

# **Optimism, Happiness and other Cruelties from a Conference on Sex/Gender Norms**

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## **SUMMARY**

In addition to a deliberately brief overview of the conference and its contents, this analytical outlook focuses on affect in its interwovenness of subject and object and examines the question how one could, particularly at a conference on sex/gender norms, deliberate, reflect and discuss – or not – the force of affects for these same sex/gender norms. How and where is affect accorded space, where does it claim space itself? The outlook discusses how, by means of the powerful emotions of ‘happiness’ and ‘optimism’ as forces of affect, some bodies are included and others excluded, and how, in revealing the cruelty of promises of happiness and conference optimism, such cruelties can be overcome or turned to productive effect.

## **BODIES – AFFECTS – SCIENCE**

Endlessly emerging, accumulating, transforming in the shifting of bodies and relations, the force of affect is never as absent from scholarship as claims of objectivity would like for us to believe. Despite all efforts, the rhythms and modalities of affective intensities resist attempts to control or eliminate them. The proposition that knowledge is situated – that it deals with “particular and specific embodiment” and not the “transcendence of all limits and responsibilities” (Haraway 1988: 82) – is perhaps already a banality for scholars of ‘sex/gender’ and ‘sexuality’, yet one that still warrants repetition and also critical reflection. For example, one might argue that affect instead claims knowledge to be positioned and dis-positioned simultaneously, or perhaps in a constant state of re-position-

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**1** | Original version in English. For an explanation as to this phrasing, see footnote 3, p. 9 in this publication. It will not be further discussed in this chapter, and has been uniformly applied to conform with the book’s political and semantic framework.

ing that both marks and reflects bodies as well as the worlds within which bodies unfold. Affect emphasizes the becomings and un-becomings that are forming and residing ‘in-between’ and ‘beside’. It is this in-the-vicinity and in-stability that pulls out rather than hides the tensions in and impossibilities of dualistic modes of thinking that assume the certainty of being taken for granted. Typically encompassing but always more than mere emotion, affect

“marks a body’s belonging to a world of encounters or; a world’s *belonging* to a body of encounters but also in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities.” (Seigworth/Gregg 2010: 2)

In this chapter I would like to consider the conference “Gender Normativity and its Effects on Childhood and Adolescence”, held in Luxembourg from the 24th to the 29th of September 2012, as part of a world of affective forces of encounter. I do not pretend to place an easy label on the messy type of affective display that became for me a critical revelation of the positions or limitations of corporeal belonging as well as the abundance of non-belonging at various intervals throughout the conference, but the dynamics of both belongings and non-belongings resulted in the temporary but no less impassioned departure of one participant – a representative of an association for intersex persons – from the space of the conference. This displacement signaled most visibly the presence of affect in a space where any semblance of emotion is seen to have little room for expression. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I would thus like to try to understand this conference, not only by its presences, but also by its absences, or at least via the pushing out of certain ways of being. However, by the fact that even in their non-appearance, or removal, certain bodies trouble those present, a division between us and them, subject and object, inside and outside proves to be imperfect.

My presence at the conference was facilitated by an invitation from the organizers to write a brief summary of findings to be submitted back to the event’s financial supporters, the National Research Fund of Luxembourg (FNR: ‘Fonds National de la Recherche’). Hence, unlike most other chapters in this book, this text is not an extended version of a paper presented at the conference. Instead, I draw on one presentation from the conference to reflect upon how it, and the conference as a whole, related to the topic and the various groups (un-) addressed within its content. This means that I have the luxury of reflecting on the complexities of the congress and its topic retrospectively. That being said, my comments are not meant to undervalue what I see to have been an extraordinar-

ily successful, enlightening and productive conference – clearly organized with much sensitivity and careful reflection.

