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Methodological Solutions in Studies on Transgender. Exploring the Terrain

**Rozwiązania metodologiczne w badaniach nad transpłciowością.
Próba rozpoznania terenu**

Abstract: The aim of the article is to identify methodological solutions in studies on transgenderism conducted around the world¹. The article provides an overview of the solutions used in the methodology of research on transgender. This was done based on a compilation of major foreign research on transgender and an analysis of the content of the EBSCO website. As a result, some changes have been observed over time. They concerned the scope of the amount of research related to the issue of transgender over time, preferences of data collection methods, research patterns and technologically advanced solutions. Possible factors determining the result of the review were discussed. The authors indicated the significance of the developing methodological tendencies in studies on transgenderism during several decades on education and, as a result, on general social awareness.

Keywords: methodological solution, transgender, data collection.

¹ This is the first in a series of articles. The article is also part of a project under the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” (IDUB) program under the name *About becoming... Narratives of parents of adult transgender children (2022-2024)*

Introduction

There have always been transgender people (Bell-Metereau, 2019). The current situation of transgender people in Poland has become a political fact, a pretext for public debate and manifestations with other sexual minorities. The main objective of this paper is to analyse source literature with regards to research on transgenderism. We believed that scientific research is significant for the development of social awareness and education which broadens knowledge regarding transgenderism. Therefore we decided to revise empirical works on the subject in the context of applied research methods. This allowed us to determine the areas and scientific disciplines, where the topic of transgenderism raises particular interest. We made a decision to analyse the EBSCO database, which includes empirical data from all over the world. Moreover, we signaled a Polish perspective in order to present a point of view which was the impetus for our analysis. The aim of the article is to identify methodological solutions in studies on transgenderism conducted around the world.

We will begin our deliberations with terminology. The term transsexual was introduced in 1949 by Caudwell, however transsexualism as a phenomenon gained greater interest in 1952 with the first broadly publicised sex reassignment surgery performed in Denmark, which allowed George Jorgensen to become Christine Jorgensen (Urban, 2009, p. 719). As a diagnostic category it was introduced in the third edition of the DSM (ibidem, p. 719). During the conference in Geneva (May 25th2019), after a revision, the WHO confirmed the new rules regarding the classification of diseases and mental disorders, which were „described in detail in the ICD-11, which was developed for several years. The most important changes concern the diagnosis and classification of transgender people. According to new guidelines gender dysphoria is no longer listed as a mental disorder” (Domagała, 2019). According to Susan Stryker „The word “transgender” itself, which seems to have been coined in the 1980s, took on its current meaning in 1992 after appearing in the title of a small but influential pamphlet by Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come*. First usage of the term 'transgender' is generally attributed to Virginia Prince, a Southern California advocate for freedom of gender expression” (Stryker, 2006, p. 1). John Bancroft stresses that the:

„aetiology of transgenderism is multifactorial, where the main role is ascribed to biological conditions (genetic, neurodevelopmental) which are also affected by the environment. The prenatal period and

the first years connected with the shaping of sexually diverse brain areas are fundamental for the development of future gender identity. The function regulating this process is fulfilled by sex hormones, especially androgens” (Bancroft, 2011).

The text will present the mainstream of method-league solutions in transgenderism research adopted over the past 98 years. We would also like to draw attention to how many scientific works have been devoted to the issues of transsexualism, available in the EBSCO international database over the last decades and in the area of which scientific disciplines they have most often appeared. This will be important to highlight gaps in available transgender research.

Transgenderism

The modern term gender identity is important in the scientific, social and cultural context. It constitutes a multidimensional research category, studied by representatives of various disciplines. However, in the past it did not raise as much interest among researchers as the issue of identity and the significance of the ego. This is surprising, given that gender identity is an inseparable and fundamental element of human identity. Gender identity is understood through the prism of four models (Fajkowska-Stanik, 2001; see Czyżowska, 2012; cf. Miller, 2014).

