

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN GENDER FRAMES:

The Case of Transgender Reproduction

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In this article, we examine the ways gendered frames shift to make room for societal changes while maintaining existing pillars of systemic gender inequality. Utilizing the case of U.S. media representations of transgender people who reproduce, we analyze how media outlets make room for increasing societal recognition of transgender people and maintain cisnormative and repronormative traditions and beliefs in the process. Specifically, we outline how these media outlets accomplish both outcomes in two ways. First, they reinforce cisgender-based repronormativity via conceptualizations of transgender reproduction as new and occurring in contrast to normative, cisgender reproduction. Second, they create a transnormative reproductive subject, which establishes a new socially sanctioned script for what it means to be transgender and what types of transgender experience may be recognized or accepted in mainstream society. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding how social authorities may shift existing gender frames to make room for changes in society while at the same time maintaining normative beliefs. These normative beliefs continue to facilitate societal patterns of gender inequality within such new frames.

Keywords: *transgender; reproduction; gender frames; doing gender; repronormativity; cisnormativity; transnormativity, gender*

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In 2008, mainstream media began to take notice of transgender reproduction as a result of Thomas Beatie's writing and public speaking about his pregnancy (M. Ryan 2009). This was neither the beginning of transgender reproduction as an element of social life, nor the first time transgender people had written publicly about reproductive experience. In fact, people who would now be considered transgender have engaged in various processes of family formation throughout recorded history (Stryker 2008), and trans writers, such as Patrick Califia in 2000 in *The Village Voice*, have addressed transgender reproductive experience before and since this event. Rather than the discovery of a new phenomenon, media coverage of Thomas Beatie's pregnancy represented the entrance of transgender reproduction into the mainstream consciousness.

As media pundits and some scholars noted at the time (M. Ryan 2009), the Beatie case and the topic of transgender reproduction more broadly provide an opportunity to examine continuity and change in societal gender norms (see also Riggs 2013). On the one hand, media coverage of Beatie, and other cases of transgender reproduction since, continue historical framing of reproduction as an essentially gendered and potentially necessary part of social life (Almeling 2015; E. Martin 1987). On the other hand, the incorporation of transgender people's reproductive endeavors shifts historical efforts to link pregnancy and childbirth to cisgender womanhood and cisnormative beliefs proposing that all people assigned female must identify as women (McCabe and Sumerau 2018). As transgender populations become increasingly visible and reproductive politics continue to hold major sway in U.S. politics and media, what are we to make of these tensions? How do gender frames shift to make room for increasing recognition of transgender people and maintain prior traditions and beliefs about gendered phenomena?

Here, we address these questions by examining U.S. media coverage of transgender reproduction since the Beatie case. Specifically, we analyze how media representations frame transgender reproduction in ways that both *create symbolic room* for some forms of reproduction that do not conform to cisnormative demands for sex–gender congruency, and *maintain boundaries* between cisnormative reproduction and other forms. Further, we demonstrate how media representations of transgender reproduction create a new script—or ideal type—of transgender selfhood (Johnson 2016), and discuss the implications of this construction for transgender populations. In so doing, our work provides an illustration of the importance of examining shifting gender frames, as well as the ways

such shifts may reveal processes of both continuity and change in the operation of gender in contemporary societies.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN GENDER RELATIONS

Rather than an immutable component of biology, gender scholars have long demonstrated that gender itself is an individual and collective accomplishment (see, e.g., C. Connell 2010; R. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987). Following Goffman (1977), social authorities segregate all aspects of social life into masculine and feminine, and individuals and groups are taught these gendered meanings throughout their lives. With these lessons in mind, people may then act in ways that others may read as evidence of a masculine or feminine self (Kessler and McKenna 1978). At the same time, people hold themselves and others accountable to properly presenting masculine or feminine selves throughout their social interactions (Garfinkel 1967). While the behaviors and other components of a masculine or feminine self may vary widely between settings and contexts, all such meanings rely upon people adopting and holding others accountable to whatever it means to be a man or a woman at a given time and in a given place (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Expanding on these observations, Ridgeway (2011) argued that such processes of doing gender ultimately rely on the construction, dissemination, and enforcement of gender frames. Gender frames are the shared meanings people develop and internalize concerning which behaviors, appearances, and other social phenomena are essentially masculine or feminine (see also Goffman 1974). If, for example, long hair is framed as evidence of a feminine self, then people may encounter another person with long hair and “determine” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014) this person possesses a feminine self and should be held accountable to other frames defining what it means to be feminine in that place and time (see also Sumerau and Mathers 2019). As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) noted, such frames allow individuals and groups to both “do” their own gender and “determine” the gender of others in line with social expectations.

