

# Study suggests precise social categorizations improve social work research

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Social workers who use broad categorizations to define populations may impede their own ability to adequately assess complex oppressive social relationships, specifically among transgender women, according to

faculty in Georgia State's School of Social Work.

Differences in experience, outlook and perception—particularly those shaped by gender—contribute to the "apparatus of social reproduction," the process by which [research](#) adds to oppressive conditions for those being researched, according to instructor William Lane (M.S.W. '17) and assistant professor Kristie Seelman.

The co-[authors](#) encourage their social work colleagues to consider the role they play in this dynamic, and to carefully approach social categorization, in a research article published earlier this year.

"Over the past few years, policies that affect [transgender](#) people—from healthcare to identification laws and school guidelines—have been discussed and implemented on a national scale," said Lane. "Yet even in these conversations, the experiences of [transgender people](#)—[women](#) in particular—have been obscured, fueled by an overall misunderstanding."

Their database search of article abstracts found transgender women largely absent or misrepresented in social work literature.

"For example, transgender women disproportionately rely on sex work for survival. The fact that we found no references to this in a significant database, Social Work Abstracts, highlights a gap in the field," he said.

Lane and Seelman further explored the theoretical relationship between the categories used in research on transgender women and oppressive conditions. The theoretical lens they present, the apparatus of social reproduction, aims to disentangle this relationship and help social work researchers better assess their methods and practices.

"As a [social worker](#), the primary questions I seek to answer are: who controls resources, who has access to resources, and who doesn't have

access? In the case of transgender women, I am concerned with how they survive and get their basic needs met, and how the field of [social work](#) can help or hinder that," said Lane.

He encourages social workers to reconsider the use of broad social categorizations of transgender women and conduct research unique to their experience.

"We should invite transgender women to read, critique and contribute to the discourse to get a full and accurate depiction of the world they live in," he said. "The communities we study should have their voices included in the research we conduct."

**More information:** William A. Lane et al. The Apparatus of Social Reproduction, *Affilia* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0886109917747614](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109917747614)

Provided by Georgia State University

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