



TransForming Research Practice:

Collaborative Foundations in Trans and
Non-Binary Inclusive Research

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Introduction

There has been an exponential increase in transgender visibility in cultural life in the UK and beyond over the last decade. As this growth has ensued so too has the production of a wave of social research focussed on trans and non-binary people's experiences. For social researchers, policy makers and trans communities alike this is a time of great opportunity, where well positioned and thoughtfully produced research might contribute much needed knowledge to assist the equalities advances of an acutely marginalised population. However this time of opportunity brings with it very real responsibility; it is also a time where social researchers need to pay attention to developing a research culture that produces the knowledge that is most needed to positively effect change and critically, produce this knowledge in culturally sensitive ways, to avoid doing harm alongside this good.

This document is the result of the one day seminar, TransForming Research Practice that took place on 9th May 2016 (#Trans_Forming) and focussed on this important subject. The document considers the lessons have we learned through being involved in research with trans and non-binary populations to date and what thoughts we can offer to social researchers seeking to engage in trans and non-binary people in their research. It does not make any claims to have all the answers and it does not make any attempt to be exhaustive in its scope. Such an endeavour would certainly fail to capture the complexities of the topic and also fail to do justice to its own potential to generate further thinking and debate. Rather, we hope that this document might be the starting point for a much wider conversation for research practitioners and to this end it is presented as a brief, plain language collection of some thoughts that might aid researchers' own reflexive practice. Whilst some of its contents will no doubt be obvious to many seasoned researchers, we hope that some of the more specific content in relation to trans and non-binary populations will be useful to newer and more senior researchers alike.

The document is structured in relation to what might be thought of as three foundations of better research production;

- having a *useful topic*,
- being a *culturally sensitive researcher* and
- adopting *ethical research practice*

For each of these areas we offer some general thoughts for your own exploration as well as some specific ideas. We have described these as collaborative foundations because a key message of this document is that the knowledge we need to produce necessarily involves working in collaboration;

whether this is through conversations with other interested researchers to share expertise and findings, working with trans and non-binary service providers or working collaboratively and meaningfully with communities of interest.

This collaborative approach was at the heart of the production of this document. This document itself was written by Ellis Morgan and Prof. Yvette Taylor who hosted the TransForming Research Practice seminar at the University of Strathclyde on 9th May 2016 but it benefitted from the many voices that contributed to that event; including the voices of academic researchers, activists, community members and representatives of key trans and non-binary services. We hope that this approach can continue to feed a growing research culture based on generosity and collaboration for an outcome that we are all invested in; a strong research culture that supports better lives for trans and non-binary people.

First Foundation: Finding a Useful Topic

The first foundation of any research is having a well-conceived topic. Trans research spans the general-theoretical to the specific lived experience; from formations of trans cultural identities to legal and medical framings, taking in every aspect of how life is lived in the social world, from employment to family life, to partnerships and accessing services. The diversity of research in this arena contributes towards a multiplistic understanding and there isn't one arena of thinking that is more valuable *per se* than another. However whilst an array of approaches all have their place, ensuring that your research topic itself can be genuinely useful, even as a small part of this web of understanding, is critical. There is a vast array of trans and non-binary specific research being carried out but there are still significant gaps in the knowledge that might inform policy and practice to advance trans and non-binary equalities. This section considers how your research topic might be most usefully positioned in relation to three key considerations:

- Ensuring that your area of interest is something of wider value
- Deciding whether your research is best conceived of as trans inclusive or trans specific
- Readyng you research for life after production

How do I ensure that my area of interest is something that will be of wider value?

Whilst a thorough literature search is essential to identify knowledge gaps, it is also useful to enter a dialogue with trans and non-binary service providers, communities of interest and other stakeholders in trans equalities to access their knowledge about what is most needed from their perspectives. You might also consider ways that your research can take current understandings to the next level; for example we may know that trans and non-binary people are likely to experience discrimination, but how does this play out intersectionally to disproportionately affect those most marginalised, perhaps because of class or race? One way of maximising the usefulness of your research is to focus areas of life that are known to be problematic for trans and non-binary people, but where a depth of knowledge is absent. Another way is to focus your research specifically on the most marginalised sections of the population, for example disabled and black and minority ethnic trans and non-binary people.

Is my research better conceived of as trans and non-binary inclusive or trans and non-binary specific?

