

Trans men are men (but transwomen are not women)



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As will be familiar to anyone who is likely to be reading this, ‘transsexualism’ as it was understood in the past has undergone a rapid rebranding as ‘transgender’-ism, gathering a whole lot of new recruits along the way. The aim of public health officials and policy makers today is to ‘depathologize’ transgenderism, which means finding a way to take transgender people’s claims at face value, rather than seeing them as symptoms of a mental or physical disorder. This all fits in very well with the popular idea that we should defer to marginalised people’s knowledge claims, because their situated experiences with discrimination and disadvantage are likely to mean that they know things that it would be difficult — or even impossible — for people lacking those experiences to come to know. This is roughly how we’ve ended up, in 2020, in the position of believing that an adult human male’s claim that he *feels like a woman* is sufficient grounds for believing that *he is, in fact, a woman* (and so endorsing the trans activists’ slogan, ‘trans women are women!’). If we resist his claim we must think he is either *deluded* or that he is *deceiving us*, according to transgender philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher (Bettcher 2007, p. 50). But many trans people are evidently perfectly sincere, so not setting out to deceive; and if we’re to avoid pathologizing, it’s also unpalatable to settle for the ‘deluded’ option. This pushes us into finding a way to accept the adult human male’s claim ‘I feel like a woman’ as being true.

If he is neither deluded nor being deceitful, then his claim can be false in only two ways: one, he is mistaken about how he feels; two, he is mistaken about what being a woman feels like. I agree with Bettcher that it would be pretty objectionable to presume to tell another person how she feels, so here I will pursue the second option. I will argue that because males are highly unlikely to know what being a woman is like, their claim to feel like a woman is likely to lack justification, and so should not be presumed true. This might not matter so much if there was nothing at stake. Perhaps it’s enough that a male wants to be a woman, regardless of whether his claim to *be like* women is true. But women’s political interests are at stake, so it does matter. So transwomen are not, and should not be accepted as, women. Both of these arguments turn out to have an unexpected implication for trans men. Because neither argument goes through for trans men, we have some reason to both believe trans men’s claims to feel like men (and to be men, on the basis of that belief), and to accept trans men *as* men. In the last part of

the piece I discuss a likely objection to this asymmetric endorsement of the claim that trans people are what they identify as.

Knowledge of others' experience

The defender of 'trans women are women!' is likely to object to how I have set this question up. I have said, there are some males who claim to feel like women, and to *be* women on the basis of that feeling. But how can such males know what being a woman feels like, and so know that what they are saying is true? The sloganeer will want to say, that's not fair, because those males *are* women. So what it is like to be them just is one answer to what it is like to be a woman. Transwomen have knowledge of womanhood by introspection. But this won't do. Certainly there will be a way that transwomen feel. But to assert that this feeling is *feeling like a woman*, there must be a further claim to knowledge of what being a woman feels like. It is that knowledge that is used to justify the claim that this feeling is like that feeling. This is what makes transwomen and women *the same*. If transwomen were using introspection alone, they couldn't justify the claim that feeling *like this* is feeling *like a woman*. So my setup is fair. I will now argue that their claim lacks justification.

We live in an androcentric world. The term 'androcentrism' means 'male-centred', and was popularised by American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her 1911 book.[1] Throughout history, because of social hierarchies which positioned women as inferior to men, men have been the authors of most of the works of history, philosophy, and science; the painters of most of the exhibited paintings; the directors of most of the television shows and films; most of the poets; most of the university lecturers, most of the politicians (the list goes on). Our culture and history have been shaped by the male perspective, including men's perspective *of women*. The history of feminism is a history of resisting that perspective, and fighting both to reject men's perspective of women, and to make space for women's perspective on the world (whether or not that perspective is unique).

