

NEUROETHICS & TRANS STUDIES:

MAPPING AN OVERDUE OVERLAP



INTERNATIONAL NEUROETHICS SOCIETY 2024 ANNUAL MEETING

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18 APRIL 2024

TALK AGENDA & FURTHER MATERIAL



- 1) The Point
- 2) An Illustrative Anecdote
- 3) Where Is Neuroethics?

Overlap & Opportunities

- 4) Reassessing Neuroenhancement
- 5) Personal Identity & Brain Change
- 6) Neurorights & Cognitive Liberty

- 7) Political Context / Ethics of Scholarship
- 8) Closing / Q&A



Context & Prior Work

- A. Trans Bioethics & Trans Studies
- B. “Neurogenderings” Research in Feminist Neuroethics: a Transfeminist Revival?



Further Thoughts

- C. Personal Identity & Brain Change
- D. Neurorights & Cognitive Liberty
- E. Research Ethics Considerations

Current Neuroethics-Relevant Controversies

- E. Diagnostic Labels & Pathologization
- F. “Quality of Evidence” Concerns
- G. Questionable Historical Comparisons

THE POINT

Very little neuroethics scholarship engages with trans issues, despite trans experience being laden with key neuroethics themes like neuroenhancement, personal identity, & cognitive liberty.



There is invaluable work to be done here, if we can do it *right*.

AN ILLUSTRATIVE ANECDOTE

“Why did you not seek out a brain scan to confirm that you have gender dysphoria?”



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NEUROESSENTIALISM



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NEUROESSENTIALISM



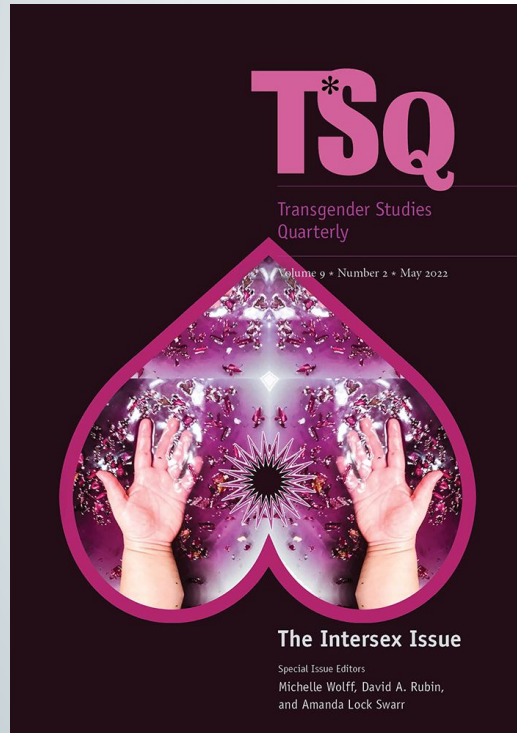
Trans as Brain Intersex

The Trans-Intersex Nexus in Neurobiological Research

THELMA WANG

Abstract There is an abundance of neuroscientific research seeking to pin down the origins of transgender people’s gender identity in the brain. The established premise is that transgender people have a brain structure more in line with the sex group with which they identify than the one they are assigned to at birth. Transgender is imagined as a form of intersexuality—but of the brain, rather than the genitalia. This article aims to critically interrogate the neuroscientific notion of transgender as brain intersex by situating the neuroscientific understanding of trans people within the genealogy of the medical management of transgender and intersex people. The study also examines how medical authority consolidates itself through the “trans-intersex nexus”—a mechanism in which trans and intersex people are placed in a relationship of simultaneous separation and reinforcement under the control of medical knowledge and technologies.

Keywords trans-intersex nexus, neuroscience, science and technology studies (STS), transgender studies, intersex studies



WHERE IS NEUROETHICS?

- Based on my own lengthy observation, keyword searches, reviews of journal / edited-volume ToCs: neuroethics has never engaged with these topics **in a sustained or impactful way.**
- Feminist neuroethics has been a site of valuable work that's topically adjacent, but scarcely mentions trans people or perspectives.

Philosophical Psychology
Vol. 23, No. 1, February 2010, 95–111



Sex differences and neuroethics

Peggy DesAutels

Discussions in neuroethics to date have ignored an ever-increasing neuroscientific literature on sex differences in brains. If, indeed, there are significant differences in the brains of men versus women and in the brains of boys versus girls, the ethical and social implications loom very large. I argue that recent neuroscientific findings on sex-based brain differences have significant implications for theories of morality and for our understandings of the neuroscience of moral cognition and behavior.

