

Becoming

Discourses of trans emergence, epiphanies and oppositions

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This study constitutes a sociological analysis of how trans people experience epiphany stemming from cultural processes present in most European-based cultures, and contrasts with psychological gazes of the process of epiphany as an individualised phenomenon. Although it is likely that some trans people never experience an epiphany – for example, very young children, and those who die before they become fully aware they are trans – most will have experienced an epiphany of some kind; indeed, it may be one of the few experiences most trans people have in common. ‘Epiphany’ here is characterised as the process of coming to identify as transgender, and in this context does not necessarily refer to a sudden personal revelation. In some instances epiphanies may take some considerable time and their durations measured in months or years rather than minutes or hours.

This chapter examines data relating to the ways young trans people describe the experience of epiphany, suggesting that the processes by which trans people come to identify as transgender on a local or individual level are affected by obstacles to trans emergence on a general level, as well as resistance to these obstacles. Analysing data from a small-scale, in-depth qualitative study of 16 young trans people, relating to epiphany on an individual level provides evidence of the nature of the cultural processes constituting these impediments.

The analysis draws on Social Activity Method (Dowling, 1998 , 2009 , 2013), a new sociological method which constitutes a deductive and inductive dialogic interaction between empirical and theoretical fields, regarding the social as constituting the formation, maintenance and destabilising of alliances and oppositions. A systematic mode of analysing qualitative data, Social Activity Method focuses on constructing an organisational language with the aim of presenting constructive descriptions as opposed to ‘forensics’ in social research. Initially I present data to construct two axes of analysis to constitute a relational space with which to elucidate the processes involved and subsequently produce a constructive description of them. The relational space in Figure 3.1 consists of two axes and draws out the principal differences between the ways participants in this study experienced epiphany: modes of becoming and modes of identification. These are elaborated in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

| <u>Mode of Becoming</u> | <u>Mode of Identification</u> | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| | Opposition | Alliance |
| Anaphoric | <i>Affirming</i> | <i>Desubjugating</i> |
| Cataphoric | <i>Differentiating</i> | <i>Introducing</i> |

Figure 3.1

Becoming: anaphoric and cataphoric

Deleuze (1991), referring to Bergson (1913), argues that, rather than regarding ourselves as 'being', it would be more appropriate to regard ourselves as perpetually 'becoming'. Understanding ourselves in this way has the advantage of de-essentialising trans people's experiences and representing a more neutral characterisation by acknowledging that all people – not just trans people – experience change, in different ways, during their lives.

The period of epiphany for trans people can be regarded as 'becoming' at possibly its most intense, however short or long this period is. According to the Deleuzian/Bergsonian view, epiphany will not occur in temporal isolation. It will either follow from less intense antecedent periods of prior becoming, constituted here as anaphoric becoming, or will constitute itself as a kind of 'new beginning' oriented primarily towards the future, characterised here as cataphoric becoming.

In the case of some participants, epiphany was experienced as a kind of revelation where something hitherto unsuspected was made clear to them; for example, in the case of participant SP:

Well, I had no idea what it was until I was friends with this one trans woman and I was like 'OK. . .' and she would talk to me about her childhood and that kind of thing and I strongly identified but the opposite way.

His realisation that he identified as a trans man developed with no significant antecedent suspicions that he might be transgender. In this sense, it represented an orientation to the future as opposed to the past; consequently his experience is characterised as cataphoric.

In contrast, anaphoric becoming is exemplified by R's experience:

I hate this as a cliché, but I always knew I was different from when I was young. From a very, very young age, my interests and that were different; I didn't like being with the boys I liked being with the girls.

She had some idea about her identification before an epiphany that included a re-examination of past experiences, but appeared not to have had access to the vocabulary with which to express these earlier (see Kennedy, 2014). The experience of another participant, F, who experienced a sudden epiphany upon being introduced to other trans women, contrasts with R's epiphany which took place over a much longer period of time:

I kind of took one step and then I kind of took ten steps; yes, I sort of put one foot into the trans scene and very quickly I was ten steps into it. I didn't really have second thoughts about it.

