

Article

Becoming Trans: A Constructivist Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of the trans phenomenon from a constructivist psychological perspective that articulates the organic, operative, and social dimensions of a human subject. It emphasizes the developmental process through which a subject—through trial and error, conflicts, and decisions—elaborates and adopts a trans identity as a solution to a problem in living, under specific conditions of social and institutional influence or mediation. The paper critiques both the explanation based on the “discovery” of an intrinsic or innate identity and that of “contamination” or mere social influence, and it highlights the conceptual shortcomings of the queer antinormative discourse regarding sex, will, the function of norms, and normative progress. It examines the performative effects of this social influence in Spain under the Trans Law and its affirmative approach, which accelerates decisions with irreversible consequences while simultaneously restricting the very plural and rational social influence upon which a subject’s life decisions and normative progress depend.

Devenir Trans: un Análisis Constructivista

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece un análisis del fenómeno trans desde una perspectiva psicológica constructivista que articula las dimensiones orgánica, operatoria y social de un sujeto humano. Se enfatiza el proceso de desarrollo por el que un sujeto, a través de tanteos, conflictos y decisiones, elabora y adopta una identidad trans como solución a un problema vital, bajo determinadas condiciones de influjo o mediación social e institucional. Se critica tanto la explicación en términos de “descubrimiento” de una identidad intrínseca o innata, como la de “contaminación” o mero influjo social, y se muestran las deficiencias conceptuales del discurso antinormativo *queer* en lo relativo al sexo, a la voluntad, a la función de la norma y al progreso normativo. Se examinan los efectos performativos de dicho influjo social en España, bajo la Ley Trans y su enfoque afirmativo, que acelera decisiones con consecuencias irreversibles a la vez que restringe precisamente el influjo social plural y racional, sobre el que las decisiones vitales de un sujeto y el progreso normativo se fundan.

Palabras clave

Constructivismo
Psicología del desarrollo
Transexualidad
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Introduction

We understand the trans phenomenon to be the set of realities that converge in the existence of people whose experience of themselves does not conform to the distinction between man and woman, either because they wish to change their condition from male to female, or vice versa, or because they wish to change to some other non-binary condition. The phenomenon encompasses realities at various levels. Some relate to the body, particularly its primary sexual characteristics and, above all, its secondary ones. Others relate to the psychological development typical of young people or adolescents and to the formation of the self, which includes socialization, self-perception, identity conflict, and, at times, drama. Finally, other realities relate to social and institutional practices, linked to customs and laws. Here come into play the ideological, political, and economic interests characteristic of the last few decades of explosive identity and narcissistic culture linked to neoliberalism in what we call the West.

The phenomenon itself is ambiguous both in terms of the arguments that define and justify it and in terms of the term “trans” itself—merely a prefix—which seems to imply transcending a certain notion of sex and a certain notion of gender, and even transgressing any norm or criterion that underpins those notions. Our objective in this work is to examine this confusion and offer a model for articulating the levels mentioned in the previous paragraph, avoiding reducing the phenomenon to (1) the demands of the body or genetics (biological reductionism), (2) the dictates of an “authentic self” or an unconditional will (psychological reductionism), or (3) social, economic, political, and ideological pressures (sociological reductionism). It seems to us that this model provides a better understanding of the significant role these latter factors have played in the exponential increase, over the last decade, of people who identify as “trans,” caught up in a growing ideological swarm where that and other terms are more rhetorical than denotative (sometimes functioning as a shibboleth, a password of recognition).

Not surprisingly, the trans phenomenon has been accompanied by intense media and political activity, featuring bitter controversies with a proliferation of critical literature (e.g., Alarcón, 2022; Alsedo, 2024; Errasti & Pérez, 2022; López, 2023; Lora, 2021; Mercado, 2022; Miyares, 2022; Shrier, 2021) as well as defensive literature (e.g., Alegre et al., 2023; Butler, 2024; Duval, 2020; Gonzales & Rayne, 2019; Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018; Mittal, 2025; Stryker, 2017; Tompkins, 2023). In Spain, the Trans Law, passed in March 2023, allows for gender self-determination starting at age 12 with judicial permission, at age 14 with parental authorization, and at age 16 freely. The most debated aspect, aside from the age requirements, is the fact that expert reports are not considered necessary. Furthermore, the law prohibits conversion therapy (the attempt to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity) and establishes intervention and educational measures related to the LGBTQI+ community. From a psychological perspective, the official stance emphasizes the depathologization of transsexuality and aligns with the Trans Law, though with the caveat of recommending clinical follow-up in some cases.¹ However, there

¹ The General Council of the Spanish Psychological Association, which brings together the official associations of psychologists, is part of the international network IPsyNet (*International Psychology Network for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Issues*), which is affiliated with the *American Psychological Association* and promotes affirmative support for so-called sexual and gender diversity.

are critical opinions calling for greater caution. The best known is that of José Errasti and Marino Pérez (2022), which we consider to be the best-argued. These authors analyze the spread of so-called queer or trans ideology in schools, businesses, and society at large, and present alternative theoretical and therapeutic approaches for addressing the phenomenon. They argue that the body and personal identity are inseparable, such that discomfort with one’s own body is inextricably linked to emotional distress, which depends on psychosocial development and culturally available models of socialization. They combine analysis with criticism, in this case of the recklessness involved in accepting individual self-perception at face value and the resulting possibility of pharmacological and surgical interventions whose effects are often harmful and irreversible. Thus they critique the so-called affirmative approach.