As such, gender scholars have repeatedly stressed the importance of critically examining the construction, dissemination, and enforcement of gender frames (see Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016 for review). For example, researchers have shown how social authorities, including but not limited to law (Meadow 2010), government (Westbrook and Schilt 2014), media (Miller 2018), science (Nowakowski and Sumerau 2019), families (Pfeffer 2017), and religion (Sumerau, Mathers, and Lampe 2019), each

frame gender in specific—sometimes similar, sometimes different—ways that provide the symbolic resources for ongoing processes of doing and determining gender. Overall, these studies demonstrate how gender frames provide the masculine and feminine meanings that people will be held accountable to in the course of their ongoing lives.

Building on such studies, gender scholars have devoted significant attention to the ways people resist and/or hold one another accountable to gender frames (see, e.g., Garrison 2018; Shuster 2017; Sumerau and Grollman 2018). Like gender itself, such studies note that “accountability structures” (West and Zimmerman 1987) are not immutable or static. Rather, the frames people may be held accountable to vary, shift, and change across settings and time periods. They also shift in relation to broader patterns of social change or the incorporation of new knowledges and populations into mainstream social arrangements (Johnson 2018). Following Dunn and Creek (2015), understanding gender in society thus requires attending to continuity and change in gendered frames (see also Johnson 2015).

CISNORMATIVE, TRANSNORMATIVE, AND REPRONORMATIVE GENDER FRAMES

In the present study we examine a case at the nexus of three gender frames in the midst of societal shifts: cisnormativity, transnormativity, and repronormativity. As Pfeffer (2017) noted, the increasing visibility of transgender populations both demonstrates the socially constructed nature of cisnormativity and complicates mainstream assumptions about reproduction, reproductive bodies, and the formation of families (see also Riggs 2013; MacDonald et al. 2016). At the same time, however, increased transgender visibility coincides with the social formation of an ideal—or potentially “normal”—transgender subject (see, e.g., Johnson 2016; Miller 2018; Sumerau and Mathers 2019), which creates tensions within and beyond transgender communities concerning what it means to be transgender and who is both properly transgender and potentially acceptable to society (see also Garrison 2018). The case of transgender reproduction provides an opportunity to witness how transformations in these cisnormative, transnormative, and repronormative gender frames play out.

Mainstream recognition of transgender reproduction demonstrates the socially constructed nature of cisnormativity. An ideology that assumes and requires all people to be cisgender (i.e., people who develop gender

identities that conform to the sex they were assigned by social authorities at birth) and enforces such norms on others (Serano 2007; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016; Westbrook and Schilt 2014), cisnormativity rests upon people holding themselves and others accountable to gender framed as congruent with assigned sex, limited to two and only two options, and recognizable for the purposes of gender determination. Much like other examples of increased transgender visibility, attention to transgender reproduction requires a revision of cisnormative gender frames to incorporate an aspect of social life that does not fit into the existing belief system (Riggs 2013). As a result, the case of transgender reproduction unfolds alongside attempts by some to challenge and change cisnormativity (Meadow 2018), and efforts by others to maintain and reinforce this system (Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018).

As Johnson (2015) noted in his discussion of similar dynamics related to biological and medical norms more broadly, the tension between cisnormative beliefs that biology predicts and defines gender and greater transgender visibility impacts the ways gender is framed in relation to bio-medical practices as well as the contents of cisnormative bio-medical accountability structures (Castañeda 2015). For the most part, social authorities have responded by shifting some aspects of cisnormative bio-medical norms to less explicitly anti-transgender forms, while maintaining the framing of cisgender selfhood as the natural default setting for human social development (shuster 2016). In this study, we build on these observations by exploring similar complexity in the case of transgender reproduction.

