

Where are the missing trans crips?

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The interactions between transidentity, impairment, and disability have been studied extensively in the last two decades, mostly thanks to innovative ideas and reflections from the neurodivergent communities, and often outside of academic circles. That said, physically impaired trans people are curiously often absent from the discussion — which may reflect a real-life statistical anomaly. While there are conflicting reports on the proportion of trans people, and on the proportion of physically impaired people, both communities make up a large part of the general population, and are numerous enough to have many sub-communities. However, their intersection is conspicuously absent compared to similarly sized groups. This seems to indicate that gender and physical impairments could affect each other in significant ways. This article seeks to explore three questions, the first being whether physically impaired trans people are indeed under-represented. Having presented multiple pieces of evidence attesting to this, we look at why that could be the case by providing a set of potential partial explanations. We start by exploring the possibility that they are present but invisible, before looking at whether they might legitimately just exist in fewer numbers due to specific societal constraints. Finally, we discuss the potential implications — most importantly, awareness of this topic could allow a small but significant number of people to regain a small amount of control and power over their own bodies.

1 Overview and preliminaries

Crip and queer communities online noticeably overlap, with many people identifying as members of both communities at the same time. However, a more attentive survey shows that this mostly consists of people with psychological or cognitive disabilities, with physical disabilities being conspicuously underrepresented — especially when it comes to trans crips. This also translates to academic research, where the relative abundance of original thought on neurodivergent trans people is matched by very limited research on physically disabled queers. Following up on Alexandre Baril's initial work on looking at trans crip masculinities (Baril, 2019), we take a more statistical approach by trying to establish the under-representation of physically disabled trans people in both offline and online communities, and looking at its potential causes.

First of all, we need to explain some of the terminology used. From the queer side, we will use “trans”¹ as an inclusive umbrella term for the various communities not only identifying as transgender, transsexual and transvestite, but also including non-binary people. In short, anyone not identifying with their assigned gender at birth would be considered trans for the purview of this article. On the crip side — a term we use

¹ We use “trans” instead of “trans*” or “trans-”, despite agreeing with the arguments presented in (Stryker, 2008), partially because it seems to be more commonly used by the community itself, but also because the extension of the term “trans-” beyond that of “trans” would make require additional qualifiers in multiple places in this piece, as “trans-” could apply ambiguously.

following McRuer (2006) — a crip will designate an arbitrary person with any kind of disability. We also want to be able to talk more precisely about physically disabled people, so we will use the word “gimp” to denote a crip with a physical disability². We will use the concepts of both impairment and disability, with the latter indicating that the source of the issue comes from the relationship between the crip and their environment, and not from the impairment itself (and we will generally follow the language chosen by the subjects themselves). Part of the discussion will focus on more visible and “severe” disabilities, despite this categorisation being potentially problematic. The reason for this choice is that we will briefly look at the construction of the self, which is partially done through socialisation, and through the image that we perceive others have of us, where the experience of being visibly and invisibly impaired are quite different.

We will face an issue with some of the statistics used in this article. We are trying to look at the intersection of two communities (or rather, two sub-communities) on which data can be scarce. The resources and statistics used come from a few different countries (mostly France, where centralised high-quality data on physical disabilities is available, and the USA, where data on the trans population is much more available). This raises the question of ecological validity, as there is no guarantee that proportions are stable geographically. However, the variability can be bounded, at least within Western countries (by looking at the between-country variance), and the effects we are looking at are typically happening at such a scale that even an error of 50% would not strongly affect the bottom line. The statistics and reflections shown here will then focus on Western countries³.

With all of this cleared up, let's now look at the interactions between disability and gender. We'll start by looking at whether this intuition that there are hardly any trans gimps is accurate, using different methodologies based on statistical evidence and first person experience. We'll then look at four effects that could make the missing contingent of trans gimps invisible to our methods and then two main reasons why there might legitimately be fewer trans gimps than one would expect if there were no effects of being physically disabled on being trans. Finally, we'll quickly look at the social consequences of this analysis.

2. Are we seeing trans crips?

2.1 Expliciting our subjects

The answer to this question is a trivial yes, as can be attested by the visible cultural effects of trans neurodivergent people, by extensive studies focusing on some specific groups — especially trans autistic people⁴ (Strang et al., 2018) but not only (Marshall, 2014, van Schalkwyk, 2018) — and finally by a

² The word “crip”, although it initially had a very strong association with physical impairments, is now widely used by the community — in a reclaiming process — to denote all kinds of disabled people. This gives the word power and generality, but also makes it harder to talk about specific subgroups who might not have reclaimed identifiers to the same extent. “Gimp” has not been reclaimed to the same extent, but shares the same associations that “crip” initially had, which is why we use it here with the precise meaning of a subgroup of “crip”.

