

The Adoption Analogy Revisited



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In a guest post at Philip Goff's blog *Conscience and Consciousness*, Professor Sophie Grace Chappell from the Open University, UK [made the case](#)[1] that 'transwomen are to women as adoptive parents are to parents'. Some of my colleagues across the discipline of Philosophy have been very impressed with this analogy, and because it keeps coming up both in conversation and online — most recently referred to with enthusiasm by Brian Leiter [here](#)[2] — I've decided to write up a full reply. A few of us have already given a partial reply [here](#)[3] (in Section Two — 'Bad Analogies' — at point 4). I'll outline Sophie Grace's argument below, then I'll make the case against it. If you've read her post already, then feel free to skip ahead to the response.

Sophie Grace's argument

Sophie Grace takes an adoptive parent to be (usually) 'someone who desperately wants to be a parent but can't be one in the normal biological sense'. Even though there can be difficulties, 'adoptive parents are, [...] deeply committed to parenting. Unlike some biological parents, they aren't parents by accident'. She goes on to say that society recognises and values this commitment, and accepts adoptive parents *as parents*, although in some cases there are differences between them and biological parents that matter ('blood transfusion, organ donation, testing for inherited difference').

She makes a case against telling transwomen they're not women by analogy to adoptive parents. In eight paragraphs all beginning with 'nobody sensible thinks...' she says that nobody sensible thinks that:

- i) it would be acceptable to yell in the face of an adoptive parent 'Biology! Science! You're running away from the facts! You're delusional! You're not a real parent!' This would be rude and insensitive, would be false, and would be targeting a sore point for the adoptive parent
- ii) it would be an infraction of anyone's human rights to make sure they call adoptive parents *parents*
- iii) you don't owe a retraction, correction, and apology if you refer to an adoptive parent as a non-parent
- iv) that calling adoptive parents *parents* 'undermines our understanding of what it is to be a parent'
- v) that adoptive parents are a threat to other parents, or to children, e.g. that those who want to adopt just want to get close to vulnerable children or parents

vi) that we shouldn't have adoptive parents in parents' spaces (she qualifies this by saying 'we should be prepared to listen carefully and sympathetically to the case that might be made sometimes for biological-parents-only-spaces. But in general, adoptive parents have similar enough concerns and interests to biological parents for it to be, in most cases, both natural and useful to include them in such spaces')

vii) that adoptive parents are buying into an 'oppressive ideological agenda of parenthood, and, by their choice to be parents, imposing that agenda on other parents'

viii) there's just one right way to be a good adoptive parent. She says 'though there are some things that have to be in common between all good parents, there are lots of different ways of being a good parent'

Sophie Grace also says that we can't always tell whether a parent is adoptive or biological, and even if we see some visual cues that suggest the former, it's rude to ask. The convention is not to ask, and to wait to be told. Then she drives her point home about how transwomen should be treated, again purely through the analogy, by saying:

'If you're an adoptive parent, you're a parent — for most purposes — and no one sensible scratches their head over that, or decrees that you can't sit on school parents' councils, or sees it as somehow dangerous or threatening or undermining of 'real parents' or dishonest or deceptive or delusional or a symptom of mental illness or a piece of embarrassing and pathetic public make-believe. On the contrary, people just accept you as a parent, and value your commitment to parenthood as an important contribution to the well-being of our society that you could not have made if you didn't have the psychological set-up that you do'.

The argument was that 'transwomen are to women as adoptive parents are to parents'. So everything that Sophie Grace said about how we *wouldn't* treat adoptive parents is supposed to apply over directly to how we *shouldn't* treat transwomen. She earns this normative conclusion *only* to the extent that transwomen actually are to women as adoptive parents are to parents. Below I make the case that the analogy fails, and with it her conclusion.

