

Transgender discussion offers an opportunity to understand the nuances of gender identity

May 25 2016, by Laura Paisley



It's a moment that most of us experience several times a day.

And when we're in public, most of us proceed almost without thinking to

the nearest door bearing our corresponding gender signifier, the all-familiar A-line skirt or the pants. Simple, right?

Not necessarily. For transgender individuals—those who identify with or express a [gender identity](#) that differs from their sex at birth—the reality of using a public restroom is much more complicated. It can quickly become a minefield.

Chris Cervantes, a senior at USC Dornsife double majoring in gender studies and sociology, knows this firsthand.

"Until recently, USC didn't have many gender-neutral bathrooms," said the Los Angeles native. "Often there are none where my classes are located, so when I need to use the bathroom, where am I supposed to go?"

Cervantes identifies as gender nonconforming.

"I feel like the traits I exhibit and the way I carry myself can hold space both for masculinity and femininity without identifying as a man or a woman."

Cervantes recalled instances of entering the women's restroom and being questioned or harassed.

"People say things like, 'You're in the wrong bathroom,' or 'Excuse me, sir, do you know this is the women's room?' And I'm thinking, 'I'm not going to do anything to you or anyone else—I just really need to use the bathroom.' "

These day-to-day challenges are part of a larger struggle for transgender people, one that is not always adequately addressed amid the celebrity-centric representations in today's media. Legal discrimination and

violence remain serious issues for the transgender community, and neither can the impact of race and class on their experience be ignored.

But lately, personalities like Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, Chaz Bono, Janet Mock and teen advocate Jazz Jennings have brought the movement to mainstream public attention like never before. In June 2014, actress and activist Cox became the first transgender person to appear on the cover of Time magazine. Popular television shows like *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black* have humanized the transgender experience for new audiences.

At times it feels like a breakthrough moment—like we're at a "tipping point," as Time put it. But how did we get here and what lies ahead? USC Dornsife experts from sociology, political science, history, gender studies and psychology offer a variety of perspectives on the transgender experience, from the belief that the transgender movement is rooted in civil rights to the conundrum of the transgender athlete, how hormones relate to gender and social behavior, and the controversy regarding gender neutrality. Taken together, these perspectives—along with some of Cervantes' own personal experiences—offer us a deeper understanding of what it means to be transgender.

A short history of 20th-century gender movements

Though much has been done to raise awareness and increase acceptance of the transgender experience in recent years, one thing is clear: The transgender movement is anything but new.

"There was a tremendous amount of groundwork laid before Caitlyn Jenner came on the scene," said Michael Messner, professor of sociology and gender studies, and chair of sociology. "The women's and gay and lesbian movements over the past 40 or 50 years—all of that has created a fertile ground for greater acceptance of transgender people today."

Jack Halberstam, professor of American studies and ethnicity, gender studies, comparative literature and English, agreed with Messner.

"Change is slow," he said, "but when it happens it feels like it takes place overnight. Of course, the media loves the idea of 'Once we were intolerant people and now we're not.' But in fact, people have been working on issues around gender justice for a very long time. The amount of attention has just reached a critical pitch where people in general are seeing what people used to see only in queer communities—that there are multiple genders across the culture."

Our contemporary understanding acknowledges that gender identification doesn't automatically correlate with sexual orientation—gender and sexuality are separate. A hundred years ago, however, same-sex desire and cross-gender identification were thoroughly entwined, said Alice Echols, Barbra Streisand Professor of Contemporary Gender Studies and professor of history and gender studies. Her research expertise encompasses the history of sexuality, second-wave American feminism, and the social and cultural history of the 1960s and '70s.

By the advent of the '50s, things were beginning to shift. The first gay rights groups began to emerge, and a growing number of gays and lesbians were presenting themselves in a gender-conforming manner. Moreover, 1953 witnessed the emergence of America's first transgender celebrity, Christine Jorgensen, who in 1952 revealed to the world that she had undergone a "rare sex-conversion" from man to woman.

