

TRANSGENDER INCLUSION AND FEMINISM: ORGANIZATIONS AND INNOVATION

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As transgender issues become increasingly prominent, feminist organizations, many of which have restricted membership to women, are forced to consider how feminism is affected by changing gender identities. This article examines the how four feminist organizations in New York City considered the inclusion of transgender individuals. The groups examined here exhibited traits, such as decentralized, informal structures, that made them likely sites of social innovation. Additionally, by communicating with one another, the organizations influenced one another in discussions about transgender inclusion.

As individuals of transgendered, intersexed, and gender-queer experience become more conspicuous and strive to be better understood, gender itself is losing its binary rigidity.¹ At the same time, feminist organizations are examining how to respond to this destabilization of gender. Feminism has grounded its identity in rigid concepts of gender. As that rigidity is questioned, feminist groups must confront crucial questions. Do transgendered people have a place in feminist activism? Many transgendered people live as women, others were women, and nearly all have experienced oppression as a result of their gender expression. Is feminism still feminism if it includes and advocates for those who have not been women from birth?

Although the feminist movement is vast and varied, the word “feminism” commonly refers to the struggle of women for social and gender equity. Historically, women have indicated that their bodies, or the meanings attributed to those bodies, are the reasons for their devaluation and oppression. Immediately there is a problem. The experiences of women are highly diverse. It seems questionable to assume that all female experiences of oppression

are similar. Indeed, feminism has faced diversity within its ranks as various advocates have sought to address specific issues associated with class, race, and sexuality. Although these efforts ultimately affected changes within feminism, the movement has largely retained the same basic structure: women fighting for the rights of women.

But gender is not uncontested ground in feminism. In fact, gender poses fundamentally new and potentially divisive challenges for the movement. This article examines how transgender inclusion in feminist groups makes the traditional concept of gender problematic. It also considers the contemporary conditions that now complicate the relationship between gender and feminism. In particular, the work focuses on interactions among feminist groups, examining how organizations deal with the question of transgender inclusion, when they address the issue, and what conclusions they reach.

The viability of transgender and transsexual feminists has been debated for over 25 years. The question stretches back to and beyond Janice Raymond's incendiary work, *The Transsexual Empire* (1994). The current study joins the dialogue in the vast literature concerning the roles that gender, race, class, and sexuality play in feminism. Judith Butler (1999) acknowledges this plurality in feminism, stating, "The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.' at the end of the list" (p. 182). She continues, "This illimitable *et cetera*, however, offers itself as a new departure for feminist political theorizing" (1999, p. 182; emphasis in original). In the future, she hypothesizes, the mission of feminism may broaden to encompass the concerns of a much wider group of people, changing the face of feminism forever. The article examines how Butler's theory works in and among agencies dealing with, as Butler (1999) calls it, "gender trouble."

As this study examines radical changes in the feminist movement by studying individual organizations, it utilizes the great body of organizational theory concerning such changes. That thinking is commonly described as Social Innovation Theory.² Just as profit-driven firms encourage innovative ideas by structuring themselves in certain ways, so also, Jon Pierce and André Delbecq (1977) argue, nonprofit organizations with a particular set of characteristics will be likely sites of social innovation. They argue that several structural variables of groups make radical changes likely. Such variables include high degrees of diversity and differentiation, as well as low levels of centralization, stratification, and formalization of roles. Pierce and Delbecq (1977) also claim that the attitudes of members and staff, as well as the values of an organization, can encourage consideration of change in a group. Finally,

they point to contextual attributes, such as environmental uncertainty, the size of the organization, the age of that organization, and its collaborations with other groups, as factors affecting an organization's likelihood to innovate (1977, p. 35).

Once organizations consider potentially innovative ideas, other factors affect the decisions they make. Joshua Gamson (1997) outlines a framework of particular use to this project, theorizing that movements like feminism are constantly defining the boundaries of identity and sending out "messages of exclusion" (1997, p. 180). He argues that as organizations involved in these movements interact with one another, they influence and are influenced by the actions of related groups. Ultimately, they come to conclusions based on the makeup of their respective audiences or memberships (Gamson, 1997, p. 180).