Given my role, I first offer a very short synopsis of key findings of the various presentations and discussions that took place during the conference. I then discuss how optimism – an affective force holding the conference together in important and necessary ways – may help to make sense of the absence of certain bodies from the affective, phenomenological and epistemological space of the conference. Rather than attempt the problematic task of making sense of the aforementioned person's brief departure, I consider in some detail the affective register of a presentation that was among those that, according to the departing participant, sparked their exit. Specifically, I will consider one of several photographs included in a presentation by an endocrinologist who sought to visualize the success of his protocol for the provision of sex/gender assignment procedures to transsexual youth. I do not reproduce the image in this chapter, largely for ethical reasons, although I consider how its materiality during the lecture, in interaction with the discursive, social and especially affective dimensions of the presentation, were put to work to sustain the futurity of certain bodies at the expense of others.

### **Brief conference overview**

What are sex/gender norms and how do they manifest their impact on young people? How are sex/gender norms socially constructed, structurally anchored and historically distinct? To what extent is a world without sex/gender norms imaginable or even desirable? These are a few of the central questions that accompanied the conference “Gender Normativity and its Effects on Childhood and Adolescence” held in Luxembourg from the 24th to the 29th of September 2012. To approach these questions, scholars, activists and politicians explored interdependent sites of power and knowledge production that might be summed up under the categories medicine, law, and education. In addition, opening lectures helped to situate discussions of these various aspects within the fields of philosophy, sociology and ethics. This book offers a comprehensive exploration of the issues presented at the conference; I offer a brief summary of points that I found to be key ‘findings’.

In general, presenters seemed to agree that the body is a highly contested site for reading and regulating sex/gender. Despite the common construction of sexed/gendered bodies as naturally categorical or dualistic, conference participants made clear that they are remarkably varied and malleable. For example, one presenter argued that a combination of biological and socio-environmental

factors – such as temperature, social interactions and hormonal regulation – influence the development of the biological characteristics typically used to categorize animals into two sexes. Other presenters demonstrated that alleged truths about sexed/gendered and racialized bodily differences have been and continue to be used to naturalize socially constructed and hierarchical sex/gender and racial categories, and are experienced as violent by sex/gender non-conforming, as well as sex/gender conforming, youth. One speaker suggested that categorization may be a sort of ‘necessary evil’ in as much as it helps us make sense of a complex world. Thus, rather than try to do away with categorization, it may be helpful to recognize that categories of knowledge and categories of representation are mutually productive and are both involved in the construction of sex/gender inequalities, but each offers tools to transform the other.

Multiple speakers emphasized that EU and UN rights documents demand that signatory states recognize a child’s fundamental rights, including the rights to health, identity, freedom and protection. Nonetheless, these and related laws have been interpreted in different ways over time, highlighting the plasticity and sociohistoric relevance of reading and interpreting legal documents, particularly about sex/gender, sexuality and age. While there are certain international or national laws that offer support for young trans people who wish to undergo sex/gender confirming procedures, and for the stance that doctors should not operate on intersex infants if not medically necessary, many of these legislative tools are difficult to make sense of due to their complexity and have not yet been applied successfully to individual countries or cases.

All the same, conference presenters emphasized that laws alone do not offer means to improving the situation for trans and intersex youth; they must be monitored, interpreted and enforced based on the needs and rights of the youth they intend to address, and should be developed in constant exchange with youth themselves as well as with other sites of praxis and knowledge production. Educational processes offer one such space for collaboration. Given that the naturalization of sex/gender differences takes place in both formal and informal educational spaces – such as during child rearing, in medical textbooks or children’s literature – these forms of communication introduce important opportunities for intervention. Within this context especially, the concept of cisgenderism, introduced by one presenter and defined as a systematic form of prejudice that stigmatizes non-cisgender forms of expression, offers a compelling new epistemology for thinking about sex/gender norms and structures of oppression.

