

TRANSSEXUALS' EMBODIMENT OF WOMANHOOD

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This article draws on in-depth interviews with nine white, middle-class, male-to-female transsexuals to examine how they produce and experience bodily transformation. Interviewees' bodywork entailed retraining, redecorating, and reshaping the physical body, which shaped their feelings, role-taking, and self-monitoring. These analyses make three contributions: They offer support for a perspective that embodies gender, further transsexual scholarship, and contribute to feminist debate over the sex/gender distinction. The authors conclude by exploring how viewing gender as embodied could influence medical discourse on transsexualism and have personal and political consequences for transsexuals.

Keywords: *embodying gender; transsexuals; sex/gender distinction*

Bodies may be our friends or enemies, a source of pain or pleasure, a place of liberation or domination, but they are also the material with which we experience and create gender. During the past decade, feminist sociologists have increasingly explored the relation between bodies, culture, and subjectivity (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Gagné and McGaughey 2002; Lorber and Martin 1998; McCaughey 1998). Sociologists appear to be coming to terms with how people “embody gender,” which refers not only to how people use or mold the body to signify gender but also to how such bodywork is intertwined with subjectivity (i.e., cognition and feelings). In this article, we offer additional support for an embodying gender perspective by analyzing how self-defined male-to-female transsexuals embody womanhood. Our analysis furthers our understanding of transsexuals' embodied experiences and has implications for feminist debate over the sex/gender distinction.

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Sociological research on transsexuals usually minimizes the importance of the body-subjectivity nexus. Studies that touch on how the body is used in doing and attributing gender (Bolin 1988; Ekins 1997; Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978), managing stigma and passing (Heller Feinbloom 1976; Kando 1973), or how the physical body is surgically altered (Billings and Urban 1982; Hausman 1995; Raymond 1979) tell us little about how transsexuals experience bodily transformation. Studies that apply the labeling theory (Risman 1982), examine narrative construction (Mason-Schrock 1996), analyze coming out (Gagné, Tewksbury, and McCaughey 1997), or describe transsexuals' use of ideologies (Gagné and Tewksbury 1999) neglect the body while emphasizing the process of self-definition.

Recent research by Rubin (2003) and Namaste (2000) moves transgender scholarship toward understanding the link between bodies and subjectivities. Namaste analyzed how transsexuals cope with violations of and threats to their bodies from police and discriminatory health care providers. Rubin examined female-to-male transsexuals' experiences of feeling betrayed by their birthed bodies and growing into their desired bodies. For example, Rubin's interviewees said that using hormone therapy and mastectomies to masculinize their bodies affirmed their identities as men, which evoked feelings of authenticity.¹ Our research likewise shows how transsexuals' bodywork shapes feelings of authenticity, but our interviewees expressed more contradictory feelings and also indicated that their bodywork shaped role-taking, self-monitoring, and practical consciousness (which refers to taken for granted knowledge about how to do things; Giddens 1984, 41-45).

Research on how women embody gender focuses on how they experience changing demeanor, fashioning appearance, or modifying the physical body. McCaughey (1998) showed how women who learn to subvert feminine demeanor in self-defense classes redefine womanhood and feel more assertive and confident in their everyday lives. Dellinger and Williams (1997) showed that makeup provides women opportunities for bonding and that women can experience makeup as both empowering and constraining. Gagné and McCaughey (2002) showed how women who undergo cosmetic surgery view themselves through the male gaze and feel more confident and liberated as their bodies become more palatable to the patriarchal imagination. Our analysis supports these studies' findings that bodywork shapes subjectivity and that women are agents acting within cultural and institutional constraints. Rather than focusing on women's experience of changing the body's demeanor, appearance, or physical shape, we examine how born males do these forms of bodywork in their quest to assume womanhood.

Contemporary theory and research on embodying gender echo Beauvoir's (1961) classic notion that the body is a situation. Beauvoir's position is that subjectivity is always embodied, the body is always part of one's lived experience, and personal experience is shaped not only by biographical, historical, cultural, and interactional contexts but also by how one uses his or her freedom or agency. Writing before the invention of the sex/gender distinction, Beauvoir critiqued both biological determinism and the scientific view of the body as detached from

subjectivity. Moi (1999) argued that Beauvoir's view of gender as embodied avoids problems that arise from conceptualizing gender as distinct from sex as well as postmodernist attempts to collapse the sex/gender distinction.

Psychiatrist Robert Stoller (1968, 9) invented the sex/gender distinction to understand patients who desired to transform their bodily signs of gender: He concluded that sex was "biological" and gender was "psychological or cultural." Gayle Rubin (1975) brought the distinction into feminist discourse in her critique of women's oppression and biological determinism. Sociologists often maintain the idea that sex is a biological object distinct from subjectivity and culture in key theoretical treatises on gender—whether viewing gender as an institution (Lorber 1994), a structure (Risman 1998), or a situated activity (West and Zimmerman 1987)—and continue to wield the distinction against biological determinists (Kennelly, Merz, and Lorber 2001; Risman 2001).