Trans and non-binary *specific* research focusses particularly on the experiences of trans and non-binary people and this is the most common way that people approach gathering knowledge about these communities. However, trans and non-binary *inclusive* research can also be very useful in advancing trans equalities; this is research that is more generalised but seeks to include trans peoples' experiences in its scope. For example a study of how young people access youth services and actively seeks to include trans young people in its cohort would be trans inclusive research. Both trans specific and trans inclusive research can be useful for advancing trans equalities; whilst trans specific research enables an in-depth look at the quite particular experiences that being trans or non-binary produces, trans inclusive research can allow a broader understanding about ways in which trans and non-binary peoples experiences are different (or not so different) from non-trans people. If you intend for your research to be trans inclusive rather than specific, it is worth considering how you will make sure that trans and non-binary involvement is meaningful and not merely tokenistic. Also, even if your topic is trans specific, it is also worth considering if there other people that could usefully be included that make up part of the picture. For example trans people's family, friends, partners or service providers. Again, it may be useful to enter a dialogue with trans and non-binary service providers, communities of interest and other stakeholders in trans equalities to access their knowledge about what may useful from their perspectives.

Readying your Research for Life after Production

Having a useful topic is clearly only one part of the equation; what you then do with your research afterwards it key. If you have worked collaboratively with trans and non-binary service producers, individuals and communities to shape your topic to be as useful as possible, you will also have had the chance to find out how they want to use this information. This can be an opportunity to embed knowledge exchange into the whole research process, which can be far more effective way of ensuring your research has an active life post-production, rather than leaving this right until the end.

It might be the case that early conversations with trans and non-binary services and other interested organisations enable you to form ongoing partnerships from the very outset that include an agreement for using your data in creative ways in addition to your formal academic outputs. One possibility is that you agree to create a plain language summary report of your findings for the organisation you are collaborating with to use for their own purposes after completion of your research. Or it may be that you agree that you will work together to create a specific product; for example if you were to carry out research on trans peoples experiences of accessing sexual health

services, you could work with a relevant trans organisation from the outset to eventually co-produce a leaflet for mainstream sexual health services that would inform trans and non-binary engagement.

Generally, the more embedded these intentions are to use data collaboratively, the more likely it is it will be successful. Formal academic outputs are of course important, but it is useful to remember that a wider impact is possible by thinking creatively about communicating your research findings in formats that will work better for different audiences. University funding departments, research councils and other funders often have small grants available to help fund you and any services you work with towards these aspects of knowledge exchange.

Second Foundation: Being a Culturally Sensitive Researcher

Alongside having a well-conceived topic, it is important that researchers ensure that they have undertaken adequate preparation to conduct their research in ways that are culturally sensitive. What this means is grasping as well as you can the issues that create trans and non-binary marginalisation and taking steps to avoid replicating this within your own research. Of course there is no such thing as an all knowing researcher and even if you are a trans or non-binary researcher yourself there will be marginalising aspects of peoples' experiences that you cannot predict in advance. However as researchers we have an ethical responsibility to do what we can to minimise the harm we might do in the course of our research. This section explores four key considerations in relation to being a culturally sensitive researcher:

- Approaching research with the right intentions
- Generating greater cultural awareness
- Accessing Research Participants
- Sharing information about yourself

Am I coming at this research with the right intentions?

Undertaking research with marginalised populations accentuates the power divisions that are always present in conducting research. Whilst you may have every intention of conducting research that will work to alleviate inequalities, those giving you their time and energy have to put considerable trust in you not wasting their time or even making their situation worse. One of the key things that trans and non-binary people might want to know when you embark on your research to gauge this risk is 'why are you interested in this?'. Whether you are a trans or non-trans researcher it's a good idea to have a genuine answer to this question ready to share. Not only will it account for the trust that participants will place in you, it will also fuel your ongoing commitment to making this research count.

How can I generate greater cultural awareness?

It may well be that you have your own lived experience as a trans or non-binary person, that you have close relationships with trans and non-binary people or that you have worked closely with trans and non-binaries communities - or it may be that you are very new this area of experience. No matter what your experience and knowledge it is useful to identify your knowledge gaps before you embark on your research. Be aware that having lots of experience can create a false sense of security through an assumption that you are more culturally aware of a diverse range of experience than you actually are. Attendance to the 'near dangers' created by lots of relevant experience is just

as important addressing the ‘far dangers’ posed by larger and more obvious knowledge gaps. You have a responsibility to educate yourself and this might begin with literature (by trans and non-binary people for example), websites, visiting trans and non-binary focussed organisations and having conversations with people connected to your topic. It is important to be critical about the information you access – don’t take for granted that language used by one person to describe aspects of their identity (or their bodies or their relationships etc.) is the language used by another, keep an open mind about how people might see themselves and try not to make assumptions about the kinds of experiences they might have had. Be aware that broader intersectional knowledge often constitutes our blind spots – for example not appreciating the ways that race, disability, gender or religion differently renders trans and non-binary peoples perspectives and experiences. Alongside recognising the gaps in your knowledge though, make sure you also recognise and value what you do know. You will undoubtedly have experience that you can draw on and make the most of your particular expertise.

What’s the best way to access research participants?

