

# Regulating the Restroom: The Clash of Distinctions and Perspectives

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#### Abstract

Part of the *Cognitive Case Study Series* from Cabrera Research Lab, this case explores the distinctions made and perspectives taken with respect to the growing national debate around gender identification and bathroom choice.

A "cognitive case study"—inspired by the cases used in business and policy schools that involve students in real-world problem solving—is designed to engage students in metacognition (thinking about thinking). Cognitive cases introduce the cognitive patterns underlying our mental models, and then encourage us to explore how our and others' mental models affect our emotions, behavior, action, and even our reality. These cases explore a broad range of topics, from politics to social issues to the physical sciences to everyday phenomena, with the purpose of enabling readers to see the cognitive structures at play across a variety of realms.

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There has been increasing national debate about legislating the bathroom choice of individuals who are transgender. The most far-reaching case to date is the passage of North Carolina (NC) House Bill 2 (HB2), "The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act," on March 23, 2016. The bill requires that individuals use the public restroom designated for their assigned sex at birth. The bill passed the NC House 82-26 and the Senate 32-0, with Senate Democrats walking out on the vote in protest. The NC law overturned a Charlotte ordinance that banned discrimination against LGBT individuals and allowed transgender individuals to use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify. The state law also preempts other localities in the state from enacting similar legislation on LGBT rights. HB2 deals only with public restrooms; it does not regulate businesses or private institutions. In early May the Obama administration authored a directive—citing Title IX—that every public school provide transgender access to all activities and facilities consistent with their gender identity-or face the loss of federal funds. [1] The U.S. Justice Department brought suit against North Carolina on May 9 on the grounds that HB2 violates federal nondiscrimination laws. The Charlotte Observer reports that "McCrory and Republican legislative leaders Phil Berger and Tim Moore filed their own complaints, accusing the federal government of distorting discrimination law to include LGBT protections and asking the federal courts to deem HB2 nondiscriminatory." [2]



Figure 1: Opposition to Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, Framed by Opponents as "Bathroom Ordinance"

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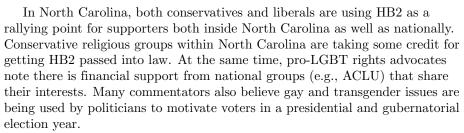
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Figure 2: The issue requires new distinctions to be recognized or ignored



Nowhere are the battle lines more clearly drawn than in the governor's race between McCrory, an HB2 defender, and Attorney General Roy Cooper, a Democrat who believes the law should be repealed. [2]

# Being Aware of Making Distinctions and Taking Perspectives

In Systems Thinking Made Simple, the Cabreras (2015) present four simple rules that underlie systems thinking and cognition itself: making distinctions (D) and recognizing systems (S), relationships (R), and perspectives (P). The distinctions rule—"Any idea or thing can be distinguished from the other ideas or things it is with"  $[3]^{p45}$ —is comprised of two elements: an "identity" (any thing or idea) and an "other" (that which is not the thing or idea). The distinctions rule draws attention to the fact that by focusing on one thing (the identity) we are automatically excluding other things (the other). As the Cabreras write, "Distinction-making simplifies our thinking, yet it also introduces biases that may go unchecked when the thinker is unaware."  $[3]^{p47}$ 

Intimately related to distinction-making is the taking of perspectives, which is often done unconsciously. The perspectives rule—"Any thing or idea can be the point or the view of a perspective" [3]<sup>p45</sup>—consists of two elements: the view (that which is "seen") and the point ("the seer"). Using any of other simple rules of cognition—distinctions, systems, and relationships—involves taking perspectives, whether we know it or not.