At the same time, however, researchers noted that challenges to cisnormativity, especially since the 1990s, have led to the formation of ideal types of transgender selfhood (Schilt 2010; Mason-Schrock 1996; Miller 2018). Termed “transnormativity,” studies demonstrate that such ideal types emerge from broader social recognition of only certain forms of transgender experience, create pathways for possible social acceptance for transgender people who fit into these forms, and facilitate greater marginalization for transgender people who do not fit within these forms (Johnson 2016). Further, such studies demonstrate significant tensions within and between transgender communities about the emergence of a “normal” or “ideal” transgender type (Garrison 2018). Although research has begun to investigate the creation of such ideal types in relation to, for example, relationships (Pfeffer 2017), coming out (Travers 2018), and health care (Johnson 2018), here we demonstrate another potential avenue—reproduction.

To this end, reproduction may be especially important for scholars seeking to understand shifting gender frames because few aspects of contemporary society are as heavily prized and privileged or as emphatically gendered as the biological production of offspring (see, e.g., Almeling 2011, 2015; Berkowitz 2009; Carter 2009; K. A. Martin 2003; Waggoner 2015). Recent work on repronormativity (Franke 2001), or an ideology that assumes and requires all will seek to biologically reproduce, offers similar insights. Specifically, such analyses consistently demonstrate that the cultural imperative to biologically reproduce impacts every aspect of social life, facilitates the marginalization of childfree people, and represents a systematic source of pressure and medical power upon the population and especially upon those assigned female (see, e.g., Blackstone and Stewart 2012; Downing 2015; Weissman 2017). Taken together, these studies suggest the relationship between normative gender frames (trans or otherwise) and reproduction offer fertile ground for analyses.

Much like the emergence of ideal types of transgender selfhood, however, the role of reproduction in the maintenance or adjustment of gender frames is complex. On the one hand, many people define their reproductive experiences as incredibly fulfilling, meaningful, and positive (see, e.g., Carter 2009; Carter and Anthony 2015; Riggs 2013; Mamo 2007; K. Ryan, Todres, and Alexander 2011). By the same token, many people regret reproduction, and many others experience considerable strain due to societal pressures to biologically reproduce (see, e.g., Donath 2015; Lupton 2000; MacDonald et al. 2016). Further, we see both responses from transgender and cisgender respondents (and others who identify between or beyond such designations personally or politically), and each example suggests that repronormativity, as a social system, is problematic, but that reproduction, at least in some cases, is not necessarily so. With this complexity in mind, we examine how media frame reproduction among transgender people.

METHODS

Data for this article derive from news reports published over the course of four years. The first author used database searches within mainstream media websites and collections to locate and survey any reports on transgender reproduction published between January 1, 2013, and December 31, 2017. These endeavors were done with the 25 highest-trafficked news media sources in the United States (Olmstead, Mitchell,

and Rosenstiel 2011). The time period was chosen in an attempt to capture any potential variations over a multi-year period and recent media reports to construct a baseline for guiding future research endeavors. This time period was also chosen to explore media coverage of transgender reproduction following the Beatie case. Data collection proceeded from the initial location of the articles. The first author utilized and cross-checked databases for each media outlet to locate all possible articles. They searched for articles with key words, including “transgender,” “transgender reproduction,” “transgender pregnancy,” and “transgender birth.” They further attempted variations of these words as well as terminology used in some of the results (i.e., “pregnant man”). Results that were only focused on cisgender people and reproductive issues were excluded, but articles about transgender reproduction reprinted by media outlets were included to capture an overall portrait of the coverage. The final sample includes 27 articles from 14 media outlets (see Sources below for details).