³ Despite this focus on Western countries, we will also try to address issues without focusing on North America, avoiding here the complex discussions of the impact of policies that target racial minorities for incarceration and sex work, as well as the differential impact of labour protections, which operate differently in Europe.

⁴ There are potential issues of vocabulary here, as the term “disabled” is claimed by a proportion of neurodivergent activists, while this classification is rejected by many others (Ripamonti, 2016). We choose to follow self-definition

recent survey on transgender people in the USA (James et al. 2016). This survey, called the USTS — the largest one ever done at the time on the trans community within the USA with 27715 respondents, had some revealing statistics on how many respondents identified as disabled, with multiple sub categories. The main finding on this specific subject was that 39% of trans people answered that they had a disability covered in the American Community Survey (the main census tool in the USA), versus 15% in the general (not just trans) population. Moreover, 28% identified as a person with a disability. This comparison (as with all the ones that follows) is weighted to compensate for the age representativity that is skewed in the survey.

The questionnaire did not ask about specific impairments but instead asked about difficulties in accomplishing certain tasks. This categorisation is then far from exhaustive and not as detailed as it could be⁵, but it still provides valuable insights. First, it shows that, as far as statistical categories go, visual and hearing impairments do not seem to have a statistical effect on transidentity, by which we mean that the proportion of impaired trans people is equivalent to the proportion of impaired cis people. On the other hand, difficulties in decision-making, remembering or concentrating (without distinction of cause) are extremely frequent (30% versus 5% in the general population). Doing errands alone was also difficult for 22% of the trans population (versus 6% in the general population). There is, conspicuously, a single task for which the proportion having difficulties is lower in the trans population: climbing stairs and walking, where the proportions are 6% versus 8%.

This shows a peculiarity, but by itself, the statistically significant difference is not huge yet. We will now refine our categories to show that, within some sub-communities, the difference might be much starker. We will not actually refine the category from the transidentity side, as self-declaration is enough for our purposes for now. However, we will look at more restricted kinds of physical impairments. More specifically, if we want to explore potential interactions between disability and gender construction, it stands to reason that we should look at disabilities that occur before the person realises that they are transgender (or even better, before they start constructing their notions of gender in very early age). We will then use two specific expressions. A trans gimp will be someone who is both trans and physically impaired. Correspondingly, an early trans gimp will be someone with an early experience of physical disability (who will often but not always be a wheelchair user) who identifies as trans (including non-binary genders). We will focus on the latter, but most of the arguments of the next few sections could apply to all trans gimps.

It is annoyingly difficult to obtain reliable statistics, as no single survey looks at those questions simultaneously. One way would be to look at the proportion of disabilities that appear in adulthood and use this as a proxy that we should remove from the earlier total. The following subsection shows some preliminary results following this methodology, but low data quality makes getting any accuracy a hopeless task with current datasets. The subsection after that shows alternative evidence using first-person observations and media analysis, and subsequent sections look at potential explanations.

practices and consider that the existence of many who identify as autistic, trans, and disabled justifies the use of the corresponding term on this segment of the population.

⁵ As the survey tried to analyse many aspects of trans people's lives, it was already very long, with 324 different elements (sometimes comprising multiple yes/no questions), including a single element on disability (James et al. 2016).

2.2 Approximative statistical evidence for the absence

The USTS survey gave some evidence that there is indeed a missing — or at least invisible — group of trans gimps. However, this difference is not large enough to induce the observed lack of visibility, especially when considering our more restricted definition of early trans gimps. One way to explain the discrepancy would be to use one crucial observation: being trans might only marginally affect the probability of becoming disabled. This mostly matters for the potential explanations in the next two sections. Invisibility concerns all trans gimps, potentially for different reasons, but if there were way fewer trans people among people who were disabled from birth, it would indicate a strong effect of disability on gender.

Let's suppose for a moment that half of all disabled people became disabled once they were adults. Assuming the USTS data is correct, the difference between the proportion of physically disabled people and physically disabled trans people is only 2%, out of a total of 8%. If we also assume for now that being trans does not affect the likelihood of becoming physically disabled, this means that 2% of the trans population had a physical disability before adulthood, compared to 4% in the general population.

