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## ***BEARDS, BREASTS, AND BODIES*** ***Doing Sex in a Gendered World***

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*Gender is commonly thought of as dependent on sex even though there are occasional aberrations. Interviews with female-to-male trans people, however, suggest that sex and sex characteristics can be understood as expressions of gender. The expression of gender relies on both behavior and the appearance of the performer as male or female. When sex characteristics do not align with gender, behavior becomes more important to gender expression and interpretation. When sex characteristics become more congruent with gender, behavior becomes more fluid and less important in asserting gender. Respondents also challenge traditional notions of sexual orientation by focusing less on the sex of the partner and more on the gender organization of the relationship. The relationship's ability to validate the interviewee's masculinity or maleness often takes precedence over the sex of the partner, helping to explain changing sexual orientation as female-to-male transsexual and transgendered people transition into men.*

**Keywords:** *transsexuals; transgenderism; gender theory; gender identity*

**G**ender is ubiquitous and, along with race and class, orders most aspects of daily life. "Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water" (Lorber 1994, 13). Because transsexuals, transgendered people, and others at the borders of gender and sex are fish out of water, they help illuminate strengths and weaknesses in common conceptions of gender. This project clarifies the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual orientation through interviews with female-to-male transsexuals and transgendered people.<sup>1</sup> The interviewees challenge the underlying assumption in much of gender literature that sex, gender, and sexual orientation align in highly correlated, relatively fixed, binary categories.

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Instead, these categories are a process of differentiation and constructed meaning that are bound in social context.

### SEX, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

In the United States, the term "gender" is increasingly used as a proxy for the term "sex" (Auerbach 1999). My own small rebellion against this tendency is to respond literally: When asked to indicate sex, I reply female; when asked for gender, I reply male. Perhaps I am doing little to change concepts of gender and sex,<sup>2</sup> but at least I am on mailing lists that target my diverse interests! At the same time that the public seems to be increasingly using "gender" as proxy for "sex," gender theorists are more clearly delineating the relationship between sex and gender. However, because gender and sex are seemingly inexplicably connected in most aspects of social life, theorists have difficulty in retaining these delineations throughout their work.

Intellectuals have been creating, critiquing, and advancing concepts of gender for the past 30 years. Generally, gender is defined as the socially constructed correlate of sex. The concept of gender as socially constructed has been theorized extensively and illustrated in a variety of arenas from the playground to the boardroom (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kanter 1977; Kessler 1990; Lorber 1994; Messner 2000; Thorne 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). However, many definitions positing gender as an ongoing accomplishment rely on sex as the "master status" or "coat rack" on which gender is socially constructed (Nicholson 1994). Although there is a general consensus that gender is socially constructed, theorists have too often relied on sex as its initiating point.

Delphy (1993) critiqued the overreliance on sex in defining gender. She claimed that illustrating the social construction of gender by describing the cross-cultural variation in men's and women's behavior and social roles only reinforces the notion that gender originates in sex. The description of cross-cultural variation further entrenches the notion of "gender as the *content* with sex as the *container*" (Delphy 1993, 3). Both Nicholson (1994) and Delphy (1993) challenged the view that gender derives from sex and, in a sense, posited the opposite: That "gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences" (Scott 1988, 2). Gender, then, is the concept that creates and defines sex differences.

Typically, sex is assigned based on genital inspection at birth, but biological sex is a complex constellation of chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and reproductive organs. The study of intersexed and sex-reassigned children illustrates that social notions of sex are employed when biological sex is ambiguous (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kessler 1990). Because sex is an organizing principle of most societies, people are forced to be one or the other, even when "only a surgical shoehorn can put them there" (Fausto-Sterling 1993, 24). Given this, sex is both a physical attribute and socially constructed.

West and Zimmerman (1987) grappled with the social aspect of sex by adding a category to the sex, gender, and sexuality framework. They defined “sex category” as socially perceived sex and claimed that “recognition of the analytical independence of sex, sex category, and gender is essential for understanding the relationships among these elements and the interactional work involved in ‘being’ a gendered person in society” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127). However, the categories of sex category, gender, and sexuality are not just analytically, but also practically, distinct. West and Zimmerman ultimately identified gender as the performance one is accountable for based on sex category’s leaving little room for feminine men and masculine women. “In virtually any situation, one’s sex category can be relevant, and one’s performance as an incumbent of that category (i.e., gender) can be subjected to evaluation” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 145). We are left with the ironic conclusion that gender is socially constructed yet is rigidly defined by sex category—an inadequate framework for the explanation of atypical gender behavior.

Lorber (1994, 1999) attempted to uncouple masculinity and femininity from sex category by developing subcategories of gender including gender status (being taken for a man or woman), gender identity (sense of self as a man or woman), and gender display (being feminine and/or masculine). Even with this delineation, Lorber, like West and Zimmerman (1987), consistently slipped into assumptions of the “natural” link between categories. For instance, she claimed transsexuals and “transvestites” do not challenge the gender order because “their goal is to be feminine women and masculine men” (Lorber 1994, 20). As well, she described socialization as a woman or man as “produce[ing] different feelings, consciousness, relationships, skills—ways of being that we call feminine or masculine” (Lorber 1994, 14). This account fails to explain the behavior and identity of trans people for two reasons. First, it assumes the intransigence between the categories man/masculine and woman/feminine, which is not the experience of transsexuals and transgendered people. Not all men, constructed or biological, are masculine or wish to be. Second, Lorber asserted that being treated as a man or woman in social interaction creates a masculine or feminine consciousness. This assertion fails to explain how people grow up to have a gender identity contrary to that expected from their socialization. Lorber’s work is important in defining gender as an institution that creates and reinforces inequality, but it also illustrates how easily sex and gender (masculinity and femininity) become elided when sex is used as the initiating point for gendering individuals.

