

# Assessment 3

## Essay

keystroke

### **How do the gendered politics of beauty standards affect the concept of passing as a transgender person (and how does it also affect cisgender people)?**

Transgender people inevitably come into contact with the concept of “passing” while transitioning socially and/or medically. Despite its prevalence in transgender circles, the concept is rarely discussed in mainstream culture, as only those whose identity clashes with the mainstream are seen as needing to worry about passing. This is in spite of the fact that passing as a concept affects most people by being an extension of extremely gendered beauty standards that are not only used to police transgender people, but all people, to harmful ends.

In relation to transgender identity, passing is defined as being able to appear as cisgender to an otherwise unaware observer/second party. This involves adopting the aesthetics of cisgender people in the same gender category they wish to present as to the point where they can no longer be recognised as transgender without wanting to be (referred to in transgender circles as being “clocked”). The concept of passing in the west initially began (as most things do) with racism in the US and worries that Black slaves would be able to evade capture and even seek opportunity while “disguised” as “white”. This concept went on to be applied to other disadvantaged groups based on sexuality and of course, gender (Billard 2019).

Passing exists within transgender communities as a way for individuals to escape the stigma, oppression and danger that comes with being visibly transgender. The ability to pass as cisgender may grant someone the privilege that comes with being part of that group. It may also be done out of self-actualisation, where a transgender person affirms their own gender by constructing an identity extremely close to their cisgender counterparts (Billard 2019).

As passing requires adopting the aesthetics of cisgender people, it necessitates adopting not just the visible body of a cisgender person, but the fashion and mannerisms of cisgender people too. This shows that by adopting the aesthetics of a cisgender identity, an individual is constantly performing a cisgender identity in order to assimilate (Butler 1988).

Performative gender requires a strict adherence to how a gendered person is meant to

behave, often with societal punishments should one fail, such as ostracisation and discrimination. Beauty standards control how people act to a large extent as they dictate both how the body and clothing should look which in-turn impact how well someone passes (Wolf 1990).

Beauty standards seek to police how people look and what they do with their bodies, this is often disproportionately affects women. Women under modern western beauty standards are told to be thin, pretty, and young while men are told to possess women who embody those standards (Wolf 1990). This harms all women, trans and cisgender as they are expected to submit to the ownership of men.

Men also have their own beauty standards to adhere to, with the image of a lean, muscular man with a broad chest becoming prominent in advertising and magazines (Law and Peixoto Labre 2002). This places a pressure on men to body build as well as lose weight, connecting to the culture of fatphobia that also effects women.

When transgender people try to adhere to beauty standards to pass they either succeed or fail, with varying consequences. A non-passing transgender person may be either seen as lazy and not trying hard enough should they forgo makeup or extravagant clothing. The implicit meaning behind this is that they haven't put the effort in and thus don't deserve to have their gender recognised. If a transgender person puts effort into their appearance but still does not pass, they are seen as a parody of their gender, a man in a dress or dyke to be laughed at (Burns 2018). While these are passive repercussions often only appearing in the mind or thoughtless speech of others, more active repercussions can be found in the constant attention that being visibly transgender can bring. As a societal punishment for breaking the social norm an individual may experience anything from disgusted stares to verbal abuse and physical violence, sometimes resulting in death (Billard 2019).

A passing transgender person may be initially safer as they do not draw attention, however this state can also be tenuous and comes with its own problems. Someone passing seeks to be indistinguishable from a cisgender person, however should the person's transgender status be found out they are often treated as deceptive, concealing their "true" gender from the people that surround them, and/or as a predator disguising themselves to get closer to their "prey". These narratives are all further perpetuated by the media through both fictional and non-fictional content. When "discovered" transgender people can face extremely violent retribution from their peers, including assault, rape and murder. When murdered, the perpetrator can even employ the "trans panic" defence in court – stating that the murder was done in the heat of passion when the victim's transgender identity became known, framing the victim as the perpetrator and normalising the violence against transgender people and systemically perpetuating transphobia (Billard 2019). It comes as no surprise that the majority of victims are either poor, in sex work, or non-white (Bettcher 2014).

Within the community transgender people may also harm themselves with this model, as it supposes that there is a “right” way to perform gender in a very binary fashion. This puts a lot of internal pressures onto transgender people, some of whom might think that if they cannot pass there is no point in transitioning. Fatphobia can amplify this, as fat bodies are considered less desirable under western beauty standards. Others might feel pressure to get surgeries in order to confirm their bodies to a cisgender form (Kilikita 2022). Externally but still within the community, there might also be the creation of a “pecking order” based on surgeries, beauty, and how well someone passes as close to the binary that can result in poor treatment for those at the bottom (Bettcher 2014).

Non-binary individuals are also harmed by this, as mainstream beauty standards are extremely binary and failing to fully adopt or fit into either is also socially punished. Due to a lack of a beauty standard to fit into, this also paints a perpetual target on them as they can never pass as a cisgender identity (Bean 2017) (although there is discourse over non-binary beauty standards within queer communities).

Despite not being discussed often, the concept of passing can very much be applied to cisgender people. The expectations of cisgender men, both socially and in appearance are highly controlled from birth; men who stray from these ideals of stoicism and toughness by expressing care for their peers or dressing non-stereotypical (especially if the clothes can be construed as feminine) are labelled as “girly”, “fag” and “pussy” (Oransky and Marecek 2009). Here we see that cisgender men can also fail to pass, with their masculinity being questioned and conditionally taken away depending on how they conform to binary gender standards. The binary ideas of being man/woman enough are the same enforcement of the “right” way to perform gender as seen with transgender individuals, with many of the same pressures applying. With fatphobia and pressure to get cosmetic surgery to a “pecking order” based on how tightly one conforms to passing/beauty standards (Bettcher 2014).

One definition of passing unmentioned until now is that passing doesn’t necessarily mean passing as conventionally attractive, but can happen as long as there are no “characteristics visibly jeopardising” presentation as a cisgender person (Billard 2019). Under this framework it would appear that passing is less enforced by beauty standards, however the disproportionate “clocking” of women with strong facial features outside of western beauty standards, especially non-white women show that the enforcement of beauty standards is crucial to the concept of passing (Billson 2023).

This practise of “clocking” cisgender individuals (predominantly women) has led to the pseudo-new phenomenon of “transvestigations”. This often involves people, mostly on social media such as X/Twitter, investigating the gender of women in positions of visibility (Michelle Obama being a prominent example) with the purpose of uncovering them as a secret transgender person to the ends of implicating them in a plot of the global elite to spread “gender ideology”, although the conspiracy need not always be so

widespread. With the retooling of patently antisemitic tropes in service of the conspiracy and blatantly racist methods such as phrenology, “transvestigations” can result in the targeted harassment of the individuals under “investigation” (Webster 2024).

Passing as a concept has existed since the eighteenth century in different forms, and while it plays a role in the safety of transgender (and non-white) individuals, it is worth interrogating its purpose and the harm it creates. Its surrounding cultural attachments cause violence against those being “clocked”, create intra-community social hierarchies for transgender people, and can even be seen as the denial of cisgender identities through online harassment, “transvestigations” and toxic masculinity. When not conforming to the strict gendered ideals of western beauty standards, passing effects a layer of violence onto trans and cisgender people—from harassment to hunting.

## References

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