These two oppositions form the vertical axis of the relational space in Figure 3.1: anaphoric and cataphoric becoming.

Modes of identification: alliance and opposition

The horizontal axis in Figure 3.1 is constituted by alliance and opposition modes of identification. It draws on Brubaker's and Cooper's (2000) attempt to arrive at a more rigorous characterisation of the term 'identity'. They characterise the two main types of identification process as 'self-identification and social location', which is predominantly dependent on establishing an identity in opposition to those who are different, and 'commonality, connectedness and groupedness' which emphasises alliances and likeness with similars. The first involves distinguishing oneself from other groups or situating oneself in relation

to others in different groups; the second involves establishing a commonality between oneself and other groups. This establishes the horizontal axis of the relational space: 'Modes of Identification' constituted as 'opposition' for the former and 'alliance' for the latter.

Drawing on the data for illustration, participant H's experience of epiphany was predominantly characterised by an opposition to his birth-assigned gender: When I turned 14, over the summer in between year nine and year ten, I went on the internet and just typed in things like 'I don't like being a girl', 'I don't like. . .' things about not being a girl, and those searches led me to people's blogs who are transgender, you know I've never heard of that before.

His identification process was oppositional in the sense that he was, from the outset, rejecting association with his birth-assigned gender. This contrasts with participant I's identification process which was predominantly positively oriented towards female:

I would associate with being female rather than . . . it probably would be a mixture of the two but leaning towards associating with being female.

Instead of primarily constituting an opposition between herself and others of her birth-assigned gender, as H does, participant I is principally concerned to construct an alliance, identifying positively with her real gender.

This completes the characterisation of the two axes of modes of becoming and of identification, and enables us to construct the relational space in Figure 3.1 with which to generate an analysis.

Modes of epiphany

The relational space in Figure 3.1 is constituted of a vertical and a horizontal axis based on the binary oppositions elaborated previously, and as a result constitutes the four different modes of epiphany: affirming, desubjugating, introducing and differentiating.

The top left corner of Figure 3.1 indicates the intersection of an oppositional identification process with an anaphoric becoming, which I have characterised as an 'affirming' epiphany. In this mode there is reference to antecedent experiences but there is uncertainty about identification and gender identity. Prior life experiences, which may previously have been disorienting, are reinterpreted. In this mode, the identification process is primarily oppositional, originating mostly from a rejection of one's birth-assigned gender. Participant P, for example, describes his prior experiences of being misinterpreted as a tomboy when he was younger, which later became relevant while experiencing epiphany:

[My mother] told me that I started rejecting dresses at age 3, I don't remember it, I think what, the identity I remember having, the identity I was given by other people, was a tomboy.

These experiences helped provide him with a frame of reference when coming to understand himself as trans. However, they also represented an obstacle earlier on: being assigned the identity of 'tomboy' was considerably disorienting, as he found out after being introduced to another 'tomboy':

I wasn't masculine at all; I'm still not very masculine at all, and she was just like, she was a girl who liked boy things.

Moving clockwise round the relational space, the top right corner is characterised as ‘desubjugating’: this represents an alliance mode of identification with an anaphoric becoming. M’s experience exemplifies this:

They could see it, everyone else could see it, but I was kind of really struggling with it, really fighting with it; it was, I mean, a massive internal fight, going, ‘Oh fuck I’ve been a lesbian’, you know. That’s hard enough; do I have to . . . to . . . be weirder?

In this instance the obstacle M reports is the notion itself of accepting himself as transgender; he refers to his own resistance to identifying as a trans man, reflecting his earlier experience of coming out as a butch lesbian while he was at school. This mode of epiphany can be regarded as enabling him to overcome resistance to identifying as a trans man; a group of trans men helped him overcome the effects of prior negative experiences in a different context. Subsequently he reveals how this identification process primarily represented a positive orientation towards identifying as a man, as opposed to a rejection of femininity:

I love the femininity that I have, but it’s also coming from a masculine place, you know.

