LESSON PLAN

Transgender Representation in TV and Movies

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

LEVEL: Grade 9 to 12

DURATION: 2 hours

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kathleen Clarke, B.A. Sociology (2015)

Overview

In this lesson, students are introduced to concepts of gender identity and gender expression and learn about common portrayals of trans people in movies and TV shows. Students then draw on this analysis to imagine trans characters and allies in different TV and movie genres. Finally, students consider the question of whether it's more important for characters from marginalized communities to be represented in media more often or if it's more important that those portrayals be positive and accurate.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

- An understanding of current and past representations of the transgender community

- An understanding of the implications of the lack of appropriate representations of transgender persons in the media

- An understanding of gender identity, gender expression and allies

Preparation and Materials

Have blank sheets of paper on hand for students to write on for group and individual work and brainstorming

- Photocopy the following handouts:

  - *Sex and Gender Glossary*

  - *Television Shows and Movies with Transgender Representation*

  - *Creating Trans and Ally Characters*

  - *Victimhood or Invisibility?*

- Review the teacher backgrounder *Television Shows and Movies with Transgender Representation: Teacher's Copy*

Procedure

Begin by asking the class to reflect on and write down five TV shows and/or movies they've seen recently. (It doesn't have to be the five most recent, just the first five that come to mind.) Now ask them to think about the characters in those TV shows and movies and make a list of the different categories they fit into in terms of:

- Race or ethnicity
- Ability or disability
- Religion (if identified)
- Sexual orientation

Once students have had a few minutes to make their lists, write the categories as headings on the board. (Make sure to leave room for a fifth category.) Have students help you fill in the lists, noting the characters' names and how they are identified.
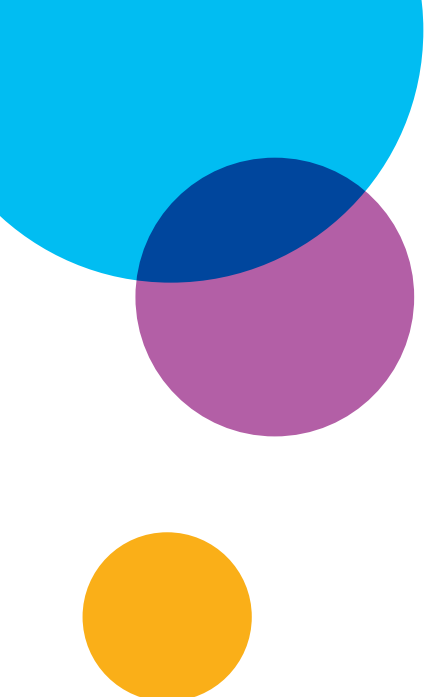
Remind students that media representations of groups, communities, experiences and ideas are important to explore, because the media is often seen as a reflection of our current society. (If you feel your students need more background on this idea, you can show them the MediaSmarts video *Media have social and political implications*.)

Looking at the categories, ask students:

- Which groups are well-represented? Which are not?
- What happens when groups are excluded? What happens when you don't see an identity or group that you belong to being represented in the media?

Add a fifth category to the board that reads "Gender Identity" and ask students what they think it means. Don't confirm or refute any suggestions (though you may need to respond to any discriminatory language).

Distribute the handout *Sex and Gender Glossary* and go through the definitions of the terms *sex, sexual orientation, gender identity* and *transgender* with the class. Now ask students if they can recall any transgender characters on the television shows and movies that they have seen; if so, add them to the Gender Identity category.

Distribute the handout *Television Shows and Movies with Transgender Representation* to the class and ask students to read it and discuss the questions with a partner. Use the *Teacher's Copy* to lead a whole-class discussion about the questions. **Note that *Orange is the New Black* is recommended for mature viewers. It is included in this lesson because of its importance in the history of trans representation, but teachers should be careful not to appear to be recommending viewing it to students.**

Following up on the final question, suggest to students that media creators can resolve the issue of defining trans characters by creating characters who respond to their challenges, rather than being passively *victimized* by them, and also have other characters act as *allies*.