In contrast to these "distinctionists," many postmodern feminists (most notably Butler 1990) argue that the concept of gender overwrites sex. Postmodernists claim that transgendered people are proof that sex is malleable, which supports their more general argument that biological sex is a sociopolitical construction. And if "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender," Butler (1990, 7) argued, then "perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all." Drawing on the poststructuralist concept of the "materiality of the signifier," Butler (1993) argued that the body is material because language, which constitutes the body, is material. Butler thus collapsed the sex/gender distinction by claiming that bodies themselves are cultural byproducts. Although Butler usefully linked homophobic and sexist discourse to gender, viewed gender as a performance rather than as a static characteristic, and suggested how discourse structures the definition of sex, she failed to acknowledge that bodies are also physical. As Moi (1999, 74) pointed out, Butler conceived of "gender as a category that does *not include* the body."

Beauvoir's (1961) perspective on the body counters distinctionists' objectification of the body and postmodernists' denial of biological facts, both of which tend to disembody gender. In contrast to distinctionist assumptions that suggest the body as separate from subjectivity, Beauvoir understands subjectivity as always embodied. This contradiction leads Moi (1999, 72) to suggest that within Beauvoir's framework, "the sex/gender distinction simply does not apply." In contrast to postmodernists, Beauvoir understands that bodies are physically material and enable and limit one's behavior and experience. Our analysis of the process through which some male-to-female transsexuals embody womanhood shows how the body and subjectivity interact and how biological facts cannot simply be overwritten by cultural discourse. We thus provide some support for Moi's argument that an embodying gender perspective—grounded in Beauvoir's view of the body—is a useful alternative to distinctionist and postmodernist frameworks.

Our analysis has three intertwined objectives. First, we provide additional support for a perspective that embodies gender by showing how transsexuals' subjectivity is linked to their bodywork. In addition, whereas related empirical studies

focus on how people assumed to be women accomplish gendered bodily transformation (Davis 1995; Gagné and McGaghey 2002), decoration (Dellinger and Williams 1997), or demeanor (McCaughey 1998), we show how born males work on all three types of bodywork with the aim of assuming womanhood. Second, we build on Rubin's (2003) research on transsexual embodiment by examining how bodywork shapes not only authenticity but also self-monitoring, role-taking, practical consciousness, and other emotions such as pride, shame, confidence, and fear. And third, we explore how our analysis and, more generally, an embodied approach to gender contributes to feminist debate concerning the sex/gender distinction. In conclusion, we consider how viewing gender as embodied may shape how transsexuals define themselves and how they relate to the medical community.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data derive from in-depth interviews with nine white, middle-class, male-to-female transsexuals who were between 31 and 47 years of age. The senior author met interviewees while doing fieldwork at a support group for transsexuals and cross-dressers as part of a larger study (see Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004). Interviewees, who identified themselves as transsexuals at the beginning of support group meetings and interviews, usually said that transsexuality meant that they were "born in the wrong body" and that it was a liminal stage on the path to womanhood. Interviewees' paths were emotionally rocky and demanding of bodywork. All said they desired genital reconstruction; six had started hormone therapy; seven had begun electrolysis; seven had systematically worked on altering their voices; eight had labored to feminize their deportment, clothing, and makeup; and two had begun living full-time as women.

The senior author—who held no institutional authority over interviewees (cf Garfinkel 1967)—conducted the two-to-three-hour-long interviews in his or the interviewees' homes. He asked guiding and clarifying questions (Lofland and Lofland 1984) about "coming to terms," how they carried out and experienced their bodily transformation, and coming out to others.

Interviewees frequently said they had been depressed and sometimes suicidal before adopting and accepting the transsexual identity, harassed when presenting themselves publicly as women, shunned by some friends and family members, shamed or ignored by unsympathetic therapists, and sometimes excluded from women's groups. As their transformation progressed and their bodies came to affirm their self-definitions, interviewees harvested emotional rewards, although transembodiment was not a panacea.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed inductively. We first read the transcripts and wrote summaries of each interview, which led us to focus on transsexuals' bodywork. We then used a qualitative analysis program, *Atlas ti*, to code and sort the interview data into 56 topical files titled, for example, electrolysis or voice alteration. By comparing and contrasting the sorted data, three basic

practices of embodying gender emerged: Retraining, redecorating, and remaking the body. After writing a draft of the analysis, it became clear that interviewees were changing not only their bodies but also their subjectivities. Exploring the implications of this insight helped us situate the analysis within research on embodying gender and transsexuals as well as the sex/gender debate.

FINDINGS

Interviewees had to overcome many material obstacles as they worked on their bodies. If their physical bodies or comportment betrayed them when they presented themselves as women, they risked embarrassment, fear, and assault. Research suggests that transembodiment is more work intensive for male-to-female transsexuals than it is for female-to-male transsexuals (Rubin 2003)—largely because gender norms surrounding appearance, demeanor, and the body are more stringent for women. Below, we analyze how interviewees retrained, redecorated, and reshaped their bodies and how this project shaped their subjectivities in expected and unexpected ways.

Retraining the Body

A key part of interviewees' projects involved retraining their bodies. Because all but one said that they had not been effeminate boys or men, they had to overcome habits of moving and speaking like men, which simultaneously reconditioned their subjectivities. In contrast to the female-to-male transsexuals whom Rubin (2003) interviewed (who had masculine demeanors to start with), most of our interviewees created detailed curricula and spent much time practicing and monitoring their bodily movements and speech. Transsexuals' retraining of the body was linked to changes in role-taking, self-monitoring, practical consciousness, and emotions, suggesting limits of the distinctionist assumption that the body is not an object separate from subjectivity. Interviewees worked diligently to condition the physical body to move and speak differently, which suggests that the postmodernist assumption that bodies are mainly constituted through discourse is also limited.