Moving clockwise round the relational space, the bottom right corner is characterised as ‘introducing’: a cataphoric becoming with an alliance identification process. Participant F describes her experience:

I guess it just happened, I mean, I just went to one trans club one time and I met a friend there and he was really into trans girls and we dated for a while and he showed me all the other trans clubs. [. . .] I didn’t know the scene at all; I didn’t know any of the websites.

Here, she was quite literally introduced to trans people, with whom she very quickly came to identify, for the first time. In a not-dissimilar way to M’s experience, F identified as a gay man before this; however, unlike M, she had no prior indication that she might come to identify as a trans woman. Her discourse is focused on the future; throughout her interview she often talked of medical transition and other aspects of her future life such as buying a place to live, enjoying herself while young and getting married. There was nothing trans-related from her pre-epiphany life referred to in her interview.

The final section, in the bottom left corner, is characterised as ‘differentiating’. Participant B, a non-binary person, describes how they related negatively to their birth-assigned gender:

B: It’s also been somewhat of a problem that he sees me as a woman because he can’t really see me in another way because if he were to see me as a man he wouldn’t want to . . . you know be doing stuff in the first place.

INT: So it’s important that he sees you not as a woman, for you to enjoy it?

B: Yeah.

They describe how they found it became difficult to have sex with their husband because he needed to regard them as a woman in order to have sex with them, something which was problematic for them as a non-binary person who rejected their assigned gender. This is reflected in their attitude to wearing women’s clothes for drag:

INT: So you might consider doing drag at some point?

B: Yeah since I started identifying as trans I have a few times done . . . it's a bit difficult because when I put on women's clothes I look like a woman and not as a person in drag.

They also report having no antecedent conception that they might come to identify as trans, at least before they had been married for some time: My husband didn't know from the start because I didn't know from the start.

This is characterised as differentiating mode since the principal issue here is to define themselves apart from others, in this case from both cisgender people of the same birth-assigned gender and from binary-identifying trans people. This relational space, constructed from the intersection of two binary oppositions derived directly from empirical data, enables us to produce a constructive description of trans people's epiphanies on a local level. The next section analyses how this might relate to trans emergence on a more general level.

Analysis: delegitimisation and erasure

This section argues that the modes of epiphany described here have all occurred as a consequence of cultural processes of resistance. What follows is an analysis of the modes of epiphany characterised in the relational space in Figure 3.1, constituting a constructive description of the processes that result in these types of epiphany. By examining the ways participants have experienced epiphanies, we can describe the nature of this cultural resistance.

Stryker (2008) noted how the decades between 1970 and 1990 were particularly difficult for trans people in European-based cultures, but that this started to change when a new wave of trans activism emerged during the 1990s. The process of epiphany manifests itself as an individual response to cultural processes, making it necessary for trans people to experience an understanding of their genders as a kind of revelation: established cultural mythologisations of gendering as an externally imposed, essentialised cultural process constitute an obstruction to identifying as transgender. If, in an ideal cultural environment, genders were not assigned at birth or perhaps only provisionally assigned, transgender people would not need to experience epiphany – at least not in the same ways they do in this analysis – because the assumptions of this process of 'cultural cisgenderism' (Kennedy, 2013) would no longer be made.

What is evident from the modes of epiphany outlined in Figure 3.1 is that they can be regarded as individual responses to the variety of sociocultural environments in which trans people grow up. Different trans people experience different kinds of epiphanies because we grow up in different cultural environments; these can erase and/or delegitimise trans people. Therefore, the Introducing mode of epiphany can be regarded as occurring as a consequence of the cultural erasure of trans people; trans people are simply excluded from the general cultural milieu so the possibility of coming to identify as trans is much more restricted. This is evident in the case of F: the possibility that she might be a woman was not considered until she was introduced, in person, to other trans women.