Setting aside the androcentrism of our entire cultural history, let me give a few contemporary examples. According to *Statista*, in the 12-year period 2007–2019, 95.2% of the directors of top-grossing films were male; 80% of the directors of Netflix shows were male; 69% of the directors of television show episodes were male; and 65.5% of the directors of narrative independent films were male.[2] In Australia, an analysis of 206 feature films in the 5 year period 2013–2018 found women to be 17% of the directors, 22% of the writers, and 37% of the producers.[3]

What about literature? In 'Bias, She Wrote', Rosie Cima looks at the gender balance of the New York Times Best Seller list. For the list itself it was pretty balanced — in 2001 it actually got to 50%, and has been anything between 43% and 49% since then. But if we look at top authors by decade (ranked by number of books on the list), there are only three women in the top-ten list, and the genre for two of them is romance. (For the men it varied between Adventure, Suspense, Spy/Politics, and Mystery). In the romance genre, women have outnumbered men as writers since the 1960s, being more than 80% of the writers since the 1980s. Almost every other genre fiction category is male-dominated, the exception being literary fiction which has been roughly balanced since 2000.[4]

In 2007 Jerry Saltz wrote a piece for *New York Magazine* titled 'Where Are All The Women?' in which he reported on his count of the women artists exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. For the November 2004 reopening, it was 20 out of 415 works — roughly 5%. By Fall 2006, it was 19 out of 399 works, still roughly 5%. By 2007, when he wrote the article, it was 14 out of 400 (3.5%).[5] A follow-up piece by Catherine Cornero looked at 7 other galleries or art fairs, and found numbers between 1% (The Frick Collection) and 27% (Art Basel Miami Beach 2007).[6]

Don't lose sight of the fact that these are only recent improvements — going back further makes things much more depressing. The older a man is, the less exposure he will have had to books, television shows, films, and art that presented him with a female perspective on the world. I could go on, and tell you about films and television shows that, even when they are directed or produced by women, still tell

men's stories as written by men. I could direct you to websites that record, for amusement and head-shaking, male authors' attempts to write women characters in sex scenes (Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* contains brilliant documentation of, and commentary on, this point), or even just in general.[7] [8] [9] Author Eli Gottlieb admits that men writing women takes 'a hubristic leap'. [10] This is not to say it can't be done. Norman Rush does it in *On Mating*, and apparently William Boyd does it in *Brazzaville Beach*. I'm sure there are other examples. But the failures do seem to drastically outnumber the successes. Feminists have long been noting the way that female characters in films, television, and books are often only there to 'prop up' the male lead.

Michele Willens, writing for *The Atlantic*, argues that when women try to write men, like Gillian Flynn, Hilary Mantel, and Louise Erdrich have all done, 'their success rate seems noteworthy'. [11] What could explain this? I think there's no mystery here at all; the answer is in exactly what we've been discussing, namely, androcentrism. When the culture is *entirely saturated* with men's point of view, women have no shortage of material to make use of in understanding how men see the world, including how they see women. One source (which I've now forgotten — sorry!) talks about how films make their audiences complicit in the sexual objectification of women, by literally forcing the male perspective upon their viewers. A woman enters a room, *the camera pans up and down her body* in just the way that a man might look her up and down, appraisingly. (*Peep Show* took this device to extremes, literally giving the audience the view from Mark or Jeremy's eyeballs). Women understand men's lives, men's stories, men's pain, men's fears, and men's view of women, because women are constantly exposed to media which brings this to their attention.

The opposite is not true. When a man watches a television series with a woman character in it, chances are he's watching a woman *as written by a man*, who exists solely to prop up the male lead. (A friend of mine recently made exactly this complaint about 'the nurse' in Season Two of Ricky Gervais's *After Life*). Unless he's reading a romance or literary novel, chances are things are like this when he reads a novel, too. Men have had little opportunity historically, and still have little opportunity, really, to gain any real insight into women's lives, women's stories, women's pain, women's fears, or women's view of men. Most of what men are exposed to when it comes to women is *men's view of women*. This bears repeating. As long as our world is androcentric, men are likely to have a poor understanding of women and women's lives.