Many presenters and participants may read this brief summary with dissatisfaction due to the inevitable reduction of arguments and the exclusion of nuance

necessitated by the chapter's space restrictions and the nature of my responsibilities as rapporteur. More relevant to this chapter, however, it also slighted the material and inter-corporeal complexities of the conference that constitute and are constituted of affect. Indeed, within the context of this conference, there is still much to gain by exploring the vital role of affect in the (un)-doings, naturalization and illumination of sex/gender norms. Without a doubt the conference did engage with the significance of emotion and personal history in understanding and communicating about sex/gender norms. For example, one young trans person, an invited speaker, described in personal and sobering detail the feelings of rejection and suffering that accompanied ongoing interactions with health care providers, educators and others. And an unannounced but carefully organized artistic performance provoked, at a minimum, reflection about conference participants' own sex/gender norms and the possibilities of sex/gender fluidity both corporeally and performatively. All the same, whereas other topics became a matter of theoretical and empirical development, affect was left to gather in and across the space/time assemblages of the conference, fated to be felt and experienced, but never discussed.

As affect insists that both subject and object are intertwined – that the division of subject/object is not easy to make out – one might claim that engagements with *sex/gender* norms via affect can be both the objects and subjects of the conference simultaneously. Indeed, the process of the conference is already part of the world described by the conference, thus the conference generates even while it tries to portray. For that reason I'd like to ask what it might mean to think about affect as an '*effective force of sex/gender norms*', especially in the context of a conference with sex/gender norms as its topic of investigation. To that end, there are two affective registers from the conference that I will explore that are not entirely unrelated: 'optimism' and 'happiness'.

### **The cruelties of conference optimism**

Despite the shortcomings of the conference summary I provide above, I think it is not an exaggeration to speak of a cohesive and yet chaotic affective energy that to some extent permeated the entirety of the events. This ostensible cohesion was also reflected in the humdrum details of the conference – during greetings or discussions at the coffee table between sessions or upon arrival in the morning and departure in the evening, among groups of participants and presenters during lunch or dinner breaks, during social events at the hotel and, most markedly, after the final event when due thanks were voiced publicly and many were taken by the feeling of having accomplished something important

over the course of the preceding days' events. This cohesion and sense of accomplishment speaks to the focus of the conference and the remarkable talent of the organizers to procure excellent speakers who – in some way or another – share a critique of sex/gender norms. Similar, no doubt, to many others who attended, I left feeling inspired and motivated, among other feelings, with many questions and reflections that I bring with me to my activism, doctoral work and other settings.

To borrow from Lauren Berlant, I would like to propose that we think of the conference as an object of desire, which she describes as "a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (2010: 93). We do not have to look beyond the introduction to the conference program to see that it makes certain promises that become proximal to the conference itself:

"This conference will examine, above all, gender norms and their manifestations during development and education...The conference will also critically explore ideas about what is 'best' for a child, who defines this 'best' and who knows what is 'best'... [T]he conference will provide space for a result-oriented debate about how to improve familial and social incorporation of gender non-conforming youth into prevailing gender norms. It will consider ways to expand the spectrum of recognition regarding variability across biological sex, gender identities, social roles and sexual orientations, as well as the ways in which they all interact... [A]nother goal of the conference is to expand the discussion about gender equality to include youth who evade prevailing gender norms. Results and conclusions from the conference will help to provide possible solutions for improving equality, especially in the realms of formal and informal education...Discussions and developments with regards to 'good practices' will be a focus of the conference..."

The possibility – and to some extent the actuality – of fulfilling these (often lofty) promises provided for many participants and presenters of the conference a sense of optimism – what one might describe as an orientation towards and attachment to the event as it happens. This is not to say that there was no disagreement or divergence within the conference, or that the temporality of the conference was clearly directional or even linear, or that all presentations shared a particular epistemology or political ideology. Given the fact that one participant left the space of the conference in aggravation, as I mentioned above, the real but sporadic disaccord during the conference has already been established. All the same, it is interesting to note that for this participant, the most viable option was not to continue to engage in debate or conversation, but instead to leave the room.