ACTIVITY: CREATING TRANS AND ALLY CHARACTERS

As a class, identify at least ten different *genres* found in movies and TV (superhero movies, romantic comedies, kids' movies, teen dramas, crime dramas, situation comedies, etc.).

Distribute the handout *Creating Trans and Ally Characters*. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. Have each group select a genre (it is fine if more than one group does the same genre) and have them create their trans and ally characters, then share them with the class.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION

Distribute the assignment sheet *Victimhood or Invisibility?* and go through it with the class. Have students complete a five-paragraph essay on one of the listed topics.

TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN TV AND MOVIES

Sex and Gender Glossary

Sex assigned at birth:
The classification of people as male or female. At birth infants are assigned a sex, usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy.

Sexual Orientation:
Describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. For example, a person who transitions from male to female and is attracted solely to men would identify as a straight woman.

Gender Identity:
One's internal, deeply held sense of one's gender. For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender:
An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms - including *transgender*. Some of those terms are defined below.

Gender Expression:
External manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behaviour, voice, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Transsexual:
An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. Still preferred by some people who have permanently changed - or seek to change - their bodies through medical interventions (including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries). Unlike *transgender*, *transsexual* is **not** an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word *transgender*.

Trans:
Used as shorthand to mean transgender - or sometimes to be inclusive of a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella.

Transgender Man:
People who were assigned female at birth but identify and live as a man may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten it to trans man. (Note: trans man, not "transman.") Some may also use FTM, an abbreviation for female-to-male. Some may prefer to simply be called men, without any modifier. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

Transgender Woman:
People who were assigned male at birth but identify and live as a woman may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten to trans woman. (Note: trans woman, not "transwoman.") Some may also use MTF, an abbreviation for male-to-female. Some may prefer to simply be called women, without any modifier. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

Cisgender:
A term used by some to describe people who are not transgender. "Cis-" is a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side as," and is therefore an antonym of "trans-." A more widely understood way to describe people who are not transgender is simply to say *non-transgender* people.

Gender Non-Conforming:
A term used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. **Please note that not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender; nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming.** Many people have gender expressions that are not entirely conventional -- that fact alone does not make them transgender. Many transgender men and women have gender expressions that are conventionally masculine or feminine. Simply being transgender does not make someone gender non-conforming. The term is not a synonym for *transgender* or *transsexual* and should only be used if someone self-identifies as gender non-conforming.

Nonbinary:
People whose gender identity doesn't fall into the categories of "man" or "woman" often call themselves nonbinary. Some nonbinary people identity as trans and some don't.

Genderqueer:
A term used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms. The term genderfluid is also sometimes used. The term is not a synonym for *transgender* or *transsexual* and should only be used if someone self-identifies as genderqueer.

Two-Spirit:
A term used in some Indigenous cultures and by some Indigenous people. It means a person with both a feminine and masculine spirit, and can be used to describe either sexual orientation, gender identity or both. Can also be written 2 Spirit or 2S.

*Reference: GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender Issues http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender (2015). Reprinted with permission.
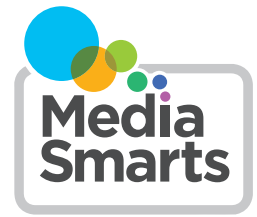
TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN TV AND MOVIES

Television Shows with Transgender Representation

Read through the descriptions of transgender characters in TV shows and then discuss the questions that follow with a partner. Be ready to discuss your answers in class.

Orange is the New Black (TV, 2013): Sophia is the only transgender woman in Litchfield Penitentiary, where the show is set. Before transitioning she worked as a firefighter, and now works as a hairdresser in the prison; she is one of the most "feminine" of the prisoners in terms of her gender expression. She is in prison for credit card fraud, which she did in order to pay for her sex-reassignment surgeries. While many of the other inmates generally accept her, she faces prejudice from staff and some inmates, including a severe beating from other inmates.

