

Not Your Victim

Confronting Ableism and Transphobia Through a Feminist Analysis of Selected Published Adult Trans+Autistic Narratives of Transition

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Project Objective

I sought to investigate how agential lived experiences of trans+autistic people confound common forms of transphobia.

Background: Illegitimizing Gender

Controlling Images: The Eternal Child

Trans+autistic people, like all autistic people, are seen and controlled through the **controlling image** [4] of the eternal child. That is, they are seen as less agential than allistics. Controlling images, unlike mere stereotypes, become mechanisms of control. In the case of trans+autistic people, this is used to discredit gendered experiences. Even trans-inclusive organizations, in part because of this controlling image, discredit autistic gendered experiences. For instance, the canonical transgender standards of care, with one sole exception, only talks about autism in relation to children and adolescents. Some of the references occur in a section discussing conditions that may “im-pair diagnostic clarity” [1, p. S52]. In essence, an autistic person’s communicated thoughts and feelings about their own gender, their ability to know their own gender, may be compromised according to the standards of care. This control is even more starkly seen in US and UK government regulation which draw upon the eternal child stereo-type. Further, transphobic thought leaders draw upon this controlling image and, using the apparent prevalence of autistic people among trans people, apply it to all trans people. Often this is implied rather than directly stated, but it is clear that the dots are expected to be connected by readers or listeners.

Discredited Yet Popular Theory: Social Contagion

Alongside the controlling image of autistic+trans as eternal children, and interacting with this controlling image, is the theory of trans people as victims of a **social contagion**. Under this theory, trans people are suggestible (and thus non-agential) and can, essentially, catch transgenderism from the wider trans community, particularly the on-line trans community. This was popularized in parent forums, a publication subject to substantial corrections [5] and a retracted publication [2]. It forms some of the intellectual justification for transphobic laws. Combined with the eternal child controlling image, this paints a picture where state intervention may be required to safeguard trans people, and, particularly, trans+autistic people. This in turn removes agency from trans+autistic people. (see Fig. 1)

Interrupting Transphobia

When trans+autistic people exercise agency, they can rhetorically disrupt these transphobia and ableism, particularly the eternal child controlling image (as the child is a stand-in for a non-agential subject) and social contagion (where the subject becomes a passive participant seeking community rather than acting agentially). **This project sought to examine how agency is manifest in trans+autistic people.**