All of this has serious implications for the claim we started off with, which was the adult human male's claim that he feels like a woman. For him to know that what he feels like is how being a woman feels, he has to have some idea of how being a woman feels. Given the overwhelming androcentrism of our culture, it is highly unlikely that he has any such idea. Most likely, what he thinks he knows about women he has learned from men. When a male says that he feels like a woman, he is most likely mistaken about what being a woman feels like, and so mistaken in making the comparison. Thus *feeling like a woman* is insufficient justification, in most cases, for literally being a woman. So at least on the strength of the phenomenological (to do with how things feel), doxastic (to do with beliefs), and epistemic (to do with knowledge) claims to womanhood, the transwoman is not a woman.

Trans men, on the other hand, are in the same position as the woman writers of male characters, whose success rate seems to be noteworthy. Trans men, being steeped in androcentric culture like all the rest of us, have *ample* knowledge of what being a man feels like (or at least, as good as it gets without literally crawling inside someone else's brain). When a trans man says 'I feel like a man', she has the relevant bits of information: she knows what being a man feels like, and she knows how she feels, to make the comparison. The trans man's claim is *justified*, where the transwoman's claim is not. We have a reason to accept the trans man's claim as true, and so to accept her (now 'him') as a man.

What's at stake politically

I'll keep this brief, because it's not a new point. For men there is little at stake in accepting the claim 'trans men are men!'. Men do not have sex-based political interests that they have a strong interest in

protecting. Men are *over-* not under-represented in positions of power in our society, and they are not discriminated against on the basis of being men. Because men are the dominant social group when it comes to sex, there is no generally-accepted right that men have to ‘men-only spaces’. When men try to keep women out of things, we think that’s almost always sexism (with some exceptions for clubs and associations). Furthermore, trans men, being on average shorter and lighter than men (I make this claim on the basis of the male/female average physical difference, not on the basis of trans men specifically compared to men, about which I have no evidence), do not pose any kind of physical threat to men. Trans men often ‘pass’, so are not even known to be trans (not that this would be likely to cause much anxiety among men, among whom there tend not to be significant numbers of people who have experienced histories of abuse at the hands of women). So for men, not much is at stake when it comes to the question of accepting trans men as men. Thus there is no barrier thrown up in front of the reasons we already established in the last section to accept trans men’s claims to feel like men (and thus be men).

The opposite is not true. Women historically have been oppressed as a caste, and this continues to have ramifications today in the forms of discrimination; under-representation; explicit, implicit, and unconscious biases; and constraining social norms and expectations. Women have sex-based political interests, e.g. in fighting against pregnancy and breastfeeding discrimination, and making sure that their states protect their human rights under CEDAW. As measures to improve women’s situation, some anti-discrimination, affirmative action, and other positive measures have been put in place, including e.g. sex-segregated bathrooms in workplaces, hiring quotas, and women’s networking and mentoring events. All of these measures are compromised when the social and legal understanding of who counts as a woman is changed, particularly when it is changed to include some males. Spaces are not women-only when they include some males, even when it’s only *some* males rather than *all* males (e.g. with bathrooms or changing rooms being binary but trans-inclusive rather than fully unisex). Furthermore, transwomen are generally taller and heavier than women (same caveat as above), many don’t pass, and their being in women-only spaces causes anxiety in the significant numbers of women who have experienced abuse at the hands of males. For women, there is a lot at stake in the question of accepting transwomen as women. This throws up *another* barrier, in front of the problem with justification for their claim to *be* women, established in the last section.

In summary: trans men are men, because we have reason to believe them when they claim to feel like men (there is no reason to think they are mistaken about what being a man feels like), and because there is nothing particularly at stake for men in accepting them as men. But transwomen are not women, because we have reason to think they are mistaken when they claim to feel like women, and because there is a great deal at stake for women in accepting transwomen as women.

This is a general claim that permits of exceptions. Just as there was the odd male author who could write a compelling female character, there might be the odd male who has real insight into what being a woman feels like. Perhaps he has steeped himself in the cultural artefacts that present a ‘woman’s perspective’, reading female-authored literature and watching female-directed films telling stories of female people’s lives. Perhaps he has read a ton of feminist literature. Perhaps he was raised by a strong mother in a single-parent family, or surrounded by sisters and aunts, to whom he paid real attention. Perhaps he has women friends, and has gained a genuine understanding from them of how they experience the world (including its sexism and misogyny). Perhaps he has himself ‘passed as’ a woman for many years, and so experienced some of this first hand. But acknowledging that such males are likely to be the exception rather than the rule, and that they are likely to be rare among older males, who will have spent most of their lives even more impoverished when it comes to culture presenting a female perspective, gives us a reason against accepting ‘trans women are women!’ as a general platitude.