METHOD

Data for this study came from the author's interviews with members and staff of feminist organizations around New York City. Participants were identified through snowball sampling. As explained below, members of these groups were well informed about other feminist organizations that are in New York and address transgender issues. The organizations participating in this research have experienced a destabilization of the gender binary within their communities and have extensively considered possible responses. The 4 organizations included here represent a variety of feminist groups. All, however, were founded with the intent of providing spaces exclusively for women to pursue their interests. The author spoke with at least 2 members or staff in each studied group. Most interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. In order to protect the anonymity of participants in this study, the names of all organizations and individuals have been changed.

The first of the 4 groups included in this study is GRRL Theater, a collective of self-identified female artists producing theater by women and for women. The troupe's collective structure encourages involvement from all members without prioritizing 1 member's opinions over another's. Although the collective's Web site invites any and all women to join, it is clear in extending its invitation only to those who identify as women. During 2004 and 2005, members of the group debated whether or not transgendered artists should be allowed to participate. The group concluded that while transgendered women are welcome, transgendered men are not.

The second group studied, The Toybox, is a sex shop founded by lesbian women. The shop is designed to offer information, encouragement, and

products to women exploring their sexuality. Responding to what they saw as a dearth of sex shops that felt welcoming to women, the founders of The Toybox set out to create an environment in which women could purchase toys, books, and videos that celebrate their sexual vitality in a safe and fun place. In order to ensure that the store was welcoming, not intimidating to women, the founders of The Toybox initially staffed the store only with women. This recently changed as the staff grew to include transgendered women and transgendered men. Currently, there are no official limitations on hiring. It must be noted here that The Toybox, in contrast to the other agencies studied, is a multisite, for-profit organization, and this structure may affect its decision-making process in unobserved ways.

Located in Brooklyn, the third studied group, the New York Antiviolence Organization (NYAO) touts itself on its Web site as a feminist women's organization designed to build and strengthen women's confidence and leadership, as well as to improve their safety. The organization offers many varied programs, including self-defense classes, antiviolence workshops for teens, and family safety seminars. In the early 1990s, NYAO began to welcome transgendered women into its previously women-only self-defense classes. The group's Web site addresses the underlying shift, stating that the organization is in the process of reconsidering its policy to determine the best way to reconcile its historic mission and its desire to be allies with the transgender community while addressing violence issues pertinent to women and transgendered people. However, the group still considers itself feminist and primarily for women.

The fourth group examined in this study is Gay Women's Television (GWTV), which produces and airs a monthly, hour-long show on cable access channels across the country. In addition, the organization offers classes in digital media, filmmaking, production, and editing. The organization identifies the target audience for these classes as lesbian women and considers its mission to inform the public discourse by contributing lesbian voices in realistic, inclusive settings. In recent years, one of the most active volunteers at GWTV transitioned from female to male and prepared to resign from the group. Instead, he was invited to stay on as the executive producer, prompting the organization to evaluate its relationship with the transgender community and its role in the lesbian community.

RESULTS

Characteristics That Promote Social Innovation

DIFFERENTIATION. The first common characteristic among the organizations studied is a high degree of differentiation among members or staff. Among the groups considered, GRRL Theater, NYAO, and GWTV have highly heterogeneous memberships that span ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. By contrast, The Toybox staff can appear highly homogeneous. In this group, however, there is a high rate of staff turnover; employees are hired, work for a short time, and move on. Although the people coming and going through the store share similar demographic traits, the frequent shuffling of workers ensures that new and different viewpoints are introduced. Thus, each group in this study brings people with disparate perspectives together in recombinant groups that are likely to develop new ideas.