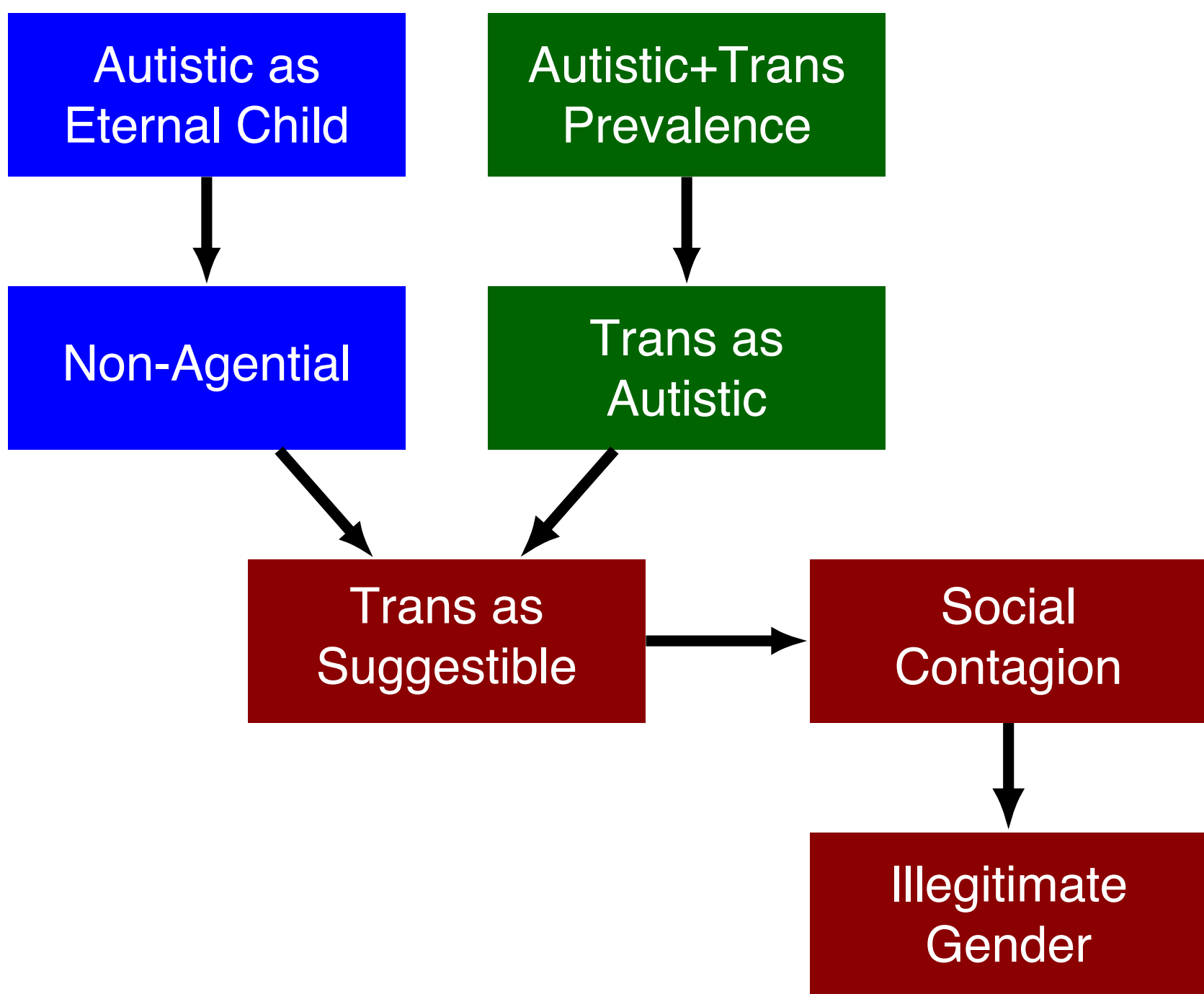


Figure 1: The eternal child controlling image combines with social contagion to illegitimize gender

What Was Done

Trans+autistic autobiographical narratives were analyzed, identifying agential themes present during gender transition. *Spectrums* [7], an anthology of trans+autistic voices was chosen as the source text, as most contributors wrote about their transition. Using a feminist approach to the material that valued the ability of trans+autistic people to speak for themselves, I analyzed the text using what I call an “autistic literalness” approach. This approach recognizes the double-empathy problem [6] alongside Donna Haraway’s situated knowledge theory [3]. Our lived experience shapes how we interpret communication. Using an autistic lens can enhance understanding of autistic writing.

Using this autistic literalness framework, codes, and later themes, were developed during a multi-pass analysis of the source text. During the first pass, descriptions of agency (or lack of) were assigned an initial set of codes. In the subsequent pass, these codes were merged, split, refined, or eliminated, using the previous coding and keyword searches on an OCR-ed copy of the book to ensure relevant passages were not missed during the coding process. This created a set of candidate themes. In the final phase, these themes were refined to produce the final set of themes.

How was this Done?

Agency in Community

Trans+autistic experiences with community demonstrate a counterpoint to the transphobic idea in social contagion of conformance for sake of community. Many writers rejected some communities (often rejecting predominantly-allistic queer communities due to ableism in those communities) or formed their own, more suitable, communities.

This rejection of unsuitable communities and creation of new communities demonstrates agency and confounds theories that autistics are trans merely to be popular. In addition, writers referenced autistic communities as places where gender and sexual diversity was both visible and acceptable, which allowed them to be in community as their gendered/ungendered selves, which demonstrates a different community need from allistic trans community.

Resisting Hegemony

The *Spectrums* contributors wrote of resisting pressures to conform to hegemonic views of gender. For instance, they wrote of being denied gendered expressions by schools, parents, and doctors, coupled with strong pressures to mask their gender. Likewise, they faced pressures to present as neurotypical and to deny their autistic selves. Sometimes this resulted in outright resistance or rebellion, but some resistance was done in less visible ways, such as intentionally hiding their genders in some situations. Regardless, they were keenly aware of how trans+autistic people are seen by others and resisted that pressure, often utilizing strategic disclosure (i.e. Inhabiting online spaces where they could use their true names rather than legal names or presenting as neurotypical to gender doctors). They were aware of what was expected and found ways to exist in spite of that.

Enacting Identity

Often, writers absorbed transphobic ideas and questioned their trans identities. This was seen through autistic ways of discovering and developing knowledge, such as intense research, where they researched the transphobic views and analyzed their own gender against those views, ultimately rejecting those views. While this may have been viewed as obsession by non-autistic observers, research is an autistic epistemology (way of knowing). The writers knew they did not fit. They may have tried to fit into the transphobic, neurotypical system, before ultimately rejecting that system.

