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## How Many Trans People Get Abortions? An Introduction to Critical Data Studies

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## How Many Trans People Get Abortions? An Introduction to Critical Data Studies

### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback. I also want to thank my colleagues at the Abortion Rights Fund of Western Massachusetts for supporting my continued work at the intersection of reproductive justice and trans liberation.

## Introduction/Rationale

As abortion restrictions escalate, scholars and activists have struggled to incorporate transgender individuals into their organizing efforts. Not everyone who needs an abortion identifies as a woman. The question of whether to continue discussing abortion as a “woman’s issue,” however, remains contentious. Some people argue that the term “pregnant people” minimizes the role of misogyny in anti-abortion movements and erases women’s specific experiences (Baker & Thomsen, 2022), while others counter that including trans people and centering marginalized women’s experiences are not mutually exclusive strategies (Barcelos, 2022). This debate exemplifies the imprecision of language. Even the term “woman” is complicated, as not all women menstruate, nor do they face the same barriers to abortion care (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Thus, the depiction of abortion as a “woman’s issue” is not an inevitable truth but a social movement strategy, a frame (Benford & Snow, 2000) used to prime someone how to think about abortion. In *Shaping Abortion Discourses*, Ferree et al. (2002) discuss frames used by activists across the political spectrum, including abortion as a moral issue or as a matter of privacy from the state. If we understand “woman” and “pregnant people” as social movement frames, this enables us to examine their impact on consciousness raising, public opinion, and coalition-building.

Looking to social science research to justify their position on these topics, stakeholders often wonder how many trans people actually get abortions. As someone who works at the intersection of trans studies and reproductive justice, this is a question I have personally received from scholars, activists, and reporters. Presumably, lower rates would be used to justify the use of “woman” as a social movement frame, while higher rates would support the use of “pregnant people.” In this assignment, I invite students to use the concept of critical data studies to examine the politics of how we collect and interpret data. Specifically, they will learn about critical data studies from an introductory article in *Trans Studies Quarterly (TSQ)*, then conduct a case study using two short articles from the journal *Contraception* that attempt to estimate the number of trans abortion-seekers. This activity engages several core topics in feminist theory, including the relationship between knowledge and power (Haraway, 1988), building coalitions across difference (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Kendall, 2020), and questions of identity, essentialism, and what constitutes a “woman” (Butler, 1990; Collins, 1990; Fuss, 1989).

In addition to feminist theory courses that address the aforementioned topics, this activity would be well-suited to disciplinary or interdisciplinary courses relating to methodology and data collection, reproduction and health, social movements, trans studies, and LGBTQ studies. In the explanation section, I estimate the activity will take 45 minutes to complete. For introductory courses that require more facilitation, I would budget 10-15 extra minutes.

## Learning Objectives

Students will:

- reflect critically on the politics of data collection and presentation, specifically as applied to transgender communities
- examine the role of language in feminist organizing, including how language and social movement strategies mutually reinforce one another
- cultivate a deeper understanding of transgender inclusion in the abortion access movement

## Explanation

In the first part of this activity, students conduct a close reading of an article from *TSQ* as an introduction to critical data studies. If you wish to spread the activity over two class periods, the first part can be done separately from the other two. Next, students will prepare for the case study by discussing the debate over using “women” vs. “pregnant people,” reflecting on why stakeholders might want to know the number of trans abortion-seekers. Finally, students will discuss two studies that estimate how many trans people get abortions, considering the challenge of estimating this number and the politics of interpretation.

### *Part 1: A Short Introduction to Critical Data Studies*

To get acquainted with critical data studies, students should read (before class) the introduction to the special issue on “Making Transgender Count” from *TSQ*. When introducing the concept of critical data studies, explain to students that it is an interdisciplinary field that examines how we collect and interpret data, centering the relationship between knowledge and power (Iliadis & Russo, 2016). Frame the *TSQ* reading as both methodological (why do we know so little about transgender people?) and theoretical. Specifically, explain that Currah & Stryker (2015) examine how the recognition of transgender people through statistical data is a double-edged sword. On one hand, within the “marketplace of social problems” (Best, 1990, p.176), having data to “prove” trans people’s social and economic circumstances is often necessary to enact change. On the other hand, how we collect and interpret data about trans people can present multiple risks to these communities.

