

This briefing argues that the concept of social contagion helps to explain the recent surge in transgenderism among young people.

The Christian Institute's leaflet '**Social contagion**' considers how irrational beliefs, feelings or behaviour can spread rapidly between people, often appearing to come out of nowhere.



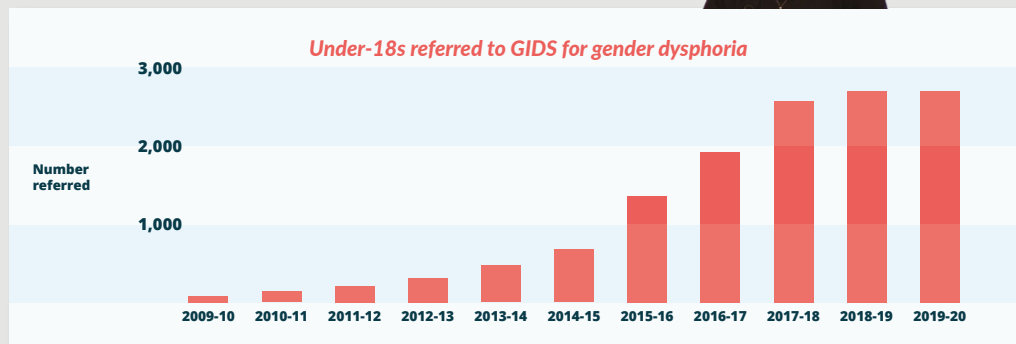
Statistics that demand an explanation

The NHS's Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) works with children. It has seen a more than **3,000 per cent increase** over the last decade in referrals for 'gender dysphoria' – the feeling that you were born in the wrong

body. There were 77 referrals to GIDS in 2009-10. But this rose to 2,728 in 2019-20.¹ Referrals have also gone from being over half boys to nearly three-quarters girls.² Most of them are

teenagers. This trend is seen across the western world.³ Even the Director of GIDS, **Dr Polly Carmichael**, has admitted that questions should be asked "about whether some people

are getting caught up in something".⁴ For the sake of our young people, there is an urgent need to understand what is behind this dramatic increase.



EVIDENCE OF CLUSTERING



In some schools there have been clear signs of a transgender craze.

A school in Brighton claimed in 2018 to have 40 pupils who did not identify with their biological sex, and a further 36 identifying as 'gender-fluid'.⁵ It was reported

that in another school 17 children were in the process of 'changing gender', with some pupils 'grooming' younger children to follow.⁶

Trying to explain the transgender explosion

Some claim the huge growth in transgenderism is just because society has become more accepting and better services are now provided.

For example, one former clinical psychologist at Tavistock has said:

“...the most likely cause of the referral rate going up is the fact that the service is more accessible, and I think there have been significant cultural changes that perhaps make it more acceptable for people to tell their families and their friends that they're transgender”.⁷

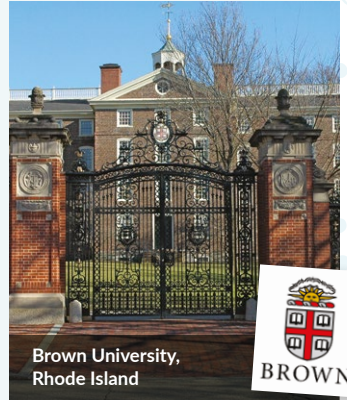
In other words, transgenderism has not actually increased, it is just

more visible. This is a very superficial analysis.

A better explanation is that it is an example of social contagion – a craze. The available evidence supports this.

Dr Lisa Littman of Brown University has popularised the term ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria’ (ROGD). Littman highlighted that many young people identifying as transgender had little or no history of gender confusion. They also increased their social media use shortly before transition and had friends who had recently started identifying as transgender.⁸

Littman's findings liken ROGD to mental health conditions such as anorexia,



which are known to be socially contagious. This should have profound implications for how ROGD is approached and treated.

PEOPLE EXPERIENCE REAL DISTRESS

Young people experiencing ROGD are gripped by the feeling that they were born in the wrong body. They can experience intense confusion and distress.

Helena, 22, is a ‘detransitioner’ – someone who has left the transgender lifestyle. Looking back on her teenage experience, she says:

“...It genuinely feels like you were born in the wrong body... it's a very painful feeling. It's about your body as a whole, it's about how society treats you but it's also about individual body parts that you just can't stand to look at – you're always aware of them.”⁹



The online trans subculture

THE ROLE OF SUGGESTION

How is it that teenagers can come to feel they were born in the wrong body? The power of suggestion may provide one answer.

When a suggestible person is taken in by an idea, it can dramatically affect how they see things. Our briefing, *Social*



contagion, deals with this in more detail. Many teenagers react against pressure from their peers or others to behave in particular ways. Some have difficulty adjusting to puberty. These underlying insecurities may be making teenagers more open to suggestion, giving transgenderism an air of plausibility. In fact, very

commonly experienced adolescent anxieties are used as 'evidence' that a young person is 'truly transgender'.

For example, the 'Transgender Teen Survival Guide' on social media site Tumblr lists 'signs of indirect dysphoria':

- "A sense of misalignment, disconnect, or estrangement from your own emotions";
- "A seeming pointlessness to your life, and no sense of any real meaning or ultimate purpose";
- "wishing you could be normal".¹⁰



It is easy to find the victims of this harmful advice. Reddit – another social media site – is brimming with anxious people crying out for diagnosis and help from peers.