In line with this general diagnosis, we would like to delve deeper into how the trans phenomenon can be understood from a psychological perspective, drawing on a theoretical tradition—constructivism—represented by such well-known classics as James Mark Baldwin, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Ignace Meyerson. Although it is a heterogeneous tradition that does not resolve everything on its own, we believe it offers some of the best tools for a thorough understanding of what a subject is. If we had to condense its core into a few words, we would say that it treats psychogenesis as a process that both mediates and is mediated by biological and socio-historical conditions, yet has its own logic (Sánchez-González, 2009; Sánchez-González, 2025; Sánchez-González & Loredó-Narciandi, 2009).

Norm and Construction

The theoretical underpinnings of the Trans Law and queer ideology in general (Bernini, 2018; Butler, 2007; Fuster-Ruiz de Apodaca et al., 2023; Preciado, 2020) tend to embrace a conception of the self as a self-determining interiority. It abstracts from processes of sociocultural influence, as if individual feeling and choice were absolutized. At the same time, everything tends to be considered a social construction in which the instituted—the norm—is ontologically and morally devalued relative to the instituting—the novel. Of course, this theoretical background is not monolithic and has evolved. Thus, Judith Butler (2024) has distanced herself from the conception of construction as something purely social or discursive and has moved toward forms of materialism that we consider vitalist and metaphysical, according to which, at the core, it is matter itself that grounds the diverse, ever-instituting, and even queer (mixed, undefined, strange, non-normative) character of all reality. In fact, these theorists need not necessarily subscribe to the idea that gender is an internal, individual essence, although we believe they have no choice but to assume it, given that their conception of the subject blends psychodynamic perspectives with a Foucauldian view of power (*cf.* Loredó, *in press*).

Butler’s idea of performativity assumes that sex-gender identity (of sex and/or gender) is what the body and its expression establish within a given sociocultural network, but at no point does it fully clarify how personal identity is constructed by articulating philo-, onto-, and historiogenetic components; nor why identity is so important in reference to sexual or gender identity and not, for example, social or national identity; nor what the difference is

between sex and gender; nor what kind of objectivity sex possesses (why we cannot convert XX chromosomes into XY or vice versa) and what kind of objectivity gender possesses (how is it imposed, if at all?; how is it chosen, if at all?). Resorting to vitalist, potentialist, or processualist metaphysics is, we believe, a hasty flight to avoid confronting the problem of what exactly the construction of the self and personal identity—including sex-gender identity—means. This flight consists of shifting the *nomos* to the *physis*: it is assumed that nature itself endorses or already contains, in potential, the indefinite plurality of possibilities that later come to be expressed not so much as individual choices per se (“I am a woman,” “I am trans,” etc.) but rather as self-recognitions, realizations of what one already was deep down, actualizations of potentialities. This leads to a conception of gender as an internal essence.

Sometimes a distinction is made between transsexualism and transgenderism, with the former referring to sex reassignment and the latter to gender reassignment, which obviously continues to reproduce the dichotomy between nature or *physis* (that which is given, binary, and rigid) and culture or *nomos* (that which is created by us, diverse, and flexible). Gerard Coll-Planas and Miquel Missé (2015) observe this dichotomy, understanding it as a tension between the conception of sex-gender identity as an essence or as an anti-essentialist tool, in opposition to the canon of the masculine and the feminine. Butler (2015, 2024) and other queer theorists, such as Paul B. Preciado (2022), seek to understand it in the second sense, which aligns with their anti-normative perspective, rooted in the liberation philosophies of May 1968.

Both Coll-Planas and Missé, as well as Butler and Michel Foucault, while acknowledging that the norm is constitutive of subjectivity, seem to tend to conceive of it as something monolithic or at least negative, emphasizing its repressive nature and downplaying its productive nature. They recognize that while the norm oppresses, it also constitutes; yet they seem to forget that, to the extent that it constitutes, it enables action. Drawing on Kant’s well-worn metaphor—that of the dove that feels the resistance of the air and believes it would fly faster in a vacuum—we say that seeing only the negative side of the norm is to act like that dove. It is to forget that the interplay of oppression and liberation occurs in the course of actions that co-determine one another and depend on a historical context characterized, in the case at hand, by the universalization of medical and psychological care, the emergence of new urban subcultures, the widening separation between reproduction and sex, and the reduction in family size. Without norms there is no freedom, only a void.² And that void is filled with self-recognition. Anti-normative obsession, indeed, leads to an authentic subjective interiority—the source of a criterion for how to live—opposed to an inauthentic social exteriority that is oppressive.

But that interiority and exteriority are purely metaphysical. The primal interiority that remains after denying norms is in reality

nothing, or nothing more than a blind desire to continue freeing oneself from everything indefinitely; a desire incapable of distinguishing what is considered more or less valuable within the norm, since it experiences it as a whole to be discarded. The metaphysics of interiority (letting the self emerge and be the one to decide through desire) and that of exteriority (fighting against every norm, destroying every tradition, always being suspicious) would not only require stepping outside the world to contemplate the interior and the exterior as whole totalities, but would also act *de facto* as a normative criterion: a criterion that blindly prescribes, without acknowledging or justifying it, *the norm of ending all norms*.