According to Pierce and Delbecq (1977), “Focus on the value of constructive conflict, the absence of a single professional ideology, and cross-fertilization of ideas are representative of phenomena implicit in organization differentiation that seem to stimulate the initiation of innovation proposals” (p. 29). This article will show that these groups share many of these characteristics. Accordingly, as individuals from different backgrounds share their opinions and challenge others, group members are likely to engage in a process of problem solving that considers more than one viewpoint and incorporates many, creating a new idea. As Robert Sutton (2003) argues:

When group members [fight] over conflicting ideas, it [provokes] them to weave others’ ideas together with their own, to insist that others provide compelling logical rationale for their ideas, and to contribute still more ideas. The resulting solutions [are] more comprehensive, integrated, and well defended (p. 46).

The groups analyzed here exhibit a degree of differentiation that facilitates this creative process.

DECENTRALIZATION, STRATIFICATION, AND FORMALIZATION OF ROLES. Other structural traits that these groups exhibit affect their ability to consider and implement change, including encouraging conflict, promoting creative thought and valuing a willingness to take risks. According to Pierce and Delbecq (1977) and George Kelly (1976), organizations that are likely to make dramatic changes frequently display a high degree of decentralization, a low level of stratification, and minimal formalization of roles within the group.

Each of these factors liberates members involved in the decision-making process to think outside the box without being preoccupied with status or adherence to a particular role.

The clearest examples of decentralization and lack of formalization in an organization can be observed in GRRL Theater. As part of a collective, members of the troupe are all equal participants in the discussions concerning transgender inclusion. Additionally, GRRL Theater has no board of directors to make decisions about transgender inclusion and no advisory panel to make suggestions to the group. Therefore, there is no formal structure imposed on the process of decision making. Adhering to the model proposed by Pierce and Delbecq (1997), this structure makes GRRL Theater more likely to consider innovative changes that could drastically alter the group and have broad ramifications in the feminist arena.

Although each studied organization exhibits a relatively low level of formalization, certain groups are more structured than others. In particular, The Toybox, a profit-driven organization, runs like any other retail business. It includes salespeople, managers, and owners; these roles are organized hierarchically. The greater degree of structure at The Toybox, in comparison to the levels of structure in the other organizations, provides a possible explanation for why the inclusion of transgendered staff was not as radical there as it was or could have been in the other groups. Sarah, one of the founders of the store, indicates that there was a general lack of conflict concerning the change in policy. She notes that the policies before and after inclusion were largely unofficial. Because employees are stratified, it was possible for staff members to accept the policy shift as something in which they had limited input. For these reasons, transgender inclusion at The Toybox was not so much a radically innovative decision but rather a gradual, minimally contested evolution.

ATTITUDES OF MEMBERS. Members of the groups in this study consistently refer to their organizations as leaders to which other groups look for indications about feminism's evolution. To continue as leaders in the field, these groups must value the development of groundbreaking ideas. According to Pierce and Delbecq, a "value of innovation and creative behavior is seen as playing a critical role in an organization's effective utilization of innovative capacity" (1977, p. 33). In other words, when organizations value and encourage innovative ideas, members are likely to develop them. The import that these groups place on being noted leaders among feminists stimulates progressive thought, leading to innovative organizational changes.

In describing the development of her store's reputation, Sarah relates how other proprietors of sex shops have come to "follow [The Toybox's] lead a

little bit.” Although the niche into which her store fits (lesbian-owned sex shops that celebrate female sexuality) is rather small, Sarah values The Toybox’s position as a leader to which other shops look for instruction. To remain in this position, the store must place itself at the forefront of the field, considering interesting, new changes before others.

The members of GRRL Theater also readily acknowledge that the collective is not only unique, but additionally that, by virtue of its originality, it influences feminist theater across the country and even the world. Although there are only a handful of active members at a time, one, Shelly, points out that GRRL Theater is known and celebrated far beyond the shores of Manhattan, saying, “What we do spreads. I travel and I am from Argentina, and my lesbian friends in Argentina, they know GRRL.... You know it’s like a wave. Whatever happens here ... it’s happening also in Argentina.”