This would constitute some evidence supporting our hypothesis, but we made two risky assumptions. The first is that only half of all physically disabled people became disabled in adulthood. This is probably a very low guess if we look at different sources of data, such as French epidemiological statistics (Ravaud, Delcey, and Abdou, 2002), which indicate that the rate of “severe” physical disabilities⁶ goes up from 0.45% before age 19 to 2.64% between age 20 and 59. This includes physical disabilities linked to other disabilities (otherwise the rates are respectively 0.20% and 1.33%). More recent data indicates similar tendencies with a doubling of the proportion of (not just physically) disabled people bump between age 15-29 and 30-34 with the proportion going from 1% to 2% (Amrous et al., 2013). The second issue is that we assumed that being trans does not affect the risk of becoming physically disabled. This might be true for some causes of disability, such as traffic accidents⁷, but is not necessarily the case for others. To put things in perspective, still using French data (Amrous, Barhoumi, and Biauxque, 2013), 22% of people who had a state recognition of disability had their disabilities from birth, 19% from a work-related accident, and 14% from an accident not related to their work (the other disabilities were related to either working conditions — such as ones involving handling toxic substances — or old age).

Besides traffic accidents, controlling for ways to become disabled becomes messy due to a large array of positive and negative factors, from joblessness to the different choices of careers, both impacting work accident rates⁸. In the process of reducing our assumptions, we've also made some new ones (such as the idea that French and USA numbers are correlated). Moreover, we should also consider the fact that some

⁶ A “severe” disability in this context means that it leads to a recognition of disabled status by the state.

⁷ For traffic accidents only, one has to consider factors such as car ownership, place of residence, use of public transit, and many others. However, even that is surprisingly difficult, as a meta-study done in 2004 revealed that prevalence estimates of post-crash disability varied from 2% to 87% depending on the criteria and methodology used (Ameratunga, 2004).

⁸ For example, there is a high proportion of trans people who practice sex work at least occasionally (9% in the past year according to the USTS, with half of them identifying as trans women), which is a big factor in being the victim of violence, and could lead to traumatic experiences. At the same time, trans people might be driven away from certain “dangerous” professions where the environment can be male-dominated and transphobic (including against trans men).

correlations exist: treatment choices made by transitioning people can lead to disability, especially when they are done outside of the medical system, and without knowledgeable supervision, which is far from rare (Rotondi et al., 2013).

We then end up with a new issue: with the numbers shown, even if no early gimp identifies as trans, this might not be sufficient to account for the 2% discrepancy in the USTS survey, even using slightly inflated numbers. We must conclude that there is a mix of factors at play that can affect the visibility of trans gimps (disabled both from birth and in adulthood). We should then look at other methods to establish their absence (or presence) until more accurate data is available.

2.3 Qualitative-statistical evidence from first person observations

First person observations cannot normally be generalised to any extent, because of both the paucity of data and the biases inherent to the observer. That said, sometimes lower bounds can be established. Let's, for this subsection only, use the more general notion of trans gimps that ignores the moment they acquired their disability⁹. Using the previous statistics, we can estimate that around 0.01% of the total population fits the definition of the trans gimp. This corresponds to roughly 0.4% of trans people multiplied by 2.5% of gimps, following the numbers of Ravaud, Delcey, and Abdou (2002) and Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017). Those numbers are also partially problematic, with the proportion of trans people of different genders still being a contentious point. For example, the USTS survey had 33% of respondents identifying as trans women, 29% as trans men, 3% as crossdressers and 35% as non-binary people, of which 80% were designated female at birth (James et al., 2016). Similar numbers were found by an Ontarian survey (Scheim and Bauer, 2015), which also indicated a large difference between the proportion who only transitioned socially and not medically (35% for trans men versus 10% for trans women), as well as in the proportion who underwent genital surgeries (1.4% for trans men versus 21% for trans women). This is a departure from what was until recently commonly assumed — that there were significantly more trans women than men — as the studies arguing this were often based on healthcare demand (Becerra-Fernández, 2017).

With only 0.01% of the population concerned, an average observer would then probably not know a trans gimp personally. That, however, is dependent on the observer. The author of this article identifies as both crip and trans, interacts with the corresponding communities, has been an activist involved in them for more than a decade, and is familiar with a large set of people in both communities. By sampling directly within each community, we should be able to find around 2.5% of gimps in the trans community, and 0.4% of trans people in the crip community (hence more than 1% on average if we sample equally in both communities). Moreover, being known as a member of both communities should increase the chance of meeting other people at the intersection (because of preferential attachment, as well as the assumption of shared experiences and lower discrimination between people sharing similar oppressions). Let's now consider both the offline and the online experience (notably on Tumblr, which has vibrant trans and crip communities, and Twitter to a smaller extent). Being able to reach (and, reciprocally, observe) hundreds of people at the very least, if not a few thousands (reasonable over more than a few years), the question is: how many do I know that fit the criteria? The answer should be in the dozens, accounting for the different

⁹ This choice is made for two reasons. First, knowing when people acquired their disability is hard online (disabled is often shown in the user's biography, seldom with more information than a type of impairment). Second, showing that even this larger community is still high-invisible reinforces the point that the early trans gimps are also missing.

biases. The answer is at most one, besides myself, even after some months spent looking for them explicitly (but only by observing existing communities and without making public announcements, as that would skew the statistics). This search did yield a few potential other trans gimps, through word of mouth in all cases¹⁰. At this level of discrepancy, the probability that I am a statistical fluke becomes mathematically unreasonable¹¹.

