

Tey Meadow
Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century
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Quote: "Although the title of the work includes the words "trans kids," the focus of the book is not the children themselves, but how their gender is facilitated, managed, constrained, stressed over, and understood by the adults in their lives and how these understandings actively challenge and change contemporary culture."

In *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century*, sociologist and author Tey Meadow presents the results of her ethnographic study on the changing social processes of *gendering* children. The focus here is on *responses* to the preferences, expressions, and assertions of transgender and gender-nonconforming (GNC) children, specifically those responses that involve parents/guardians seeking assistance from advocates and experts outside the family unit. The focus here involves the perspectives of parents/guardians as they interact with advocacy organizations, gender clinicians, and others who either affirm or reject their child's expression or identity. Formal interviews of the children involved are not a part of the study (for reasons explained shortly), but Meadow spent considerable time visiting, playing with, and generally spending time with the children whose lives are of concern. Of course, an ethnography does not consist in simply recording testimonies of research subjects but in analyzing those testimonies, providing useful context, and *making meaning* of those first-person accounts. Meadow aptly provides insight into these individual and collective experiences and compassionately describes the social landscape in question.

Trans Kids is broken into seven chapters and spans 226 pages, not including the appendices. For my purposes here, I will briefly review each chapter but pay significantly more attention to the first chapter, "Studying Each Other," since it specifies the foundational structure of the study as well as the author's accepted characterization of gender. After discussing these foundational aspects at some length, I then identify the main ideas of the remaining chapters in turn. Lastly, I will briefly critique this work and identify aspects of the study that are more than worthy of further consideration.

Meadow's first chapter, entitled "Studying Each Other," identifies the basic assumptions of the book. Since it is an ethnography, a portion of each chapter consists in the recounting of first-person narratives that were part of this study. Although the title of the work includes the words "trans kids," the focus of the book is not the children themselves, but how their gender is facilitated, managed, constrained, stressed over, and understood by the adults in their lives and how these understandings actively challenge and change contemporary culture. Early on, Meadow realized that interviewing the children themselves could become a source of shame or embarrassment to those children later, and thus chose to discontinue those formal interviews. She writes, "I didn't want to be the vague memory that haunted some future adult, the researcher who showed up because there was something strange or different about their identity, their way of being in the world" (236).

In the case of *Trans Kids*, the ethnography is both relational and embedded, and these characteristics of the study are related to the author's account of gender itself. First, the ethnography is *relational* in that it focuses on "fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people" (232). The study here is not of static culture but of gender categories gaining recognition through social processes. The ethnography is also *embedded*, which is unavoidable given the author's understanding of gender itself as essentially relational and interactive in nature. She explains, "it is the reiterative power of the social that produces the very forms of gender it then constrains and regulates. Gender is an achievement, rather than an attribute" (7). Given that gender is a kind of social negotiation and that a clinical or evaluative gaze is unavoidable, this gaze was leveled at the researcher herself as well as at the trans children and youth around her. In this sense, the researcher's attempts to *make meaning* of these different contexts of gender recognition (or lack thereof) was in the context of her subjects' attempts to *make meaning* of her own gender presentation. Being a researcher and yet also being subject to this evaluative gaze strengthens Meadow's analysis in that she is not independent from the processes she wishes to describe. Her experiences with gender also give her a window through which to understand the experiences of the children of the parents/guardians who were the focus of the study. When reflecting on some of her conversations with renowned psychologist Ken Zucker, she writes, "In some ways, this taste of objectification offered me the closest approximation of what I imagined the children parented by my research subjects experience: objectification in the service of affirmation" (12). In this sense, study participants and the researcher as well are situated as knowers in a shared and changing social context.