Learning how to change their demeanor shaped interviewees' role-taking. Like Garfinkel's (1967, 146) Agnes, our interviewees acted as "secret apprentices" who created a curriculum that would help them transform. By studying women they knew—lovers, coworkers, and friends—interviewees learned how to not only retrain their demeanor and voice (something that Agnes apparently did not have to work on) but also take women's perspectives. Because interviewees were raised as boys and tried to conform to hegemonic masculinity, taking women's perspectives, even in limited ways, subverted men's usual cognitive habit of seeing women as mere objects. For example, Kris,² a Vietnam veteran who occasionally cross-dressed in front of two former wives, said,

With the three wives I had, I studied them. I mean I studied them. It wasn't just observation. I watched how they did things. How they held a cigarette, how they sat, how they walked, how they gestured . . . picking up a fork, the way a woman drives a car. Men don't realize it, but everything is so different. . . . A woman holds a cigarette out toward the end of her fingers, and a male holds a cigarette down here [near the knuckles]. . . . When a woman drives a car, both hands are not on the sides; they're at the top [and] the thumbs are always above the steering wheel. . . . If you start listening, when [women] end a sentence, they go up. The voice inflection will always go up. And when you do that, it softens your voice.

Similar to young girls trying to learn how to be women, interviewees also analyzed media representations for clues on how to embody womanhood. Karen, who kept her transsexuality secret from her wife and teenage daughter, clandestinely learned about feminine demeanor while watching television with her family: "I watch a lot of women on TV. Women touch more. They are more intimate with each other. They are not afraid of showing emotion. They smile more. They are not afraid to express vulnerability. . . . Basically, learning how to sit, gestures, the tilt of the head, smile, touching you. Those are all mostly female things I've picked up through the process of watching TV."

Overall, whether analyzing real or fictional women, interviewees used cognitive role-taking to break down the task of embodying womanhood into small units of behavior, such as how to pick up a fork, display emotion, or speak the language of subordinated people. Some added that retraining their bodies helped them venture beyond cognitive role-taking into empathic role-taking. Kris said that observing her wife's demeanor led her to imagine what embodying womanhood felt like, which facilitated letting go of some masculine elements of her personality. "[My third ex-wife] was an ultrafeminine woman: Actions, speech, behavior. I envied her. I would just sit and watch her and watch her. And it was almost like I could physically feel myself growing into her. That was the feeling. It was like all of a sudden, I was her. I started to lose more and more control over the masculine part of me." Envisioning oneself encased in a woman's body enabled Kris to transcend maleness, an escape that evoked a sense of comfort and joy. Such empathic role-taking subverted the usual working of masculinist selves, which are conditioned to avoid feeling what women feel (Schwalbe 1992).

Although researchers have noted that male-to-female transsexuals often diligently practice changing their "body movement and voice" with the aim of passing (Bolin 1988, 134), it is less clear how this work shapes subjectivity. Similar to newcomers in women's self-defense classes (McCaughey 1998), our interviewees said that the initial retraining of their bodies intensified self-monitoring and feelings of inauthenticity. As Shelly, who as a man had suffered stress-related seizures, put it, "I was raised in a man's world, so I'm trying to relearn the way I was supposed to be. . . . Like, walking like a lady or getting out of a car like a woman, things like that. Now I have to consciously think about it; it's not just something that comes automatically." Similarly, Kris said, in trying to change her voice, "I had to just really concentrate and say to myself, 'I have to always remember to always make my

voice go up.' ” The increased self-monitoring and policing ironically made enacting their self-definitions feel inauthentic, at least initially. Developing “a voice you can live with,” as one interviewee put it, also taxed authenticity—especially when using her feminine voice around people who had, until recently, thought of her as a man. As Taylor, who had come out only a few months earlier, explained, “It just feels so false to change my voice around people who knew me in a different way.”

Like with women in self-defense classes (McCaughy 1998, 290), repetitive practice of interviewees' feminized bodily movements and voices installed them into “bodily memory.” As interviewees practiced at home, in the car, at support group meetings, and at public outings, their newly adopted voices and body movements became a taken for granted aspect of their practical consciousness. Kris, for example, said that intensive practice made holding her car's steering wheel with hands at the top and thumbs up “feel natural” and that although she had previously needed to “really concentrate and say to myself, ‘I have to always remember to make my voice go up,’ now it's just natural.” Jenny, who had just come out to her dissertation chair, said that besides her voice, which she was still working on, gesturing in a feminine manner “to a great extent now comes naturally.” As bodily memory kicked in, what felt authentic changed to match what was culturally prescribed for the bodies they chose to create. “Feeling the part” is how Karen described it.

Before interviewees began systematic retraining, they had adopted the label “woman” as their core self-definition. Hoping to maximize the chances that this self-definition would be affirmed in their everyday lives, interviewees worked to recondition their body movements and vocalizations—which altered subjectivity. Creating a curriculum of behavior modification helped feminize interviewees' role-taking. Although their initial practicing of gendered demeanor increased self-monitoring and feelings of inauthenticity, consistent practice enabled interviewees to install feminized body movements and speaking patterns into their practical consciousness, which fostered feelings of authenticity. Transsexuals' retraining of the body thus suggests that the subjectivity and the body are not easily separated and that the body is physically material and conditioned, which problematizes some key distinctionist and postmodernist assumptions and offers additional support for viewing gender as embodied.

