Public Perception of Transgender Individuals

Abstract

Do people have a negative reaction to transmen and/or transwomen when entering a particular restroom? Although legal changes have been made to support gender minorities, opinions on informal privileges, such as which restroom transmen and transwomen can/should use, have been slow to change. Media outlets show some people believe that allowing transgender individuals into any restroom could give sexual predators an opportunity to attack. This study examines how and why people react to transgender individuals entering public restrooms. Particularly, are people less likely to allow transwomen than transmen to choose which restroom to enter? Is it possible that respondents have a stronger opinion when transgender individuals enter the women’s restroom because people possess the belief that women but not men, need to be protected? Would people only care when transmen or transwomen have a sexual attraction the patrons of the restroom? 560 respondents participated in an online experiment that varied across eight different vignettes, differing by sexual preference, choice in restroom, and gender. These findings will help us to understand the mechanisms of why people might have negative opinions about transgender individuals’ use of public restroom.

The rights and privileges of transgender individuals has been a relevant topic in contemporary media and legislature. Katy Steinmetz (2015), from Time Magazine, illustrates the public outcry, from ordinary citizens to U.S. politicians, around the potential sexual threat that transmen and transwomen pose in public restrooms. By sexual threat, I mean that some individuals believe that transgender individuals are sexual predators. It is known that transmen
have been treated differently in the workplace based on their trans-status, such as experiencing benefits of being a men (e.g. people take their work more seriously), but also face negative verbal reactions (Schilt 2010). We also know that transwomen have been given the label of “deceiver” due to a belief that transgender individuals are tricking members of society (Bettcher 2007). Prior research has provided the public with the detailed experiences of both transmen and transwomen (Schilt 2010; Bettcher 2007), but there is limited empirical data on the United States’ population’s perception of transmen and transwomen.

News articles have illustrated that reactions to transmen and transwomen using public restrooms that match their gender may be negative. If this is in fact the case, why? It could be possible that people have negative reactions to transgender individuals, or is it possible there is another driving factor? Potentially, transwomen could be viewed more negatively than transmen, or could it possibly be the sexual preference of the individual that matter? If people are truly worried about sexual predators, as the recent Time magazine article suggests, we would expect that an individual with no sexual desire towards women would pose no threat in the women’s restroom (the same can be said for the men’s restroom).

As sated previously, studies have been done that elaborate on the experiences and opinions of transgender individuals, but there is a little research on the opinions of the rest of the United States. This study will provide detailed information on how the public views both transmen and transwomen, as well as what determines whether a trans person should be allowed to use the public restroom of their choice. I aim to answer three main questions: do transgender individuals receive negative reactions due to their transgender status, sexual preference, or their choice in bathroom?
To address these questions, I use experimental methods that allow systematically varying gender, choice of bathroom (men’s vs. women’s), and sexual preference (attracted to males or females). Specifically, I use eight different vignettes in which gender, restroom, and sexual preference are varied. Each participant is given one of the vignettes and answers a variety of qualitative and quantitative questions that aim to shed light on their views and attitudes towards transgender individuals. By using experimental methods, I will be able to discover the cause of opinions towards transgender individuals. This is unlike prior studies on transmen and transwomen that mainly focus on the experiences of those individuals.

**Transphobia**

It is possible that people’s negative reactions come from transphobia. Transphobia is defined by negative attitudes (i.e. hatred or rage) towards all transgender individuals, regardless of gender or sexual preference (Bettcher 2007). Bettcher (2007) illustrates that many people feel “deceived” or “tricked” by transgender individuals which can leads to distrust and malcontent. The belief that transmen and transwomen cannot be trusted can carry over into many other situations. Transmen that go into the workforce under the identity of a naturally born male seem to receive less stigma than transmen that go into the workforce under the identity of being transgender. Some of these men received pleasant compliments or words of encouragement, but others experience negative responses (Schilt 2010). The individuals who received the short end of the stick were sometimes relocated into different positions. One person told his story of going into retail and having a job working on the floor with customers; once their employer found out he was a transman, he was relocated to the back of the store. He was told that the company could not have him out in the open because his employer felt he was an inappropriate image for
the company. His experience is not the only one, a school teacher in California was fired once he transitioned to a man. The school stated he was unfit to work at the establishment due to his “immoral conduct” (Schilt 2010).

These dilemmas lead to more specific problems that transgender individuals must deal with during their daily lives; one of which is the concept of being a “deceiver.” There are some that harbor ill-will toward transmen and transwomen based on the assumption that they are being “tricked” (Bettcher 2007). Schilt and Westbrook (2009) found data similar to Bettcher’s (2007) while looking through news articles involving violent acts committed towards transgender individuals. It was found that journalists framed the story in a way that described the acts as a response to the transgender person’s “deception” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Again, people go to the rhetoric of transmen and transwomen being deceivers, and that has caused people to lash out towards these individuals.

