For a Sociology of Transsexualism

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore the development of theories on transsexualism with a view to advancing a typology of theories of transsexualism. This typology exposes a general shift from concerns with 'authenticity' (the transsexual as a 'real' woman or man) to issues of 'performativity' (the transsexual as hyperbolic enactment of gender). I will argue it is through a displacement of psychology with sociology as the major lens through which transsexualism is theorized that such a shift from authenticity to performativity is effected. The final typology considers the notion of transgression (rendering the modern two-gender system obsolete). The article argues that whilst transgression may be possible, it is not guaranteed by all forms of transsexualism.

KEY WORDS

authenticity / ethnomethodology / performativity / symbolic interactionism / transgression / transsexualism

> We find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body.
>
> (Stone, 1998: 10)

Much sociological theory has been occupied with the vicissitudes of identity, prompted recently by postmodern and new materialist interventions.[1] Whereas sociology has always emphasized the social construction of identity, after postmodernism, the limits of social constructionism have taken on a much sharper hue. Reflecting this theoretical turn, socialization theory have been largely displaced by deeper explorations of the ontological status of key concepts such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and

disability. Within gender and sexuality studies, sociologists seek to challenge the 'naturalness' of sex, gender and sexuality. For instance, Weeks (1996) provides an account of the construction of homosexuality, Esterberg (1996) the construction of lesbianism, and Ingraham (1996) and Jackson (1999) the construction of heterosexuality.

The aim of this article is to explore the development of theories on transsexualism with a view to advancing the need for a distinctly sociological approach to this particular identity. The history of development exposes a general shift from concerns with 'authenticity' (the transsexual as a 'real' woman or man) to issues of 'performativity' (the transsexual as hyperbolic enactment of gender). I will argue that it is through a displacement of psychology with sociology as the major lens through which transsexualism is theorized that such a shift from authenticity to performativity is effected.

My argument is, briefly, that psychological analyses of transsexualism focus on the issue of authenticity because the discipline remains wedded to sex and gender as coherent, stable and 'real' concepts. I argue that a particularly *sociological* imagination supplants the notion of authenticity with performativity because sociology explicitly questions the relationship between sex and gender. Given sociology's understanding of *both* sex and gender as the outcome of social interaction rather than human 'nature', its agenda is not to police the boundaries of the modern two-gender system, but rather to understand why such vociferous debates concerning these boundaries take place (Hird, 2000). I will argue, finally, that a recent return to symbolic interactionism (particularly Mead and Goffman) and ethnomethodology (particularly Garfinkel, and Kessler and McKenna) are reframing debates within transsexual studies around the notion of transgression (rendering the modern two-gender system obsolete). I will conclude by contemplating the possibilities for considering transsexualism as transgressive, from a sociological perspective.

Although analyses of transsexualism usually appear within other disciplines such as sexuality studies, the questions which transsexualism raises regarding the materiality of the body, the construction of identity and the interaction between self and society are definitively sociological concerns (Featherstone and Turner, 1995; Turner, 1992). As such, current developments in transsexual studies will be of interest to sociologists generally. Given also that studies on transsexualism are increasing, it is both relevant and timely that sociology now reflect upon its approach to this social phenomenon.

Transsexualism in Society

Transsexualism currently defines an individual's relation to gender reassignment – pre-transition/operative, transitioning/in the process of hormonal and surgical sex-reassignment, and post-transition/operative (Bolin, 1994; Prosser, 1998). There are approximately 5000 post-operative transsexual people in the UK. Several NHS hospitals provide ongoing surgical, hormonal and psychiatric

care for transsexuals in Bristol, Leeds, Leicester, London and Newcastle (Department of Economic Development, 1999; Press for Change, 2000).

My hypothesization of a typology consisting of authenticity, performativity and transgression emerged from an analysis of the history of transsexualism. This is a history of pathology – the very term 'transsexual' is a psychological and medical classification. It is helpful to signpost this historical context through which transsexualism emerges as a social phenomenon in order to situate the typology to be hypothesized.