Our analysis developed in an inductive manner. Drawing on elements of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), the first author began by reading each article in detail and taking notes about themes in the articles. They were initially seeking to understand such news coverage in relation to a study planned in the future but became intrigued—or developed an inductive twinge about gendered meanings (Kleinman 2007)—when reading and re-reading the articles while taking notes and writing memos. This process led them to begin outlining an analysis based on the themes in the articles. The second author provided assistance and guidance on data collection procedures, data analysis, and reproduction scholarship. The first author devised a working paper that they shared with the second author who revised the work. The two then shared the working paper with the third author, who specializes in transgender studies. After reading through the working paper and discussing the data with the first and second authors, the third author took clean copies of the articles and copies with the coding and notes of the first author for comparative analysis (see Rohlinger 2015 for comparative approaches to content analysis and verification). The third author then went back through the entirety of the articles, coding the clean copy to pull out themes. Following her initial coding of the clean copy, the third author compared her codes to those obtained by the first author, reviewed by the second author, and used in the working paper. Upon confirming similar codes, the third author began developing the analysis presented here with insights from the other authors.

This composition continued in a back-and-forth manner wherein the third author shared potential explanations with the other authors while the other authors provided commentary upon such developments. Together, we developed a typology of themes common and repeated in the articles (Charmaz 2006). The culmination of these efforts allowed us to ascertain how U.S. media reports about transgender reproduction frame gender, reproduction, and transgender people. In the following analysis, we outline how such framing creates space for transgender reproduction within a cisnormative gender system by reinforcing repronormativity and creating a transnormative subject.

REINFORCING REPRONORMATIVITY

Media reports of transgender reproduction occur within a social context wherein reproduction is generally defined as a necessary component of full social participation (Almeling 2015). Reproduction, and reproductive-based kinship networks or families, as Heath (2012) noted, are highlighted and promoted as the ultimate ideal, and a perceived requirement and expectation for living a full life. Not surprisingly, mainstream media content, even when focused on a non-cisgender population, reinforces these repronormative assumptions throughout its coverage. At the same time, it does so by defining transgender reproduction as an exception to cisnormative, biologically based reproduction.

Transgender Reproduction as New

Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers (2016) demonstrated that the erasure of transgender populations from broader social knowledge is an important mechanism for facilitating cisnormativity (see also Mathers 2017; Shuster 2017; Westbrook and Schilt 2014). While Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers (2016) focused on the ways social authorities avoid or ignore the existence of transgender people historically and at present, processes of erasure may also arise in the ways social authorities frame a given practice or group (Ridgeway 2011). This occurs when a group or practice that is not new is framed as “new” when social authorities begin to pay attention to it in some way. In fact, this type of framing was evident in all the articles about transgender reproduction we examined.

History is filled with examples of this generic process of erasure (see, e.g., Collins 2005; Loewen 1995; Warner 1999). First, there is a population or practice that has occurred at many times throughout history, but

either the practice, the population, or both are currently marginalized in a given society. Then, as a result of activism of some sort, the marginalized practice or population begins to gain mainstream attention. Next, social authorities define the “not new” practice or population as “new” for their followers when empirically the only “new” thing is that the mainstream now recognizes the practice or population. The combination of these steps erases the history of the population or practice, aligns with existing norms built on the erasure of the practice or population, and frames the marginalized practice or population as something abnormal or unexpected (i.e., rather than systematically ignored or suppressed).

We saw this type of erasure taking place in the case of transgender reproduction in every article within our sample (see also Sumerau and Mathers 2019 for discussion of this pattern in relation to transgender visibility more broadly). Especially considering the media we analyzed was published years after the Beatie case was widely publicized, the presence of this type of framing (i.e., the absence of any historical recognition of transgender people who reproduce) is especially striking because a simple Internet search reveals the inaccuracy of this frame. At the time of the Beatie case, for example, news outlets ran stories with headlines like “The Pregnant Man Speaks Out,” “He’s Having a Baby,” and “Pregnant Man Gives Birth to Second Child.” Although even these stories were not about anything “new” aside from Beatie’s willingness to be public about his pregnancies, their reliance on framing Beatie as a “new phenomenon” would find voice again years later in every single article we examined on the subject.

This makes sense, however, when we consider that cisnormativity, as a belief system, leaves no room for transgender people, and thus, cisnormative gender frames must be revised at any time transgender existence is recognized in the mainstream (Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018). Although Beatie was only one case receiving mainstream attention, the emergence of more such cases created further situations wherein cisnormative-based outlets had to find ways to revise their prior frames for covering such topics. This type of framing referred to each transgender reproductive case as “historic,” “the first ever,” “unique,” “history making,” or otherwise something that had never happened before the last five years (for similar patterns in recent coverage of other transgender experience, see Sumerau and Mathers 2019). A profile of a transgender couple in 2016, for example, began with the following: “The couple who made history last year when the transgender ‘father’ fell pregnant by the trans ‘mother.’”