Thus, an idealistic conception of the notion of construction is adopted, according to which any reference to the validity, stability, or objectivity of what is constructed is blocked. The process of construction tends to be reduced to power, understood in turn in a metaphysical sense. Medical categories regarding transsexuality are reduced to a pathologizing medical discourse that is imposed on people. While the categories that define personal identity are rightly considered performative insofar as they do not merely describe but participate in the production of subjectivity—restricting the possibilities of the uninstituted while simultaneously enabling what ultimately becomes instituted—what ultimately comes into existence immediately falls under suspicion of being an imposition, a violation of what ought to be or should have been. Instead of understanding it as a reality with a certain degree of consistency, of value for living, it is understood as the product of an oppressive exercise of power. The constituted is viewed from the perspective of its limitations, of what could have been (constituted) and was not (because what is actually constituted has prevented it) but should be. It is as if what is constituted, what is constructed, by definition contained nothing good. Everything it contains is suspected of serving power, a power whose interests are supposed to never coincide with those of the subject, the latter conceived on the scale of an *id* that is pure desire, creative potentiality that should not be limited by any norm. Thus, power constitutes us as subjects, but this constitution is always shadowy, because it occurs by contrast with what is supposed to be better, in opposition to what is given. Furthermore, it is often thought that what is or should be to come is a recovery of something that has been repressed by Christianity, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, etc. (Barqui et al., 2018; Preciado, 2022; Stryker, 2017). It can also be conceived as that which has been ontogenetically repressed, if one believes that the “assignment” of sex at birth impedes the free development of what would emerge, in the absence of such an imposition, as a boy, a girl, or a non-binary child (Green & Friedman, 2015).

Inner Essence and Power

According to queer ideology, rather than a construction per se, there is a systematic *resistance* to the norm. And the processes by virtue of which resistance is better than acceptance are always opaque. They seem to rest on the experiences of liberation of those involved, which are not even contrasted with the experiences that the “old” categories once made possible and continue to make possible for the supposedly dominated or oppressed, who then appear as a kind of poor, deluded, or alienated people in the darkness of the cave (“We can no longer learn anything from the

2 Aside from philosophical traditions such as Marxism (social practices determine consciousness) or pragmatism (thought as participation in the norms of language and discussion), the idea of norms as constitutive of subjectivity is, within the constructivist psychological tradition, found in the works of the “founding fathers” themselves: Baldwin (the social construction of the self), Piaget (normative and even formalized structures as the horizon of psychogenesis), and Vygotsky (the *zone of proximal development* as a path toward the norm or the dual formation of psychological functions, which posits that the internalization of the given is a condition of possibility for thought, even if that given is transformed in the process of internalization). There is no self without a relationship to the other or without normative practices that shape it. In trans ideology, what resonates is rather a psychoanalytic framework where the authentic is the *id*, the superego censors, and the self, crushed by both, is a sort of survivor.

sane," warns Preciado, 2022, p. 153). Those who try to break the norm emerge as champions of a peculiar universalism, not grounded in any criterion of self-improvement or truth, but in the presumption that their need or experience is everyone's need or experience—whether because everyone has an interest in enjoying that experience of disidentification, or because opening up that possibility is considered valuable in itself as an act of rebellion and “emancipation.”

The notion of construction commonly found in trans ideology—which is closely related to social constructionism and rooted in the idea of resistance—is thus meaningless when it comes to the validity of that construction. It seems to persist solely to avoid the essentialism of the self, which would manifest itself through a natural interiority, whether neurobiological or psychological. The problem is that it is doubtful whether it actually avoids this, because the reasons for the superiority of the experiences of the champions of the new norm (the “good” one) are formally indistinguishable from those of the previous norm (the “bad” one). The only criterion, in the end, is experience and its liberating contrast with the limits of the past. Experience determines what is valuable against the given norm, but it is impossible to know whose experience it is, since the subject is constituted by the norm. So either there is no subject at all, but only a socially given and internalized normativity—in which case it is not known who is resisting—or there is indeed something, a surplus, a remnant beyond the constitutive norm, in which case, however, if that surplus cannot be understood in accordance with an alternative system of norms that also grounds it, then it can only be an internal, intrapsychic residue, an essence that ultimately reduces to a blind will or desire to resist, to say no to what is given, to disidentify. Thus, “the counter-sexual society is dedicated to the systematic deconstruction of the naturalization of sexual practices and the gender system” (Preciado, 2002, p. 19).

In short, here is the essential paradox: either the construction returns to a substantial and indeterminate interiority (the voice of negation), or it is necessary to show where and how better alternatives emerge for that supposedly oppressed self. But if it is possible to show such a thing, it is because the self is *not* completely dominated, but rather constituted in a strict, positive sense, that is, endowed with operational resources and tools for living that are meaningful and valid to some degree, given in their actual (not merely potential) constitution, undoubtedly in tension with others that may be judged as less valid according to some criterion, but which are equally present here and now, coexisting in their constitutive reality. The flesh-and-blood subject is not a body invaded by an external power, but an agent that does what is possible to distinguish and contrast one set of norms with another, transforming them, where appropriate, not from a pure experience alien to all norms—as the mere voice of negation—but by acting in the here and now, always from within some normative framework, without which it would not exist as a subject. The subject possesses some degree of awareness or competence regarding reality, regarding the contradictions of reality, and regarding the plurality of normative and value-based references that coexist and come into conflict. For this reason, the subject is capable of contextually transforming reality: not through negation from a position of potential otherness, but by exploring the possibilities of alternative norms whose value has already been

established and enacted—to some degree—by those who came before. The key to negation is also normative and social, and is as present as it is potential.

