boyd 1999, p. 74), it is necessary to change your perspective to that of the people involved in each situation to get a clearer understanding of gender and sexuality. Take the instance of Pierrette, documented by Pierre Vachet in the early 1930s (McLaren 1999, p. 88). Vachet was a psychiatrist in Paris, who had a patient who, while presenting as a young man, claimed to have ‘the soul of a woman’. Pierrette had gone through periods in their life where she happily dressed as a women and others where she tried to conform to society expectations. She was only truly happy when they made the decision to abandon efforts to live a man, and embrace her feminine soul. Pierrette explained to Vachet that while she enjoyed flirting with men and wanted to please them, she had no sexual interest in them. She was asexual, although this was most likely not a term used in the 1930s. Vachet deduced that Pierrette’s desire to be a woman was in no way connected to homosexual tendencies. (McLaren 1999, p. 89).

In another instance in 1947, David Warren and his wife were arrested for ‘perjury, conspiracy, and impersonation in marriage’ (Boyd 1999, p.74) when he came to the attention of the FBI on an unrelated matter. David Warren was living as a man when he wed

Thelma Jane Walter and while they considered their relationship to be heterosexual in nature, the laws of the time deemed that Warren was legally a woman and therefore Warren and Walter were living in a lesbian relationship, which was forbidden at that time. While the case was later abandoned due to a legal technicality, Walter had lost her position as a teacher at the local high school (Lebaron 2005). While the authorities saw this a lesbian relationship, Warren's assertion that while born a woman, he was in fact a man emotionally and psychologically and under these conditions, no laws had been broken. The loss of Walter's employment would today be counted as discrimination but in 1947 resigning from her position as a teacher was the socially acceptable thing to do.

Other instances of discrimination against transwomen have been well documented in the controversial Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Boyd 1999, p. 78). At the 1991 event, male-to-female transgender woman Nancy Jean Burkholder was removed from the festival after being told by a person working for the festival organisers that the festival did not permit transsexuals to attend (Boyd 1999, p. 78). There was no policy found at the time that explicitly excluded transsexual women from attending the festival. Festival organisers subsequently changed the festival policy to include only womyn-born-womyn, thereby directly excluding transsexual women from the event. For the following twenty-three years, the festival was dogged by controversy, protests before the final event in 2015. This case highlights the challenges in defining gender and sexuality even in LGBTQI space. Acceptance as male or female is possibly only guaranteed in your born body (Boyd 1999, p. 79; Jack 2021, p. 48).

Sadly, there is another layer of challenge for transgender people in gaining acceptance, particularly as it pertains to trans women. Janice Raymond, a lesbian feminist, has been very vocal in her opposition to trans women, being accused of being transphobic

(Jack 2021, p. 48). Raymond believes that “trans women are inauthentic products of patriarchy who use feminine garb to infiltrate and ‘rape’ women’s bodies, spaces, and socio-political practice” (Jack 2021, p. 48). Raymond believes that trans women are unlikely to willingly relinquish their (former) male privilege and that they have an inherently ‘male gaze’. To counter this, Sandy Stone argues that while trans women may retain male privilege, they are a subject to female oppression as well (Jack 2021, p. 48). This lack of acceptance can lead to social dysphoria and contribute to gender dysphoria.

Gender dysphoria is described as feeling uncomfortable or distressed when a person’s gender identity is different from the sex category given at birth, or with physical characteristics specific to born gender. This condition is not experienced by all transgender persons. A 2020 article in *Stigma and Health* sought to provide a better understanding of the gender dysphoria beyond binary concepts (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow & Lindley 2020, p. 199). Researchers reported that respondents were concerned with how they were perceived by those around them and how other people interacted with them and their expectations, and with the use of appropriate pronouns (Galupo, et. al. 2000, p. 200, p. 201). Respondents noted that the closer the relationship, the more distressing it was to be misgendered, or called by a deadname. Other issues, such as the timbre of their voice, or involuntary, lingering affectations that may invite queries of gender in the minds of the respondents led to anxiety due to self-perception (Galupo et. at. 2020, p. 203). This in turn could lead into a loss of ability to function in social settings, compounding anxieties. These complexities are far removed from the simple act of ‘cross-dressing’.

How do you try to understand how a populace thought about a particular issue tens of decades, indeed centuries, after the fact? It is very difficult to look through the lens of

21st century culture, community and knowledge to then presume to know what our predecessors were thinking on the issues of what we describe as transgender. Masculine women and feminine men are not an anomaly that suddenly occurred in the mid-nineteenth century; non-conforming men and women have chosen to substitute their mode of dress for centuries. Gender dysphoria has existed across time. Transphobia, by different names, has also existed across time. This does beg the question: is a feminist who hates transwomen a misogynist or a misandrist?

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