This type of phrasing shows up throughout the articles. It seems the “first time ever” or “history making pregnancy” can happen multiple times every year. Despite the above example noting 2016 as the first case and many other outlets covering Beatie in 2008, the Associated Press noted that a couple were “making history with a unique pregnancy” in 2015. This is interesting because some media covered examples of transgender reproductive experiences nearly 20 years ago (see the 2000 *Village Voice* coverage of Matthew Rice by Patrick Califia noted in the introduction). Despite the passage of almost two decades, outlets including *The Washington Post*, *Yahoo News*, CBS, *The Huffington Post*, CNN, and the Associated Press all framed cases between 2013 and 2017 as “new” or “history making.” Even more striking is that some of these outlets—CNN and CBS, for example—covered the Beatie case years beforehand as well. The same way the Americas are framed as “discovered” when colonialists conquered them in U.S. history texts (Loewen 1995), transgender reproduction appears to have been “discovered” or “new” when mainstream media chose to pay attention to it, and sometimes it was even new again the second or third time a media source covered it (i.e., CNN and CBS).

Regardless of any intentions on the part of media producers or audience members, this type of framing creates the impression that reproduction is and has been a cisgender phenomenon rather than something that could be done by anyone with the biological capability to do so. This framing defines reproduction as a cisnormative phenomenon but also makes room for transgender people within repronormativity by defining each example of transgender reproduction as the first time non-cisgender people have reproduced biologically. As such, the repronormative gender frame shifts to allow space for transgender people but maintains its cisnormative foundation by defining transgender reproduction as an exception.

Reproduction in Contrast To

As noted above, repronormativity is one of the most common and widespread ideologies in the United States (Almeling 2015). Within and beyond media, such messages find voice in narratives defining reproduction as *the*, rather than one possible, pathway to fulfillment, happiness, and social recognition. As Heath (2012) showed, these narratives circulate throughout all levels of society and often provide the foundational assumptions for many social policies regarding economics, medical access, and other fundamental social resources. Further, such narratives

define reproduction as intrinsically linked to biological, cisnormative gender frames conflating biological reproduction with parenthood and female assignment with womanhood.

All but two of the articles we examined accomplished such repronormative reinforcement and did so by emphasizing biology. Regarding a transgender couple in 2015, for example, the Associated Press noted: “Although both take hormones, neither has undergone gender-reassignment surgery so the child-to-be was conceived the old-fashioned way with no known medical complications to date.” Likewise, in a profile of another transgender parent, in 2016 *The BBC* noted, “She is a trans person who has scorned societal labels by refusing gender reassignment, yet also embraced the family institution to become a mother.” The same profile later noted that this transgender duo “could conceive a baby like any other couple—without medical intervention.” Despite the empirical reality that many people, regardless of genitals or gender identities, cannot conceive children without medical aid or do not wish to biologically reproduce (Almeling 2011), these articles define biological reproduction—and especially forms of it created via sexual activity between different sets of genitals—as the natural path. Further, as we note below, the notion that trans people can reproduce “like any other couple” creates the impression of a “universal” reproductive experience despite wide variations based on a variety of factors in the ways people do reproduction and experience such endeavors. Even as such media make room for transgender people in mainstream discussions of reproduction, then, these articles reinforce the biological underpinnings of cisnormative and repronormative systems, while suggesting there is some type of “normal” and “universal” pregnancy experience.

