"Integration and meaning of new gender categories for American LGBTQ+ people"

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In recent years, various identity markers, more specifically gender categories, have emerged. Those may or may not be related to the "male" "female" categories. Labels that make no reference to those terms are often seen, by academics and people who identify with them, as falling under the "transgender" umbrella (Thorne et al. 139; Dvorsky and Hughes). This word is fairly new: it was coined by American psychiatrist John F. Oliven in 1965 to replace "transsexualism" (Oliven 514). He thought this latter term more appropriate because transgender identity is unrelated to sexuality or sexual orientation; instead, it is connected to gender identity and expression more specifically, the fact that those differ from expectations related to the sex assigned at birth. In the United States, the word "transgender" became widely used in the 1990s (Williams 232; Thorne et al. 145) and was added to the acronym LGBTQ+ in the late 1990s (Aravosis; Saguy and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 24). In 1994 the word "cisgender" was invented to refer to people who are not transgender. Its use is debated today, however this paper does not intend to discuss this particular controversy (McIntyre; Defosse).

This paper explores the different categories subsumed under the "transgender" umbrella and their meanings. After proposing a typology of recently coined subcategories, I will analyse the extent to which those new terms are actually used by LGBTQ+ people themselves. Indeed, even though these terms describe trans people and supposedly stem from them to self-identify, the integration of this new vocabulary within the broader "imagined [LGBTQ+] community" (Anderson 6) is worthy of inquiry. To answer this question, I will analyse three data sets collected over the summer 2018 during a fieldwork conducted as an intern for the American non-profit organization Family Equality. It is a non-profit dedicated to LGBTQ+ families, meaning specifically LGBTQ+ adults who are raising children. Every year, the group organizes an event called *Family Week* which takes place in Boston, Massachusetts, but gathers families who live and travelled from 35 states, Washington DC and 6 other countries in 2018. As an intern for the group, I helped organize the week and wrote the survey attendees completed after the event (this document is not publicly available). In this survey, respondents were asked to write-in their own identity labels in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and race. They were not provided with a list of identity markers to choose from because I wanted to be able to analyse the categories they chose without being prompted. I had access to attendees'

answers for both 2017 and 2018. During my fieldwork, I also conducted in-depth interviews with 36 LGBTQ+ people who did not answer the Family Week survey since they were not all members of the non-profit (the two who were members did not respond to the survey). They were recruited thanks to a fellow intern in the organization, who is not a member of said group. He agreed to post on his Facebook account a call for interviews that was then shared by others. I asked respondents to self-identify at the end of the interview specifically to be able to compare how they labelled themselves when they were explicitly asked to do so and how they identified more spontaneously. The differences in self-labelling will be studied as well. This analysis will lead us to reflect on the meaning of the new labels for transgender people themselves and how it differs from the mainstream narrative about this community.[1]

I. Typology of the new gender categories

The recent increase in the diversification and number of gender categories can be observed on numerous social media platforms. The example of Facebook has been chosen for analysis because it offers the most possibilities. When it was created in 2004, people could only self-identify as "male" or "female" but that changed in 2014 when the site started offering 58 possible gender categories for people to self-identity with (Oremus; Lees). This evolution has been analysed by American Sociologist Roger Brubaker:

> [Trans people] transform the space of gender categorization from a one-dimensional continuum into a two-dimensional space, defined by the cis-trans axis as well as the male-female axis. In this two-dimensional space, the categories male and female (or some mix thereof) no longer suffice to define a gender identity; one needs the categories cis and trans as well (Brubaker 16)

In other words, he posits that we are observing a paradigm shift in the way gender is perceived and expressed. Instead of only considering a classic male-female binary or continuum—which already includes the possibility of a trans identity as individuals may move from one end of the spectrum to the other—a second binary can be taken into account when self-identifying