Thus, either we settle for the voice of negation, or we adopt a dialectical conception of construction—which is a construction based on what exists in the world and, therefore, must be pluralistic and hold validity to varying degrees, at least to some degree. This implies that action is always normatively constituted—and is therefore possible—while at the same time always being in a process of development and eventual transformation. It never reaches the (purely limiting or metaphysical) point in which the only norm is the negation of all norms. There is no room for the circular argument that what exists is bad because the alternative is good. Within what exists lies the seed of both the good and the bad. Therefore, we must judge, and we must explore and discuss our own criteria of goodness. This brings us back to the rationality of the real, the actual, and the present, and frees us from the psychodynamic nightmare that opposes desire to norm in a totalizing way, as if certain norms were not essential for continuing to live and to debate norms. It also frees us from the Foucauldian nightmare according to which all power is undesirable or suspect, as if there were no powers essential for continuing to live, powers worth upholding, such as the power to command and effectively coordinate resources during an emergency, the power to pursue and punish corruption, or the power to enforce equality before the law.

Sex and Gender

Biological science and medical technology cannot be reduced to oppressive discourses. They define essential traits of the human subject as a Linnaean and Darwinian animal within the plural core of a culture. And culture does not remove us from nature; in fact, biological evolution occurs in part thanks to animal cultures. Sex—or, to be more precise, sexual dimorphism—is a condition of the human animal's existence over time, of our species. It is linked to dispositions that participate in ontogenetic development and that statistically lead to the behavior typical of sexual morphology, in the sense of the use of traits of individuals with male gametes to fertilize individuals with female gametes, as well as subsequent gestation, childbirth, and behaviors—mediated, for example, by epigenetically identifiable hormonal processes—of attachment and care for offspring. Certainly, there is no “instinct,” no biological or psychobiological inner mechanism that regulates the entire process or contains sexual or gender identity, but rather a complex course of development in which sexual patterns or habits and “sexual identity” are constituted (constructed), at least in contexts where the latter has come to exist as a category.

No rational discussion of the issue should doubt the existence of (binary) sex in that sense, linked to the reproductive functions and the corresponding sexual dimorphism. Even approaches such as that of Anne Fausto-Sterling (2006), which argue that sex constitutes a spectrum rather than a binary reality, require the acceptance of two poles between which the entire range of the spectrum exists. Moreover, even assuming that more than two biological sexes were naturally possible, as Fausto-Sterling herself initially proposed (1993), the statistical norm remains binary to this day, and without it the continuation of the species would be impossible even with universalized assisted reproductive technologies, which require the

existence of ova and sperm.³ Embryonic or ontogenetic exceptions are, rather, confirmations of the rule: depending on the definition of intersexuality adopted, its prevalence is estimated to be between 0.05% and 1.7% in the general population (Ballering et al., 2023).

Scientifically speaking, there is also no doubt that sexual behavior in many species is not limited to reproductive copulation. In the case of humans, there are a multitude of institutionalized sexual patterns unrelated to reproductive intent. The historical and cultural diversity of the uses of the body and its sexual organs is evident, and this is what characterizes the notion of sexual gender (i.e., not grammatical). Beyond the conventional heterosexual dualism—which prescribes certain socio-institutional and psychological patterns for men and women and proscribes deviant behaviors, generally homosexual ones—what matters is that these behaviors exist and are also a product of human development, even if they are statistically less frequent. Desire can be shaped and channeled in diverse ways, and this is, in fact, always occurring, within certain parameters. There is diversity in the development of sexual behavior even in societies that repress it.

As we see it, the problem is not so much the desire to change one's appearance—and to gain social and institutional recognition—as it is the confusion between sex and gender and the proliferation of an ideology of liberation through “transitioning” from one sex to another; an ideology that (A) either proposes a change of sex (transsexuality), in which case there continue to be two sexes and two corresponding genders, or (B) asserts a virtually infinite range of possible sex-gender situations (transgenderism), either because (B1) it denies the foundational sexual dualism or because (B2), without denying it, it considers gender identity to be entirely independent of it.⁴ Not being an essence, sex cannot currently be changed, and it is not easy to imagine a form of engineering capable of transforming the XX genetic makeup of all the trillions of cells in a human individual into XY or vice versa.

Choice and Institutionalization

Gender preferences are not chosen in a single, definitive act of will, but rather they are constituted throughout development. Will consists rather of an inevitable and continuous process of decision-making within a given context, guided by certain relatively stable principles, norms, or values, with the risk of error—both in the decision itself and in the principles—which may be revised and corrected by life experience or by social changes, such as scientific advancements. That such gender preferences are varied and possible does not imply that they are a pure manifestation of absolute individual freedom or will, independent of all social mediation and the very process of development. It is possible for a human male to live as if he were a human female, and this has occurred in various ways throughout the centuries. Stating in an official document that

one's sex differs from the one “assigned” (by society, by a doctor) on the birth certificate has a performative meaning: I now self-identify as male or female (or as neither) and ask that the public authority endorse this. Note that here the involvement of the state is indeed required—in fact, it is actively sought—and not accidentally but substantively: personal self-perception alone has very limited value unless it is socially validated through the state. If it were enough to live or attempt to live in accordance with one's perceived or chosen identity, without any endorsement, support, or defense from the state or society, the essential practical problem of the entire trans movement would almost dissolve.