Another way the articles reinforced biological repronormativity while universalizing pregnancy itself involves framing reproduction as an experience that transcends social differences or variations tied to differential social locations (see also McCabe and Sumerau 2018 for more on this theme of framing cisgender reproduction). In fact, this element was present in all but one of the articles in our sample. Specifically, this type of rhetoric suggested that there exists a normal method of pregnancy that transcended social markers. Whereas researchers have noted that reproductive efforts overall, and pregnancy specifically, vary by race, sex, class, gender, sexualities, and other social factors (Almeling 2015), media accounts contrasted the transgender cases they studied in juxtaposition to “regular,” “normal,” or “ordinary” pregnancies. In fact, one article even framed the case in question as “an otherwise ordinary pregnancy” (CNN

2017). About another transgender family in 2017, *The Huffington Post* noted that “they’re nearly indistinguishable from any other family.” Interestingly, each of the articles utilized similar rhetoric, and in such cases, representations of transgender reproduction were framed in contrast to a usually unspoken assumption of what a “normal” reproductive process would be.

This type of framing is reminiscent of the ways reproduction is often framed when related to other marginalized practices or populations. In terms of populations, for example, we see similar framing (i.e., there is one normative way to reproduce) noted in analyses of lesbian, gay, and bisexual pregnancy, child-rearing, and reproductive plans and rights (Berkowitz 2009). In terms of practices, Almeling (2011) showed similar ways medical/technology-based reproduction is often framed as less natural or abnormal in comparison to sexual reproduction. In these cases, media makes room for reproductive phenomena beyond cisnormative, biological norms while also defining anything outside of such norms as an unusual or abnormal exception. Likewise, such efforts make room for transgender people but ultimately reinforce cisnormative repronormativity as the standard frame by which all other efforts are judged.

CREATING A TRANSNORMATIVE SUBJECT

As noted above, increased transgender visibility has facilitated the creation of ideal types of transgender selfhood. Following Johnson (2016), the creation of a transnormative narrative or self—or a societal image of what a “normal” transgender person is or should be—contains possibilities for social acceptance for transgender people willing and capable of fitting these gender frames (see also Sumerau and Mathers 2019). However, it also creates pitfalls for transgender people who are unwilling or unable to fit these frames (for whatever reason) and are thus left at risk of further marginalization within and beyond transgender communities (see, e.g., Castañeda 2015; Miller 2018; Shuster 2017). Here, we explore how U.S. media coverage of transgender reproduction establishes such a transnormative subject.

To this end, it is important to recognize that the reproductive transgender subject established in these media accounts represents a new gender frame of its own. Although researchers have outlined transnormative subjects established via coming out stories (Schilt 2010), medical and legal protocols (Johnson 2015), and transgender celebrity narratives (Miller

2018), the reproductive transgender self offers another type. Especially considering that many transgender people have, do, or wish to reproduce, this type of representation may be incredibly salient as transgender visibility in mainstream society continues to increase.

This type of transgender subject also may be theoretically important for at least two reasons. First, the reproductive transgender self contains possibilities for positive transgender selfhood that does not conform to the dominant “born in the wrong body narrative.” Rather, as some of Riggs’s (2013) respondents noted, this particular transgender self may find empowerment—or at least usefulness—in the possession of an assigned sex that does not match one’s gender. Second, and related to the first, the recognition of transgender people who both experience fulfilling lives and some social acceptance, and do not conform to medical discourses suggesting sex–gender incongruity is automatically detrimental could lend weight to ongoing attempts to reform the gender frames embedded in medical practice. While only systematic study of transgender reproductive representations and experiences can shed empirical light on these theoretical possibilities, here we outline the contours of the reproductive transgender self found within U.S. media depictions of transgender reproduction.

Just as Normal as Cisgender Parents

Within each example of the media coverage of transgender reproduction we examined, every article that contained quotes from transgender parents (i.e., all but three articles) framed said parents as just as normal as any other (i.e., cisgender) parents. In much the same way lesbian and gay parents are often framed as just like heterosexual parents except gay or lesbian (Powell et al. 2010), this rhetorical maneuvering presents transgender people as complementary to cisnormativity (for in-depth discussion and analyses of how such maneuvers intertwine with societal patterns of hetero, homo, and mono normativity as well, see Sumerau and Mathers 2019). In so doing, however, it makes room for transgender people, but only on the condition that they are relatable to cisgender others. In this way, the cisnormative frame expands to allow *some* transgender people, but does so by creating a boundary between normal, relatable transgender people and deviant others (Garrison 2018). This type of framing allows some transgender people to claim social standing, but may also entail negative repercussions for other transgender people (Johnson 2016).