The exclusion of this participant may be part of an affective force that became entangled with the accumulating optimism of the conference. With each pre-

sentation, participants were opened up to a certain way of knowing the topic being presented, which was, given the context, purportedly connected with sex/gender norms and their impact on youth. One could agree or disagree with part or all of one or every presentation, and yet the decision to stay and listen and continue the project of the conference was an optimistic investment in the conference as a means for attaining the bouquet of promises it was thought to potentially provide.

It is important to acknowledge that the participant returned to the conference room shortly after their departure. Was it a renewed optimism – no matter how faint or uncertain – that brought them back? Berlant uses the term ‘cruel optimism’ to describe the unrelenting optimism one brings to an object despite eventual, or even certain, disappointment: “Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss” (2010: 94). Why would one persist with an attachment to an object in the face of a certain disappointment? This question is not easy to answer, but Berlant proposes that it may be based in a fear that the loss of the object will make it impossible to continue hope about anything at all. Even if failure is certain, there is a desperate hope that certainty is at times uncertain so that hope, and life, can continue.

Although I am not proposing that optimism, cruel or otherwise, is what provoked the participant’s return – only he can offer an explanation for that decision – what I would like to suggest here is that there is some *cruelty* in the optimistic ventures of organizing, attending, participating in, presenting at or writing about this and similar conferences in as much as they invest in structures that are known to (re)produce systems of discrimination. There is a persisting desire to make these structures work – to analyze, critique and adjust them – with the hope that they will one day be based on equality and justice. An interest in and concern about sex/gender norms in the domains of education, medicine and law reinforces an investment in those fields even as they are identified as sites of normalization. To help make this clear, I attempt in the next section to demonstrate one example of the cruelty embedded in the emotion of happiness as it was put to work in a physician’s conference presentation.

### **Happy sex/gender norms**

Sarah Ahmed (2010) calls ‘happy objects’ those objects towards which affect pulls us. She uses the example of the family to exemplify how certain objects are read as good, as the cause of happiness, because we are oriented towards them as being good: “The family provides a shared horizon in which objects circulate, accumulating positive affective value.” (Ahmed 2010: 38). According to Ahmed, the depiction of families as happy, however, occurs by identifying those who do

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<sup>2</sup> | Kongressprogramm. URL: <http://idw-online.de/pages/de/attachmentdata18240.pdf> [21.12.2013].

not reproduce its line as the cause of unhappiness: "Some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I would re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of *getting along*. Some bodies become blockage points, points where smooth communication stops." (Ahmed 2010: 39). From this light, one might argue that sex/gender norms gather some of their force within, and with, objects that promise happiness. Or more concretely, sex/gender norms might also be read as *happy objects* that pull us not just towards them, but also away from those who do not conform to, and thus obstruct, an orientation towards those norms.

During the conference, at least one object of sex/gender norms was transmitted through another object that too was painted as happy: a photograph. I should clarify that, rather than physical photographs, we were presented with digital images within the context of a PowerPoint presentation. That this analysis is about a PowerPoint of a digitalized version of a photograph of a body is important for understanding the degrees of repurposing that took place – materially, socially, technically, temporally and spatially – so that the matter of the image could be put to work in the ways intended by the conference presenter, and perhaps in ways that he did not intend. In this context, it is helpful to think of the photograph as a 'social biography' (Kopytoff 1986) in as much as the function and meaning of the image was likely dependent upon where and when it was exhibited as well as the intention of the presenter and their relationship to the photograph. Although I am unable to provide an overview of the complex visual economy (Poole 1997) of the image, it is safe to assume that it has been repurposed over time and its agency and forms of life include a complexity of shifting, divergent and asymmetric affective relations and meanings.

