

Book Reviews

**Transgender communication studies:
Histories, trends, and trajectories.**

Leland G. Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzza (Eds.)

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Leland G. Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzza faced a mammoth task in assembling *Transgender Communication Studies: to synthesize and contribute to an area of inquiry only just beginning to define itself as separate from gay and lesbian studies*. The volume, which sits at the intersection of two broad and diverse fields of study—communication and transgender studies—confronts this challenge by casting a wide net across the field of communication and engaging directly with the emerging literature of transgender studies, rather than the established literature of “LGBT” studies. As Spencer points out in the introduction, the “T” of “LGBT” is often invisible in communication scholarship, and so this book provides it overdue attention (p. ix).

The book *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories* consists of 14 essays from a team of predominantly early career scholars. Together the essays support a broad understanding of the term “transgender,” though their contents focus more heavily on those who identify as transgender men and women than on those who identify as nonbinary or

gender-nonconforming. For inclusion in the volume, each chapter required a literature review, original argument, and suggestions for future research. Spencer writes that “original argument” was defined broadly, “such that authors could submit theoretical, empirical, or rhetorical/critical chapters” (p. xvii). Yet, while the book nominally aims to provide a mix of approaches, the majority of chapters are rhetorical/critical in nature, belying the editors’ own areas of expertise.

The volume is organized according to the editors’ uncomfortable division of the field of communication into three categories (human communication, media, and public and rhetorical communication), with 14 further disputable subfields. This division reflects the understandable aim to provide research from across the broad field of communication, and Spencer even acknowledges in the introduction that “any attempt to organize subdisciplines in our field ultimately falters when scrutinized” (p. xx). However, these divisions produce asymmetrical and unrepresentative categorizations of the work performed in the field of communication. For example, while Chapter 2 (“The Workplace Socialization of Gender Identity: A Phenomenological Exploration of Being Transgender at Work”) represents the large subfield of organizational communication, Chapter 12 (“Coming Out, Bringing Out: God’s Love, Transgender Identity, and Difference”) represents the narrow topic

of “religious discourse.” Nonetheless, the book succeeds in contributing to a broad array of communication topics, advancing a limited literature in need of greater attention across the field.

Indeed the great success of the book is that it brings transgender topics to the forefront, rather than letting them remain an afterthought or a footnote tacked on to gay and lesbian studies. The volume is one of the first assertions of the importance of transgender communication scholarship, and certainly the most powerful to date. It further systematically rejects the assumption that transgender concerns can be understood through gay and lesbian concerns. Rather, each chapter investigates the unique ways in which transgender identities are situated in society through the lens of communication research. Moreover, the book provides a large set of contributions that speak to multiple audiences. While each chapter contributes to the academic literature on transgender communication, several also speak directly to contemporary social justice projects.

Yet, while *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories* provides a series of novel contributions to both activist and academic literatures, it does not quite deliver on the promise of its title. Given the subtitle and that the volume is broken down by subfield, one would expect each chapter to present a comprehensive review and evaluation of the relevant literature in each subfield with the ultimate aim of theorizing the area of study. However, the chapters focus more on the presentation of new research than the analysis of “histories, trends, and trajectories.”

Three chapters stand out as exceptions. Yep, Russo, and Allen’s fifth chapter (“Pushing Boundaries: Toward the Development of a Model for Transgender Communication in (Inter)cultural Contexts”) is the theoretical highlight of the volume. Yep and his students engage with the core literature of transgender studies to map a model for assessing the relationship between power and gender identity in communication contexts. They then read the extant literature on transgender communication studies through this model, producing a rich theoretical framework that is both challenging and thoroughly contributive to the field of communication at large.

Lester’s 9th chapter (“From Abomination to Indifference: A Visual Analysis of Transgender Stereotypes in the Media”) and Adams’s 11th chapter (“Traversing the Transcape: A Brief Historical Etymology of Trans* Terminology”) are the historical review highlights of the volume. Adams provides by far the most comprehensive analysis of historical trends, tracing the evolution of the terminology used to identify transgender individuals, and consequently how transgender identity has been conceptualized, since the turn of the 20th century. She further discusses the political implications of the resultant conceptions of transgender identity, particularly in the contemporary moment. At a time when transgender issues are beginning to enter the public consciousness and transgender rights are beginning to enter mainstream political debate, these conceptions are of great importance, and thus her analysis extremely useful. Lester likewise provides a thorough historical review. Lester’s

chapter analyzes how transgender stereotypes in televisual media have promoted, and continue to promote, transphobia by evoking disgust in the audience. He contextualizes these representations in the larger conversation about the influence of minority portrayals on social acceptance, and helpfully contributes to the field's larger understanding of visual stereotyping.

Overall, *Transgender Communication Studies* will undoubtedly serve as a go-to resource for scholars who find their work addressing transgender topics but lack familiarity with the relevant literature. The volume will be

particularly helpful to media studies and rhetoric scholars, though social scientists in human communication will also find relevant theoretical contributions. Moreover, this book stands as a testament to how rich and challenging communication research in transgender studies can be once divorced from the limiting assumptions of gay and lesbian studies, paving a way forward as a new wave of public awareness draws attention to transgender issues in media and communication.

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