Deciding to seek advice from outside of the family regarding how to navigate and respond to one's child's gender expression or identification is a major decision for parents/guardians of transgender and GNC children. Chapter 2, "Gender Troubles" focuses on an identification of the *reasons* that those interviewed decided to seek the assistance of outside advocacy organizations and experts. Meadow's understanding of gender as a kind of social negotiation is readily poised to accept that these negotiations are affected by different cultural contexts, but she contends that reported differences, although culturally neutral, are more affected by the child's gender assignment at birth than by family culture. One of the most interesting conclusions here involves how cross-gender expression, play, and identification are asymmetrical when comparing trans feminine children (those assigned male at birth) and trans masculine children (those assigned female at birth). Meadow reports that trans masculine children are generally older when their parents seek assistance outside the family (mean age 10 as compared to 5.2 for trans feminine children) and that attracting the attention of adult guardians requires, for trans masculine persons, a much greater degree of displayed emotional distress and more persistent and explicit gender identification than it does for their trans feminine counterparts. Relatedly, Meadow found that children assigned male at birth were subject to stricter gender-norm enforcement and that parents interpreted relatively slight norm infractions as cause for concern. Meadow describes the gender category of male as "brittle" (47), and "accorded [both] high value and highly fragile" (51).

"The Gender Clinic" is both the title and topic of Meadow's third chapter. Here, her research focuses specifically on the internationally well-known and since closed Gender Clinic at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto, Canada. The work of CAMH is inseparable from both the influence and reputation of Dr. Ken Zucker, whose professional standing went from being regarded as a revolutionary maverick and one of the most influential psychologists in the field of gender to the demise of his career for being too rigid for the movement he helped to launch. Importantly, Meadow notes that Zucker and his clinic were affected not just by society's changing notions of gender, but also by a push toward a more facilitative role of medicine and psychological care, rather than a more traditional regulative role. Thus, identifying exactly who can be regarded *legitimately* as residing in the category of transgender, as distinct from the "merely" gay or lesbian category, has come to be regarded by many as unjustified "gatekeeping" and should be replaced with a more consumer model of care. Many guardians

of children who sought help from Zucker and his clinic were advised to limit cross-gender play and expression to determine the tenacity and persistence of these behaviors and preferences. These tactics received criticism from many, especially the adult transgender community, and were thought to resemble a form of harmful reparative therapy. For these and other related reasons, rather than look to the psychological community for assistance, many parents and guardians have sought advice from parent-focused organizations.

In "Building a Parent Movement" (chapter 4), Meadow describes the rise of two different advocacy movements and their role in supporting and normalizing transgender and GNC identity and expression in children and youth. Central to understanding, according to Meadow, is the difference in focus and philosophical outlook between the organization Trans Youth Family Allies (TYFA), run by Kim Pearson, and Gender Spectrum, founded by Stephanie Brill. Meadow describes TYFA's Pearson as an "accidental activist," who uses her identity as a mother of a trans child as leverage to build a powerful national movement. According to Meadow, the broadly heteronormative and cisgender logics and assumptions of TYFA are fueled by parental concern and the minimization of risk to their transgender and GNC children. In contrast, those leading Gender Spectrum have had close ties to LGBTQ west coast activism and have focused on education and a critique of the binary gender system. According to many interviewed, Gender Spectrum is more likely to appeal to parents of GNC children than to those parents of children who identify as transgender and envision some form of medical intervention in their future.

Although the subject of anxiety is mentioned throughout the book, the chapter "Anxiety and Gender Regulation" takes on this topic in more depth. The anxiety at issue is not from a single source, but from many. Meadow articulates the stories of those parents/guardians who experience anxiety as a result of recognizing that children who are GNC or transgender are statistically more likely to be bullied, harassed, or simply not accepted in society. The secondary source of this anxiety has to do with other adults who may negatively judge the parent's choices in allowing or celebrating nonnormative gender expression. In some cases, such a negative judgment may result in censure, severe harassment, and even intervention by the state in the form of a visit from a representative of the local Child Protective Services agency. With regard to the latter experience, families who include children of color, LGBTQ parents, and those with prior history with state agencies (for example, with adoption or foster parenting) are all more likely to be regarded as parentally negligent or even abusive for allowing their children to exhibit gender nonnormative expression or behavior in public. As a result, in many cases parents report that they "edited" (175) their children's behavior in various contexts based on perceived risk. Here we see cisgender norms reasserting themselves in the context of parenting non-cisgender children.