The response

There are several crucial differences between biological and adoptive parents, on the one hand, and transwomen and women, on the other hand. These include: that both biological and adoptive parents *actually parent*, whereas it's not at all clear what transwomen and women have in common that is supposed to play this same role; that there is no historical power relationship between biological and adoptive parents, whereas there is between male and female people; that calling adoptive parents *parents* doesn't undermine our understanding of what it is to be a parent because what is core to parenting — raising children — is done by both, whereas what is core to being a woman is *being female*, and that is *not* done by both; there is no established history of adoptive parental violence against biological parents, whereas there *is* an established history of male violence against women; that adoptive parents *do* have 'similar enough concerns and interests' to biological parents, but transwomen do not have these to women (especially [considering the heterogeneity](#)[4] among transwomen); that there is no 'oppressive ideological agenda of parenthood' but there is of being a woman (namely being feminine); and finally, that there are many ways to be a *bad* parent, which we can probably agree on, but there are no ways to be a bad woman. I'll say more about each of these below, the first two on their own, and the rest following a paste of the relevant item from Sophie Grace's list.

As we explained [here](#)[3], giving birth and adopting are two different routes to becoming a parent. These differences — the difficulties involved in the adoption process, and the physiological experience of pregnancy — might give the different types of parents a reason to meet up with others like them, especially at the stage of *being pregnant* and *waiting* to adopt. But, especially once both actually have children in their homes, both are parents. Both are engaged in the common project of *raising children*. So

while there are two routes to being a parent, both routes actually lead to doing the same thing, namely parenting — understood as the project of raising children.

But what is supposed to play the role of raising children, when it comes to thinking about transwomen and women? That is, what is the common project in which both transwomen and women are engaged, which there are simply different routes we can take to? We can't say it's 'woman-ing', because what is that? If we cash it out in terms of some sort of stereotype of femininity, a lot of *women* won't count as 'woman-ing', and so transwomen and women won't have that thing in common. Having a 'feminine' or 'woman' gender identity doesn't do any better, because again, some women do not have this (conservatively, women in comas and some neuro-atypical women won't have a gender identity; generously, *most* women won't have one). Gender critical feminists, like me, think that there's nothing more to being a woman than being an adult human female. But if that's right, it's not a thing that transwomen and women have in common, because transwomen are *male*. Sophie Grace owes us a story of what the analogy to *parenting* is supposed to be in the case of women and transwomen; without it, the analogy doesn't go through.

Furthermore, there's no historical power relationship between biological and adoptive parents. Even if there have been periods in which some biological parents have had negative attitudes toward adoptive parents, there certainly isn't a relationship of *oppression* between the two groups (understood as the dominant group systematically extracting resources from the subordinate group, as in the case of race, sex, and class). So when we say that we should treat both groups — adoptive and biological parents — as parents, and that we should combine both groups in cases where we need to get parents together (say, for school meetings), this doesn't create any predictable tensions. That is precisely not true for treating both transwomen and women *as women*, and combining both groups in cases where we need to get women together. Male people have historically oppressed female people (and in some places continue to do so) and the historical oppression of female people has not been fully mitigated. There exists a power relationship between male people and female people. Transwomen are a subgroup of male people; so putting transwomen together with women in cases where we need to get women together creates a predictable tension. Again, given the disanalogy between adoptive and biological parents, on the one hand, and transwomen and women, on the other, the argument from analogy doesn't go through.

Now to Sophie Grace's list i) — viii) and her final remarks about the important contribution that adoptive parents make, and the value of transwomen's choice to be women.

i) [Nobody sensible thinks] it would be acceptable to yell in the face of an adoptive parent 'Biology! Science! You're running away from the facts! You're delusional! You're not a real parent!' This would be rude and insensitive, would be false, and would be targeting a sore point for the adoptive parent

Well, 'yell in the face' certainly biases the case here. I think we can all agree we shouldn't be yelling in each other's faces. But is it so obvious that we shouldn't politely state that biology and science show that a person can't change sex, and that sex denialism is running away from the facts? And while it surely *is* rude and insensitive to say to a person suffering from either body dysmorphia or gender dysphoria that they're not what they think they are, it's not clear that it's rude or insensitive to say this to a person who has merely become emboldened by queer theory to claim that their lack of identification with masculinity somehow makes them a woman. *Who* we're talking to matters, and *how* we say what we say matters. It's not obvious that the analogy holds up here either, given that adoptive parents really are parents (engaged in the project of raising children) whereas transwomen are not obviously women (they're certainly not female, and it's not clear what the project could be that they're similarly engaged in, as discussed already).

ii) [Nobody sensible thinks] it would be an infraction of anyone's human rights to make sure they call adoptive parents parents