## Support for HB2

North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory tweeted the following about keeping bathrooms separated by biological sex (and overturning the Charlotte ordinance that allowed transgender individuals to use the bathroom of the sex with which they identify): "Ordinance defied common sense, allowing men to use women's bathroom/locker room for instance. That's why I signed bipartisan bill to stop it." NC Republican Senate leader Phil Berger, in an April 19 letter to business executives, explained the danger of the Charlotte ordinance HB2 overruled: "Ill-intentioned, non-transgender individuals, some with criminal pasts, have used similar ordinances elsewhere in the country to gain legal access to changing facilities and bathrooms of minors of the opposite sex." [4] North Carolina House Speaker Tim Moore also defended the bill, citing privacy concerns: "The way the ordinance was written by City Council in Charlotte, it would have allowed a man to go into a bathroom, locker or any changing facility, where women are—even if he was a man. We were concerned. Obviously there is the security risk of a sexual predator, but there is the issue of privacy." [5] Similarly, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council has argued



Figure 3: Mixing Sexes in the Locker Room

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in favor of HB2 as a "defense of the privacy that men and women expect (and deserve) in a facility where intimate hygiene and disrobing take place." [6]

In the subsequent controversy, Governor McCrory defended his actions:

The Right is often criticized—and rightly so—for wanting to getting [sic] involved in the bedrooms...The Left is wanting to get involved in locker rooms, showers and bathrooms. It was working pretty well when we were just dealing with it. ... I don't think government should tell the private sector what their locker room, shower room and bathroom policies should be. [7]

## Opposition to HB2

Sarah Preston of the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina called HB2 "an extreme bill that undoes all local nondiscrimination laws and specifically excludes gay and transgender people from legal protections." [4] The ACLU and other groups criticized the NC General Assembly for spending the money on a special session to pass the legislation, which they called rushed through and undemocratic. "Legislators have gone out of their way to stigmatize and marginalize transgender North Carolinians by pushing ugly and fundamentally untrue stereotypes that are based on fear and ignorance and not supported by the experiences of more than 200 cities with these protections," Preston said. [4] Over 100 companies signed a letter to the NC governor asking for repeal of HB2, noting the law will be bad for the state's economy, tourism, and industry. [8] Many have protested against the bill, such as Bruce Springsteen when he canceled his April 10 concert in Greensboro, NC. [9] Other groups such as Pearl Jam and Maroon 5 have followed suit. [2] The NBA threatened to take away Charlotte's right to host the 2017 All-Star Game. PayPal canceled its planned Charlotte expansion, costing 400 jobs. A major pharmaceuticals company announced it was reconsidering locating a manufacturing facility in Durham, NC. [2] Finally, NC's Attorney General Roy Cooper said in a press conference that he would refuse to defend the law in court. [10]

# The National Context

Dubbed "bathroom bills," legislation requiring bathroom use based on sex at birth has been introduced in states such as Arizona, Maryland, Kentucky, and Florida—typically mandating that people use the bathroom that matches the sex designated on their birth certificate, a bureaucratic designation that is difficult for individuals to change.

Many of the places in the US where this issue has flared are dealing specifically with school-related issues—often sparked by lawsuits for or against allowing transgender youth to use the bathroom of their choice. The following cases were reported by the Associated Press: [4]

- In Gloucester County, VA, the school board is challenging a federal court ruling that a transgender student must be allowed to use the boys' restroom at school.
- In Palatine, IL, 51 families are taking legal action to stop the school district from allowing a transgender student to use a girls' locker room. The families' attorney, Jocelyn Floyd, said the federal Department of



Figure 4: National Opposition to State Law HB2



Figure 5: LGBT Rights Framing

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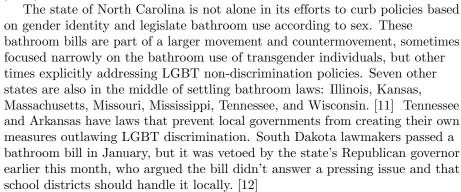
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Education had pressured the school district into a "dangerous social experiment." The transgender student is being represented by the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois.

- Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick is demanding the resignation of a Fort Worth school superintendent who helped draft restroom guidelines to accommodate transgender students.
- In Marion County, FL, the school board voted to require that students use the bathrooms and locker rooms based on their biological sex. A conservative legal group called Liberty Counsel reported advocating for the policy "after learning that a devout Christian boy was 'extremely upset when he encountered a female student in the boy's bathroom at his high school." [4] Liberty Counsel's website reads: "The passage of laws declaring a 'right' to bathroom and locker room access based on 'gender identity' defies common sense and puts women at risk."

