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Passing the Test: The Transgender Self, Society and Femininity

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Passing the Test: The Transgender Self, Society and Femininity

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“The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just.”- Abraham Lincoln

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Abstract

This research explores the complex relationships between transgender women and their bodies, their intimate relationships, their identities, and the pressure to pass. I begin by defining the term transgender, as well as discuss the history of transgender issues in the Netherlands. Several works by both Dutch and non-Dutch authors that focus on the transgender identity are reviewed and related to this study. The theories postulated by Julia Serrano, Matthew Sycamore Bernstein, Linda Nicholson and Judith Butler are critical to the analysis of personal interviews conducted by the researcher with five Dutch transgender women. Through these interviews several themes arise, including the importance of the body, womanhood and femininity, and the pressure to pass. The researcher argues that transgender women confirm their self identities through transforming their bodies, whether physiologically or superficially (i.e. clothing, mannerisms, etc.) and through conforming to the ideals of femininity. In the future, similar studies should be conducted with female-to-male transgender men and explore the intersections of gender with race, class, and generational differences.

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“As far as I am concerned being any gender is a drag”- Patti Smith

Introduction

The transgender identity is a relatively new gender identity expression in the Netherlands. Transsexualism is the prevalent narrative of gender variance in Holland, and as early as 1959 surgeons performed sex-reassignment surgeries. Only recently has transgenderism become a visible identity in Holland, though it is still not completely understood or embraced by Dutch people, or even self-identified transsexuals (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

The focus in the Netherlands, and especially in Amsterdam, has been on how the medical establishment can relieve the dissonance between the body and mind through hormonal treatment and sex-reassignment surgeries. The universal health care system and gender clinics that are a part of medical centers like the Vrije Universiteit make medical intervention possible. People who receive sex-reassignment surgery are recognized by the government as the other gender.

The space for transgender people is still being carved out in Dutch society. More people are identifying with the term transgender because it allows them to acknowledge both their former gender identity, as well as their new one. Transgender individuals experience complicated relationships between their bodies, their femininity or masculinity and society. Their desires to pass as the gender of their choosing and be recognized by others are central issues within the transgender community.

In my research, I want to deviate from this narrow focus on the medicalization of gender identity and look at how transgender individuals shape their social identities. I chose

to analyze male-to-female (MTF) transgender people who are self-identified as women. I explore how their bodies create and shape relationships with others, as well as how their bodies confirm their gender identities. Through their stories I also discover the tensions between femininity and womanhood and how they navigate social norms of what it means to be a woman. Finally, I examine passing and ask why they want to pass, when they want to pass and who they pass for.

Before you begin reading, here is a brief outline of the format of this paper. I will first provide a definition of transgender, as well as provide a brief history of the transgender identity within Dutch culture. I will then pose my theoretical framework, which centers on the work of Julia Serrano Mattilda a.k.a Mathew Bernstein Sycamore, Linda Nicholson, and Judith Butler. I use these frameworks to analyze the personal interviews of MTF transgender individuals, focusing on the body, femininity, and passing.

“What trans people are trying to do is find a way of presenting their gender identity in such a way that the rest of the world will understand who they are”- Stephen Whittle

Defining Transgender

The term and identity transgender is relatively new and came about in the 1980s. Virginia Prince used it to identify people who fell along a spectrum between transvestite and transsexual (Stryker 2006: 4). A transvestite is someone who dresses like the opposite gender, but does not consistently live as the opposite gender. A transsexual, at the other end of the spectrum, is someone who seeks physiological change of the breast, vagina, or penis in order to live full time as the other gender. In the past, transsexuals considered themselves very distinct from transvestites. Anne Bolin, an anthropologist specializing in gender identity, suggests that transsexuals believed “the transsexual was not engaging in an illusion or an impersonation but rather a true expression of a feminine gender identity” (Bolin 1994: 451).

As time went on, a new community and identity developed. Transgender came to mean “somebody who permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation” (Stryker 2006: 4). In the early 1990s, activist and transgender author Leslie Feinberg transformed the definition of transgender from a verb to an adjective. It became an umbrella term for all people who are marginalized because they are gender variant. This new definition led to a political movement and mobilized people to fight against heteronormativity¹ and patriarchal values (Stryker 2006: 4).

¹ Michael Warner coined the term “heteronormativity” in his book [Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory](#); he argues that heteronormativity rests upon “het[erosexual] culture think[ing] itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist” (Warner 1993: xxi).

In the Netherlands, there is no consensus on a definition of transgender. Thomas Wormgoor in “The Emancipation of Transgender” provides a definition of transgender in Holland as “a collective term for all forms of deviant gender identities” or “a term used to indicate a third category next to transvestites and transsexuals; that is, people who are not compatible with their physical gender, but who do not feel transvestite or transsexual either” (Wormgoor 2010: 63).

In this paper, I will be referring to transgender individuals as people who feel they have been identified and categorized as the wrong gender at birth, specifically at-birth identified males or men who currently identify as females or women. Some of my informants have received surgery or hormones, but do not identify as strictly transsexual. Most live full time as their desired gender, female, in social spaces and relationships and identify their gender as woman, while some do not live as a woman all the time or only recently began living their life as a woman.

“Een goede travestiet zie je niet (a good transvestite will not be noticed)”- Dutch expression

A Brief History of Transgender Identity and Dutch Society

Gender crossing is not a new practice in Holland. Since 1959 when the first sex-reassignment² surgery took place, different forms of gender bending have been visible within Dutch society. The first discussions surrounding changing one's gender identity were centered on transsexual individuals, people who wanted surgery to correct their physiological body to match what their brain was telling them is their gender (Megens Lecture 2011). In 1966, a negative report was issued by the Gezondheidsraad, or Dutch Health Council, that disapproved of sex-reassignment surgery (Kui 2005). It was not until 1977 that the Gezondheidsraad suggested sex-reassignment surgery as a way to treat transsexuals. The Gender Clinic at Vrije Universiteit, de Genderstichting, was opened in 1972 where the majority of sex-reassignment procedures take place. Then in 1985, the government allowed people to get their gender changed on legal documents if they had completed sex-reassignment surgery. Transsexuals were required, however, to divorce their partners upon legal gender change until homosexual marriage was legalized in 2001 (Kam Wai 2005).

It was not until 1988 that media attention surrounding transsexuals became a hot topic in the Netherlands. Louis Gooren, who was the head of the gender team at Vrije Universiteit, became the first professor of transsexuality in the world. The focus was on the medicalization of transsexuals and did not address other forms of transgendering (Kui 2005). Since the late 80s, the focus has still remained largely on transsexuals and the necessity for medical

² Sex-reassignment surgery only refers to the genitals and not to “top-surgery” or augmenting the breasts

intervention. There have been movements against the medicalization of transgender identities, especially in the late 1990s to present.

Trans-organizations have prominently been a part of the de-medicalization process. The very first transgender organization (before transgender was even a term) was established in 1970—T en T Groep Amsterdam. In 1975, they joined forces with Landelijke Kontakt Groep Travestie en Transseksualiteit. Their organization centered on providing “a safe and private environment to share experiences” (Kui 2005: 1). Environments like those were especially necessary because very little support was provided for transsexuals once they finished their surgeries, and little to no support was given to people not looking for medical intervention. Self-help style peer groups became the main source of psychological and emotional support. Berdache, a group started in 1997, worked with parents of transgender children and werkgroep FACET, from 1990, worked with spouses of transgender people (Kui 2005).

In the 1990s, the term transgender came into use and provided a space for activists to work towards improving the standards of health care for all transgender individuals, as well as improve the quality of life and education on transgender culture. Organizations wanted to move away from the medical establishment and focus on the individual and transgender rights. Organizations like Stichting T-Image and Noodles from the early 2000s worked to set up educational and cultural events, as well as promote queer and transgender participation in the public sphere (Kui 2005). Currently, events like Transgender Day of Remembrance and the Transgender Film Festival educate Dutch society on transgender issues and make the transgender identity a visible part of the culture.

In terms of acceptance within Dutch culture, there seems to be the ever present form of Dutch tolerance. Transgender people are allowed to legally change their gender and live as

their desired gender as long as they receive sex-reassignment surgery. People who choose to live more in-between the genders or choose not to receive surgery can have more difficulty navigating social norms and government support. People may live however they choose here, but that does not necessarily mean that there is a lot of support from the majority of people. Vreer Sirenu, a transgender-queer activist in the Netherlands emphasizes the pathologicalization of transgenderism in Dutch culture and the dependence upon the medical community to “fix” people (Sirenu Lecture 2011). Though legally transgender people have equal rights in the Netherlands and are protected from discrimination, Dutch society still very much maintains a gender binary. This binary is most evident in the “real life test” that is required preceding sex-reassignment surgery at the Vrije Universiteit Gender Clinic (Megens Lecture 2011). The real life test is when a person lives as the other sex in all social, public spheres, such as work or in the train station. This proves to doctors that the person has made a complete transformation and is ready for permanent surgery. Such requirements only continue the process of normalization and emphasize the need pass.

Transgender people living in Dutch society are more privileged and protected than transgender people in other countries, but that does not mean they are immune from the cultural stereotypes and normalization that still pervade Dutch culture. The medical establishment is very much privileged as the solution to the transgender identity. In effect, the identity is somewhat erased, invisible, and all you see are men and women.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” - George Satayana

Literature Review

Transgender issues have only in the last twenty years become a topic of conversation in the academic sphere. Very little research compared with other gender identity discourses have been performed, especially in the Netherlands. It seems that transgender is frequently conflated with transsexuality and rarely do research projects focus on both post-operative and non-operative transgender individuals. The literature I will discuss below interacts very well with my research and some of the literature I review works to situate my research in a specifically Dutch context.