Psychology and medicine remain central in transsexual studies, and both disciplines steadfastly adhere to a two-gender (female and male) paradigm. Medical inquiry into transsexualism advances two theories of aetiology: psychiatric and somatic. I review the development of attempts within the field of psychiatry to account for transsexualism, and then attend to arguments supporting a somatic causation.

Psychiatric Arguments

Sexology emerged toward the end of the 19th century as a distinct sub-discipline of psychology, on the heels of medicine and psychiatry which were rapidly expanding fields. The 'innocent pleasures' of cross-dressing described by men during the 18th century were gradually usurped by a hegemonic psycho-medical discourse, the major 'cultural lens' through which sexuality is now understood (Ekins and King, 1997; Farrer, 1987, 1994). In the first instance, sexology focused on homosexuality. Von Krafft-Ebing considered 'contrary inverted sexual feelings' and 'gynandry' in the seminal *The Psychopathia Sexualis* (1894). This work was followed closely by more favourable considerations of 'congenital inverts' in Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1936) and philanthropists such as Edward Carpenter's 'intermediate sex' in *Love's Coming of Age* (1896). Challenging the hitherto hegemonic notion of homosexuals as 'criminal', these early sexologists determined homosexuality to be a biological ailment, a sickness rather than a crime. The approach was distinctly positivist – von Krafft-Ebing measured the hips, ears, faces, pelvises and skulls of living 'inverts' and performed autopsies on the dead, in order to discover a congenital cause (MacKenzie, 1994: 35). 'Insane' relatives were considered for a possible hereditary effect. Demonstrating a surprising consistency with pre-modern theories, von Krafft-Ebing considered male-to-female (MTF) 'inverts' to be 'failed men' in contrast to female-to-male (FTM) 'inverts' who were apparently intelligent, accomplished and independent women.

Stoller (1968, 1975) first distinguished transsexualism from those *psychopathia sexualis* already under scrutiny, homosexuality and transvestism. Stoller proposed transsexualism to be the product of 'unconscious' rearing of the child in the opposite sex. Stoller focused on a three-generation formula that he summarized as: 'too much mother made possible by too little father' (1969: 166). Heavily influenced by psychology and medicine, a large number of researchers subsequently took as given the aetiology of transsexualism to

consist of parental 'deviations' from 'normal' femininity and masculinity. These included 'effeminate' fathers, domineering mothers, birth order, divorce (Pomeroy, 1969); IQ (Doorbar, 1969); temporal lobe disorder (Blumer, 1969); parental age (Wålinder, 1969); introversion, depression and non-adjustment to work (Johnson and Hunt, 1990); a precursor of transvestism and homosexuality (Limentani, 1979); and narcissism, profound dependency conflicts, immature, potentially explosive, demanding, manipulative, controlling, coercive and paranoid personalities (Lothstein, 1988).

At the same time that homosexuality liberated itself through political rights claims from psycho-medical classification, transsexualism became an official psychological 'disorder' in the 1980 edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III). According to the more recent DSM-IV, adult 'gender dysphoria' (formerly 'transsexualism') is defined as:

> A strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex).
>
> Persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex.
>
> The disturbance is not concurrent with a physical intersex condition.
>
> The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
>
> (Wilson 1997: 1–11)

Currently, psychoanalysis and behaviour modification represent the major psycho-medical responses to transsexualism. Both treatment approaches 'seek to ensure that identity, social status and biology "match". The end result is that the binary structure of gender is maintained' (Ekins and King, 1997: 9). The 'success' criteria for these three psycho-medical treatment responses is the same – at all costs, the result must be an individual who is unambiguously *either* female or male.

