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## On Creating and Framing Cissexual Advocacy with the Trans\* Community in Higher Education

Benjamin Z. Huelskamp

*Utilizing scholarly personal narrative (SPN) and the author's experiences as a cissexual aspiring ally to the trans\* community, this essay discusses cissexual advocacy with the trans\* community. In order to frame this advocacy a theoretical framework is proposed for cissexuals.*

I have never doubted that I am a man born in a gendered body and thus have been treated as a man my entire life. The congruency between my perceived sex and my gender identity has always been solidly aligned. I was taught the expectations of the male gender in my society and was socialized to perform that gender in ways that eventually felt natural. I have also been gendered by others each day of my life in ways that had aligned with my identity. Because of the congruency I experienced, I was and still am accorded significant privilege as a cissexual man. As I explored my identity as a gay man and my membership in the queer community, I came into contact with the trans\* community. While I aspire to be an ally I continue to educate myself about the trans\* community. This led me to wonder how I could appropriately engage with trans\* people while also acknowledging the privileges inherent in my identity. Freire (1993) stated that “The convert who approaches the people...and attempts to impose his [sic] ‘status,’ remains nostalgic towards his [sic] origins” (p. 61). Freire’s convert is any person who attempts to lay aside their own privilege in order to join in the mission of liberation for an oppressed group. In other words, attempting to impose a “status” of the dominant group on the non-dominant group is not a step in the liberation of that group.

One of my first attempts—and not a particularly successful attempt at that—at self education around the trans\* community was reading the book *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg, 1993). Set just before the Stonewall Riots in 1969, I clearly recall the part of the story surrounding Jess’s arrest, the protagonist who self-identifies as butch. I remember reading a section of the book where she is arrested and taken to a police station. There she is mocked and brutalized at the hands of the officers who ridicule her performance of the “opposite” sex. The first time I read the book I thought to myself: “Why doesn’t she just conform and be relatively safe?” For

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me, conformity to gender-based expectations was mostly a simple process. I did not have the knowledge or experience to process the dissonance I was experiencing. This dissonance was important because it was the first challenge I experienced to what Serano (2007) called the “cissexual assumption” or the “common, albeit mistaken, assumption that the way they experience their physical and subconscious sexes...applies to everyone else in the world” (pp. 164-165). Reading the same passages now, I am struck by the courage Jess shows in standing up to physical oppression to be honest to the truth and narrative she holds. As I deepened my knowledge and experience with the trans\* community, I experienced the challenge of understanding that not just people like me perpetrated oppression, but I was a direct party to that oppression. With this epiphany came a deep desire to be an ally for the trans\* community. However, there is no clear blueprint, guideline, or framework—at least not that I know of—which speaks to cissexual ally-ship with the trans\* community.

Speaking to cissexuals in academia, Serano (2007), who identifies as a member of the trans\* community, addressed the problems inherent in how the trans\* community is often portrayed and about how the community is spoken. There are relatively few cissexuals who have addressed cissexual privilege and the work cissexuals need to do both individually and collectively. Cissexual privilege, like all forms of privilege, is often invisible to the dominant group—in this case cissexuals—and while it certainly rewards us daily, cissexuals could go through life without ever being aware of the privilege.

To follow McIntosh (1988) in recognizing dominant group privilege: this morning I got up and went to the bus stop. Another rider greeted me with “Good morning, sir,” and I said the same in return. The two of us immediately assumed that the other identified as male based entirely on cultural cues. The bus driver greeted me the same way. Though I would like to think I was passively observing gender, “...in reality we are constantly and actively projecting our ideas and assumptions about maleness and femaleness onto every person we meet” (Serano, 2007, p. 163). When I arrived at the mall I saw advertisements and signs that portrayed individuals who had very similar presentations of my gender. I entered a store that had “men’s wear” on the logo and was shown around without being asked if I was in the right place or if I was buying a gift. When I needed to use the restroom no one accosted me or denied me entrance to the bathroom marked “men.” I did not fear for my safety in using that facility. When I was asked to fill out a comment card at one store there was an option for my gender. The entire time I was out, no one asked me for my “real” name, distrusted my gender identity when I presented identification to buy a bottle of wine, or asked me to explain how, when, or why I had surgery to “obtain” my gender identity.