An early 1990's study conducted by American anthropologist Anne Bolin focuses on the Berdache society or two-spirited people of North America. In her essay “Transcending and Transgendering”, written a decade after her initial research, Bolin explores how the transsexual identity was conceptualized in Berdache and Western society, as well as the birth of the transgender identity. Her research is important because she discusses how medicalization of gender-crossing normalized and reaffirmed biological sex and the gender binary system (Bolin 1994: 454). Men who lived as women were only legitimate women if they received sex-reassignment surgery, which she calls a form of “biological elitism” (Bolin 1994: 458). The transsexual objective is to develop into a female and outgrow the transsexual status. The ability to feel feminine and be a woman is contingent upon their physiological transformation; “transsexuals did not begin their transition with fully crystallized feminine personal identities...but rather gradually acquired a feminine identity” after “transmutat[ing] personal identity, social identity and physiology (Bolin 1994: 449). She also discusses how the transgender identity and community developed as a political movement against the strict adherence to gender binaries and “out of [this] deconstructed gender polarity arises the

possibility of a social woman without a penis” (Bolin 1994: 483). The transgender identity, as opposed to transsexuality, transcends gender binaries and hegemonic definitions of femininity. In my research, I am focusing on how people pass as the other gender with or without medicalization and how their surgically altered bodies affect their personal relationships

Turning to studies done in the Netherlands, Ines Orobio de Castro, who received a PhD from the University of Utrecht, wrote her dissertation Made to Order: Sex/Gender in a Transsexual Perspective that focuses on gender, power and transsexuality in Dutch family law. Orobio de Castro’s analysis of Janice Raymond’s Transsexual Empire is pertinent to my study of how transgender people negotiate the female gender identity. Raymond proposes that MTF transgender individuals will never be real women because they do not have the history of being a woman. And, that if men can become women then there is no real difference between the sexes and all the harm and inferiority experienced by women cannot be attributed to power-dynamics among men and women. Orobio de Castro asserts that “it is the history of functioning and being defined as different and inferior that counts. From this [Raymond] concludes that women’s specific personal histories which are imposed upon them by sexist society, can never be experienced in the same way by men, be they transsexual or not” (Orobio De Castro 1993: 92). Orobio de Castro does not completely agree with Raymond’s accusatory opus against MTF transsexuals, but she does agree that it is important to recognize that women-born-women do have different, unique experiences that men will never fully understand or have to experience. Women do face discrimination and victimization within patriarchal societies. Orobio de Castro, however, challenges Raymond’s accusations that transsexual women are a “male-made masquerade” and that they are trying to disenfranchise the identity of woman (Orobio de Castro 1993: 93). She also questions Raymond’s reliance on a “pre-cultural female essence” that emphasizes the contrast between

“artificiality of male to female transsexuals with the authenticity supposedly shared by all real women” (Orobio de Castro 1993: 94). The ideas of an essential femaleness and authenticity are extremely relevant to my study. I will be looking at how transgender individuals navigate being male-born-women within a society that is somewhat accepting of transgenering. I will also explore how transgender women develop their own sense of femininity and womanhood as they live their lives as women. In regards to authenticity, I will be discussing with my interviewees how authentic they feel and if authenticity is something that they strive for or if they feel they feel authentic just being who they are.

Paul Vennix, a member of the Netherlands Institute of Social Sexological Research, conducted a study on crossdressers, transgenders and non-operative transsexuals in Belgium and the Netherlands. In his study, “Gender Subsystems of Crossdressers in the Netherlands and Belgium”, he began under the assumption that there are two gender identity subsystems, a masculine system and a feminine. He differentiates the subsystems by suggesting that “the stronger the masculine subsystem is...the more often crossdressing has a sexual meaning” (Vennix 1997: 1). Vennix associates masculinity with sexuality and the desire for sexual attraction. And, when the feminine subsystem is dominant men crossdress to “express the girl within”, or more technically, “gender transpose” (Vennix 1997: 1). For men to want to be women it means that they strongly identify with the female identity and it transcends merely a desire for gender or sexual role play, as in the case of female-to-male. After analyzing his data on the three different identities stated above, Vennix concludes that transgender people experience more psychological distress than transsexuals and he suggests that a “partial transformation” take place in order for transgender people to express more of their feminine subsystem (Vennix 1997: 4). My study addresses how this identity or choice to partially transform physiologically or not is lived out in specific stories of Dutch transgender women and how these women negotiate their “feminine subsystems”.

Another Netherlands study that focuses on the transgender identity was conducted by Tim de Jong, called “Man of Vrouw, Min of Meer, Gesprekken over een niet-gangbare sekse” (Man or Woman, More or Less). De Jong collected life stories from twenty-two transgender people and professionals who work with transgender people. De Jong’s goal with his work was to discuss the limitations the gender binary system imposes upon people. The stories in the book tell of people with the “experience of being in-between the sexes, half-man/half-woman, or someone to whom these categories in no way apply (De Jong, 1999: 1). De Jong argues that trans identities provide a space for people who do not want to live within the gender binary and feel restricted by it. De Jong also discusses how the medical establishment also creates limitations by forcing people who want sex-reassignment surgery to fit into a prototypical transsexual narrative (De Jong 1999: 2). De Jong wanted his work to help educate professionals and people interested in transgender issues through real life stories of transgender individuals. My own work is very similar to this and also works to expose how the gender binary restricts people to conform to certain cultural expectations.

Two recent studies conducted in the Netherlands on transgender perspectives were completed by peers of mine in the same abroad program—Mary Kelterborn and Lily Swartz. Mary Kelterborn’s “The Medicalization of Gender: how the medical discourse of transsexuality and intersexuality in the Netherlands contributes to the third space” analyzes through personal interviews with transsexuals and intersex people how well the medical establishment handles transsexual and intersex issues, or does not handle them. Kelterborn uses the concept of the “third space”, which she defines as “encompass[ing] infinite possibilities”, as an area where gender bending identities coexist and provide space in a society that maintains gender binaries as the norm (Kelterborn 2001: 1). Kelterborn’s research comes to similar conclusions that other researchers have come to concerning the medicalization of gender variant identities: people need more psychological counseling,

better access to different options, and more support for those who do not want surgery. In contrast to her focus on the relationship between individuals and the medical establishment, I am exploring the relationship between the individual and others.

Lily Swartz's 2006 study, "Dutch Transwomen's Voices on Feminism in the Netherlands" complements my study well. Swartz examines how transgender women tend to feel left out of feminism and discriminated against because they are not seen as real women. She suggests that feminism and transgender women have more in common than it may seem, especially because women-born-women and transwomen both face marginalization in patriarchal societies and are often forced to adhere to institutionalized gender norms (Swartz 2006). My research delves more into how transgender women interact with and negotiate their femininity and femaleness within society and how they pass as women (considered real or not).

I hope that my study fills in the gaps where a focus on the individual and their interaction with society and the negotiations they make on a daily basis to live as they choose is seemingly absent. Moving away from inquiry into the medicalization of bodies towards a more cultural-based approach could reveal more about the effects of society on individuals and how individuals create their own identities, and what their relationships with their bodies and others are like.

*“I’ve just realized that who someone else thinks I am has very little to do with who I actually am, and that I have almost no control over what a person might see when they see me”-
Helen Boyd (spouse of a transwoman)*

Theoretical Framework

Within my research, I will primarily be focusing on the work of Julia Serrano, Mattilda a.k.a Matthew Bernstein Sycamore, Linda Nicholson, and Judith Butler. I will use their theories as guiding tools in my analyses. My analytical tools are, however, not limited to these four theorists and I will be interweaving several theories and propositions throughout my paper. Using these theories, as well as my interviews, I will argue that the confirmation of self is through transforming the body, whether physiologically or superficially and through conforming to the ideals of femininity through passing. First, however, I will discuss why and how I use these theories and then I will give explanations of each theory.

Julia Serrano, a trans activist, biologist and writer discusses the complexity of issues surrounding female transsexuals³ in her book Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity. I will be using her theories on *subconscious sex*, perceptions and interpretations of gender, social and biologically based femininity and passing-centrism. *Subconscious sex* is relevant to my study because it provides an explanation of how my interviewees feel that they are women even though their culturally defined male bodies contradict these feelings. It helps me to understand that a person’s *subconscious sex* or identity does not have to be shaped through purely cultural explanations and expectations. Serrano’s theories on gender interpretations, femininity and passing-centrism are important because they relate how an individual navigates cultural norms and is influenced by the gaze of the other. I better understand how my interviewees pass and why

³ Julia Serrano uses transsexual instead of transgender throughout Whipping Girl. I am applying her theories to my transgender interviewees because transsexual can fall under the umbrella term transsexual and all of my interviewees have or intend to receive hormones and/or sex-reassignment surgery.

they choose to pass based upon the expectations they have for themselves, as well as the expectations held by society.

Mattilda a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore's theories on passing in her book Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity are useful in my analysis of the phenomenon of passing. Passing as a form of violence and a strategy for assimilation guide my interpretations of my interviewees' arguments for why they pass and whether they are passing for themselves or others. Her work also leads me to question what exactly is passing and what are my interviewees trying to pass as. Mattilda's criticism of passing and her insistence that the desire to pass infiltrates all identities begs the question is everyone, always, trying to pass as something, whether for their own validation or for others.

Nicholson's theories in her article "Interpreting Gender" on the body as a reflection of the self and the culturally and historically situated definitions of women are important to my understanding of how it is possible for society and the interviewees themselves to consider them women. It also underscores the importance of sex-reassignment surgery, as well as female dress and cosmetic rituals and why they are so meaningful to transgender peoples' self identity.

Butler's work with recognition and gendered violence in Undoing Gender is significant to my research because both concepts set the basis for how transgender people interact with their environment and how their environment responds to their identity. All of my interviewees talked in-depth about receiving recognition as a female and how it confirms their identity, as well as ease the tensions between who they want to be and who they once were because they were finally validated as women. Gendered violence was not specifically discussed in my interviews, but I do analyze certain experiences my interviewees have had as the product of gendered violence.