Just like sex and gender, sexuality can also be defined as socially constructed. Sexual behaviors and the meanings assigned to them vary across time and cultures. For instance, Herdt’s (1981) study of same-sex fellatio in a tribe in Papua, New Guinea, found that this behavior did not constitute homosexuality or pedophilia, although it might be defined as both in the United States. In the United States, same-sex behavior is assumed to occur only in individuals with a gay or bisexual orientation, yet the AIDS epidemic forced educators and epidemiologists to acknowledge the lack of correlation between identity and behavior (Parker and Aggleton 1999).

Schippers (2000) documented a lack of correlation between sexual orientation and sexual behavior in her study of alternative hard rock culture in the United States. Seeing sexual behavior and its meaning as highly reliant on social context helps explain the changing attractions and orientation of female-to-male transsexual and transgendered people (FTMs) as they transition.

Sex, gender, and sexuality, then, are all to varying degrees socially interpreted, and all contribute to an overarching concept of gender that relies on both perceived sex and behaviors and their attribution as masculine or feminine.

A growing number of scholars are writing particularly about FTMs and female masculinities. The longest-term contributor has been Devor (1989, 1997, 1998, 2004). Adding to Devor's work in recent years have been Cromwell (1999), Halberstam (1998), Prosser (1998), and Rubin (2003). Although transsexuals are increasingly represented in academic research, concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality are rarely explored. Gender theorists have often examined transsexuality through the lens of gender (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Nicholson 1994; West and Zimmerman 1987); less often have transsexual theorists interrogated gender through the lens of transsexuality. Using transsexuality as a standpoint to complicate and critique gender has been more common in nonacademic writing (Bornstein 1995; Califia 1997; Feinberg 1998).

Most work in the social sciences regarding transsexuals has focused largely on male-to-female transsexuals (Bolin 1988; Ekins 1997; Lewins 1995). Work by social scientists is important because it can help transform individual, personal experiences into broader social patterns and illuminate the role of social interaction and institutions. The limited research on FTMs offers a unique construction to social science research regarding transsexuality. Devor (1997) documented the lives of 46 FTMs using extensive quotes, allowing FTMs to speak about their lives, their upbringing, and their experiences with transitioning. Although this work is an incredibly detailed recording of the life experiences of FTMs, Devor avoids interpreting or theorizing about the experiences of FTMs and the potential meanings they have for the field of gender studies.

Prosser (1998) took to task the loss of materiality and "the body" in postmodern work regarding transsexuals. Prosser reminded theorists that gender is not simply conceptual but real, and experienced in the body (see Devor 1999). Although Prosser's critique of postmodern thought around transsexuality is extremely important, my interviews indicate that he may overemphasize the importance of the body in transsexual experience. Particular body characteristics are not important in themselves but become important because of social interpretation.

Cromwell (1999) eloquently summarized notions of gender and sexuality and described them as being located in either essentialist or constructed frameworks. He criticized both and claimed that exclusively constructionist explanations rely on the primacy of social interaction, implying that gender identity does not exist when individuals are alone. He claimed that trans people are important to study because, through them, it is evident that even if socially constructed, there is an underlying, unwavering gender identity. Most important though, Cromwell asserted that trans

people's construction of identities, bodies, and sexualities as different rather than deviant subverts the dominant gender/sex paradigm. Rubin (2003) concurred with Cromwell's view of the paradox that gender identity is socially constructed yet at the same time embodied and "absolutely real" (Cromwell 1999, 175). Prosser (1998), Cromwell, and Rubin all challenge aspects of gender theory that do not mesh with the experiences of transsexuals and transgendered people. The body is a very real aspect of the (trans)gendered experience and expression, and even though gender identity is socially constructed, it takes on a solidity and immutability that is not dependent on social interaction.

With this emerging academic work regarding transsexuality, the need to examine how transsexuality and transgenderism complicate the gender field has arisen. Questions such as the following have become increasingly compelling:

What is the impact of changing sex on the individual's social and sexual behaviors?  
 How does an individual's sex affect other people's interpretation of his or her behavior?  
 As sex changes, how does social interaction change?

By investigating the changing behaviors and interactions of FTMs as they transition, this article illustrates important connections between gender and perceived sex and contributes to the social scientific understanding of transsexuality. Examining the experience of FTMs clarifies that masculinity and femininity are not inextricably linked with male and female and that perceived sex is important in interpreting behavior as masculine or feminine. This project also adds to social scientific work on transsexuality by using transsexuality as a standpoint to critique gender in a systematic, empirically based manner. As well, it supports recent academic work regarding FTMs (Cromwell 1999; Prosser 1998; Rubin 2003) by illustrating the importance of the body to gender and gender identity and helps to increase the representation of FTMs in the social scientific literature on transsexuality.