When considering the relative visibility of other communities, such as people who identify as trans and disabled with a non-physical impairment, who number at least a hundred among the people previously mentioned, the utter absence of trans gimps is only more dearly felt. To extend this avenue of investigation, it might be interesting to use a hybrid approach, looking not at trans gimps themselves but at their cultural impact. That reveals little immediately, as even the few objects where they should be welcome seem bereft of them. For example, the science-fiction anthologies *Defying Doomsday* and *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction* both feature queer disabled characters and authors (Dolichva, 2016, Sjunneson-Henry, 2018). That said, most of those who are both trans and disabled do not have physical disabilities (the main exception being Bogi Takács¹²).

The question is then the source of this absence. The next section will look at the first possibility: that trans gimps do exist, but are hiding, or rather not revealing themselves. The section after that will then look at another explanation: that trans gimps do not exist to start with.

3. Invisible trans crips

Maybe trans gimps are here, but are just not being noticed (in surveys, media or communities). There are many potential reasons, but we'll focus the discussion on the four that seem most relevant: exclusion from mainstream society, fear of discrimination, perceived illegitimacy, and the use of different codes.

¹⁰ Those potential trans gimps were mentioned to me through friends in either the trans community or the crip community who were aware of my search. Talking to some people in the medical profession, especially ones who follow physically disabled people from birth and for decades (and who are friendly to trans people), yielded nothing.

¹¹ One has to be careful with a form of anthropic principle: being able to observe and search for trans gimps probably requires being a trans crip (hence I should not count myself in the total). Still, using the numbers shown above, and assuming that I saw 1000 people in the relevant categories over the past few years (a low estimate), the probability of finding a single other trans crip is around 1 in 4000. Even by just looking at 500 Twitter or Tumblr accounts of trans people, the probability of finding a single one would be 0.15% if there were no anomaly in the proportion of trans crips. Considering the real number of trans crip found online was zero (as the one I know was met in a specialised space with a focus on those issues), the probability of finding none online drops to three per million.

¹² According to emself, Bogi Takács has a physical disability that lets em walk unassisted most of the time, making em at the edge of the characterisation of trans gimps (Takács, 2020). Ey are also married to R.B. Lemberg who also writes about queer and disabled fiction which would be worth checking in a comparative media analysis. Another potential source would be the “Unbroken” anthology, edited by Marieke Nijkamp (Nijkamp et al., 2018).

3.1 Exclusion from mainstream society.

As we've seen before, being either crip or trans already imposes heavy costs. This is especially true in countries like the USA, where discrimination¹³ and the lack of a social safety net means that many trans people end up homeless (30% total according to the USTS, including 12% in the year prior to the survey). The crip side is not any better: the #CripTax makes sure that living as a crip is much more expensive, while most countries condition state help on the recipients having very limited resources (USA Social Security, 2020, and Handirect, 2020). The fact is that many people (if not most) in each group are fighting for their sheer survival. In such conditions, with little time, energy or money, it becomes even harder to produce media (with self-representation) or participate in online or offline communities. With the public perception that many trans people practice sex work¹⁴, they are also at risk of harassment and exclusion, even among potential support networks within queer and feminist circles¹⁵, which creates another barrier to entry.

3.2 Fear of discrimination or repercussions

As the discriminations which cause the previous effects are well-known in the community, fear is a legitimate response. This can lead some to stay in the closet, in multiple ways. First, just like in the general trans population, fear of incomprehension and negative consequences can delay the public coming out, or prevent it altogether. This is of course amplified by the vulnerability experienced by many crips. Moreover, coming out as trans is not even always possible for people dependent on others for basic tasks (such as getting dressed¹⁶ or even obtaining information) or living in assisted living facilities. The threat of being kicked out and having to live in the street, which happens to many young (hence dependent) trans people, would be enough to deter most dependent gimps (as it could be equivalent to a death sentence). Even if the concerned trans gimps are not fully in the closet, they might only disclose their identities to close friends, to avoid the risk of their family, institution, or medical assistance finding out. Finally, they might also prefer presenting two separate identities online, especially on social networks, to have access to resources without being identified and othered within those communities — which could be ableist or transphobic, just like any other communities (Athelstan, 2015).