The first model is the psychoanalytical model which is biological and deterministic in character, as we can clearly see in the concept of Sigmund Freud (1984) and Erik H. Erikson (2000). The psychoanalyst who broke with this approach was Alfred Adler (1986), for whom the significance of the development of gender identity lay in a sense of commonality, thus emphasising the need to treat people and their development subjectively. The next model was the cognitive-developmental approach, whose main representatives were Jean Piaget (1967), Lawrence Kohlberg (1969), Dale Marcus and Willis Overton (1978) and Susan Harter (1983). This model accounts for gender identification as one of the phases of shaping identity. It is integrated with intellectual development. Another approach is the social learning theory by Albert Bandura (2007), which lists personal and environmental traits as factors determining personality development. Bandura claimed that a child learns and copies behaviour through the observation of others. The final approach is the model by Sandra Lipsitz Bem (2000), according to which masculinity and femininity are shaped by socio-cultural not biological factors. Moreover, the author does not present the two genders as opposite and

mutually exclusive, emphasising that traits characteristic of them can occur at the same time, as exemplified by androgynous people.

To sum up, according to the basic perspectives on gender identity development, its shaping is largely determined by biological, mental, social and cultural factors, and it is in these contexts, according to Stephen Whittle (2002), that this phenomenon needs to be studied.

Methodology

The article provides an overview of the solutions used in the methodology of transgender research. It was made on the basis of a compilation of the main foreign research on transgenderism and an analysis of the content of the EBSCO website. The analysis of positions in foreign and Polish literature was carried out as a team in order to limit subjectivity. The criterion for the selection of texts for analysis was the presence in the EBSCO database and the issue of transsexuality (or transsexuality depending on the year in which the research was carried out). The publications were analyzed in terms of the methodology used in the presented research and scientific discipline. The research question we want to answer is what methodology was used in scientific research on transgenderism and in which scientific disciplines such research is most often carried out. The answer to this question will allow to show the gaps in research on transgenderism.

The Main Stream of Research on Transgenderism in Poland

In order to show the perspective we are in we will also signal the area of studies on transgenderism in Poland. We analysed data available at the Polish Science OPIBIP database. We decided to use Polish Science as a source because it is the oldest OPIBIP database and it contains research papers from Polish research centres (nauka-polska.pl). Moreover, it is available to the general public and used by research centres in Poland and abroad. The result of the search in the OPIBIP database are empirical papers and research projects dating back to the year 2000. Our overview indicates methodological diversity in studies on transgenderism in Poland. The database includes papers whose authors use qualitative and quantitative methods. The vast majority are papers using standardised research tools (inventories, scales), however, there were also such methods as biographical interviews and participant observation. Furthermore, researchers in Poland use meta-analysis, discourse analysis and clinical studies, including clinical experiments.

It should be noted that the OPIBIP mainly contains doctoral and habilitation dissertations and research projects, which translate into research

publications in Polish and foreign journals. These studies are thus a starting point for empirical work on transgenderism in Poland.

The research methods used in the listed works and projects present a broad scope of methodological solutions in studies on transgenderism. We are aware that we cannot make any claims regarding the situation in Poland on this base. However, our objective was to outline our methodological perspective in studies on transgenderism.

Methodological Solutions in Studies on Transgenderism Adopted in the Last 98 years

Our study of methodological solutions in studies on transgenderism was conducted through the EBSCO database service. The overview included 22 databases: Academic Research Source eBooks, Academic Search Complete, Agricola, Business Source Complete, eBook Collection, ERIC, European Views of the Americas: 1493 to 1750, GreenFILE, Health Source – Consumer Edition, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, MasterFILE Premier, MasterFILE Reference eBook Collection, MathSciNet via EBSCOhost, MEDLINE, Newspaper Source, Newswires, OpenDissertations, Regional Business News, Sociology Source Ultimate, Teacher Reference Center, Academic Research Source eJournals, AHFS Consumer Medication Information.