[1] This paper is dedicated to gender categories. As a result, other data points will not be analysed even though they were collected both in the surveys and the interviews. Race, sexual orientation and social class did not have a notable enough impact on gender categorization among the interviewees to be taken into account in this paper. In terms of race the respondents to the in-depth interviews identified as follows: 18 White, 5 Latinx, 4 African-American, 4 Asian-American and 5 mixed race people. Respondents were born between 1953 and 1999: 4 baby-boomers (born 1946-1964), 5 generation X (born 1965-1980), 20 millennials (1981-1996) and 7 generation Z (born after 1997). They did not all live in the same state, most lived on the East Coast since my fieldwork was in Boston, Massachusetts, but the South was also represented (South Carolina and Texas for example), as well as California. Finally, in terms of social class, excluding the 11 students who did not have properly paying jobs, income levels ranged from $20 000 to $230 000 a year: most respondents (13) earned between $40 000 and $90 000 a year, 4 earned less than $40 000 and 8 earned more than $90 000. As for Family Week respondents, the majority was white, 84% in 2017 and 74.20% in 2018, then the racial breakdown was as follows: 6% mixed race, 5% Latinx, 3% Asian and 2% Black in 2017; 8.8% Latinx, 5% Asian; 4.4% Black, 3.8% mixed race and 3.8% Jewish in 2018. The income level was not asked in the survey but I was able to ascertain that the middle, upper-middle classes were overrepresented in the attendees.

and identifying others: the trans-cis binary. The latter cannot really be characterized as a continuum if "cis" or "cisgender" is interpreted to mean "non-trans", especially if the categories that make no reference to the "male" and "female" labels are understood as being part of the trans umbrella. This interpretation is adopted here because it aligns with my fieldwork observations and the literature on the topic (Thorne et al. 139; Dvorsky and Hughes; Herman 4). The categories offered by Facebook certainly illustrate this paradigm shift, given that a person can identify along both binaries or only one if they are ordered in the following way (some categories deemed similar have been merged together).

Identifying on male-female continuum only	**Identifying to both**	**Identifying to trans-cis binary only**
Male	Cis female/ Cis woman	Cis / Cisgender
Female	Cis male/ Cis man	Genderqueer
Man	Cisgender Woman/man	Gender Fluid
Woman	Female to Male / FTM	Gender non-conforming
	Male to Female / MTF	Gender questioning
	Trans Female/ Trans Woman	Gender Variant
	Trans Male / Trans Man	Non-binary
	Trans feminine	Pangender
	Trans masculine	Trans
	Transgender female / woman	Trans person
	Transgender male /man	Transgender
	Transsexual Man	Transgender person
	Transsexual Woman	Transsexual
		Transsexual person

This classification shows that the "male" and "female" categories are perceived and interpreted as being on a continuum—meaning that male and female are not two distinct categories that do not intersect at all but rather a spectrum of potential identities—especially when looking at the "trans masculine" and "trans feminine" categories. The reference to "male" and "female" denotes a journey from one end of the continuum/spectrum toward the other without necessarily reaching it. Using "masculine" instead of "man" or "male" implies that the person

has the qualities and appearance associated with being a man and masculinity, but it does not automatically mean that the person is or identifies as a man or male. Those categories suggest that there are several ways of embodying and living one's gender identity that would borrow from the "female", the "male" or both. This interpretation was confirmed by the interviews conducted as will be shown in the third part.

"Trans masculine" and "trans feminine" explicitly mention the trans umbrella, but other labels do not include the word "trans" and have also been classified as part of this umbrella. It is imperfect to place "genderqueer," "gender fluid," "gender non-conforming" and other terms nominally unrelated to either binary in the trans-cis binary. At first glance, those categories may be seen as being located on or in the middle of the male-female continuum. They would then be related to it. However, those words can also be interpreted as a way of rejecting the "male-female" binary, a form of political statement made by trans people (Thorne et al. 146–48). Moreover, the people I interviewed who identified with those terms also identified as trans (this point will be discussed further later). As a result, even though it is debatable, they were placed as being related to the trans-cis binary. The labels "Male to Female/MTF" and "Female to Male/FTM" may not be explicitly related to the trans-cis binary but they implicitly are, since they refer to a journey from one end of the male-female continuum to the other, which corresponds to the mainstream representation of trans identities (Brubaker 9-10).

