

PROPOSAL

Interpreting Violence: Epistemic Substitution and the Limits of the Gender Identity Framework

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Transmen experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence, with approximately half affected according to several large national population surveys. Despite these prevalence rates, considerable uncertainty persists regarding the interpretation and explanation of violence against transmen. Transgender advocacy initiatives over the past decade have tended to centre on gender identity recognition, a new framework that has advanced rapidly through many levels of institutional policy. But it is unclear whether those frameworks sufficiently address the specific forms of violence faced by transmen. This gap highlights the urgent need to review and enhance existing frameworks.

My project is a philosophical exploration of an arc of reasoning, starting with the question: **How should the violence affecting transmen be interpreted?**

First, I will look at how social scientists and philosophers define oppression. By developing clear metrics, I will use existing empirical data to evaluate whether transmen can be meaningfully identified as an oppressed class.

From there, I will analyze what mechanisms appear to produce those forms of oppression. Sexual assault will be used as the key analytical test case in part because its prevalence makes it a pressing issue, but also because the mechanisms of this specific form of violence have been widely theorized.

I will then engage transgender scholarship to evaluate the gender identity framework against what is known about sexual violence. That is, whether the gender identity framework accurately identifies the causes of harm in cases of sexual violence. Preliminary findings indicate that

assaults against transmen are more effectively explained by sex-based power dynamics and the regulation of female bodies, rather than by transphobia per se.

This suggests a key gap, and I will engage with a third body of philosophical scholarship on how societies interpret and make sense of experiences of injustice. Philosophers such as Miranda Fricker have shown that when conceptual categories for describing events are unavailable, harm can be unnamed and invisible. Fricker calls this hermeneutical injustice. Building on Fricker's idea, I introduce the concept of *epistemic substitution*. This means that one way of understanding harm, like gender identity, replaces another, like sex, and as a result, important aspects of violence can be hidden. Unlike hermeneutical injustice, which happens when people lack ways to interpret their experiences, epistemic substitution happens when one existing category is swapped for another, hiding important details about harm.

Using examples from history of women who lived as men and managed to fit into society, I will show that being understood by others affects how vulnerable someone is to violence. I argue that interpreting violence primarily through gender identity categories may misrecognize the underlying mechanisms of violence and oppression, and therefore, be misaligned with what has historically supported male-passing women to integrate well within social contexts. Where misrecognition happens, I will present what is required for epistemic repair.

This research contributes to gender studies, feminist philosophy, and sociology. By focusing on how interpretive frameworks shape social inclusion and our understanding of violence it provides greater clarity about how harm is experienced by transmen. It allows for a more nuanced account of prevention and support, and may help illuminate the broader principles at stake.

I am specifically contributing:

1. A philosophical analysis of oppression
2. A critique of the gender identity framework
3. The concept epistemic substitution

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