Desubjugating and affirming modes can be regarded as most likely to be a response to delegitimisation through oppositional narratives that attempt to situate trans people as not legitimate, genuine, authentic, 'normal' or rational. The anaphoric nature of these epiphanies suggests that these participants' prior rebellions against their assigned genders are likely to have been delegitimised

somehow; for example, through being regarded in ways that signified, for themselves and others around them, identities other than differently gendered ones:

I do remember one day when I was walking to school in seventh grade, something not sure why I thought it was just a random thought, gender identity and sexual orientation I would probably think of myself as a butch lesbian or masculine lesbian but that's just wrong. . . . Does not compute. (participant D)

Differentiating mode is somewhat different and can be regarded as a response to a combination of both erasure and delegitimation. Cataphoric becoming represents a consequence of erasure, while oppositional identification suggests that a reaction against birth-assigned gender is more significant than positively identifying with another gender. In this instance, erasure and delegitimation combine against the possibility of identifying as genders other than those assigned at birth and, in this instance, non-binary genders also. In the case of participant B this is either because non-binary gender identification is both excluded and delegitimised at the most basic level of language, or because dysphoric feelings can be, and often are, misinterpreted as signifiers of other things such as homosexuality, as exemplified by participant D.

This analysis prompts the question: how has there been an apparent significant increase in numbers of trans people becoming more visible as trans people? While there appear to be no studies that can definitively tell us how many trans people there are (Nicolazzo, 2017), it is evident that increasing numbers of people are coming forward to ask for gender reassignment surgery (Lyons, 2016), and there is anecdotal evidence that many more than that are living their lives as a gender they were not assigned at birth, which includes a significant increase in the number of under-18s (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2016).

Now that I have established a picture of trans epiphanies on a local or individual level, I use it to analyse the social and cultural milieu which have resulted in trans people needing to experience epiphanies in these ways, and how these relate to the recent emergence of trans people as a more widely recognised social group.

Emergence

Erasure, a mode of obstruction that was particularly prominent in, and before, the mid-twentieth century, remains as such today in some environments. In the past, trans people were advised to relocate to a different part of the country after transitioning, change their names and reconstruct a backstory for their earlier lives (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967). 'Stealth' remains an option today but probably by a declining proportion of trans people (Garfinkel, 1967 ; Shapiro, 2004; Lester, 2017). While erasure may be less in evidence now (e.g. Steinmetz, 2014; Pesta, 2015; Mock, 2017 ; Bindel, 2016), delegitimation is becoming more prominent (e.g. Greer, 1999 ; Jeffreys, 2014). Those opposed to the existence and well-being of trans people appear to have made the decision that delegitimation represents the most productive strategy, from their perspective, particularly at the general level. Evidence from participant SH exemplifies how this subsequently affects the local:

She moved house last September so I went round to help her move all her stuff and the old people came into the new property . . . just to pick up their post, and I'm standing there like this (points to bearded face) with a beard like this (points again) and she was just saying, 'Oh, this is my daughter'. I'd never met these people in my entire life.

Here, not only does SH's mother attempt to delegitimise her son by misrepresentation but also she attempts to invoke what she appears to perceive is a general non-acceptance of trans people from people who are, in this context, effectively random members of the public. Here, the move from a perceived general cultural mythologisation is mobilised into the local, in what SH constitutes as an opposition to him identifying as a trans man.

How this general-level opposition appears to affect the local is also exemplified by participant G's mother, who draws on the narrative of 'trans regret' by some journalists and media platforms as an opposition strategy:

My mum, who is not equipped with any information, says, 'Oh, loads of people regret it' and I think the regret rate is probably the lowest of anything [...] I think she says it because it's [...] particularly when things are, you know, sensationalized by the media.

Material produced by journalists such as Jenni Murray, who in 2017 published a lengthy article in the UK newspaper *The Times* arguing that trans women are not 'real women', represents a topical example of a strategy of delegitimation, based on misrepresentation of trans women (McCormick, 2017) in particular. Other journalists have attempted to misrepresent trans children and adults who campaign on their behalf (Butterworth, 2016) by employing narratives that are unsupported by data. The following example appeared in a UK tabloid newspaper and employs many traditional right-wing stereotypes regarding the supposedly nefarious influence of public-sector workers such as 'well-meaning liberal teachers' and 'social workers':

