

ThinkProgress, DC, USA

Conservative book 'When Harry Became Sally' attacks trans people while conveniently leaving them out

Ryan T. Anderson's latest book on "The Transgender Moment" conveniently ignores reality.

Zack Ford | Jan 25, 2018, 10:19 am

None of [the "early praise" reviews](#) for author Ryan T. Anderson's new book, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*, actually come from transgender people, nor from doctors who care for transgender patients, nor from anyone who advocates for transgender people. The same is true of the content inside the book, due out February 20, which is largely based in junk science.

Anderson, a William E. Simon Senior Research Fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, has become one of the most prominent voices in the contemporary anti-LGBTQ movement. Those eager to oppose the fight for transgender equality have been anticipating the arrival of *When Harry Became Sally*, hoping it will serve as a valuable compendium for convincing people to reject the legitimacy of transgender identities.

Anderson doesn't shy away from that motive.

"In this book, I argue that Dr. McHugh got it right," he writes in his introduction, referring to Dr. Paul McHugh and McHugh's theory that being transgender is a mental illness.

McHugh has used his credentials as a Johns Hopkins University professor to establish himself as [one of the only "experts"](#) that anti-trans conservatives can cite, which Anderson does frequently. There are more citations for McHugh than any other in the book; Lawrence Mayer, McHugh's frequent co-author, is a close second.

When Harry Became Sally depends on readers being skeptical about transgender identities from the start. "[O]rdinary Americans recognize the transgender moment to be a politically correct fad built on a shaky platform, and many are pushing back," Anderson writes. "This book is intended to arm them with knowledge." Anderson, of course, claims to have that "knowledge," and he relishes the opportunity to espouse his own gender ideology about the proper "complementary" roles of men and women.

Anderson also attempts to convince the reader that these transgender individuals are all mentally ill and would be better off not transitioning. They are abstract concepts, not real people with real experiences. This makes it easy for him to insist — without any supporting research — that there must be "healthier ways to deal with gender dysphoria," including "healthy alternatives to transitioning."

When Harry Became Sally falls into [the same trap as Anderson's previous book](#), *Truth Overruled*, which teaches the reader how to fight marriage equality in a post-*Obergefell* world. In both *Truth Overruled* and *When Harry Became Sally*, Anderson imagines he's offering a cohesive treatise on his anti-LGBTQ position, but instead exposes the many weaknesses and contradictions in his own arguments.

Here are just a few.

The “compassion” myth

Anderson believes that transgender people are suffering from delusions and claims to be motivated by compassion for people who experience gender dysphoria, while rejecting every aspect of their transitioned identities.

“Jenner is not a woman,” he says of Caitlyn Jenner, whom he references on multiple occasions. “Regardless of which technical labels the experts apply to him [sic], the crucial point is that his [sic] feelings and thoughts are misguided and they do not change reality.”

Anderson ignores the fact that Jenner has legally changed her name and her gender identification on all of her legal documents, and misgendering and “deadnaming” her repeatedly. (“Deadnaming” is when someone refers to a transgender individual by the name they used before they transitioned. [It is often done maliciously](#), with the intent of delegitimizing and rejecting a trans person's identity.)

Anderson likewise deadnames Chaz Bono and Lili Elbe, the subject of *The Danish Girl*, and describes actress Laverne Cox as “a man who identifies as a woman.” He similarly describes teen role activist Jazz Jennings as “a teenage boy... who identifies as a girl” and later as “a biological male.” Neither Cox nor Jennings have made their pre-transition names public.

Anderson isn't snide about the constant misgendering. He openly admits to doing so intentionally because “those with gender dysphoria want to transform their bodies into what they mistakenly believe their real self is.” Quoting McHugh, he describes them as “counterfeits or impersonators of the sex with which they ‘identify.’”

“Detransitioning”

“Detransitioners” are a small handful of individuals who took steps to change their bodies as part of a gender transition but later came to regret those changes. Anderson is urgently concerned with these individuals, choosing to focus on their stories while ignoring real life accounts from those who have benefited by transitioning.

“I couldn't shake from my mind the stories of people who had detransitioned,” he writes, explaining that they were the primary reason he wrote the book. “They are heartbreaking. I had to do what I could to prevent more people from suffering the same way.”