Transparent (TV, 2014): A dysfunctional Los Angeles family is shaken when father Maura comes out as transgender. Throughout the series, Maura and her children struggle with their sexualities and how they fit into society. As well, Maura is forced to confront the privilege she experienced before coming out and is upset when she is not accepted at an event that is restricted to people assigned female at birth. By the end of the series it is revealed that Maura's grandmother was a trans woman and her child Ari also comes out as non-binary. The series was criticized for having a cisgender actor play Maura and for not having any trans writers or producers in the first season. The series later added trans writers to its writing staff and its executive producer came out as non-binary.

Note: Orange is the New Black *and* Transparent *are recommended for viewers over 18 only.*

Grey's Anatomy (TV, 2015): Rosalyn is a transgender woman who is the brother in-law of one of the main characters of the show. Rosalyn faces issues of acceptance with her brother, but is defended by her sister-in-law as she immediately uses the appropriate gendered pronouns for Rosalyn, "she" and "her".

The Fosters (TV, 2014): Cole is a transgender male youth that is living in a group home for "juvenile delinquents". He struggles with finding support within state institutions. He is placed in a girl's group home as a result. Cole reveals a lot of struggles that transgender male youth have such as chest binding, others' use of incorrect pronouns, and disregard for his preferred name.

Sort Of (TV, 2022): Nonbinary lead character Sabi, the youngest child in a large South Asian family, reconsiders their planned move to Berlin after their best friend Bessy is in a serious accident. Instead, Sabi stays in Toronto to help care for their friend and becomes a nanny to Bessy's children. They are in a relationship with Lewis, a straight, cisgender man who knows Sabi is nonbinary but feels conflicted about his sexuality. Bilal Baig, who plays Sabi, is also nonbinary and is a producer and writer on the series.

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. "Identity Crisis" (TV, 2002): Paul Millander is a transgender man that appears in three episodes of CSI culminating in the episode *Identity Crisis*. He plays a serial killer who murders his mother and then kills himself. His trans identity is inaccurately portrayed as being the result of a belief that he could have prevented his father's murder, which he witnessed when he was ten years old, if he had been a man.

QUESTIONS

1. Trans characters in media typically appear as either *victims* or *villains.* Which of these characters fall into either category? Are there any that are allowed to be more complex characters?

2. How have representations of trans characters changed between the earliest and most recent examples?

3. What challenges faced by trans people are portrayed in these different examples? What misconceptions about trans people are communicated?

4. What effect do you think it has on trans viewers to see characters portrayed primarily as victims? What effect do you think it would have if the challenges they face *weren't* portrayed in media representations?

5. Do you notice any differences between shows where writers or producers are trans and ones where they aren't? If so, what are they? How important do you think it is for trans people to be involved behind the scenes when trans characters appear onscreen?

TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN TV AND MOVIES

Television Shows and Movies with Transgender Representation: Teacher's Copy

QUESTIONS

1. Trans characters in media typically appear as either *victims* or *villains*. Which of these characters fall into either category? Are there any that are allowed to be more complex characters?

Transgender characters are often portrayed as **victims or villains**.

The character in *CSI* is portrayed as a villain. Transgender characters are often used for comedic purposes, often as part of jokes that rely on their "shocking" gender identity. Most transgender representation in crime dramas portrays these characters as mentally unstable and **pathologize** them. Taking this character and portraying their gender identity as a medical or psychological problem stigmatizes the group as a whole.

The characters in *The Fosters* and *Grey's Anatomy* are portrayed primarily as victims, in that their portrayal focuses exclusively on the challenges they face as a result of their gender identity.

The characters in *Transparent* and *Orange is the New Black* are more complex: neither is a pure villain or victim (both encounter challenges based on their identity, and also sometimes engage in harmful behaviour related to it.) **Note that *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent* are recommended for mature viewers. They are included in this lesson because of its importance in the history of trans representation, but teachers should be careful not to appear to be recommending viewing it to students.** The character in *Sort Of* is neither a victim or a villain but has a storyline relating mostly to their relationships with friends.