One of Serrano's most chief assertions in her book is the concept of a *subconscious sex*. The *subconscious sex* is a part of a larger framework she outlines called the "intrinsic inclination model" (see appendix B), which she uses to explain gender and sexual variation (I however will focus only on *subconscious sex*) (Serrano 2007: 99). Serrano chooses this term over gender identity, which she finds to be "misleading" because it could imply both a choice and a subconscious feeling (Serrano 2007: 78). *Subconscious sex* is best described by Serrano as "on some level, my brain expects my body to be female"⁴ (Serrano 2007: 80). She describes it as being intrinsic and "impervious to conscious thought or social influence", in contrast to gender identity, which she says "has been very much shaped by cultural norms and [her] own personal beliefs and experiences" (Serrano 2007:83). Throughout the interview process, my interviewees divulged experiences that seem to demonstrate a *subconscious sex*, specifically wanting to be a woman.

Not only does Serrano dismantle gender identity as the defining identity term, she also challenges the gender performativity model, made (in)famous by Judith Butler. Serrano favors a model that "lies in the perception and interpretations" of an individual's gender (based primarily on physical appearance) by other people (Serrano 2007: 193). She gives several examples of times that she merely dressed the way she wanted and behaved as herself, and in doing this she was perceived as a woman. She maintains that she was not actively performing like a woman, but simply gesturing and speaking in a way which was natural to her. It was the public who interpreted her mannerisms and outfit as feminine, which then led to their perception of her as a woman (Serrano 2007: 192). Serrano finds problems

4 The assertion that there is something intrinsic about our identities is rooted in Western philosophy and is potentially dangerous to the transgender identity because it suggests that gender and identity is biologically based. Historically, when a "problem" is found to have a biological basis, society, namely the medical establishment offers a "cure". I will, however, go forward with the *subconscious sex* as a lens for analysis

with a performance-centric model because it implies “femaleness is not a natural state, but one that we produce when we call ourselves women—when we act, dress, speak in what are considered feminine ways” (Serrano 2007: 190). All of my interviewees would deny that their femaleness comes from their behaviors because they all agree that it is intrinsic to who they are as people. Serrano also argues that “if you look like a supermodel, you can act as butch as you want to, but other people will inevitably gender you as female” (Serrano 2007: 191). Thus, it does not matter how you perform if your general physical appearance resembles a woman then people will perceive you to be a woman. This is important to my research because all of my interviewees physically look like women and argue that they are perceived by the public as women even when their so-called masculine mannerisms or behaviors are apparent.

This brings me to her argument that femininity finds its origins in both the social and biological. Serrano challenges both the *naturalization* and the *artificialization* of femininity because in both scenarios femininity is often assumed to be a single, unified social or biological package or program (Serrano 2007: 321). Serrano unpacks different cases in which femininity could be socially or biologically based. For instance, women’s fashion is something that Serrano believes to be almost exclusively shaped through culture, especially because fashion norms of changed so much over time (Serrano 2007: 322). On the other hand, she considers heightened emotional intensity and sensitivity to be biologically based; she claims “virtually all transsexuals transitioning in the MTF direction report an increased intensity in the way that they experience emotions once they begin taking estrogen” (Serrano 2007:323). The interaction between social norms and biology is a discussion that Serrano argues is lacking in discussions of femininity. Without acknowledging femininity is not “a monolithic entity” and that both people who are born or not born women can possess feminine traits, femininity will be trapped within the gender and sex binaries that “subsume

femininity and femaleness” and restrict the ability for transgender people to be accepted as the gender identity they desire (Serrano 2007: 320-321). The restrictions on who can be feminine and who cannot were noticeable in the stories of my interviewees. Almost every interviewee expressed that they did not always feel like women because they didn’t have the body, or the mannerisms, or even the same thoughts as women-born-women, even though they all want to be women and identify as women.

Western society’s obsession with gender binaries, whether it is based in a social constructionist or an essentialist paradigm, creates and perpetuates an obsession with passing. Serrano describes this obsession as passing-centrism, which “serves to privilege the transsexual’s assigned sex over their identified and lived sex, thereby reinforcing the idea that transsexual genders are illegitimate” (Serrano 2007: 178). She argues that “cissexuals⁵ (not transsexuals) are the ones who create, foster, and enforce ‘passing’ by their tendency to treat transsexuals in dramatically different ways based solely on the superficial criteria of our appearance” (Serrano 2007: 179). Thus, transgender people may feel compelled to pass as their desired gender and conceal their transgender history in order to not face discrimination or violence. She also finds passing a “highly problematic term in that it implies that the trans person is getting away with something” (Serrano 2007: 176). Serrano wants to make it clear that transgender people are not being inauthentic or tricking people when they go out in public, they are merely dressing and behaving as themselves. The whole concept of passing is only an issue because society has still not recognized the transgender identity. Serrano proposes the term “misgendered” and “appropriately gendered” as ways to recognize that some people are “assigned a gender that does not match the gender they consider themselves

⁵ People who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned (Serrano 2007: 12)

to be” and others are assigned a “gender that matches the way they self-identify” (Serrano 2007: 179).

Mattilda a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore, theory on passing underscores Julia Serrano’s. Mattilda, a radical queer activist, criticizes “passing as a means through which the violence of assimilation takes place” (Mattilda 2006: 8). Mattilda views passing as a system of regulatory power, in the same vein as Foucault’s “docile bodies”. She confronts all forms of passing, whether it is passing as a woman, a Christian, or a good girl, as a normalization prison that privileges authenticity and forces people to hide their true identities. Through the narratives in her book that reveal the struggles with passing, Mattilda “confront[s] the perilous intersections of identity, categorization, and community in order to challenge the very notion of belonging” (Mattilda 2006: 8). I will look at passing as a tool for perpetuating violence, as well as a tool for public and private confirmation of self, asking along the way who do you pass for and why do you pass?

Linda Nicholson problematizes how the body is conceptualized cross-culturally and cross-generationally, as well as the definition of woman. Nicholson criticizes how within feminist theory, as well as others, authors tend to assume that the male and female bodies have the same meanings in all cultures and all historical periods. She contends that we must acknowledge the “culturally various understandings of the body” and the different “social variations in the male/female distinction...” (Nicholson 1994: 83). She discusses how previously it was thought that the female body was simply an underdeveloped version of the male body, that there was not a real difference between the two (Nicholson 1994). Recently, with the advent of industrialization and urbanization, the differences between the male and female body are much more pronounced in Western society (Nicholson 1994). Through these new ways of living, the body has come to “serve as the source of information about the self and thus to serve as the source of information about one’s identity as male or female”

(Nicholson 1994: 88). The idea of the body as a signifier of identity is a central theme throughout my interviews. The reason a transgender person may want to seek sex-reassignment surgery is so that her body correctly represents her identity and so that people interpret her identity as female.

Nicholson also suggests that the definition of woman has shifted across time and cultures. The shift in definitions can be based upon the change in perceptions of the female body. She comes to argue that since the meaning of woman is fluid, “those presently advocating nontraditional understandings of it, such as transsexuals, cannot be dismissed merely on the grounds that their interpretations contradict standard patterns” (Nicholson 1994: 101). This assertion validates transgender peoples’ feelings about their own womanhood and femininity. It creates the possibility for non women-born-women to be considered just as much of a woman as women-born-women. I think that all of my interviewees strive to be not just taken seriously as women, but believed to be just as real as a woman-born-woman.

Judith Butler, though a controversial figure in the transgender community, brings to light two very important concepts, recognition and gendered violence, that complicate the relationship between the self and other’s interpretations, as well as influence the desire to pass. In her “Introduction: Acting in Concert”, Butler poses the idea of “a desire for recognition” (Butler 2004: 2). Humans are constantly seeking recognition because “it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings” (Butler 2004: 2). To be recognized, then, others must be able to understand you. Often, to be understood, one must fit the social norms, which provide us with an identity and a community; “the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms” (Butler 2004: 2). Butler suggests that “we see the ‘norm’ as that which binds us, but we also see that the ‘norm’ creates unity on through the strategy of exclusion”

(Butler 2004: 206). Transgender individuals do not follow the norm and are thus excluded. Since transgender people defy the norms, “it is unclear whether [they] are still living, or ought to be, whether [their] lives are valuable, or can be made to be...” (Butler 2004: 206).

Butler’s idea of gendered violence is born out of the defiance of social norms. Gendered violence occurs when people live outside the accepted cultural norms for what it means to be a man or a woman. Transgender people frequently experience gendered violence, especially through pathologization and criminalization (Butler 2004: 218). Butler asks “why gender violence against transgendered subjects is not recognized as violence” (Butler 2004: 218). And, it is because transgender people are not recognized as real or intelligible.

Passing, then, as Mattilda also makes clear, is a normalization process. However, in Butler’s case, normalization is not always an act of violence, but a protective force. Transgender people strive to “embody the norm” as a survival method (Butler 2004: 217). Butler poses that the material “body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought were confined as open to transformation” (Butler 2004: 217). It is, thus, possible for transgender people to fit within a norm, in this case through passing as one of the two accepted gender binaries, man or woman. Through passing, transgender people can achieve recognition.

One of the most significant questions we must ask ourselves though who provides recognition and what qualifies them to bestow recognition? Butler articulates that it is at the juncture between the subject who gives or withholds recognition and the subjected who seeks recognition that “recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced” (Butler 2004: 2). In the case of transgender individuals, it is the other, the public, the society that has the power to recognize them as intelligible or not, the power to give them value as human beings. It is also important, however, for transgender

people to give recognition to their own self, though it is inevitably “bound up with social critique and social transformation” (Butler 2004: 7).