In mid-May, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education released a statement of "Joint Guidance to Help Schools Ensure the Civil Rights of Transgender Students." [1] The text of the statement reads: "Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, schools receiving federal money may not discriminate based on a student's sex, including a student's transgender status. The guidance makes clear that both federal agencies treat a student's gender identity as the student's sex for purposes of enforcing Title IX." [1] Fox News reported "swift and strong condemnation from conservatives, with one public official blasting it as presidential 'blackmail'" in reaction to the demand that every public school provide transgender access or face the loss of federal funds (2016).



Several cities have also taken a stance on the issue. New York City's mayor issued an executive order allowing people to use public restrooms based on their gender identity and Philadelphia stated that private companies must display gender-neutral signage on single-occupancy bathrooms. In contrast, Houston voters refused to pass a proposition that would have included LGBT people in non-discrimination policies. [12]

The issue is rising through the court system. A coalition of 11 entities (Texas, Alabama, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Utah, Georgia, Maine Governor Paul LePage, the Arizona Department of Education, and two school districts in Arizona and Texas) filed a complaint in a Texas US District Court suing the Obama administration over its May 13, 2016, directive requiring public school districts grant transgender students access to the bathrooms that correspond with their gender identities. [13] The administration issued guidance through the Department of Education two years



Figure 6: Cartoon Depicts Limited Choices



Figure 7: #FlushTarget Campaign Bill-board

earlier providing clarification that Title IX not only prohibits sex discrimination, but discrimination on the basis of gender identity. [13] However, the most recent directive spelled out the implications for bathroom use, and has raised the stakes in this increasingly publicized and national battle. While the Republican and Democratic parties are taking opposite stances on the issue, individual cases do not always follow party lines (e.g., 2 of the 11-member coalition are from states with Democratic governors).

In early August, the US Supreme Court agreed to put on hold a federal judge's order that a school board in Gloucester County, VA, must allow a male-identifying student who was born female but has undergone hormone therapy and has legally changed his name to use the boys' bathroom at school. [14] The ruling (with 3 justices dissenting) was in response to the school board challenging the decision of a federal appeals court and asking that the order be blocked as they prepare to appeal the lower court's decision.

The national context of this debate—as it plays out in our schools, public areas, and policy arenas—creates a new complex wedge issue that will be difficult to resolve. This issue sits squarely at the intersection of politics, safety, civil rights, and social values, and the opinions are diverse and meaningful among all involved.

## Opponents of Bathroom Choice Based on Gender Identity

Steinmetz [15] identifies the most common argument articulated against allowing transgendered people to use the bathroom of the sex with which they identify as follows: "[A]llowing transgender women to use the women's room would open the doors up for sexual predators or peeping teenage boys to use those protections as a dangerous ruse to get into female spaces."

A 2012 incident at Evergreen State College in Washington state—a school with a policy allowing people to access bathrooms and locker rooms based on their gender identity—has been much cited by supporters of bathroom bills:

There was a police investigation, but no arrest, after some girls from a local high school swim team complained that they saw a person with male genitalia in the sauna area of the women's locker room they were using. The college said the person seen by the girls identified as a woman and was entitled to be at the sauna. It subsequently added some screening to prevent possible recurrences. [4]

In an interview with MSNBC journalist Chuck Todd, Travis Weber of the Family Research Council cited an incident at the University of Toronto where two girls were victims of voyeurism inside a gender-neutral bathroom. As they were showering, a cell phone was seen being held over the stall recording them. [16]

A number of scholars and commentators have weighed in on the issue of whose rights should be protected and how. Russell [17] argues that transgenders' rights should not outweigh those of the majority, noting that "the number of non-transgender students outweighs transgender students by a significant margin." She argues:

If the issue is truly about comfort, how does the comfort of a transgender student trump that of the non-transgender student? If

it somehow helps a transgender child to use the bathroom among peers with whom he identifies, does it not equally help a child to use the bathroom among peers who possess the same genitals? Policies that allow transgenders to use opposite-sex bathrooms still infringe on the privacy rights of non-transgender students. If equality is truly the goal, then allowing a transgender to use the bathroom with members of the opposite sex cannot be the answer, because it doesn't treat both parties equally. ... I don't think the goal of the LGBTQ community is to have equal rights, but to monopolize the rights of everyone else. [17]

In an article titled "The politics of the toilet: A feminist response to the campaign to 'degender' a women's space," Sheila Jeffreys cites evidence from the Transgender Law Center in California that "only 15% of transgenders intended to have surgery to mutilate their genitals." Based on this, Jeffreys frames the issue as "the admission of persons who are likely to possess intact male anatomy but may choose to identify with the sex stereotype more usually associated with women on an occasional or permanent basis." [18]<sup>p43</sup> Jeffreys objects to the language used by transgender rights advocates:

The way in which queer and transgender activists use the term "gender" is problematic because it obscures the existence of persons, women, who are biologically female, and their particular interests. ... Biological sex plays no role in this gendered approach, though it is on the basis of biological sex that women are subordinated. ... In transgender theory everyone, women and men, simply has "gender identities", and is equally oppressed by discrimination towards them on the basis not of their "sex", but of their "gender." [18]<sup>p43-44</sup>

Jeffreys describes women-only spaces as a protected right according to equal opportunity laws that recognized "in some situations women may indeed exclude men from services and events."  $[18]^{p44}$ 

The queer campaigners for degendered toilets do not show any awareness of the fact that women's toilets were created out of a recognition that they were essential to women's equality. Women's subordination on the grounds of their sex has, historically, been organised through the relegation of women to the private sphere and their exclusion from public space. ... The campaign for toilets was about what would now be understood as the human right of women to existence and movement in public space. [18]<sup>p46</sup>

Her main concern is that "...the entry of male-bodied transgenders into women's facilities, or the elimination of women's facilities in favour of 'gender-neutral' bathrooms, is likely to endanger women's safety" [18]<sup>p44</sup>.

Jeffreys cites Mary Anne Case on this topic: "Perusal of sources ranging from newspapers to law report [sic] indicates that robbery, assault, molestation, rape, and even murder are not infrequently perpetrated by men who have followed or lain wait for women and girls in the toilet." [19], p220 [18] p48. Citing Lowrey and Shin [20] and Owens [21], Jeffreys argues that US school children report a frequent occurrence of sexual assault in bathrooms by a variety of male perpetrators. Finally, she brings up the threat posed by some men deriving sexual pleasure from observing and recording women's bathroom activity, a subset of the pornography genre called "upskirts." [18] p48

She summarizes her argument as thus:

Men who transgender base their campaign for access to women's toilets on the problem of violence from other males in the men's facilities. Their apprehension, however well-founded it may be, is not a reason for enabling their entry into women's facilities because women have well-founded fears of being sexually assaulted by male persons. [18]<sup>p50</sup>

To contextualize this argument in terms of gender and sexual assault figures (*irrespective* of location), the National Sexual Violence Resource Center reports that 91% of sexual assault victims are female, and 96% of perpetrators are male. [22]



Figure 8: A Rock and a Hard Place

## **Arguments for Transgender Bathroom Choice**

Harvard Law Professor Jeannie Suk presents a different feminist argument in *The New Yorker* [23] that the case for protecting women from the dangers of the male world (via integrated bathrooms) reflects Victorian notions:

The same separate-spheres paternalism led to the designation of certain physical spaces for women apart from those for men, including bathrooms in public venues. These were safe spaces, if you will, tucked in a world in which women were vulnerable. As our society is currently experiencing a resurgence of paternalist concern about women's sexual vulnerability-especially in the context of that great equalizer, education-it is no surprise that there would also be a new emphasis on the Victorian phenomenon of separate restrooms.