CRIES FOR HELP



"I'm confused about my gender"¹¹

"Trying to figure out if I am trans or not"¹²

"I honestly don't know if I'm trans or not, any advice?"¹³

"Apparently I might be trans?"¹⁴

"Do I have dysphoria?"¹⁵

"Is it gender dysphoria? Can you help me..?"

"I do not know if I really want to be a girl... I am so confused."¹⁶

MISLEADING PEER GROUP DIAGNOSIS

Peer groups, online and offline, can encourage people's feelings that they are in the wrong body ('gender dysphoria'). Those wondering if they are transgender are told they are, almost regardless of what symptom they describe. This reinforces the suggestion that the individual has gender dysphoria. Even those who conclude they don't are counselled back into believing they do. Sweeping statements blame transgenderism for any and every experience.

Real social media exchanges

I've been wondering for a while if I'm trans or not. I think I've gone through just about every online article and quiz, looking for something that makes it click one way or the other, but nothing has.

*...this is like. Textbook. I had more or less these exact thoughts and I don't know if I've ever met a trans girl who didn't.*¹⁷

I am not 100% sure that I am a girl on the inside [but] I generally feel more connected to women and more often than not will see a beautiful woman and the first thoughts in my head are 'I wish I could look like that'...

*You didn't specifically ask the question but I will answer it anyway. Yes, you are probably trans. I and most others who have started HRT, went through the same doubts that others have gone through... make an appointment with your PCP or an endocrinologist to start HRT.*¹⁸

*Not all dysphoria is direct dysphoria. Some forms of it can mask themselves as depression or anxiety. Others can be a weight on your day leaving you tired and without energy. Some can make cognitive tasks difficult. Overt dysphoria is actually fairly rare.*¹⁹

In such groups, even slight doubts become major issues. Normal teenage angst is hijacked and discontent is magnified. Young people are manipulated into believing they are the opposite sex. Rehearsing this idea then entrenches it. In the words

of one detransitioner:

"the worse I felt the more I would pursue this idea of being trans and this future of being trans. And then being more inundated with that kind of narrative just made me more depressed and more dysphoric. So it was an unending cycle."²⁰

Many detransitioners have found that their gender confusion and distress only settled down after they distanced themselves from online trans groups. Once they stopped thinking that changing sex would solve their problems, they could begin to improve.²¹



Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria





Dr Lisa Littman's study of 'rapid onset gender dysphoria' (ROGD) shows how transgender ideas can spread like a contagion. It was first published by scientific

journal PLOS ONE in 2018.²² The study is pioneering research, describing and analysing 256 'parental reports' about teenagers experiencing ROGD.

Dr Littman observed from the reports that, before identifying as transgender, many if not most of the adolescents experienced:

- History of social anxiety, isolation and difficulty forming friendships;
- History of trauma;
- Friendships with others identifying as transgender;
- Increase in social media use.

Parents identified the sources they thought were most influential on their child becoming gender dysphoric. The most frequent answers were:

-  YouTube transition videos;
-  Tumblr;



A group of friends they knew in person (not online);



A community/group of people that they met online;

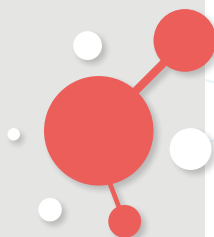


An individual they knew in person (not online).

Examples of the online content teenagers were accessing included:

- "That if they didn't transition immediately they would never be happy";
- What to say to a doctor "to convince them to provide hormones";
- "They should use the 'suicide narrative' to convince parents";
- "That it is acceptable to lie to... a doctor or therapist in order to get hormones faster".

It is striking how similar the anecdotal reports from parents are. They show all the signs of social contagion. ROGD is being spread through teenage communities at an alarming rate, both online and offline.



Dangerous deception

There are many reasons why people can feel they are 'trapped in the wrong body'. The causes of transgenderism in adults will often be different to the causes among teenagers. And even the rapid increase among young people probably has no single cause.

However, the breakdown of the family in recent decades has left many young people feeling directionless. Bereft of meaning, they are vulnerable

to a whole host of dangerous ideologies.

Trans activists offer their own diagnosis of a confusing world. They offer community and identity. They encourage young people to interpret ordinary problems as signs that they were born in the wrong body. And this is used to explain anything they feel is wrong in their lives.

This ideology may be having a profound effect on

suggestible minds, causing intense distress and confusion. Many believe it offers the answer they need.

Like the contagions of self-harm and eating disorders, transgenderism is fundamentally deceptive. Any immediate euphoria that may follow hormone therapy or surgery does not last. It frequently leads to profound regret or a desire for further surgery.



True freedom

Adopting a transgender identity will never ultimately bring peace or escape from the pains of a fallen world. It may claim to offer freedom, but the outcome is a life based on false hope. In the Son of God, however, people can find true freedom. Jesus said: "if the

Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). He taught that he came so people "may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). In the midst of many false hopes and broken promises, the Gospel

offers forgiveness of sin, freedom from a broken world and the hope of a resurrected universe. Men and women living true life in Christ in the here and now also look forward to the day when they will enjoy total restoration and peace.



References available at christian.org.uk/Transgendercraze-ref



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