¹³ This discrimination is true on too many fronts to count, but it should be kept in mind that there have been laws against crossdressing, enacted as recently as 1966, with people being jailed for this offence well into the 1970s. Some of those laws have only been overturned in recent years: in Oakland, CA, in 2010, and in Haddon Township, NJ, in 2014 (PBS News Desk, 2015).

¹⁴ For an example of this found in the USTS, 33% of Black trans women who interacted with law enforcement reported that the officer — who knew they were trans — thought they were a sex worker. See also Rodriguez et al. (2017) for the effects of being trans on access to healthcare.

¹⁵ For discussions on the dynamics of online communities see (Feraday, 2016, Clark-Parsons, 2018, Szuba, 2018, Byron, 2019).

¹⁶ Appearance is of course only a limited part of the experience of transidentity, but it often plays an important role for the trans individual. Not being allowed to dress as one wants often exacerbates dysphoric feelings.

3.3 Perceived illegitimacy

Beyond the fear that could be felt when considering whether to come out as trans, the issue of legitimacy is also relevant¹⁷. As the ability to act on their own presentation is lowered (especially for dependent trans gimps), there can be a perceived impossibility of fully transitioning. At the very least, transition can seem difficult and dangerous, not just health-wise but also socially, as it could reduce the good-will from strangers that can be necessary to live in our societies¹⁸. Even medically, many options that are available to people without medical issues can become unrealistic because of drug interactions, doctors who refuse to treat such patients¹⁹ or refuse to believe them, or simply heightened fear of doctors linked to their experiences as crips (James et al., 2016, Rodriguez et al., 2017).

Moreover, even when they do consider the possibility of transitioning, the common goal of “passing” might be out of reach, partially because of the limited therapeutic options. It might then not be worth the effort to try a partial transition. There is also a significant part of the queer community that views partial transitions as illegitimate²⁰. A too common discourse²¹ there asserts that if one is not ready to suffer or risk their life for an identity, they do not deserve the right to claim it. Trans gimps who cannot fully — or even partially — transition might then be wary of being rejected and potentially harassed by fellow trans people upon coming out.

3.4 Use of different codes

The last possibility we should mention is that trans gimps can simply be present but not visible in the usual ways. For example, they could have different perceptions of masculinity and femininity, which can affect how they choose to express their genders. Their disability can also affect their capacity to either pass as their felt gender or to pass as their assigned gender to the people who do not pay attention if they do not correct them, all the while being sufficiently gender non-conforming for their own comfort. For example, someone could have a condition that affects their facial structure, muscles or voice, in which case they could pass as another gender, as any anomaly that could affect their passing would be attributed to the disability. Conversely, it might be more permissible to be non-conforming to one’s assigned gender as a visibly disabled person, as some choices might be explained away this way. For example, wearing a

¹⁷ Legitimacy is also affected by the conflicting discourses between “change the world, not our body-minds” (as cited from Clare, 2017 in Baril, 2019) and the trans ideal to have body autonomy and be free to alter one’s physiology (Baril, 2019).

¹⁸ This is especially true in situations where the crip is not autonomous and their ability to use a service is dependent on the goodwill of the people around, corresponding to “accessibility as a favour” as defined in (Blanchard, 2020).

¹⁹ Following the “no harm principle”, doctors might want to avoid recommending the usual treatments when they do not know whether the medication could interact with the patient’s disability (which in turn prevents the analysis of interactions between transitioning therapeutic options and disabilities). This leaves the patient to their own devices, which arguably does more harm than good when one considers the suicide and self-treatment rates (Rotondi, 2013).

²⁰ This includes a part of the trans community itself, performing what is termed *horizontal transphobia* (Hudson, 2017, Audebeau, 2019). This is before we even start addressing the issues of exosexism — the belief that non-binary genders do not exist, and corresponding oppressions (Vergess, 2016) — which induces different forms of oppression (Feraday, 2016, Clark-Parsons, 2018).

²¹ This attitude could of course be the result of only a few influential actors in the community, but the inner workings of social media can make it seem that the attitude is consensual. This is also related to the necessity of “passing” as a trans person, even in online circles (Clark-Parsons, 2015).

dress in a wheelchair might be more permissible than for a man, as people might not notice that it is a dress (partially because they mostly pay attention to the chair). Even when people do notice, they might just think it is easier to wear dresses than other clothes for ease of use (especially if the dress has a conservative cut²²). This means that the trans gimp gets misgendered all the time, but remains relatively free of harassment while having the presentation they prefer in public, which can be enough for them to live comfortably at a low social cost (while still being visible to the queers who are more aware of the specific codes used). They might then not try to attract attention by participating in the relevant communities as it could remove their excuse to be as they feel in public if the fact ever became known.