Anderson dedicates an entire chapter to sharing stories from six such detransitioners,

several of whom are identified only by their first names or with pseudonyms. “Many of these people regret the damage done to their bodies and their lost fertility,” he says. “They feel they were too young to be making such life-altering decisions.”

However, the stories suggest that the individuals in question may not have been transgender as the term is generally applied. Self-diagnosis and misdiagnosis following [insufficient consultation](#) with counselors are a common recurrence; these individuals largely convinced themselves that the problems they were experiencing meant that they were transgender, then communicated that diagnosis to a therapist who didn’t question it.

Many also [experienced](#) some form of childhood trauma, including sexual and physical abuse. It’s no coincidence that detransitioning was often part of a process that included being diagnosed with a dissociative disorder that they had perceived as gender dysphoria, but which was actually a very different concern that should have been treated differently from the beginning. [Walt Heyer](#), for instance — one of the six stories Anderson highlights — has created a career for himself of advocating against transgender equality based on his “ex-trans” narrative. But Heyer openly admits in his personal testimony that he actually had a dissociative disorder related to abuse he experienced as a child. In other words, he may have transitioned, but he likely was never actually *transgender*.

[Others are open about the fact that they struggled](#) with acceptance and may have felt that, because they didn’t conform to gender norms and were punished by their peers, they would be better off as the gender with which they assumed they more closely matched.

Ironically, Anderson doesn’t then seem concerned when, later in the book, he dedicates a whole separate chapter to reinforcing the same patriarchal values that fostered some of the challenges these detransitioners faced.

“Our sexed nature has profound implications for how we should structure the formation of young people to prepare them for marriage and family life, and how husbands and wives interact with each other and with their children as moms and dads,” he writes, reiterating his old arguments against marriage equality for same-sex couples.

He brazenly praises the Pence rule, also known as the Graham rule, which requires men to refuse to meet one-on-one with women to avoid temptation. He rejoices when women prefer not to work full-time or who dedicate themselves to homemaking, conspicuously omitting any similar praise for stay-at-home dads or any notice of the gender pay gap. He pines for “male-only associations and activities,” warning that eliminating them “can be damaging to men, and to the women they care about,” making no mention of the #MeToo movement or explosion of sexual harassment stories that have helped shine a light on the toxic masculinity in our culture.

Not only does Anderson believe sex determines gender, he also believes that there are distinct ways men and women should act, unconcerned with the consequences of those norms nor their impact on people like the detransitioners who do not fit to stereotype.

Omitting important research

Convinced that transitioning is bad but unable to offer any alternative, Anderson is left with the task of sowing as much doubt as possible about its benefits. For the most part, he regurgitates much of the non-peer-reviewed analysis that Mayer and McHugh have already done, which claims there are myriad negative outcomes for transitioning and has been widely debunked [for its omissions and biases](#).

Similarly, most of his preferred experts are affiliated with the American College of Pediatricians (ACPeds), an anti-LGBTQ hate group that [masquerades](#) as a professional organization so that it can peddle anti-LGBTQ junk science. The Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine recently [rebuked](#) an article by ACPeds president Michelle Cretella for its “medical omissions, circumstantial facts, hateful interpretation, and peripheral context.”

Such is his determination to undermine trans-affirming care, Anderson at one point even humors the extremely offensive and widely-rejected theory called “[autogynephilia](#),” which posits that transgender women are either self-hating gay men who want to pursue sexual relationships with heterosexual men or heterosexual men who are sexually aroused — to the point of mental illness — by presenting themselves as women. The theory is not supported by research, offers no explanation for transgender men, and is only subscribed to by a few acolytes of its inventor, Ray Blanchard.

Anderson also dedicates a whole chapter to transgender kids, which relies entirely on “the desistance myth,” the expectation that some 80 percent of children perceived to be transgender will end up dropping that identity later. As ThinkProgress explained [in an in-depth investigation last year](#), the desistance myth relies on studies that did not adequately distinguish transgender kids from those who simply violated gender norms and that employed antiquated diagnostic criteria.

As his primary source of information against trans-affirming care, Anderson curiously relies on testimony presented in the lawsuits over North Carolina’s HB2, the now-famous “bathroom bill” requiring transgender individuals to use the facilities matching the gender listed on their birth certificates in schools and on other public properties.