We focused on the period between 1923 and 2021, as English-language source literature indicates that the term transsexualism first appeared in 1923 when German physician Magnus Hirschfeld used the term *seelischer transsexualismus*, translated as „mental transsexualism”, in the work *Die intersexuelle Konstitution* (Schechter, 2016).

As the below chart demonstrates most scientific works devoted to transsexualism and transgenderism appear in psychological journals. Our analyses revealed 10212 items. The next group (though with a significant difference) were medical journals, with 7740 texts. Interestingly, psychology and medicine are two disciplines where the appearance of the topic in question is dated to 1954. All other disciplines give later dates (Figure 1).

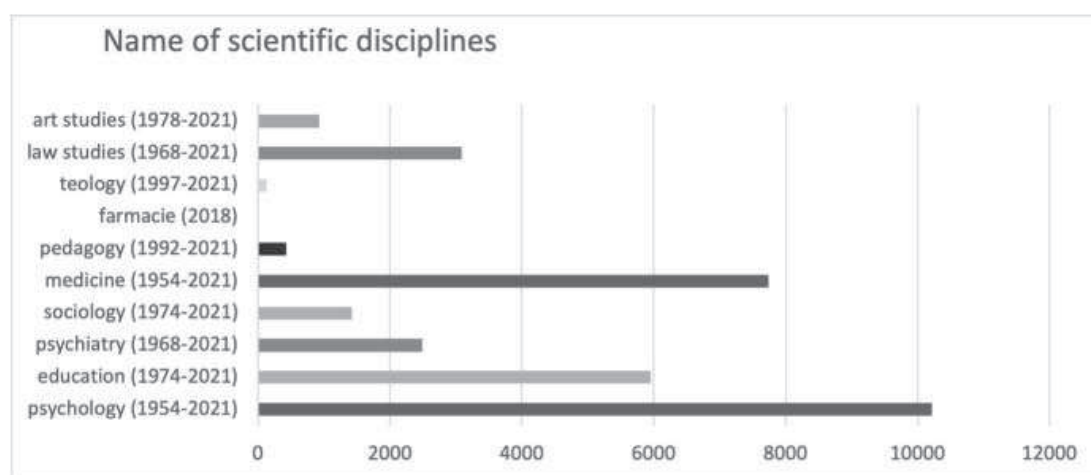


Figure 1. Name of scientific disciplines

The next field distinguished in our list is education (in a broad sense), with 5950 articles. Education ‘opened up’ to the issue of transsexualism and transgenderism much later as the first text appeared in 1974, twenty years after medicine and psychology. This is pessimistic data which shows that social awareness may have started to form much later than the scientific world could present its position regarding human gender diversity. This must have impacted people who faced rejected by society due to their individuality. If education had opened to transsexualism and transgenderism earlier, it would have prevented many tragedies in the lives of those alienated.

Law is another discipline where a significant body of works (3086) devoted to transsexualism and transgenderism appeared. This is most probably connected with the constantly changing regulations regarding gender transition, meant to optimise the process and provide those undergoing it with a sense of safety.

The next discipline is psychiatry with 2485 works. It was listed independently of medicine as articles in the field of psychiatry differ from those in general medicine. Texts belonging to other medical specialisations mostly addressed gender transition surgery and hormonal therapy. Psychiatry, on the other hand, is related to psychology with regard to the topics it addresses.

Other texts appeared in the field of pedagogy (428)², theology (127) and art (927). Works belonging to the first two categories were published in the 1990s. Texts related to art began appearing in the late 1970s.

Studies on transgenderism were dominated by three main approaches:

1. Interview (N= 680)
2. Questionnaire (N=649)

² It should be stressed that there is a distinction into pedagogy and education in Poland, hence the division in this analysis.

3. Survey (N=608)

We studied the database filtering publications by English terms describing methods of data collection and schemas of study. The selected results are presented in Table 1 and in the text below. We began by verifying the dominance of transgenderism in publications. Out of 3192 records referring to reports on transsexualism (transsexual, transsexuality, transgender) 680 concerned interviews with transgender people.