The images in question were presented as part of a talk by one German endocrinologist who was invited to offer an overview of the protocol he and others utilize to provide sex/gender-confirming procedures to interested trans youth. It should first be noted that not all physicians are in agreement that hormono-surgical procedures should be made available to young people. Many fear that persons below a certain age have not yet fully developed their sense of self, and there is thus a reluctance to perform interventions that are considered irreversible. According to this doctor, however, at the onset of puberty – which he defines as between the ages of 10 and 13 – either reconciliation with the so-called 'biological sex' occurs, or there is an increased rejection of a body seen as 'wrong'. For him, the temptation to 'wait and see' does cause harm, as providing young people with hormone inhibitors at an age early enough to postpone the development of allegedly 'irreversible' secondary sex/gender features helps to ensure that their

transitions are not only less emotionally and socially straining, but that they are also physically and visually more convincing. To demonstrate the success of his approach, he included in his slide show before and after pictures, first of one trans girl and then of one trans boy. He also made sure to inform us that he received approval from the relevant persons for the presentation of these images at the conference.

To underscore the success of the procedures, and thus of the work of this endocrinologist, he did not rely on the visual power of the images alone. Instead, he provided commentary with each image, no doubt in part to ensure that the images were packed with a certain affective strength. Indeed, I propose that the force of affect accrues within the assemblage of meanings and relations produced by the presenter and his narration, the pictures projected onto the screen and the inter-corporal dynamics of the various members of the audience. To accompany a photo of a trans boy, post surgical interventions and shirtless, at age 18, the doctor clarifies that the person developed into a “very nice and open young man.” The doctor then added that “no one who saw him would think that he initially was not a boy.” And later, due to the success of his transition, we were informed, “he had a very high graduating grade (*Abitur*)” and that he “picked up one girl after another - a very successful flirt”. Youth who undergo transitions early enough, he concludes, are “not in an extra category, but instead belong to the group. And this equality with the group is,” from the perspective of this endocrinologist, “very important for their general psychosocial development.”

There is a certain irony in the work of this physician as he calls upon images as proof of both the invisibility and the success of his work: “No one who saw him would think that he initially was not a boy”. The interventions performed by him and other doctors on this young person are ‘so good’ (in their construction of sex/gender conforming bodies) that the ‘threat of adversity’ (via the potential doubting of the young person’s sex/gender) has been all but erased. Of course, implicit in the doctor’s statement is the assumption that it would be bad if one were to think that the young person initially was or may not have been a boy. The implied – and hence unspoken – aspect of this statement reminds us that it was taken as a given that sex/gender non-conforming bodies are undesirable and that their undesirability is a shared belief if not a basic fact. It is also worth pointing out that the visuals and narration selected for this presentation render as positive, desirable and happy those bodies that conform to norms, so that we are again oriented in their direction as the path towards happiness. It thus becomes clear that sex/gender norms are to some extent reinforced as norms by making the achievement of those norms part of a promise of happiness.

Here one might insist that the boy in the photo requested that the doctors do all they could to ensure that, following his transition, there be as few remnants as possible of the sex/gender he was assigned at birth - often referred to as one's so-called 'biological sex'. The doctor's comment ("No one who saw him would think that he initially was not a boy") makes the assumption that it would be bad if one were to think that the boy were anything but a boy, this critic might argue, only because the boy himself wishes that to be the case. Since the doctor did not provide the details of the boy's request, this may or not be true. This critique thus takes for granted the uncertain stance that all trans youth wish to conform to the sex/gender norms of the sex/gender with which they identify (assuming they identify with a static and easy to define sex/gender). It also fails to consider the complex temporalities of the photo and its affective agency beyond the desires of the photographed boy, and beyond the desires of the doctor. In addition to asking what the boy or the doctor intend for the boy's body and the photo of the boy's body (and the PowerPoint slide of the photo of the boy's body) to communicate, one might ask what the image does at the conference, despite or even because of those intended messages. What are the futures that the photo enables or excludes, and what are the histories that it brings to the present?

For this doctor it was not enough to imply that the bodies in the projected images have achieved happiness solely based on their convincing transition as demonstrated by their inability to be distinguished from sex/gender conforming youth; in order for them to escape suspicion, to 'pass' as a success of sex/gender transition, they must also be bodies that are "not in an extra category, but instead belong to the group." Although the doctor never makes clear to which group he is referring, he does provide us with certain clues about the criteria of their belonging (or at least the criteria of belonging as a young trans man): the acquisition of an Abitur, (hetero)sexual appeal and psychosocial development. There is an exchange of positive affect that occurs due to the proximal relations between these seemingly desired criteria and the sex/gender norms reinforced via the presentation and discussion of the images. The accumulation of their various positive registers helps to blur them together such that they all become part of the same 'happy family'.