Redecorating the Body

If interviewees had successfully retrained their bodies but continued to ornament themselves in a typically masculine fashion, audiences would have likely defined them as feminine men or gay—especially if they did not change their material bodies. Clothing and makeup not only help transsexuals pass as women (Bolin 1988; Heller Feinbloom 1976; Kando 1973) but also shape how they embody womanhood. In contrast to distinctionist assumptions that the body and subjectivity are separate, our analysis shows how subjective experience is shaped through bodily decoration. In contrast to postmodernist assumptions, our findings illustrate not

only that decoration is a kind of cultural text but that decoration also accommodates, reshapes, and retrains the material body. Overall, our analysis of interviewees' redecoration supports theory (Bartky 1990; Beauvoir 1961) and research (Dellinger and Williams 1997) on embodying gender that points out that decorative work shapes women's subjectivities in contradictory ways.

Interviewees indicated that feminine decoration disciplined the body and subjective experience. Joyce said that she often had to make a "conscious effort" to not "sit with [her] legs spread" but that wearing long skirts "reinforces it a lot more." Shelly said that walking like a woman was easier when she wore women's shoes. Interviewees also learned that feminine decoration could be accidentally botched by navigating the body in a masculine fashion, which intensified the need to monitor body movements. For example, Kris said she discovered that the reason many women hold cigarettes near the tips of their fingers "is that you don't smudge your lipstick."

Interviewees thus suggested that wearing women's clothing and makeup shaped their bodies into feminine conformity, which over time, helped feminine gestures feel authentic. Clothing is more than a gendered text; it helps transform the physical body into a gendered vessel. In further contrast to the postmodernist assumption that the body is a cultural artifact, interviewees said their corporeal bodies often shaped how they could or needed to decorate themselves as women. Many interviewees said their foot size and height were impediments to finding fashionably feminine accoutrements. In addition, interviewees viewed makeup as required because of biology. Joyce, a Navy veteran, said, "There's no way of going out without [makeup]. A man trying to pass as a woman cannot, mostly because of the beard, but also because skin color and texture are different. Makeup softens that." The combination of thick thighs and masculine genitals created another problem for Joyce, who had been a semiprofessional bicyclist: "If I'm going to avoid having a bulge in the front of my skirt, there's only one place to put it, and for me that space is already taken—just with the leg muscles." Her initial strategy was to wear loose-fitting pleated skirts. Joyce later adopted "the tuck": She guided her testicles into her abdominal cavity through the holes from which they originally emerged, which opened up some space between her thighs for her penis. Joyce wore tight-fitting underpants to keep this arrangement in place, which widened her fashion options. Thus, while biological facts sometimes restricted interviewees' gendered decoration, gendered attire sometimes molded the physical body to better match gendered cultural meanings.

Learning to redecorate their bodies to signify womanhood led interviewees down an emotionally ambiguous path that evoked shame and pride, authenticity and inauthenticity, empowerment and disempowerment, and confidence and fear. They often made mistakes, which provoked shame or embarrassment about their appearance, especially when going out in public.

Joyce, who was more than six feet tall and had been experimenting with makeup for only a few months, said, "I've made some terrible messes. . . . When I first went out with makeup, I looked like a drag queen!" As Marzie, who learned about

crossing cultures in the Peace Corps, put it, "Most of us end up wearing something really hideously inappropriate. I have a pink ribbon, but I had to have it, and I've got a miniskirt, although I don't wear it in public." Defining such mistakes as part of an adolescent-like phase of transition, or as "the same ones that little girls make when they first start playing in mommy's makeup," as Erin put it, helped mitigate feelings of shame.

Education and practice were also useful in mitigating shame, and when done collectively with other transsexuals, they also provided bonding opportunities. Interviewees said they educated themselves by reading and sharing books such as *Blue Eyeshadow Should Be Illegal*, inviting makeup professionals to support group meetings for discussion and demonstration, participating in Mary Kay makeup parties for trans women, systematically observing what real and fictional women wear in different social situations, talking with supportive nontrans women, exchanging decorative information and techniques on transgender e-mail lists, asking for advice at department store cosmetic counters, discussing clothing and appearance during support group meetings, and in Joyce's case, having a consultation with a New York "transformation expert" who specialized in refashioning men into women. Similar to women who talk about makeup at work (Dellinger and Williams 1997), these educational experiences provided opportunities for interviewees to bond with other women.

Decorative education was both empowering and disempowering for interviewees. On one hand, it provided practical knowledge that enabled them to pass, which is to say that it protected them from public harassment and violence. For example, Sue spent \$250 on makeup at her first Mary Kay party and said it was "one of the reasons that I was able to get out and pass so soon." On the other hand, their redecorative education positioned them as submissive to profit-seeking cultural "experts." Much of this expert knowledge was detailed and demanding, as Karen, who preferred Carole Jackson's color analysis system, explained: "Carole Jackson has coined the four seasons—winter, spring, summer, and fall—to coordinate with people's skin tones, eyes, hair . . . makeup, and clothing. My colors are bold bright colors as compared to Erin [who is] a muted color. . . . So once I identified the clothing I was supposed to wear—so I don't look washed out—and the right tints and shades of eye color and [foundation], it really helped." Following decorative systems required Karen and others to work on decorating their bodies in a mechanical, "paint by numbers" approach rather than a more creative, "working with a blank canvas" approach. Such knowledge was experienced as empowering to interviewees, even though it limited their creative expression and conditioned them to feel good about supporting the profiteers and promoters of gender differentiation.