Another member, Jill, describes how the theater’s reputation draws young, eager new members who often challenge the group’s functioning:

You have a lot of folks in there in their early twenties, just out of college, who have studied GRRL in their women’s studies classes and their theater classes, who come in thinking they know how GRRL is supposed to be. And they kind of end up butting heads ... with these grassroots performance artists who have been doing this shit for 20 years.

The collective encourages conflict because it values its position as a ground-breaking group. This role also creates conflict within the group.

ENVIRONMENTAL UNCERTAINTY. Jonathan Bach and David Stark argue that nongovernmental agencies “are acting as social entrepreneurs and innovators today” by turning “ambiguity into an asset” (2002, p. 6). Though their study population consists of organizations in Eastern Europe, many of the conclusions they draw are general enough to apply to the organizations examined here. When organizations operate in an environment of uncertainty, they inevitably face situations that require quick and creative thinking in order to solve emerging problems. A common theme emerged in interviews with staff of NYAO, GRRL Theater, and GWTV. Staff from these groups remarked that their group’s survival is continually tenuous. After losing significant sources of funding, facing unexpected expenses, and experiencing fundraising difficulties, NYAO and GRRL Theater were on the brink of financial crisis so great that they faced the possibility of elimination. In the case of GRRL Theater, Jill connected the group’s fiscal concerns with its consideration of transgender inclusion. She reported that some members threatened to suspend their fundraising if their specific desired outcome was

not reached. Although other interviewees did not explicitly connect their groups' uncertain environment with considerations of transgender inclusion, data from the interviews suggest the uncertainty of the groups' situations affects nearly every aspect of the organizations.

Why Now? Communication Theories and Interactions among Groups

It is important to examine why so many groups are struggling with the question of transgender inclusion at this point in time. It may be possible to better understand the current struggles by studying how these four groups relate to one another in the feminist arena. Using a framework proposed by Joshua Gamson (1995, 1997) makes it possible to outline a discourse within feminism that encouraged each of the groups in this study to consider transgender inclusion. As feminist organizations interact with one another, they participate in a dialogue within the movement. A cyclical pattern results; as more feminist groups consider transgender issues, it becomes increasingly likely that other organizations will take up similar questions. This cycle creates the environment in which transgender inclusion becomes a hot topic for feminist groups across the country and around the world.

THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE AUDIENCE. Historically, feminism has relied on its understanding of its particular identity. The feminist movement has been grounded in the premise that a class of women is oppressed by those who are not women.³ This foundational premise compels feminists to distinguish who is and is not a woman, putting feminism in the business of exclusion. Feminists have drawn and redrawn these boundaries in order to determine the scope of their movement, to be heard, and to be effective. Gamson argues:

In political systems that distribute rights and resources to groups with discernible boundaries, activists are smart to be vigilant about those boundaries; in cultural systems that devalue so many identities, a movement with clarity about who belongs can better provide its designated members with the strength and pride to revalue their identities (1997, p. 179).

However, Gamson asserts, when the boundaries that define a group are no longer viable because of pressure from individuals who are not easily categorized, it is necessary for the group to renegotiate the boundaries (1997, p. 180). Each of the groups in this study was compelled to reconsider the limits it placed on membership as a result of either a direct challenge from the increasingly active transgender community or a recognition of the community's existence as sufficiently problematic, though no direct challenge took place.

Moreover, as these groups interacted concerning transgender issues, they began to question organizational boundaries and the boundaries of the feminist movement itself.