Somatic Arguments

Despite many years of attempts, arguments that transsexualism is somatic in origin have taken a backseat to psychiatric arguments (Playdon, 2000). Those supporting somatic arguments cite long-term evidence suggesting that transsexual women and men are not mentally ill, and that, in tandem with homosexuality, much of the distress, anger and depression evidenced in transsexual people is a result of societal discrimination and *not* the transsexual condition itself. And as in the case of homosexuality, no reliable evidence suggests transsexualism can be 'cured'. Thus Playdon argues that transsexualism be considered an intersexed condition (2000). This theory is supported by recent evidence by Zhou et al. (in Gooren, 2000) who found that six transsexual women revealed female patterns in a normally sexually dimorphic part of the

brain. Despite continued research into somatic causation, these types of studies, like 'gay gene' theories of homosexuality, remain less popular than psychiatric theories of transsexualism.

A Typology of Transsexualism

As I have outlined, transsexualism has been most widely theorized from medical and psychiatric perspectives. However, a number of other theoretical perspectives, including feminist, queer and transgender studies, have offered analyses of transsexualism since the 1970s. Each of these theoretical perspectives is undergirded by particular assumptions about sex and gender. Following Brunsdon's (1997) analysis of the development of identity in feminist television criticism, I want to construct a similar typology to hypothesize the relationship between these theories and transsexualism. This typology would consist of the following:

(1) authenticity – transsexualism and 'real' sex and gender;
(2) performativity – transsexualism and fictive sex and gender; and
(3) transgression – transsexualism and the disruption of sex and gender.

Each category is defined through the relationship between transsexualism and the concepts of sex and gender. Focus on authenticity assumes a relationship between sex, gender and 'reality', usually defined through morphology. Here, transsexualism is assessed against criteria of stable, fixed and immutable sex. Performativity, in contrast, suggests the discursive production of any notion of reality based upon sex. As such, transsexualism offers key insights into the mechanisms and techniques through which sex and gender are naturalized and essentialized. Closely linked with performativity, transgression argues that transsexualism purposefully violates society's naturalization of sexual difference.

Authenticity

Concern with the authenticity of transsexualism reflects upon the possibility of changing sex. Society relies on sex as a stable and unchangeable indicator of sexual difference, upon which hierarchies of power then produce divisions of labour. As such, society is most familiar with arguments relating to transsexual people's supposed declarations of 'being' the 'opposite' sex to their bodies. The notion of authenticity rests upon three inter-related assumptions: that sex and gender exist; that sex and gender constitute measurable traits; and that the 'normal' population adheres to the first two assumptions.

In terms of the first assumption, the entire psychological approach to transsexualism depends upon stable notions of 'sex' as the biological, anatomical makeup of individuals; and 'gender' as the identity which individuals derive

from their anatomical 'sex'. Adult maturity is determined by the extent to which the individual is able to adhere to society's two-gender system. Thus, the medical community does not view the post-operative individual as changing their sex or gender: 'it is difficult to persuade transsexuals who have had their genitals removed that they are in fact nothing more than castrated males' (Randell, 1969: 375). It is anathema to some psychoanalysis to accept the individual's stated sex identity and much therapeutic energy is devoted to convincing the transsexual of the immutability of 'sex'. Hence, individuals are referred to as 'transsexuals', men 'living as' women or women 'living as' men.

The second assumption made within psychology is that sex and gender are measurable traits. To assess the supposed effects on gender identity of children raised by transsexual people, Green (1978) assesses children's gender identity by toy, game and clothing preference, peer group composition, roles played in fantasy games and vocational aspiration. Highly stereotyped behavioural cues, long criticized by sociologists as providing *social* rather than *individual* expectations of gender, remain central in the diagnosis of children suspected of 'potential' transsexualism. At the recent Atypical Gender Identity Conference (2000), clinicians reviewed cases in which transsexualism was diagnosed as early as three years of age, based on a male child's interest in wearing nail polish, dressing in 'flowery' clothing, and preference for urinating in a sitting position (see Hird, forthcoming).

