

Pronouns, Populism, and Panic: Framing in Alberta’s Gender Identity Policies

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Background

In Alberta and beyond, contention regarding transgender identities have been increasingly brought to the forefront of public discourse and policy-making. Described by Judith Butler (2024) as part of the “anti-gender ideology movement”, recent discourse surrounding transgender identities “treats gender as a monolith, frightening in its power and reach” (4). The concept of gender has been framed as something to be feared, with the ability to dismantle society as it currently stands. In Alberta, such discourse has materialized as gender identity policies enclosed in *Bill 26*, *Bill 27*, and *Bill 29*, restricting gender-affirming health care, preferred pronoun use in schools, access to comprehensive sexual education, and access to sports for trans youth (Smith 2024). Given the great criticisms and dire consequences of these policies, placed within the context of wider global tension surrounding gender and transgender identities, my research is interested in the constitution of Alberta’s gender identity policies within Alberta’s political culture.

Research Questions

- How are Alberta’s gender identity policies rhetorically framed?
- How does Alberta’s political culture influence these policies?

Argument

I argue that Alberta’s gender identity policies have utilized moral panic and populist framings in order to provoke fear around transness and gender. In doing so, the policies channel fears of diminished freedom towards gender, restricting the rights of trans youth in the contradictory name of protection.

Methods

To conduct my research, I used Fairclough’s (2013) conception of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which specifically recognizes the connection between discourse and social elements such as power and identity (78). Importantly, Fairclough (2013) notes, CDA “is normative critique: it does not simply describe existing realities but also evaluates them, assesses the extent to which they match up to values that are taken (contentiously) to be fundamental for just or decent societies” (178). Using the Canadian Newsstream database, I collected all articles published in Alberta newspapers in 2024 containing the terms “transgender”, “child”, and “youth”. Having collected 102 articles, I manually selected articles that clearly supported the policies, resulting in 15 relevant articles. I then collected Alberta legislature *Hansard* transcripts using the same search terms and time frame in the *Hansard* search function. This resulted in 27 documents discussing the policies. Using NVivo, based on predefined traits of moral panic, populism, and references of freedom/choice, I inductively coded the news media and *Hansard* transcripts for instances of these traits. For discussions of freedom, I used additional search terms: “free”, “parent”, “right”, “indoctrination”, “force”, “choice”, and “ideology” within the already selected data set.

Findings

- **Moral Panic:**

Concern: The first trait of a moral panic is an increased level of concern regarding a demographic or the actions of a demographic in society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, 156-157). In the act of proposing legislation, concerns of the government become clear. The concerns of the policy are often highly generalized and treat gender homogenously.

Hostility: The main sources of hostility coded in *Hansard* and news media were towards transgender women in sports, and towards transness as a concept in discussions of detransitioning. Such hostility is not based in concern for youth, but wider transphobia.

Consensus: In terms of consensus, the faction in favour of such policies appears to be small. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) state that consensus does not have to be unanimous across a population to be deemed a moral panic (157). Consensus on this policy takes place within far-right factions of the United Conservative Party (UCP).

Disproportionality: Supporters of the policies are often unable to provide examples of a “threat”, relying on a *feeling*, rather than a legitimate issue. One example states: “[The NDP] say: how many transgender athletes have you recorded? Madam Speaker, we don’t keep track of those numbers...[Stories are] the only statistic that we need to move forward with this” (Schow 2024).

Volatility: In identifying volatility with regard to a moral panic, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) state that moral panics often appear suddenly, and quickly evaporate (159). In this case, the Alberta policies stem from decades of homophobia, transphobia, and trans misogyny, none of which is exclusive to Alberta. Rather, supporters of the policy treat transness as *if* it has suddenly appeared.

The major divergence from conventional moral panics is the lack of consensus in the media. Yet, given the contemporary diversity of media (McRobbie and Thornton 1995, 564), and a right wing distrust in mainstream media, critique of the policies in such media will likely only embolden conservative support.

- **Populism:**

“The People” vs. “The Elite”: Three prominent out-groups became clear in rhetoric in favour of the policies: the federal Liberals, trans organizations and communities, and transgender women. The federal government and trans organizations are framed as interfering in Alberta politics, emphasizing their tax funding (Sarkonak 2024). Trans women are framed as threats to cis women, directly contradicting the material marginalization of trans women (Butler 2024, 11).

Simplification: Supporters of the policies heavily rely on simplification to make their argument. Most evidently, parental notification of pronouns and gender expression is defended in simply arguing that “parents should be involved with their children” (Nicolaides 2024a, 1891), disregarding the nuances and dangers of notification.

Anti-Pluralism: Oswald *et al.* (2021) describes anti-pluralism as an “essential part of populism”, as a populist leader cannot truly speak for all of the “people”, they instead generalize their language to encapsulate the majority of “ordinary people” (16). The *Hansard* transcripts demonstrate anti-pluralist rhetoric in action, often focusing on what “all parents” think or want.

Disenfranchisement: Cis women are framed as experiencing deprivation on two fronts: victims of “gender ideology” *forcing* them to transition, and through the inclusion of trans women in sports, despite clear social factors present in detransitioning and extensive marginalization of trans women.

- **“Freedom”:**

Parental Rights: Within these policies, parental rights are asserted as the right to be *involved or aware* of a child’s education (Carter 2007). While framed around parental involvement, these policies are inherently tied to control over children, in the name of parental freedom, regardless of the interests of the child.

Indoctrination/Choice: Trans identities are framed as “choices”, forced upon youth, denying the possibility of social recognition and acceptance (Butler 2024, 45). In this vision, gender ideology is framed as homogenous and wholly indoctrinating, ignoring any critical thought taking place.

Implications

A felt sense of infringement on freedom does not come from nothing. There is a sense of what Kuzlarić (2022) refers to as “general existential insecurity” present in this political moment (38), though certainly not on account of free gender expression. Rather, in this current neoliberal social order marked by growing inequality, continual crises, and precarity, this societal anxiety is directed towards those that diverge from gender norms, as addressing the true sources of instability would mean changing the current neoliberal class structure.

Regardless of if the bills are passed, these policies alienate trans identities, further disenfranchising already marginalized people. Most evidently, Alberta’s gender identity policies are an unabridged invasion on youth self-determination. In legislatively restricting the freedom of youths, the UCP enforces adherence to one’s sex assigned at birth, restricting the freedom that the policies so vehemently claim to protect.

On a broader scale, contradictory logics of freedom used in these policies are also used to target and dismantle institutions that may support trans individuals such as public healthcare and education (Kuzlarić 2022). This reality is currently taking place in Alberta in the UCP’s attempts to push private education and privatize healthcare, both in the name of “choice” (Nicolaides 2024b, 2047; McKay 2024). As such, most nefariously, trans people are not only ideationally alienated, but also economically and socially.

Resistance

Because Alberta’s gender identity policies exist within this current political moment of economic privatization and social alienation, solidarity is essential. The same rhetoric is being used in eradicating reproductive and economic rights, and alienating migrants. The same rhetoric is being used across the world to blame and attack marginalized groups to cultivate polarization, distracting from economic and social devastation at the hands of corporations and governments. These policies are a backlash to social progress, meaning progress has been made and recognized by powerful entities. To resist these policies, we must resist division in its many forms, reaffirm the need for social protection, and as Amirali *et al.* (2024) describes, “understand trans childhood not as an exception or a tragic but inevitable reality, but to cherish it as a happy outcome” (262). In problematizing anti-trans narratives – as well as broader political rationalities of neoliberalism – we can begin to construct a future of prosperity and legitimate freedom.

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