Finally, the table shows three terms to refer to being "trans": transgender, transsexual and trans. Transsexual is the older term, so it may be used by people who identified as trans before the word "transgender" became more widely used in the 1990s (Thorne et al. 145). The clipped form "trans" may be more colloquial or used euphemistically to avoid specifying whether the person has undergone surgery. Indeed, "transsexual" may imply that the person has undergone sex reassignment or gender affirming surgeries, and some people may not wish to disclose that when they introduce themselves on a social network website. The term "transgender" would then have a broader definition to include people who have undergone surgeries but also those who have not (Thorne et al. 144). During my fieldwork, "trans" and "transgender" were used relatively interchangeably, a stance that will also be adopted here.

II. Integration of those new categories by LGBTQ+ people

Given this multiplication of categories, the extent to which those labels are actually used by LGBTQ+ people themselves must be questioned. In the three data sets collected over the summer of 2018, only the following categories were used:

	Family Week 2017	Family Week 2018	Interviews 2018
Identifying on male-female continuum only			
Male/man	45	62	13
Female/ woman	90	77	10
Identifying to both			
Cis man	0	6	7
Cis woman	0	2	1
Trans man	0	0	1
Transgender masculine	0	3	3
Identifying to trans-cis binary only			
Cis	2	1	0
Transgender/trans	2	1	0
Genderqueer	3	2	0
Gender Non-conforming	1	0	1
Queer	1	0	0
Total	144	154	36

The three data sets include LGBTQ+ people exclusively to observe whether the use of the trans umbrella or the word "cis" is widespread within the community itself. As a result, the transgender population being in the minority in all three sets is not really an impediment to the understanding of the integration of the paradigm shift. The number of trans people was as follow: in 2017, 7 out of 144 participants, meaning 4,86%; 6/154, meaning 3,9% in 2018 and 5/36 or 13.89% in the 2018 interviews. It is, however, very salient that most respondents only identify on the male-female continuum: 135/144 in 2017, 139/154 in 2018 and 23/36 in the interviews; especially if only non-trans people are counted: 135/137; 139/148; 23/31. This shows that the trans-cis binary is not readily integrated in the lexicon of self-identification even within an LGBTQ+ sub-community who is familiar with the terms. The program for Family Week included the words "trans," "transgender," "cisgender," "gender non-conforming" and "non-binary" because some events were organized by and for trans people (Family Equality 10 and 12). Moreover, as an intern, I had informal conversations with attendees and some discussed anti-trans rhetoric coming from the Trump administration—for

example its attempt to ban trans people from the military (Cooper and Gibbons-Neff). This means that attendees know some of the new gender categories related to the trans-cis binary but do not use them to self-identify.

The same holds true for the interviewees. Out of 36, 5 self-identified under the trans umbrella and 8 out of the remaining 31 used "cis" or "cisgender" as part of their self-identification. Out of the 23 remaining interviewees 10 used the word cis or mentioned trans people and their issues during the interview, namely the attacks from the Trump administration against them, but also the fact that activism in the LGBTQ+ community had somewhat forgotten, or was not doing enough for, trans people. Overall, 23 out of 31 interviewees knew some of the vocabulary related to the trans umbrella but only 8 non-trans people used it to self-identify.

The data doesn't shed light on the reasons why people familiar with categories related to the trans-cis binary do not identify with those terms: it could be a conscious rejection of the word "cisgender" for political reasons (McIntyre; Defosse). In other words, being "cis" is then understood as conforming to gender expectations associated with the sex assigned at birth which is seen as too restrictive or a way of reinforcing a form of gender binarity. As a result, refusing the label is a way of rejecting conventional readings of the word as well as any implied link between sex and gender performance. This interpretation explains why any form of non-conformity, and the categories associated with it, is interpreted as part of the trans umbrella.