How you access research participants will largely depend on your methodology, but commonly researchers will approach trans and non-binary services to help publicise their research. If you are thinking of doing this you may find you have more success if you have worked collaboratively from the outset of your research, for example in asking how your research topic might best be pitched to be most useful. Remember that collaboration is a two-way street and organisations will be more motivated to assist you if they have a vested interest in the research.

You may find that organisations you contact might want to ask you questions about yourself, your experience and your perspective on your research. This will be because they have an active duty to protect the people that they provide services to and will want to ensure that you are unlikely to cause upset or harm through your approach. Remember that organisations get many, many requests to send out calls for research participants and you may need to exercise patience and also put as much work in as you can to make this easy for them. Also, if you ask for a call for participants to be circulated and receive ‘no’ for an answer this might be an opportunity to get some feedback as it may be that the person who has refused has a useful insight into problems with your research proposal that you can learn from.

One very important thing *not* to do when looking for research participants is turn up at trans and non-binary meeting groups or services without an invitation or making an appointment first. Many trans groups are held on a confidential basis making an unsolicited, in-person approach is both inappropriate and unethical.

How much information about myself should I share?

In order for gatekeepers in organisations and participants to take an informed decision about working with you, you will need to reveal a certain amount of information about yourself; as mentioned before at very least you will need to talk about the context of your research and why you are interested in producing it. In addition to this you will also need to consider what else you are happy to disclose about yourself, including your own trans / non-trans identity or experience. If you aren't comfortable revealing this information it may be worth thinking through your reasons for this before you embark on the research; remember that you are asking your participants to be revealing of themselves and it can accentuate a power imbalance to be overly guarded about the very information you are seeking to glean from them. Whatever you choose to reveal about yourself to your participants remember that there is no such thing as a neutral researcher. Participants will naturally make assumptions about anything that you don't tell them, affecting your research just as much as anything that you actually do tell them. Generally speaking, being open and honest about the perspectives you bring to the research is the most ethical approach, as long as it is done with the best intentions. Even if you don't tell your participants much about yourself, you will need to be ready to discuss this at least when it comes to writing up your research as you will need to take into account the very particular ways that you and your experiences were part of what shaped that research encounter and what you took from it.

Third Foundation: Adopting Ethical Practice

Producing research that avoids marginalisation hinges on a practical application of knowledge and intention in the moment. Ensuring sound research practice means thinking through the ethics of your research from start to finish, critically engaging with each decision you make as you carry out the research. As researchers we often work in environments where there is a pressure to work quickly, but despite these pressures it is important to allocate adequate time to integrating ethical practice into each stage of the research. Fundamental principles rest on giving maximum agency to participants and being as transparent as possible throughout the research process. This section considers two key considerations in relation to adopting ethical research practice include:

- Designing ethical and non-marginalising research
- Providing adequate support to participants

How can I design my research process to be as ethical and non-marginalising as possible?

Many of the aspects of how you carry out your research will be shaped by the methodology that you are using; surveys, interviews and participant observation for example all require very different approaches to ethical research design in practice. However wherever possible it can be useful to build in as much flexibility to the data production as possible. Methodologies that allow for participants to have agency in where, when and how they provide with you with information allow for differences between people in how they feel most at ease interacting. Ideally researchers would be able to give participants time for reflection on the questions they will be asked and would also be able to apply flexibility in the moment. In practice however there can be a tension in balancing these; methodologies that allow for the greatest reflection time – such as email interviews, online surveys and other non-face to face methods – are those with the least flexibility to be applied contextually in the moment (as you can in real time interviews for example). One suggested practice is to provide a list of interview questions (or topic areas) in advance to allow for some preparation but also to facilitate a conversation about potential ‘no-go’ areas. Whether or not you choose to adopt this practice it is vital that you communicate clearly about the nature and context of the research and engage in a dialogue with participants around this. Giving people the chance to make an informed decision over participation is at the heart of ethical practice. You might also build in a process for participants reading over their contributions after you have gathered information to check they are happy with it and also make sure that the language you are using (including terminology and pronouns) is as they want it to be. At the design stage you might also think through addressing the issue of attracting more diverse representation in your participant cohort; consider

having different ways of articulating your research in adverts (whilst remaining true to its intention and scope) to 'speak to' different parts of the community and if there is a possibility of conducting the research in multiple languages having translations of adverts can also be helpful.

How can I ensure participants are adequately supported?

Whilst a good research design will have enabled participants to make an informed decision about participation, there will continue to be ethical considerations throughout the research. For many trans and non-binary people talking about some aspects of their experience may be traumatic – and it's not always possible to predict where these sources of trauma might lie. Face to face (and other real time methods) offer the most potential for in the moment support; for example through pausing an interview, stopping altogether or skipping a question. One useful practice, whether your methodology operates in real time or through correspondence, is to prepare a list of support contacts and provide this to participants as a matter of course.

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