The final assumption undergirding authenticity debates is that, as a 'dysphoria', transsexualism effects a minority of 'deviants' in an otherwise 'normally' sexed and gendered population. So although Oppenheimer (1991) admits that 'so many people wish to undergo a sex change', psychology remains committed to a view of transsexualism as an individual 'pathology'. Indeed, transsexualism has been described as a 'disturbance' (Walters and Ross, 1986: 22); 'the most extreme degree of disorder' (Lancet, in Lewins, 1995: 26); 'psychosis' (Socarides, 1970); and a 'narcissistic disorder' (Lothstein, 1988). Doorbar notes that transsexuals exhibit some 'suspiciousness of authority figures [and] quite frank delusions of persecution' (1969: 192). Knorr et al. (1969) report the medical fraternity's belief that anyone wanting surgery that involves penile castration must be, *by definition*, psychotic, regardless of how 'normal' his other personality and behavioural attributes. Stoller (1968, 1975) describes transsexuals as distrustful and ready liars who trivialize their problems. With obvious reluctance, Money and Brennan report that the FTM transsexuals they studied 'would otherwise be classed as normal females', although the researchers wistfully offer the hope that 'negative findings today do not rule out the possibility of positive findings tomorrow' (1969: 149).

Authenticity to Performativity

The shift from concerns around authenticity to debate about transsexualism as performative may be largely attributed to the influence of feminist theory. When

sex reassignment surgery was propelled onto the public stage by Christine Jorgenson's case in 1953, feminism was one of the first disciplines beyond psychology to analyse transsexuality. Feminist analyses responded to the autobiographical narrations of transsexuals that began to proliferate in the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, feminism largely rejected transsexualism as a legitimate identity, arguing that transsexuality conformed to gender stereotypes rather than challenged hegemonic gender in any way. This critique was directed towards the popular 'woman trapped in man's body' trope and the subsequent emphasis on sex-reassignment surgery to 'fix' this psycho-medical problem. Medical practitioners, psychologists and transsexuals crafted a 'transsexual identity' based on the sustained desire for sex-reassignment surgery (Bolin, 1994; Prosser, 1998). Individuals quickly keyed into the necessary life-history required for successful 'passing', although it took some years before clinicians realised that both they and their 'patients' were referring to the same behavioural profiles provided in *The Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders* (Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, 1998).[2] Highly stereotyped, traditional markers of gender continue to establish the success of reassignment, from dress, makeup and even fainting at the sight of blood. For example, when Lili Elbe awoke from the first stage of her MTF surgery, she wrote a note that she then showed to her doctor (Stone, 1991). Both 'patient' and doctor agreed that 'no man' could have written the script. Here even orthography apparently reflects innate sex rather than acquired skill.

Given feminists' commitment to illuminating these supposedly innate 'feminine' behaviours as socially constructed requirements of patriarchal society, transsexual narratives unsurprisingly raised suspicion and rancour. So much so that the issue of 'passing' commanded feminist theories of transsexualism. Janice Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* (1979) remains the 'definitive statement on transsexualism by a genetic female academic' opposed to sex reassignment surgery (Stone, 1991: 3). In order to differentiate between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' women, Raymond employed the distinctly modern recipe of biology and socialization:

> We know who we are. We know that we are women who are born with female chromosomes and anatomy, and that whether or not we were socialised to be so-called normal women, patriarchy has treated and will treat us like women. Transsexuals have not had this same history.
>
> (1979: 114)

This double-cocktail criteria of biology and socialization resonated with those of psychology outlined above. A similar argument was espoused by Jeffreys (1990), who provided a critical review of early autobiographies by Roberta Cowell and Jan Morris, whom Jeffreys claimed are 'typical' transsexual stories. Jeffreys argued that transsexuals choose to 'imitate the most extreme examples of feminine behaviour and dress in grossly stereotypical feminine clothing' in preference to feminists who dress 'in jeans and t-shirts'

(1990: 177, 178).[3] Jeffreys criticized MTF transsexuals for, what she argued, is an inability to understand supposedly 'feminine' behaviours and characteristics as those which women must adopt in order to avoid patriarchal censure. What transsexuals consider individual attributes, Jeffreys maintained are political signifiers of women's oppression. By donning stereotyped clothing and behaviours, transsexuals, for Jeffreys, collude with patriarchy and further contribute to women's oppression.[4]