An objection: endorsement of a fundamentally mistaken worldview[12]

A gender critical objection is likely to be that we shouldn’t accept ‘trans men are men!’ because it’s a gateway to ‘trans women are women!’ which, as we have just seen, we have ample reason to reject. Gender is harmful norms and expectations imposed on the basis of sex, not an identity that one can

know (or mistakenly believe) one has through introspection. Accepting that trans men are men — because they say they are, and we have no reason to think they are mistaken, and it doesn't really matter politically if they are — is to let a fundamentally mistaken worldview gain another foothold. If we accept 'trans men are men!' then we're more likely to accept 'trans women are women!' and that's one of the many things we've been fighting against.

The persuasiveness of this objection depends on whether it's likely that we can't maintain the asymmetry. If people are so simple-minded that it's all or nothing, then I agree it should be nothing. Gender is not (or is not primarily and most importantly) identity. But I am not convinced that people are so simple-minded. I think it's interesting that the asymmetry can be defended. And it comes with the extra, and slightly amusing, aspect that in defending trans men's interests *as they understand them* (i.e. that they are men and ought to be socially accepted as men), gender critical feminists are actually standing up for women ('women' according to the gender critical perspective on sex, gender, and gender terms).

Notes

[1] Hibbs, Carolyn. 'Androcentrism', *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, 2014 Edition. Online at https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4614-5583-7_16

[2] 'Gender distribution of directors in TV and film in the United States from 2007 to 2019, by media platform', *Statista*. Online at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/656433/gender-distribution-directors-media-platform/>

[3] 'Number and proportion of male and female producers, directors and writers of Australian feature films, 1970–2018', *Screen Australia*, 2008. <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/people-and-businesses/gender-industry-wide/feature-filmmakers-1970-2017>

[4] Cima, Rosie. 'Bias, She Wrote', *The Pudding*, June 2017. Online at <https://pudding.cool/2017/06/best-sellers/>

[5] Saltz, Jerry. 'Where Are All The Women?' *New York Magazine*, 15th November 2007. <https://nymag.com/arts/art/features/40979/>

[6] Cornero, Catherine. 'Data: Gender Studies', *New York Magazine*, 15th November 1007. Online at <https://nymag.com/arts/art/features/40980/>

[7] Penn, Farrah. 'I'm So Sorry, But Here's How Some Male Authors For Really Real Described Women In Books', *BuzzFeed*, 24th February 2019. Online at <https://www.buzzfeed.com/farahpenn/heres-how-male-authors-described-women-in-books>

[8] Gardner, Kate. 'The Twitter Account "Men Writing Women" Is A Hilarious Look At Some Seriously Sexist Prose', *The Mary Sue*, 9th August 2019. <https://www.themarysue.com/the-twitter-account-men-writing-women-is-a-hilarious-look-at-some-seriously-sexist-prose/>

[9] Klee, Miles. 'Why Male Authors Are So Bad At Writing Sex Scenes', *Mel Magazine*, 2019. Online at <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/bad-sex-fiction-award-male-authors>

[10] Willens, Michele. 'The Mixed Results of Male Authors Writing Female Characters', *The Atlantic*, 2nd March 2013. Online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/03/the-mixed-results-of-male-authors-writing-female-characters/273641/>

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] This wording comes from a tweet I liked a lot recently. In reply to Arielle Scarcella asking ‘For people who hate the word “cis” Tell me why :D’, Helen Joyce replied ‘For me, accepting being labelled cis would be like accepting being called a heretic rather than an atheist. I would already have capitulated and accepted the truth of a world view I think fundamentally mistaken’. Twitter, @HJoyceGender to @ArielleScarcell, 27th April 2020.