If I were a teenager today, well-meaning liberal teachers and social workers would probably tell me that I was trapped in the wrong body. They might refer me to a psychiatrist who would prescribe fistfuls of hormones and other drugs. And terrifyingly, I might easily be recommended for gender re-assignment surgery [...] just because I didn't like the pink straitjacket imposed on girls.
(Bindel, J. *Daily Mail* 24 October 2016)

Attempts to delegitimise trans people by such narratives appear to be one of the strategies of resistance currently most in evidence (Brubaker, 2016), although these have a history dating back well into the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Raymond, 1979; Blanchard, 1989; Greer, 1999). What is significant about these narratives is that whilst previously they tended to be less well known outside specific academic and 'feminist' groups, they have recently become more widely apparent in mainstream mass media (Guardian, 2016). This suggests that those who campaign against trans people's rights have perceived the need to import material previously only deployed in specialist domains into the general domain. In effect, they have drawn on existing arguments that were already available and popularised them. This move – distributing material which has been described by Lester (2017) as intentionally producing ignorance and by Lees (2015) as constituting hate-speech, to a much wider audience – can be regarded as a response to the emergence of trans people in the public consciousness.

We can see therefore how what previously constituted a more passive erasure appears to have been discarded in favour of a more active strategy of delegitimation. Such delegitimising strategies have been heavily criticised for being divisive (Riddell, 1980), pathologising (Tosh, 2016), dishonest (Stone, 1996; Tosh, 2016), violent and abusive (Williams, 2016), bio-essentialist and harmful (MacKinnon, 2015).

Implications

To a significant extent the deployment of delegitimising narratives negates the possibility of maintaining the erasure of transgender identities as an effective anti-trans strategy. ¹ There are fundamental differences between erasure and delegitimation, in particular of motivation and activity. Stryker (2006) characterises a shift in wider cultural mythologisations that developed during the Renaissance. She argues that during this time Western culture moved away from a spiritual basis and became based much more on the material. This materiality had the side effect of introducing an element of cultural erasure in European based cultures, in contrast to many other cultures (Williams, 1986; Wiesner-Hanks, 2011: 4), which resulted in the spiritual and psychological becoming subordinated to the physical.

As the general underlying basis for culture became more focused on the physical, claiming a gender identity at variance with that assigned according to an interpretation of one's physical body at birth would have become harder to conceptualise. It would have been in opposition to a more widespread assumption of gender as an essentialised quality based on one's physical body at birth produced by the wider material basis of culture in general. Not only would this have made it more difficult to regard oneself as trans but also the possibility of convincing others would also have seemed – and probably been – more difficult. As a consequence this produced an erasure, which did not necessarily affect other cultures until European colonial invasions and occupations took place. This essentialist materiality made it more difficult to identify in opposition to genders assigned at birth. To this extent erasure can be regarded as not intentionally targeted at trans people in particular, despite having negative consequences for trans people.

So whilst the erasure of trans people can be regarded as a largely passive and unintended cultural process, delegitimation strategies should be regarded as purposely, actively and knowingly concocted, distributed and maintained with the aim of specifically and deliberately affecting trans people's lives to their detriment (Dart, 2017). Erasure can be regarded as having arisen as the side effect of cultural processes not specifically directed at trans people, and against which trans activism has had to contend in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, while delegitimation can be regarded as the result of deliberately fashioned and targeted opposition (O'Shea, 2016).

Whether these delegitimation strategies are pursued by those motivated by right-wing politics in the guise of religion, or whether the stated motivation is 'radical feminism', or, as appears to be more recently the case (Brydum, 2017), an alliance between these two apparently opposing ideologies manifest in the shape of a US-based group Hands Across the Aisle, ² their effects are intentional. At the root of their deployment appear to be groups of people actively attempting to make the lives of trans people more dangerous, more stressful, more liminal, more isolated and less productive. If these very public attempts at delegitimation are permitted to continue, the consequences are likely to be more trans people experiencing epiphanies, but subsequently finding an increasingly hostile environment created for them when they do.