The theories which I have outlined above are just as complex as the narratives told by my interviewees. In my analysis I will directly and indirectly refer to these theories. Through these theories I have also come to hold my own definitions of passing and femininity. When moving forward with my analysis I came to understand passing as the attempt to appear to be a woman in order to align one’s body with one’s *subconscious sex* and to be interpreted and treated by others as a woman. Passing, also, protects a person from violence by fitting in to the accepted cultural norms of a female. Femininity, in general, is associated with the cultural characteristics and traits primarily associated with women in Western society. These characteristics and traits could refer to anything from reproductive organs to long, braided hair, to high-pitched voices, etc. I would argue that through passing and feminization of their bodies and behaviors (actively and subconsciously), my interviewees are constantly working to validate their woman identity.

“Class, race, sexuality, gender and all other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other need to be excavated from the inside.”- Dorothy Allison

Methodology

Methods:

In this study, I collected qualitative data through informal interviews of five MTF transgender individuals. I had an interview guide on hand (see appendix A), which ended up becoming somewhat obsolete because interviewees answered my questions without me asking them through the telling of their narratives, and I tended to come up with better questions based on what I was hearing from the interviewees. All the interviews inevitably organically evolved from the information given by the interviewee.

The interviews were a mix oral histories and semi-structured interviews focused on passing, femininity and the body. I asked all the interviewees their personal definitions of femininity, as well as their opinions on why people want to pass. I also discussed the relationship with their bodies, pre and post medical intervention, as well as how their body impacts relationships with others.

All of the interviewees were comfortable answering my questions, even ones that required the most sensitive and intimate answers. I think their comfort level was influenced by mainly two factors. First, they are accustomed to discussing their identity and being questioned by peers, medical professionals and the public because transgender people do not fit the assumed norm. Secondly, I personally tried to create an open and safe atmosphere by presenting myself as accepting of their identity and open to hearing their stories as they want to tell them. I also did not want them to feel like they were being interviewed by someone merely interested in them for inquisitive academic purposes, but by someone who wants to present their stories and opinions as valid and important to a better understanding of transgender issues.

The interviews lasted between forty minutes and three hours. Some interviews were conducted in the comfort of the interviewee's home, while others were at cafes or transgender

organizations of the interviewees' choice. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis with permission from the interviewees.

My target group is MTF transgender individuals. Interviewees are at different stages in the transitioning process; some have received both hormones and surgeries, while some only hormones or no treatment at all. All interviewees identify themselves as women and transgender people, or people with a transgender background/history. All of the interviewees are from the Netherlands and live in Amsterdam or surrounding cities. The interviewees are a diverse set of people, coming from all different socio-economic and racial backgrounds. The interviewees are also from different age brackets, from eighteen to fifty-seven.

I located interviewees through academic connections and the snow-ball approach. A few of the interviewees are well acquainted with the SIT program and I was referred to them by my academic director. Other interviewees were found through the help of a contact at Transvisie who works with many transgender individuals. Some of the interviewees have previously been interviewed, which could influence their answers to my questions. They are more accustomed to working with researchers and sharing their narratives. Some of their answers may not have been completely spontaneous as other interviewees' answers because they have been asked similar questions in the past. I do not think, however, that this greatly impacted the authenticity of their answers nor my analysis.

Assumptions:

When I began this study I tried not to go in with too many assumptions because I am an outsider attempting to understand a community that is so different from my own. Though I also identify as a woman and follow certain feminine norms and expectations, I am a

cisgender⁶ person who has not had to face the same obstacles as transgender people. In order to move forward with the paper I did make some assumptions, but those assumptions changed as I continued to do more research and interviews.

My initial assumptions were that MTF transgender women all want to pass and not be seen as transgender; that the goal of transitioning was to only be identified as women. I also assumed that transgender women considered themselves to be feminine and possess a similar femininity to women-born-women. I thought that they believed themselves to be women just in the wrong body and that through surgery they could be women. And, I also assumed that Dutch femininity and attitudes towards transgender people would be more or less similar to attitudes held in the U.S. These assumptions were based in my relatively limited knowledge of transgender issues in the U.S. and mostly based upon information I had acquired in feminist university courses and through the media. This information was not very in-depth and was not specifically geared towards transgender issues or activism, which suggests that it is not completely representative of the transgender population in neither the U.S. nor other countries like Holland.

As I did more research and gained more knowledge of the community I was working with my assumptions shifted dramatically. I found that passing is important to my interviewees, but not all of them necessarily want to hide their transgender roots. I also realized that people pass for a multitude of reasons and pass in different circumstances. I came to understand that not all transgender women identify with or think they possess femininity. Dutch femininity is also very different from the femininity I know of in the United States and Dutch attitudes on transgender issues are not the same. Finally, I changed

⁶ Cisgender “refer[s] to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt 2009: 461).

my assumption that transgender women think themselves to be women to transgender women want to be women and are trying to achieve a level of femininity and femaleness. These are the assumptions that I went forward with once I did more background research on the Dutch transgender community.

Ethics:

Conducting research with a community that is often discriminated against and stigmatized brings up issues that as a researcher I must be cognizant of and sensitive to. Most importantly, I stressed to my interviewees that they have the right to be anonymous.

Anonymity is very important because not all of my interviewees' families are aware that they live as women. Furthermore, anonymity protects my interviewees from potential violence or discrimination because of their participation in my study. All the interviewees except for one said I could use their female names, but I decided to change the names of all my interviewees after considering the potential for future, unknown repercussions.

In conjunction with anonymity, interviewees were made aware that they did not have to answer any question that I posed to them and could choose to cease the interview at any time if they were uncomfortable. This was very important because some of the questions I asked or topics that arose were deeply personal and could potentially evoke emotional or traumatic memories. I often prepped the interviewee with "this is very personal or you don't have to answer this" if I thought a question could make the person uneasy. Fortunately, all the interviewees felt extremely comfortable answering all my questions and none of them were caused distress from the interview process.

Challenges and Limitations:

When I began this project I did not realize the complexities and obstacles I would encounter along the way. First I will begin with the major challenges I faced:

- **Finding Interviewees:** It is difficult to locate such a small target group in a short amount of time. Ideally, I would have wanted to speak to at least twenty informants and delve deeper into their experiences, including their other identities like race, class, etc. I found it difficult to even locate the small number I did find due to time constraints and access to contacts.
- **Language:** Language difference in the sense of English verses Dutch was not a problem. My interviewees had no problem expressing themselves in English. I did, however, find it difficult to express my questions because I did not know exactly what words to use. I didn't know if I should use transgender, trans, woman, transwoman. Do I ask do you feel like a woman? Are you a woman? I found myself fumbling over my words because I was not sure what lingo was appropriate, especially because the English language is somewhat constricting with only certain words available to talk about gender or how one feels about their gender. I made my interviewees aware that I struggled with terms to use. I would say to them, "I am having trouble finding what term to use, could you help so I can understand what you mean". This allowed us to work together so I could understand exactly what they meant when they told me something.
- **Complexity of topic:** As I began to conduct my interviews, I realized that when you ask someone about their identity or about their opinion on their body, for example, you get an extremely intricate and complex web of connections to so many other facets of the person's life. This began to overwhelm me as I transcribed my interviews because with each new

interview a new dimension to my topic was revealed. I continuously wanted to add more and more to my paper, but I had to accept that I could not discuss everything that my interviewees told me. I had to narrow down the scope of my study, which I did with reluctance.

I also had to cope with limitations regarding the project that influenced how this paper was written:

- **American Bias:** As an American, I hold certain cultural biases and perceptions towards femininity. I come from a society that stresses a gender binary system with fairly rigid expectations of femininity and womanhood. Women in America are hyper-feminine, especially compared to women in Holland, wearing short skirts, long nails and long, dyed hair. I find myself seeking to pass as a woman by wearing make-up, dresses and “acting” girly. I subconsciously and consciously expect women to behave and look a certain way. Whether someone is cisgender or transgender, I have criteria for what a woman should be based upon growing up in America. I, also, held biases towards the transgender community based upon my American upbringing. I thought that transgender people suffered severe psychological problems because they are outcasts in American society and that they generally do not come from affluent backgrounds. These biases stemmed from inaccurate media portrayals of the transgender community, which I now know not to be valid. I tried to make my interviewees aware of this American bias by explaining to them my knowledge and then having them tell me how their experience is similar or different.

- **Stages in Transition/Generational Differences:** I found that having interviewees that are in different stages of transition and different age groups dramatically changed their perceptions of not just Dutch culture and transgender issues, but their perceptions of their bodies and experiences as women. Though I am glad I was able to have a diversity of ranges, I was limited to only having one or two representatives from each stage or generation, which is not representative of the target group at all.
- **Time:** I only had a little over a month to complete this research, which forced me to only tackle a small set of issues and work with a very small subject pool. Though this helped to keep my study focused, it also limited my resources and ability to cover more areas within transgender issues.

Throughout this research process I have had the privilege of gaining insight into a community that is both underrepresented, and often misrepresented in society. I was able to talk to five incredible, diverse women who shared their histories and opinions without hesitation. Through their oral histories and the interview process I was able to draw general conclusions and identify trends, while being careful to acknowledge potential biases and challenges to the analysis process. I made myself open to both overlapping and diverging ideas about femininity, passing, and the relationship between the individual and society.

“More exists among human beings than can be answered by the simplistic question I'm hit with every day of my life: ‘Are you a man or a woman?’”- Leslie Feinberg

Biographies

Demi: Demi is my youngest interviewee as well as my first. She is eighteen-years old and lives in Amsterdam with her mother. Demi is half-Dutch, half-Surinamese and was born a boy. Though her female identity evolved in her childhood, she did not begin her transition process until she was sixteen when she was put on the waiting list at Vrije Universiteit's Gender Clinic. It was only within the past year that she began her hormone treatment. She is intending to receive bottom surgery, but not top surgery. Demi lives and works as a woman now and intends on shedding her transgender identity. Demi is coming from the perspective of a transgender person who realized they wanted to be a woman at a very young age. She is also growing up in a society that will allow her to transition with government funding and give her legal support against discrimination. She is extremely modern, but also very young compared to the rest of my interviewees and has not had all the life experiences as the others that could have informed the opinions she expresses in her interview.

