

Gender, Sexuality and Identity

Challenges and Experiences - Video 1

Hershel Russell:

So - transgender. 'Trans' means 'across', so if you're transgender you've crossed over some mysterious something about gender. And we looked very hard as a community for what we wanted the word to be for people who are not transgender. Transgender versus normal - uuch. Transgender versus biological male, biological female - I'm biological, you know. I am not made of chopped computer parts, oddly enough! So we came up with this word cisgender. 'Cis' means 'on the same side'; it's a word from chemistry. So if you're transgender you've - you've gone across some mysterious thing called gender; if you're cisgender you've stayed on the same side of that. And the other terminology we really like is - I'd rather you didn't say that I used to be a woman. That's like - it feels kind of weird. What we prefer is 'I was assigned female at birth'. So when I was born the midwife looked at me and said, "It's a girl" and the midwife was wrong. So that's a much preferable term: assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth.

Surgeries - surgeries and sameness. I think it's always true that when we look from the outside at a marginalized group it's easy to assume that everybody's the same. And of course it's never true, and we are exactly as diverse as every other community in every way: racialized identities, class, ability, disability, age obviously - in every way you can be diverse, we're diverse. And in terms of access to hormones and surgeries, and in terms of what we want, again it's very, very personal, as you said; it's very personal what people want. Some people only want hormones; no surgery. Some - particularly trans[gender] men only want chest surgery and no hormones. And we're coming from a time when the medical system has treated us extraordinarily badly over the last 50 years, and it's so great that it's improving, but we're coming from a time when the medical system really imposed an expectation that you would do a whole series in a particular order. And we fought very hard against that, and we are sort of winning, but there are still people who assume that; and still people also who are seeking for this kind of mysterious beast called 'the true transsexual' as opposed to this actual human being who is sitting there, who is complicated like every other human being.