Alternatively, refusing to self-identify as "cis" may show that respondents see trans issues as separate from them, as "other." The latter explanation stems from the idea that the LGBTQ+ acronym does not represent a united community, but rather that there is a trans community on the one hand and a gay/lesbian/bi community on the other. The integration of the two in one single movement is not self-evident even for their members, which could explain why some gay people do not readily adopt new categories originating from the trans community. This is especially striking since historically, gay people have felt that trans people were a minority that could have a negative impact on their own activism (Coombs). This is notably true for activist groups which use the "politics of respectability" as a tactic, and Family Equality is one of them (Higginbotham; Cooper). These groups of activists tend to try to reduce the number of stigmas that could be assigned to their members and focus on one or two areas in order to be perceived as respectable despite the "attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman 3). In other words, gay people who wanted to have their rights recognized have historically focused on sexual orientation, which meant avoiding any discussion about race, class or a gender identity that would deviate from mainstream norms.

In the end, the paradigm shift posited by Roger Brubaker is only budding; even within an LGBTQ+ sub-community since people who identify with both binaries, or only to the trans-cis

one, are in the minority in all three data sets. It is also notable that out of the 58 categories offered by Facebook, only a handful are actually used. This leaves the question of the meaning of those new categories: how can I interpret them? What do they mean for the people who do use them?

III. Meaning of the new categories for trans people

The trans umbrella outlined so far is rather large and encompasses numerous new categories. As a result, we may wonder what the new categories reveal about trans identities themselves. Brubaker offers a way to map the reality represented by those new words. He explains that the current mainstream narrative of what it means to be transgender mainly focuses on what he calls *trans of migration*: meaning people who have fully migrated from one gender to the other, from one end of the male-female continuum to the other. In practice, this would indicate that the person has changed their identity documents to adopt a new name and reflect their gender identity instead of the sex they were assigned at birth. It also implies that the person has undergone sex reassignment or gender affirming surgery so that their body corresponds to the gender they identify with, and this is recorded on their new identity documents. It further suggests that the person can "go stealth," which means to live as their official and preferred gender without disclosing that they are transgender. However, this feeds into the paranoia around people "hiding" and "lying" about their identities (Beauchamp).

The *trans of migration* or the "stealth model of transitioning" remains dominant in the mainstream narrative, even though it has been challenged by some trans activist groups since the 1990s (Westbrook and Schilt 37). Brubaker considers that there is a discrepancy today between this narrative and the way trans people actually perceive their own identities. He identifies a more complex reality with some trans people who do not want to migrate but would rather remain in an in-between, or even do away with the male-female continuum altogether:

> The *trans of between* involves defining oneself with reference to the two established categories [male-female], without belonging entirely or unambiguously to either one, and without moving definitively from one to the other. The *trans of beyond* involves positioning oneself in a space that is not defined with reference to established categories. It is characterized by the claim to transcend existing categories—or to transcend categorization altogether. (Brubaker 10)

These two ways of being trans are visible in the categories chosen by the people in all 3 data sets. Those who identify without any reference to the male-female continuum would be *trans of beyond*, in particular people who identify with words not directly or explicitly linked to the trans-cis binary, namely "genderqueer," "gender non-conforming," "queer" and "transgender/trans." Grouping those labels within the trans umbrella and considering them as being "beyond" existing categories is confirmed by the interviews. The interviewee who

nominally identified as "gender non-conforming," Fa[2], only did so when explicitly asked to self-label. Throughout the interview they used the label "trans." They described "figuring out [being] queer and also transgender" at the age of five, being a "closeted queer person and transgender person," and "never coming out as trans" to their parents despite having undergone surgeries. This way of speaking about their identity shows that they first identify as part of the trans community before delving into more detail. The same can be said for the other four trans people interviewed as they identified as "trans masculine" or "trans man." In the flow of conversation, they would say "coming out as trans," "my trans identity," "as a trans person" and only identify along the male-female continuum when asked explicitly. The idea of identifying with the trans community first, before any other gender categories, was also illustrated during my fieldwork. Some interviewees and trans participants at Family Week made a point of wearing outfits or jewellery displaying the trans flag. This choice visually signifies both their belonging to the trans community and their wish to be seen as trans beyond other gender categories that they identify with or could be assigned to them.