Petra: Petra is a fifty-one year old transgender woman living in Amsterdam. She grew up outside of Amsterdam in a small village with her parents and sisters. Petra wanted to be a woman since her childhood, but lived as a man until her twenties when she would occasionally wear women's clothing. It was not until she was thirty-seven that she began receiving surgeries to transition physiologically. Her first surgery was a facial feminization procedure, followed by bottom and top surgery. Most of her surgeries were performed in countries outside of the Netherlands. Petra is professionally a psychologist and worked with transgender clients for years. She also spent time living in Boston, which she described as “uproot[ing] me from keeping me in my male place” (Petra Personal Interview 2011). Petra lives and works as a woman and is celebrating this year her ten year anniversary since her

first surgery. Petra tends to have a very objective view of her transgender identity, which I think is due to her profession. She is almost hyper-aware of her limitations and who she is which is not the case for all transgender people. She could talk about the transgender process in both personal and distanced ways.

Annika: Annika is fifty –seven years old and describes herself as a secondary transsexual, but also identifies with transgender. She grew up outside of Amsterdam and currently has two sons, as well as a girlfriend. Annika did not begin to acknowledge her woman identity until 2001, well into her life. At the age of six, however, she began to have masochistic fantasies that revolved around specifically around women. Finally in 2001 she began to experiment with her female identity, which created a lot of conflict, in conjunction with her masochism. In 2003 she attempted suicide due to the stress of her conflicting identities and depression. In 2004 she began to take anti-male hormones to repress her masochism, and, in the same year, began receiving female hormones from the Genderteam at the Vrije Universiteit. Due to her battle with Crohn's Disease, she is unable to receive any sex-reassignment surgery, but she will continue to take hormones. Thus, Annika is at a standstill in her transition process and cannot completely physiologically transition. Annika dresses as a woman in public, but her children are unaware of her feminine identity. She, however, seems most happy when she is able to dress and be addressed as a woman in public and private.

Elsa: Elsa is forty-five years old and grew up in Den Haag and a smaller village in the south of Holland; currently, she lives in Haarlem. Though Elsa has felt like a woman since childhood, it is only in the past year that she began living as a woman. Previously, she would wear her mother's clothing in secrecy or dress in women's clothing in private. Her family was very strict Christians and she feared her parents would not accept her if she told them she wanted to be a woman. Earlier this year, she decided to start dressing as a woman in public and at her work. She also had a preliminary meeting with doctors at the gender clinic so that

she could begin hormones and receive sex-reassignment surgery. She will most likely not be able to receive hormone treatments or surgery for at least a year. Elsa is happy to finally express her femininity to her friends and family and she says that everyone has been very accepting of her new identity.

Sonja: Sonja is twenty-nine years old and grew up in the South of Holland, but currently lives in Amsterdam. Since childhood she did not want to be considered a boy and eventually realized that living as a woman felt right to her. Four years ago she began hormone treatments and a year ago received sex-reassignment surgery. She has yet to receive top surgery, but is considering it for the future. Unlike my other interviewees, Sonja is a lesbian and is currently dating another woman. She suggests that being a part of the gay community makes it easier for her to live as a woman. Sonja also works at a transgender organization and says that being around people who are not heteronormative adds to her quality of life as a woman. She considers herself to be privileged because she has almost no trouble living as a woman and most people do not see her transgender past.

“For male and female alike, the bodies of the other sex are messages signaling what we must do—they are glowing signifiers of our own necessities” –John Updike

The Body

The body as a tool to create intimate relationships:

Our bodies serve many purposes in our lives. They serve as the instrument through which we experience the world, our senses interpreting interactions between our bodies and other objects, even the minutest of particles. I would argue that the interaction between our bodies and the body of others is one of, if not the most, important to our experience as humans, as social creatures that have the ability to love and to care. Our bodies are the tools that we use to create and sustain relationships with others, especially intimate relationships with our partners.

Unlike cisgender people, my transgender interviewees did not want to form intimate relationships with the male bodies they were born with. A male body was not the right tool and they did not want their partners interacting with a male body, but rather a female body. Petra spoke a lot about the desire to have a female body in a relationship with her partner. Though she is not totally in favor sex-reassignment surgery, she views it as a necessary evil in order to attain a female body. She proposes that “you are giving something that is functional; you are getting something that is dysfunctional. You are a handicap person” (Petra Personal Interview 2011). Here she discusses her dilemma with the medicalization of her body, but also its importance to achieving the intimate relationships she wants:

“It was in a hospital. It was like I am sick. It shouldn’t be in the hospital. I am not sick. You might want a medical intervention, but that suits a very very very small part of what you want. What you want is a life as a woman. And you want someone to talk to about that, about the feasibility of it, about your genderness, about who am I really. So how do I frame this experience so that it makes sense, so that it goes somewhere, and does something good for me? So that if I go into a relationship, I know who at

least I am going to be in that relationship because it has to be really me” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Petra underscores the limits of simply receiving surgery and that living life as a woman is not achieved by simply going under the knife. She, however, acknowledges that to be in a relationship she needs to know “who at least [she is] going to be” (Petra, Personal Interview). It seems important to her that her partner will be interpreting her in a way that she feels confirms who she is, which is a woman.

Petra, Sonja, and Demi discussed how it would not be possible for them to be in an intimate relationship unless they had female bodies. Petra talks of the stress and consequences she faced because she did not have the body she wanted:

“You want to have sex with a body that you don’t have and that’s very, it makes you very aloof from your experience because you aren’t really grounded, you aren’t a valid person. So in terms of do I date boys or girls, it was very difficult for me because I want to be a girl therefore I kinda like girls, but I like boys better, so how does that work?” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Petra argues that without a female body she is not valid to the men she wants to be with. This assertion resonates with Butler’s theory of recognition. Petra desires to be recognized as a woman and without a female body she does not consider herself to be valid, she does not recognize herself in that relationship, nor does she believe a man will recognize her as a woman in the relationship. Petra suggests that she likes boys better, but as long as she has a female body she feels conflicted and may even feel that she should like girls. Perhaps this could be related more to a fear of “homophobia”, but nevertheless, Petra made it extremely clear that being with a man and having a vagina are pivotal to her sexual happiness. She said, with a Cheshire cat smirk on her face, “the idea of being impregnated by a man, and seeing a man and feeling I want to have your babies, that’s pretty strong. That’s something that I want. I want to have somebody’s body and preferably inside me” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Sonja also spoke about the inability to be intimate before surgery; “surgery was important to go that step further to be intimate in the relationship and to have sex” (Sonja Personal Interview 2011). Sonja spoke about her penis in a distanced manner, never directly referring to it or only calling it a “sexual organ”. This suggested to me that she was very uncomfortable in a male body and would only be truly happy in a female body. Until surgery, she had never allowed another person to touch it. She spoke about her current relationship with her girlfriend who she had been with pre-surgery and now post-surgery. Here, she discusses her apprehension with intimacy and the process they went through once she received sex-reassignment surgery:

“I didn’t want my sexual organs to be in the relationship, but a certain development in our relationship was not possible before surgery. And even though it brought up new issues of intimacy and arousal...most women discover their sex organs at a young age, so I had to catch up and since I was already in that relationship a normal step in that relationship is to become more intimate but as a person maybe it should have been become more intimate with my own body...but eventually things did get better and it feels more familiar” (Sonja Personal Interview 2011).

Though it was a struggle to simultaneously become intimate with her new body and her partner, she talks about it as an evolution that had to occur. Sonja also brings up an important point about the intimacy people experience with themselves and that transgender people experience almost a second adolescence in which they become familiar with their new vagina or penis.

Unlike Sonja and Petra, Demi expressed actual revulsion towards her penis. She made it perfectly clear to me that she not only hates having a penis, but would never be able to be with a man as long as she has a penis. Demi did not hold back her distaste for her penis when she spoke about having sex:

“But it was very awkward. I can’t have sex with that thing, it’s very gross, I can’t even imagine someone touching it, it’s just gross, you know. It’s just gross. I just cringe.”

“so you don’t like your penis?”

“(laughter) No. I don’t even like the word. Just thinking about someone touching it, that’s gross. And just gay sex is gross too” (Demi Personal Interview 2011).

Demi’s dissatisfaction with having a penis is extremely apparent. She cannot even imagine being in an intimate relationship because she cannot even stand it, let alone imagine another man wanting to touch it.

It is important to Demi, as well as Petra and Sonja to interact with their partners in a female body. But this begs the question of why is the vagina equivalent to a female body? Monique Deveaux suggests in her article “Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault” that women “conceptualize [the] relationships to their bodies as both a reflection of social construction” and as “responses to (and mediation[s] of) the cultural ideals of femininity” (Deveaux 1994 244). In order to be a woman in a relationship they feel pressure to adhere to what their culture deems feminine, which is the possession of a vagina. Especially in the case of my heterosexual interviewees, it was apparent that they feared the male’s response to the lack of vagina and that in order to be desirable and recognizable as female they must have a vagina.

From my informants’ narratives, it is evident that possessing a female body, especially a vagina, is central to their ability to form intimate relationships with their sexual partners. Petra stressed to me that being able to have sex with a female body is the most important factor in living as a woman. She said that being able to live as a woman is “very physical. If you make it less physical, it gets less real. And then it becomes about you being a doll. And you aren’t, you aren’t a doll” (Petra Personal Interview). Another interviewee, Elsa, suggests that the body is not what is most important to her relationships with others—“It is a very important thing, but not the only thing. Social things, how you respond with your mind, how people will respond to you, how you deal with it and that you are treated like a woman, so it

is more than only the body” (Elsa Personal Interview). Nevertheless, the body is a pivotal tool in building a relationship with another person. They want to be treated as a woman and interact as a woman with their partner. If their bodies are interpreted as male then the relationship between their partner and themselves changes to something that they do not desire.