### STUDY DESIGN AND SAMPLE

For this project, I interviewed 18 trans-identified people, all born female, the majority residing in Seattle, Washington. I sought informants in a variety of ways. I contacted friends and acquaintances with contacts in the trans community and introduced myself to people I knew to be trans, soliciting interviews. I also attended the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conference, *Creating Change*, in Oakland, California, in November 1999, recruiting two informants and attending two trans-specific workshops, one regarding families and the other regarding relationships. I relied on snowball sampling to recruit the majority of the interviewees. Although this small sample is not random, the interviewees were able to provide a great deal of information regarding the relationship between perceived sex and gendered behavior.

TABLE 1: Sample Characteristics

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/ Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Sexual Preference</i>	<i>Time from Beginning of Physical Transition</i>	<i>Transition Status</i>
Aaron	34	White	Bio women, bio men, FTMs	1 year	Hormones
Billy	30	White	Bio men, FTMs	6 years	Hormones, chest surgery
Brandon	20	African American	FTMs, male-to-female transsexuals, bio women		Nontransitioned
Dick	27	White	Bisexual	2 years	Hormones, chest surgery
Jessica	22	White	Mainly bio women, femmes		Nontransitioned
Jay	27	Chinese American	Bio women		Nontransitioned
Joe	38	Latino	Bio women, FTMs	8 years	Hormones, chest surgery
Kyle	25	White	Bio women		Nontransitioned
Luke	25	White	Mainly bio women		Nontransitioned
Max	21	White	Bio women, femmes	1 year	Hormones, chest surgery
Mick	38	White	Lesbians	2 years	Chest surgery
Mitch	36	White	Bio women, femmes	4 years	Hormones, chest surgery
Pete	34	White	Queer, bisexual	3 years	Hormones, chest surgery
Rogelio	40	Latino/Black	Bio women	6 years living as trans, 1 year taking hormones	Hormones
Sam	30	White	Bio women, bio men, FTMs	4 years	Hormones, chest surgery
Ted	29	White	Pansexual	1 year	Hormones
Terry	45	White	Unknown because of recent transition	3 months	Hormones
Trevor	35	White	Bio women, femmes	1 year	Hormones, chest surgery

NOTE: Bio women = biological women; bio men = biological men; FTMs = female-to-male transsexual and transgendered people.

Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 45 and had begun living as trans between the ages of 18 and 45 (see Table 1). I say this with some hesitation because many FTMs privately identify as trans for years before transitioning or being out about their identity. In this case, I am defining "living as trans" as being referred to as "he" consistently, publicly and/or in their subcultural network. With this definition,

three of the respondents were not living as trans even though they identified as transgendered.

Fourteen of the respondents were white, one was African American, two were Latino, and one was Chinese American. Only one respondent did not previously identify as lesbian or bisexual. After transitioning, defining sexual orientation becomes more complicated since sex, and sometimes sexual preference, changes. Assigning sexual orientation requires assigning people to categories based on the sex of the sexual participants. Since many FTMs report being newly attracted to men after transitioning, it appears that their orientation has changed even though, in a sense, they remain homosexual (previously a lesbian, now gay). However, if they are still primarily involved with lesbians or with feminine women, it is difficult to say their orientation has changed when only their perceived sex is different. As well, if an individual is primarily attracted to feminine people, but after transitioning dates feminine men as well as feminine women, his gendered sexual preference has not changed, so it is unclear whether this describes a change in sexual orientation. Because of these complexities, Table 1 records the reported sexual preference as closely as possible without relying on usual categories of sexual orientation.

Even though they were raised in a variety of locations, the great majority of respondents currently live in urban areas. The sample is probably not representative of the trans population in the United States because it is overwhelmingly urban and emphasizes FTMs who have chosen not to assimilate into mainstream, heterosexual culture. These people, it seemed, might be better positioned to comment on changes in the trans community regarding notions of sex, gender, and sexuality because they have access to greater numbers of trans people and are more often engaged with others about trans issues.

At the time of the interviews, five of the informants were nonoperative and not taking hormones. Only one seemed certain he never wanted medical intervention, and that was due to a compromised immune system. Of these five, none have seriously considered taking hormones, but four expressed a strong desire for chest surgery that involves removal of the breasts and repositioning of the nipples if necessary. Two could not have surgery for financial reasons and one for medical reasons, and one was hesitant for family and political reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Only 1 of the 18 interviewees had had chest surgery, was not taking hormones, and had no further plans for medical intervention. Twelve of the 13 taking hormones had had chest surgery or were planning to do so. The remaining individual was not considering chest surgery due to concerns about keloids due to his dark skin.<sup>4</sup> He expressed frustration at how little information was available to darker-skinned transmen about the potential effects of surgery.

I interviewed FTMs using a general set of questions regarding their experiences with the medical community, the trans community, their families, and their relationship to masculinity. I did not set out to prove a preformulated hypothesis regarding the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual orientation; nor did I predetermine the ideal number of respondents. Instead, in a manner derived from

grounded theory, I interviewed respondents until I started to hear common patterns in their comments and stories. Ekins (1997, 3), utilizing grounded theory in his exploration of identity processes for female-to-male transsexuals, described grounded theory as that "which demands intimate appreciation of the arena studied, but which writes up that intimate appreciation in terms of theoretical analyses." Grounded theory expands our understanding of qualitative research; it relies not only on documentation of interviews but also on the standpoint of the researcher and her or his intimate relationship with the topic of interest. For this reason, I reveal myself as transgendered, born female, with no immediate plans to transition. By "transition," I mean to live as a man by taking hormones and acquiring whatever surgeries necessary. This position as both transgendered and not transitioned gives me a keen interest in the relationship between sex, sex category (perceived sex), and gender and perhaps a voyeuristic interest in hearing what it is like to "cross over"—the difference between internal identity as a man and social interaction when perceived as one. I believe being trans identified gave me easier access to trans people and made it easier for interviewees to confide in me not only because they felt more at ease but because I had familiarity with common cultural terms, customs, and issues.