Keywords: Feminist Ethics; Neuroethics; Sex Differences

[Critical Studies of the Sexed Brain: A Critique of What and for Whom?](#)

Cynthia Kraus

Original Paper | Published: 03 May 2011 | Pages: 247 - 259

[The Neurotechnological Cerebral Subject: Persistence of Implicit and Explicit Gender Norms in a Network of Change](#)

Sigrid Schmitz

Original Paper | Published: 18 June 2011 | Pages: 261 - 274

[\(A\)e\(s\)th\(et\)ics of Brain Imaging, Visibilities and Sayabilities in Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging](#)

Hannah Fitsch

Original Paper | Published: 15 November 2011 | Pages: 275 - 283

[Explaining, or Sustaining, the Status Quo? The Potentially Self-Fulfilling Effects of 'Hardwired' Accounts of Sex Differences](#)

Cordelia Fine

Original Paper | Published: 22 June 2011 | Pages: 285 - 294

WHERE IS NEUROETHICS?

- Other fields (esp. bioethics) have produced trans-relevant work I would call “neuroethics,” but they have not done so under that label.

Sex Roles (2018) 78:228–241
DOI 10.1007/s11199-017-0786-3



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Effects of Gender Neuroessentialism on Transprejudice: An Experimental Study

Boby Ho-Hong Ching¹ • Jason Teng Xu²

Dismantling the Transgender Brain

Eric Llaveria Caselles

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I analyze in detail a neuroscientific research paper that investigates the structural connectome of transmen and transwomen in relation to cismen and ciswomen. Situated within the frame of Feminist Science Studies and from an outsider-within perspective, my analysis meets three objectives. First,

The Misuse of Gender Dysphoria: Toward Greater Conceptual Clarity in Transgender Health

Florence Ashley 
Faculty of Law, McGill University

Florence Ashley

Abstract

The notion of gender dysphoria is ce Clinicians who work in transgender h as defined and described in the fifth notion of this term as used to ass therapy and surgery. Unnecessary di related care can contribute to stigma

Keywords

transgender, access to health care, di

Gender dysphoria, which refers to t comfort some trans people experie discrepancy between their gender as gendered self-image, has been a cen

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DOI: 10.1177/1745691619872987
www.psychologicalscience.org/PPS



Adolescent Medical Transition is Ethical: An Analogy with Reproductive Health

ABSTRACT. In this article, I argue that adolescent medical transition is ethical by analogizing it to abortion and birth control. The interventions are similar insofar as they intervene on healthy physiological states by reason of the person’s fundamental self-conception and desired life, and their effectiveness is defined by their ability to achieve patients’ embodiment goals. Since the evidence of mental health benefits is comparable between adolescent medical transition, abortion, and birth control, disallowing transition-related interventions would betray an unacceptable double standard. While great enough risks can override autonomy over fundamental aspects of personal identity, I demonstrate that the available scientific evidence does not corroborate the view that adolescent medical transition is dangerous. Consequently, adolescent medical transition should be recognized as ethical and remain available.

ONE OPPORTUNITY: REASSESSING NEUROENHANCEMENT

- Neuroethics discourse on cognitive enhancement has heavily focused on (work-oriented) cognitive abilities in contexts of productivity: school, employment.
- Aren't we more than our cognition? Doesn't "better" mean something more than labor value?



ONE OPPORTUNITY: REASSESSING NEUROENHANCEMENT

- Neuroethics discourse on cognitive enhancement has heavily focused on (work-oriented) cognitive abilities in contexts of productivity: school, employment.
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- Meanwhile, it is not uncommon to encounter trans people narrativizing transition as a kind of neuro- (though not strictly cognitive) **enhancement experience**.



But far and away the biggest changes in the first few months were emotional. It felt like a haze was lifted from my brain and I could actually perceive my own emotions clearly. Like just coming out and being myself before hrt helped me open up but this was on a much deeper level

testosterone fixed a lot of my issues with emotional regulation overnight. it improved my command over my temper. i no longer cry under sudden stress or pressure. it significantly lessened my depression and my anxiety.

starting T made me feel more at home in my body, less disassociated, more physically in touch with myself

it raised my appetite - not just my capacity for food, but also how much i enjoy it

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES: PERSONAL IDENTITY & BRAIN CHANGE