"What had been happening gradually is becoming more obvious, this disaggregation of same-sex desire from cross-gender identification. By the time we get to the 1970s disco era, this really ramps up," Echols said.

In the '70s, the women's and gay liberation movements were in full

swing, though relations between feminists and trans women were at times contentious. Some feminists were open and interested in thinking and talking about transgender issues, said Echols, and others felt threatened by them, questioning the validity of their claim to "womanness." For some, these tensions persist even today.

Transgender: the new civil rights movement?

On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled by a 5–4 vote that the Constitution guarantees the right to same-sex marriage. For many in the LGBT movement, it was seen as monumental—the hard-fought attainment of a civil right.

"One thing that often occurs after a particular social movement has gained a significant victory is a reflection, a looking inward that asks, 'What are the next sets of challenges?'" said Ange-Marie Hancock, associate professor of political science, gender studies and sociology.

In 2016, this means the push for transgender-friendly public policy, including gender-neutral public accommodations and protections against discrimination in housing, employment and health care as well as transgender-based violence.

"These kinds of policies are coming to the forefront because we're in the midst of this cultural shift," Hancock said, "but also because people within the LGBT movement are more open to hearing it now that the major milestone of marriage equality has been achieved."

Nationally, only 17 states have anti-discrimination laws for housing and workplace protection, public accommodations or both. California is one of the more progressive states in terms of advancing health-care, workplace and school policies that support transgender people, and create precedents for the national policy agenda, Hancock said.

California is currently working toward providing gender-neutral facilities for public employees, allowing people to choose the bathroom of the gender they identify with rather than their biological sex.



Transgender issues are often civil rights issues, as evidenced by the fight for gender-neutral bathrooms and antidiscrimination laws related to work and housing. Credit: Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library (1833-1841). "Butterflies And Moths" From Larva To Adult.

"I think 10 years from now things are going to be quite different" regarding men's and women's bathrooms, said Chris Freeman, professor (teaching) of English. He regularly teaches the course "Transgender Studies" at USC Dornsife and believes that having this subject matter in the curriculum is crucial. College is where students really think about and discover these issues.

"Looking at transgender issues through the literary lens removes it from the purely personal," he said. "It lets you think about how an artist constructs that world, that identity and those challenges."

Freeman sees an analogy between the push for gender-neutral bathroom access and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, a civil rights law designed to protect against discrimination. It enforced architectural accommodations in public buildings for disabled people, including wheelchair ramps, elevators and reserved parking spaces.

"Those did not exist 40 years ago—it was an architectural accommodation of a law," he said. "I think the whole concept of connecting gender to where you go to the toilet will soon be a thing of the past."

Another issue related to civil rights is violence. The transgender community—particularly trans women of color—faces an epidemic of physical and sexual violence. According to transequality.org, more than one in four transgender people has experienced a bias-driven assault, and in the LGBT community the homicide rate is highest among trans women.

Messner's book *Some Men: Feminist Allies and the Movement to End Violence Against Women* (Oxford University Press, 2015) discusses how the movement against gender-based violence is now broadening to include transgender activists.

"Ending violence against women remains the centerpiece of the anti-violence movement," he explained, "but the increasingly popular term 'gender-based violence' reflects a growing understanding of the need to recognize and confront LGBT violence." Ending violence against transgender people is a social justice issue at its core, and the laws must reflect this. But legislative gains are only half the battle.

"It's not that California doesn't have strong hate crime laws," Hancock said, "it's also about making sure they are enforced equally across different populations."

Transgender lives at the intersection

Intersectionality is a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. The subject of Hancock's newest book, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (Oxford University Press, 2016), intersectionality is a theoretical framework that views race, gender, class and sexuality as co-constructing agents rather than isolated factors that run on parallel tracks.

"Talking about Caitlyn Jenner or Laverne Cox, there are different combinations of privilege and disadvantage based on how these categories co-construct each other," Hancock explained. "One of the things intersectionality teaches us is that Caitlyn has a particular combination of privileges and disadvantages. Yes, she is transgender, and this is a new experience she's navigating. But there's the additional privilege of being wealthy and white that affords her a certain benefit of the doubt."