Figure 2 illustrates a general comparison of all publications regardless of the methods applied, divided into two categories: transsexual and transsexuality/gender. The second category includes more items. This could be related to revisions in the ICD and DSM classifications or to a shift in public opinion.

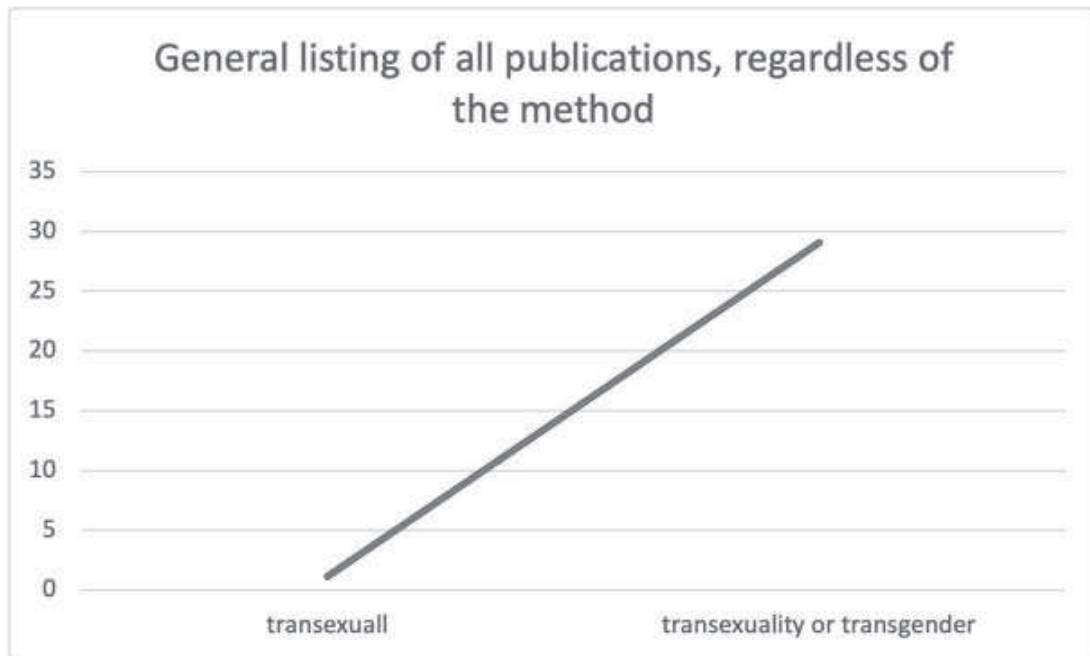


Figure 2. General listing of all publications, regardless of the method

The next stage was to study the applied solutions in the scope of research schemas, data collection methods and data analysis, dividing all EBSCO publications according to 5-year periods. We used a popular classification of data collection methods (Cohen et. Al., 2007; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 2001; Rubacha, 2008) and examples of organising research on transgenderism and data analysis in such studies which were most frequently cited in literature. In general the number of texts reporting studies on transgenderism has been increasing in the five year periods (Figure 3).

