

I'm Me, Therefore I Am

(Or an antidote to Binary Androgenic Taxonomies – BATs)

By Christine Burns © 2003

UK transsexual rights campaigner Christine Burns wonders whether the instinctive urge to classify the world in either/or terms is a “man” thing. Or are there, in fact, TWO kinds of people – those who classify people into two kinds and the rest? Those who are “BATs” and those who aren’t?

One thing's for certain about being a trans person. The process of growing up and learning how to make sense of the world involves coming to terms with a society dominated by classifications – and especially binary ones.

Yet are classifications of people into “either/or” boxes a necessity or a hindrance? Do they inform or confuse our understanding of humanity? Do categories of male-female, white-black, straight-gay, Christians-others, “Us” and “Them” serve to help in getting to know the stranger you meet on the train or the person you sleep with? Or do binary taxonomies like these actively hinder that process of discovery about another unique human being – setting up systems of stereotypical assumptions or generalisations which actually get in the way of open-minded evaluation of the available data?

Is it a “man” thing to classify in this way? Do women, through a generally greater interest in seeing individuality rather than difference, rely on oppositional classification far less? Who needs to classify in this way, and why? Is dividing people into “either/or” driven by an instinct to differentiate “superior” and “inferior”? And when the classifier is *themselves* part of the equation is the tendency further exaggerated by the need to show that “us” is better than “them”?

What happens when the data you find isn't consistent with a binary classification system? Does it have to be shoehorned to preserve the binary neatness of the generalisation? Or, in discovering that the world can't be neatly divided into opposing categories does it emerge

that, on one plane at least, there really are two kinds of people after all: Those who need binary classification to make sense of their world, and those who don't need it?

These may seem ironic questions for a trans person (of all people) to ask. After all, the popular mythology states that we are hopelessly embroiled in reinforcing stereotypical notions of just two forms of gender presentation. And because that concept of us is such a powerful stereotype in its own right, many non-trans people neither look nor think any further – having already classified us according to – yes, you got it – their binary view of gender. In our lives the pot is forever calling the kettle black without a trace of self insight.

“Biology isn't destiny” may be what it used to say on the T-shirts, but how many people sporting that apparel were just as prepared to argue that a trans woman couldn't be a woman because surgical alteration of the body didn't count? When arguing for or against essentialism, it really does help to be consistent!

Some of these thoughts first really began to occur to me ten years ago whilst sitting on a kerbside with a psychologist I'd never met before – waiting for an airport shuttle bus. We had both been attending the 1993 conference of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association in New York. Both of us were in the process of switching off from three days of intensive work and it was the intercession of an amorous bus driver, who had insisted on putting his phone number in my address book, which drew us together, as women, to talk about the state of the world. Eventually, as time passed, our conversation then turned to reflect upon the conference we had both just attended.

Neither of us thought to classify the other – except insofar as to perceive our shared experience of being women in a world where strange men can sometimes come up and hit on you out of the blue.

Trans women like myself, with the experience of deconstructing gender presentation to try and make sense of it, have a practiced eye for observing the gender displays of others.

Looking back on that encounter now, I realise that I would probably have had to pause and think if called upon to judge whether my companion was trans or not. Non-trans people should never become too smug about how others will perceive them. (And if that thought worries you at all then you've taken your first step towards empathising with trans people's feelings about classification by others).

We were certainly in a setting where the probability of needing to weigh up the evidence was perhaps more heightened than usual. But it never really crossed my mind at the time as to whether the question was relevant. Neither (as it transpired) had it crossed my companion's mind to wonder (let alone speculate) whether I was anything other than a woman too. What mattered was that we had found two things in common. We were both, for whatever professional reasons, delegates to a conference on a topic which presumably interested us – and we both had experiences to share about being women in a world part-populated by men.

The stranger asked where it was that I practiced. That was my cue to explain that I wasn't a psychologist but a trans woman beginning to study the way in which others study us. She expressed genuine surprise. Both her assumptions had been wrong.

There were undoubted implications in why she had simply taken me to be a kindred spirit on at least two axes. Nevertheless these were rapidly digested and integrated into her framework for understanding the world. That completed, we carried on talking about our experiences of travel as single women, untroubled by any thought of whether one of us had more right to an opinion on the topic than the other. It didn't seem relevant. We were more interested in what we had in common than in highlighting difference.