4. Inexistent trans gimps

The previous section gave potential interactions between gender and disability that generally resulted in discrimination, making public self-identification hard or even impossible. It also assumed that trans gimps existed, but could not be seen, mostly due to intersectional oppression. We now turn to the other main possibility: that they do not exist. First, there is a sad truth that we must consider: both disability and transidentity have a highly negative impact on homelessness, access to quality healthcare²³, and, partially as a consequence, on life expectancy. On the matter of life expectancy of disabled people, most models show it as lower by one to a few decades depending on the precise impairment, but there is also a relative lack of accuracy (Thomas and Barnes, 2010). On the trans side, we can observe elevated murder rates, suicide rates²⁴ and limited access to doctors who accept to treat them. It is then not impossible that the interacting issues could compound, giving an even lower life expectancy for trans gimps²⁵. Thankfully, this effect is most probably too small to account for most of the observed absence. Let's then look at two different possibilities: lack of (self)-diagnosis and differing constructions of masculinity and femininity.

4.1 Lack of (self)-diagnosis

To be included in our definition, trans gimps have to identify with both of their specific identities, even though they might decide to hide it (to general society, or even to their close circle). Hence, people who might exhibit symptoms of one identity without being aware of it would not count. When it comes to symptoms of disability, our focus on physical disabilities, especially severe ones, means that the probability of not being aware of one's disability is quite lower, especially when compared to cognitive and psychological disabilities. Being unable to perform basic physical actions (such as climbing stairs) is

²² In the author's personal experience, wearing a long black dress while on a mobility scooter is absolutely not noticeable. In one occasion at a conference with eighty attendees, choosing to wear a different dress the next day, as well as a bow in my hair, led to many questions being asked about my gender, by people who would swear I was not wearing a dress the previous day.

²³ The USTS survey also looked at the interactions of healthcare experience and disability among trans people, with 42% of people who identify as disabled reporting at least one negative experience when seeing a health care provider, versus 30% for non-disabled people.

²⁴ According to the USTS, 40% of trans people have attempted suicide at some point in their lives, 9 times the USA baseline.

²⁵ There has been some misinformation on the life expectancy of trans people, sometimes reported to be as low as 35 in the USA. It is hard to find exact values, but this value has been reported by South American associations to the IACHR (IACHR, 2015).

detected early by medical practitioners, whereas one can live for decades with serious cognitive or psychological impairments without knowing that it is not the normal state of being²⁶.

On the other hand, identifying as trans is often a product of personal reflections without any input from medical practitioners. It is made much easier by the presence of a community to talk to, and by the availability of resources. This includes specialised resources (about gender subjects in general, transitioning, non-binary identities) but also by seeing representations of trans people in diverse media (which can help with normalisation, making identification with the character possible, and offering a way to explore those gender feelings). It seems — and it is a cultural trope, although little data exists on the subject — that trans people often hang in LGB circles before coming out as trans. The (relative) availability of information about transidentity within LGB circles might be a factor in this regard. In any case, many trans people only publicly claim that identity after decades²⁷, and often only realise that they are trans shortly before their coming out. The image of someone going to the doctor and being told that they might be trans would elicit a chuckle in many trans readers, as it is generally difficult to get people (especially medical professionals) to believe that one is trans, let alone suggest it without prompting.

There of course are many ways of discovering that one is trans, but one comes to mind as a particularly common experience (that might not be statistically overwhelming but exist as a cultural trope within those circles). It starts with a feeling of dissatisfaction or disconnect with one's body and presentation (a component of what is generally termed gender dysphoria). This unease can push one to examine the causes, and eventually explore the possibility of transidentity if given enough information about the subject.

This brings us to a first potential explanation for the inexistence of trans gimps. Maybe they simply do not realise their own potential transidentity. There are indeed quite a few factors that would indicate why this could be a relevant hypothesis. First, the feeling of disconnect, dissatisfaction or even hatred of one's body, sometimes in the context of a body dysmorphic disorder, seems to be a common experience among gimps. It might not even be mentioned, as it might seem natural to hate a body that brings pain and makes one fully aware of one's very real limitations. Unease that would trigger introspection in a person without physical impairments might then be simply brushed away and swept under the rug of disability, by the gimp themselves. As the subject itself might be painful (as it corresponds to contemplating what one is lacking), the gimp might even try to avoid thinking about it altogether. This is the first step: the same symptoms could exist, but the gimp would explain them away by attributing them to an already known condition. This could apply even more to non-binary people, who might not have strong gender feelings to give them a clear idea of their own identity, and for whom identifying their gender might be even harder.