The body as a confirmation of self:

I often find myself thinking about the body in relation to others, rather than in relation to the person inhabiting the body. Through the interviews, I began to see how the female body is a means through which my informants confirmed their self-identity. This often became apparent when I asked the question, “so why get surgery?” Petra’s response to this question sums up generally what my other interviewees expressed as well:

“Because that thing says something about me that I am not and then you get back to the very origin of being transsexual and that it is first and foremost an irritant after a while...and what you get won’t contradict you, so that my body won’t contradict me so brutally” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

In short, the penis contradicts the individuals’ belief that they are a woman and surgery eradicates this contradiction. Nicholson discusses the importance of the body to a person’s identity in “Interpreting Gender”. She asserts that since the 20th century, new ways of thinking about the body and the self has led the body “to serve as the source of information about the self and thus to serve as the source of information about one’s identity as male or female” (Nicholson 1994: 88). All of my interviewees stress the unquantifiable meaning of being able to have a female body and how it relieves the tension between their mind and body. They all want a vagina because that signifies to them that they are a woman, which is their *subconscious sex*. Elsa, who has yet to receive surgery, imagines how a female body will make her feel:

“I want to feel like a woman. I want to be like a woman. I do not want to feel like a transgender and I think that is an important thing. I do not want to be a third kind of sex. I want to belong to the female part” (Elsa Personal Interview 2011).

For Elsa, surgery will not only make her feel like a woman, but it will also make her feel not like a transgender person. She would find it difficult to remain outside the gender binaries for many reasons, first of which is because a male body does not align with her female identity. I would also suggest that possessing a vagina would make her a more socially viable being that is better understood in a gender binary system, but, not just socially viable to others, but to herself as well (Butler 2004).

Sonja articulates how her new body confirms her identity through an “adjustment” rather than a change:

“I never felt I was in the wrong body because you never get another body then the one you have, it’s just adjusted and I am happy with the adjustments so far. And I do feel more feminine because my body is aligned with how I feel, it hits home, but still I don’t know if that is how other women feel, so it’s just my personal experience of femininity and my body” (Sonja Personal Interview 2011).

Sonja’s sex-reassignment surgery helped her to feel more like a woman, but she brings up the important point that our bodies aren’t “wrong”, but more just possibly not the body we have in mind. This could possibly be a different scenario if Western cultures for hundreds of years did not sex the bodies in such an extreme way, if having a vagina or a penis did not automatically place you in the category woman or man.

Since this categorization does take place, my informants seek to alter their bodies to fit in the category woman. Most of my informants hinted at feeling a bit jealous of women-born-women who do not think about how their female body confirms their identity from birth. Demi spoke of this several times throughout her interview:

“Sometimes I am jealous of girls with their bodies. I can be in a relationship when I have a full body, but I’ll always have this body. Even if I get a vagina it will still be

this body. I am never going to be a real woman. You can still have, you can still look so much like a woman but you are never gonna be a real woman, even if I have an operation” (Demi Personal Interview 2011).

Demi not only discusses her jealousy, but argues that she will never be a real woman. To be a real woman implies that you have a vagina from birth. However, this belief is dependent upon a Western and historical context. Nicholson reminds us that the meaning of woman has evolved over time and has not always held the same connotations or the same characteristics (Nicholson 1994). Nicholson does acknowledge that the vagina “play[s] a dominant role within such a network [of feminine meanings] over long period of time” (Nicholson 1994: 100). This is not to say though that one cannot be a real woman if they do not possess a vagina. Demi and my other interviewees, however, currently live a society which may teach them that they are not real women, which puts pressure on them to receive sex-reassignment surgery at the very minimum in order to achieve womanhood.

But, not all transgender women receive sex-reassignment surgery and they still can the feeling of being a woman. Annika is unable to receive surgery due to a pre-existing condition. Though she wishes she could have a vagina she remains optimistic:

“I’ll have to accept that I don’t need the surgery. I am very proud of my breasts for example. When I wear this shirt I can look at them...I love this. And my hips are a little wider and the body hair doesn’t come back” (Annika Personal Interview 2011).

Annika receives hormone treatments and her breasts have grown significantly since she began treatment. For her, there are other ways in which her body can confirm her identity beyond a vagina. Wider hips, lack of body hair and breasts are all characteristics we associate with a female body, but they are often cast to the side as features which add to the female body, not make the female body like how a vagina makes a female body. I think this is due to the different sizes of breasts and body shapes, which can be so drastically different depending on the woman. Women, however, possess a vagina, no matter the size or shape. Annika’s story

underscores the idea that there is more to the female body than a vagina, nevertheless, the possession of female body characteristics is still important to one's identity.

We carry our bodies wherever we go. They define us, they shape us, and they give us meaning and create meaning. Our bodies are a canvas upon which we can express who we are and how we want the world to interpret who we are. We cannot escape the interpretations others have of our bodies, and we need our bodies in order to be with others. And, to my interviewees who had to adjust their body, had to change their bodies to achieve the interpretations they want, the body is exceedingly more important to their happiness. Possessing a vagina not only confirms who they are as women, but confirms who they are to their most intimate partners.

“One is not born a woman, but becomes one.” - Simone de Beauvoir

Femininity and Womanhood

Wanting to be a woman:

Transgender women, often from an early age, but not always, seem to feel a pull towards women and femininity; this could be considered their *subconscious sex* appearing (Serrano 2007). As they grow older and begin to have sexual fantasies and their secondary sexual characteristics mature, they begin to realize they do not want to be a boy nor be treated as one. As I spoke to my interviewees about their feelings, all of them began with the similar sentiment “I want to be a woman”. Even after they have had sex-reassignment surgery, the phrase remains the same, “I want to be a woman”. This implies that they do not feel they will ever achieve the same femaleness as a woman-born-woman. However, they take measures like surgery, hormone treatments, and wearing feminine clothes in order to be recognized as a woman by others.

Petra and I discussed the desire to be a woman in-depth:

“There was a long time where I knew I wanted to be a woman, but it has to be feasible, it has to be doable. So you can say you’re a woman but you’re not, because you don’t have the body, you don’t have the procreative capacity you don’t have the history of being a woman. The only thing that you know is that you really want to have a female body, but there are also a lot of limits to that. So you can know what you want but you can’t get what you want” (Petra Personal Interview 2001).

Petra’s comments mimic the belief held by theorists like Janice Raymond (1979) that one cannot be a woman because one doesn’t “have the history of being a woman” (Petra Personal Interview 2011). Petra mainly focuses on the fact that she does not have what is considered to be a female body, which she equates with womanhood. Since she does not have a female body she cannot give birth to children, which she also associates with womanhood. Though she intellectually understands herself to not be a woman, it does not stop her from

feeling like she wants to be one. Petra, somewhat pessimistically, suggests that “you can’t get what you want”. Petra has received sex-reassignment surgery and identifies as a woman, yet still does not consider herself to be within the same category as other women-born-women.

Petra even scoffs at transgender women who believe that they are actually women. “The whole idea that you are really a woman...I guess that some transgenders really feel like a woman but I think it’s psychotic to say that. It’s like saying you’re really on the moon, but it’s obvious you aren’t on the moon” (Petra Personal Interview 2011). Petra’s distinction between women and transgender women is important because it establishes an inherent difference that is not only perceived by a transgender woman herself, but also by others. Gendered violence, I would argue, is perpetuated and justified through this established difference. Petra cements the distinction she feels when she laments, “for women to be a woman is not an achievement, it’s a natural thing. For me it’s not natural at all. If I am put to the test I am not a woman at all. And I’ve been tested so many times” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Annika also expressed her desire to be a woman several times throughout her interview—“I want to be a woman. I can’t say that I am trapped in the body of a man, but I want to be a woman (Annika Personal Interview 2011). Annika did not acknowledge her feelings until well into her adult life. She admits that she probably repressed the feelings since childhood, but they did not begin to manifest until her 40s. Annika describes her feelings as more of a yearning, “when I realized that I wanted to be a woman, I could place it in this yearning, I could place this yearning in my sweet fantasy. But from that time on I have been looking for answers and explanations” (Annika Personal Interview 2011). Annika’s “sweet fantasy” refers to her masochistic abduction fantasy by a woman. Annika embraces her yearning to be a woman, but still wants to understand why she has these feelings. Over the past years she has come up with several reasons why she wants to be a woman. Currently,

she associates her feelings with the idea that she is still a child. She said, “I am still a child of six years olds. I am creating my own mother figuring and protecting the child in me, but knowing that the feelings won’t go away” (Annika Personal Interview 2011). Whether or not this is true, creating a story around her feelings gives them more meaning and, I would argue, legitimizes them to Annika herself and others.

Petra, on the other hand, explains her desire to be a woman through her transgender identity.

“I am transgender. If people see me as transgender that is correct. That is okay. That’s my emancipation as a transgender person. But it all hinges upon being transgender. So if all of a sudden I have to be a woman, I don’t know quite how to do it. I feel myself believable as a transgender but not as a woman” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Petra justifies her feelings by claiming the transgender identity, even though if you were to ask her what/who she is, she would say a woman. The transgender identity creates a safe space for her to want to be a woman

Demi discusses the consequences of denying the desire to be a woman and continuing to live as a boy:

“Umm, (pause) let me think...umm..I mean, I don’t know. Sometimes, I’ve been suppressing the other side of me for so long, I mean the real me, I just rolled with whatever I had as a boy. Just living but not really living, just going on. I mean I don’t know. What does it mean feeling like a woman? What does that mean? You just try what feels good and if it feels good you just go on” (Demi Personal Interview 2011).

