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Reflexive Transembodiment

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As Florian Znaniecki (1925:83) notes, we often use the visual cues of another's "body" to "schematize . . . the person into several classes [such] as male or female." At birth, medical authorities and adults define the bodies of transsexuals as indicating a sex category to which they no longer identify. As explained by Jenny, one of our interviewees, "I don't care if I have a dick, I'm a woman." Transsexuals embark on a journey to alter their bodies so as to be seen by themselves and others as announcing an identity to which they are deeply attached. Their desire to inhabit and be socially affirmed as members of the "opposite sex" is experienced so profoundly that they are willing to risk losing family, friends, and employment. Transsexuals' "status passage" (Glaser and Strauss 1971) takes considerable money, time, emotional energy, and commitment—more, perhaps, than most other forms of bodywork.

In order to highlight the embodied nature of their transition *and* the central role of reflexivity, we refer to transsexuals' status passage as "reflexive transembodiment." Reflexivity is important to transembodiment in many ways. For example, believing one is really a woman or a man requires objectifying oneself as a sexed object. Reflexivity is also central to learning, practicing, and publicly expressing the embodiment of womanhood or manhood. As Crossley (2005) points out, body maintenance and modification are by definition reflexive as they requiring viewing and treating the body as an object, and thus can be considered "reflexive body techniques." Unlike female-bodied women engaging in similar practices, male-to-female transsexuals' body projects are generally deemed deviant. As a result, transembodied people often feel compelled to carefully account for their bodywork and strategically control how they present themselves to others. The reflexive self shapes and is shaped by such accounting and controlling.

We suggest that reflexive transembodiment is also a useful concept because it emphasizes the link between transsexuals' bodywork and reflexivity, which transsexual scholarship often neglects. For example, research that suggests that the body is a tool that transsexuals use to do gender or manage stigma (Feinbloom, 1976; Garfinkel, 1967; Kessler and McKenna, 1978) or examines the history or process of "sex reassignment" (Billings and Urban 1982; Raymond 1979) downplays the importance of reflexivity. Research that examines coming to terms with transsexuality or coming out to others (Gagné and Tewksbury 1999; Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey, 1997; Risman, 1984) downplays the body while emphasizing the reflexive process of self-definition. Furthermore, scholarship that attempts to addresses the relationship between transgendered people's bodies and subjectivities often neglects the interactionist notion of reflexivity in favor of phenomenological (Rubin 2003) or postmodern (Butler 1990) concepts. The notion of "reflexive transembodiment" aims to situate transsexual

scholarship more squarely within an interactionist framework on the body/subjectivity.

Although transembodiment may appear extreme, the experience reflects a common dynamic with regard to Charles Cooley's (1902) looking class self. Most of us, at least occasionally, imagine that when certain others view us, they do not see our "true selves" through the mosaic of our bodily signs. We may envision others judging our bodies in ways that evoke feelings of shame or, if we feel particularly empowered, anger ("How dare you objectify me!"). Transsexuals, however, are usually more concerned with being judged as a *member* of their desired sex category than they are with being a particular *kind* of member. Male-to-female transsexuals usually say they feel authentic, proud, and sometimes liberated when they or others read their bodies as signifying womanhood.

In this chapter, we will examine the role of reflexivity in the experiences of nine white, middle class male-to-female transsexuals, whom the first author interviewed and observed during fourteen months of fieldwork in a transgender community (see Schrock and Reid [2006] for a more complete description of methods). We analyze how these transsexuals exercised reflexivity in their attempts to resolve several dilemmas of their status passage. More specifically, we examine how interviewees mitigate shame by adopting the transgender community as a reference group, created a sense of coherence through reflexive storytelling, and transformed their corporal and social selves via reflexive bodywork. We present in-depth analyses of previously unexplored data on how interviewees employed reflexivity in the process of coming out as women to people who had only known them as men. We show how the reflexive process shaped their coming out strategy, which involved concealing then leaking the body project, followed by verbally then visually coming out.

Taking New Perspectives

As Harold Garfinkel (1969:122) points out, transsexuals breach one of the key taken-for-granted assumptions of gender: that people are born into and remain in a single gender category. Contemporary gender scholars (see for example, Lorber 1994) view the maintenance of such gender boundaries as fundamental to the reproduction of inequality. While, in some ways, many transsexuals reinforce the boundaries, such as conforming to stereotypical gender norms (Gagné and Tewksbury 1998), in other ways, their challenging of the aforementioned assumption likely plays into the interactional and often institutionalized policing of their presentations. In the U.S., transsexuals who are "read" as men in women's clothing commonly face public harassment and sometimes violence, they are not protected from employment discrimination (on the federal level), and they are stigmatized as perverted and unnatural (Burke, 1996; Namaste, 2000). In contrast to those who undergo surgery to alter bodily signs of gender (such as women who have breast implants) those who undergo sex reassignment surgery must first be diagnosed with a mental illness and submit to a regimen of regulation.

Such policing can lead transsexuals to imagine a generalized other that stigmatizes them as unnatural or perverted, which, as Cooley might predict, leads to undesired emotions. Feelings of shame, fear, isolation, and powerlessness, were so intense for some of our interviewees that they planned or attempted suicide. Becoming involved in the transgender subculture, however, can change how transsexuals define and feel about themselves. For example**,** Taylor said that attending her first transgender support group meeting was "really good" and that "it was like I broke through a shell; an underground society that had before been out of reach. . . It's almost like I had come home." As Tamotsu Shibutani (1955) might explain, transsexuals used a new reference group from which to view themselves. As interviewees interacted with other transgendered people in support groups, read community publications, and learned about or

became involved in the movement for trans liberation, debilitating feelings were sometimes transformed into pride, self-efficacy, solidarity, and anger at the gender police.

Reflexive Storytelling

Newly defined transsexuals experience a disjuncture between two objects of the reflexive self: what Morris Rosenberg (1979) refers to as external features (publicly visible bodily characteristics and signifiers of social identity) and internal features (cognition and feelings). As Taylor describes, "I know up here [pointing to her head] something is not male. And yet there is absolutely no direct sensory input that confirms it. None." A key reflexive method by which interviewees reconciled the discrepancy was through what Mead (1929) discussed as the symbolic reconstruction of the past for present purposes.

One form of this reconstruction is the self-narrative, which refers to a story that selectively links biographical events so as to project a self as object (Gergen and Gergen 1983). Interviewees' self-narratives bestowed a sense of coherency and were constructed, it appeared, to boost the chance their selves would seem credible from others' perspectives. Interviewees, for example, used childhood memories of gender non-conformity, such as failing at sports and crossdressing or desiring to do so, as evidence of transsexuality. For example, Erin said: "Even in grade school I didn't want to play with the boys. I didn't want to play football, or basketball, or baseball, or any of those things. I wanted to play jump rope with the girls." They also reframed memories of gender conformity, such as doing well at sports and not crossdressing, as evidence of being in denial about their transsexuality. Interviewees thus used gender ideology and pop psychology to overwrite cultural definitions of differently gendered bodies.

The body as sexual vessel posed a similar symbolic dilemma for interviewees. Because many, as men, had used women's clothing during masturbation rituals or in sexual encounters with women or engaged in "normal" sex with women or men, they constructed stories that distanced themselves from erotic transvestites, heterosexual men, and homosexual men (Schrock and Reid, 2006). Interviewees rhetorically de-fetishized autoerotic crossdressing and refashioned transvestic sex by blaming sexual arousal while crossdressed on uncooperative penises that listened more to their male biology than their differently gendered "true selves." Interviewees straightened out gay sex and queered straight sex primarily by using gender ideology that equates submissiveness with womanhood. For example, Erin described her first sexual encounter with a man as follows:

> He treated me totally female, not male. [H]e didn't rush me into it. We sat on the couch, we talked, he put his arm around me, we hugged, we kissed, he undressed me slowly. He picked me up and carried me to the bedroom. . . . And we made love. Slow tender love. . . . When I was with him, I felt *soooo* female. . . . Straight people cannot understand that. They go, "He's got a dick, you've got a dick, right? That means you're gay." It was there, but the way he treated it was not like a masculine thing. It was like a feminine thing. Does that make sense? He didn't treat it like it was a, quote, penis; he treated it like it was a vagina.

Here we can see how reflexive storytelling can render insignificant one of the most potent cultural signifiers of manhood: the erect penis, or, as Jenny called it, the "hideous growth."

Reflexive Bodywork

In addition to discrediting the body's importance in signifying gender, interviewees used the reflexive process to shape and present their bodies with the hope that others would be able to imagine them as women. This involves what Morris Rosenberg (1990:3) calls "reflexive agency," which refers to the "process whereby the organism acts back on itself for the purpose of

producing intended effects on itself." Transsexuals employ reflexive agency in two ways: (1) they worked backstage to change their bodies in ways that bolstered the belief that others would imagine them as women and (2) they strategically altered subjectivity in order to control front stage bodily displays to encourage others to define and affirm them as women.

Because interviewees were not pressured in childhood and adolescence to discipline their bodies to signify femaleness, they took women's perspectives in order to develop a curriculum of bodily transformation and then diligently practiced and disciplined their bodies accordingly. They retrained their physical bodies to produce feminine verbal and nonverbal gestures, redecorated their bodies with makeup and feminine accoutrements, and remade their physical bodies through dieting, electrolysis, hormone therapy, and they were saving money for genital surgery. Such reflexive body techniques (Crossley, 2005) especially retraining movements and makeup application, initially increased self-monitoring and made interviewees feel inauthentic. "Applying makeup sometimes feels like I am putting on some kind of mask," said Shelly. However, similar to women who participate in self-defense classes (McCaughey, 1998:290), continual repetition eventually installed the practices into "bodily memory." Kris, for example, said that she used to "really concentrate and say to myself, 'I have to always remember to make my voice go up [at the end of a sentence],' but now it's just natural." As their techniques of bodywork became more habitual, interviewees felt more authentically female. Subjectivity and bodywork are inseparable.

Whereas the relatively private work of "transgendering" (Ekins, 1997) the body unintentionally shaped subjectivity, publicly embodying womanhood initially involved the intentionally shaping of subjectivity with the aim of evoking audiences' affirmation of womanhood (Schrock and Boyd, 2005). If they acted anxiously when presenting themselves as women in public, interviewees feared that others would assess them more critically and notice residual signs of manhood (such as adams apples, large hands, etc.). With the aim of blending into the gendered social landscape, interviewees engaged in cognitive emotion work (Hochschild 1979) in the form of personal pep talks. For example, Kris said, "The whole key [to passing] is to get in your head that, 'I'm a woman.' So what if I do something a little bit different. As long as I don't go, 'whoops,' you know, and try to change it too quick. People notice those things." Here we can see how reflexive agency was used to evoke displays of confidence that were intended to coax audiences into reading their public bodies as signifying womanhood. While we do not know how others' actually viewed them, it does appear they avoided confrontations about discrepant signs of gender. And minimizing such confrontations enabled interviewees to imagine that others categorized them as women, which, in turn, evoked feelings of pride and authenticity.

Reflexivity and Coming Out

As transsexual women began presenting themselves as anonymous women in public settings, they continued presenting themselves as men to more familiar faces. They were in effect living a gendered variation of William James' (1892) adage: people have "many different social selves." Transsexuals' coming out process involved retiring manhood and embodying womanhood full time. Changing how others imputed gendered selves to them, however, was tricky business. Interviewees needed to control, as much as possible, the process through which they came out to friends, family, and coworkers and employers.

Interviewees believed that losing the ability to play an active part in shaping the image of themselves in others' minds could be socially devastating. Such stories were plentiful in the transgender community. For example, one interviewee explained what happened when a

transsexual friend lost control over the coming out process:

> [My friend] was engaged to be married and had not told his fiancé, which is a mistake that we all make. She was over at his place when he wasn't there once and found his [women's] clothes, and decided that [the friend] was sick, sinful, and every other thing she could say about him. Called up his boss, told his boss, told his mother, his family.

Being outed in such a manner could involve not only the loss of control over one's image in others' minds, but also the loss of familial relationships as well as employment.

Although some significant others may withdraw material and emotional support regardless of how transsexuals come out, interviewees believed that the more skillfully they controlled the coming out process, the better able they were to maintain important relationships. "If you present it properly and give people enough time and information and if there's genuine love between you or a genuine friendship, then it'll work out," said Taylor. Interviewees believed that coming out "properly" required perspective taking. As Sue described it:

> It's important in everything we do to not only think of it from your perspective but from the other person's perspective and how they will react. And I guess in a way I've tried to predict how they're going to act and give them a way that they can be happy with this decision too, and not be too worried . . . I think there are ways to make it easier on other people.

Making it easier on other people involved coming out to people gradually, which involved strategically concealing and leaking the body project as well as coming out verbally and visually. As others (see, for example, Cahill and Eggleston 1996; Waskul 2002) have suggested, stigmatized "others" tend to do more than their share of such emotion work. As we will show, imagining how particular others may define, judge, and treat them greatly influenced the coming out process.

Concealing the Body Project

As their transembodiment progressed, interviewees had difficulty keeping evidence of their body projects backstage. Interviewees believed that others would view them in a more accepting manner, if they did not "discover" their transsexuality. The most basic way transsexuals concealed their projects was to limit access to the backstage. They kept friends and family out of their bedroom closets and bathrooms or temporarily stowed away the evidence when necessary. Some dramatically cut down on inviting non-transgendered friends and family members over. When asked if anyone had ever noticed something in her apartment that raised suspicion, Joyce responded, "No, I don't have a lot of people over." Such "protective strategies" helped shield the backstage from "inopportune intrusions" (Goffman 1963).

For some interviewees, however, a secure residentially-based backstage was impossible to maintain and they developed other strategies. In order to keep her transsexuality a secret from her wife and daughter, for example, Erin said, "I kept my [women's] clothes in a storage facility and I changed there or changed in the car." When Taylor was moving, she said, "My friends were going to help me pack, I was in total fear that somehow a box would break open and all this stuff would fall out. So, it was like, into the dumpster it all went." Thus when a residentially-based backstage was not secure, interviewees moved or eliminated the backstage.

Concealing the body project also involved, controlling "unmeant gestures" (Goffman 1959) that could discredit masculine performances. As Sue explained, controlling feminine practices involved acute consciousness of how others may impute gendered meanings to their performances as men.

> I catch myself [gesturing like a woman] as my male side and I really have to put my hands in my pockets because I just know it's not right. [Question: Are there other things?] I touch folks. As a man, I don't mind touching a woman, but a guy freaks out over it. . . . Sometimes I cross my legs so that basically one leg is really high over the other as compared to the guy ninety-degree angle [cross]. I try to catch myself with that because I've heard my daughter say, "That guy is a fag. Look at the way he crosses his legs." I have to be careful also because I have taken most of the hair off my hands, so I have to be careful how much I use them and how long I let my nails grow. It's a continual editing process. Sometimes I sit down and catch myself reaching back to smooth a skirt and it isn't there.

Interviewees' continual editing of how their bodies may be signifying gender thus involved perspective taking aimed at guessing how others evaluated their gendered performances.

In terms of hiding bodily modifications, interviewees most often relied on a literal version of what Goffman (1963) called "covering." After an out-of-town friend, whom Taylor described as "homophobic," called and said he was going through a severe depression wanted to visit, Taylor wanted to be supportive but worried about him noticing her changing appearance:

> And there I was, it was the middle of summer, legs shaved, no hair on my chest , nothing. And he comes down in the middle of the summer for a visit. I spent a week with this guy wearing long sleeve T-shirts and jeans and the middle of August (mutual laughter). God, I was miserable. He kind of figured something was up, but it never really came up.

Leaking the Body Project

As interviewees' bodywork progressed, it became increasingly difficult to hide. Signs of womanhood leaked out of the backstage. Interviewees believed that gradually leaking their body projects would prime others to be more accepting of their status passage. In other words, perspective-taking led them to strategically introduce gender ambiguity into their self presentations. As Kris explained:

> I think I've done things in such a way that's made it easier for people to accept me. And I think also that if two years ago when I started having these feelings I had come out and said, "I need to live full time as a woman" . . . for people who had known me, it would have been a very abrupt change. But for several years now, I've been slowly changing my appearance and my actions, letting people gradually get more accustomed to how I felt and acted.

Controlled leaking sometimes targeted a specific person to whom interviewees expected to come out. For example, in hope that her current friend, Carol, would be more prepared when she came out, Joyce sometimes styled her lengthening hair in a feminine manner before getting together. She also invited Carol to accompany her when she had both ears pierced. And afterwards, Joyce reported they "haggled over which one of us were going to get to buy a particular pair of earrings. I think that's what finally got her curiosity; like, 'Okay, what's up with this?'" Carol didn't actually ask Joyce the previous question, but Joyce imagined that such leaking shaped how Carol perceived her.

For interviewees who planned on trying to transition on the job (rather than search for work after living fulltime as women), leaking the backstage was seen as a useful strategy. As Sue began experimenting with makeup, she said:

> I started wearing it to work [as a man] as part of skin protection. I would do the basic skin care package of cleansing, refresher, moisturizer, and a little base coat of makeup

> just to protect the skin. People had no problems. I told people at work and they'd say, "That's fine. I see you as a guy and you're just wanting to have the best skin."

Some interviewees also changed the way they dressed as men. As Sue said:

> At work I slowly faded out my male clothes—I wouldn't wear a dress or anything—but be fairly androgynous. . . . The clothes I was buying as a guy were very stylish, but also very much like what girls wear. So then I started substituting. "Well, gee, if I'm buying a male's vest that looks like this, I might as well buy a girl's vest." And so I started phasing out the male clothes all together in my day-to-day work.

Most interviewees similarly began expressing feminine demeanor while presenting themselves as men. Erin, for example, said,

> I found myself last fall, forgetting to walk like a boy—and having to make myself do it. But after a short time of that, I said, "Screw this, I'm not even gong to try anymore." I'm just going to walk the way I feel like walking. If people have a problem with it, the heck with them. And so far I haven't had any overtly negative responses from people around me, like at work. I think the operative assumption among people at work is that I'm gay and just coming out of the closest. And in talking things over with the human resources person there, who I've told all about the truth, we decided that that's probably the best approach for now, just let people think that; let them wonder.

Gradually feminizing their body's décor, demeanor, and shape enabled transsexuals to imagine that friends, family members, and employers/coworkers began to view them, at minimum, as gender nonconformists. As they leaked more and more of their body project to various audiences, transsexuals thus adopted incremental looking glasses, each of which brought their differently gendered "true selves" more into focus.

Coming out Verbally

As interviewees became more comfortable embodying womanhood in public and increasingly leaked their bodywork, it became emotionally difficult to present themselves as men. As Jenny explained, "Now when I have to put on the boy face and go do the boy things again, I go, 'Oh, fuck it, I don't want to do those things anymore.'" She later added that the "social affirmation of masculinity just rubs me raw." Trying to hide their differently gendered "true selves" from others also took a toll on their relationships. Taylor said that before coming out to her family, "I'm a little more closed than normal when I'm around them." When presenting herself as a man to people to whom she had not yet come out, Joyce said, "I am inhibited in talking, period."

As their desire to embody womanhood fulltime intensified and they perceived others might be getting the wrong impression, interviewees believed that it was time to reveal their differently gendered "true selves." But coming out was carefully executed because they believed that others would see them as radically different for the rest of their lives. As Joyce said, "It's not something that you can take back either, like, 'Oops, just kidding.'" In the hope that they could minimize negative reactions, interviewees told people that they were transsexuals before they allowed these others to see them as women.

Interviewees often picked women friends to come out to first, as they believed women would be less apt than men to respond harshly and that they might also help with makeup and fashion choices. Gender-conscious perspective taking thus shaped interviewees' coming out strategy. Although such a strategy worked for some interviewees, it did not go smoothly for Joyce. Joyce was pretty sure that her friend Carol knew about her transsexuality when she came out to her. On top of the information Joyce leaked about her body project (most notably, her earrings and hair styling), Carol asked, on behalf of another friend, "if I knew where she could

get size 13 shoes. Well, why would she ask me?" But when Joyce came out to her, Carol was stunned and had difficulty accepting. Erin had better luck when she came out to an out-of-town male friend over the phone:

> My friend in Atlanta . . . called and invited me down to go to a Johnny Winter concert he's a blues guitarist that we both love. I said, "Don I would love to come but there's something that you need to know about me first. I'm going to look different, I'm going to act different than the last time you saw me. The beard is gone, I've had both ears pierced and I will look to you, at best, androgynous." I then proceeded to tell him why. I explained to him I was a transsexual and gave him my best explanation of current medical interpretation of it and I realized how freaked out he was. I said, "Okay, now that you know this, you are welcome to withdraw your invitation if you wish." He says, "No, I'm interested." Then we talked for a couple of hours.

Coming out to out-of-town friends seemed less risky to interviewees, perhaps because losing remote friends would less affect their day-to-day lives than losing local friends.

Coming out to parents was especially difficult for interviewees. Not all of our interviewees had come out to their parents. One interviewee with elderly parents implied that she would not pursue sex reassignment surgery until they passed away. Interviewees' worse fear when coming out to parents was that they would be banished. As Marzie explained:

> And finally while I was sitting there with my mother at breakfast and said one of the reasons that we came up here is that there is something that I wanted to talk about. And she said, "Well, what is it?" And I was just struggling. She could see that obviously there was something really emotional that I had to talk about. So she said, "Well, let's go in the other room." So we went over there, and I just started crying. Just trying to—I knew what I had to say but it was just so intense. And so she was like, "What is it? What is it? What could be this sad?" And so I started to tell her, "Well ever since I could remember I've had these feelings. I started seeing a therapist a year ago and was having these feelings about gender identity." And then she goes, "You're not going to have a sex change operation are you?" (mutual laughter) Then we talked, we talked for a couple of hours. I cried a lot. It was pretty intense, and she took it pretty well. And she was really supportive and really loving. And she was even able to make some jokes about it, which was nice. [But] she was really afraid, really afraid that I won't be accepted, that I'll be unhappy, that [my wife] would leave me, and that I'd commit suicide. She's pretty religious and she's praying a lot. . . She doesn't really accept it; she's still hoping that I can change how I feel.

Marzie's experience was similar to other interviewees whose parents hoped that this was only a phase.

Colleagues and superiors within institutional settings, such as school or work, were generally the last to hear about interviewees' transsexuality. Financial concerns were paramount and transsexuals also wanted to make sure that their bodywork had progressed to the point where they would not be embarrassed by their appearance. Jenny, who humorously advised, "writing a dissertation and changing sex is guaranteed to be, like, one of the most foolish things that anybody has ever done," explained coming out to her dissertation advisor as follows:

> I had to be willing to lose everything before I could tell my advisor. I had to get ready for a reaction that—well you know, actually, "That's impossible" would have been a better reaction than I got. The worst reaction I could think of was one of, "Well I understand that you have this problem but you realize that you can't stay in the field."

> [A]nd it turned out to be true. I had to be willing to lose, to give up something, in route to reclaim it as Jenny.

Jenny dropped her advisor and found someone more supportive of her status passage.

Sue appeared to have had better luck coming out to 225 coworkers, in part, perhaps, because transsexuality was written into the company's anti-discrimination policy. As she described it:

> Yesterday I sent a computer message to 225 people, everyone in the building and said, "Everyone, I just want you to know that I'm in the process of going through a change in my personal life that will be visible to people here at Data General. And this is a process of changing from living as a man to living as a woman and da, da, da." It was a real short little message and then finally I was like, "Up until now I have been slowly changing, living less and less as a man and with the only exception being work. Today I make the final step and beginning to live full time as a woman. Please address me as any other female employee of my company." And stuff like that. Oh, "And if you have any questions, talk to HR," because they asked me to put that in so people wouldn't come to me, they want to sort of be a buffer, I guess . . . One woman I've never met before sent me a little message saying, "Welcome to the female race. I wish you luck." [E]veryone's reaction surprised me so much. I've heard so many people say, "Congratulations." It just had never occurred to me that that would be the response. But they sort of looked at it as I've made this decision and I'm making a decision that will better my life and they're all very happy for me.

As Viktor Gecas (1982) points out, there is often a difference between how others actually view us and how we imagine they see us—and this difference is often self-enhancing. While we do not know for sure, it seems likely that many of Sue's coworkers were not as accepting as those who were compelled to verbalize support. By imaging that "they're *all* very happy" for her, however, Sue bolstered her self-worth and commitment to her transembodied status passage.

Coming out Visually

After verbally coming out as transsexuals, most interviewees only then decided to let audiences see them as women. They felt that even if others offered support when they came out verbally, true acceptance only came when others literally viewed and interacted with them as embodiments of women. As one interviewee described, "It's important to let them see me and start to get used to me as Taylor." Embodying womanhood in front of these audiences helped resolve the previously discussed dilemma of the reflexive self: it gave audiences the opportunity to view them in line with interviewees' self-definitions as women.

As previously mentioned, Joyce's friend Carol was stunned when she came out to her, but they remained friends, although there was much tension. Joyce believed that if Carol saw her dressed as a woman, that things might get better. One afternoon when Carol came over to get some statistical assistance for her dissertation research, Joyce answered the door dressed in women's clothes:

> She just froze up. Basically we weren't able to start . . . until I went back and changed. I was looking for acceptance and maybe I shouldn't have pushed it by even being dressed that morning before she was coming over. . . But I won't feel like she accepts me until she sees me dressed.

Interviewees who did not surprise others appeared to gain better reception. For example, Erin told the following story of meeting her homophobic out-of-town friend, who invited *her* to go a Johnny Winter concert:

> I showed up at his house dressed and he . . . said, “Welcome Erin.” And we went in and talked for about an hour and decided that we were real hungry and went out for dinner…it was completely comfortable. I spent the next day in drab (dressed as a man), because he wanted to see me both ways, and then the following day I dressed as Erin again. . . He said, “Thank you for spending yesterday in drab. I saw how unhappy you are. I now have a much better understanding of what it means to you.” And that really meant a lot.

Fewer interviewees had visually come out to their parents at the time of their interviews. Jenny’s decision to visually come out to her family during her annual Christmas visit got mixed reviews at best: “That was an odd situation, in that what made me less tense made my family more tense. There was all of that feedback.” Parents of the interviewees seemed unprepared to view their sons as women.