In one instance, he refers to statements by forensic psychologist [Randi Ettner](#) and child and adolescent psychiatrist [Scott Leibowitz](#), who explain that forcing a transgender student to use separate facilities at school is harmful, exacerbating the student’s gender dysphoria and negatively impacting their overall mental health.

“Unsurprisingly,” he writes, “neither Ettner nor Leibowitz cites any studies to support these claims. No such research exists.”

This is simply untrue. A [GLSEN student climate survey](#) conducted in 2015 found that 70 percent of trans students forced to use the bathroom matching the gender listed on their birth certificate ended up avoiding bathrooms altogether because they felt unsafe and uncomfortable. Students subjected to such policies showed increased levels of depression,

while those whose schools supported them had similar mental health outcomes to their cisgender peers.

“The Swedish Study”

Anderson relies heavily on [a frequently cited Swedish study](#) conducted in 2011, which — as conservatives describe it — demonstrates that suicide rates among those who have undergone transition surgery are high, proving that transition doesn't benefit trans people.

The study's author, Cecilia Dhejne, has [repeatedly insisted](#), however, that this conclusion is wrong.

“It DOES NOT say that medical transition causes people to commit suicide,” she wrote in a Reddit AMA this past summer, noting that the higher suicide rates were largely attributable to patients who transitioned prior to 1989. “To my knowledge, there is no study that...showed that suicide attempts in the transgender group [are] due to [the fact that] they regret transition.”

At one point, Anderson uses Dhejne's study to make an incorrect claim about American-Canadian psychologist Kenneth Zucker, [whose Toronto clinic was closed](#) after decades of employing harmful treatments designed to “correct” the gender of transgender kids. Anderson claims Zucker was “attacked by activists” after refusing to retract Dhejne's study, which had been printed in the journal *Plos One*.

“The [World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH)] objected to something published in the journal he edited,” Anderson writes, referring to Dhejne's study. “...WPATH pressured the study's authors to retract their conclusions, but Zucker refused to permit a retraction.”

But Dhejne told ThinkProgress that Zucker has never had any affiliation with *Plos One*. Zucker is the editor of *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, which has published some of Dhejne's other articles but has no affiliation with WPATH and did not publish her study on suicide rates.

“No member of WPATH has, to the best of my knowledge, ever interfered with any research articles I have tried to publish,” she told ThinkProgress.

Anderson's sole source for the anecdote seems to be the North Carolina/HB2 court [declaration](#) of a pediatric endocrinologist by the name of Quentin Van Meter. Van Meter, a [board member](#) at ACPeds, cites the Swedish study himself to justify his support for the state's discriminatory law. But when he tells the story that it was somehow connected to Zucker's ouster, he ironically provides no citation.

Anderson cites Van Meter several other times in the book, such as when he's denying that twin studies prove there's a biological component to transgender identities ([they actually do](#)), and when he's trying to dismiss the significance of [the trans-affirming consensuses](#) every

major medical organization has endorsed.

An imagined threat

Anderson dedicates his last chapter to policy solutions he thinks would solve the problem. For the most part, they rely on the idea that transgender people should be barred from using facilities that match their gender identity.

Anderson expresses particular concern regarding parents' ability to shield their children from sharing facilities with transgender students at school. "Dissent is equated with bigotry and hate, so no dissent will be tolerated," he warns. "All students must accept gender ideology, and their parents will have no say in the matter."

Anderson then argues that it "is entirely reasonable not to want to see persons of the opposite sex in a state of undress, even if they 'identify as' the same sex." These arguments focus entirely on transgender women in women's spaces, completely ignoring how women would react [if transgender men](#) were forced to use women's spaces.

He subsequently lists a number of incidents of voyeurism and assault, which he claims demonstrate how vulnerable women's spaces are. [As ThinkProgress previously pointed out](#), many of these incidents are easily debunked and have no connection to the implementation of transgender nondiscrimination protections.

When Harry Became Sally is designed to act as the ultimate "red pill" on transgender issues. For those already inclined to discriminate against transgender people, Anderson's catalog of flawed arguments and distorted research might serve to reinforce their prejudices and fears. But for those looking to better understand what transgender people experience or how to actually respond compassionately, Anderson's book has virtually nothing to offer.

<https://thinkprogress.org/review-when-harry-became-sally-transgender-moment-4033a1b06dbb/>