Such framing was readily apparent throughout the articles we examined. In a profile by *Daily Mail* in 2017, for example, a parent noted: “We are the same as other families. Even though we may not have the same rights, we’re the same.” Similarly, in a profile in 2015, another respondent noted: “We are more than capable of loving our children just as much and just as efficiently as any other parent.” Likewise, in a CBS profile in 2016, another transgender parent, when asked what society should know about transgender families, said:

When it all comes down to it, trans people love their babies just as much as non-trans people. We’re doing this to build families and expand the people that we love. I have the same concerns as any non-trans parent does. . . . Just because the way that we got to that family looks different, doesn’t mean that we’re radically different from any other family.

While some articles (i.e., five of our sources) would mention differences between transgender and non-transgender families in the commentary (all five) and occasionally in relation to discrimination faced by transgender people more broadly (in two articles), they simultaneously presented transgender parents as simply facing the same concerns as cisgender parents. In 2017, for example, CBS had another profile with a very similar line noting that the family in this case “fall[s] into a familiar routine caring for baby . . . feeding, burping, and soothing the newborn just like any other loving parents.” As the *Huffington Post* put it in a profile of a transgender couple in 2017, the parents were “nearly indistinguishable from any other family” in their daily lives having and raising a child.

It is important to note two things here. First, it is striking that transgender reproduction is both distinct from other forms (as noted in the last section) and also indistinguishable from other forms at the same time. Throughout the entirety of the articles, this tension arises repeatedly where transgender reproduction is framed as both very different (as noted above) and basically the same as cisgender reproduction. This emerges as media representations seek both to make room for a transgender subject *and* to reinforce cisnormativity and repronormativity at the same time. Second, it is heartening—and potentially life-saving for some—to see positive portrayals of transgender families in mainstream media, but at the same time, these depictions both leave the struggles faced by transgender families almost completely unexplored and limit potential acceptance of such families to those who might fit with existing norms. Once again, these examples point to the complexity of shifting gender frames to make

room for transgender people while also seeking to maintain aspects of existing cisnormative and repronormative gender frames.

It Gets Better

The second method of creating a transnormative subject involved offering a narrative arc whereby transgender people first faced issues with their bodies and/or gender, but then found loving relationships, engaged in reproduction, and finally lived happily ever after. This story arc appeared, in some form, in every article. It framed reproduction and the establishment of a family as the turning point between difficulties transgender people face and future happiness to come. As with other happily-ever-after or it-gets-better stories that circulate within mainstream and in-community media among lesbian, gay, and to a lesser extent, bisexual populations (Adams 2011), this type of story can be a powerful—and, again, even life-saving in some cases—narrative for transgender people facing struggles within a cisnormative gender system. At the same time, however, this type of story can create false hopes that can be debilitating over time if or when things do not get better, and it can lead cisgender media consumers to assume things are better than they are for transgender people as a whole (Sumerau, Mathers, and Lampe 2019).

In the media coverage of transgender reproduction, this narrative begins with some kind of difficulty related to transgender identity or coming out as transgender. For example, a *New York Daily News* profile in 2015 notes early in the story that coming out to family was, as the subject of the profile put it, “the most miserable months of my life.” The profiles will then generally talk about the details or the difficulties of being pregnant. Whether this part focuses on the hormonal shifts in pregnancy (CBS 2016), conflicts with family (*Boston Globe* 2017), or navigating daily life (CBS 2017), it explains that reproduction is difficult but worth the difficulty. Finally, the narratives always offer some variation of a happy ending where the transgender parent(s) reaches fulfillment. In a 2017 *New York Daily News* profile, for example, this finale is provided by defining birth as “a pure moment of bliss, the happiest moment of my life.” In each profile, the same pattern repeats—being transgender is difficult and painful for one of many reasons earlier in life; reproduction is hard but worth it; and the end result generates bliss or transforms the pain of the past into something joyous.