Marzie’s wife Christine was initially supportive when Marzie verbally came out and even said she desired to remain married after transembodiment was complete. But Christine started having reservations as Marzie began embodying womanhood more regularly. As explained by Marzie:

> She never had a relationship with a woman, but there had been women she felt attracted to. So she always felt it wouldn’t make a difference to her whether I was male or female. But it was the person, you know, that she cared about. And so it would be okay. But I guess during the last six months as I’ve begun making the transition, and especially as she’s started seeing me as a woman, that she’s been dealing with these feelings and it’s become more and more clear to her that her orientation is pretty strongly heterosexual. And she doesn’t think that she can continue in the relationship.

Although Marzie’s wife accepted her as a woman and had hoped to remain married, as Marzie’s embodiment of womanhood progressed, she was unable to be attracted to the body of the person whom she loved.

Coming out visually led interviewees to imagine that others could never again see them as men, regardless of their masculine biographies and bodily remnants. But some were not sure if they would ever be accepted as women either. Regardless, interviewees believed that coming out visually closed down all exits off of their transembodied passage. Being a man who once thought he was a woman was perhaps too embarrassing to imagine. Taylor, who came out visually to all her friends during a weekend festival in her hometown, claimed:

> I can never be Tom-the-guy around any of these people again. And I don’t know if I’ll ever be Taylor-the-woman around them either. I mean, to these people I’m probably going to always be something in-between. To some of them, I hope to a large portion of them, that I’m a good person. But I’ll never be able to go back to how it was. I gave up the ability to return to Tom (pause), which is great. It’s like full steam ahead now.

Conclusion

As our analysis suggests, reflexivity shapes the experience, strategies, and practices of transsexuals’ status passage. Interviewees used cultural notions of gender to construct biographies that essentially overwrote their masculine bodies with their differently gendered “true selves.” They adopted the transgender community as an important reference group, which helped mitigated feelings of shame. How they imagined others assigned gendered meanings to their bodies shaped how they retrained, redecorated, and redesigned their corporal selves, which, over time, made womanhood feel more authentic. In terms of the coming out process, interviewees’ reflexivity shaped how they chose and implemented strategies to conceal and leak

their body projects as well as how they verbally and visually revealed themselves as transembodied people to those who had only known them as men.

Our analysis of reflexive transembodiment can also remind us of the importance of agency and culture in reflexive body techniques. Whereas Charles Cooley is sometimes misrepresented as positing a self that is excessively conformist, transembodied people have enough agency to transgress the cultural bodily display rules associated with the sex category to which they were ascribed at birth. Such challenges to gender ideology often simultaneously reproduce it. Interviewees reflexively employed (and thus reproduced) the cultural assumptions that women are supposed to be sexually submissive and athletically inept. Similarly, their desire to escape harassment and discrimination led interviewees to adopt stereotypical bodily displays of gender. Collectively, such transformative bodywork arguably also transforms the wider culture by making the category "transsexual" increasingly available as an identity option for people who feel deeply uncomfortable in their skin. Reflexive transembodiment is thus more than doing gender by way of bodywork, it also involves the remaking of embodied culture.

Transembodied people are not the only ones, of course, who employ reflexivity in their bodywork in ways that might reproduce or challenge the dominant themes of a society's embodied culture. Some women who adopt the perspective of feminist or lesbian communities learn to become unashamed about physical bodies that fall short of impossible-to-accomplish heterosexist media depictions. As people age and their bodies less reliably express their "true selves," they may draw on as well as challenge age-based aspects of embodied culture to create self-narratives that overwrite their material bodies. Women who see themselves through a patriarchal generalized other may view their bodies as deficient and, in the hope of changing how others evaluate them, alter their bodies through diet or cosmetic surgery. College students who have their bodies tattooed and pierced might imagine that their parents would be too shocked if they accidentally discovered their new body art and might gradually come out to them. And some professors likely imagine that wearing upper middle class costumes to campus might increase the chance that they will pass as worthy and competent intellectuals. Interactionist analyses grounded in everyday life can show how the body, subjectivity, and culture are always intertwined in ways that reproduce and/or subvert inequalities.

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