Makeup application evoked both authenticity and inauthenticity in many interviewees. Shelly echoed other transsexuals when she said, "Applying makeup sometimes feels like I am putting on some kind of mask. But what it amounts to is, you know, the kinds of things that have gone on subliminally for grown women. But I haven't had the chance to practice." As Shelly's words suggest, although interviewees' bodywork was designed to maximize authenticity, decorating the body

could sometimes feel more like impersonation than embodying womanhood. Continual practice, however, led most interviewees to feel authentic about the practice. For example, Joyce said that applying makeup every evening before she logged on to chat with other transsexuals, “even though nobody saw me, except the cats,” eventually made face painting feel “natural.” Similar to our analysis of bodily retraining, the mundane repetition of such decorative work led most interviewees to feel authentic when making themselves into ornamental objects, which is to say that it became part of their practical consciousness. Fashioning the body as an object cannot be separated from subjective experience.

Wearing women’s clothing did not evoke as much ambivalence as makeup for most interviewees, perhaps because, as Marzie, a Ph.D. student in the social sciences, put it, “clothing is the most significant marker of gender.” When Shelly wore women’s clothes, she felt “freer to be me,” “more confident,” “more spontaneous,” and “like my inner strength is coming out.” Erin felt “comfort in terms of fulfilling my inner sense of identity, of expressing on some level who I really am.” Joyce felt less angry and less like a “misfit.” Jenny lost her “nervous habits” when dressing like a woman: “I’m much more aligned. Actually, I like myself; which is something that I never thought would be true. For 30 years, I tried to train myself to like myself; all of a sudden, I look in the mirror and go ‘Yeah!’” Borrowing from cultural notions that pregnant women glow, Karen said that redecorating herself triggered a “glow stage”: “At a point in this transition period . . . maybe either looking good in the mirror or it may be after 2 hours or it may be a 10-hour process of getting to a positive high. At this point, it’s what’s called the glow stage, and this is my terminology. When I start to glow, it’s a continuous time until . . . I have to transition back. [Question: When you get to the glow stage, does it mean that you feel totally good about yourself?] Totally female.” In short, the more interviewees practiced and became competent decorating themselves as women, the more they felt confident, free, and “totally female.” Like nontrans adolescent girls (Bartky 1990; Beauvoir 1961), most interviewees thus subjectively conditioned themselves to enjoy decorating themselves as ornaments.

Three interviewees who defined themselves as feminists, however, had reservations about makeup and traditionally gendered clothing. For example, Marzie said, “I’ve always identified with women coming from a feminist perspective. And so I’ve always kind of rejected things that oppress women; you know, the way women are traditionally treated in society. A lot of this clothing and makeup are things that I’ve always thought were ridiculous. . . . I think [clothing and makeup] become harmful when they are something that you are forced to do or you have to do in order to be accepted, to fit into what society expects of you.” The pressure to conform to the gender binary, however, sometimes led feminist transsexuals to question or compromise their politics. After delivering the above critique, Marzie added, “I’m hoping that I don’t have to do that. But I’m not certain, you know. I’m wondering if I do have to start wearing a lot of makeup and dressing in more traditionally feminine ways and try to get people to think of me as female.” The desire to be affirmed as women and “conformity pressures” (Gagné and Tewksbury 1998)

thus motivated some feminists to question their political values, which further strained feelings of authenticity (see Erickson 1995).

Transsexuals' stories suggest that decorative practices not only aid transsexuals in passing (Bolin 1988; Heller Feinbloom 1976; Kando 1973) but also shape how gender is subjectively experienced. Interviewees' bodily redecoration involved much more study and experimentation than what female-to-male transsexuals report (Rubin 2003), reflecting the fact that women do more than their fair share of bodywork aimed at symbolizing gender difference. In support of other research on embodying gender (Dellinger and Williams 1997), interviewees' accounts illustrate how redecorating the body can evoke contradictory feelings: Authenticity and inauthenticity, empowerment and disempowerment, pride and shame, confidence and fear. In contrast to distinctionist assumptions, our analysis thus suggests that the body is not an object distinct from subjectivity. Furthermore, in contrast to the postmodernist assumption that biology is a cultural artifact, our analysis suggests that the cultural rendering of the gendered body via decoration must accommodate, reshape, and retrain the material body.

Remaking the Body

As interviewees made progress retraining and redecorating their bodies, their corporeal bodies continued to project discrepant signs of gender. They could not just use discourse to overwrite their physical bodies; they needed to remake their physical bodies to fit cultural discourse (cf Butler 1990, 1993). Calling into question distinctionist assumptions, interviewees' remaking of their physical bodies was intimately tied to their self-perception as objects, feelings of authenticity, acceptance of pain for bodily conformity, and for some, stereotypical emotional orientations. Transsexuals began altering their bodies by first focusing on relatively minor changes that did not foreclose manhood and then proceeded to more permanently change their physiques.