Depending on the size of the of the class and the amount of facilitation students require, you might discuss the following questions as a class or break students up into small groups. With copies of the *TSQ* reading in front of them (digital or printed), students should discuss the following questions: 1) What barriers exist to collecting data about transgender people, 2) What is “statistical citizenship” and how can (the lack of) data about trans people be used to support or refute policy changes, and 3) What are the risks of collecting/presenting data about trans people?

If students appear uncertain how to answer the first question, prompt them to consider the difficulties of surveying the trans population (pp. 5-6) and lack of institutional support for researchers (pp. 7-8). For the second question, prompt students to review the definition of statistical citizenship (pp. 2). For the third question, prompt students to consider the possibilities of surveillance and the inability of survey categories to capture the reality of trans people’s lives. Part 1 of this assignment should take about 15 minutes to complete together or in groups.

### Required Text(s):

Currah, P., & Stryker, S. (2015). Introduction: Making transgender count. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2848859>

### *Part 2: Introducing the Case Study*

To transition into the case study, ask students if they are familiar with the debate over whether to use the term “women” or “pregnant people” when discussing abortion access. Have students summarize this disagreement over language; if no one volunteers an answer, explain that, in addition to women, some transgender men and nonbinary individuals can also get pregnant and require abortion services. Activists disagree about the extent to which they should discuss abortion as a “women’s issue.” At this point, clarify to students that, as is the case in all

feminist politics, there is not a “right answer” (Ahmed, 2017). Rather, the goal of this assignment is to examine the challenge of estimating how many trans people get abortions and the politics of how we interpret these statistics.

Explain to students that there are different ways of framing abortion, even within feminist communities (i.e., as a “woman’s issue” or as a “matter of privacy”). Frames are not “inherent truths” but are mobilized for different political purposes (Benford & Snow, 2000). Thus, stakeholders have different reasons for wanting to know how many trans people get abortions. In small groups, students should discuss the following three sets of stakeholders: 1) abortion providers, 2) activists who believe abortion is a “woman’s issue,” and 3) activists who prefer using the term “pregnant people.” For each of these three groups, students should brainstorm their interest in this topic and what a low or a high rate of trans people getting abortions could “prove.” In other words, how might this statistic drive policy or social movement strategies?

For providers, students should think about how clinical policies might be shaped by the perceived clientele (i.e., how might a clinic be structured if they knew some of their clients were trans or if they assumed that all their clients were women). For activists, students should think about messaging strategies (i.e., “abortion is a woman’s issue”) and coalition building (i.e., which groups of people activists collaborate with to expand abortion access). Part 2 of this assignment should take about 10 minute to complete in small groups.

### *Part 3: Conducting the Case Study*

In groups, students will review two short articles from *Contraception* that estimate the percentage of abortion-seekers in the U.S. who identify as transgender. Provide the discussion questions ahead of time, so students can conduct a targeted reading of each two-page article. After providing students five minutes to read both articles (you might suggest that group members start with different ones), give groups 10 minutes to discuss the following questions: 1) According to each set of authors, what percentage of people who gets abortions are trans, 2) Why might these authors have arrived at different conclusions, 3) What are the social and policy implications of accepting one of these statistics or the other, 4A) What other kinds of data might help us understand trans people’s experiences of abortion, and 4B) how might stakeholders use different kinds of data to answer their social and policy questions?

If students appear uncertain how to answer the second question, prompt them to review the first paragraph of the Discussion Section in the Janiak et al. reading (2021). They might also consider the challenges of surveying trans people discussed in the *TSQ* reading. For the third question, invite students to reflect back to Part 2 of this assignment, and how different stakeholders might interpret a low or a high rate of trans people getting abortions. For the fourth question, ask students about what other research methods exist (i.e., interviews, ethnography, content analysis) and how they might apply to this topic.