The next step involves the lack of information. Even among non-crips, accessing information online can be tricky, and it is only worse for crips, especially institutionalised ones, because of the tracking mechanisms and parental control often used to limit their autonomy (Lathouwers et al., 2009, Stevens 2011). But going out to meet other members of the community can be difficult, especially so when one is

²⁶ There is, of course, a difference between getting a diagnosis and getting a correct diagnosis (Essex and Roper, 2001). Putting aside the problems of potential over-medicalisation of people with psychological and cognitive disabilities, there is a non-negligible proportion of people that live for decades with undiagnosed disabilities (Angst et al., 2011).

²⁷ According to the USTS, 49% of trans people realised they were trans after age 16 (including 8% after age 26), compared to only 26% before age 10.

trying to do so discreetly but has limited independence (Cheng and Richard Udry, 2002). Moreover, meeting spots for queer communities tend to be in inaccessible places, especially in Europe²⁸. Health centers and very visible organisations tend to be problematic, as a closeted trans gimp would not want to be seen entering, especially if someone is dropping them off. But the other places available tend to be establishments that focus on serving alcohol and have a high density of people, limiting gimp mobility, safety, and being potentially unbearable for people with high noise sensitivity.

To summarise, the gimp might misdiagnose their own gender feelings as being caused by disability. They might also refuse to examine those feelings because of both the easy answer and how painful thinking honestly about the subject can be. They might not consider the possibility of being a trans gimp due to limited representation. And finally, they might not have access to information, or to places and communities where this information is distributed. Altogether, those effects can strongly reduce the proportion of gimps who would discover their own transidentity. They can also amplify the effect mentioned earlier of feeling illegitimate in claiming to be trans as a gimp²⁹.

4.2 Alternative constructions of gender

We've been focusing on people who have had physical disabilities since a very early age as a central example to try to look at how disability impacts gender, with the assumption that being transgender only marginally affects the probability of becoming disabled. If further work validates the relative absence of those trans gimps without them being necessarily hidden, lack of information and self-identification might not be enough to explain the discrepancy. Hence, we propose a second hypothesis: disability could have a major impact on the very construction of gender among young gimps. This atypical vision of gender could then tolerate a larger variety of gender expressions without unease due to potentially more flexible gender ideals and categories.

The construction of gender is a complex issue that is impossible to fully dissect, especially here, but we can mention two basic principles that are relevant to our concerns. First, socialisation of children plays a large role in how they perceive and identify with gendered behaviour³⁰. Second, sexualisation plays an important role in gender evolution during adolescence, and queer people often go through a phase of confusion over both gender identity and sexual attraction³¹.

²⁸ For example, most of the meetings in Paris, France are organised in pubs, but generally in the private rooms that are in the basement or on the upper floors (which are generally not accessible except by rickety stairs).

²⁹ The author's own experience of this phenomenon, which motivated the work prior to this article, was documented in Blanchard (2020).

³⁰ Infants can typically distinguish gender by the time they are 9 months old (Hillairet de Boisferon et al., 2015), although the ability to gender people around them continues to increase until and throughout adolescence (Li, 2016). They also start gendering themselves by age 2, although this construction of gender can change over time, especially among gender non-conforming children. That said, one has to be careful not to essentialise this socialisation, as many other factors play a role (Baril, 2014). To read an alternative viewpoint on the use of essentialism in feminist discourse, see (Heilmann, 2011).

³¹ This is corroborated by — among other things — the fact that children who exhibit gender non-conforming behaviour but end up being cisgender have high rates of homosexuality or bisexuality (Boskey, 2014). Closer to our subject, disabled adolescents also report higher rates of same-sex attraction and confusion about their sexual preferences (Cheng and Richard Udry, 2002).

Let's now consider a fictional physically disabled boy using a wheelchair as our main case study³². He is bombarded with images of locally typical masculinity and femininity during his whole youth. However, those messages create a dissonance. He is often faced with a common ideal of power — not only physical power but also social power — and, although it is evolving, lack of vulnerability. Mostly, a central tenet of traditional masculinity is independence (Asch and Fine, 1988). This can be jarring in the face of a very visible weakness, but mostly when confronted with omnipresent denials of his autonomy (Stevens, 2011). Here, we can take inspiration from the capabilities framework developed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999, Mitra, 2006). Most men will not focus on becoming a muscle-bound leader of a biker gang (and it might not even cross their minds). But the simple fact that they could choose to take such a path is relevant. It may not even be required that they stand a realistic chance at becoming this ideal of masculinity; the potential can be enough to affect their behaviours, and their identification as a man. However, this potential is denied to the gimp boy, which can force a conscious reflection about his role, and a grieving process over not being able to become what he feels he should become. Using the capabilities framework, that would be a potential disability, although it can have a strong impact as it affects self-identification. He then has to confront what masculinity he can inhabit, and might have to create his own version, one that is compatible with his capabilities.