As I've said already, that's because adoptive parents *actually parent*, so we're not forcing anyone to say anything false. People object to compelled speech when it's compulsion to utter a falsehood. For people like me who subscribe to 'woman: adult human female', it would be compulsion to utter a falsehood if I couldn't deny that transwomen are women. There, I said it: I deny that transwomen are women. What trans activists mean by 'woman' — something like the gender identity notion — is just not what I mean by 'woman'. For exactly the same reasons that trans activists are now trying to appropriate the sex term 'female' (because it is used synonymously with 'woman'), gender critical feminists *resist* the appropriation of 'woman' by trans activists (because it is used synonymously with 'female', and sex and sex-based legal protections matter).

iii) *[Nobody sensible thinks] you don't owe a retraction, correction, and apology if you refer to an adoptive parent as a non-parent*

I don't really have strong feelings about who owes retractions, corrections, and apologies on the basis of words they choose to use, at least when these words are not slurs or obvious insults. Maybe there's a case for using 'parent' to track only the biological sense and having a different word for those who adopt. There's *always* a discussion to be had about when we extend the scope of a term and when we use a new term. But what I am sure about is that I *do not* owe a retraction, correction, and apology when I refer to someone who exhibits toxic masculinity, or who has perpetrated male violence against women, as *not a woman*. Maybe it's impolite in the other cases, *even given* my subscription to 'woman: adult human female', and maybe I can owe retraction, correction, and apology on the basis of impoliteness. Seems a bit draconian to me, but it's not the hill I want to die on.

iv) *[Nobody sensible thinks] that calling adoptive parents parents 'undermines our understanding of what it is to be a parent'*

Probably because, as I keep saying, adoptive parents actually parent. But if there's nothing more to being a woman than being an adult human female, then calling transwomen women *does* undermine our understanding of what it is to be a woman, because *it contradicts it*. It forces everyone to scramble around looking for a way to make sense of what a woman is that includes *both* female people and some male people, which leads to all sorts of silly accounts of 'woman' like 'either being female or feeling like you are female'. This same objection goes for 'lesbian'. If a lesbian is a female homosexual (it is), then calling some transwomen lesbians undermines our understanding of what it is to be a lesbian, because *it contradicts it*. Forcing a revision of terms that are politically important to the people they already pick out is really bad behaviour from a group of people that pay lip service to the idea that they are allies (either to women, or to lesbians as part of the LGBT).

v) *[Nobody sensible thinks] that adoptive parents are a threat to other parents, or to children, e.g. that those who want to adopt just want to get close to vulnerable children or parents*

Right, because there's no empirical evidence suggesting that adoptive parents, as a group, are a threat to other parents, or to children, while there is *overwhelming evidence* that male people, as a group, are a threat to female people. Sure, we can't say that about *transwomen in particular*, but neither can we say that they're *exempt* from this claim (although loads of people do say exactly that, without evidence). When your definition of 'trans' is so thin as to include anyone who merely self-declares to be trans, it's hard to make a credible case for a difference between trans and non-trans male people that is supposed to magically make the former subgroup safe to women. Of course, this is ultimately an empirical question, so perhaps we'll find out one day that there *is* magic in self-declaration after all. (Or, more likely, magic in the experience of body dysmorphia or gender dysphoria, and *not* in mere self-declaration).

vi) *[Nobody sensible thinks] that we shouldn't have adoptive parents in parents' spaces: 'in general, adoptive parents have similar enough concerns and interests to biological parents for it to be, in most cases, both natural and useful to include them in such spaces'*

Agreed that adoptive parents and biological parents have similar enough concerns to be included in the same (i.e. parents') spaces. But why think that this is true of transwomen and women? Again, consider the [massive heterogeneity](#)[4] between different transwomen. Some transwomen have had sex reassignment surgery (e.g. US author and trans activist Julia Serano); some retain male genitalia but take hormones to get female secondary sex characteristics (e.g. well-known trans activist YouTubers Natalie Wynn and Kat Blaque); some do neither of these things but dress / present in a feminine way (UK Labour Women's Officer and trans activist Lily Madigan); some do none of those things but merely assert that they are women or that they are female (US trans activist Danielle Muscato; UK Stonewall Advisor and trans activist Alex Drummond). None of these people have bodily concerns in common with women (including the problems arising from the 'default male' assumption in product design); some have social treatment concerns in common with women (those who pass as female and so are treated as women), while others don't (clearly no one is subjecting [Danielle Muscato](#)[5] to erotic subordination on the basis of perceiving her to be female).