Even when one has lost one's primary sexual characteristics (which does not imply having acquired all those of the other sex), the affirmation of oneself as a subject of the opposite sex remains an acceptance of the reign of will. And affirmative public recognition, in and of itself, amounts to a celebration of self-determined interiority, to such an extent that it becomes politically incorrect to even raise doubts or problematize the phenomenon. The transsexual, as we have indicated, does not deny the sexes but only wants to change sex and believes their choice can initiate that change. In reality, the change consists of living as if one were of the other sex—usually in accordance with the most conventional heterosexual pattern—in every possible aspect, including bodily modification to the extent that it is feasible. Transgenderism (B2) denies sexual duality itself and assumes that the transsexual is, at heart, conservative—that is, they accept the existing norm (two sexes and two genders). The will, then, becomes an absolute monarch, because liberation goes beyond all given normativity (the conventional, the binary) and even beyond all possible normativity: there is a belief in total freedom to produce all the genders that fit within the diversity of experience—or none, which amounts to the same thing—an experience that ultimately consists, as we have already noted, in a constant generation of differences and a perpetual disidentification, with nothing instituted and everything in an incessant process of instituting.

The paradox is that anti-normative disidentification demands the immediate establishment of a new normativity, because it calls not only for freedom to live experiences—privately or among peers—but also, and above all, public and institutional recognition at the highest level, with normative changes ranging from laws to language and speech, including celebrations, flags on official buildings, tribute events, the promotion of academic studies and research, the creation of official bodies and observatories of all kinds, grants and aid, educational and architectural interventions (services), sports participation in events of the chosen gender, etc. A reality is promoted that is analogous to the old one (the binary one), but expanded in scope and depth; the existence of boys, girls, non-binary children, and a whole list of variants—which, when combining gender identities with sexual-affective orientations, number in the hundreds—is considered natural and has been rendered invisible until now. Otherness becomes a norm as rigid—or even more so—than the previous one; a norm constituting the new identities, premised on an act of rebellion against the old conservative and repressive status quo, ideologically underpinned by the denial—in the Foucauldian vein—of any epistemic consistency to sexual duality, linked to heteropatriarchal abuse. Transgenderism is grounded, negatively, in the rejection of sexual duality (either to deny the dependent gender dualism—B1—or to

3 Although antinatalism is defended from positions close to queer theory (Clarke & Haraway, 2018), it seems beyond dispute that a state that does not even reach the replacement rate is heading toward demographic, economic, and possibly political problems, and that all sovereign states have implemented policies aimed at adjusting birth rates to ensure the survival of the political community itself. Turning one's back on this implies accepting, with all the consequences, that the survival of the very nation-states in which one lives is irrelevant, which moreover implies a peculiar political program that is clearly in the minority on the planet.

4 Between transsexualism and transgenderism lies a conflict analogous to that between so-called classical feminism and transfeminism. Transsexual advocates have accused transgender advocates of hindering the social acceptance of trans people as men or women, while transgender advocates object to precisely the fact that acceptance requires the acceptance of the binary (Mas, 2015).

minimize that supposed dependence, such that sex is considered dual yet irrelevant to the infinite number of genders—B2), and positively on a conception of the norm, individual experience, and “free self-determination” that constitutes a flawed theory of psychological construction, as we hope to have shown.

The crux of the problem, then, does not lie in the possibility of diverse sexual lifestyles—which, after all, would be encompassed within a broad conception of gender—but rather in the imposition of a new institutionalized normativity, likely harsher than the old one (due to its explicitness and bureaucratization), based on an ad hoc rejection of the sexual dualism upon which the old norm was founded. This new institutionalization entails the construction of new subjects under new norms, deemed valid for their liberating nature but at the same time, according to their own logic, colonizing of the subject, and thus in need of some new subversion. In our view, what is happening is that, since the denial of sex lacks a foundation, the entire edifice is poorly grounded. The notion of construction in queer theory is itself poorly constructed, and can also be harmful. The expansion of a transition market fueled by the ideology that you have the right to decide without interference—without experts, without discussion, without data, without the pluralistic mediation of others, which, incidentally, is generically constitutive of all human development—has produced a significant increase in young trans people (Twenge et al., 2025) and, of course, in hormone clinics, which is often a preliminary step to surgery and is lifelong. The point is that this increase is not due to an unveiling, unless we believe that trans identity emerges from a natural intrapsychic authenticity. And this is where we must pause to examine development, from this constructivist perspective, capable of accounting for the genesis of trans identity, including the social modulations that allow us to understand this increase.

Psychology and Development

Looking at the more or less recent psychological literature on the subject, we find a bewildering variety of topics and approaches. We encounter studies on the ontogenetic development of gender identity approached from diverse perspectives: psychodynamic, clinical, psychobiological, affirmative, etc. (Aristegui et al., 2022; Bradford & Catalpa, 2019; Castañeda, 2015; Chen et al., 2018; Coyne et al., 2020; Diamond, 2020; Spivey & Edwards-Leeper, 2019; Withers, 2020). We find discussions on pathologization and depathologization and on the advisability or otherwise of early hormone therapy (Ashley, 2019; Barqui et al., 2018; Marchand, 2017; Périer, 2020). We find studies on detransitioning and discussions on whether early treatment or watchful waiting is better (Ashley, 2022; Favero & Machado, 2019; Giordano, 2019). We find studies on the role of family and social factors (Abreu et al., 2019; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019; Kane, 2006; Olson et al., 2016). And we find discussions on issues of ethics and human rights (Medjkane et al., 2021). Amid all this variety, the presence of the affirmative approach—which has become the official, or at least the de facto, one—is, of course, very noticeable (it is perfectly represented by Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; see also Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018, and the curious twist by Singh, 2016, who advocates for liberating the therapist themselves). Also very noticeable is the idea that trans people simply exist, as specific subjects, naturally (an idea that, paradoxically, can lead to

accusations of pathologization, since they are labeled as fitting into a diagnostic category), an idea that sometimes persists even when attempting to adopt an evolutionary, ontogenetic, or psychosocial perspective (Bockting & Coleman, 2016; Boskey, 2014; Dunham & Olson, 2018; Pinto & Moleiro, 2015; Riggs, 2019).