2. How have representations of trans characters changed between the earliest and most recent examples?

There seems to have been a change over the past two decades in terms of the representation of transgender individuals. More transgender characters are portrayed as victims instead of villains in television shows and movies, and a small number are given more nuanced characterizations. The more recent examples are also the first to have trans writers and producers.

3. What challenges faced by trans people are portrayed by the different examples? What misconceptions about trans people are communicated?

Challenges:

- Costs of reassignment surgery
- Pressure to have a stereotyped *gender expression* that matches their gender identity
- Prejudice
- Violence
- Physical changes in adolescence
- Others' use of name and pronouns
- Access to correct washroom for their gender identity
- Exclusion based on the gender assigned to them at birth

Misconceptions:

- Trans identity is caused by a childhood trauma
- Trans people conceal their identity from their romantic partners

4. Showing the challenges that are faced by transgender characters can make people afraid to identify themselves, but not showing them would be unrealistic and would minimize the difficulties they face.

Transgender characters often face discrimination and stigma. This representation can deter some transgender persons from publicly identifying as transgender for fear of being bullied and/or abused. This tells them that if they publicly identify, then they will be bullied and they will be rejected by people in their community and potentially by their families.

On the other hand, if television shows and movies had transgender characters that were never faced with discrimination based on their gender identity, viewers might never understand how marginalized transgender persons are made to feel, and might never learn how to be an ally or how to be supportive of the daily problems that they face.

5. Do you notice any differences between shows where writers or producers are trans and ones where they aren't? If so, what are they? How important do you think it is for trans people to be involved behind the scenes when trans characters appear onscreen?

The series with trans writers and producers have more nuanced portrayals of their characters and are less likely to have stories focus exclusively on their gender identity. While it's not impossible to deliver an accurate and thoughtful portrayals of a trans character without trans people behind the scenes, it is much more difficult.

TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN TV AND MOVIES

## Creating Trans and Ally Characters

For this exercise, your group will select a *genre* of movie or TV show and create two characters appropriate to that genre, a *trans* main character and an *ally* character. (An ally is someone who actively supports and accepts individuals who are from a group that they do not belong to. For example, a cisgendered woman can be an ally for a transgender person.)

As you are planning your characters, think about:

* What kinds of characters are commonly found in this genre? What kinds of roles do the *main* characters play and what kinds of roles do *supporting* characters play?

  For example, the main characters in a *superhero movie* are typically the superhero and the superhero's enemy. Supporting characters might include sidekicks or other characters that help the superhero, romantic interests, minor enemies, and comic relief characters.

* What kinds of challenges would your trans main character face – both related and unrelated to their gender identity?

* In what ways could your ally character provide support and encourage acceptance?

Keep in mind some guidelines for treating trans people with respect:

* If addressing a trans woman the pronouns are "she and her".

* If addressing a trans man the pronouns are "he and him".

* If addressing a gender non-conforming person, ask them what pronouns they would prefer. Common pronouns that gender non-conforming students prefer are "they, them, and theirs".

* Don't refer to a trans person's birth name or gender assigned at birth unless it is particularly relevant.
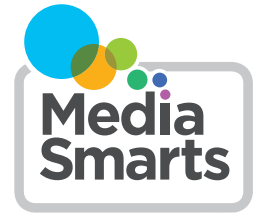
TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN TV AND MOVIES

Victimhood or Invisibility?

The transgender community, like many other marginalized communities, is faced with a difficult question when it comes to representation. Gay actor/writer Harvey Fierstein has argued that marginalized communities should seek "visibility at any cost" because "negative is better than nothing," while other activists have argued that inaccurate portrayals do more harm than not being represented.

Write an essay replying to one of the following questions:

- Are some representations better than no representations even if those representations are negative?

- If you were (or are) a part of a minority group or stigmatized community, would you want a more realistic representation that could victimize your group, or an idealistic representation that could present a new reality for your group?

- Do media producers have a responsibility to make sure that their portrayals of marginalized groups are accurate?

Make sure that you state a clear *thesis* taking a stand on one of the topics and support it with evidence drawn from media representations of trans people and other under-represented groups.