

Journal Issues Revised Version of Controversial Paper That Questioned Why Some Teens Identify as Transgender

By Tom Bartlett March 19, 2019

Following a review that lasted more than six months, the journal *PLOS ONE* has published a revised version of a controversial paper by a Brown University researcher on whether social media and the influence of friends lead some teenagers to identify as transgender — a theory that's been dubbed Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria.

The new version adds context and softens language that drew complaints from transgender advocates, but the primary findings in the paper remain unchanged.

When the original paper was published last August, those advocates objected to the methodology and to certain phrases, accusing its author, Lisa Littman, an assistant professor of the practice of behavioral and social sciences at Brown, of using "transphobic dog whistles" and engaging in hate speech. Among the objections was that only parents of transgender-identified children were surveyed, rather than the children themselves, and that phrases like "cluster outbreak" made it sound as if identifying as transgender were like contracting a disease. In a [widely discussed article](#) on Medium, Julia Serano, a biologist and author of *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism and Trans Feminism*, called the concept of Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria, or ROGD, "scientifically specious" and questioned the quality of Littman's research.

In the [new version of the paper](#), the word "outbreak" has been excised, and there's further emphasis on how the data was collected. It also notes that ROGD has "not yet been clinically validated." But the thrust of the paper remains the same. Littman points to evidence suggesting that some teenagers, mostly girls, might be identifying as transgender as a "maladaptive coping mechanism" instead of addressing underlying issues related to trauma and mental health.

In an interview, Littman said she doesn't doubt that gender dysphoria is a genuine phenomenon, nor does she consider her research anti-transgender. "There are some people who benefit from transition, and there are some people who are harmed by transition," she said. "And I don't think it's a conflict to care about both of those populations." Via email, Littman writes that she is "pleased that my work has withstood this extensive peer-review process" and that she is "very happy with the final product."

In a [blog post](#), *PLOS ONE*'s editor in chief, Joerg Heber, sounded a more apologetic note. He wrote that "the study, including its goals, methodology, and conclusions, were not adequately framed in the published version, and that these needed to be corrected." Heber went on to apologize to the transgender community, writing that the journal had failed to provide sufficient context and to be appropriately sensitive. "We should have taken the interests and the often difficult situation of adolescents experiencing gender incongruence into account when handling this manuscript for publication," he wrote.

In an interview, Heber said that *PLOS ONE* should have sent the paper back to Littman to re-frame some sections before it was published, and that he considered not doing so a failure of the journal's process. But he affirmed Littman's assertion that her findings were not disputed by the journal's monthslong review. "At its core, the survey of the parents stands as it is," Heber said. "We let the original results stand."

'Only Indirect Evidence'

In [a commentary](#) published along with the revised paper, Angelo Brandelli Costa, an academic editor for *PLOS ONE*, writes that Littman's paper provides "only indirect evidence of the role of the influence of social and media contagion on young people's gender identity" and that further investigation is warranted. Littman has also cited the limitations of what she calls a "descriptive exploratory" study along with calling for more research.

When the original paper was published, Brown promoted it on the university's website, as it often does with notable research by its professors. However, after the controversy and the announcement that *PLOS ONE* would conduct a review, the references to the paper were removed. In a [lengthy statement](#) last fall, Brown defended that action, arguing that the university "does not shy away from controversial research" but that, in this case, "concerns about research design and methods" led to the decision to no longer feature Littman's study.

That, in turn, led to complaints that both Brown and *PLOS ONE* were caving to advocates rather than backing a peer-reviewed scientific paper. A [Fox News article](#) accused the university of "censoring its own study on transgender youth." In an [essay for Quillette](#), Jeffrey S. Flier, a former dean of Harvard Medical School, questioned both Brown's and *PLOS ONE*'s responses, arguing that the ability to conduct research must be protected "whether or not the methods and conclusions provoke controversy."

While the *PLOS ONE* review and Brown's backpedaling cast a shadow over Littman's research, the paper remained available on the journal's website and has so far been viewed more than 145,000 times, a number far higher than the majority of *PLOS ONE* papers.