Interviewees' accounts of bodily transformation implied a change in taking the perspective of a generalized other (Mead 1934). More specifically, interviewees were similar to women who undergo cosmetic surgery (Gagné and McGaughey 2002, 834) in that the cognitive process of bodily evaluation was filtered through "the hegemonic male gaze." Taylor, who as a man had enjoyed weight lifting, was currently "letting [her] arms atrophy." Shelly said, "I'm trying to save up money for the Hair Club for Men because I have a receding hairline." Although Karen said she pretty much "fit the mold of the average woman," she thought she needed to "lose about 15 to 20 pounds." Like many women, they became the objects of their own objectification (Beauvoir 1961).

Another subjective consequence of transforming the material body involved conditioning themselves to accept the pain and financial cost of feminizing the body. Electrolysis provides an example. The "worst part" about electrolysis, said Marzie, "is that it's so expensive. But the pain is almost as bad." Taylor, echoing others, said, "my skin reacts very badly; I get swelling and breaking out." Marzie

and a few other interviewees went to an electrolysisist who charged \$50 an hour, and they could expect to endure about 200 hours' treatment (Bolin 1988). The interviewees could not ignore the existence of biological facts, and changing their corporeal selves was clearly intertwined with subjectivity.

As interviewees approached their real-life test—the period in which they had to live full-time as women for at least a year before they could have sex-reassignment surgery—they began taking synthetic hormones. Hormone therapy was emotionally intense for interviewees in part because it made impotent culturally defined embodiments of manhood while instigating the development of corporeal signs of womanhood. As Erin, who was planning to begin taking hormones soon after the interview, put it,

Starting the hormones . . . of course has the physical side effects, which are kind of trivial compared to what it does to you emotionally. [Question: What does it do?] There's two aspects to the emotional impact. Part of it is just the knowledge of what you are doing to yourself. The knowledge that if you do this long enough that you're going to become sterile, probably permanently; you're going to become impotent; you're going to lose interest in sex; knowing before you grow breasts that you are going to grow breasts; knowing before your hips and thighs fill out that they are going to; and then dealing with all of those things emotionally as they happen.

Similar to female-to-male transsexuals (Rubin 2003), interviewees' transformation of secondary sex characteristics increased feelings of authenticity. As Kris put it, "One morning I was standing [in front of the mirror] and I turned sideways and I went, 'Damn, there's a little something there [i.e., breast development].'" [Q: How did that make you feel?] I was in the best mood. I was like, 'I don't believe this; look at this!' I can see the woman. She's there. It's not pretend. It's not padded bras and tons of padding and taping and everything else. Now it's real." Interviewees did not want breast implants or padded bras; they wanted the most natural-like development possible, given the state of medical technology. Growing breasts brought forth unprecedented feelings of authenticity as women. Although interviewees believed they had always been women on the inside, changes to the physical body shaped how they experienced womanhood. As Beauvoir (1961) pointed out, womanhood is an ever-changing becoming.

A few interviewees believed that hormones changed their emotions and interests in stereotypical ways. Marzie said, after she began taking hormone pills,

I felt a lot more emotional, a lot more in touch with my feelings. And I was able to express my feelings a lot better. . . . It seems like I get more depressed, more easily, more often than I did before. . . . My interests have changed a lot. It used to be that when I go into a bookstore, I'd go to the science and computer section or whatever, and—in the last couple years I've been getting a lot more into nature, like growing plants and things—and so no matter when I go to the book store, first I go and check out the gardening books. . . . I'm definitely very much more into relationships. You know, I mean connecting with people and being in nature, and not at all into technology.

As some interviewees' bodies began growing into cultural definitions of womanhood, their subjective embodiment of those definitions thus also intensified. It was as if the changes in their physical bodies gave them permission and opportunities to further feminize their subjectivities.

As transsexuals rid themselves of facial hair and developed breasts, the most culturally cherished sign of manhood—the penis—became a source of increased inauthenticity. As Jenny said, hormones “make your testicles shrink. You hardly get an erection anymore. If you do cum, nothing comes out.” Having lost its virility, the penis became merely an uncomfortable reminder of their gender-discrepant bodies. Kris summed it up by saying, “Everything from the waist down, that’s got to go.” Erin said, “Some people, including myself, have a great loathing for their genitals. I find my genitals repulsive. . . . I will be glad when they are gone; an eagerly anticipated departure.” Although interviewees believed that remaking their genitalia would mitigate inauthenticity, they did not believe that surgery itself was the key to womanhood. Jenny expressed this view bluntly: “If you’re not a woman before you go to Montreal [for surgery], you won’t be one after they hack it off and turn it inside out.”

As dieting, electrolysis, and hormones altered interviewees' bodies and surgery promised to change the genital fabric of the self, threads of subjectivity were also woven to embody womanhood. As we have shown, basic body modifications were intertwined with a shift in taking the perspective of the generalized other, developing breasts increased feelings of authenticity, and the penis became a source of increased inauthenticity. Interviewees' accounts thus oppose distinctionist assumptions and support research on cosmetic surgery (Gagné and McGaughey 2002) that indicates that the body and subjectivity are intertwined. Our analysis thus also counters the tendency of research on transsexuals' body modification to downplay subjective experience (Billings and Urban 1982; Hausman 1995; Raymond 1979). Furthermore, in contrast to Butler (1990, 1993), transsexuals' changing of biological facts suggests that biological facts cannot be reduced to language.