Gamson's framework proposes that "internal movement debates over inclusion and exclusion are best understood as *public communications*. They depend heavily on the communicative environment ... especially the location and nature of the *primary audience*" (1997, p. 180, emphasis in original). Communicative environments reflect many factors affecting the debate, including the parties involved in the discussion and the groups they serve. The public communications to which Gamson refers are the boundary definitions that take place both within particular groups and, by extension, the larger context of the feminist movement. As these communications reverberate throughout the movement, the debate diffuses into individual groups. Different factions negotiate the limits of each group's identity, balancing the importance of solidarity with the need for maximum inclusivity. Individual groups propose limits on membership and, in return, these proposals become part of the discourse taking place in feminism. This discourse, whether it concerns boundary definition or other, unrelated issues, binds independent organizations together under the banner of feminism. When the discourse is dominated by certain issues or concerns, the communicative environment that is created reflects these issues and concerns. In the case of the organizations in this study, consideration of transgender issues led members to reevaluate the meanings and boundaries of gender.

When these organizations participate in feminism's public communication on transgender issues, they bring the question of transgender inclusion to their groups; each group must come to a decision about its own policy. Such deliberations may consider the group's mission, goals, and most importantly, its primary audience. As each organization makes the decision that best suits its particular vision of feminism, the choice in turn informs the ongoing public discourse about transgender inclusion. In this way, feminist organizations have simultaneously come to consider these issues, though not all arrive at the same conclusions.

THE COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS. Interviews with members and staff of feminist organizations reveal these groups are not only aware of one another, but that they interact, collaborate, and often share members. Members reported vast knowledge about questions and conflicts that arose in this study's other groups, as well as in other feminist groups.

Evidence of an ongoing discourse in the feminist movement is apparent in an interview with Shelly, a member of the GRRL Theater collective. Again and again, she cited instances in which women's groups struggled with transgender inclusion. She specifically mentioned the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, feminist sadism and masochism parties in New York, and notably, GWTV.⁴ Shelly repeatedly linked the controversy at GRRL Theater with the feminist movement's larger discussion of transgender issues. Her comments support the theory that feminist groups are interconnected and engaged in a public discourse on these issues. Throughout interviews, members of the studied groups made similar connections between their organization and others.

In theory, the communicative environment influences the public communication that already exists in feminism, giving it particular shape and tone. In practice, it can be difficult to distinguish evidence of a public communication from characteristics of the communicative environment in which it exists. For the purposes of this study, any communication between feminist groups signifies a public communication, while discourse about transgender inclusion taking place outside of these groups evidences a particular communicative environment. The communicative environment is further defined by external factors. For example, several interviewees indicated that the mobilization of an active transgender community provides impetus for feminist groups and, therefore, feminism, to consider the inclusion of transgendered individuals.

PRIMARY AUDIENCES. When feminism's unease about transgender becomes a subject in an individual group, a public communication on the issue becomes part of the group's internal decision-making process. In developing responses to such issues, the group must examine its goals, the population it serves, and its membership, adopting positions that best suit the organization's interests. The group's membership and service population comprise its "primary audience" (Gamson, 1997, p. 180). Drawing on Gamson's (1997) theory, whether the primary audience is external, as in the case of organizations that serve others, or internal, in the case of collective groups, it has a significant role in determining the course that a particular organization will take.

For example, before NYAO opened its doors to transgendered men, the group considered the various constituencies affected by such a decision. In interviews, volunteers indicated that the group's final decision to welcome transgendered men was affected by the image that NYAO projects to the community, including the women traditionally served, other antiviolenace organizations, feminist groups, and funding sources. The volunteers' observation is significant because it demonstrates that NYAO considered the public as part of its primary audience. But the finding is also important because it shows

that the group knew the decision would be scrutinized within the community. So too, the decision would become part of feminism's public communication on these issues. Similarly, the owners of The Toybox considered not only how a policy shift would affect sales, but also how a decision to employ transgendered individuals would be received in the feminist movement.

Because GWTV's primary constituency is its television viewing audience, and, according to interviews, might include lesbians from a variety of backgrounds (and even some viewers who are not lesbians), GWTV must consider the diversity of its viewers when it develops policies. The group must present programming that appeals to a broad and varied audience without alienating long-time viewers; this tension heavily influences the policy decisions made by GWTV staff. When staffers evaluated whether to ask a recently transitioned, transgendered male to serve as GWTV's executive producer, they considered the implications that this might have for the audience.

When these groups address the question of transgender inclusion, the choices they make enter into the public communication within feminism, contributing to the discourse. In this symbiotic fashion, feminist groups influence and are influenced by one another as they discuss transgender issues.

CONCLUSIONS

Some limitations of this study include its small sample size and the fact that nonprofit groups are considered together with a for-profit group. Additionally, since all of the studied organizations are located in New York, and are thus part of a very particular communicative environment, these results may not be generalizable to organizations in other parts of the country or world.

This research suggests that certain feminist organizations under certain circumstances are more likely to consider transgender inclusion than others. According to findings presented here, those organizations that confront transgender issues are likely to have a high degree of differentiation. They are likely to exhibit decentralization, minimal stratification, and low levels of formalization. Additionally, those groups typically value the development of challenging and often-groundbreaking ideas. Finally, the environmental uncertainty in which these organizations exist gives them many opportunities to reconsider beliefs and practices that govern how they function. When these feminist groups took up the question of transgender inclusion, their decision-making process was heavily influenced by the discourse among feminist groups, the communicative environment in which that discourse took place, and the primary audience that the different groups served.

As they considered transgender inclusion, these feminist organizations participated in a process of boundary redefinition that determined the brand of feminism to which each group adheres. It seems questionable to assert that there are specific, easily identifiable sects of feminism, as truly each organization adopts the aspects of the movement that best suit its primary audience. In responding to the issues of transgender inclusion, groups in this study faced three choices: (1) a group might expand the boundaries of membership to include a broader spectrum of people; (2) a group might expand the boundaries of gender, reflecting the identity of women to include a previously excluded population; and (3) a group might choose to draw clear distinctions, limiting those allowed to participate in its activity. These choices form the foundations of the 2 emergent trends: organizations choosing between an expanding feminism and a narrowing feminism.

In general terms, groups that choose to invite the participation of gender-queers and transgendered men espouse an expanding feminism. Such groups adopt Butler's (1999) perspective that a movement can be made more powerful by recognizing the tenuousness of identity. The Toybox, NYAO, and GWTV clearly fall into this category, having redrawn the limits of membership to include a broader range of people. By contrast, groups that specifically limit the membership to women (self-identified or biological) solidify the boundaries in order to keep their feminism potent. GRRL Theater fits into this category. Although it chose to welcome transgendered women, by restricting membership in order to keep transgendered men out, its policy is significantly different from those of the other 3 groups studied. However, feminism exists on a spectrum. Changing notions about gender force groups to clearly define boundaries in order to reify goals or to expand categories. The conflicts that took place in the four groups presented here indicate a desire to navigate between these two poles and to attempt to find some middle ground that would allow them to access the benefits of each feminism. Ultimately, however, boundary definition must occur, placing groups closer to a narrowing or an expanding feminism.

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NOTES

¹ The terms “transgender,” “intersexed,” and “gender-queer” encompass many varying experiences of gender outside the traditional, biological male-female binary. Transgender is an umbrella term referring to individuals “whose gender expression is non-conformant with gender role expectations of males and females in a given territory or society” (Vidal-Ortiz, 2002, p. 224).

² The word “innovation” connotes a great leap forward, an advancement, or an improvement, and the term is necessary here, as much of the relevant sociological literature deals with social innovation. Accordingly, this article presumes that innovation is “the generation, acceptance and implementation of new processes, products or services for the first time within an organization” (Pierce and Delbecq, 1977, p. 28). In this article, innovation is to be understood as a significant evolutionary change within the feminist movement and the specific organizations in question.

³ Perhaps more problematically, it has been grounded in the idea that men oppress those who are not men.

⁴ The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is a well-known, annual event that, according to its Web site at the time of this study, welcomed only “womyn-born-womyn” excluding transgendered women and all men.

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