Recently, one of us (Sánchez-González, 2025) has systematized a number of concepts from the constructivist tradition regarding cultural transmission understood from a psychological perspective: those of *mediation* (the behavior of group members is mediated, though not determined, by available cultural content), *diagramming* (there exists a stabilized system of operations that defines the basic, socially shared aspects of the reality of that content), *scaffolding* (the influence of other individuals, whether intentional or not, is often decisive in transmitting that diagramming), *openness* (operations have their own logic of generating novelty, intertwined with biological and cultural logic but not completely reducible to either), and *the functional pulse of artifacts* (cultural content does not exist autonomously, without the involvement of subjects’ recurring operations). Applying this general framework to the trans phenomenon in order to establish a minimal order, we arrive at the following.

First, there are cultural mediations shaped by the media, laws, school and educational systems, affirmative therapies, identity models, parenting practices, customs, and so on. Second, we have activities that unfold throughout the individual’s development and are related to patterns of sexual or gender behavior in a context that, at certain moments, may lead them to make decisions that steer them toward one form of identity stabilization or another. Third, throughout this development—with critical periods in early childhood and adolescence—the aforementioned activities constantly occur in interaction with those of other individuals, some of whom—family, educators, experts, friends, and social networks—exert an incomparably greater influence. If they are presented with models of trans desirability, the individual is more likely to gravitate in that direction. Fourth, what the individual does depends on what they have done, in the sense that they are constructing a biography, a “personality” that cannot be reduced to their biological or sociocultural determinants. That personality, that “identity,” that self, is literally under construction, organized around a functionally stable “axis” (emotional, sexual-affective, vocational, aesthetic, ideological, etc.) amidst and through multiple frames of meaning (using what works, integrating what they can, rejecting what they cannot). Under certain conflicts or instabilities, it will tend to polarize toward the trans horizon, to the extent that it thereby achieves stability, relief, etc. And, fifth, the exploration and use of that trans horizon in its institutional dimensions (its practices, theories, values, networks of relationships, etc.) will allow for the crystallization of identity as a trans person, which in turn closes the circle and confers reality and institutional density upon the phenomenon itself.

The trans phenomenon has thus become an object because it has been constructed as such, and in a peculiar way. It has been categorized and produced—especially in the United States and its sphere of influence—through the institutionalization of a network of mechanisms—clinical, pharmaceutical, ideological, legal, etc.—that enables acts of identification (Rosa & Blanco, 2007) with identity categories that accumulate ceaselessly and around which, moreover, the biographies of those who perform these acts seem to

take on meaning: bigender, demigender, two-spirit, fluid, neutrois, pangender, agender, polygender, apogender, aliagender, maverique, etc. From a sociological perspective, these are often categories that give rise to authentic subcultures.

The mechanism of acts of personal identification aligns with a well-known performative effect in the social sciences and philosophy, which Ian Hacking (1995) termed the “looping effect,” according to which the categories used to describe subjects constitutively—and not accidentally—affect their experience and behavior, thus functioning as self-fulfilling prophecies. Abigail Shrier’s (2021) book *Irreversible Damage* can be read as a compilation of examples of the looping effect relating to the trans phenomenon, set within a historical and sociocultural context whose characteristic components include liberal democracy, the expansion of the internet, hypervigilant parenting styles, psychologistic individualism, etc., and whose agents—distinct from culprits—are, aside from the adolescents themselves, schools and universities, therapists, families, healthcare systems, influencers, and, in general, the promotion of affirmative and celebratory ideology regarding trans issues. The package is also typically presented as complete and morally self-contained, such that anyone who does not buy into it is immediately dismissed as transphobic.

The performative psychosocial influence is evident even in something as widely accepted as early medication, insofar as it steers children and adolescents in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to deviate from the path of transition. This is pointed out by Christopher Richards et al. (2019) and William Malone et al. (2021) when they warn of the potential long-term negative physical effects of puberty blockers, for example on bone density, neurodevelopment, or fertility.⁵ According to the former, hormone therapy is like walking blindfolded. Alison Clayton (2022) literally speaks of dangerous medicine and compares mastectomy—masked behind euphemisms such as “top surgery” or “chest contouring”—to past practices like lobotomy (top surgery is nothing more than the removal of healthy tissue). Furthermore, Madeleine S.C. Wallien and Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis (2008) demonstrated long ago that most children with gender dysphoria will no longer experience it after puberty, and with some probability, it will resolve into homosexual or bisexual orientations.