The new first name chosen by trans people may also be used as a way to audibly refuse existing gender categories and affirm one's trans identity. A 2019 study of 55 trans people conducted by psychologists in Nebraska found that most respondents chose new names related to their gender identity: trans masculine respondents chose names traditionally associated to men and trans feminine people names associated to women. However, among those respondents a non-negligeable proportion (13.3% of trans feminine, 33.3% of trans masculine and 50% of gender nonconforming people) chose a gender neutral name which shows a willingness to be recognized as "in between" existing categories (Obasi et al. 7-9). The same is true of my interviewees. Three of the five trans people interviewed chose a masculine first name, but the other two, namely Fa and Zim,[3] chose to make up a new first name so that they would not be readily associated with one gender. Zim explained that he chose it because he didn't think it existed and it would prevent people from assigning him a gender upon hearing the name: he wanted to be perceived as possibly trans from his name alone. It is also a way to show that he hasn't fully migrated from one end of the gender continuum to the other: he exemplifies the *trans of between*.

The labels that would fit in the *trans of between* are specifically "trans masculine" and "trans feminine." They once again show that the "male" and "female" categories are seen as a continuum, not a binary and people who identify with those terms have chosen not to fully migrate from one side to the other. Zim is firmly in this group, uses he/him pronouns and

[2] Names of respondents have been changed to preserve anonymity. Videoconference interview conducted on July 18th, 2018. Fa was 54 at the time, identified as gender non-conforming and Filipino American.
[3] Interview conducted in person in Sommerville, Massachusetts, on July 2nd, 2018. Zim was 31 at the time, identified as trans masculine, White and Jewish. He worked in non-profit management.

identifies as “trans masculine,” but refuses to be seen as having migrated from female (or woman) to male (or man). He is married to a woman but doesn’t want to be perceived or labelled as being in a straight relationship, even though his wife and him are often perceived as such: before his transition he identified his relationship as “lesbian” and since his transition he labels it as “queer.” Regarding his personal identity, he explained: “I identify as trans masculine but not necessarily fully as a man.” When his brother asked him, “why would you want to be a man?” he answered, “this is not what this is.” He didn’t develop further, but this shows that he repeatedly refuses to fully migrate. This is why he uses gender neutral words as much as possible to describe his family relations, his spouse or himself. For example, his brother has children, and they call him “uncle” but he is uncomfortable with this label. Since a gender-neutral label doesn’t exist in that particular context he reluctantly accepts it (and categorically refuses “aunt”). *In fine*, he chooses to live his transition by fully shedding the gender he used to be assigned while not fully adopting the masculine gender.

Zim’s desire to be recognized as a *trans of between* within his own family leads us to question the way trans people negotiate their identities within the family: a gendered sphere if ever there was one. The situation differs depending on when the person transitions in relation to the formation of their family. French anthropologist Laurence Hérault studied narratives surrounding trans parents and found that people who became parents before transitioning saw themselves as “man and mother” or “woman and father,” a sort of *in-between* when it comes to relational identities (Hérault 86). Some people I met during Family Week had a similar outlook: Margaret is a good example. She is a white transwoman who was born in the 1950s, became a parent to three children in the 1980s, transitioned and got divorced in the 1990s before marrying another woman in the 2000s. Her children recognize and accept her gender identity: they use her new name and female pronouns to refer to her but still call her “dad” or “father.” She welcomes that way of perceiving her; following her transition, she now identifies as a woman but still as a father. On Facebook she chose “female” as her gender, but her introduction on the website read in 2021: “transgender activist (…). A loving wife, grandma and a devoted father.” Her own description has evolved since 2021 and now reads “Retired!, Grandma, Wife, Parent, (…) Activist.” In other words, she no longer advertises the trans part of her identity, and seems to have fully migrated in terms of language, but still refuses to fully do so when it comes to her relation to her children: the choice of the gender-neutral “parent” illustrates it. It may be because her descendants already have a mother and she feels her relationship to them is different so the label should reflect that. Those choices show she remains *in between* in her relational identities that started before her transition, even if she has migrated when it comes to other family relations and her individual identity.