Research has suggested that negative reactions to transgender individuals may stem from people’s concern their values are challenged. Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), sometimes referred to as heteronormativity, is the idea that heterosexuality is the default in society. Schilt and Westbrook (2009) make the claim that transgender individuals challenge the idea of heterosexuality. They state that “doing gender in a way that does not reflect biological sex can be perceived as a threat to heterosexuality” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). If this is true, how does that play into the opinions towards transgender individuals? If people dislike a transwoman because they believe she is automatically attracted to women (due to fear of a sexual predator), but they also dislike a transwoman because she could challenge heterosexuality by being attracted to men. Based on that logic, transwomen, and transmen, are basically going to be
viewed negatively from the very start. That being said, which of the two plays a role in the
bathroom situation? Based on public opinion being shown in the media, the transgender
individuals who are not attracted to the patrons in the restroom should not have to worry about
the potential of a sexual predator, and therefore not receive negative opinions.

Although formal rights and privileges have increased for the LGBTQ community,
informal privileges are still having to be fought for. Doan et al. (2014) discusses the concept of
informal privileges: privileges that are granted to individuals, but not in a legal sense. These
privileges are essentially social allowances given to members of society. Doan (2014) found that
Americans are willing to grant same-sex couples legal privileges, such as marriage equality, but
are less willing to grant informal privileges, such as public displays of affection. One could
argue that restroom choice is another example of informal privileges and it is possible the
attitudes uncovered by Doan (2014) could carry over to transgender individuals. I aim to
uncover if negative attitudes stem from the gender of the transgender person or possibly the fear
of the potential of a sexual predator. The setting of a public restroom, one of the most private
and personal spaces, is used to put these possibilities to the test. Transgender individuals are
having their informal privileges challenged by dominant culture. Informal privileges take place
at the interactional level and are typically given to privileged groups in society (Doan et al.
2014). These issues of distrust and infringement of privilege could possibly tie into the fear of
sexual assault that has been prevalent in the media.

**Gender Matters**

Although gender and sex are different terms, there is still some confusion about which is
which. Gender is a social construct that is portrayed by an individual instead of something that is
inherent within (West and Zimmerman 1987). Sex, on the other hand, is tied to the anatomical
and biological features of an individual (i.e. the penis and vagina). While sex is typically
thought of to be a divide between two sexes (male and female), there are actually individuals that
are born intersexed: born with ambiguous genitalia (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Although there are
individuals that are born outside of the male/female binary, society tends to be structured around
this two sex/gender system (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender is a concept that experienced
on an interactional level within society; this is especially apparent when people are located
within those gendered structures.

Individuals tend to value the concept of masculinity, while devaluing the concept of
femininity; which can be seen in the work of Pascoe (2005) and Morris (2008). School boys
behave in a manner that is tied to larger social concept: hegemonic masculinity (Pascoe 2005;
Morris 2008). Hegemonic masculinity is the most dominant form of masculinity in society, and
is perpetuated by putting down other forms of masculinity, as well as forms of femininity
(Connell 1987). Many of the boys in Morris’s (2008) study would openly express opinions on
particular behaviors that men needed to act out. There was a high value on jobs that required
working with one’s hands (i.e. blue-collar jobs), while desk jobs were seen to be more feminine
(Morris 2008). Many of the boys agreed that blue-collar jobs were better than white-collar work,
except for a select few of the students. One boy stated that white-collar jobs were desirable due
to the potential of a larger salary. He then stated that with this salary he could do what every
man should do: support his family. Many boys in the study agreed with this view and felt that it
was not manly to make your wife have to work (Morris 2008).
Pascoe’s (2005) work uncovered similar findings, but these pieces of information dealt more on the interactional level. High school boys would police one another by labeling each other “fag.” This was done as a means to keep each boy acting in a masculine fashion (Pascoe 2005). If a student would step out of line, they would immediately be slapped with the label of fag, which of course is a derogatory term that each student would want to be rid of. Essentially, each child was doing gender by acting in a masculine manner and actively avoiding to do anything that would be considered feminine (Pascoe 2005).