The move from the predominance of the tacit/implicit erasure to the overt/explicit delegitimation is significant, however. If erasure, the passive social/cultural resistance to trans people, is now less pervasive, the spread of delegitimising strategies can be regarded as a consequence of this. What may also be productive here is to consider the extent to which trans emergence on a general level can be characterised by this move. Could the decision by those opposed to trans people's existence to abandon the expression of explicit

opposition in a relatively restricted domain in favour of its wider distribution in the public sphere be regarded as one of the defining features of trans emergence? What may also be important for further consideration is how significant this move from the tacit/implicit to the overt/explicit might be with respect to the future emergence of other groups, including intersex and asexual people.

The widespread availability of the internet has been credited with the emergence of trans people as a group (e.g. Whittle, 1998); however, it seems there is more complexity to this than mere technological determinism. Since the internet functions almost entirely through language, the development of a language which enabled trans discourses and the emergence of trans people was essential. Consequently the work of activists such as Feinberg (1992), Bornstein (1995) and Stone (1996) was probably more productive in this respect than previously considered. The development from largely localised and tacit expressions of trans identification to a more general and explicit discourse has facilitated wider coalescing of trans people into groups through online social media (Beemyn and Rankin, 2011 : 160).

It is also possible that those apparently attempting to delegitimise trans people are, in no small measure, contributing to the process of emergence; their strategy is more likely to have the side effect of increasing trans visibility by facilitating explicit discussion and understanding by trans people and consequently enabling some modes of epiphany as well as supportive cohesive group formation. Those who oppose trans people's existence have, however, had to make a choice. On the one hand they could have attempted to maintain the existing passive erasure in the face of a larger and more visible trans population, or they could resort to delegitimation. Ultimately it is likely that their hand has been forced: greater trans visibility has meant that erasure is no longer a viable option. The only choice available to them was whether to engage in delegitimising acts or not. However, let us be clear: this still represents a path these groups have actively chosen to take.

Those who have opposed trans people's existence and human rights and who have produced explicitly anti-trans material since the 1970s appear to be working harder to get these materials a much wider audience through mainstream media. It is also evident that their interests now coincide with those on the right of the political spectrum (Parke, 2016). While on the one hand is a group that claims to espouse a supposedly left-wing, 'radical', 'feminist' position, on the other is a more powerful and well-funded group of politically right-wing organisations which have recruited these narratives into their own propaganda efforts, including stochastic terrorism targeted at trans people (Tannehill, 2019). Not only do these narratives consist of largely unsupported, pathologising and disempowering narratives about trans people (Tosh, 2016), but also they appear to fit easily into the ideologies or methods of the political right (Eco, 1995 , 2013 : 2). Ultimately, prejudicial and discriminatory narratives misrepresenting minority groups are used to recruit support for oppressive ideologies, as has occurred in the past (e.g. Shirer, 1960). The way that this alliance appears to have been constructed with a group otherwise claiming to be opposed to their political aims is thus not insignificant, particularly when the right-wing organisations in question are opposed to many of the women's rights for which these 'feminists' claim to be campaigning (DiBranco, 2017).

Conclusion

Exploring what might appear to be individual instances of epiphany from a sociological perspective presents us with the opportunity to understand one element of the complex phenomenon that is trans emergence. This chapter suggests

that these epiphanies may have become more common as a consequence of the move from the tacit to the explicit in terms of both discourses of emergence and narratives/propaganda of oppression. The discourses of emergence also need to be regarded as having themselves reflexively contributed towards that emergence. What may be more significant than previously assumed is trans people's own agency in achieving trans emergence at all levels through the facilitation of new discursive (and consequently cultural) possibilities, which function at many different levels, empowering trans people to become.

Notes

1 While the space to elaborate the nature of those delegitimising strategies is not available here, it would appear that misrepresenting trans people to a general population largely unfamiliar with trans people represents one of those most commonly used strategies, for example, as described by Julia Serano; <https://medium.com/@juliaserano/transgender-people-and-biological-sex-myths-c2a9bcdb4f4a>

2 <https://handsacrosstheaislewomen.com>

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