vii) *[Nobody sensible thinks] that adoptive parents are buying into an 'oppressive ideological agenda of parenthood, and, by their choice to be parents, imposing that agenda on other parents'*

Yup, because there's no oppressive ideological agenda of parenthood, whereas there are harmful and oppressive gender norms, that can be reified by people opting into them, or seeming to equate them with what it means to be a woman.

viii) *[Nobody sensible thinks] there's just one right way to be a good adoptive parent. '[T]hough there are some things that have to be in common between all good parents, there are lots of different ways of being a good parent'*

Well, maybe there's not just one right way, but there are lots of ways to be a *bad* adoptive parent, and we can probably all agree on those. Those ways are had in common between biological and adoptive parents. But we can't say the same about being a woman! Because there's nothing more to being a woman than being female, *there's no right way and no wrong way to be a woman*. You just are what you are. Wear a dress! Wear pants! Be a mathematician! Be a kindergarten teacher! Shave your armpits! Don't! And so on. So the idea that there are lots of ways of being a 'good woman', and transwomen might be some of these and women might be some (other) of these, just doesn't make sense. There's no such thing as a bad and a good woman *qua* woman. There's just being a woman (being female) or not.

We can't always tell whether a parent is adoptive or biological, and even if we see some visual cues that suggest the former, it's rude to ask. 'On the contrary, people just accept you as a parent, and value your commitment to parenthood as an important contribution to the well-being of our society that you could not have made if you didn't have the psychological set-up that you do'.

Women are trying to keep themselves safe, and this means they act differently around male and female people, especially when they're vulnerable (late at night, or in spaces that involve nudity, for example). And now we're supposed to notice that someone is male, but not respond to it *at all*, and just accept this person as a woman? And more than that, we're supposed to *value and appreciate* this person's 'commitment to [womanhood] as an important contribution to the well-being of our society' — and be grateful that they have some kind of wonderful psychological set-up that has enabled them to make this contribution...? [Incredulous stare]. I'd love to see the case for how male people claiming to be women is meant to be a contribution to the well-being of our society. I can see that male people presenting in a feminine way *without claiming to be women* would be a contribution, because it would undermine harmful gender norms about what male people should be like. I don't see the converse. And I'm not convinced, *at least* for the queer theory and the social contagion and the sexual preference -motivated people, how it's a matter of a wonderful psychological setup rather than *an act of male entitlement*, to claim to be a woman.

...*'adoptive parents are, [...] deeply committed to parenting. Unlike some biological parents, they aren't parents by accident'.*

It's true that female people are only women as an accident of birth (in some sense), while transwomen choose it. Perhaps this does make the transwoman's choice *more valuable* or socially important. But what exactly is the choice? If we had some answer to the earlier question about what it is that transwomen and women are supposed to both be deeply committed *to*, then this claim might make more sense. If it's just the undefined *being a woman*, without that being filled out in terms of performance of femininity, or subordination as female, or in some other way, then it's hard to say; and if it *is* filled out in those ways, it's easy to see why the choice is *not* after all (more) valuable or socially important. For it's not the case that transwomen are claiming to be women as an act of solidarity with women (perhaps women would be more sympathetic if that was the case, but where were they when we couldn't vote...?), or *in order to* undermine harmful social norms. If it was the latter, surely they'd claim only to be *transwomen* (a third category, and not literally women), or even better, to be *feminine men*.

In conclusion, the adoption analogy seems to break down at virtually every point. So it's just not true that transwomen are to women as adoptive parents are to parents.

Links:

[1] <https://conscienceandconsciousness.com/2018/07/11/transwomen-and-adoptive-parents-analogy/>

[2] <https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2019/06/what-i-actually-think-about-trans-gender-issues.html>

[3] Doing better in arguments about sex, gender, and trans rights – archived at hollylawford-smith.org, and at <https://medium.com/@kathleenstock/doing-better-in-arguments-about-sex-and-gender-3bec3fc4bdb6>

[4] Talking past each other about trans/gender – archived at hollylawford-smith.org

[5] <http://www.daniellemuscato.com/>