The looping effect is no mystery from a psychological standpoint. In terms of social and developmental psychology, one can expect nothing other than mutual influence and performative processes, because that is precisely what allows the subject to constitute themselves as such a subject, with a specific personality or “identity.” Shrier and other non-affirmative authors seem to assume that there is a tiny percentage of “real trans” people who are not the product of “social contagion.” However, the distinction between “real” and “contagioned” trans people is incompatible with the constructivist perspective we are applying. It reproduces the distinction between culture (contagion, social influence) and nature (what the “real” trans person seems to carry within themselves, as a pre-existing essence), and overlooks the fact that social interactions—the actions of others toward me—are an intrinsic part of the development of personality, the self, and all identity. They are not accidental, nor do they “contaminate” something prior and

pure. They are part of the process of constructing a result that does not exist beforehand, a result that is woven together through the integration of the multiple social influences experienced by a human subject and which undoubtedly has its own organic and psychophysical particularities (a genetic endowment, a bodily morphology, certain sensory thresholds, etc.). Organic conditions are always present (and are modified within their corresponding degrees of plasticity: gene expression changes throughout life, as do bodily morphology, pain tolerance, etc.), but social interaction always occurs; it cannot fail to occur. If it did not occur, the self would possess no specifically human identity—neither as a trans person nor even as a self. If a subject is raised from childhood by wolves (another type of social interaction), they end up being a hunting mammal with a system of operations coordinated with those of the wolves, not a “human person” among wolves, because they would not have become a human person (nor a “two-legged wolf”).

How, then, should we reinterpret the distinction between “real” and “contagioned” trans people? Simply in terms of different forms of institutional shaping of development. The unidirectional “pro-trans” social influence, which has grown exponentially, has led *many more individuals* to identify as trans (to “save” themselves from generic sufferings related to adolescent crises, conflicts regarding self- and body-perception and acceptance, tensions or uncertainties about sexual preference, etc.) *than would occur under social conditions of pluralistic influence* (with information and counseling on typical developmental issues and sexual preference at certain ages, on the pros and cons of hormone therapy, on the possibility of a waiting period, on the diverse experiences of other people, and, of course, regarding their inescapable freedom to ultimately decide) *and rationally grounded* (capable of articulating the developmental conditions we are attempting to explain here, critical of the chimeras of an autonomous and absolute will, and realistic about the objective limitations of “sex reassignment”). Under these social conditions of plural and rationally grounded influence, it is likely that a majority of people will end up following more or less familiar developmental courses—whether homosexual or heterosexual—that do not lead to the rejection of their bodies or to the initiation of hormone therapy or surgery. Sticking to development, without essentialism, we could then say that the rest of the subjects simply need to be trans, in the sense that *they find no better path* to alleviate their suffering. It is not that they are “the authentic ones” from the start. It is that they become trans after trial and error, deliberation, and decision-making. In their case, psychotherapeutic support cannot insist on effecting a “conversion,” because it would psychologically destroy them or push them toward self-destruction. Transsexuality would then be the most functional developmental path for identity stabilization, with its physical costs; transgenderism, without that type of cost.⁶

5 In pre-surgical medication, two phases are typically discussed: the administration of puberty blockers—peptides that inhibit the production of sex hormones and whose effects are presumed to be reversible—and subsequently cross-sex hormone therapy, that is, the administration of testosterone to women and estrogen to men.

6 In a text titled after the Hippocratic oath that requires physicians “First, do no harm”, David Bell goes so far as to suggest that the true conversion therapies are those that promote early transitions: “As I see it, the rapid decisions as regards the provision of medical and surgical intervention is itself a form of conversion therapy - like the past “treatments” for homosexuality, it seeks to refashion the body as the only permissible solution to painful conflicts about gender. It brings about transformations in the body, converting it in order to satisfy often insufficiently examined individual, family and social agendas” (Bell, 2020, p. 1035). This author points out the paradox of trans ideology when it interprets gender as something well-defined in terms of identity while, at the same time, considering the body to be fluid and malleable. Note that this is the same, but in reverse, as what was done with homosexuality: the bodies of homosexuals were considered fixed entities that determined their identity, and when that identity did not conform to that determination, it had to be molded to fit.

Social influence operates through macro- and micro-level mediations that are equally straightforward. The irreversible damage Shrier speaks of occurs among a population composed primarily of young and adolescent girls as well as young women. It is not that they are an intentional target, although as part of the phenomenon one cannot exclude commercial interests, but rather an effect of the cultural availability of a certain way of stabilizing personal identity which, as we said, is just as normative as the male-female binary (it cannot help but be normative). What trans ideology does, through its discourse and its power, is replace the norm of a world where there are boys and girls with the norm of a world where there are boys, girls, and non-binary children. This norm is supposed to be better, more authentic, and more liberating than the other, but it is unclear why. In reality, what it does is block social practices that helped stabilize identity, leading to a leap into the void that, in turn, must be cushioned by ad hoc mechanisms steering it in the opposite direction of “assigned sex”—since assigned sex is the conservative one—following a typical self-fulfilling prophecy mechanism.

The trans phenomenon is undoubtedly so difficult to address—though not necessarily to understand—because it involves a convergence of sociocultural, psychological, and biological factors, both phylogenetic and ontogenetic, and they converge in a way that aligns with a—typically contemporary—political activism based on personal or collective identities, where the paradoxical circumstance arises that, often, those who rebel coincide with those who govern (trans ideology is official policy in many governments, including Spain’s at the time of writing). What is strange is that it is not taken for granted, within the psychological profession, that there is a professional obligation to inform adolescents of the complex reality of development, so as not to trap them in the narcissistic bubble of self-determination—which, on the other hand, is precisely what our Trans Law encourages by outlawing any resistance to the subject’s will, as if that will were not already fueled in this case by an overwhelming ideology that seeks to function as *the sole mediator* of development. Instead of preventing, accompanying, and explaining what is known about biology and human development, expectations of liberation and happiness are created without any scientific basis whatsoever.