### Required Text(s):

Janiak, E., Braaten, K.P., Cottrill, A.A., Fulcher, I.R., Goldberg, A.B., & Agénor, M. (2021). Gender diversity among aspiration-abortion patients. *Contraception*, 103(6), 426-427. doi: 10.1016/j.contraception.2021.01.013

Jones, R. K., Witwer, E., & Jerman, J. (2020). Transgender abortion patients and the provision of transgender-specific care at non-hospital facilities that provide abortions. *Contraception: X*, 2, 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conx.2020.100019>

## Debriefing

Students may feel strongly connected to one social movement frame or the other, which can manifest in several ways. Some students, for example, might generalize about people who share different perspectives: “*anyone who refuses to use ‘pregnant people’ is a TERF,*” referring to Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist/Feminism, a set of activisms and ideologies that delegitimize trans people and their identities using feminist rhetoric (Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020). For these students, validate their concerns and lived experiences relating to transphobia, including the harm of misgendering in clinical (Erbenius & Payne, 2018) and other social settings (McLemore, 2015). Remind them that social movements use a variety of rhetorical strategies (Ferree et al., 2002) depending on the circumstance. Building coalitions in feminist spaces does not mean that we need to accept harm being done to us, but neither should we make assumptions about other people’s political commitments (Smith, 2015).

Students who feel connected to the framework of “women’s rights,” meanwhile, might express skepticism towards the assignment or feel alienated if they interpret the assignment (or class discussion) as a rebuke of their position. Ask clarifying questions to understand the nature of their concerns. If they mention the role of misogyny in abortion restrictions, then validate the harm that restrictions inflict on women (Foster, 2020) and the sexist assumptions that undergird such regulations (i.e., women are not capable of making complicated decisions). You may want to reiterate frame theory, reminding students that nothing is inherently a “woman’s issue.” Rather, feminists frame abortion as a “women’s issue” for strategic reasons, such as consciousness raising and coalition building (Ferree et al., 2002). Some feminists use both “women” and “pregnant people” in their activism (Crenshaw, 2022). These final points can also apply to students who ask you *your* opinion as an instructor. In this situation, reiterate that words can serve different purposes, so it might depend on the audience and the desired goal.

Some students may share intentionally or unintentionally transphobic comments, such as “*men can't get pregnant*” or “*transgender is just a trend.*” Such comments might not only derail the activity but also alienate gender diverse students and dehumanize participants in these studies. How you engage with a potentially transphobic comment depends on your relationship with the student and the content of their remark. If you think this student would be receptive to a deeper conversation on gender identity, or if you believe you may have heard their comment out of context, ask them to clarify their remarks. If the comment stems from a lack of knowledge about trans people, you can provide a brief response (“*not everyone resonates with the gender they were assigned at birth. Trans people transition for different reasons, including to feel more like themselves*”) and direct them to Trans 101 resources. The National Center for Transgender Equality has a useful FAQ page (link in references), and more curious students might enjoy the podcast “*TransLash*” or Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness*. If it does not feel useful to engage further with a student about their anti-trans comments, it is OK to set boundaries in the classroom and redirect back to the activity. For example, you can say that you believe trans people are who they say they are, but that you're happy to continue this conversation outside of class. You may also wish to consult with any LGBTQ or Diversity and Inclusion Offices on campus if you feel that this exchange may impact future classroom experiences.

## Assessment

After completing this activity, students should feel more confident discussing the inclusion of trans people in the movement for abortion access. When the terms “women” and “pregnant people” are perceived as binary opposites, people worry about saying the “wrong thing” (Gay, 2014) or feel responsible for policing other people’s language. By rearticulating these terms as social movement frames to be mobilized for specific political tasks, students can create more opportunities for dialogue within their feminist communities. This assignment also asks students to challenge their relationship to empirical data. By applying the concept of critical data studies to the case of “counting trans abortion-seekers,” students will better appreciate the role of data in driving policies and social movement strategies. This activity will help students critically examine data from multiple perspectives, including what data can tell us, what it cannot tell us, and why scholars, activists, and other stakeholders ask the questions they do.

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