I use these examples of unnoticed gender-based experiences to demonstrate the unearned privilege I am accorded as a cissexual. Although this essay does not directly address language, language is very important and has the power to both assist liberation and to oppress. I am choosing to use “trans\*” as an umbrella term for the multiple identities expressed in the trans\* community which cannot be captured in other available terms. My word choice follows similar terminology in Serano (2007). I personally identify as a cissexual and use this term to define the fact that my biological sex is congruent with my self-perceived gender. That said, I also acknowledge that the terms “cissexual” and the similar though separate “cisgender” present problems for some members of the trans\* community who view the use of “cis,” “cisgender,” and “cissexual” as a means of further stigmatizing the experiences of trans\* people (Enke, 2012).

In order to better frame this work I would like to propose a theoretical developmental model for this advocacy. It seems natural to position the first step in the development of cissexual advocacy at the place of *awareness*. Though the majority of development theories and models begin with a “pre-phase,” in my experience, when a person recognizes a need for advocacy they have already moved beyond the preparatory portion of their journey. A cissexual who has reached awareness may have had any number of experiences previously, ranging from a personal epiphany to having a first interaction with a member of the trans\* community. This stage is characterized by questions and the need for thorough self-reflection and beginning education. A person in this stage should be advised against trying to advocate for anyone because they run a high risk of doing unintentional harm to the people they are trying to help. Many people in the awareness stage think of the trans\* community monolithically based on however few experiences they have had with the community.

A person begins to move out of the awareness stage when they perceive the need for intensive study and purposeful experiences with the trans\* community: reading books by trans\* authors which directly address the trans\* community, attending conferences, pursuing other educational opportunities, volunteering with trans-conscious organizations, or engaging in other activities. This is the *developing* stage and, like the awareness stage, a person in the developing stage needs to be mindful when actively engaging with trans\* spaces and trans\* folks so as not to do unintentional harm. Unlike the awareness stage, a person in the developing stage is actively seeking out new ways to learn and be involved. Indeed the process of finding appropriate activities for involvement is a learning activity in itself. In this stage a person, through experiences with the trans\* community, first encounters resistance to their identities, whether from trans\* people distrustful of cissexual involvement or from those people seeking to help develop cissexual allies. In this stage a person begins to learn the dynamics of perceiving gender versus being perceived to be of one or another gender.

When a person begins to be accepted as an ally by trans\* folks and delves deeper into their knowledge and action they also begin to enter the assumed *allyship* stage. This stage is very important because it has a singular lesson which must be learned. Therefore it is the longest stage of this model and one that can involve the most movement back to earlier stages. An assumed ally is a person who has unilaterally assumed the title of ally—or just assumes they are an ally—without ever having been designated an ally by a person or group of people. Assumed allies often struggle deeply when their status as an ally is called into question. Any member of a privileged group knows that it is easy to set up oneself as an ally, perhaps find an ally-based training, and call yourself an ally to every member of a particular non-dominant group. The trouble with this assumption is that every member of a non-dominant group also knows the great harm assumed allies can do to individuals and even communities. The lesson in this stage is that an ally is someone who is called an ally by a person or group and having been designated an ally by that person or group is only an ally for that person or group. Just because one of my friends who identifies as a queer woman of color calls me an ally does not mean I am ally for all women, for all people of color, or for all queer people—even though I identify as queer myself. I aspire to be an ally, but aspiring to be an ally makes me nothing more than an aspiring ally. Simply put: “ally” is not a title you assign to yourself.

This perhaps is the point at which I should pause and clarify something about this model: I am not arguing that each stage is a concrete step. Rather, the model is fluid and is driven by the individual and their unique identities and circumstances. It is also very possible, even probable, that a person will move back and forth between stages quite frequently. As I write this article I would like to think I am at the aspiring ally stage (see below), but I also quite often find myself at the developing phase and also all too frequently at the assumed ally stage. These stages and our place within them largely depend on the circumstances of our interactions with others and the environment in which we exist at each moment. That being said, my hope is to give structure, however fluid or abstract, to the continued growth of cissexuals who have begun to reach out to the trans\* community.