A second effect comes into play in parallel with the desexualisation of crips. As they are often seen as undesirable in public offline and online spaces — literally, but even more when it comes to romantic attraction (Saltes, 2013) — the amount of gender-based attention is lowered through partial exclusion from dating practices (Liddiard, 2017).

To be fair, this is speculative, as both of these effects could go in many different ways. But it seems reasonable to assume that it can lead, at least in some cases, to lowered expectations for gimps when it comes to gender performance, and a lowered pressure to conform (from the outside at least, although it could still be felt dearly). The relative lack of visible trans gimps would in that case mirror the observed differences in the relative visible proportions of trans men and women as discussed in Subsection 2.3. The explanation would then follow one of the proposed explanations for this phenomenon³³: the lower pressure to stick to a traditional gender expression (because they might not be able to) would allow them to explore a range of gender expressions and to find one that fits them without being perceived as flouting gender norms³⁴. This would imply that fewer people would pay the social cost of fully actualising their non-conformity, identifying as an “eccentric” cisgender person instead. Multiple analyses of trans crip masculinities can be found in the works of Alexandre Baril, one of the very few authors to have looked at the intersection of gender construction, transidentity and disability, although without a focus on physical disabilities (Baril, 2019).

³² This is not based on the author's own experience (as it does not match), but was chosen as it seemed to be a representative example. Similar (although potentially weaker) arguments could be made in other cases.

³³ Among other explanations, one could mention the possibility that the measures are wrong (because they are based on healthcare access as mentioned previously), that gender non-conforming people can choose to present differently depending on the social groups they are a part of (where the presence of butch lesbians can be tolerated better than that of trans men), or the greater tendency to claim non-binary genders instead of the trans man label (80% of non-binary identified people in the USTS indicated being assigned female at birth).

³⁴ This exploration of gender roles is also found in the disidentification strategies in (Rainey, 2017) : “As a strategy of survival, disidentification can help men with physical disabilities be read (by others and themselves) as men worthy of patriarchal privilege, while simultaneously permitting a critique of, and play with, normative hegemonic masculinity.”

5. What does this mean for trans crips?

We've seen that some trans crips are indeed missing or invisible, and proposed a non-exhaustive list of potential explanations. Some of them do not have any specific consequences that require action beyond what is already being done³⁵. But the others have some potential consequences, on trans gimps first, and on what we as communities could do to help them. In any case, let's imagine for a moment that information were more available and that gimps had a lower barrier to entry to trans communities, and better access to information and role models.

The main consequence is that, for people who fit the criteria detailed in section 3, their social experience would improve in general³⁶. But it goes slightly beyond this. Altering one's gender expression is often a difficult choice, but it can feel extremely empowering. This is especially relevant for people who feel a disconnect and have abandoned the idea of feeling at home in their body. Choosing consciously to act on such things can be an important step to (re)take possession of one's body. For the undiagnosed trans gimps, it might also be a way to reduce some of the dysphoria they thought came naturally with their disability. It is a potentially double-edged blade, of course, with the risk of being depressed or setting unreasonable expectations. But giving people the power to try to change seems better than an exaggerated “first, do no harm” (*primum non nocere*) principle that prizes inaction.

Moreover, we are not talking about a negligible population: trans gimps might number in the tens if not hundreds of thousands in both Europe and the USA³⁷. If even a small proportion of them fall in the categories described above, it could be a boon to many.

But, for this to happen, we need to make such things possible, which requires a renewed effort on rethinking gender and disability, and on fighting for improving access to information for gimps as in Mizock et al. (2013). This discussion should probably at some point involve doctors (as gender confirmation treatments can interact with pre-existing conditions). However, they should not be the ones leading this reflection, which should not be seen through the medical lens (as it would, among other things, induce automatic gate-keeping). It also means that a discussion is needed about the specific oppressions faced by trans gimps, not just socially but on all aspects of life, as both their identities can amplify the discriminations induced by the other (from autonomy to access to medical assistance, without forgetting financial aspects).

This is why this article is addressed to people in the field of disability. We probably all know some people with hidden or unconscious feelings that are linked to transidentity. It is up to us to make those welcome in our community.

³⁵ The dead trans gimp hypothesis would hopefully become less relevant if the suicide rates among both trans people and crips were to fall.

³⁶ Not always, as people who are simply gender non-conforming could be annoyed at getting more attention focused on this aspect of themselves, attention that they might have been trying to avoid.

³⁷ Using the conservative estimates from earlier, this would correspond to at least twenty thousand trans gimps in the USA, and even more in Europe.

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