This narrative also both *reinforces and subverts* existing gender frames. In the former case, repronormativity is located at the heart of these narratives,

and conformity to this societal demand is framed as the pathway to happiness and fulfillment. Although this may be empowering to transgender people who wish to reproduce, it may be equally disheartening to those who do not wish to reproduce, and those who are unable because of infertility or sterilization. In the latter case, however, we see a divergence from medical narratives that define fulfillment and happiness for transgender people as facilitated only via biological transition and the establishment of congruence between sex and gender (Johnson 2015). In contrast, the reproductive transgender self finds happiness and fulfillment through the embrace of sex and gender incongruency via biological reproduction. Here again, we find complexity in media attempts to both make room for transgender people within existing gender frames, and to maintain the cisnormative and repronormative foundations of such frames. In the process, these representations create a reproductive transgender self, which may provide hope for those seeking a similar life and create obstacles for those who diverge from this frame.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we utilized recent U.S. media coverage of transgender reproduction to demonstrate the importance of examining continuity and change in gender frames. Although researchers have noted that gender frames may vary widely across settings, situations, and time periods, such scholarship also reveals how these shared meanings provide the symbolic materials necessary for doing, determining, and holding ourselves and others accountable to gender. Our analysis provides an example of the ways existing gender frames may shift to make room for new developments in society while also maintaining normative systems in the process.

Our findings have implications for analyses of cisnormativity in society. While gender scholars have begun to outline the effects of cisnormative interactional (Mathers 2017), organizational (Yavorsky 2016), and institutional (Westbrook and Schilt 2014) patterns and the processes whereby people reproduce cisnormativity (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016), the methods whereby social authorities both respond to increased transgender visibility and maintain cisnormative beliefs and practices have received little attention (but see Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018; Sumerau, Mathers, and Lampe 2019; Sumerau and Mathers 2019). Considering the expansion of mainstream discussions and consideration of transgender people, issues, and experiences in recent years, processes

whereby social authorities revise and/or maintain cisnormative gender frames may become an increasingly salient aspect of gender scholarship and politics (see also Johnson 2018; Miller 2018; Sumerau and Grollman 2018). As in the case of transgender reproduction, such endeavors may reveal complex interactions between both shifts in existing gender frames and attempts to maintain commitments to cisnormativity as an ever-present social system.

These findings also support emerging scholarship outlining the social construction of transnormativity and normative transgender subjects (see, e.g., Johnson 2016; Garrison 2018; Miller 2018), and extend this scholarship by demonstrating U.S. media elaboration of a reproductive transgender subject. Like other examples of transnormative ideal types established within and beyond transgender communities (Castañeda 2015), the reproductive transgender self provides a guideline and potential yardstick for some transgender people, while also limiting the form of transgender personhood and transgender reproduction delivered to the mainstream. As Johnson (2015) noted, the production and dissemination of these ideal or normative types of transgender selfhood represent new gender frames, which may be examined and compared across varied settings, contexts, and other social domains. We would thus join others calling for continued and systematic attention to the emerging construction of normative and mainstream notions of what it means to be transgender, and the implications of such meanings for gender inequalities within and beyond transgender populations (see also Shuster 2017).

Our results also have implications for reproduction scholarship. Whereas transgender reproduction is neither a new aspect of society nor accomplished only in a few specific ways, thus far reproduction scholars have left this population almost entirely unexamined (see also Riggs 2013). Whether conducting quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methodological analyses, the reproduction subfield to date, regardless of intentions, has been limited to cisnormative versions and aspects of reproduction (see also McCabe and Sumerau 2018). In contrast, we have demonstrated how analyses of transgender reproduction can speak to cisnormativity and repronormativity in the broader society, and by implication, how reproductive scholarship more broadly might benefit from critical analyses of cisnormativity and its role in the social construction, experience, and representation of reproduction.

Our work also has implications for understanding continuity and change in gender frames. First, even when aspects of empirical reality defined as nonexistent by dominant gender frames become visible in

the social world, social authorities—like the media outlets framing transgender reproduction in this study—may create room for such phenomena without dramatically transforming the existing inequitable system itself. Second, the ability of social authorities to create room for marginalized groups within existing normative systems may facilitate enough relief and acceptance for some members of marginalized populations to stall any potential for broader revision or eradication of such systems. These observations suggest systematic analyses of continuity and change among gender frames may shed light upon both the persistence of gender inequality over time and possibilities for combatting such patterns.

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