Book Review

Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century

By Tey Meadow

University of California Press, 2018, 320 pages. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520275041/trans-kids>

Reviewer: Danya Lagos, *Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin*

Tey Meadow's book, *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* (2018, University of California Press), is a refreshingly ambitious work of sociological research on gender. *Trans Kids* aims to elucidate the emergence of transgender children as a social category in the twenty-first century. Its title boldly further implies that gender, as a whole, may operate differently in the future than it has in the past. A general sociological audience may be tempted to overlook a title that implies a tiny and marginalized subpopulation, even though the proliferation of gender diversity among children that is documented in this book is increasingly reflected in families across the country. However, *Trans Kids* delivers invaluable insights into quite a number of topics that make it essential reading to any social scientist who wants to have a current understanding of gender, political economy, and methodology.

While transgender and gender nonconforming children feature prominently in the title, it is crucial to understand that they are not the main subjects of Meadow's book. The main actors in *Trans Kids* are parents who have recognized their children as transgender or gender nonconforming in one way or another, as well as professionals and activists who these parents seek out to help navigate various aspects of living with and supporting with their children. The role of children in *Trans Kids* can be summed up by the most provocative claim of the book, made early in the introduction: "... 'trans' is not just an identity; it's an industry," (p. 5). Meadow's book does indeed cover the management of an industry of sorts, and transgender children in this book largely figure in as the products of concerted cultivation, building on Laureau's analysis of race, class, and childrearing in *Unequal Childhoods* (2003, University of California Press).

While the framing an identity as an "industry" may sound blunt when describing a vulnerable and marginalized population, Meadow makes a quite necessary intervention in the state of gender theory by applying key questions of political economy used to trace the formation of groups of people to the emergence of new gender groups. This endeavor follows in the footsteps of projects that have traced the emergence of social groups in terms of race,

ethnicity, and sexuality such as G. Cristina Mora's *Making Hispanics* (2014, University of Chicago Press) and Elizabeth Armstrong's *Forging Gay Identities* (2002, University of Chicago Press). Meadow is not the first to pursue a political economic approach to analyzing gender "industries," but *Trans Kids* may be one of the most incisive accounts of the means of gender production since "The Traffic in Women" (Rubin 1975).

Trans Kids documents five distinct areas of gender production—not as an assembly line in which one step leads to the next, but as a set of common processes that parents experience in supporting their transgender and gender nonconforming children. The first of these is the process of how parents come to understand that their child is transgender or gender nonconforming, as opposed to occasionally deviating from gender norms. Next, the book turns its attention to the clinical processing of transgender children, focusing on the practice of Kenneth Zucker, a controversial psychologist and former head of a recently closed gender Clinic and Canada. The next chapter deals with the formation of movements and organizations by many of these parents—notable for being transgender advocacy movements largely led by cisgender parents, rather than transgender adults. Then, the book looks at the role of vulnerability to state regulations among parents of transgender children, looking at how the state can lead to within-group-based inequalities based on the sexual orientation or race of parents. Finally, another chapter looks at how adults come to make sense of how they have gone about parenting transgender and gender nonconforming children and the complex stories and identities that have emerged from the process.

Meadow is among the most reflexive methodologists currently active in sociology, and *Trans Kids* is an exemplar of clear, thoughtful awareness of those one is studying and the role of oneself as a researcher—making it an excellent resource on methodology for social scientists in its own right in addition to an excellent exploration of the topic matter. Meadow's reflections on her own process of conducting this study and positionality permeate the entire core of the book and are expanded on even further in two methodological appendices. In *Trans Kids*, Meadow gained access to an organization of parents who were interested in supporting their gender nonconforming and transgender children and forming a social and advocacy network. This group forms the basis for most of the data used in the book. However, Meadow emphasizes that *Trans Kids* is "not ethnography in the most traditional sense," since it is a multi-site study conducted at conferences for parents and professionals and workshops at schools and community centers. Data from Meadow's participant observation are complemented by eighty in-depth interviews with sixty-two respondents—all parents of gender nonconforming and transgender children between the ages of four and seventeen.

Trans Kids offers an incisive description and analysis of how gender is managed and produced and how these patterns may change in the near and distant future. However, one limitation to this book's intended intervention in questions of political economy is the lack of comparisons available with how this "industry" may compare to the operation of other parallel "trans" industries outside of the United States. One chapter focuses on the controversial practices

of Kenneth Zucker, a physician based in Canada. Still another chapter focuses on the differences in government regulations faced by people living in different parts of the US. However, there could be a lot more said about how “trans,” if understood as an industry, could be very different in countries with different health care systems, administrative processes, spheres of civic life, and other ways in which gender is regulated. *Trans Kids* is an excellent introduction to the gender industry present in today’s United States, and future work ought to expand on it through comparative perspectives.

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