DISCUSSION

Interviewees' trans-embodiment of womanhood was an arduous process that involved not only retraining, redecorating, and remaking the physical body but also reconditioning subjectivity. As trans women investigated how to retrain their demeanor and voices, they practiced taking women's perspectives, both cognitively and empathically, which subverted the usual workings of masculine selves. Learning to gesture and talk differently and to apply makeup initially led to self-monitoring and inauthenticity. But their repetition of the bodywork instilled the practices into their practical consciousness, which fostered authenticity. For many interviewees, redecorating the body evoked many conflicting emotions: Empowerment and dependency, pride and shame, and confidence and fear. In addition, remaking the physical body evoked in interviewees feelings of authenticity

and joy, conditioned them to reluctantly accept the emotional and financial costs of body conformity, shaped how they took the role of the generalized other, and led some to adopt stereotypical emotional orientations.

Our research offers support for viewing gender as embodied, which has implications for debate over the sex/gender distinction. Interviewees' self-definitions as women with male bodies suggest on the surface that sex and gender are distinct, as Stoller (1968) argued. But this rhetoric of selfhood should not be equated with proof of the sex/gender distinction. Transsexuals' distress with and alienation from the bodies they were born into—which motivated them to risk their relationships and often their economic and physical security to embody womanhood—suggest that the body is not clearly separate from subjectivity. Our findings call into question the distinctionist compartmentalization of subjectivity and the body by showing how transsexuals' bodywork is linked to role-taking, self-monitoring, feelings of authenticity and pride, and practical consciousness. Our data thus offer some support for Moi's (1999) claim that the distinctionist framework is limited in its ability to shed light on embodied experience.

Because our analysis shows how people can transform some biological indicators of sex, it has affinity with the postmodernist position that sex is socially constructed (Butler 1990, 7). But our data indicate that theories of gender should include the material and experiencing body. For example, our findings show that transsexuals used the body as a resource for constructing the gender category of woman. Similarly, our data call into question Butler's (1990) statement that bodies can be reduced to cultural discourse. We found that transsexuals' material bodies enable and limit how they can be culturally perceived. Our analysis also shows that transsexuals' bodywork is tied to cognition and feelings. Thus, while our findings support the postmodernist claim that sex is socially constructed and that the sex/gender distinction has shortcomings, gender should not be considered as disembodied.

Our article provides additional support for a perspective that embodies gender by making an empirical contribution to research on how gender, the body, and subjectivity interact. More specifically, our data corroborate studies that show how women's demeanor (McCaughey 1998), bodily transformation (Davis 1995; Gagné and McCaughey 2002), and decoration (Dellinger and Williams 1997) shape role-taking, emotions, and practical consciousness. Whereas the aforementioned studies focus on one or another form of bodywork, we examined all three and showed how they were sometimes intertwined. Our analysis also suggests that bodywork not only helps one be a certain kind of woman but enables one to inhabit and experience the category of woman—even if trans women's life experience is in many ways different from that of nontranssexual women. Overall, our analysis supports an embodied approach to gender, which understands the body as socially constructed, subjectively experienced, and physically material.

How might viewing gender as embodied reshape sociological theories of gender? As Martin (2004) noted, incorporating an embodied perspective into theories that define gender as an institution (Lorber 1994; Martin 2004) or structure

(Risman 1998) draws attention not only to how gendered bodies inhabit the social world but also to how the social institution of gender inhabits bodies and shapes subjectivities. Recognizing gendered institutions as embodied also helps shed light on how embodiment maintains or resists inequality (Dellinger and Williams 1997). In addition, combining an approach that views gender as embodied with ethnomethodological or interactionist research deepens our understanding of how doing or constructing gender links the body, culture, and subjectivity (McCaughey 1998). Viewing the body as a situation may also help ethnomethodological (West and Fenstemaker 1995) and interactionist efforts (Schwalbe et al. 2000) to understand how multiple forms of inequality are reproduced and challenged. The body is, after all, a place where various oppressions meet.³

What implications does our study have for transsexual scholarship? Whereas previous research suggests that the body is used in doing gender (Bolin 1988; Ekins 1997; Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978), used in displaying gender and passing (Heller Feinbloom 1976; Kando 1973), or subjected to medical interventions (Billings and Urban 1982; Hausman 1995), we show how retraining, redecorating, and remaking the body interact with subjectivity. Interviewees revealed themselves to be agents acting within social constraints who had rich and often contradictory emotional lives. In addition, whereas much transsexual research emphasizes self-definition and neglects the body (Gagné and Tewksbury 1999; Gagné, Tewksbury, and McCaughey 1997; Mason-Schrock 1996; Risman 1982), our data support Rubin's (2003) findings that transsexuals' transformation of the body is crucial to validating self-definitions and fostering authenticity. We build on Rubin's research by showing how retraining, redecorating, and remaking the body also shape habits of cognition, feeling, and practical consciousness.

How might viewing gender as embodied—which we have suggested is incompatible with key assumptions of the sex/gender distinction—shape how transsexuals define themselves? Rubin (2003, 19) argued that transcending the distinction “would leave no room for individuals who experience an existential rift between gender (identity and role) and their sex (bodies).” It is true that transsexuals often adopt distinctionist rhetoric to make sense of their desire to embody womanhood: “My gender identity is at odds with my sex.” However, it does not follow that the sex/gender distinction is the only discourse through which claiming a transsexual identity is possible. Transsexuals could, for example, draw on Beauvoir's (1961) notion of the body as a situation to assert transsexuality: “Others' reactions to my body are inconsistent with my sense of who I am and how I want to be treated, and so I will exercise my freedom and choose to embody gender differently from what others expect.” Adopting discourse that embodies gender may also lead transembodied people to develop an alternative to the medicalized label “transsexual.”