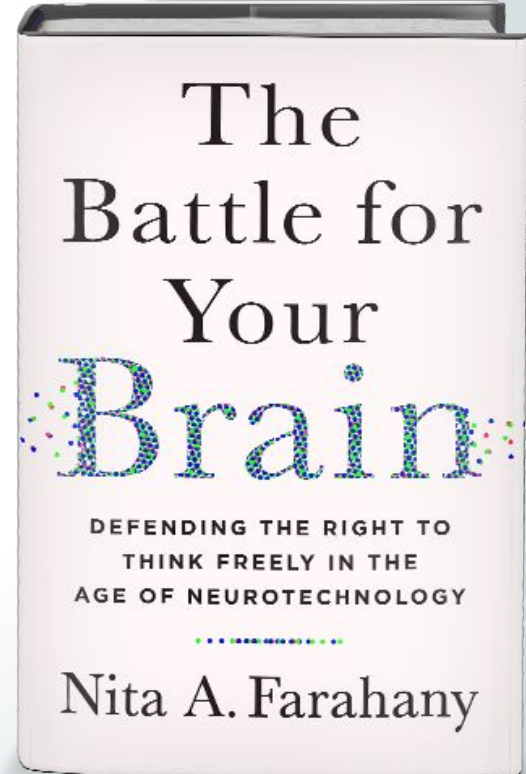
- Neuroethics scholars have paid considerable attention to questions of personal identity and the nature of the self, particularly in the context of deep brain stimulation.
- Research that is meant to inform clinical and investigative practice of DBS should, of course, remain grounded in the perspectives of DBS stakeholders (patients especially).
- But if we are developing **bigger-picture neuroethics insights** re: what it means to be the same (or a different) self as one's brain changes ... trans perspectives are indispensable.



OTHER OPPORTUNITIES: NEURORIGHTS & COGNITIVE LIBERTY

- There is potential for neurorights advocates to align with existing rights movements (reproductive justice, queer liberation), working with trans thinkers to unify our accounts of brain & bodily autonomy.

“Cognitive liberty is the right to self-determination over our brains and mental experiences, as a right to both access and use technologies, but also a right to be free from interference with our mental privacy and freedom of thought.”



POLITICAL CONTEXT & ETHICS OF SCHOLARSHIP

UK

‘Gender critical’ author Helen Joyce says she wants to ‘reduce’ number of trans people: ‘Chilling’

By Patrick Kelleher

means reducing or keeping down the number of people who transition,” Joyce said. “Living with transgenderism. It is all

“That’s for two reasons - one of them is that every one of those people is a person who’s been damaged. But the second one is every one of those people is basically, you know, a huge problem to a sane world.”

TORONTO STAR
CANADA POLITICS WORLD OPINION LIFE SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS

CRIME

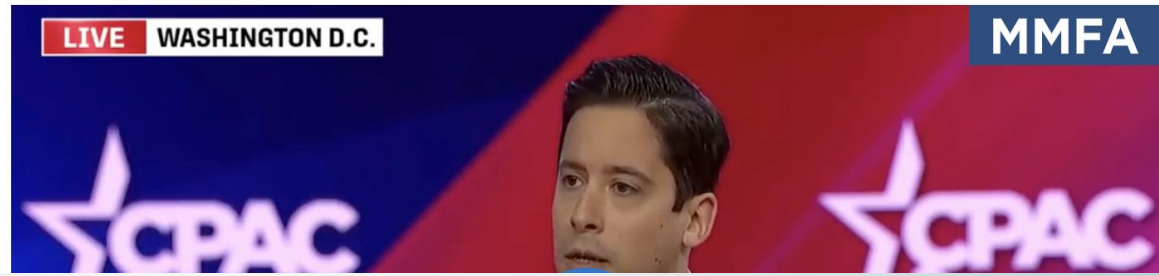
Attacker ‘targeted’ gender studies class in University of Waterloo stabbing: police

A professor and two students have been taken to hospital with injuries

By **Cheyenne Bholla** Record Reporter
Thu., June 29, 2023 | 2 min. read
Article was updated 2 hrs ago

The Daily Wire’s Michael Knowles: “Transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely”

PUBLISHED 03/04/23 3:20 PM EST



POLITICAL CONTEXT & ETHICS OF SCHOLARSHIP

- Nothing less than a battle for trans survival — for the very possibility of a future where trans people **exist at all** — is currently unfolding in the national political spotlight of most countries in the Anglophone world.
- This political context generates responsibilities for academics who produce work relevant to these issues. The value of free and fearless inquiry is *bounded* by **obligations not to lend unwitting aid to a politics of extermination.**

The Daily Wire's Michael Knowles: “Transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely”

Knowles: “There can be no middle way in dealing with transgenderism. It is all or nothing.”

WRITTEN BY [MEDIA MATTERS STAFF](#)

PUBLISHED 03/04/23 3:20 PM EST





THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Thank you all so much. This work means a great deal to me, and I know I can count on your support in building space for more of it — and for more of us



I look forward to the deeper conversations that will follow from this very condensed talk!