

For our project with Rutgers Libraries Gender Health Center (GHC), we chose to focus on the experience of transgender and non-binary* children as well as their families, as illustrated in children's literature. Pathologizing gender creativity is a complicated and at times controversial topic because there are many ways to experience and express one's gender. We, as humans, experience gender in many ways, with the main three being the identity, body, and expression. This allows for a wide array of making up people through gender, with some choosing to undergo medical treatment to alter their body, others identifying with a certain part of the gender spectrum without alteration of the body, or rejecting gendered labelling altogether. For many, there is a deep need to change their physical characteristics in order to have their outer appearance align with how they exist internally. The medicalization of gender expression has been revolutionary in recent decades and has successfully improved many lives, and shows the shifting ideas around the characteristics of human beings, or, how we make up people. Despite this, there is still much room for change, and looking outside the typical gender binaries, it is essential to address the fact that not every person will want or need to be medically altered.

While these medical treatments appear entirely physical, they highlight exactly how mindful the human body truly is. The experience of gender dysphoria demonstrates the necessity of a body that fits the mind's image of it, and the repercussions taken on a person's mental health when these needs are not met can be severe. However, as we have learned in class, courses of treatment in biomedicine can sometimes frame situations as 'problems' with presumably straightforward paths for treatment. Even when individuals choose to partake in a medical journey to alter their gender expression, each path will be unique depending on the wants of the individual and how they intend to exist in the world around them. The mindful body isn't a problem that requires fixing, but an entire aspect of medicine that requires attending to, especially in instances of transgender health.

*For the purposes of this project, the words "transgender" and "non-binary" refer to individuals that are not cisgender, and are at times used interchangeably. This is due to the fact that gender is a spectrum, and many of the children's literature researched simply contains ideas of non-cisgendered expression.

While physical characteristics of transgender individuals are not typically medically altered until a child grows older, some children face bullying, isolation, or confusion which can lead to mental health challenges. Due to this prejudice of gender nonbinary individuals, many people are not widely educated about gender creativity and expression, as well as how to understand and discuss it in a sensitive way. Specialists in the field of psychology as well as gender affirming surgeries must be aware of the “lifeworld of the patient” more than ever before (Good 90). Because these individuals can face more challenges while growing into themselves than children who fit their societal gender binaries, social and medical awareness must be present when supporting them.

We have chosen to focus on children’s books because gender exploration begins to occur at a young age, with studies showing that most children in the United States become familiar with gender binaries when they attend preschool (Martin 1998). Education about gender expression and gender identity can be a key component to help children better understand themselves and their classmates. Representation of varying identities in children’s literature can help affirm identities and build confidence, teach lessons about allyship and educate adults on the unique experiences of gender nonbinary children. A large source of controversy in the discourse surrounding transgender health and education is the sexualizing of transgender people, leading to social concepts such as fetishizing transgender persons that causes people to shy away from discussing the topic, much less educating their children about it (Serano, 2009). This provides another way for children’s literature to be an invaluable tool: children’s books aren’t sexualized, and especially not fetishized, in our society. As Ruha Benjamin highlights, science fiction provides an outlet for reimagining society, children’s books can provide a safe space for children and adults to learn about gender expression and the experience of transgender persons without the social taboos.

Most importantly, this project aims to help make education on non-cisgender experiences more accessible, and thus changing how we as a society define people in terms of their gender and chosen gender expression, allowing for a positive impact on transgender health. We hope that the resource we have created for the GHC serves as a tool for transgender youth, their parents and families, and anyone that is beginning to explore how gender may be experienced in the world today. The books we have compiled display ranges of characters, social settings, and abilities. Some of them include guides or talking points that allow adults to better understand concepts, so that they may initiate conversation with younger audiences in classrooms or at home. By increasing this education and exposure for young children, we hope that they will not only have greater access to representation and a greater understanding of the gender experience, but that over time their awareness will make a difference in the societal view of the health of transgender people in the future.

Works Cited

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