Schilt (2010) posits another location in which gender is performed: the restroom. The transmen in her study explained that public restrooms were typically a place of stress (Schilt 2010). The men were initially unsure about how to appropriately behave; many of the men carried actions from their experiences in the women’s restrooms to the men’s. They were behaving in a way they perceived to be manly (i.e. no talking, no eye contact, do your business and get out) (Schilt 2010). The gentlemen soon found that these beliefs held little water; many of the individuals found that they would be engaged in conversation by male coworkers. A few transmen even explained that they would find more difficulty using the women’s restrooms. One individual explained that women would approach him while in the restroom and state that they did not belong in that restroom and they needed to leave. He would then need to explain that he was biologically female and would have to raise his voice to a higher pitch when talking with these women (Schilt 2010). In this situation the transman were having to explain their genitalia in order to make the interaction less hostile. The interactions raise the question of whether the gender of an individual matters when entering particular restrooms.
Whether an individual identifies as a transman or a transwoman can affect the way they are viewed within society. Transmen are viewed as more creditable than transwomen after transitioning; meaning, colleagues and employers view transmen’s work as more reliable and respectable (Schilt 2010). This simple piece of information strikes to the heart of a larger concept: the value of masculinity. Schilt (2010) told the experiences of a transman who had transitioned and their academic work had begun to be taken more seriously. The opposite story is told by a transwoman academic whose work was devalued once they had transitioned. (Schilt 2010). These experiences could possibly be explained by hegemonic masculinity. People tend to value masculine traits over that of feminine traits, as shown earlier in Pascoe’s (2005) and Morris’s (2008) ethnographies. Schilt (2010) showed multiple instances that transmen were brought in as “one of the guys,” but there were no instances in which transwomen were brought in as “one of the girls.” This idea of valued masculinity could be playing a role in this interaction. If masculinity is valued within the workplace this could explain the idea of transmen being another guy.

**Sexual Preference Matters**

Is it possible that society fears the potential threat of sexual assault from a transgender person? As stated above, Schilt (2010) details the actions some women take when they see a transman in the women’s restroom: women addressing transmen as if they do not belong in that restroom. One transman during Schilt’s (2010) study justified the actions of cautious women in the restroom by bringing up the idea of potential sexual predators. The individual explained that women need to be careful because there is always a possibility of a threat. The question that comes to mind here involves the sexual preference of the individual. If a transman or a
transwoman were to enter the restroom but were not attracted to the people within, how would that affect the opinion of the patrons? Theoretically, the potential of sexual threat should be eliminated due to there being no sexual preference. For example, if a straight male were to walk into the men’s restroom, nobody worries about that man because he is a straight male. That is the same argument I am making involving transmen and transwomen. The media has shown people expressing fears of transgendered people being rapists, but if that person has absolutely no sexual desire for those patrons then that fear goes unwarranted.

**Methods**

*Design*

Experimental methods will be used to determine the causality of opinions. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of eight conditions. This will be decided using a randomized block design which should allow for a virtually equal amount of participants in each condition. In each condition, participants will be given a story about an individual with a number of descriptive characteristics involving sexual preference, bathroom choice, and gender. Both sexual preference and bathroom choice are randomly decided among two options each: attracted to men or women and men’s or women’s restroom. Gender will be manipulated between a transman and a transwoman. Respondents will have the option to keep the information on the character visible as the answer the questions that follow. The questions revolve around their perception of the
character with a focus on whether the participant feels the character is a sexual predator. A sample of what a participant sees is as follows:

Taylor was born male, but identifies as a woman. Taylor and Jennifer, who are in a romantic relationship, are shopping at the mall. Taylor needs to use the restroom and walks into the women’s public restroom.

The bolded words are the conditions that will be manipulated throughout the study. “Jennifer” is replaced by “John” in order to show sexual preference, while “women’s public restroom” is replaced with “men’s public restroom.” Of course, “male” is replaced with “female,” and “woman” is replaced with “man.”

Data

In order to test these hypotheses, I use a group of participants taken from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The number of participants is 560, which allows for a total of 70 participants for each condition. Of course the study would be much greater with a larger sample, but due to constraints 560 is the total number available.

Outcome Measures

I assess how safe/threatened a participant would feel in the same restroom as the character by simply asking just that. Respondents are given a scale and asked to rate how safe they would feel being in the restroom with the character. Perceived threat is also assessed by asking respondents how safe they think a child would be in the restroom with the character. Both of these questions are followed by an open-ended response section. This allows participants a
chance to elaborate on their prior selections. Coding of these qualitative responses will provide deeper insight as to why respondents may feel unsafe in the restroom.

Finally, I examine the acceptance of transwomen into the women’s restroom and transmen into the men’s restroom. Respondents are asked whether they agree with the restroom the character chooses to use. Similar to the safety questions, a follow-up open-ended response provides the opportunity for participants to explain their choice. A sample question is as follows:

- Do you agree with the character’s choice to use the **women’s** restroom?
  - Yes  No
- In a few sentences, please explain why you chose **YES**

The first bolded word (women’s) is determined by the condition the respondent receives. The second bolded word (yes) is determined by which answer the respondent chose in the previous question.