As another example, because trans women were born biologically male, they have experienced a degree of male privilege during their lives. But once they transition, they may find themselves expecting or demanding privileges that are no longer structurally available to them as women.

Hancock also talks about intersectional invisibility, a phenomenon in which certain subgroups—because of their race, gender or sexuality—don't receive the attention that the entire group receives. She cites the Black Lives

Matter movement as an example.

"[In the media coverage] we see it as only being about black, straight, cisgender men," she said. "They don't talk about the fact that women and trans women of color are also subject to a lot of police violence."

Can the gendered playing field be leveled?

In the sports arena, the privilege shared by all athletes is their physical prowess. In competition, differences of race, class and sexuality are in a sense transcended—and yet gender remains all-important.

Gender and sports are a significant focus of Messner's research, spanning everything from sports media analysis to children's sports to masculinity and violence in sports.

"The transgender athlete has become a really interesting issue, both politically and in terms of national and international sports organizations," he said. "Sports is one of a few institutions where you have a clear separation between male and female—one that starts right at the beginning based upon a dichotomous assumption that every individual fits into category A or B."

Messner has studied Little League Baseball and the American Youth Soccer Organization. He notes that girls and boys are allowed to play T-ball together, but higher levels are separated, with boys routed into baseball and girls into softball. Some soccer leagues enforce a similar division.

"The transgender athlete—and this is happening in youth sports, high school and elite international competitions—throws a big monkey wrench into that dichotomous organization of gender," Messner said.

When the United States Tennis Association barred Renée Richards, one of the first openly transsexual athletes, from competing in the 1976

Women's U.S. Open Tennis Championships, Richards fought the ruling all the way to the New York Supreme Court, which ruled in her favor. Many transgender athletes have followed her, but not without obstacles. The recent controversy around South African Olympic runner Caster Semenya, who is intersex and doesn't fit the binary definitions of male and female, was highly publicized.

"Organizations like the International Olympic Committee are in a quandary," Messner said. "For a number of years they tried to enforce so-called sex tests for women athletes, but all that reveals is the huge range of biological difference within the category of what we call women. There are people with chromosomal differences, there are intersex people and you can't simply measure testosterone because some women's levels are naturally high. Most organizations have now moved away from that as a standard practice."

The biochemistry of gender and social behavior

Hormones are frequently cited as an explanation for physical abilities and social behaviors that are often associated with a particular gender. But what is the interplay between hormones and gender and to what extent is one a function of the other? Endocrinology as applied to human behavior is a relatively new field, and one that many psychologists find intriguing.

Wendy Wood, Provost Professor of Psychology and Business, researches the origins of gender differences in social behavior. Her work attempts to understand the relationship between three components: hormones, our own understanding of ourselves as men and women, and societal expectations of our behavior.

It is known that gendered behavior—acting in communal, supporting, feminine ways or dominant, assertive, masculine ways—is to some

extent tied to hormonal processes, Wood said.

"Some of the most interesting work [in psychology] right now is showing how different social behaviors actually influence hormones. We usually think of hormones as drivers of behavior. In hormonal explanations for men's greater aggression and dominance, people assume that men have higher levels of testosterone, which facilitate these behaviors. But even the original animal models of testosterone derived from animal husbandry recognized that social behavior influences levels of the hormone."



While there is increasing awareness of binary transgender identities — trans women or trans men — people who identify as gender nonconforming face a unique set of challenges.

For example, if you're an athlete getting ready for a competition, testosterone levels rise—regardless of sex. And for both new mothers

and fathers, levels of the hormone actually decrease when they engage in nurturing, supportive behaviors.

"Biology and the social environment clearly interact in guiding people's gender identity and their understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman," Wood said.

Let's call the whole thing off: gender neutrality

If the dichotomous system of gender has the potential to create such inequality and oppression, why not do away with it altogether and embrace gender neutrality? The genderqueer community has long espoused the ideal of gender fluidity and exploding conventional gender categories and expectations. Today, Facebook offers 56 custom gender and pronoun selections for its users.