Of course, the assumed and yet debatable desirability of these criteria is worth pointing out. An early transition seems advantageous to this doctor, because it improves the likelihood that trans youth attain a degree and develop a certain psychosocial level and (hetero)sexual prowess. However, just to take one example, some people might be less quick to invest in the belief that an Abitur is a desired goal. After all, students in Germany are divided at a very early age

into schools that are based allegedly on achievement and, in so doing, research shows, they are also divided based on family income and migration background (Baumert/Watermann/Schümer 2003). As a result, people of color and students from lower-income families are systematically excluded from access to the educational path that makes the acquisition of an 'Abitur' possible. Thus, it is not all young trans people who might access group membership if they initiate sex/gender confirmation procedures early enough so as to eliminate signs of non-conformity; it is only those who are white and not living in poverty – two characteristics unaddressed and yet part of the affective force of the projected photo – who are entitled access to these criteria. This selective acquisition is part of what renders the criteria desirable. Hence, we can see here how sex/gender norms become inextricably linked with norms about health, sexuality, education and, less explicitly, class and race.

Regarding imminent rifts in trans activism in the United States, Jack Halberstam keenly notes: "[T]here is a huge difference between becoming a black man or a man of color and becoming a white man" (1998: 159). Indeed, the absent discussion about the meaning of race and class during transition, or about how race and class influence sex/gender norms and experiences of sex/gender non-conformity, was perceptible to me throughout the conference. This absence was mirrored in, if not to some extent produced by, the class and racial dynamics of the conference location, but also perhaps the overwhelming whiteness of the conference organizers, participants and presenters. Sarah Lamble (2008) has analyzed the events surrounding 'Transgender Day of Remembrance' (TDoR), a day intended to commemorate those who have been killed in the last year, by comparing the typically white middle-class students who organize the day with the overwhelmingly poor people of color, often sex-workers, who are in general remembered at these events. She argues that TDoR events neglect the role of racism, poverty, and other forms of stigma in the murderous violence directed at trans people, instead reducing motivating factors to specifically anti-trans hostility.

## CONCLUSION

Via the unstable but no less powerful energies of 'optimism' or 'happiness', the forces of affect at this conference on sex/gender norms include certain bodies and exclude others. To borrow from Sarah Ahmed yet again, one might call these others 'affect aliens', a term used by Ahmed to label those who refuse to reproduce the arrangements of what is perceived to cause happiness or, one might

add, to lead to a bouquet of promises. This term is particularly fitting as it describes two of the excluded alien types who, via their exclusion or rejection at the conference, have made apparent how norms are reproduced even in the space of their deconstruction: 'unhappy queers' and 'melancholic migrants'.

As we have seen, unhappy queers are those who, despite all of the happiness promised by the norm, choose or accept or are stuck with the non-conforming body that may not make possible an 'Abitur', sexual success or psychosocial development. In short, it is "the queer person who is judged to be unhappy" (Ahmed 2010: 43). The *melancholic migrant*, according to Ahmed, "is the one who is not only stubbornly attached to difference, but who insists on speaking about racism, where such speech is heard as laboring over sore points." (Ahmed 2010: 48). The migrant refuses to allow sex/gender norms to be the only cause of their unhappiness, and in this refusal, they are seen to be the cause of their own unhappiness.

The exposure of these cruelties in the optimism and happiness of the conference must be part of what is taken away as central findings. After all, as Sarah Ahmed insists, "it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as good or better life." (Ahmed 2010: 50). And if this possibility for alternate imaginings produces a new form of optimism, let us not forget the potential cruelty of that optimism, but also not the value that optimism alone makes possible for the ability to face another day.

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