**Results**

Although the study has not been completed, I believe that results may align with a few hypotheses. Schilt (2010) and Bettcher (2007) both detail instances in which transwomen are obviously discriminated against. Transwomen’s work is seen as less valuable than transmen (Schilt 2010), which is a more subtle form of discrimination, but transwomen have also been physically abused due to their transgender status (Bettcher 2007). Based on these two findings, along with portrayals of transgender individuals in the media, I expect that transwomen will be viewed in a negative light.
Despite the media not being an academic source, I believe that opinions around transgender individuals that have been portrayed may be seen. The responses I predict to see involve the sexual predator discourse. I believe that transwomen, who are attracted to women, and use the women’s restroom will be viewed extremely negatively because these individuals pose the most threat to women.

Discussion

This study examines how people in the United States view transgender individuals based on the character’s choice in restroom, sexual preference, and gender.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of this study is the sample size. While 560 participants seems like a significant number, the overall study is not generalizable to the U.S. population. Future research could involve taking this study further by making it representative to the American population. This will allow generalizable claims to be made about the country’s opinions on transgender individuals. A larger total number would also allow for more respondents in each condition, which will make the study more reliable.

While there are limitations, this study consist of multiple valuable attributes. The first being that the study is an experimental design without deception. This allows for causal claims to be made about perceptions of transwomen. I am able to determine whether or not the sexual preference of a transwoman is the cause of negative, or positive, views; the same can be said about the choice in restroom. I am also able to reduce the amount of social desirability bias by presenting respondents with only one condition instead of having them compare two different
conditions. For example, respondents may be more conscious of the researcher’s intent, and answer accordingly, if they are asked to compare a transwoman in the men’s bathroom and a transwoman in the women’s bathroom. The fact there is no deception allows me to avoid any ethical dilemmas.

Finally, this study fills a gap in the literature revolving around transgender individuals by discovering public perception. By looking at the opinions of the U.S. population, I am able to present data that uncovers how people actually feel.
References


Timeline

December 19th: Pretest with friends and family members.

December 23rd: Finish pretesting and begin finalizing instrument.

December 27th: Begin creating instrument on mTurk.

January 10th: Send amendments to IRB and submit abstract to NCSA. Introduction, Literature Review, and Methods should be completely finished.

January 20th: Have mTurk instrument completed.

February 1st: Administer survey.

February 5th: Analyze Quantitative results.

February 11th: Have Qualitative coding finished

February 28th: Data section should be completed in paper.

March 4th: Begin working on presentation for NCSA.

March 11th: Presentation should be completed and rehearsed.

March 18th: Have Data section finished.

March 25th: Have Conclusion/Discussion finished.

March 31st-April 1st: NCSA
This schedule could be completely changed depending on how the data looks. If I stick to this schedule, I should hopefully be “finished” before NCSA (which is ideal). I am unsure when posters need to be started, but I will work that in once I know when that needs to be finished.
After going through the comments from Dr. Cha, I decided that my literature review needed a lot of work. I realized that I rely way too much on Kristen Schilt’s *Just One of the Guys*, and I need to break away from solely using that piece. I attempted to expand my literature use by taking suggestions from Kristin Kelley. The main piece she recommended to me was also by Kristen Schilt, but at least it was a different source. After reading this piece, I found there were multiple points that were relevant to my research project and I was able to incorporate them into my paper.

Once I had begun working on the corrections that Dr. Cha and peers had recommended, I discovered that my literature review was poorly written. I was surprised at how many points I was referencing from other sources that really did not make sense. I had to basically go back and reread each section and make some cuts and readjustments. I wound up cutting Susan Fiske’s piece completely out of my paper. It was recommended that I drop her scale from my study because it really was not what I was trying to accomplish. After reading the section of my paper that talked about Fiske, I realized that everyone was right. I did not need a warmth-and-competence scale in my paper, and it was apparent by my writing that I was struggling to make the connections of the scale to my study.

It was also pointed out that one of my sections was almost completely useless (at least the way I had written it). The theoretical pieces applied to my study in a broader sense, but the way I had written the section did not help with tying to pieces to my study. I had focused the section on West and Zimmerman’s *Doing Gender*, but I did not do a very good job. The section was written as if I was trying to prove that people actually do gender while in the restroom. While this could be a valid point, it is not the primary focus of my research. I was putting too much time and effort into the wrong sections of my paper. After realizing that I had done this, I took that section and tried to break it up into smaller sections that could fit in other places. For example, I kept most of my West and Zimmerman information, but reworded it slightly and put it in my “Gender Matters” section. I believe this helped to shift the focus of the section to illustrating that I believe the gender of transgender individual will play an important role, rather than the fact that gender is done at the interactional level.

After rewriting other sections, I began to notice that my main hypothesis was not backed by very much literature. I was already having some trouble finding pieces relating to this topic, but I only had a few sentences discussing the idea of a sexual predator. This fact made me go back through my literature and work to develop a better section for this part of my review.

There were also a few points that just needed minor corrections, but I completely agree that they make my paper flow better. The main one was just a reorganization of my Methods section. That was a simple task, but it did make more sense after I did it.