



Reflexions on 'passing': An essay

By Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad

Professor Emerit in sexology at the University of Adger, Norway

The concept of 'passing' is constructed by the transgender community itself as a token of success in the transition process from one gender majority towards the other. It is also supported and has become an aim-setter for many in institutions that offer health care to individuals who experience gender incongruence.

The term gender majority represents the fact that, although the binary gender positions are dominant, a number of transtabled individuals define themselves outside the gender binary: as nonbinary, agender and many other definitions of self as gendered.

The term transtabled reflects the inability of psychotherapy to change anyone's gender identity, and on the insight that transgender or gender incongruence are normal variations in the vast body of gender self-perceptions.

What, then, does it mean 'to pass'?

In short, it means to be perceived by others as cis. Cis meaning congruence between gender assigned at birth and experienced gender later in life.

At the same time, the transgender community is unpleasantly aware that there are differences between those who pass as cis and those who without effort can describe themselves as gender congruent.

The incongruence group lack cis experiences like menstruation, ejaculation, semen production, pregnancy, ovulation and, not least, socialisation as the experienced gender. Hence, we can see passing on a hierarchy of levels:

- a. passing on a crowded street
- b. passing when no one else is around but the meeting person
- c. passing in public situations that involve verbal communication
- d. passing naked in front of a mirror
- e. passing naked in front of others
- f. passing in erotic encounters.

Having worked in and offered gender-affirming and gender-expanding therapy for about 35 years in addition to being transtabled myself, I have felt the power of the demand for passing. I have met individuals who have discontinued their gender path after realising that such a path could never take them all the way to a cisgendered life.

When reflecting on the demand for passing, there are two perspectives to be considered:

1. protection against hate crime and violence, which in turn is dependent on what kind of society and circumstances you live under
2. the internal longing for belonging, which is to be perceived by others as gendered in the same way as you perceive yourself to be gendered, and for that which is being perceived to be rendered a positive value when linked to you.

The first point is very understandable and important. The second raises some vital questions. Even though the demand for passing probably has its origin in transgender communities, there must be some driving force behind it. I have come to understand that it derives from societies that have a demand that individuals blend in as cis, even though the status of cis is out of reach for

transgender people. Thus far, few major cultures or societies have integrated an understanding of gender perception, and hence gender expression, as a continuum within a landscape in which the gender majorities are but two optional havens in which gender euphoria can be experienced.

In short, we can say that societies have a cis ideal for people who experience gender incongruence, and that ideal materialises in the demand for passing. Thus, societies assign a number of individuals to a mission impossible. Passing becomes a straitjacket.

What, then, could be the alternative?

The need for belonging can be seen as one basic human need. Today in most societies there are but two positive offers of gender belonging: as woman or as man. Perhaps in the most developed cultures there are also possibilities for belonging as transwoman or transman.

If societies were to recognise an almost infinite variety of gender perceptions and expressions, and supported this attitude with concepts like transtalented, transgifted and transaesthetics, the demand for passing would probably diminish, and more transpeople could embrace their social life and their naked bodies, be they adjusted or not, including also the sexuality those bodies may have to offer.

It is time to oppose the cultural cis ideal for transpeople, but it is never time to disqualify the ideals individuals may have for themselves.