Conclusion

Of course, this is not about denying that trans people exist; rather it is about understanding how they come to exist. Much less is it about doubting that they are subjects of law like any other citizen. It is about committing to understanding and regulating the phenomenon without unduly amplifying it, as well as about expanding decision-making beyond the affected individual. Experts should not dismiss the phenomenon, but neither, in our view, should they take it for granted, encourage it, or regard it as a cause for celebration, uncritically accepting the affirmative approach. And this is the case if only because, even in the best-case scenario—when the transition leads to a functional, satisfying life—the process entails a cost that, had the initial distress been addressed differently, would surely have been avoidable or at least reducible. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health professionals in general are not passive agents in the production of the trans phenomenon. The cultural configuration of this phenomenon—

which is what shapes the identity-related distress that ultimately manifests in specific individuals with names and surnames—owes much to contemporary psychological knowledge.

What we have defended here is, first, the biological objectivity of sex, linked to reproduction and the condition of dimorphic physiological development and sexual behavior. Condition does not mean instinct or destiny. Conditions are woven or interwoven in various ways; for example, allowing for both homosexual and heterosexual practices in many species. Second, we have recalled that cultural practices normalize standards of sexual behavior. And, third, we have highlighted the psychosocial reality of development—in this case, the development of sexual or gender identity and behavior—where tensions arise within which sex-gender identity and orientation stabilize. Such stabilization depends neither solely on the body (the brain; cf. Loredó, 2023) nor solely on the “soul” (psychic interiority or the depths of the self), and it may bring about novelties that clash with hegemonic norms, but which are not better simply because they oppose these norms (they inevitably institute others) or because they emerge from desire or individual freedom (which do not even exist as absolutes).

Without wishing to be naive, we wonder why the voices of developmental psychologists and social psychologists are not more prominent in explaining that ontogenetic and sociocultural mediations are inherent to the self, or why more psychotherapists do not explain that the management of personal conflicts involves a subject situated in the real, socio-historical world, among other subjects who also experience conflicts and whose behavior will not always validate our own. Anyone who decides to transition must understand what it entails, what they are doing (a psychologist cannot operate with a conception of the will that is not empirical—as a system of operations that, with the risk of error and amid uncertainty, has no choice but to incorporate decisions at certain moments, responsible decisions, i.e., informed ones). Trans metaphysics, as we have discussed, is not the best way to understand and manage the situation, not even for people who are close to taking the step.

It is true that we, too, might be asked why affirmative support is worse than prudence—that is, listening, waiting, explaining, advising, accompanying, discussing, and shifting the focus away from subjective discomforts. After all, it will be said, mechanisms like the looping effect are non-specific; they mark no difference between what happened before and what happens now: binary identification processes (man/woman) are just as performative as those of transsexuals or transgender people; it is simply that the circumstances that had previously stabilized the two sexes or the two genders have changed. Moreover, it will be argued, the side effects of the norm are likewise nonspecific, since every norm causes them but the previous world was no oasis of happiness either. Besides, the bodily modifications required by transsexuality—whether chemical or mechanical—are not even new: in other eras and cultures, drugs have been and are used; tattoos, scarifications, neck elongations, foot binding, corseting, cranial deformations, tooth filing, piercings, castrations, etc. have been and are performed.

Our response is that not all these practices have the same meaning, nor can they be judged from God’s perspective—that is, from outside of history. Techniques for self-modification undoubtedly make sense in certain contexts, but that does not

automatically justify them. First, because even within each context there can be conflicts and contradictions—clitoridectomy, for example, is not a practice fully accepted within Islamic culture, but rather a subject of debate; and second, because comparison and judgment are inevitable when our realm is of this world. Although it cannot avoid being situated, it is perfectly legitimate, if not inevitable, to condemn certain practices, and in fact we do so all the time, regardless of whether we understand—and it is desirable to understand—their cultural logic. We are undoubtedly taking sides, though aware that there is no ultimate metaphysical foundation to sustain it—but there is none for us or for anyone, because the only possible judgment is comparative and precarious, unless our kingdom is not of this world.

What the affirmative conception of the trans phenomenon does, through its claim to be the sole mediator and based on a mistaken conception of will, identity, and development, is to foster trans developments that are likely unnecessary (psychosocially ill-conceived, if you will), in astonishing numbers, which will likely lead to an astonishing amount of resulting problems and suffering. The alternative, along the lines we have presented, includes both a clearer and more critical psychological perspective (one that allows us to understand both the trans experience and the irrational conditioning to which it is subjected in our country—from which other countries are moving away⁷) and a political decision committed to both rationality and the reduction of suffering.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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⁷ The Cass Review, a document of over three hundred pages commissioned by the UK National Health Service from pediatrician Hilary Cass in 2020 (Cass, 2024), has been the driving force behind this reversal—or at least a reevaluation—in countries such as Finland, Sweden, Norway, Australia, and France, in addition to the United Kingdom itself (for the cases of Finland, Sweden, and England, see also the information provided in the article by Levine and Abbruzzese, 2023). Cass bases her arguments on empirical evidence and points out that it is unclear whether medical interventions improve gender dysphoria in the long term. She also highlights psychosocial factors, which would at least partly explain the large number of adolescent girls who exhibit this dysphoria. In contrast to the affirmative approach and ideological pressure—which she herself denounces—she advocates for a comprehensive assessment of children and adolescents that, grounded in psychotherapy, does not rule out possibilities and exercises great caution regarding puberty blockers and hormone therapy.

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