"For a lot of people there's a sort of comfort in thinking about pink and blue, male and female, yin and yang," Messner said. "But there's a growing sentiment, especially among young people, that it's better not to think of gender as dichotomous."

Freeman agreed. "People are seeing that the gender binary is an ossified model," he said. "It's not accurate or true, and people don't fit into it. So it's about getting out of the binary and recognizing that social constructs of masculine and feminine are a fiction, the enforcement of which is very damaging."

Halberstam is the author of several books about contrary gendering, including the award-winning *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998). His most recent book, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012), is focused on "how everything has changed" in the last 10 years, drastically transforming gender and sexual politics along the way.

"My recent work has been committed to trying to provide an accurate map for where we are now, recognizing that it is an incredibly volatile and shifting terrain."

People have been arguing for gender neutrality ever since the '70s and the advent of the radical feminism movement. But since gender is largely attributed, Halberstam said, the notion of absolute gender neutrality is problematic.

"Neutrality isn't an option in human interaction. We're a complex and diverse society, which means that information circulates separately from self-determined declarations. A lot of meaning is produced in society apart from anyone's agency.

"Naming and categorizing is just the tip of the iceberg of a very, very deep set of embedded social structures. We can't empty out all meaning from the way in which we move through the world."

Remaining mindful of social and gender categories may also be important to political efficacy. When thinking about the power of collectivities of people versus individuals, there are clearly times when thinking and organizing along group lines is very important.

"Once you start to explode gender categories," Messner said, "there's a sort of liberation for individuals, but you also might remove the potential for progressive organizing around those categories."

Moreover, he added, if gender categories disappear, we lose the ability to clearly see the ways in which certain groups in society retain privilege and others remain subject to economic inequality and physical violence. Effectively addressing these problems then becomes much more difficult.

Transgender on campus: one student's experience

The experience of being transgender and defining one's identity is, by definition, incredibly personal. As Jenner recently told *The Advocate*, "The media has kind of labeled me as the spokesperson for the trans community. That is not the case. I am only a spokesperson for my own journey."

Messner puts it another way: "We have this big umbrella we call transgender, but there's a lot of different stuff going on under that umbrella."

As a college student, one of Cervantes' main struggles has been finding a place to fit in.

"It's hard as someone who identifies as gender nonconforming, because that's not something a lot of people are familiar with. So it's a matter of balancing how much I'm going to work to take care of myself, and whether that means I'm going to be out to people or I'm going to be misgendered because it's too difficult to try and educate someone."

Cervantes gained a better self-understanding after meeting and talking with other transgender people.

"I have a friend who graduated from USC a couple of years ago who identifies as a 'trans boi.' He's been a mentor to me, and we have a lot of conversations about gender and masculinity, and what it means to be a masculine-presenting person of color and how that impacts [us] in society."

Cervantes is deeply committed to gender justice. At USC, the senior has been involved with the Women's Student Assembly, a student group that sponsors educational and community events while advocating for

students around gender issues.

Together with other student leaders on campus, Cervantes formed a coalition called RISE: Reform, Inform, Speak Out and Empower.

"Our goal is to communicate with university administrators about the issues we see on campus around sexual violence and gender-based harm, policy reforms, and how resources are allocated and made available to students," Cervantes said.

For the senior, despite an expanding conversation around transgenderism, certain frustrations still remain.

"With the media coverage, people are only thinking about binary trans identities—those who identify as a woman or a man. But to me, gender isn't that simple."

At USC and other universities, there's also the issue of legal nomenclature. Transgender students face the question of what name and gender will appear on their transcripts, their student IDs and the roll-call lists in their classes. These legal identifiers might not correspond to a student's gender identity.

Ultimately, it will take time for society to adapt to the idea that the existing system, the notion of [gender](#) as a binary, has set sail. This may be a "transgender moment," but there are many moments still to come. At its core, the transgender movement is a social justice movement—and we are playing the long game.

Provided by University of Southern California

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