Moving beyond language and looking into the physical aspect of trans identity, *the trans of between* is also noticeable. First, trans men who choose to become pregnant after transitioning socially and sometimes physically (through hormone therapy and top surgery for example) embody a form of *trans of between*. In that case, the pregnant man usually chooses to identify as a father and not a mother to the baby, the in-betweenness resides solely in the body and not in relational language. On this point several examples can be quoted: Thomas Beatie whose very public pregnancy was analysed by Laurence Hérault, or Trystan Reese's pregnancy (Hérault; Compton). Second, Logan[4] identifies as a "trans man," he thus seems to have migrated in terms of language. However, when asked to name role models or people who properly represent the trans community, he chose two trans men who can be said to explicitly have *in-between* bodies: Chaz Bono and "Buck Angel." The former was the object of a documentary in 2011, *Becoming Chaz*, in which he discussed his surgeries and his decision not to undergo bottom surgery (Wilson). The latter is an adult film actor who is famous for identifying as a transsexual man, having had top surgery but not bottom surgery and using his vagina in his movies (Holyfield; Sahakian).[5] The five trans people interviewed were modifying their bodies through hormone therapy, but none had undergone bottom surgery or expressed any desire to do so and only two had had top surgery (another two were in the process of raising funds to pay for top surgery). This overt refusal to fully migrate in terms of body while somewhat migrating in terms of language illustrates the complexity of meanings of the new labels for trans people themselves.

To conclude, the number of gender categories has recently been multiplied, especially under the transgender umbrella. Brubaker posits that the new categories show a paradigm shift in the way gender is considered: people can identify with both the male-female continuum and the trans-cis binary. However, we have shown that those new words are not widely used even within an LGBQT+ community whose members are familiar with them. Thus, the paradigm shift is not fully operative. This illustrates that the LGBTQ+ community is not a monolithic group but gathers communities that do not form a cohesive whole, or even fully accept and support each other.

The meaning of the new categories is multiple and complex. The mainstream narrative on trans people is that they migrate from one gender to the other, fully shedding the gender identity corresponding to the sex they were assigned at birth. Those meta categories fit the people met and interviewed during my fieldwork. Some do not want to migrate and want their

[4] Videoconference interview conducted on July 8th, 2018. Logan was 28 at the time, identified as a White trans man. He worked in customer service.

[5] Since the interviews in 2018, Buck Angel has been the object of controversies due to his more conservative stances on gender and sex. The article referenced delve into those but that is not the object here and was not mentioned by the person interviewed.

trans identity to be acknowledged *beyond* their gender. Others express a wish to remain *in between* existing gender categories and norms through language, naming practices, but also in their bodies.

To what extent is that wish respected and understood? New categories are not only about the meaning people attach to them when self-identifying: they must also be understood by others and will potentially be assigned to people, which may have an impact on existing categories. Further research would be needed to analyse both the way the new gender categories are understood and used by non-LGBTQ+ people, and their meaning for existing categories. It would also be worth studying whether there is a generational gap in self-identification. The data sets analysed are composed of mostly millennials for the in-depth interviews and people who were raising children in 2018, so mostly boomers, generations X and millennials. Generation Z was underrepresented; it would be interesting to analyse whether they are more familiar and identify more readily with the new categories analyzed in this paper.

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