A New York Times editorial puts the transgender bathroom issue in a larger civil rights context:

Access to public restrooms has been a divisive issue in past civil rights struggles. During the 1950s, African-Americans challenged Jim Crow laws that barred them from so-called white restrooms. In the following decade, as more women joined the labor force, they had to fight to get employers to provide restrooms in workplaces that had historically been dominated by men. In the 1980s, when advocates for Americans with disabilities began getting traction in their quest for equal access to public accommodations, many questioned the cost and burden of building special restroom facilities. It may seem inconceivable today that people on the forefront of those struggles were dismissed, mocked and shunned for years. Yet each was a hard-fought victory. [24]

LGBT activists claim that the incidents raised by social conservatives frequently are exaggerated, taken out of context, or have nothing to do with LGBT individuals. [25] For example, several states, school districts and corporations have adopted their own policies affirming transgender people's right to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity and have not reported problems, opponents of bathroom bills say. [15] Progressive media watchdog Media Matters contacted the 17 largest school districts governed by such policies and asked them if they had experienced any incidents of harassment or inappropriate behavior; they reported none had. [15]

As the issue has received increasing national attention, pollsters have sought to assess public opinion on the issue. The Washington Post reported the first

major poll on bathroom bills, which also included a broader question about transgender rights. [26]

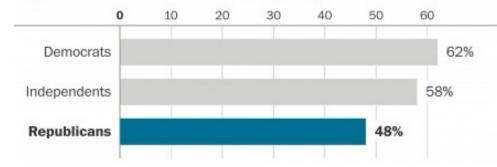
Overall, would you say you favor or oppose laws that require transgender individuals to use facilities that correspond to their gender at birth rather than their gender identity? Do you [favor/oppose] that strongly or somewhat?

- Somewhat favor 13%
- Somewhat oppose 18%
- Strongly oppose 39%
- No opinion 5%

Overall, do you favor or oppose laws that guarantee equal protection for transgender people in jobs, housing and public accommodations?

- Favor laws guaranteeing equal protection 75%
- Oppose laws guaranteeing equal protection 23%
- No opinion 2%

### Opposition to bathroom bills, by party



Source: May 2016 CNN/ORC poll

THE WASHINGTON POST

#### Figure 9

It is useful to consider the higher level of support for "laws guaranteeing equal protection" for transgenders compared to opinions about the bathroom issue, particularly since these issues are frequently coupled in news reporting and in statements of advocates. The Washington Post notes that, typical of contentious issues, public opinion has generally followed party lines. They point out, however, that registered Republicans' support for laws requiring transgender people to use the bathroom on their birth certificates lags behind party leadership's. The CNN poll shows Republicans are evenly split about whether to support such bills.

In sum, this poll shows that this issue wedges all groups. Often the political party views (as manifested by legislation and debate) do not directly represent the public opinion of those registered in each party. Therefore, the issue of access to public bathrooms creates a notable divide both between and within political and social groups. This makes it a particularly contentious, systemic problem to address.

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### Hypothetical Scenarios for Consideration

- A teenage boy who identifies as female is required to use the boy's room at school and frequently is harassed by male classmates in the restroom. He avoids using the bathroom at school if at all possible.
- A man who fully identifies as female and has a stereotypically feminine appearance must use the crowded men's room at a public park, attracting considerable attention.
- A father walks his 6-year-old daughter to a public restroom, only to see a man in his forties enter the women's room after her.
- A 16-year old student identifies as female and the school allows students to use the locker room of their gender identity. The student has male genitalia and there are only communal showers in the locker room.

### Questions

- Thinking about the hypothetical scenarios above, how might we begin to address and reconcile their inherent conflicts?
- How does the level or scale (e.g., federal, private business) of the solution/implementation alter the effectiveness of the solution?
- What are some of the primary distinctions in the debate about this issue (e.g., sex versus gender)? What are the problematic distinctions, and how are they problematic? How does perspective factor in the creation of these boundaries?

Task

Take the role of a policy advisor for a decision maker and propose a systemic solution (e.g., federal (President), state (Governor), school district (Superintendent), private business (owner))

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