Demi’s suppression of her desire to live as a woman denied her a full, satisfying life. Though she clearly says she does not know what it means to be a woman or feel like a woman, she recognizes that being a boy was not what she wanted. Demi goes on to say that even though she is on hormones and will receive sex-reassignment surgery “you are still missing the core elements of being a woman” (Demi Personal Interview 2011). This echoes

Petra's belief that you are not a woman if you do not have a female body or the history of women-born-women.

Though my interviewees struggle with their desires to be a woman, they all seem to be so much happier living their lives as women as opposed to men. The constant feeling of wanting to be a woman is something that does not seem to dissipate with time, and they will always be attempting to achieve womanhood. Whether or not they achieve it is up to their own perceptions about their identities.

Femininity/Womanhood as an achievement:

Womanhood and femininity as an achievement was an issue that my interviewees brought up several times while we were discussing the desire to be women. I find it difficult to separate womanhood from femininity in this research because my interviewees and I would use them somewhat interchangeably. I suppose you could argue femininity is the network of characteristics that implies womanhood or that womanhood is the sum of all the experiences held by a person who is interpreted as a woman. Not all women are feminine either and some men can be feminine, which further complicates the conflation of womanhood and femininity. Though this dilemma is important, I do not want to dwell on it too much in this research because I was not able to explore the distinctions with my interviewees. I now want to focus on the achievement of femininity, which for my interviewees seems to imply achieving a certain level of womanhood.

Sandra Bartky, in her article "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", asserts "we are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement..." (Bartky 1988: 95). My interviewees all achieve femininity through different means, whether through surgery or clothing or even mannerisms.

The achievement of femininity is dependent upon the interaction between an individual and others; one cannot achieve something if it is not recognized as achieved.

Petra delves into this concept when she discusses validating her transgender and feminine identities:

“When you are transgender, your partner is not and there are parts of you he will not want to know, or can’t understand, or parts of you he cannot validate because if he validates your transgenderism he is not validating your femininity and if he validates your femininity he isn’t validating your transgenderism” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

In this sense, her femininity and transgender identity are in conflict, both cannot exist at the simultaneously. In order to be feminine, she somewhat suggests she cannot be transgender, at least in relation to her partner. However, I think Petra would agree that validating her femininity is ultimately what she strives for in her sexual relationships, which is fairly evident from her discussions on her body.

Sonja and I talked a lot about the different ways in which she attempted to be feminine before she became more comfortable in her new female identity. For instance, Sonja would braid her hair—“the braids were something that, yeah, I could do and I like braiding my hair and I related that to femininity” (Sonja Personal Interview 2011). Sonja, as well as my other interviewees, suggested that superficial changes to their appearances were how they began to feel more feminine, though they also argued that people interpreted their behaviors as feminine, whether or not they were actively trying “to be” feminine.

Though Sonja enjoys people perceiving her as a woman, she does not like it when someone finds out she has a transgender past and compliments her on being feminine:

“People compliment me on looking good and feminine...and that’s odd because that shouldn’t be a reason to compliment someone, but it tells me that I am passable, but I am not busy with being passable. I just want to look good” (Sonja Personal Interview 2011).

This goes back to my previous point I brought up at the beginning of the section that femininity is not exclusive to women, a man or a transgender person can also possess feminine qualities. To achieve femininity then is not based upon your gender, but based upon a vibe you give off that others interpret as feminine based upon cultural constructs of femininity. This assertion, however, contradicts and complicates the importance of sex-reassignment surgery. My interviewees argue that to be a woman in a sexual relationship they need to have female genitalia, but then go on to argue that it is not just the body that defines their womanhood and femininity. It seems then that they privilege their female bodies over their other feminine characteristics depending upon the circumstances. In the case of a sexual relationship, the female body takes precedence over their female clothing, but when walking down the street, female dress is more essential.

Femininity can be seen as an achievement, but it is an achievement that does not exclusively belong to women-born-women. Referring back to Serrano's *subconscious sex*, that one is born with, femininity can also have "inborn" qualities. Any person can possess feminine characteristics, while also possessing masculine characteristics or simply possessing unique traits that cannot be explained by femininity or masculinity. Furthermore, I think it is important to ask what is a feminine characteristic? As a culture and society, we have come to interpret and perceive certain behaviors, objects, etc, as feminine. Julia Serrano points out, "once we let go of the concept of monolithic femininity—and with it, the either/or ideology that plagues nature-versus-nurture debates about gender—it becomes apparent that individual feminine traits arise from different combinations of biology and socialization" (Serrano 2007: 322). Not only do these traits arise from this combination, but the importance of them is also dependent upon the combination of socialization and biology. The female body as a trait is more or less privileged in certain occasions and the same goes for more superficial, appearance-based feminine characteristics. All my interviewees, however, seem to have come

to their own conclusions about what makes them feminine and emphasized throughout their interviews that no single characteristic or trait, biological or social, wholly defines their femininity all the time.

“Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male and female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.”- Virginia Woolf (Orlando)

Passing

Passing for the Self:

Passing is a controversial topic in the transgender community. As Julia Serrano and others have argued, passing implies that transgender people are trying to trick the public into believing they are a gender which they actually are not. Original definitions of passing follow a performative-centric model that suggests that everyone is always performing the culturally acceptable behaviors prescribed for men and women. As I conducted my interviews, the former definitions and assumptions I learned and held towards passing became painfully inadequate and reductionist. Passing is more than just an attempt to fit in. Passing is not merely a method that is actively employed by transgender people. Passing can occur subconsciously, passing can be for internal and external purposes, passing can be a safety measure, or a tool to perpetuate violence.

I asked my interviewees why they pass and if they feel external or internal pressure to pass. In this section, I will discuss the answers that explained why my informants passed for themselves. In the following section, I will examine the pressures to pass my informants faced do to external sources.

When I asked my interviewees why they passed, many first addressed the reasons they passed for their own benefit. Annika, especially, spoke about dressing as a woman with glee and enthusiasm:

“I was made up with a wig, a skirt, high heels, panties...wonderful, wonderful. I felt so happy. And when we went outside there was a man putting a sign up and he looked

at my legs. This was such a wonderful feeling. And from then on I knew I wanted to be a woman...I know this is what I am going to be” (Annika Personal Interview 2011).

This was Annika’s first time dressing as a woman in public. She enjoyed wearing female clothing because she was finally able to see herself as a woman. She spoke about it with this sense of freedom, as if the weight of being a male had been lifted off her shoulders. Annika also enjoyed the male confirmation. She absolutely loved when she felt he was looking at her legs as he would look at the legs of woman. This signaled to Annika that he was giving her recognition, which she craved. Through his recognition, she was finally able to admit to herself, “I want to be a woman”. In this case, passing was important because it allowed Annika to be recognized and interpreted as the gender she desired. She did not feel a pressure to pass by anyone; however, she had to pass to receive recognition.

This is where Mattilda finds passing problematic. Annika had to conform to social norms of femininity in order to receive recognition as a woman. Bartky describes this as “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky 1988: 103). Within this frame, Annika dressed and passed as a woman in order to receive recognition because she lives within a culture that subliminally pressures and requires her to do so. Though this may be the case, it is dangerous to fully buy into this explanation because it disregards Annika’s personal agency. Thus, it is the negotiation between cultural, disciplinary powers and Annika’s own choices that lead her to dress as a woman. Her personal agency is even more apparent because now Annika mainly dresses as a woman exclusively in her own home, “when I am alone I dress like a woman and that makes me happy” (Annika Personal Interview 2011). Julia Serrano underscores personal agency when she argues against passing-centrism and states, “for many of us, dressing or acting feminine is something we do for ourselves, not for others” (Serrano 2006: 18).

Sonja's experience with passing has been different compared to my other interviewees. Sonja first discussed how she does not really need to try to pass because her body and face look feminine without having to add any feminizing features. "It's a privilege and I am aware of that. I do know that I am privileged being passable and it makes it easy to not be preoccupied" (Sonja Personal Interview 2011). As we discussed passing more she reconsidered her stance on her lack of preoccupation:

"I feel insecure about [not wearing a bra] ...I feel that it doesn't fit my posture having small breasts and somehow I think that if I wouldn't use those attributes that I use now to make it seem like I have breasts the size I have now, it would make people think is that a woman? I am so used to having the ritual of putting on my bra and putting the things in it, it's so normal for me I don't have to be occupied with that insecurity" (Sonja Personal Interview 2011).

Sonja preoccupation with her breasts is no longer a preoccupation because it has become ritualized; she no longer sees it as something she does to confirm her womanhood. Deveaux argues that "women internalize the feminine ideal so profoundly...and to reject it is to reject one's own identity" (Deveaux 1994: 226). In the case of Sonja, she has internalized the need to have large breasts in order to confirm her identity. She also wants larger breasts so that others will not question her womanhood. "I feel like it's a punishment if people notice [my small breasts] because they will doubt me being a woman" (Sonja Personal Interview 2011). Once again, this brings up Mattilda's argument for passing as perpetuating normalization and escaping de-recognition.

Petra's reason for passing draw attention to both the perpetuation of violence through passing and gendered violence:

"Yeah, of course, because you want to have an affective life...if at every step in your life people are yelling at you...if you aren't passable you will find that at every step of the way people are putting blocks in front of you....And that is very hurtful because for me that meant fail, fail, fail" (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Passing is a protective force. If Petra passes then she will not be discriminated against or have to worry about violence. Gendered violence occurs because society has not recognized transgender people as valid beings, thus they must pass in order to fit in the accepted gender binary system.

But, should passing be used as protection? As long as people pass, then it is okay for gendered violence to continue because no one is questioning the norm. In this sense, passing is violence because it enables violence. Demi experience echoes the need for passing:

“Yeah, well as a transgender, you feel kind of trapped sometimes, you know. I’ll walk around all day biting my lip because my face looks feminine and so I don’t have a big jaw line. I’m afraid someone will see me as transgender and then I walk fast and I don’t go to certain places” (Demi Personal Interview 2011).