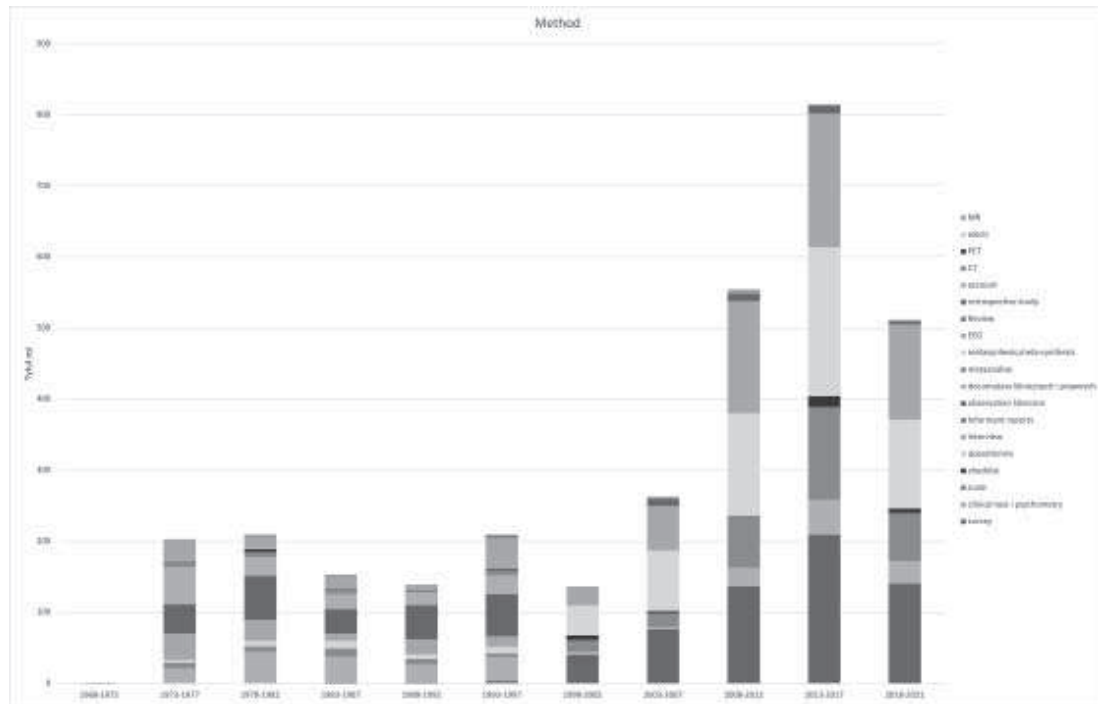


Figure 3. Methods

As emphasised earlier, the dominating form of data collection was the interview. This may result from trends connected with using specific research strategies or from the opportunities to conduct deeper and more thorough analyses which the interview offers. Stories, narratives and interviews allow us to follow the speakers' biography, especially the turning points in his or her life, and to determine ultimate situations. This gives us an opportunity to understand the broader context of the respondent's situation. A clinical interview allows us to understand the patient's state of health and often plays the main role in the process of diagnosis in instances of various health issues, especially in the assessment of one's mental health in psychology and psychiatry (Allen and Becker, 2019). The analysed texts included structured and unstructured interviews. We should also point out that the form and course if the interviews changed throughout the years in which the works were published. It is a natural consequence of the external structuring of clinical interviews (see *ibid.*), which could be seen in the analysed articles. Given that the clinical interview is one of the basic diagnostic tools in psychology and psychiatry, the number of studies on transsexualism and transgenderism using the interview in source literature is justified. It should also be noted that the distribution of the number of interviews in specific time periods did not dominate over other methods. It is only in the period between 2005 and 2012 that it stands out among other research methods.

The next method which is frequently used in research works on transsexualism and transgenderism are questionnaires (Babbie, 2013). This is not

surprising, especially given the number of articles in the field of psychology, where extensive use is made of standardised research tools, one of which is the questionnaire (see Haworth, 1996). In our analyses the questionnaire dominated over other methods in the period between 2013 and 2017, while a significant increase in texts using questionnaires is dated to 1998. Publications of research using neuroimaging did not raise interest among researchers, with individual cases focusing on EEG (Table 1). A popular solution in studies on transgenderism was documentary analysis, which consists in collecting data on features and phenomena of interest to the researcher through the analysis of primary and secondary sources, such as documents, drawings, diaries, archives, chronicles, and biographies. The advantage of such source analyses is access to information when other methods fail. Given the date when the first article on transgenderism was published, and the applied research methods, it could be said that there are still few empirical studies of this phenomenon.