Therefore, an *aspiring ally*, the last stage in this model, is a person who seeks to continue developing their knowledge, skills, and experiences around the trans\* community, but who also recognizes that in order to be an ally they must be designated as an ally by a person or group. So being an aspiring ally is not a termination stage, but rather a continual journey which requires the individual to actively engage in new experiences, education, and reflection in order to continue to grow as an ally. A person who reaches this stage and then decides to stop actively engaging with their own development easily returns to previous stages. The aspiring ally stage is in many ways the beginning of a journey rather than end of a path of

development. A challenging element of this stage is working through the continual or potential feelings of guilt around the entitlement of our gender.

One of my students came out to me as transgender and in working with him I realized that I was silently questioning to what point he could understand being a man given that he had been raised as a woman. This limiting of a person based on gendered lessons and socialization is a myth and is a key element of cissexual privilege. Serano (2007) said “In other words, cissexuals view their gender entitlement as a birthright” (p. 168). Aspiring allies also learn that while self-identification is an important part of a trans\* person’s identity development, identifying others is also important. Abes and Kasch (2007) introduced queer theory into earlier work with the trans\* community (Abes and Jones, 2004) in order to further analyze the experiences of one of the participants named in both studies as “KT” who identified as transgender. One of several conclusions Abes and Kasch (2007) drew was that “Aspects of KT’s queer narrative are about the viewer, not the viewed. It is the viewer’s perception of KT’s identities that constructs distinctions and unities among KT’s dimensions of identity” (p. 633). This statement situates much of the understanding of a trans\* person’s identity not on the trans\* person, but rather on the external viewer of that person. This view is supported by experience, for example, around bathroom use. A trans\* person who identifies as a woman, but is perceived as a man will potentially have more difficulty accessing a female bathroom than a cissexual woman. That fact has little to do with the actual way the trans\* person identifies, but rather with the way they are viewed. This lesson carries a two-fold weight for a cissexual aspiring ally: my conclusions about another person’s gender have power and the way in which every person experiences gender is dictated by the gendered conclusions of others.

Aspiring allies have a responsibility to engage in reflection as well as continual engagement. For that reason I envision the aspiring ally stage as comprised of four sub-stages, each which drives the overall stage through the course of reflection. I borrow the idea for these sub-stages, though not their names, from Nash and Viray (2013). The first sub-stage is a *challenge idea*, in which the aspiring ally faces an unplanned or difficult situation and must work through its implications. For example, an aspiring ally who has never been an ally for a trans\* person in their immediate family or close circle of friends. The next sub-stage is simply *sitting* with this challenge. Once the edge of the discomfort has dulled, the cissexual moves to the third sub-stage which is *full reflection* on the challenge and what it means to them and to the trans\* person or group of trans\* people. Narrative writing, counseling, and other externally reflective means may be useful to consider the situation without projecting the challenge on others, particularly on trans\* people. If the aspiring ally is able to move through reflection they reach *resolution*. Resolution, as the fourth sub-stage, should be understood in this context not as a resolution of all questions or challenges, but rather as a state of being

that “holds of the promise of inner transformation” (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 72). The transformation is what moves the cissexual aspiring ally forward to greater awareness of what it means to truly be an ally.

While I do not believe it is possible for cissexuals to ever fully resolve our privilege because we can never truly understand a noncongruency between our internal and external gender and sex identities. In not understanding this reality we also lack the capacity to truly grasp how gender can be internally identified and not always performed. However, as cissexuals become allies with the trans\* community the inability to understand creates significant feelings of guilt which is simultaneously unsettling and necessary to their further growth and development. By sitting with these feelings and reflecting on their power, cissexuals can move forward to supporting the trans\* folk they encounter. No one cissexual can ever be an ally of all trans\* people, but one cissexual can show other cissexuals the way. This is perhaps the goal of being an aspiring ally: help those who identify like us along the way.

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