## FINDINGS

The perceived sex of individuals, whether biological or not, influences the meaning assigned to behavior and the tenor of social and sexual interaction. FTMs illustrate the reliance on both sex and behavior in expressing and interpreting gender. Perceived sex and individual behavior are compensatory, and both are responsible for the performance of gender: When sex is ambiguous or less convincing, there is increased reliance on highly gendered behavior; when sex is obvious, then there is considerably more freedom in behavior. For this reason, sex is not the initiating point for gender. Instead, sex, whether biological or constructed, is an integral aspect of gender. "If the body itself is always seen through social interpretation then sex is not something that is separate from gender but is, rather, that which is subsumable under it" (Nicholson 1994, 79).

As I listened to interviewees, the tension and balance between behavior and appearance, between acting masculine and appearing male, became evident. In general, interviewees confirmed Nicholson's (1994) assertion that (perceived) sex is an important aspect of the construction of gender and that perceived sex is a lens through which behavior is interpreted. However, particular sex characteristics such as a penis or breasts are not as crucial to the perception of sex as their meanings created in both social and sexual interaction.

Generally, after taking hormones, interviewees were perceived as men regardless of behavior and regardless of other conflicting sex signifiers including breasts and, in the case of one interviewee, even when nine months pregnant.<sup>5</sup> The physical assertion of sex is so strong through secondary sex characteristics that gender

identity is validated. Interviewees find certain sex characteristics to be particularly important to their social identity as male: "I think it's all about facial hair. It's not about my fetish for facial hair, but socially, when you have facial hair, you can pass regardless of what your body looks like. I mean, I was nine months pregnant walking around and people were like, 'Ooh, that guy's fat'" (Billy).

Another interviewee also finds facial hair to be particularly important to initial gender/sex attribution. In reply to the question, "For you, what is the most important physical change since transitioning," he responds, "Probably facial hair, because nobody even questions facial hair. . . . I've met FTMs that have these huge hips. I mean this guy, he was [shaped] like a top, and he had a full beard. Nobody questioned that he had huge hips, so that is the one key thing. And probably secondary is a receding hairline. Even with a high voice, people accept a high voiced man" (Joe).

As the interviewees became socially recognized as men, they tended to be more comfortable expressing a variety of behaviors and engaging in stereotypically feminine activities, such as sewing or wearing nail polish. The increase in male sex characteristics creates both greater internal comfort with identity and social interactions that are increasingly congruent with sex identity. As a result, some FTMs are able to relax their hypermasculine behavior.

I went through a phase of thinking every behavior I do is going to be cued into somehow by somebody. So, I've got to be hypervigilant about how many long sentences I say, does my voice go up at the end of a sentence, how do I move my hands, am I quick to try and touch someone. . . . And I got to a point where I said, This is who I am. . . . There are feminine attributes and there are masculine attributes that I like and I am going to maintain in my life. . . . If that makes people think, "Oh you're a fag," well great, all my best friends are fags. . . . But when I was first coming out, it was all about "I've got to be perceived as male all the time, no matter what." That bone-crushing handshake and slapping people on the back and all of that silliness. I did all that. (Rogelio)

Like Rogelio, Pete finds transitioning gave him the freedom to express his feminine side: "It was very apparent how masculine a woman I was . . . and now it's like I've turned into this flaming queen like 90 percent of the time. And so my femininity, I had an outlet for it somehow, but it was in a kind of gay way. It wasn't in a womanly kind of way, it was just femininity. Because I don't think that female equals femininity and male equals masculinity" (Pete).

Sex category and gendered behavior, then, are compensatory; they are both responsible for the social validation of gender identity and require a particular balance. When sex is ambiguous or less convincing, there is increased reliance on highly gendered behavior. When sex category is obvious, then there is considerably more freedom in behavior, as is evident when talking to FTMs about the process of transitioning.

For two interviewees, gay men are particularly valuable role models in deconstructing traditional masculinity and learning to incorporate "feminine" behavior and expression into a male identity:

So, those fairly feminine men that I have dated have been very undeniably male, but they haven't been a hundred percent masculine all the time, and I think I've learned from my relationships with them to sort of relax. Lighten up a little; nail polish isn't going to kill anybody. I think that I'm more able to be at peace with all of the aspects of myself. . . . [Now] I'm not going to go out of my way to butch it up. I'm male looking enough to get away with it, whereas when I did that kind of stuff before I transitioned people were like, "Well, you're not butch enough to be a man." (Billy)

FTMs transition for many reasons, but aligning external appearance with internal identity and changing social interaction were the chief reasons given by my interviewees. "Doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) in a way that validates identity relies on both internal and external factors. Being able to look like one feels is key to the contentment of many FTMs. More than interacting with the social world as a man, comfort in one's body can be a chief motivator for FTMs, especially when seeking chest surgery. "I'd say that having a flat chest really seems right, and I really like that. I can throw a T-shirt on and feel absolutely comfortable instead of going [hunching shoulders]. And when I catch my reflection somewhere or look in the mirror, it's like, 'Oh, yeah' instead of, 'Oh, I forgot,' and that's been the most amazing thing . . . recognizing myself" (Trevor).

Some interviewees believed they would be content to live without any medical treatment or with chest surgery but not hormones as long as they were acknowledged as transgendered by themselves and their social circle. Even for those who were able to achieve a reasonable level of internal comfort, social interaction remained an ongoing challenge. Feeling invisible or not being treated in congruence with their gender identity motivated them to take hormones to experience broader social interaction appropriate to their gender identity. Some FTMs reported the desire to be seen as trans by other FTMs as an important factor in their decision to transition. For others, being called "ma'am" or treated as a woman in public was particularly grating. Being "she'd" was a constant reminder of the incongruence between social identity and internal gender identity.

And the longer I knew that I was transgendered, the harder it got to live without changing my body. It's like the acknowledgment wasn't enough for me, and it got to a point where it was no longer enough for the people who knew me intimately to see my male side. It just got to be this really discordant thing between who I knew I was and who the people in my life knew I was . . . because I was perceived as a woman socially. I was seen as a woman and was treated differently than how I was treated by my friends and the people that I loved. . . . So finally after a couple of years . . . I finally decided to take hormones. (Billy)

The potential impact on social interaction is key to the decision to transition. Although for some FTMs, gaining comfort in their body is the crucial element in decision making, for most interviewees, the change in social interaction is the motivating factor. Being treated as a man socially is important enough to risk many other things including loss of family, friends, and career. For other interviewees, though, not wanting to be treated as a man in all social situations motivated them not to

transition. “In some ways, I wouldn’t really want to give up my access to woman’s space, and I think that would be a big reason why I wouldn’t do it because I like being around women. I don’t feel like I’m women identified, but I’m women centered. So in that sense, I wouldn’t want to give up being able to spend a lot of time with women in different contexts that I might lose if I passed as a man” (Jay).

Some interviewees also worried that appearing as a biological man would make them no longer identifiable as trans or queer, making them invisible to their communities. As well, for some of those not transitioning, the potential loss of friends and family outweighed their desire to transition.

As expected, social interaction changed radically after transitioning, but sometimes in ways not anticipated. Whether these changes were positive or negative, expected or not, they still provided FTMs with social validation of their gender identity and the clear message that they were passing.

### CHANGING INTERACTION

Many transmen found being perceived as a man enlightening. The most often noted changes to social interaction included being treated with more respect, being allowed more conversational space, being included in men’s banter, and experiencing an increase in women’s fear of them. Some FTMs realized that they would be threatening to women at night and acted accordingly while others were surprised to realize that women were afraid of them. “I remember one time walking up the hill; it was like nine o’clock, and this woman was walking in front of me, and she kept looking back, and I thought, ‘What the hell is wrong with that girl?’ And then I stopped in my tracks. When I looked at her face clearly under the light, she was afraid. So I crossed the street” (Joe).

For many FTMs, becoming an unquestioned member of the “boys’ club” was an educational experience. The blatant expressions of sexism by many men when in the company of each other was surprising to these new men.

I was on one of the school shuttles on campus and it was at a time when there weren’t a lot of people on. There was a male bus driver, myself, and a young woman on the bus, and she had long blonde hair, a very pretty girl. She got off the bus, and there was just me and the bus driver, and the bus driver was reading me as a guy and totally being a sexist pig. I did not know how to deal with it or how to respond, let alone call him on his shit because I wasn’t particularly, at this point, feeling like I wanted to get read or anything. So I basically just nodded my head and didn’t say anything. (Ted)

One nontransitioned FTM who is usually taken for a man at work also feels pressure to conform and to ward off suspicion by either ignoring or contributing to sexist and homophobic comments when among coworkers. This is in direct contrast to Pete’s experience, who became known as an outspoken advocate for women and minorities at his job after transitioning: “I feel like I’m one of the guys, which is really kind of odd. In some ways, it’s really affirming, and in some ways, it’s really

unsettling. In Bellevue [his former job], it was a joke. 'Pete's here, so you better shut up.' Because they're sexist, they're homophobic, they're racist. And I would say, 'This is not something I think you should be talking about in the lunch room.' So I was constantly turning heads because I'm kind of an unusual guy" (Pete).

Acting like a "sensitive new age guy" did not challenge Pete's masculinity or essential maleness but simply defined him as "kind of an unusual guy." He was able to assume this role because his gender was established and supported through his unquestionably male appearance.

Interviewees found that their interactions with both men and women changed as they transitioned. After transitioning, a few FTMs, like the previously quoted interviewee, maintained strong feminist ideals and worked hard to change to appropriate behavior for a feminist man. This was an effort as behavioral expectations for men and butch lesbians differ radically, and what may be attributed to assertiveness in a masculine woman becomes intolerable in a man:

I found that I had to really, really work to change my behavior. Because there were a lot of skills that I needed to survive as a butch woman in the world that made me a really obnoxious guy. There were things that I was doing that just were not okay. Like in school, talking over people. You know when women speak, they often speak at the same time with each other and that means something really different than when a guy speaks at the same time. And so it wasn't that I changed, it was that people's perceptions of me changed and that in order to maintain things that were important to me as a feminist, I had to really change my behavior. (Billy)

The perception that behavior had not really changed, but people's assignment of meaning to that behavior had, was common in the interviews. That is, what is masculine or feminine, what is assertive or obnoxious, is relative and dependent on social context. And the body—whether one appears male or female—is a key element of social context. These interviews suggest that whether a behavior is labeled masculine or feminine is highly dependent on the initial attribution of sex.

Besides gaining information as insiders, FTMs also felt they gained permission to take up more space as men. Many FTMs transition from the lesbian community, and most in this sample had been butch identified. As a result, they were used to having what they perceived to be a comfortable amount of social space even though they were women. As they transitioned, however, they were surprised at how much social privilege they gained, both conversationally and behaviorally. Terry, a previously high-profile lesbian known for her radical and outspoken politics, reported, "I am getting better service in stores and restaurants, and when I express an opinion, people listen. And that's really weird because I'm not a shy person, so having people sort of check themselves and make more conversational space than they did for me before is really kind of unsettling" (Terry).

As well as being allowed conversational space, many of these new men received special attention and greater respect from heterosexual women because their behavior was gender atypical yet highly valued. They were noticed and rewarded when confronting sexist remarks, understanding women's social position, and

performing tasks usually dominated by women. Billy reports an experience in a women's studies class where he was the only man siding with the female students' point of view: "A woman came up to me after class and said, 'Wow, you know you're the most amazing feminist man I've ever met.' I just did not have the heart to ruin that for her. I was just like, you know, there are other guys out there who are capable of this, and it's not just because I'm a transsexual that I can be a feminist" (Billy). The ability to shop for clothes for their girlfriends was cited by two interviewees as a skill much admired. They reported excessive attention from saleswomen as a result of their competence in a usually female-dominated area:

One other thing I have noticed about women, and in particular saleswomen in stores, is that they're always shocked that I can pick out good clothing items either for myself or for someone else, and I don't really need help with that. And I get flirted with constantly by saleswomen, I think largely because they get that I get how to shop. So, they see this guy that's masculine and secure in himself and he's not having to posture, and he can walk up with an armload of women's clothes that he's been picking out. . . . She [the saleswoman] says, "Wow, I want a boyfriend like you." So I get a lot of that. (Mitch)

These accounts underscore the relationship between behavior and appearance. When FTMs are perceived as men, their gender-atypical behavior is not sanctioned or suspect but admired and rewarded. Their perceived status as male allows their masculinity to remain intact even in the face of contradictory evidence. This contrasts with the experience of one FTM not taking hormones who is usually taken for a butch lesbian. Saleswomen at Victoria's Secret treated him rudely when he shopped for lingerie for his girlfriend until he made a greater effort to pass as a man. When passing as a man, he received markedly better service.

Not all FTMs gain social status by being perceived as men. It is a common assumption, bordering on urban legend, that transitioning brings with it improved status, treatment, and financial opportunities. However, having a paper trail including a previous female name and identity can severely compromise job prospects, especially in a professional position.

The reality is we are on the bottom of the economic totem pole. And it does not matter what our educational background is. We could be the most brilliant people on the planet and we're still fucked when it comes to the kinds of jobs that we've gotten or the kinds of advances that we've gotten in the job market. Here I am, I've been out of law school for nearly 10 years, and I'm barely scraping by. And if I go in and apply for a job with a firm, well yeah, they may really like me, but once they start doing any investigating on my background, my old name comes up. (Mitch)

The assumption of a rise in status after sex reassignment also rests largely on the assumption of whiteness. Through my limited sample and conversations with friends, it appears that becoming a Black man is often a step down in status. Rogelio talks about the change in his experience as he becomes more consistently taken for a man:

I am a Black male. I'm the suspect. I'm the one you have to be afraid of. I'm the one from whom you have to get away, so you have to cross the street, you have to lock your doors. You have to clutch whatever you've got a little closer to your body. . . . It's very difficult to get white FTMs to understand that. . . . [As a Black person], if I go into a store, I am followed. Now I am openly followed; before it was, "Oh, let's hide behind the rack of bread or something so that she won't see us." Now it's, "Oh, it's a guy, he's probably got a gun; he's probably got a knife. We have to know where his hands are at all times." (Rogelio)

Although it is an unpleasant experience, he reports that at least he knows he is consistently passing as a man by the rude treatment he receives from other men in social situations.

Another group of FTMs also experiences being perceived as male as a liability, not a privilege. Even though FTMs can have feminine behavior without calling their maleness into question, feminine behavior does lead to an increase in gay bashing and antigay harassment. FTMs who transitioned from being very butch to being perceived as male generally experienced a radical decline in harassment. Two of these butches were even gay bashed before transitioning because they were perceived to be gay men. With additional male sex characteristics, however, they were no longer perceived to be feminine men. For these men, the transition marked a decline in public harassment and intimidation. However, for more feminine FTMs, the harassment increased after transitioning. Appearing as small, feminine men made them vulnerable to attack. This interviewee reported a marked increase in violence and harassment after transitioning:

I get gay bashed often. That's my biggest fear right now is male-on-male violence. . . . Once I just got over pneumonia. I was downtown and I was on my way to choir, and some guy looked at me, and I was wondering why he was staring. I looked at him and I looked away. He called me a faggot because I was staring. He said, "Stop looking at me, faggot," and he chased me seven blocks. At first I thought he was just going to run me off, but I kept running and he was running after me as fast as he could and everybody was standing around just kind of staring. And I became really panicked that no one was ever going to help if I really needed it. People yell "faggot" at me all the time. (Dick)

One interviewee experienced about the same level of violence and harassment before and after transitioning. Unfortunately, he was attacked and harassed as a gay man as often before as after transitioning. On one occasion before transitioning, he was followed home and badly beaten by two men who forced their way into his house believing that they were assaulting a gay man: "If I'm with my partner I'm read as straight so I don't have to worry about being jumped as a gay guy, but if I am at a queer event and my partner's not around or if I'm just by myself. . . . But I've just gotten to a point where I'm like, 'Fuck it.' At least now that I am on hormones, I have a little more strength to fight back" (Ted).

In sum then, FTMs are motivated to change their physical presentations for two reasons: First, to become more comfortable with their bodies and achieve greater

congruence between identity and appearance and, second, to change social interaction so that it better validates their gender identity, both subculturally and in the wider social world. This strategy to change social interaction is very effective. All FTMs who transitioned noticed a marked change in their social interactions. Not all of these changes in interaction were positive, however. First, the recognition that women are treated poorly compared to men was a shock. Second, being identified as a man was a liability when one was Black or appeared feminine. In other words, the assumption of an increase in privilege only consistently applied to masculine, non-Black men. Even then, the liabilities of being found out, especially on the job, remained.

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Sexual behavior is another site that more clearly explicates the relationship between sex and gender. Sexual orientation is based not solely on the object of sexual and erotic attraction, but also on the sex category and gender performance created in the context of sexual interaction. The performance of gender is crucial in the sexual arena for two reasons: First, because sexuality is expressed through the body, which may or may not align with an individual's gender identity and, second, because heterosexual intercourse can symbolize the social inequalities between men and women. Altering the body alters the sexual relationships of FTMs by changing their gender/sex location in sexual interaction.

Many FTMs change sexual orientation after transitioning or, at the least, find that their object attraction expands to include both sexes. Devor (1997) found a large increase in the number of FTMs who, after transitioning, were sexually attracted to gay men. Why do many transmen change sexual orientation after transitioning? Even the earliest sexuality studies such as the Kinsey report (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948) provide evidence that individuals' attractions, fantasies, and behaviors do not always align with their professed sexual orientation. Currently, a diverse gay culture and the increased ease of living a gay lifestyle have created a wide variety of options for people with attractions to the same or both sexes (Seidman 2002). As well, coinciding with a rise in gay and lesbian cultures in the 1960s and 1970s was a heightened feminist consciousness. For some feminists, sexual relationships with men are problematic because of the power dynamic and broader cultural commentary enacted in heterosexual relations. Bisexual women sometimes find the dynamic untenable and choose to identify as lesbians. Aaron, a previously bisexual woman, confirms:

I do have an attraction to men; however, when I was a straight woman, I totally gave up going out with men because I was a strong female person and had a lot of problems interacting with men, even in the anarchist community, the punk community. They like tough girls, this strong riot girl persona, and yet when you're in the relationship with those same people, they still have those misogynistic, sexist beliefs about how

you're supposed to interact in bed, in the relationship. I just never fit into that mold and finally said, "Fuck you guys; I'm not going there with you," and just came out as a dyke and lived happily as a dyke. . . . What I realize coming into the transgendered community myself was that it made so much sense to become transgendered, to become visually male, and to be able to relate to men as a man because then they would at least visually see me as part of who I am in a way that they could not see me when I was female. . . . That's really exciting for me. . . . I can still relate to femmes who are attracted to transmen. I can still relate to butches. I can still relate to straight women . . . but I also get back being able to relate to men, and that's definitely a gift. (Aaron)

In another example, Dick was primarily involved with men and briefly identified as a lesbian before transitioning. He found sexual orientation and gender identity to be inexplicably entangled as he struggled to clarify his identity. When he was a woman and in a long-term relationship with a man, he began to identify as queer. He assumed that his male partner was incongruent with his queer orientation. Over time, he realized that the sex of his partner was not as crucial to his queer identity as was the gender organization of the relationship. Identifying as queer was an attempt to express the desire for interaction congruent with gender identity rather than expressing the desire for a partner of a particular sex.

[Transitioning] makes a difference because it's queer then, and it's not locating me as a straight woman, which is not going to work. The way that I came out as queer, I thought it was about sexuality but it's really about gender. I was in a relationship with a man who I had been with for a couple of years . . . and then I started figuring out this thing about queerness, and I could not put my finger on it and I couldn't articulate it, but I knew that I couldn't be in a relationship with him. . . . But what I figured out a lot later was that it wasn't about not wanting to be with a guy; it was about not wanting to be the girl. (Dick)

Heterosexuality, then, is a problem for these FTMs not because of object choice but because of the gendered meaning created in intimate and sexual interaction that situates them as women. Most of the FTMs in the sample who changed sexual orientation or attractions after transitioning did not previously identify as bisexual or heterosexual. Two key changes allowed them to entertain the idea of sexual involvement with men. First, the relationship and power dynamic between two men is very different from that between a man and a woman. Second, in heterosexual interactions previous to transitioning, the sexual arena only reinforced FTMs' social and sexual position as women, thus conflicting with their gender identity. After transitioning, sexual interaction with men can validate gender identity:

So, it's okay for me to date men who were born men because I don't feel like they treat me weird. I couldn't stand this feminization of me, especially in the bedroom. Now I feel like I actually have a sex drive. Hormones didn't make me horny, the combination of me transitioning and taking hormones made me have maybe a normal sex drive. (Dick)

I've never totally dismissed men as sexual partners in general, but I knew that I'm very much dyke identified. But I think being masculine and having a male recognize your masculinity is just as sexy as a woman recognizing your masculinity, as opposed to a man relating to you as a woman. (Trevor)

I do not wish to imply that many lesbians are simply repressed bisexuals or heterosexuals using sex reassignment to cope with their sexual attraction toward men. Instead, I am arguing that the sexual interaction between FTMs and men is decidedly different from heterosexual interaction. The type of male partner generally changes as well—from straight to gay. For many FTMs, their change in sexual orientation and the degree of that change was a welcome surprise. Some appreciated the opportunity to interact with men on a sexual level that felt free of the power dynamics in heterosexual relations. Others were happy to date other FTMs or biological men as a way of maintaining their queer identity. Several interviewees who transitioned from a lesbian identity did not like appearing heterosexual and identified as queer regardless of their object choice because their body and gender status disrupted the usual sexuality paradigm. Still, they struggled with their invisibility as queer after transitioning. “Being with an FTM, we’re the same, it’s very queer to me. . . . A lot of times, I’m bugged if I walk down the street with a girl and we seem straight. . . . I think that’s the worst part about transitioning is the queerness is really obliterated from you. It’s taken away. I mean you’re pretty queer, somebody walking down the street with a guy with a cunt is queer, but it’s invisible” (Joe).

In his work with male-to-female transsexuals, Lewins (1995) discussed the relationship between gender and sexual orientation in the context of symbolic interactionism. The sexual arena is a site for creating and validating sex and gender identity because “when we desire someone and it is reciprocated, the positive nature of continuing interaction reaffirms and, possibly for some, confirms their gender identity” (Lewins 1995, 38). Sexual interaction, depending on the sexual orientation of the partner, is key to validating the male identity of FTMs. Whether that partner is a heterosexual or bisexual woman or a gay man, the interaction that involves the FTM as male confirms gender identity.

## CONCLUSION

Trans people are in the unique position of experiencing social interaction as both women and men and illustrate the relativity of attributing behavior as masculine or feminine. Behavior labeled as assertive in a butch can be identified as oppressive in a man. And unremarkable behavior for a woman such as shopping or caring for children can be labeled extraordinary and laudable when performed by a man. Although generally these new men found increased social privilege, those without institutional privilege did not. Becoming a Black man or a feminine man were social liabilities affecting interaction and increasing risk of harassment and harm.

Whether for better or worse, being perceived as a man changed social interaction and relationships and validated gender identity.

In addition to illustrating the relativity of assignation of meaning to behavior, these interviews illustrate the relativity of sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is based not exclusively on object attraction but also on the gendered meanings created in sexual and romantic interaction. Sexual orientation can be seen as fluid, depending on both the perceived sex of the individuals and the gender organization of the relationship.

This study of a small group of FTMs helps clarify the relationship between sex and gender because it does not use sex as the initiating point for gender and because most respondents have experienced social interaction as both men and women. Much sociological theory regarding gender assumes that gender is the behavioral, socially constructed correlate of sex, that gender is "written on the body." Even if there are case studies involving occasional aberrations, gender is generally characterized as initiating from sex. With this study, though, the opposite relationship is apparent. Sex is a crucial aspect of gender, and the gendered meaning assigned to behavior is based on sex attribution. People are not simply held accountable for a gender performance based on their sex (see West and Zimmerman 1987); the gendered meaning of behavior is dependent on sex attribution. Whether behavior is defined as masculine or feminine, laudable or annoying, is dependent on sex category. Doing gender, then, does not simply involve performing appropriate masculinity or femininity based on sex category. Doing gender involves a balance of both doing sex and performing masculinity and femininity. When there is no confusion or ambiguity in the sex performance, individuals are able to have more diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity. This balance between behavior and appearance in expressing gender helps explain the changing behavior of FTMs as they transition as well as the presence of men and women with a diversity of gendered behaviors and display.

## NOTES

1. Interviewees do not necessarily identify as female-to-male transsexual and transgendered people (FTMs). There are many terms that more closely describe individuals' personal identity and experience including "trans," "boy dyke," "trannyboy," "queer," "man," "FTM," "transsexual," and "gender bender." For simplicity and clarity, I will use "FTM" and "trans" and apologize to interviewees who feel this does not adequately express their sex/gender location.

2. See Lucal (1999) for an excellent discussion regarding interpersonal strategies for disrupting the gender order.

3. Politically, some feminist FTMs express discomfort at becoming members of the most privileged economic and social class (white men).

4. A keloid is thick, raised, fibrous scar tissue occurring in response to an injury or surgery; it occurs more often in darker-skinned individuals.

5. After taking testosterone, an individual appears male even if he or she discontinues use. The interviewee who became pregnant discontinued hormones to ovulate and continue his pregnancy then began hormones again after childbirth.

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