The last two chapters, "Telling Gender Stories" and "From Failure to Form," finish up the main part of the book. The first chronicles the various ways in which parents and others narrate the children's gendered lives as a way of making social sense of those lives in their particular social context. Given the contemporary social climate, parents and others are asked to justify or to "give account" (190) of their parental choices and their child's behavior. These justifications take different forms. Many of the parents interviewed (39%) believe that biology is somehow a key causal determinant for their child's gender, others refer to psychology as explanatory, and still others present justification strategies that involve spirituality. These narratives create the basis for new ways of thinking about gender that in turn create social spaces for the enactment and recognition of new forms of gender. Meadow contends that these processes result not in the "end of gender" but a proliferation of a diversity of recognized and distinct genders. Meadow equally accepts these disparate explanations and recognizes that context is relevant to what narratives are adopted and are more likely to be accepted as normalizing. The last chapter, "From Failure to Form," serves as a kind of brief conclusion, pulling together many of the themes I have outlined above.

Trans Kids is a valuable piece of work, but like any project it has some limitations. Given that Meadow's project involves a study of those families who seek assistance in navigating the gender choices and preferences of their children, the pool of those studied is a mere subset of families with GNC or transgender children. First, some families may not seek the help of gender clinics or attend national gender conferences due to financial constraints. Second, some parents/guardians may be hesitant to seek the help of clinics or advocacy organizations due to worries that biases regarding their own race, ethnicity, religion, class, ability level, or other factors may make such interactions ineffectual or worse. Although Pearson's image as a no-nonsense, midwestern, white mom appeals to many parents, and Brill's west coast queer ideology appeals to others, these two images are not universally relatable or ones that inspire universal trust. Third, and as Meadow mentions, regarding one's child as a kind of "project" can be seen as a style of parenting stemming from white middle-class communities. Indeed, most of the families in this study are white. Lastly and relatedly, other family challenges may simply eclipse the need for outside assistance in negotiating aspects of childhood gender, making these families' experiences undetectable to studies such as Meadow's. This is not to say that Meadow presents her findings as anything but constrained by her methodology, but it is worthwhile to recognize that the stories she presents are those of families that are similarly situated in significant ways and are not generalizable to all.

Finally, at least three areas of further inquiry are relevant to *Trans Kids*. First, although Meadow's characterization of gender as a matter of social negotiation works well for her purposes here, the characterization can be critiqued in a number of ways. Meadow admits that there is a tension between the idea of socially negotiated gender and that of gender identity as being an immutable or generally stable aspect of one's identity. The author does not delve into this tension at any length. Instead, she presents her understanding of gender as a kind of postulate, then notes how this characterization is helpful in explaining particular interactions. Second, the experience of anxiety, as expressed by gender advocates, clinicians, and parents, is a central theme throughout the book. The oft-mentioned presence of this particular emotion not only brings the privileges of the cisgender experience into sharp focus, but it is worthy of further consideration in its own right. Indeed, accepting Meadow's analysis paints a picture of a social change birthed by adult anxiety. Third, the last theme that presents itself throughout the book involves the role, or more accurately, the lack of role, that transgender adults are seen to play in the emergence of these new gender categories. If anything, especially in the eyes of some parents/guardians, transgender adults are thought to be the hope-to-be-avoided social-"fringe": individuals from whom parents wish to "disassociate," especially to the extent that some transgender adults do not, or do not wish to, conform to cisgender ideals of expression (117). To the extent that trans communities of different contexts have histories, heroes, and elders, the practice of parents disassociating from these histories and individuals may have significant ramifications in terms of the lives of trans adults, the lives of trans children with experiences similar to those in Meadow's study, the recognition of the different ways to be trans, as well as the policing of gender expression. These last comments are not presented as identifying weaknesses of Meadow's strictly sociological account but are offered as worthy of future consideration.

Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century is worth reading because it presents an important sociological snapshot of the experiences of parents and guardians of transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth. Understanding how these individuals navigate the quickly changing notions of gender provides insight both into the nature of these experiences and of the *gendering* process that serves as the focus of Meadow's study. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Meadow's specific conception of gender, the stories of individuals' interactions with the medical industry, parent-support groups, child-protection services, and the anxiety produced in these navigations provides valuable information for social and moral analysis.