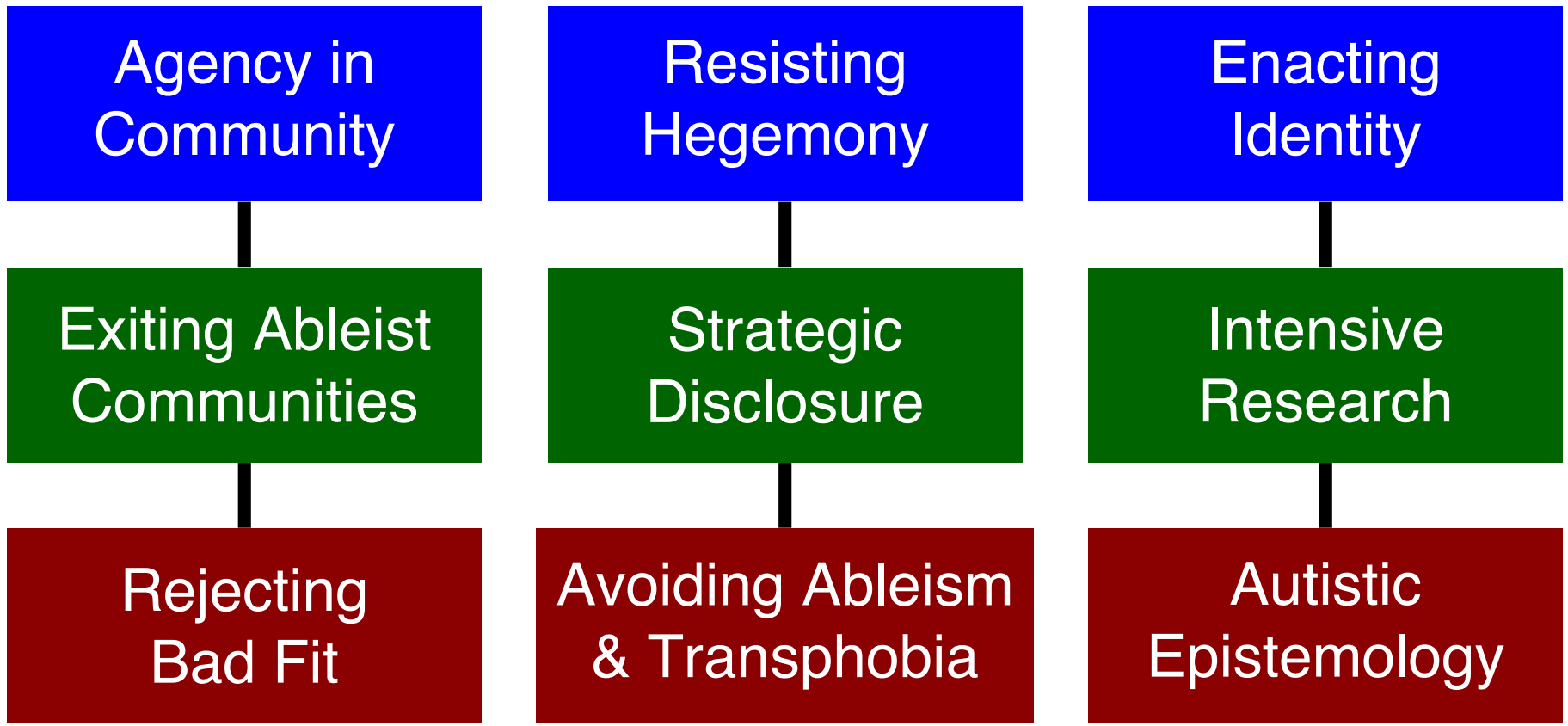


Figure 2: Identified themes, each with an example and explanation of how that example demonstrates agency

Summary

Autistic agential approaches to gender transition confound and interrupt transphobic theories. Rather than autistics as passive participants who latch onto the first community they find, adopting

practices that will lead to acceptance there, autistic people can reject communities that don’t fit. They hear and absorb transphobic and ableist views which pressure them to assume a cis and neurotypical presentation, but then check that against their own lived experiences, often utilizing autistic epistemologies such as intensive research. While this can appear to an outsider as obsession, it is a way autistic people respond to incongruities. This leads, in some cases, to autistic people who do face, and resist, pressure, not from supposed peer pressure to be trans, but from others in their lives who have various degrees of power over them. In these situations trans+autistic people employ resistive strategies ranging from outright rebellion to strategic disclosure.

Advocacy Directions

- Constructing accessible and inclusive queer community spaces, specifically ensuring autistic needs are centered and utilizing trans+autistic leadership.
- Collecting and publicizing stories of resistance and positive autistic+trans experiences.
- Creating resources suited to autistic research (well-cited, detailed, and using both scientific and accessible forms of language), with a focus on responding to transphobic theories.

Some Limitations

Spectrums focused on those who could access language, were aware of the anthology’s call for submissions, could manage the organizational demands of submitting a writing to the anthology, and currently identified as not-cis in some way. As a result, the writers were likely more apt to be politically active and willing to resist hegemonic pressures. Importantly we don’t know what happened to the people who failed at that resistance or may not have the somewhat privileged position of language and political access that the writers in *Spectrums* had.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Sonny Dhoot, for his patience with my anxiety around the thesis this poster is based upon!

I also acknowledge the trans+autistic people who are no longer with us. **You are missed.**

👊 Anti-Acknowledgement

To the USA government: you may try to erase trans+autistic lives, as you tried to erase so many other lives, but **you will not succeed.**