Table 1. Indication of all research methods

Method* N	1973-1977		1978-1982		1983-1987		1988-1992		1993-1997		1998-2002		2003-2007		2008-2012		2013-2017		2018-2021		
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	
survey	0	0,00	0	0,00	1	0,66	1	0,71	3	1,44	40	29,41	76	29,01	136	24,55	209	25,64	140	27,34	
clinical test	22	10,89	45	21,53	37	24,34	26	18,57	34	16,27	5	3,68	3	1,15	27	4,87	50	6,13	32	6,25	
scale	7	3,47	7	3,35	11	7,24	7	5,00	5	2,39	16	11,76	20	7,63	71	12,82	130	15,95	68	13,28	
checklist	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	6	4,41	2	0,76	1	0,18	15	1,84	6	1,17	
questionnaire	4	1,98	8	3,83	11	7,24	7	5,00	10	4,78	43	31,62	86	32,82	145	26,17	210	25,77	125	24,41	
interview	37	18,32	29	13,88	10	6,58	21	15,00	14	6,70	26	19,12	63	24,05	158	28,52	188	23,07	134	26,17	
informant reports	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	
clinical observations	41	20,30	62	29,67	34	22,37	48	34,29	59	28,23	0	0,00	10	3,82	11	1,99	11	1,35	5	0,98	
documentary method	52	25,74	27	12,92	22	14,47	18	12,86	27	12,92	0	0,00	0	0,38	0	0,00	1	0,12	1	0,20	
meta-analysis	9	4,46	7	3,35	5	3,29	1	0,71	7	3,35	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	
meta-synthesis	0	0,00	4	1,91	1	0,66	1	0,71	1	0,48	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	
review	29	14,36	17	8,13	19	12,50	8	5,71	45	21,53	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	
retrospective study	0	0,00	2	0,96	0	0,00	1	0,71	4	1,91	0	0,00	1	0,38	3	0,54	0	0,00	0	0,00	
account	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	
Neuroimaging	EEG**	1	0,50	1	0,48	1	0,66	1	0,71	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	2	0,36	1	0,12	1	0,20
	CT	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00
	PET	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00
	Electr	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00
	MR	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00	0	0,00
total	202	100,00	209	100,00	152	100,00	140	100,00	209	100,00	136	100,00	262	100,00	554	100,00	815	100,00	512	100,00	

Source: Authors. * English terms were used when searching the EBSCO database EBSCO.** Data in italics are a detailed presentation of results for a general listing of the neuroimaging method. They should not be taken into consideration in the result summary. EEG – electroencephalography, CT – computed tomography, PET – positron emission tomography, MRI – magnetic resonance imaging

Summary

Transgenderism as a subject of study causes numerous methodological and ethical problems. The growing ethically sensitising reflectivity (cf. Flanagan, 2012) means that despite the existence of convenient and effective technological solutions it is impossible to apply them universally. On the one hand, they can pose a threat to transgender people. On the other hand, they can be a source of abuse towards such people and their loved ones. While interviews may be considered more invasive, this does not decrease the use of such tools. We are left with clinical observation and more thorough studies of the social environment or the relationships with the social environment. The former have one disadvantage, i.e. they provide information burdened with the context of illness. The latter appear underappreciated by researchers of the phenomenon described in the text, even though they provide more opportunities in the scope of selecting data collection methods, especially in the context of adult. Arguably, scientific research has influenced social awareness with regard to transgenderism. Unfortunately our analyses have shown remainders of medicalised labels of illness or exceptions to the relatively understood ‘norm’.

Analysis of the EBSCO database, oriented towards the applied research methods, also revealed the distribution of scientific disciplines with respect to the development of knowledge and awareness of transgenderism. There is a growing tendency in the fields of pedagogy and most of all education. Nevertheless, especially in the case of pedagogy, the scope is small in comparison with medicine or psychology. As a result knowledge regarding the upbringing aspect of transgender people remains unlimited. We are aware of the limitations of our analysis resulting from the use of databases available only in EBSCO. However, the ranges of the base allowed us to make a reliable reconnaissance of the area in terms of the methodology used in transgender research.

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