Part of the reason that transembodied people often use a distinctionist discourse to define themselves is because the American Psychiatric Association's (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*' definition of gender identity disorder (GID) is based on the sex/gender distinction (Hausman 1995).

Transsexuals must persuade a psychiatrist to label them with this mental disorder before endocrinologists and surgeons will agree to help transform their bodies. In addition, the public health care system of Canada and a handful of U.S. private insurers that cover medical procedures desired by some transsexuals require a diagnosis of GID.

Critics argue that GID legitimates the stigmatization of transsexuals, which in turn fosters discrimination, harassment, and violence against, as well as suicide and other self-defeating behavior among, transgendered and genderqueer people.⁴ Critics also point out that homophobic parents and psychiatrists use GID as a resource to force gender-variant children to undergo therapy in attempt to “straighten them out” (Burke 1996).

Often using rhetoric that has affinity with a discourse that embodies gender, a plethora of proqueer organizations have urged the American Psychiatric Association to reform the GID label in a way that protects gender-variant children, depathologizes transsexuals, and encourages insurers to cover medical intervention.⁵ More specifically, advocates for reform argue that GID should be replaced with an alternative label (such as “gender dysphoria”) that (1) emphasizes a person’s distress with the gendered body or its expected display and behavior, (2) is transferred from a list of mental disorders to a list of medical conditions, and (3) makes clear that transsexuals often benefit from medical intervention. Proqueer psychiatrists and activists could use a discourse that embodies gender and transcends the sex/gender distinction as a resource to further press for GID reform. Success, of course, ultimately depends on negotiations among American Psychiatric Association elites who may be reluctant to give up their authority to police and regulate how children and adults embody gender.⁶

Transgender activists have also identified the feminist movement’s discourse on bodily self-determination as key to trans liberation (Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004). For example, the International Bill of Transgender Rights—created by a group of trans lawyers and widely distributed through the Internet—asserts 10 basic rights that its authors say every human being should be entitled to, including the right to freely express gender and sexuality, the right to competent medical care, and the right to control and change one’s own body. As feminist movements against men’s interpersonal violence, warmongering, genital mutilation, and involuntary servitude and for reproductive rights, sexual liberation, and prostitutes’ rights suggest, feminists have long understood that securing bodily sovereignty is the basis of freedom. Outside of academia, many feminists—especially third wavers but also the National Organization for Women, for example—recognize the link between transgendered people’s and women’s liberation and support transsexuals’ struggle to own their own bodies.

Without asserting transsexuals’ right to bodily sovereignty, inside of academia, feminist sociologists usually emphasize that transsexuals’ bodywork is a result of and helps reproduce overly restrictive gender norms (Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997; Heller Feinbloom 1976; Lorber 1994; Mason-Schrock 1996; Risman 1982). Working within the distinctionist framework, culture becomes

more important to critique and target for change than bodily disfranchisement. And while most transsexuals and nontranssexuals discipline their bodies to conform to gendered expectations, it does not follow that people should be denied the right to control their own bodies. A perspective that embodies gender can resonate more fully with a feminist politics of the body, reminding us that how people police bodies is at least as important as how individuals embody gender. As our study of transsexuals suggests, viewing gender as embodied can us help uncover how bodies and subjectivities are implicated in the patterns of activity that create, reproduce, and challenge oppression.

NOTES

1. For Rubin (2003), feelings of authenticity arise when others affirm one's self-definition, and for Mason-Schrock (1996), authenticity arises through constructing narratives that bolster one's self-definition. The analysis presented here similarly suggests that constructing bodies to confirm to an ideal self evokes feelings of authenticity. We also draw on other social-psychological knowledge about authenticity, namely, that in contemporary society, people tend to feel more authentic the less they scrutinize their behavior (Turner 1976) and people feel more authentic when their actions reflect their values (Erickson 1995).

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. We should note that transcending the sex/gender distinction does not interfere with our ability to refute biological determinism. As Beauvoir (1961) demonstrated, we just need to skillfully and consistently deny that biological facts justify or cause women's oppression.

4. The term "transgender" is currently used to describe not only transsexuals, but also part-time cross-dressers and drag queens/kings. People who define themselves and try to live outside or subvert the gender binary often adopt the term "genderqueer."

5. Groups that have called for gender identity disorder (GID) reform include BiNet USA, the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, the Human Rights Campaign, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, GenderPAC, GID Reform Advocates, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the International Foundation for Gender Education, the National Organization for Women, the National Youth Advocacy Coalition, and Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

6. While queer activists have protested GID inside and outside of the American Psychiatric Association annual meetings at least since 1993 and have some allies who are members of the American Psychiatric Association (Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004), the American Psychiatric Association is controlled by institutional elites who are often hesitant to declassify mental disorders, perhaps because doing so delegitimizes their labeling industry. For example, at the 2003 American Psychiatric Association annual meeting, there was a special session on GID in which a founder of GID Reform Advocates presented reasons for reforming GID. A prominent psychiatrist—who headed the group that first included GID in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 1994)—countered by saying that a discrepancy between one's gender identity and sex "is a dysfunction," while a former American Psychiatric Association president added that a transsexual "is not a normal sexual variant" (Hausman 2003, 25).

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