Demi feels a constant pressure to look feminine, not just so that people believe her to be and treat her as a woman, but so that people do not enact violence against her because she is transgender. Passing, thus, becomes both the mechanism for safety and violence. Passing as a woman keeps her safe, but the social pressure to pass perpetuates the cycle of violence by delegitimizing her identity and forcing it into hiding.

My interviewees discussed passing as something that they did not always actively attempt and claimed that passing was more about living their life as a woman than trying to fit in to the cultural norm. However, the line between wanting to live as a woman and being pressured to live as a woman seems to blur and intersect the more I probed.

Passing for others:

As I just mentioned, working out why people pass is difficult because the reasoning behind it is so intertwined with both social and internal pressures. My interviewees usually first spoke about passing as something they did for themselves, but eventually discussed other reasons. Elsa, for instance said, “I do it for myself, in the first place because I want to feel

myself as a woman and I want to express that. I hope that other people will accept me as being a woman” (Elsa Personal Interview 2011). Her first concern was herself, yet she also mentioned she seeks acceptance. Acceptance could be important to her because it confirms her identity, but also because she wants others to be comfortable with her identity.

Petra focuses specifically on the acceptance of straight men in her narrative:

“Physical attraction for straight guys very much depends on the notion the other person is female. Whereas I can only do female and that is not enough for them” (Petra Personal Interview 2011).

Since Petra is straight, she wants men to recognize her as a female. She wants to pass, physiologically and in appearance so that men will be attracted to her. She considers herself not to “be” female, but she can, at the very least, “do” female, as in dress, behave, and look like a woman. In this sense, she is passing in order to live up to the expectations of others that she seeks to have relationships with.

Demi spoke about passing for others more generally:

“I won’t even go to the mall without make-up. Forty-five minutes of make-up a day, foundation, contouring, everything. I won’t go anywhere without make-up on. But some girls are like that too. But, I just won’t because if I don’t do that it’s like a totally other face” (Demi Personal Interview 2011).

Demi implies that she presents herself to the public as a prototypical girl and hides any feature that could betray her femininity and “give her away”. She recognizes that other girls are also compelled to spend a lot of energy applying make-up, but she must do it because if she does not she will look like a completely different person than how she wants people to perceive her. She must alter her appearance for the sake of the public’s interpretation of her gender. The need to change one’s appearance to “look” feminine is underscored by Julia Serrano’s idea of the public as the “primary active participant by virtue of their incessant need to gender every person they see as either female or male” (Serrano

2007: 177). To her close friends, it probably does not matter whether she is wearing make-up or not because they understand who she is on the inside. But, the only knowledge the public has is what they see upon first glance, and the first thing they will notice is if she is a man or a woman. I think as humans we tend to categorize people as an organizational method, but this method can and does restrict people to established cultural expectations. Demi fears that she will not be recognized as not just herself, but not as a woman if she does not pass. She, also, fears the gendered violence that could occur if someone recognizes her as a transgender. These two fears are constantly working together to pressure her to pass as a woman in public.

From these stories, we see that people pass for various reasons. The complexity of the issue is emphasized by these varied responses and the inability to point to a simple answer to “why do you pass?” While my interviewees pass in order to live life the way they desire, they also acknowledge that external forces influence their desire to pass. The fear of violence against transgender people is still very present and the fear of not being accepted by both the public and even their closest partners is visible in their narratives. Passing is, above all, a way for them to see themselves as women in social and private situations. Through passing, they possess the identity they want.

"To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."- E.E. Cummings

Conclusions

The conclusions I have come to are based upon the narratives of my five informants. I am unable to make sweeping generalizations about transgender women, but there were identifiable trends throughout the interview process.

First, the possession of a female body allows transgender women to have intimate relationships with their partners. It is important for my interviewees to be a woman in their relationships with others and be treated as such. Without a vagina or other female physical characteristics, they are not the person they want to be in relation to another.

Secondly, a female body relieves the tension between their mind, or *subconscious sex* and body and confirms their self-identity woman. Living in a male body contradicts who they are and as a male they are not recognized as who they want to be.

The desire to be a woman is also a very strong feeling. They achieve womanhood through various means, either through altering their bodies with sex-reassignment surgery or changing their appearance to fit into the cultural stereotypes of femininity. However, femininity is not always an achievement, but the result of in-born traits or characteristics that our cultures have come to associate with femininity.

It also became apparent that the essentialness of having a female body is dependent upon the circumstance. In sexual relations, having a vagina is of the utmost importance, but when in public my interviewees focused more on their appearance and dress.

In terms of passing, my interviewees mainly focused on passing for themselves and its importance to confirming their female identity. They also touched upon passing as a way to prevent violence against them and prevent others from not recognizing them as women.

Above all, my interviewees seek recognition and validation of their female identity. They achieve validation and recognition through negotiating cultural norms, as well as their personal feelings and unique behaviors. It is important to their happiness and quality of life that they feel like woman and that others recognize these feelings. Passing and altering their bodies and appearance all work to create and sustain their female identities in their eyes and the eyes of others. As women they are able to lead the life they have always wanted.

We know what we are, but not what we may be.” — William Shakespeare

Recommendations for Future Research

Though I attempted to tackle as much as I could in my relatively small study, there were factors that I was unfortunately not able to discuss in my work that I believe are extremely important. First, I suggest that a longitudinal study be performed with more substantially more participants. A study that chronicles an individual’s journey from their initial dissonance between mind and body to their transition living as the opposite sex in society could offer a deeper insight into how a person is influenced by social norms. A study such as this would be very difficult to conduct because it would probably involve children, but if it could be done it would provide unquantifiable amounts of knowledge on the transgender identity and its interaction with culture.

Future studies should also focus more on the intersections between race, socio-economic status and generational differences. Throughout my study I could see that these were factors in my participants’ responses, but I was unable to grapple with these issues due to time constraints.

Finally, a sister study with female-to-male (FTM) participants should be conducted in order to see the similarities and differences between the experiences of MTF and FTM individuals. FTM men also seem to be underrepresented in transgender issues and do not receive as much media attention as MTF, at least this is what I have witnessed in the U.S.

Research on transgender issues will never be done as long as there are people out there willing to fight against normalization and discrimination and fight for equal rights and opportunities for all people—man, woman, cisgender or transgender.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Section 1: Childhood

- Tell me about your childhood
- Did you realize you were dressing differently from other boys?
- Did your parents try to make you dress or act a certain way?
- Did you have older siblings that influenced your behavior?

Section 2: Developing identity of opposite gender

- Did you ever feel masculine or have you always felt feminine or like a girl?
- What about Dutch culture influenced how you thought about your “transgender” feelings?
- Do you feel accepted by the Dutch culture?
- Did you feel homosexual or heterosexual?

Section 3: Decision to transform into other gender

- As you began to the transformation process, did you feel accepted by people in your community?
- Do you think the people around you understood what was going on?
- What kinds of names were you called?
- Did most people have a traditional conception of gender norms and binaries?
- Would you wear make-up and wigs etc if society didn’t impose it on you?
- Do you feel society imposes upon you?
- Do you feel more like a woman with your make-up and hair or the same as when you just look like yourself?

Section 4: Medical/hormonal steps to transform

- Why do transgender people want to get surgery?
- Do you think people need to get the surgery in order to “fully” be the other gender?
- Do you think you get surgery to conform to what socially and medically look like a woman?
- Would you get the surgery whether or not it’s what society would want?
- Is it important to you to mimic a biological woman’s body and processes?

Section 5: perception of current identity

- What makes you feel feminine?
- How do society’s opinions directly affect how you dress and your identity?
- Do you ever identify with your birth gender? How so?
- Do you think Dutch people keep to very much a gender binary?
- Is there room for your identity in Dutch culture?
- Do you want to shed your transgender identity?
- Do you feel like a real woman?
- What makes you feel like a woman?

Section 6: Opinions on Femininity and Masculinity

- What is your personal definition of femininity and masculinity?
- What does it mean to be a woman?
- What do you think are stereotypes about femininity? What are examples from your own experience?
- Who in your eyes represents the ultimate “woman”?
 - What about this person makes them a prototype of femininity?
- What pop culture sources do you look to for your perception of what it means to be a woman?
- Do you think there is a difference between being a woman and being feminine? If so, explain.
- Do you think a transgendered person can ever experience the world as a woman? How do you experience the world as a woman? How is it different from when you were a man?
- Why do you think transgender people can try to dress hyper-feminine? Do you think it is successful?
- What is the biggest difference between a transgender person and a cross-dresser?

Appendix B

Intrinsic Inclination Model⁷

Basic Tenets:

1. Subconscious sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation represent separate gender inclinations that are determined largely independent of one another. (This model does not preclude the possibility that these three inclinations may themselves be composed of multiple, separable inclinations, or that additional gender inclinations may exist as well.)
2. These gender inclinations are, to some extent, intrinsic to our persons, as they occur on a deep, subconscious level and generally remain intact despite social influences and conscious attempts by individuals to purge, repress, or ignore them.
3. Because no single genetic, anatomical, hormonal, environmental, or psychological factor has ever been found to directly cause any of these gender inclinations, we can assume that they are quantitative traits (i.e. multiple factors determine them through complex interactions). As a result, rather than producing discrete classes (such as feminine and masculine; attraction to women or men), each inclination shows a continuous range of possible outcomes.
4. Each of these inclinations roughly correlates with physical sex, resulting in a bimodal distribution pattern (i.e., two overlapping bell curves) similar to that seen for other gender differences, such as height. While it may be true that, on average, men are taller than women, such a statement becomes virtually meaningless when one examines individual people, as any given woman may be taller than any given man. Most people have heights that are relatively close to the average, but others fall in outlying areas of the range (for instance, some women are 6 feet 2 inches and some men are 5 feet 4 inches). Similarly, while women are more masculine than certain men, and some men more feminine than certain women.

⁷ A direct transcription from Julia Serrano's Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity