

Transsexuals' Sexual Stories

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When viewed through a popular cultural lens, male-to-female transsexuals' sexual biographies can appear to indicate male transvestitism, heterosexuality, or homosexuality rather than transsexuality. How do transsexuals subvert such implications and construct transsexual identities? Drawing on K. Plummer's (1995) approach to sexual stories, we examine how nine male-to-female transsexuals construct their sexual pasts to accomplish what sociologists call "identity work." Interviewees used gendered sexual scripts, cultural discourse on the biological basis of male sexual arousal, and a discourse of therapeutic individualism to narratively defetishize autoerotic crossdressing, queer straight sex, refashion transvestic sex, and straighten out gay sex.

KEY WORDS: cultural discourse; identity work; self-narratives; sexual stories; transsexuals.

INTRODUCTION

While most people embed their sexual pasts into narratives that bolster or construct current identities (Plummer, 1995), changing genders or "transgendering" (Ekins, 1997) considerably complicates the process. For male-to-female transsexuals who have previously incorporated crossdressing in autoerotic activities or sexual relations with women, they must construct sexual stories that distance themselves from male transvestites while affirming their identities as women. For male-to-female transsexuals who have engaged in "normal" sexual relations with women or men, they must construct sexual stories that disaffiliate themselves from "normal" heterosexual or homosexual men and affiliate themselves with women. In this article, we examine how some male-to-female transsexuals use cultural discourses to construct narratives of intimate life to accomplish what sociologists call "identity work" (Snow & Anderson, 1987).

Although much social-psychological research views identities, sexual or otherwise, as relatively static psychic property of individuals (Callero, 2003; Howard, 2000), an identity work perspective "aims to understand how

identities are created, used, and changed" (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Based on principles of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), most research on identity work focuses on how people use language to construct an image of self (Dunn, 2001; Fields, 2001; Hadden & Lester, 1979; Holden, 1997; Hunt & Benford, 1994; Phelan & Hunt, 1998; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Storrs, 1999; Wolkomir, 2001, 2004). For example, Fields (2001) showed how parents with gay and lesbian adult children use discourses of gender, sexuality, and parenting to portray themselves as moral beings and their children as normal. Similarly, Wolkomir (2004) showed how Christian women married to "ex-gay" men construct stereotypically feminine identities by redefining homosexuality and rhetorically submitting to God.

Crafting self-narratives is an essential form of identity work. When people lose the capacity to narrate their biographies, as is the case with some brain injury victims, they have in effect "lost their selves" (Young & Saver, 2001). Narrating a self involves selectively emphasizing, ignoring, and interpreting often-contradictory biographical experiences in ways that produce a coherent story (Polkinghorne, 1988). Self-narratives consist of an "individual's account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time" (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). Sociologists have applied a narrative approach to study how women with sexually transmitted diseases manage stigmatized identities (Nack, 2000), how

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people—despite evidence to the contrary—construct identities as AIDS/HIV sufferers (Lombardo, 2004), how callers to a sex and relationship advice show construct moral identities (Ferris, 2004), how heavy drinkers distance themselves from the identity “alcoholic” (Jarvinen, 2001), and how the “co-dependent” self is created in support groups (Irvine, 2000). Whereas some scholars study retrospective accounts to explore how childhood behaviors may be linked with adult behaviors and identities (see, for example, Bailey & Zucker, 1995), a narrative approach views retrospective accounts as part of present, ongoing projects of identity work.

In contrast to approaches that view transsexuals’ stories as signifying an underlying psychological condition such as Gender Identity Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), revealing past phenomenological experiences (Rubin, 2003), or previous social processes of “male femaling” (Ekins, 1997), a narrative approach examines biographical storytelling as a means for expressing meaning about or conveying a transsexual identity. For example, Mason-Schrock (1996) showed how members of a transsexual support group created, adopted, and affirmed a standard repertoire of stories—including stories about early childhood crossdressing and denial narratives—that helped group members construct transsexual identities. While some advocates of narrative analysis challenge the legitimacy of clinical psychology’s diagnostic labels and practices (Sarbin, 1997) and others work to incorporate a narrative approach into therapeutic processes (DiMaggio, Salvatore, Azzara, & Catania, 2003), our goal is to show how a narrative approach sheds light on the role sexuality plays in constructing transsexual identities. Although Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) noted that the affirmation of transsexuality involves, in part, “a reexamination of sexual identity,” we show how such a reexamination takes place through narrative construction.

We thus focus on the type of narratives that Plummer (1995) terms “sexual stories,” which are narratives of intimate life that are created and shared by individuals and groups. Researchers have analyzed how members of various groups use sexual stories to accomplish identity work, including polyamorous individuals (Barker, 2005), “ex-lesbians” (Ponticelli, 1999), lesbians (Crawley & Broad, 2004), heterosexual women athletes (Iannotta & Cane, 2002), young gay men (Mutchler, 2000), sadomasochists (Langdridge & Butt, 2005), and gay and lesbian Catholics (Loseke & Cavendish, 2001). A common thread in these studies is that—regardless of the etiology of sexual behaviors—people must narrate into existence their sexual identities. As Plummer (1995) suggests, claiming a sexual identity only becomes an option *after* sexual stories are culturally available (see also D’Emilio, 1998).

