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

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

Introduction

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

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

The space for transgender people is still being carved out in Dutch society. Kelterborn describes it as a “third space” that “encompasses infinite possibilities”; transgenderism is an area where gender-bending identities coexist and provide space in a society that maintains gender binaries as the norm. More people are identifying with the identity transgender because it allows them to acknowledge both their former gender identity, as well as their new one. Passing as the opposite gender can be a part of a transgender person’s experience. Some transgender critics consider passing to be a “male-made masquerade”. Other’s like, Ines Orobio de Castro, question the assumed “artificiality of male to female transsexuals with the authenticity supposedly shared by all real women.” Transgender individuals are constantly reaffirming their status as women through passing and through changing their bodies, whether surgically or cosmetically. Transgender individuals experience complicated relationships between their bodies, their femininity or masculinity and society. The desire “to pass” as the gender of their choosing and be recognized by others is central issues within the transgender community.

In my research, I deviate from a narrow focus on the medicalization of gender identity and look at how transgender individuals shape their social identities. I interview five self-identified male-to-female (MTF) transgender women. I analyze their stories and explore how their bodies create and shape relationships with others, as well as how their bodies confirm their gender identities. I examine their experiences with passing and ask why they want to pass, when they want to pass and whom they pass for.

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

Defining Transgender

The term and identity transgender is relatively new and came about in the 1980s. Virginia

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1 Petra, Personal Interview. November 7, 2011. Amsterdam
3 Ines Orobio de Castro, Made to Order: Sex/Gender in a Transsexual Perspective (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1993), 93.
Prince used it to identify people who fell along a spectrum between transvestite and transsexual.4 As time went on, a new community and identity developed. Transgender came to mean “somebody who permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation.”5 Later, it became an umbrella term for all people who are marginalized because they are gender variant. This new definition led to a political movement and mobilized people to fight against heteronormativity6 and patriarchal values.7

In the Netherlands, there is no consensus on a definition of transgender. Thomas provides a definition of transgender in Holland as “a collective term for all forms of deviant gender identities” or “a term used to indicate a third category next to transvestites and transsexuals; that is, people who are not compatible with their physical gender, but who do not feel transvestite or transsexual either.”8

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

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

A Brief History of Transgender Identity and Dutch Society

Gender crossing is not a new practice in Holland. Since 1959 when the first sex-reassignment surgery took place, different forms of gender bending have been visible within Dutch society. The first discussions surrounding the change to one’s gender identity were centered on transsexual individuals, people who wanted surgery to correct their physiological body to match what their brain was telling them is their gender.9 In 1966, a negative report was issued by the Gezondheidsraad, or Dutch Health Council, that disapproved of sex-reassignment surgery.10 It was not until 1977 that the Gezondheidsraad suggested sex-reassignment surgery as a way to “treat” transsexuals. The Gender Clinic at Vrije Universiteit, de Genderstichting, was opened in 1972 where the majority of sex-reassignment procedures take place. Then in 1985, the government allowed people to change their gender on legal documents if they had completed sex-reassignment surgery. Transsexuals were required, however, to divorce their partners upon legal gender change until homosexual marriage was legalized in 2001.11

It was not until 1988 that media attention surrounding transsexuals became a hot topic in the Netherlands. Louis Gooren, who was the head of the gender team at Vrije Universiteit, became the

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5 Stryker and Whittle, 4.
6 Michael Warner coined the term “heteronormativity” in his book Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory. He argues that heteronormativity rests upon “het[erosexual] culture think[ing] itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist” (Warner 1993, xxi).
7 Stryker and Whittle, 4.
9 Sex-reassignment surgery only refers to the genitals and not to “top-surgery” or augmenting the breasts
12 M Bakker and K.W. Kui.
first professor of transsexuality in the world. The focus was on the medicalization of transsexuals and did not address other forms of transgendering. Since the late 80s, the focus has remained largely on transsexuals and the necessity for medical intervention, though there have been movements against the medicalization of transgender identities, especially from the late 1990s to present.

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

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

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

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

13 M. Bakker and K.W. Kui.
14 M. Bakker and K.W. Kui, 1.
15 M. Bakker and K.W. Kui.
16 M. Bakker and K.W. Kui.
18 Jos Megens. Lecture
“I’ve just realized that who someone else thinks I am has very little to do with who I actually am, and that I have almost no control over what a person might see when they see me”
- Helen Boyd (spouse of a transwoman)

**Theoretical Framework**

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

Julia Serrano, a Trans activist, biologist and writer discusses the complexity of issues surrounding female transsexuals. She suggests the origins of a transsexual identity and analyzes how transsexuals navigate Western culture, which she presumes to be a hostile environment for transsexual individuals.

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

Not only does Serrano dismantle gender identity as the defining identity term, she also challenges the gender performativity model, made (in)famous by Judith Butler. Serrano favors a model that “lies in the perception and interpretations” of an individual’s gender (based primarily on physical appearance) by other people. She gives several examples of times that she merely dressed the way she wanted and behaved as herself, and in doing this she was perceived as a woman. She maintains that she was not actively performing like a woman, but simply gesturing and speaking in a way which was natural to her. It was the public who interpreted her mannerisms and outfit as feminine, which then led to their perception of her as a woman. Serrano finds problems with a performance-centric model because it implies “femaleness is not a natural state, but one that we produce when we

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


21 Julia Serrano, 78.

22 Julia Serrano, 80.

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

24 Julia Serrano, 83.

25 Julia Serrano, 193.

26 Julia Serrano, 192.
call ourselves women—when we act, dress, speak in what are considered feminine ways.”

All of the interviewees would deny that their femaleness comes from their behaviors because they all agree that it is intrinsic to who they are as people. Serrano also argues that “if you look like a supermodel, you can act as butch as you want to, but other people will inevitably gender you as female.” Thus, it does not matter how you perform because if your general physical appearance resembles a woman then people will perceive you to be a woman. This is important to my research because all of my interviewees physically look like women and argue that they are perceived by the public as women even when their so-called masculine mannerisms or behaviors are apparent.

This brings me to Serrano’s argument that femininity finds its origins in both the social and biological. Serrano challenges both the naturalization and the artificialization of femininity because in both scenarios femininity is often assumed to be a single, unified social or biological package or program. Serrano unpacks different cases in which femininity could be socially or biologically based. For instance, women’s fashion is something that Serrano believes to be almost exclusively shaped through culture, especially because fashion norms of changed so much over time. On the other hand, she considers heightened emotional intensity and sensitivity to be biologically based; she claims “virtually all transsexuals transitioning in the MTF direction report an increased intensity in the way that they experience emotions once they begin taking estrogen.”

The interaction between social norms and biology is a discussion that Serrano argues is lacking in discussions of femininity. Without acknowledging femininity is not “a monolithic entity” and that both people who are born or not born women can possess feminine traits, femininity will be trapped within the gender and sex binaries that “subsume femininity and femaleness” and restrict the ability for transgender people to be accepted as the gender identity they desire. The restrictions on who can be feminine and who cannot were noticeable in the stories of my interviewees. Almost every interviewee expressed that they did not always feel like women because they didn’t have the body, or the mannerisms, or even the same thoughts as women-born-women, even though they all want to be women and identify as women.

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

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27 Julia Serrano, 190.
28 Julia Serrano, 191.
29 Julia Serrano, 321.
30 Julia Serrano, 322.
31 Julia Serrano, 323.
32 Julia Serrano, 320-321.
33 Julia Serrano, 178.
34 People who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned (Serrano, 2007: 12)
35 Julia Serrano, 179.
36 Julia Serrano, 176.
people are “assigned a gender that does not match the gender they consider themselves to be” and others are assigned a “gender that matches the way they self-identify.”

Mattilda a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore’s theory on passing underscores Julia Serrano’s criticism of the practice. Mattilda, a radical queer activist, criticizes “passing as a means through which the violence of assimilation takes place.” Mattilda views passing as a system of regulatory power, in the same vein as Foucault’s “docile bodies”. She confronts all forms of passing, whether it is passing as a woman, a Christian, or a good girl, as a normalization prison that privileges authenticity and forces people to hide their true identities. Through the narratives in her book that reveal the struggles with passing, Mattilda “confront[s] the perilous intersections of identity, categorization, and community in order to challenge the very notion of belonging.”

I look at passing as a tool for perpetuating violence, as well as a tool for public and private confirmation of self, asking along the way who do you pass for and why do you pass?

Linda Nicholson problematizes how the body is conceptualized cross-culturally and cross-generationally, as well as the definition of woman. Nicholson criticizes how within feminist theory, as well as others, authors tend to assume that the male and female bodies have the same meanings in all cultures and all historical periods. She contends that we must acknowledge the “culturally various understandings of the body” and the different “social variations in the male/female distinction.”

She discusses how previously it was thought that the female body was simply an underdeveloped version of the male body, that there was not a real difference between the two. Recently, with the advent of industrialization and urbanization, the differences between the male and female body are much more pronounced in Western society. Through these new ways of living, the body has come to “serve as the source of information about the self and thus to serve as the source of information about one’s identity as male or female.” The idea of the body as a signifier of identity is a central theme throughout my interviews. The reason a transgender person may want to seek sex-reassignment surgery is so that her body correctly represents her identity and so that people interpret her identity as female.

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

Judith Butler, though a controversial figure in the transgender community, brings to light two very important concepts, recognition and gendered violence, that complicate the relationship between the self and other’s interpretations, as well as influence the desire to pass. Butler poses the idea of “a desire for recognition.” Humans are constantly seeking recognition because “it is only
through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings.”

To be recognized, then, others must be able to understand you. Often, to be understood, one must fit the social norms, which provide us with an identity and a community; “the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms.”

Butler suggests that “we see the ‘norm’ as that which binds us, but we also see that the ‘norm’ creates unity on through the strategy of exclusion.” Transgender individuals do not follow the norm and are thus excluded. Since transgender people defy the norms, “it is unclear whether [they] are still living, or ought to be, whether [their] lives are valuable, or can be made to be…”

Butler’s idea of gendered violence is born out of the defiance of social norms. Gendered violence occurs when people live outside the accepted cultural norms for what it means to be a man or a woman. Transgender people frequently experience gendered violence, especially through pathologization and criminalization.

Butler asks “why gender violence against transgendered subjects is not recognized as violence.” She argues that it is because transgender people are not recognized as real or intelligible.

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

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

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

46 Judith Butler, 2.
47 Judith Butler, 2.
48 Judith Butler, 206.
49 Judith Butler, 206.
50 Judith Butler, 218.
51 Judith Butler, 218.
52 Judith Butler, 217.
53 Judith Butler, 217.
54 Judith Butler, 2.
55 Judith Butler, 7.
“For male and female alike, the bodies of the other sex are messages signaling what we must do—they are glowing signifiers of our own necessities”
–John Updike

The Body

The body as a tool to create intimate relationships:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Petra argues that without a female body she is not valid to the men she wants to be with. This assertion resonates with Butler’s theory of recognition. Petra desires to be recognized as a woman and without a female body she does not consider herself to be valid, she does not recognize herself in that relationship, nor does she believe a man will recognize her as a woman in the relationship. Petra suggests that she likes boys better, but as long as she has a female body she feels conflicted and may even feel that she should like girls. Perhaps this could be related more to a fear of “homophobia”, but nevertheless, Petra made it extremely clear that being with a man and having a vagina are pivotal to

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56 Contact the author for a complete methods section on the interviews
57 Names have been changed for confidentiality.
59 Petra, Personal Interview.
60 Petra, Personal Interview.
her sexual happiness. She said, with a Cheshire cat smirk on her face, “the idea of being impregnated by a man, and seeing a man and feeling I want to have your babies, that’s pretty strong. That’s something that I want. I want to have somebody’s body and preferably inside me.” Sonja, a twenty-nine year old transgender woman also speaks about the inability to be intimate before receiving sex-reassignment surgery. She says, “Surgery was important to go that step further to be intimate in the relationship and to have sex.” Sonja speaks about her penis in a distanced manner, never directly referring to it or only calling it a “sexual organ”. This suggested to me that she was very uncomfortable in a male body and would only be truly happy in a female body. Until surgery, she had never allowed another person to touch it. She spoke about her current relationship with her girlfriend who she had been with pre-surgery and now post-surgery. She discusses her apprehension with intimacy and the process they went through once she received sex-reassignment surgery:

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

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

Unlike Sonja and Petra, Demi expressed actual revulsion towards her penis. Demi is the youngest of the interviewees, eighteen, and realized that she wanted to be a woman at a very young age. She made it perfectly clear that she not only hates having a penis, but would never be able to be with a man as long as she has a penis. Demi does not hold back her distaste for her penis when she speaks about having sex:

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

“So you don’t like your penis?”

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

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

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

From the informants’ narratives, it is evident that possessing a female body, especially a

61 Petra, Personal Interview.
63 Sonja, Personal Interview.
64 Demi, Personal Interview, October 20, 2011. Amsterdam
vagina, is central to their ability to form intimate relationships with their sexual partners. Petra stressed to me that being able to have sex with a female body is the most important factor in living as a woman. She said that being able to live as a woman is “very physical. If you make it less physical, it gets less real. And then it becomes about you being a doll. And you aren’t, you aren’t a doll.”\(^66\) Another interviewee, Elsa, who only recently began transitioning, suggests that the body is not what is most important to her relationships with others—“It is a very important thing, but not the only thing. Social things, how you respond with your mind, how people will respond to you, how you deal with it and that you are treated like a woman, so it is more than only the body.”\(^67\) Nevertheless, the body is a pivotal tool in building a relationship with another person. Transgender women want to be treated as women and interact as women with their partner. If their bodies are interpreted as male then the relationship between their partner and themselves changes to something that they do not desire.

**The Body as a Confirmation of Self:**

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

“Because that thing says something about me that I am not and then you get back to the very origin of being transsexual and that it is first and foremost an irritant after a while…and what you get won’t contradict you, so that my body won’t contradict me so brutally.”\(^68\)

In short, the penis contradicts the individuals’ belief that they are a woman and surgery eradicates this contradiction. Linda Nicholson e asserts that since the 20\(^{th}\) century, new ways of thinking about the body and the self has led the body “to serve as the source of information about the self and thus to serve as the source of information about one’s identity as male or female.”\(^69\) All of the interviewees stress the unquantifiable meaning of being able to have a female body and how it relieves the tension between their mind and body. They all want a vagina because that signifies to them that they are a woman, which is their *subconscious sex*. Elsa, who has yet to receive surgery, imagines how a female body will make her feel:

“I want to feel like a woman. I want to be like a woman. I do not want to feel like a transgender and I think that is an important thing. I do not want to be a third kind of sex. I want to belong to the female part.”\(^70\)

For Elsa, surgery will not only make her feel like a woman, but it will also make her feel not like a transgender person. She would find it difficult to remain outside the gender binaries for many reasons, first of which is because a male body does not align with her female identity. Furthermore, possessing a vagina would make her a more socially viable being that is better understood in a gender binary system.\(^71\)

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

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

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\(^66\) Petra, Personal Interview.  
\(^67\) Elsa, Personal Interview. December 2, 2011. Amsterdam  
\(^68\) Petra, Personal Interview.  
\(^69\) Linda Nicholson, 88.  
\(^70\) Elsa, Personal Interview.  
\(^71\) Judith Butler.
women feel, so it’s just my personal experience of femininity and my body.”

Sonja’s sex-reassignment surgery helped her to feel more like a woman, but she brings up the important point that her female body is not “wrong”, it’s just not the body she had in mind. Western society forces a gender binary system upon us that categorizes the body into two distinct sexes, male and female. Tim De Jong discusses that the gender binary system is limiting and that there are people with the “experience of being in-between the sexes, half-man/half-woman, or someone to whom these categories in no way apply.” Since this categorization does take place, my informants seek to alter their bodies to fit in the category woman.

Most of the interviewees hinted at feeling a bit jealous of women-born-women who do not think about how their female body confirms their identity from birth. Demi spoke of this several times throughout her interview:

“Sometimes I am jealous of girls with their bodies. I can be in a relationship when I have a full body, but I’ll always have this body. Even if I get a vagina it will still be this body. I am never going to be a real woman. You can still have, you can still look so much like a woman but you are never gonna be a real woman, even if I have an operation.”

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

Though pressure for surgery exists, not all transgender women receive sex-reassignment surgery. Even without surgery, they can still have the feeling of being a woman. Annika is fifty-seven and unable to receive surgery due to a pre-existing condition. Though she wishes she could have a vagina she remains optimistic:

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

Annika receives hormone treatments and her breasts have grown significantly since she began treatment. For her, there are other ways in which her body can confirm her identity beyond a vagina. Wider hips, lack of body hair and breasts are all characteristics associated with a female body, but they are often cast to the side as features which add to the female body, not features that make the female body like a vagina makes a female body. This could possibly be due to the different sizes of breasts and body shapes, which can be so drastically different depending on the woman. Women, however, possess a vagina, no matter the size or shape. Annika’s story underscores the idea that there is more to the female body then a vagina, but the possession of female body characteristics is still important to one’s identity.

We carry our bodies wherever we go. They define us, they shape us, and they give us meaning and create meaning. Our bodies are a canvas upon which we can express who we are and how we want the world to interpret who we are. We cannot escape the interpretations others have of our

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72 Sonja, Personal Interview.
73 Tim de Jong, “Man of Vrouw, Min of Meer, Gesprekken over een niet-gangbare sekse (Man or Woman, More or Less),” Schorer (1999): 2.
74 Demi, Personal Interview.
75 Linda Nicholson, 100.
bodies, and we need our bodies in order to be with others. And, to my interviewees who had to adjust their body, had to change their bodies to achieve the interpretations they want, the body is exceedingly more important to their happiness. Possessing a vagina not only confirms who they are as women, but confirms who they are to their most intimate partners.

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

- Virginia Woolf (Orlando)

**Passing**

**Passing for the Self:**

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

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

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

“I was made up with a wig, a skirt, high heels, panties…wonderful, wonderful. I felt so happy. And when we went outside there was a man putting a sign up and he looked at my legs. This was such a wonderful feeling. And from then on I knew I wanted to be a woman…I know this is what I am going to be.”

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

Mattilda takes issue with the receiving recognition only when a person fits into established gender categories. Annika had to conform to social norms of femininity in order to receive recognition as a woman. Bartky describes this as “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular.”

Within this frame, Annika dressed and passed as a woman in order to receive recognition because...
she lives within a culture that subliminally pressures and requires her to do so. Though this may be the case, it is dangerous to fully buy into this explanation because it disregards Annika’s personal agency. Thus, it is the negotiation between cultural, disciplinary powers and Annika’s own choices that lead her to dress as a woman. Her personal agency is even more apparent because now Annika mainly dresses as a woman exclusively in her own home, “when I am alone I dress like a woman and that makes me happy.” Serrano underscores personal agency when she argues against passing-centrism and states, “for many of us, dressing or acting feminine is something we do for ourselves, not for others.”

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

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

Sonja preoccupation with her breasts is no longer a preoccupation because it has become ritualized; she no longer sees it as something she does to confirm her womanhood. Deveaux argues, “Women internalize the feminine ideal so profoundly…and to reject it is to reject one’s own identity.” In the case of Sonja, she seems to have internalized the need to have large breasts in order to confirm her identity. She also wants larger breasts so that others will not question her womanhood.

“I feel like it’s a punishment if people notice [my small breasts] because they will doubt me being a woman.” Once again, this brings up Mattilda’s argument for passing as perpetuating normalization and escaping de-recognition.

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

“Yeah, of course, because you want to have an affective life...if at every step in your life people are yelling at you...if you aren’t passable you will find that at every step of the way people are putting blocks in front of you...And that is very hurtful because for me that meant fail, fail, fail.”

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

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

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

79 Annika, Personal Interview.
80 Julia Serrano, 18.
81 Sonja, Personal Interview.
82 Sonja, Personal Interview.
83 Monique Deveaux, 226.
84 Sonja, Personal Interview.
85 Petra, Personal Interview.
86 Demi, Personal Interview.
Demi feels a constant pressure to look feminine, not just so that people believe her to be and treat her as a woman, but so that people do not enact violence against her because she is transgender. Passing, thus, becomes both the mechanism for safety and violence. Passing as a woman keeps her safe, but the social pressure to pass perpetuates the cycle of violence by delegitimizing her identity and forcing it into hiding.

The interviewees discuss passing as something that they do not always actively attempt and claim that passing is more about living their life as a woman than trying to fit into the cultural norm. However, the line between wanting to live as a woman and being pressured to live as a woman seems to blur and intersect the more I probed.

**Passing for Others:**

As was just mentioned, working out why people pass is difficult because the reasoning behind it is so intertwined with both social and internal pressures. The interviewees usually first spoke about passing as something they did for themselves, but eventually discussed other reasons. Elsa, for instance said, “I do it for myself, in the first place because I want to feel myself as a woman and I want to express that. I hope that other people will accept me as being a woman.” Her first concern was herself, yet she also mentioned she seeks acceptance. Acceptance could be important to her because it confirms her identity, but also because she wants others to be comfortable with her identity.

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

“Physical attraction for straight guys very much depends on the notion the other person is female. Whereas I can only do female and that is not enough for them.” Since Petra is straight, she wants men to recognize her as a female. She wants to pass, physiologically and in appearance so that men will be attracted to her. She considers herself not to “be” female, but she can, at the very least, “do” female, as in dress, behave, and look like a woman. In this sense, she is passing in order to live up to the expectations of others that she seeks to have relationships with.

Demi speaks about passing for others more generally:

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

Demi implies that she presents herself to the public as a prototypical girl and hides any feature that could betray her femininity and “give her away”. She recognizes that other girls are also compelled to spend a lot of energy applying make-up, but she must do it because if she does not she will look like a completely different person than how she wants people to perceive her. She must alter her appearance for the sake of the public’s interpretation of her gender.

The need to change one’s appearance to “look” feminine is underscored by Serrano’s idea of the public as the “primary active participant by virtue of their incessant need to gender every person they see as either female or male.” To her close friends, it probably does not matter whether she is wearing make-up or not because they understand who she is on the inside. But, the only knowledge the public has is what they see upon first glance, and the first thing they will notice is if she is a man or a woman. As humans, we tend to categorize people as an organizational method, but this method can and does restrict people to established cultural expectations. Demi fears that she will not be recognized as herself, nor as a woman if she does not pass. She also fears the gendered violence that could occur if someone recognizes her as a transgender. These two fears are constantly working together to pressure her to pass as a woman in public.

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87 Elsa, Personal Interview.
88 Petra, Personal Interview.
89 Demi, Personal Interview.
90 Julia Serrano, 177.
From these stories, we can see that people pass for various reasons. The complexity of the issue is emphasized by these varied responses and the inability to point to a simple answer to “why do you pass?” While my interviewees pass in order to live life the way they desire, they also acknowledge that external forces influence their desire to pass. The fear of violence against transgender people is still very present and the fear of not being accepted by both the public and even their closest partners is visible in their narratives. Passing is, above all, a way for them to see themselves as women in social and private situations. Through passing, they possess the identity they want.

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

- E.E. Cummings

**Conclusion**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Future studies should focus on the intersections between race, socio-economic status and generational differences within the transgender population. Throughout my study I could see that these were factors in my participants’ responses, but I was unable to grapple with these issues due to time constraints. A sister study with female-to-male (FTM) participants could also be conducted in order to see the similarities and differences between the experiences of MTF and FTM individuals. FTM men seem to be underrepresented in transgender issues and do not receive as much media attention as MTF.
Research on transgender issues will never be done as long as there are people out there willing to fight against normalization and discrimination and fight for equal rights and opportunities for all people—man, woman, cisgender or transgender.

**Bibliography**

*Including Interviews*

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