And that is a key thing to understand, whether you are trans or not trans. Sometimes a label is relevant, but the vast majority of the time it is not. When we meet people we can take them at face value and build from there by listening and learning. That way we learn quickly about the other person's individuality, and can appreciate them for who they are (as opposed to

worrying about what they are). This would seem to me to be an especially valuable methodology for anyone dealing in behavioural sciences.

But let's now consider the alternative for a moment, and relate it to our experiences of life.

The opposite to the kind of unique-picture-building approach which I've described is based on collecting observations only in order to create and then fit people into categories – and if you are especially lazy and concerned primarily in whether other people are “us” or “them” then the ideal number of categories which you would like to have is two.

Two is a special number – unique for the way in which it simplifies the application of logic. For if the world has only two categories of something then the only thing you ever need to do is decide whether the thing you are observing belongs under the first heading, or not.

Any other number of categories involves a lot more work – and the higher the number of choices the more the process of data collection involves listening well enough to discern differences, which may often be subtle.

If there are three categories then it is no longer a simple decision to decide which one to place someone into. Eliminating “category one” still leaves the question of categories two and three. And if you've already accepted the idea that things aren't “either/or” then there is the additional complication that if the thing doesn't fit into categories two and three this could mean they are a new “category four” that you didn't have before.

No doubt about it, life's far simpler with two categories. Male-female, White-Black, Straight-Gay .. and so forth. If someone isn't male then they're female. If you're not white then you're black. If you're not straight then you are bound to be gay. “If you're not with us then you are against us”.

Nature is seldom quite so simplistic though. People are not just fat or thin, tall or short, good or bad. In fact this is what makes us unique as human beings. Our individuality relies on the sum of where we are on an almost infinite number of axes of measurement. And, in general, people very rarely seem to inhabit the extremes. Skins are many different shades. Very tall or very short are unusual. So is ultra macho or ultra feminine – however you choose to define such constructs.

Even when it comes to physical sex you don't have to venture very far beyond medicine's clumsy attempts to obscure the evidence to realise that, although you might expect two fairly distinct peaks on the graph, there is plenty of data in-between. So, defining sex in terms of "male" ("this child has a penis") and "not male" doesn't work 100% of the time – and leads to a social crisis the moment someone comes along to wreck the assumption that "no penis" is just another way of saying "female". But if this applies to the parts of sex-based division which we can see or measure, then what about the other part – the bit we can't see?

Having just two categories through which to view the world can tempt those who want to explain the world this way into corruption.

What happens when the data presented to you doesn't fit ? Do you abandon the binary model (and everything you've based on it so far) or do you simply widen one of the categories you've got so that "the rest" is general enough to act as a general dustbin for awkward results?

It must be very tempting to do this even if, as a researcher, you are not consciously aware of the motivation. You could be very unkind and call such shoehorning of inconvenient data "lying". It may not seem like lying to the person doing it, of course – it is just what you naturally do if you see things in "either/or" terms. However, if binary classification really is a predominantly masculine sport, as I've suggested it might be, then it certainly gives a whole new slant to the expression, "All men are liars"!

Joking aside, however, I would certainly suggest that researchers who adopt binary approaches to classifying their data may have to account for their subjectivities and answer the charge that they could have an unconscious motive to present things a certain way.

All of which brings me to a recently published book which, with the binary classification of trans people as a central and almost axiomatic premise, has recently entered and threatened to disrupt our lives.

At this point I'm not going to commit the sin of short-circuiting your own role as a critical reader. A book like J M Bailey's "*The Man Who Would Be Queen*" has already evoked so many strong reactions that there is a real risk of the original text remaining unread whilst the majority devour other people's accounts at second hand and form their opinions from there.

I actively encourage people to read the book and to form their own opinions in fact. I may have my own opinions, and I've made them known to an extent. However, I would far rather you formed your own opinions at first hand rather than regurgitating other people's.

What I can legitimately offer is some questions to contemplate whilst reading though – as a sort of framework for thinking about the ideas put forward.

Indeed, this whole essay is mostly about asking questions rather than providing answers. That way we retain our individuality and the right to either like or loathe what we see. You may, as a result, become a fierce critic or a devoted acolyte or something else (why be binary?). That's your choice though – not mine. And since the questions I pose can be applied to any viewpoint about our lives (including trans people's own narratives), this isn't an invitation to criticise one individual treatise. Instead you could look upon it as a framework for reality checking any theory or viewpoint which comes along.

So what questions can I offer ?

Well the first three questions are the basics which can be applied both to any idea as a whole, and to its parts.

First, is it helpful? In this context is Bailey's book helpful to trans people pre and post transition and in their everyday dealings with the world? Moreover, is it helpful to the families of trans people, work colleagues and complete strangers? Does it help make the world a better place for trans people? Does it help end the forms of daily discrimination (and worse) faced by our kind? Can it help prevent transphobic murders? If so then good. If not then this might be a reason to question its' purpose.

Second, does it add to or promote understanding? Again you need to ask that question from the perspective of both the broader world (which generally seems to know very little about trans people to begin with) and from the perspective of trans people – who have a vested interest in feeling correctly and sympathetically understood as a prerequisite for equitable social inclusion and personal safety. Is diagnosis, treatment and social assimilation better or worse within conceptual frameworks which construct a view of trans people in other ways?

Third (and this is a vital foundation for the other two), is it accurate? How does it measure up in terms of impartiality, fairness, rigour and objectivity? Is the reasoning sound and internally consistent? Is the data accurate, complete and correctly interpreted? Are there other interpretations and how are these considered?

Along the way, and because it is a central tenet of the section of Mr Bailey's book concerning transsexuality, you will need to consider how those three questions relate to the taxonomy employed. That is, how and why does one set out to categorise trans people? Is it helpful, does it add to or promote understanding? Is it accurate?

Those with experience of the issues raised by other minority groups may want to examine the *language* of the classification system itself. How are the views of the subjects considered? Are they given weight, and how?

Dominant majorities don't tend to get the point about labels because the majority is usually considered to be the positive position against which other possibilities are compared. Being part of the majority isn't generally a negative sort of thing. If you are a member of "them" as opposed to "us" the feelings may be rather different though.

So, is a particular choice of terminology stigmatising in itself? Are the labels helpful to people living their lives? Are labels such as "homosexual transsexual" and "autogynephilic transsexual" helpful in differentiating treatment strategies? Does the labelling add to or promote understanding? Do the labels help in promoting social enfranchisement and human rights or threaten such advances? Are the labels accurate?

Next, and this is very difficult if you are not already an expert in a subject's literature and politics, how do you assess the completeness and interpretation of the data used to justify a proposition? How are alternative interpretations represented and dealt with?

For the benefit of those who are new to the study of trans people and the people who study them, the idea of categorising subject histories into "types" is not new – and neither is the suggestion that there are two. Ten years ago, other researchers referred to their classifications as "primary" transsexuals and the rest (naturally enough) as "secondary". Others referred to the first group as "true" transsexuals – with an obvious implication about the rest. All these schemes share the characteristic that one group is clearly defined and the other one tends to contain "all the rest".

Do people find it easiest to understand the kind of trans person whom it is perceptually impossible to think of as male? Is "not male" taken to mean "female"? And, if that is the case, then is the evaluation less critical because it seems such a no-brainer? Do such researchers

substitute their own subjective impressions of what they see in place of objective analysis of what's actually going on in the pretty trans woman's mind? Other researchers in the past have said for instance that they are influenced in decision-making by whether they themselves are attracted to the patient. Are less stereotypically-feminine-looking trans women classified differently because they represent more work – and work that is too alien for *non*-trans researchers to conceive of classifying in further levels of detail?

Certainly the idea that there is more than one type of transsexuality is not new, and need not be especially controversial. Hundreds of people may share the same train to get somewhere and they may all have different explanations for their journey. They may get on and off at different stops and then they may all go separate ways. The simplistic observer may only see the view from on the train, unless they are prepared to get off a few times and follow. This is often cited as problematic when studying trans people because the outcomes result in people disappearing into the woodwork the moment their need for medical cooperation is complete. Nevertheless, are researchers able to claim a full objective picture of how to classify all the people on the train if they haven't got off and followed a significant number? Being on the train and having a first or second class ticket *isn't* the motivation. Finding out their intended destination *is*.

So, since even those of us who work with the people after they "got off the train" don't know all the destinations, classification by motivation is not an exact science. The idea that there may be only two types of traveller may therefore seem unnecessarily restrictive as a starting hypothesis – and especially if the only way to maintain that stance is to insist that every traveller is lying when they don't agree. What the reader needs to ask is, "How does a researcher get from the vagueness of "many" to the precision of a specific number?" And how does a binary classification affect the approach to data that doesn't fit? How is that disagreement handled?

This then begs another question. What is the purpose of such classification? From a discrimination point of view, all trans people are tarred with the same brush. Trans women

who “pass” well may avoid easy identification and targeting. Yet in societies which force trans people to reveal their histories for legal purposes, the playing field is easily levelled. In such circumstances being a “type 1”, “type 2” or type 99” transsexual carries no immediately obvious advantage from that perspective.

Does classification help in treatment? And, if so, are the differences meaningful? Professor Bailey states elsewhere that both of his own “kinds” are “real transsexuals”. In his words both are valid subjects for treatment. So is there still a reason for distinguishing? And, if so, are the categories appropriate to the purpose?

Is his *first* category appropriate? Does it mean that young, pretty trans girls who stir something in the therapist’s loins can simply be fasttracked to the operating theatre?

And then what of the second kind? If the second category is simply diagnosed by failure to measure up as the first, how does this help the individual? If the subject’s history is to be imputed from their label, and if disagreement is characterised as lying or a lack of insight, what further point is there in talking to the patient – other than rule that they’ve only progressed when they fall into line and agree? This may not be the *intention* of individual and well-meaning analysts, but could a system of classification which constrains allowable patient narratives lead this way? Is that the purpose of therapy?

Indeed, *what is* the purpose of therapy when working with people who go to a practitioner and say they are trans? Is the idea to help the individual find their own unique comfortable accommodation of their experience within the world and deal with the traumas they’ll face? Or is it the objective to force one of two pre-determined explanations onto the individual, by withholding consent to treatment until they’ve suppressed their own account? Is this not in itself a strong motive to lie?

In turn this leads us also to questions of realities, and when they are considered to be valid or not. What place does “Catch 22” have in scientific research? Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 was brilliantly circular in nature:

“To get out of the US Army you need to be diagnosed as insane. However wanting to get out of the Army proves you are sane.”

Do some trans researchers practice a similar brand of closed logic?

“There are two types of trans people”. “Trans people who disagree with this are to be discounted because they are liars”

This may not be quite as compact and symmetrical as Heller’s .. to achieve that you would have to say, “All transsexuals are liars, therefore all liars are transsexuals”. Nevertheless systems of data collection and interpretation, which discount awkward data on the basis that it belongs to the group you are studying, are inevitably problematic. The problems are particularly acute if you are selective in the data that you treat in this way.

For instance, Professor Bailey writes elsewhere in his defence that many transsexual people have written to tell him that his categorisation of them as Autogynephilic has helped them. But on what basis can this be accepted as truth if transsexuals lie at other times to suit themselves? The problem with selective believing is that all the questions are focussed on the believer’s own subjectivities and, as I posited earlier in this essay, researchers can have unconscious motivations of their own. Achieving objectivity as a scientist requires a lot of insight about oneself too.

In conclusion therefore I have not set out to tell you what to think about a book like J M Bailey’s, but I have suggested how to think about it. Advice like this can never be exhaustive. There will always be other angles. In particular, you may think I’ve focussed on areas to be critical. However, that is the point of science. It is not sufficient to focus only upon the parts

you like and conveniently forget the bits that don't fit. It is the awkward questions, and the ability to answer them fully and convincingly that really test whether a position stands up to scrutiny.

The central point of the transsexual portion of J M Bailey's book is to put forward a binary classification of all transsexual people in which both labels are freely admitted to be "controversial". I have therefore focussed some attention on the matter of taxonomies and effects. Categorisation needs difference. It drives an approach which looks for difference and seeks to enhance it by correlation with other occurrences. At the same time it forces all other phenomena to be observed in the same way. So, if transsexual people can be categorised in one of two ways then this virtually demands that everything else about those two categories should be consistent too. And the whole practice can only have a purpose if those predictive characteristics are helpful in some way – not just in deciding which parts of the trans person's personal narrative to believe or disbelieve, but to actually focus help in different areas.

The reader mustn't forget too that there are other widely held schools of thought about the roots of transsexualism, leading to different ways of conceptualising the people. J M Bailey has focussed primarily on the theories of one school. Equally, there is not room in an essay like this to explore the other school's teachings and theories to the same degree. Plenty of information is widely available about that other work though, through normal channels of scientific publication and the Internet. Readers will doubtless know how to find this. Hopefully I've provided some tools which can be applied equally to both viewpoints. And then you can make up your own mind.

Liars and extremely dysfunctional men? Or women finding their way in a sceptical and frightened world? You decide. But do it fairly, because our lives and happiness and the lives of the people close to us depend on that.

(4071 words)

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