Following Plummer (1995), our approach to sexual stories is part of the social constructionist intellectual tradition. As such, our assumptions about identity, social life, and the aims of sexuality research are incompatible with an essentialist paradigm (see DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Working within an essentialist paradigm, Blanchard (1991, 1993a), Bailey (2003), and Lawrence (1998) use clinical vignettes or narratives of intimate life to categorize male-to-female transsexuals as “homosexuals” (attracted to men) or “autogynephiles” (aroused by the thought of themselves as female). Autogynophilia, they argue, is part of a family of “erotic target” disorders (paraphilias) that includes sexual desire for children and animals (Freund & Blanchard, 1993; see also Lawrence, 2004). In his quantitative work, Blanchard (1989) developed multiple-choice questions that he used to categorize people as autogynephiles, which enabled him to explore statistical associations between the “type” of transsexuality and the degree of sexual interest in women (Blanchard, 1992) or discomfort with one’s gendered body (Blanchard, 1993b). In contrast to these efforts to construct types of transsexuals, our constructionist approach examines how transsexuals themselves use sexual stories for their own identity work projects.

A key benefit of taking a constructionist approach to sexual identities is that it can open a window into the relationship between identity work and the wider culture (Plummer, 1995). For example, Loseke and Cavendish (2001) showed how a group of sexual minorities narratively portrayed themselves as both “proudly sexually marginalized and devoutly Catholic,” which subverts cultural discourses that define the sexually marginalized as un-Christian, shameful, and deviant. Kitzinger’s (1987) analysis of the construction of lesbian identities examined how some lesbians adopted a liberal discourse that subverts a discourse of sexual pathology while reproducing a discourse that supports women’s oppression. Research thus shows how self-narratives can both subvert and reproduce the master story patterns of the larger culture.

For the present study, three cultural discourses were particularly important. First, sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986), most notably *gendered* sexual scripts (Alison, Santtila, Sandnabba, & Nordling, 2001; Reed & Weinberg, 1984), prescribe different kinds of sexual behavior and feelings for men and women. While gendered sexual scripts can support inequality in heterosexual relationships by creating expectations that men are sexually dominant and women are submissive, they can also be resources for individuals to construct gender identity. A second key cultural resource is the discourse of therapeutic individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Schwalbe,

1996), which assumes that feelings are signs of one's "true self" and guides a person to dig into one's emotional core and "become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself" (Bellah et al., 1985). While therapeutic discourse focuses attention on personal feelings and identity, it also hinders understanding of how larger social systems operate and thus can be used to legitimate race, class, and gender inequality (Schwalbe, 1996). A third resource is a discourse on gendered sexuality that paints male sexual desire and arousal as biologically based. As Tiefer (1995) points out, this discourse can be used by men to partially separate their gender identity from "natural" biological arousal—which decreases embarrassment of sexual dysfunction—but it can also be used to justify men's dominance in sexual relations (including rape). While many people likely use these discourses to construct identities, they are particularly important for transitioning transsexuals because of their intent to cross culturally defined gender boundaries.

If transsexuals feel that their current self-definitions are threatened by their sexual pasts, why wouldn't they just deny them? While transsexuals could deny ever participating in potentially identity-threatening sexual behaviors—as some likely do when talking with gatekeepers of surgery and their associates—ethnographic research shows that transsexuals generally see themselves on a quest for authentic selfhood (Bolin, 1988; Ekins, 1997; Feinbloom, 1976; Gagne et al., 1997; Kando, 1973; Mason-Schrock, 1996). Denial of past experiences would be inconsistent with their quest for authenticity. Drawing on therapeutic discourse, many transsexuals work diligently on finding their "true self," which requires extensive biographical exploration and construction. Furthermore, because mental health professionals have used sexual behavior and desire to define the (sometimes changing) parameters of what it means to be a homosexual, heterosexual, transvestite, or transsexual, transsexuals need to linguistically "locate" themselves within the field of identities (see Hadden & Lester, 1978); that is, they must affiliate themselves with transsexuals while disaffiliating themselves from other sexual identities.

In addition, research shows that transitioning transsexuals sometimes feel threatened by street harassment and violence, medical and job discrimination, media misrepresentation and public stigmatization, unsympathetic therapists, ministers, and medical doctors, prejudiced police and government bureaucrats, and exclusionary women's groups (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998; Gamson, 1997, 1998; Namaste, 2000; Schrock, Holden, & Reid, 2004; Sweeney, 2004). Although support groups help mitigate transsexuals' fear and loneliness (Bolin, 1988; Feinbloom, 1976; Schrock et al., 2004) and changing

their material bodies can evoke increased feelings of authenticity and confidence (Gagne et al., 1997; Rubin, 2003; Schrock, Reid, & Boyd, 2005), it should not be surprising that transsexuals in the contemporary political context carefully plumb their sexual biographies for evidence that confirms they are indeed "true" transsexuals. As Plummer (1995) points out, understanding the historical and political context in which people tell sexual stories helps us understand how and why people construct narratives of intimate life.

METHOD

Data for this study were derived from nine in-depth interviews with self-defined male-to-female transsexuals conducted in 1994 and 1995. The first author became acquainted with interviewees during 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork at a support group for crossdressers, transsexuals, and significant others. The interviews and fieldwork, along with transgender community publications, email lists, an online support group, support group newsletters, transgender social movement organizations' appeals, and activist speeches, were part of a larger IRB-approved research project that has examined collective narration in support group meetings (Mason-Schrock, 1996); social movement mobilization (Schrock et al., 2004), and the subjective experience of bodily transformation (Schrock et al., 2005). The present study focuses on interviews because they were the only data to include narratives of intimate life.

The ethnographer first asked permission to research the support group by calling its "information" number that was listed in a regional gay and lesbian newspaper. When he called, he explained to the group's coleader that he was a graduate student interested in observing the meetings and interviewing members and that confidentiality was guaranteed. When asked for more details, he said he was interested in understanding transsexuals' life experiences but that he was approaching the research "sort of like an anthropologist": He would collect as much information as he could and only later examine the data for patterns and narrow his analytic focus. After the coleader explained that the group was for people crossdressing for "purer reasons" than sexual arousal and that the meetings reflected members' needs, such as passing and coming out, she invited him to talk to group members.

At the next meeting, the first author repeated to group members what he had told the coleader and answered a number of questions from members, such as how he would ensure confidentiality, how he became interested in transgendered issues, and if he had ever crossdressed.

He responded by saying that he would use pseudonyms when writing fieldnotes and papers, that he would exclude a person's comments from notes or papers if s/he so desired, that he did not want to disturb the group process, and he would leave if anyone felt too uncomfortable. Furthermore, he said he became interested in transgender issues when taking two undergraduate courses on sexual variation and then working with the course instructor on various research projects, one of which involved interviewing transsexuals. And he explained that his sister and cousin dressed him in girl's clothes once when he was young, but that he was not a crossdresser or a transsexual. After discussing these issues, group members gave him verbal consent. During the around the room check-ins at subsequent meetings, he reminded members of his research and gained newcomers' consent before writing them into his fieldnotes.

Participants

Although the first author did not crossdress and spoke only during the check-ins or in response to direct questions during the meetings, he talked informally with members before and after the official meeting time. During the meetings, he often joined in with laughter at group jokes—including their running joke that he was in denial—and occasionally shed tears with group members when they discussed emotional issues, such as the unexpected death of a regular group member. Although the present analysis relied only on interview data (in part because the support group officially censored sex talk), the rapport generated through fieldwork arguably made it easier for interviewees to talk about their sexual biographies. It probably also helped that the interviewer held no institutional authority over interviewees nor was he connected to mental health professionals who did.

About 5 months into the fieldwork, the first author began approaching transsexual members to schedule interviews. All agreed. The nine interviewees were White, college educated male-to-female transsexuals between 31 and 47 years of age. All were in the midst of transition: two had recently defined themselves as transsexuals; five lived part-time as women; and two lived full-time as women. All said they desired but none had undergone sex reassignment surgery. None of the interviewees were paid for their participation and all of them signed university-approved consent forms.

Interviewees revealed an array of sexual experiences that needed to be woven into their transsexual narratives. Before coming to terms with transsexuality, six interviewees had exclusively defined themselves as

heterosexual men, two had thought of themselves as heterosexual while young but later became involved in the gay community, and one interviewee had been exclusively attracted to men. Before adopting transsexual identities, six had used women's garments, at least once, in private masturbation rituals and four said they and their female partners had at least once incorporated crossdressing into their sexual interactions. After coming to terms, three defined themselves as heterosexual women, three as lesbian women, and three planned to explore sex with both women and men after surgery in order to see what felt most authentic.

Procedure

The interviews took place in the interviewees' or interviewer's residence and lasted between 2 and 3½ hr. Although the interview guide's open-ended questions focused on early crossdressing, coming to terms, bodily transformation, passing, and coming out, all but two interviewees voluntarily brought up sexual experiences when telling their life stories. For the interviewees who did not bring it up on their own, the interviewer asked guiding questions such as, "I've read that sexuality can be part of crossdressing and other transsexuals have mentioned this to me. Has it been a part of your experience?" Although interviewees sometimes did not go into depth about a particular sexual experience, all of their accounts reinforced their transsexual identity. When the significance of a sexual experience seemed unclear, the interviewer asked clarifying questions such as, "How do you make sense of that experience?" (see Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

While working together on research on transgender social movement mobilization and transsexuals' experience of bodily transformation, the first and second author became interested in unexplored interview data on transsexuals' sexuality. Both authors began data analysis by rereading the interview transcripts, noting in the margins when and how sexual experiences were discussed, and writing "analytic memos" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) about each interviewee's sexual stories. We then used qualitative analysis software, *ATLAS.ti*, to conduct coding of the transcripts. Rather than following a pure grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this initial coding was guided by a general question: "What types of sexual stories did interviewees tell?" We then posed the following question to each type of story: "What are the narrative's main features and functions?" By comparing and contrasting answers to these questions, we derived the analysis presented below.

RESULTS

We discuss how interviewees' sexual storytelling accounted for (1) memories of masturbating with or being aroused by women's clothing; (2) sexual relations with women; (3) incorporating crossdressing into sexual relations with women; and (4) sexual relations with men. Interviewees primarily used gendered sexual scripts, a discourse on the biological basis of sexual arousal, and a discourse of self-discovery to subvert the implication that the aforementioned sexual practices indicated they were heterosexual men, gay men, or transvestites and construct their identities as transsexuals. In doing so, interviewees rhetorically defetishized autoerotic crossdressing, queered straight sex, refashioned transvestic sex, and straightened out gay sex.

Defetishizing Autoerotic Crossdressing

"I was sexually aroused when I [cross]dressed, which made me think, ah-ha, I'm a transvestite," said Erin. Five other interviewees also said that at one point or another that they had used women's garments during autoerotic activities. Although their experiences differed, each interviewee faced the narrative task of incorporating these experiences into their transsexual identities, which necessarily involved differentiating themselves from transvestites. Interviewees accomplished this task by drawing on a variety of discourses, including discourses on child, male, and fetishist sexuality as well as therapeutic discourse. Interviewees essentially used these discourses to "defetishize" autoerotic crossdressing and spin their sexual biographies to indicate transsexuality.

Interviewees used cultural discourse on sexuality that paints preadolescents as asexual (see Martinson, 1973)—which is used to regulate childhood sexuality (Weeks, 1986)—as a resource to distance themselves from erotic transvestites. In telling their sexual stories, the six who had used women's garments during masturbation drew on the notion that sexual life begins only after puberty as a resource for identity work. Erin's account was typical: "I had been dressing for seven years before I had my first orgasm, so my reaching puberty and beginning to masturbate and becoming sexual was just coincidental with my crossdressing." The implication was that because they crossdressed *before* puberty, that they were not, underneath it all, just transvestites. Transsexuals thus used part of a larger discourse of sexual regulation as a resource to facilitate liberation from their gendered bodies.

Narratively defetishizing autoerotic crossdressing in ways that signified womanhood was difficult because

of the quintessential cultural signifier of manhood: the erect penis (Tiefer, 1995). Interviewees had to subvert the notion that achieving erections when wearing women's garments signified manhood or transvestitism. In accounting for her autoerotic crossdressing, Joyce said: "Maybe I just felt sexy and a penis being what it is, [it] doesn't require much to wake up." While erections are culturally rendered as signifying manhood, Joyce thus subverted this notion by rendering erections as irrepressible biological responses that overpowered her true womanhood. Joyce thus used one thread of a discourse on male sexuality—namely, that biology controls arousal—to disaffiliate herself from men and transvestites.

Another common distancing strategy was to say that they did not need to crossdress to become sexually aroused. Although the *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) does not define "transvestic fetishism" as being sexually *dependent* on crossdressing, interviewees used this popular belief as a resource to minimize inauthenticity. Erin, for example, said, "I have never needed to be crossdressed to become aroused. In fact, I would generally take off the women's clothes before I would ejaculate so I wouldn't mess them up." Erin thus used her memory of removing women's garments before soiling them as a piece of biographical evidence to further defetishize autoerotic crossdressing.

In telling tales about autoerotic crossdressing in adulthood, five interviewees disaffiliated themselves from transvestitism by suggesting that (1) crossdressing evoked feelings beyond the erotic and (2) they increasingly changed their overall appearance to be more feminine. Jenny's account illustrates both strategies:

I hit puberty around sixth grade and from about that point until the time I started graduate school I insisted to myself that the only reason that I did it was for the erotic stimulation during masturbation. But by the time that I was in graduate school that wasn't the truth. It wasn't like I put on a pair of panties, masturbate, and be done with it. It was put something on and I'd feel great pleasure. I got more pleasure from the dressing up than from [masturbation] and that was hard to reconcile. "I shouldn't think that way. I shouldn't feel that way." And I'd get dresses and skirts. I'd get makeup and perfume. I would figure out ways to stuff a bra. I would do all these things that didn't have any erotic components.

Jenny's story thus used a discourse of therapeutic self-discovery and a discourse of gendered sexuality for her transsexual identity work. First, by highlighting nonerotic emotions when crossdressing, she employed the notion that true selves are revealed through emotions to imply that because she felt "pleasure" beyond the erotic—she was not really a transvestite. Second, although women's dresses, bras, makeup, and perfume are often sexualized

in our culture, Jenny used the discursive notion that male sexuality necessarily centers on the phallus (Tiefer, 1995) as a resource for self-affirmation. More specifically, the implication was that because she wore or applied feminine decoration that did not directly stimulate the genitals, she was not a transvestite, but a transsexual.

In contrast to defining nonerotic aspects of cross-dressing as indicating transsexuality, interviewees also framed coming to terms with transsexuality as eradicating or at least diminishing a link between women's clothing and sexual arousal. After saying that crossdressing "started as a fetish," for example, Shelly said: "I was sexually aroused by it, but as I got older it was something more serious, more of an identity." Erin said that cross-dressing "is becoming more of an everyday part of my life [and now] I don't get aroused." Joyce gave a more dramatic narrative:

There were a couple of moments that I dressed in hose and heels, and maybe this was even before the earrings, that I turned around and looked at myself in the mirror and it was just electric. There was a person there. It was female. This was not a man in a dress. I was there seeing myself as a woman and, after that, the connection with male sexuality just snapped. The old connection between lingerie or whatever and male sexual response is just not there anymore since I've seen myself this way.

Although Joyce crossdressed during masturbation rituals for about 20 years, her story of recognizing her differently gendered true self in the mirror "snapped" the sexual association with women's clothes. Such stories thus subtly used therapeutic discourse to imply that autoerotic crossdressing was a method to sustain denial of their differently gendered true selves.

Joyce, who had not yet begun hormone therapy, admitted that even after defining herself as transsexual, women's clothing occasionally provoked erections. But she used essentialist discourse on male sexuality (Tiefer, 1995) to minimize the significance of arousal. When Joyce mentioned that she still occasionally gets "a little erection" when trying on a new piece of women's clothing, she blamed "testosterone poisoning" and said that such arousal should end when she begins taking hormones. When storytelling could not successfully de-link crossdressing and erections, synthetic hormones (and eventually surgery) could.

In telling their sexual stories, interviewees needed to subvert the cultural assumption that autoerotic cross-dressing necessarily makes a person a transvestite. They distanced themselves from transvestitism by using discourses on therapeutic self-discovery, childhood sexuality, and male sexuality. Their identity work signified a transsexual identity by using these discourses to suggest

that autoerotic crossdressing was a method for sustaining denial of their transsexuality and that expressing their differently gendered true selves through crossdressing occurred long before they began masturbating.

Queering Straight Sex

Young males growing up in our heteronormative culture learn early on that having sex with females is key to proving one's manhood (Tiefer, 1995). The cultural notion that "real men" are heterosexual is a resource to regulate sexuality, define gay men as others, maintain gender boundaries, and devalue femininity in men. For male-to-female transsexuals with histories of male-female sex, this gendered discourse on sexuality threatens the construction of the self as real women. More specifically, interviewees who, as men, had sexual relations with women needed to tell sexual stories that reframed such experiences as signifying their true womanhood. The task at hand was thus to "queer" heterosexuality, by which we mean they narratively subverted the cultural assumption that sex between male and female-bodied individuals equals heterosexuality. Interviewees most commonly queered straight sex by saying that they performed such sexual acts in stereotypically feminine ways and by claiming to try on the identity "woman" when having sex with women.

For Sue, however, who had spent most of her life defining herself as a gay man, queering straight sex involved implying that the rarity of sexual encounters with women resulted from her differently gendered true self.

Sex with women has really been rare, because I just don't identify much with that role. The times I've been with women has been more out of guilt or the feeling that I need to somehow do something to make up—I'm being happy but I'm not necessarily fulfilling them.

Using a discourse of heteronormativity as a resource, Sue thus implied that sexual relations with women were infrequent because she did not identify as a man—not merely because she was more sexually attracted to men. She furthermore used the sexual story to construct her transsexual identity by implying that the reason she did sometimes have sex with women, as a man, was because she was, in effect, stereotypically feminine: she felt guilty about not fulfilling others' needs and decided to put others' happiness above her own.

Interviewees expressed a preference for feminine sexual demeanor by locating themselves in opposition to (hetero)gendered sexual scripts that assign "to men the role of initiating and pursuing sexual activity until stopped by the partner" (Reed & Weinberg, 1984). More specifically, interviewees often constructed themselves as having

been uncomfortable and uninterested in being assertive or dominant sexual actors while being interested in lengthy foreplay during sexual interactions with women. Shelly's account of having sex with women, as a man, illustrates several common narrative themes:

I feel more sensitive in lovemaking, for instance. I enjoy cuddling, embracing. [In contrast], a lot of guys want to get straight at it. . . . In fact, I've asked [women] partners to take the top position. I guess I enjoy all positions. But I like to be the more passive one. At the same time, I'm not just laying there dumb.

Shelly used traditionally gendered sexual scripts to narratively distance herself from stereotypes of male heterosexuality while affiliating herself with some stereotypes of female sexuality. By painting herself as sensitive, relatively passive, and enjoying foreplay, Shelly minimized the threat of an apparent heterosexual biography. In this way, Shelly and others reframed past sexual encounters between their male-bodied selves and female-bodied women as expressing their own womanhood.

In addition to interpreting stereotypically feminine sexual demeanor as revealing their transsexuality, interviewees also queered their heterosexual biographies by saying they had previously defined themselves as women when navigating their male bodies in sexual interactions with female-bodied partners. By saying they had mentally adopted the identity "woman," the implication was that these experiences were lesbian rather than heterosexual in nature. For example, Marzie said, "When I [as a man] slept with women, I fantasized that I was a woman." These sexual stories subtly used the assumption in therapeutic discourse that one's true self is fundamentally only knowable or discoverable through personal subjective experience.

Overall, interviewees made allusions to acting in stereotypically feminine ways and sometimes said they adopted the identity "woman" when telling stories about having sex, as men, with women. Their use of gendered sexual scripts and therapeutic discourse helped them subvert a central assumption of heteronormative discourse: sex between male and female-bodied individuals indicates heterosexuality. Interviewees' sexual stories thus rhetorically queered "straight sex" by assuming that recalled subjective experiences and some cultural discourses were more important than the material body in determining sexual orientation.

Refashioning Transvestic Sex

Four interviewees said they had incorporated cross-dressing, at least once, into sexual relationships with

women. On the surface, these experiences could be seen as evidence that they were heterosexual men who were either erotic transvestites or crossdressers who occasionally dabbled in the erotic, rather than transsexual. Interviewees' narrative task was thus to spin their stories about such experiences so as to reinforce their transsexual identities. Therapeutic discourse was a key cultural resource for such identity work, particularly the idea that feelings are signs of true selves. As we will show, interviewees used therapeutic discourse to metaphorically "refashion" apparently transvestic sex to signify their true transsexuality.

Four interviewees each said they were quite happy when, as men, they incorporated crossdressing into their sexual interactions with women. They did not, however, see this joy as a result of heightened eroticism. Instead, interviewees suggested that their joy derived from wearing women's garments in front of someone who affirmed their womanhood. As Kris put it, "[My second wife] liked me to wear her underwear when we went to bed. And I thought, 'Oh God I'm in heaven. Thank you Jesus!' Finally, a woman understands the way I am." Kris went on to say that, for her, it was "not a sexual thing," but it enabled her to "wear the clothes that I really want to wear and I can feel and behave in the way that I think I should be behaving all the time. So it was a great outlet." By emphasizing the affirmation of "the way I am" and denying that the crossdressing was sexually arousing, Kris distanced herself from erotic transvestites. Key to accomplishing this narrative maneuver was her subtle use of therapeutic discourse. By juxtaposing her account of transcendent joy when first being able to wear women's underwear during sex next to her invocation of authenticity, Erin implied that her true self had found an avenue of expression.

If in telling her sexual story, however, Kris said that she remained completely satisfied with wearing women's underwear during sex, her story would leave open the possibility of being a transvestite. Kris, however, narratively closed off this possibility:

As time went on, it progressed to where I was wearing more and more female clothing, but only when we made love—*only* when we made love. But that was enough to keep me going. But then again it was like, "This is not what I want. I like what I'm wearing but I still want to be her."

In the above account, Kris distanced herself from erotic transvestites with three common rhetorical maneuvers. First, she implied that she became dissatisfied with only wearing women's underwear by saying that she began to wear "more and more female clothing"—which suggested

that women's clothing was more than just a prop for sexual stimulation. Second, she implied that she was unsatisfied about restricting the wearing of women's clothing during lovemaking. Third, she implied that wearing women's clothing was ultimately unsatisfying in and of itself because it did not change her body: Kris said she wanted to "be" her wife, not merely dress in her clothes. Each of her distancing methods employed the therapeutic assumption that feeling unsatisfied indicates that one is not expressing the true self. Her use of therapeutic discourse thus helped her dismiss the possibility that her biography indicated that she was a transvestite.

In giving her account of sexual crossdressing, Taylor distanced herself from erotic transvestites by expressing unhappiness with her appearance:

It was fun to be with her [dressed] as a woman. And she was actually able to experience some lesbian feelings that she had. But it brought even more humiliation and confusion because I wasn't happy with that. I felt like I looked really dumb. I hadn't changed my physique or my outer appearance very much. My eyebrows were still very heavy. I had a lot of body hair, that kind of thing. So I really looked like a guy dressed up like a woman. Not like a girl. And that made me unhappy and I just felt like an idiot. Also, all this happened behind closed doors, closed windows. For two nights a week, I'd shut all the blinds in our house and dress up like a girl and feel like an idiot. And that was very degrading.

In saying she felt "unhappy," humiliated, and "confused" about looking "like a guy dressed up like a woman" instead of "a girl," Taylor distanced herself from erotic transvestites. She indicated that it was not satisfying for her to merely use women's clothing in sexual interactions. Furthermore, by implying that it was important for her to change her *body* and that it was "degrading" to only crossdress in private, she aligned herself with transsexuals who desire to embody womanhood in public social life. Kris thus used the therapeutic notion that feeling dissatisfied signified inauthenticity to aid her current feelings of being authentically transsexual.

By pointing to emotions that, according to therapeutic discourse, signify that they were or were not expressing their true selves, interviewees were able to reinterpret the meaning of behavior that on the surface suggests they might be erotic transvestites. More specifically, they used the emotions of joy and happiness in narrating their initial incorporation of crossdressing into sexual relations with women. They defined such emotions as signs that their true selves had gained an outlet. However, they then narratively invoked emotions such as dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and humiliation to frame their sexual experiences, which disaffiliated themselves from transvestites. Their sexual stories thus refashioned what an outside observer

might define as transvestic sex as indicating their true transsexuality.

Straightening Gay Sex

When I come out to people . . . the first thing some of them say is, "Are you gay or bisexual?" But gender has nothing to do with sexual orientation. So there's some confusion out there.

In the above quote, Shelly suggests that for many people in our culture, there is confusion over transsexuality and homosexuality (and bisexuality). Shelly herself, as well as Sue and Kris had—as men—had sex with other men and adopted, at least for a time, a gay identity. Like most people in our culture, they initially believed that, when two male-bodied individuals have sex, that it indicates homosexuality. In telling their sexual stories, however, interviewees "straightened out" apparent gay sex by using traditional sexual scripts that painted women as sexually submissive and enjoying foreplay and by painting themselves as victims of cultural myths that confuse cross-gender identification with sexual orientation.

The most basic way interviewees straightened out gay sex was to paint their initial identification as gay men as a mistake. More specifically, three interviewees indicated that because they felt different from cultural notions of what heterosexual men are supposed to be and because they were attracted to men, they assumed they were gay. Being gay initially seemed more plausible than being male-bodied heterosexual women. For example, Sue said:

I remember too that just before high school the feeling of "well, maybe I'm really gay" started coming into mind. Still, it was like I have all these [crossdressing activities] that I like doing; I'm not really relating too much to this heterosexual male role, although I don't think those were exactly my thoughts at the time (mutual laughter)—a junior high school kid saying, "a heterosexual male role," ha! But that's what I was starting to think about.

In giving their accounts, interviewees also emphasized that as boys and young men they had little knowledge of transsexuality, and thus assumed they must be gay. As Shelly succinctly put it, "I like dressing like a girl but the only thing I know is there are gay people and straight people, [so] I must be a gay person."

Interviewees' sexual stories bolstered their transsexual identities when reconstructing previous sexual acts with men. One rhetorical strategy involved suggesting that sex with men enabled them to imagine what it would be like to be women. Sue, for example, described her male-male sexual encounters as helping her become "more

strongly identified as a woman sexually.” She represented her sexual relationship with a male roommate as follows:

With him, I really started to feel much more in the feminine role, which was good, though I didn’t really tell him. But in our sexual relationship it was obvious who was more of the aggressor and who wasn’t. And obviously I wasn’t. So, that was good.

Sue used traditionally gendered sexual scripts that paint women as sexually passive to align her biography with stereotypes of women’s sexuality. The implication was that being sexually submissive to male-bodied people indicated her heterosexual womanhood rather than homosexual manhood. Sue furthermore thought her passivity in sex with her roommate was “good” because, in hindsight, it brought her closer to coming to terms with transsexuality.

Stories of sex between two male-bodied people were not only construed as a small step toward womanhood, but interviewees sometimes depicted sexual encounters as life-altering epiphanies that spurred transition. After a divorce, Erin began dressing as a woman and going to a gay bar where she met Ben, whom she emphasized was “bisexual,” and who became a “lifelong friend” and, for a time, her lover. After getting to know each other as friends for about 3 months, they had their first sexual encounter, which Erin describes as follows:

It was the most remarkable experience of my life. It was nothing like I thought it was going to be. 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. That was a *thrill* all alone. . . . He explained everything to me: what to do; what he was going to do; what it was going to feel like—*everything*. I had never even touched a man before. *Never*. And I was touching him. And it was the strangest—it was like it didn’t feel strange, it felt *natural*. And we made love. Slow tender love. . . . When I was with him, I felt *soooo* female. Not just looking female, dressed female, but I felt female. And that changed me. That was the final hurdle, step, conquest—that was it. When that happened I knew, “No, you’ve not made a weird decision, you’ve not been strange all these years, finally, *finally*, girl, you’ve found out who you are and know that you are not gay,” even though I was with a man. I knew it. He didn’t treat me that way. . . . 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.

In her sexual story, Erin used both a discourse of therapy and gendered sexual scripts to narrate her transsexual

identity. In emphasizing her appreciation of Ben’s slow and tender guidance, she constructed him as sensitive to her feminine self and desires but also as a gentle initiator. Similar to interviewees’ interpretation of sex between male and female-bodied individuals, Erin thus used a gendered (hetero)sexual script to subvert the cultural definition of homosexuality as sex between two male-bodied people. She also employed therapeutic discourse to suggest that she *felt* like woman, even when he handled her penis. Straightening out gay sex thus involved placing more narrative significance on her subjective feelings than her bodily signs of manhood.

The promise of validating their differently gendered true selves through sexual relations with men led some interviewees who had previously only been attracted to women, including three interviewees, to consider trying out sex with men (see also Daskalos, 1998). For example, although Jenny had been “only attracted to women,” after sex-reassignment surgery she said she will “try it out both ways and see what happens.” Jenny said, “There is a dramatic validation of one’s femininity in being able to seduce a man. The same thing doesn’t apply to being able to seduce a woman.” In addition, Karen, who had invited and was accompanied by the first author to a hockey game a week earlier, said at the end of a 3 hr-long interview:

This will probably throw you for little bit of a loop. There are times when I really, really feel feminine that I have a high need to cuddle and it would be really awkward for me to cuddle with a woman. My only choice is a guy and I’m really struggling with that but I would really like to go either with a paid escort or with someone who is gay or someone who would do it as a courtesy. Go out on a date, dancing, theater, dinner, and whatever. . . . That’s what I would like as my next experience. I’m trying to figure out how to achieve that. Like the other night at the hockey game, that was a borderline experience. I appreciate that.

Karen then asked the interviewer if he would go out on a date with her. He politely declined.

The above quotes suggest that interviewees not only used traditionally gendered sexual scripts to make sense of their sexual pasts, but to also chart their sexual futures. The cultural notion that sex with men confirms womanhood was thus a tool for interviewees to narratively straighten out past gay sex, but also use what many people define as gay sex or romance to try out heterosexual womanhood. If successful in their quests, many of the other interviewees will likely incorporate sexual experiences with male-bodied individuals into their transsexual identity work. People thus do not only use sexual stories to interpret their biographies in line with current or desired identities, but they often use their agency to fit their lives into the

culturally defined boundaries of the sexual identities they aim to inhabit.

DISCUSSION

While some transsexuals may choose to deny potentially identity-threatening sexual experiences when talking to mental health professionals or others, their quest for authenticity (Bolin, 1988; Mason-Schrock, 1996) and the social risks of transition (Gamson, 1997, 1998; Schrock et al., 2004; Sweeney, 2004) likely motivate them to incorporate their sexual experiences into their self-narratives. That is, transsexuals may be spurred to construct sexual stories by self-reflexive questions such as, “Are you sure this is worth it? Are you sure that you are a transsexual?” which some of our interviewees said they worked through when “coming to terms.” Because male-to-female transsexual identity work necessarily involves disaffiliation from gay, straight, and transvestic men, other transsexuals, like our interviewees, likely spin narratives of sexual behavior that on the surface appear to indicate male homosexuality, heterosexuality, or transvestitism to signify transsexuality.

Corroborating previous research on sexual stories (Kitzinger, 1987; Loseke & Cavendish, 2001; Plummer, 1995), our analysis showed that interviewees’ identity work subverted some and drew on other discourses of sexuality. They subverted cultural (and essentialist) discourses that define homosexual sex as being between two male-bodied individuals, heterosexual sex as being between male-bodied and female-bodied individuals, and transvestic sex as involving males incorporating women’s garments into their autoerotic activities or sex with women. Interviewees accomplished such discursive subversion by drawing on discourses about the biological basis of male sexual arousal (Tiefer, 1995), heteronormative gendered sexual scripts (Alison et al., 2001; Reed & Weinberg, 1984), and therapeutic individualism (Bellah et al., 1985; Schwalbe, 1996). Interviewees thus unintentionally reproduced discourses that can be used to legitimate the oppression of women, gays and lesbians, racial minorities, and working class and poor people. Perhaps these discourses resonated with our interviewees because they legitimated the privileges that white, middle class men are usually socialized to unreflexively accept. Such discourses may also resonate with those who occupy institutional positions designed, at least in part, to regulate transsexuals (see Namaste, 2000).

Our data have several limitations. Like most transsexual research, our nonrandom sample of interviewees does not allow us to generalize to the larger population

of male-to-female transsexuals. Furthermore, the homogeneity of our sample limits our ability to conduct an in-depth analysis of how race, class, or region may shape transsexuals’ sexual storytelling. In addition, our interviews were conducted before the transgender subculture became involved in the debate over autogynephilia, before the transgender social movement, and before the media began portraying transsexuals, at least occasionally, in a more positive fashion. And finally, because our interview schedule was not designed to elicit sexual stories and the interviews did not focus primarily on sexuality, our data was probably less rich than it could have otherwise been.

Future research on transsexual identity work and transsexuals more generally, as Namaste (2000) suggests, should gather a more diverse sample of participants in order to explore how race, class, and region shape transsexuals’ experiences. Conducting in-depth interviews that focus primarily on transsexuals’ sexual experiences could also lead to a more nuanced understanding of the variety and social role of transsexuals’ sexual stories. It may also be fruitful to analyze how recent and ongoing collective efforts to further label or liberate transsexuals shapes how transsexuals themselves construct their own identities as well as how they experience their “transsexual trajectories” (Rubin, 2003). Another avenue for constructionist research would be to analyze how scientific discourse has constructed transsexuals’ sexuality (especially the discourse on autogynephilia), how such constructions influence transsexuals’ self-narratives, emotional well-being, and experiences with mental health professionals. Examining how the transgender community has “talked back” to the scientific community about their sexuality and how community members have debated the importance of sexuality among themselves may also be productive paths for social constructionists interested in the confluence of gender and sexuality to explore.

As sexual stories and identities proliferate, constructing an unambiguous sexual identity becomes more difficult—especially if one has participated in a diversity of sexual experiences throughout one’s life. The dilemma may be particularly poignant for male-to-female transsexuals who have used women’s clothing in sexual activities or experienced “normal” sexual relations with women or men. By defetishizing autoerotic crossdressing, queering straight sex, refashioning transvestic sex, and straightening out gay sex, however, our interviewees were able to construct a more coherent sense of self that evoked feelings of authenticity. Anyone who has engaged in or fantasized about sexual activities that do not fit into the culturally defined parameters of the sexual identity to which s/he is currently attached may be compelled to create similar narratives. Most people, however, do not

have their sexual biographies evaluated by mental health professionals who determine whether they can inhabit the bodies they desire. The stories that sexologists spin about transsexuals' sexual lives may indeed be of more social consequence than the sexual stories transsexuals tell about themselves.

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