Jeffreys' suspicion towards gender reassignment was argued from a feminist perspective, but social theorists have more generally shared this scepticism. Those opposed to gender reassignment surgery argue that the medical fraternity colludes with society to silence the cultural imperative of the two-gender system. For example, MacKenzie (1994) argues that surgery maintains the current artificial distinctions based on gender, rather than challenging it in any way. In *Sex by Prescription*, Szasz suggests transsexualism is a 'condition tailor-made for our surgical-technological age' – the desire to experiment with new technology ensures that critical reflection on the efficacy of gender reassignment is minimized (1990: 86). In *Changing Sex* (1995), Hausman argues similarly that transsexualism is a product of a modern belief in technology as societal saviour. Millott argues 'there is no transsexuality without the surgeon and endocrinologist' (1983: 17).

Performativity

The opposition that Raymond, Szasz, Hausman and others express towards gender reassignment has been challenged within the last ten years by emerging transsexual narratives, suggesting that many transsexuals choose sex and gender identification by default. As argued previously, modern psycho-medical discourses compel individuals to identify themselves as only one of two genders. Until recently, transsexual narratives have been scarce because transsexual survival has largely depended upon the ability to disappear (Green, 1999). In the 1990s, a distinct set of transsexual narratives began to argue that if gender can be learned, then 'womanhood' is available to anyone with the capacity to learn (Denny, 1996; Feinberg, 1996; Lewins, 1995; More and Whittle, 1999; Prosser, 1998; Rothblatt, 1995; Stone, 1991; Stryker, 1994, 1995).

Thus we find a shift from an analytic emphasis on the authenticity of gendered identity to a more malleable notion of identity as performance. This shift is propelled by a combination of transsexual rights claims (see Feinberg, 1996; More and Whittle, 1999), poststructural and postmodern feminist theory's critique of essentialism (see Alcoff, 1988; Butler and Scott, 1992; Flax, 1988; Fraser and Nicholson, 1988; Spelman, 1988), and an increasing focus within sociology on identity (see Featherstone and Turner, 1995; Rose, 1996; Shilling, 1993). In recent years the most prominent and commonly-cited text referring to performativity is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler argues that 'we never experience or know ourselves as a body pure and simple,

i.e. as our "sex", because we never know our sex outside of its expression of gender' (1986: 39). Butler reverses the naturalized understanding of sex exist-ing prior to gender and argues that gender produces the effect of sex:

> Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produces this *on the surface of the body*, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* man-ufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.
>
> (1990: 136, original emphasis)

Drawing upon Foucault's (1984) insight that dominant discourses reinforce the idea that nature has already determined the 'truth' of our bodies, and that our bodies define our gender for us, Butler argues that gender does not alter from some locatable starting point, but is much more an activity, enactment or per-formance in constant movement. Butler and Delphy (1984, 1993) concur that rather than ontology, sex is no more than an 'effect'.[5] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses drag to illustrate the techniques of performative gender, and later in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), transsexualism provides the example of gender's production of sex. Thus, transsexualism is a hyperbolic performance of sex and gender.[6]

Butler's account of gender producing sex through performative enactment is a contemporary development of distinguished and distinctly sociological theories of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. In one of the found-ing texts of sociology, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim remarked 'every time a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phe-nomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false' (1938: 104). Durkheim was not arguing that social phenomena are produced without individual con-sciousness, but that the general characteristics of 'human nature' are not the cause of collective representations. Thus, sociological analyses that transpose psychological states onto social phenomena, take effect as cause. Put another way, by resisting psychology's epistemology of diagnosing the 'cause' of trans-sexualism by means of a priori natural, universal human laws, sociology is better able to analyse transsexualism as a specifically social production of soci-ety (Durkheim, in Giddens, 1972). From this starting point, symbolic inter-actionist and ethnomethodological approaches have focused on the relationship between sex and gender in society.

Symbolic Interactionism

Defining one of the fundamental precepts of symbolic interactionism, Mead (1934) forcefully argued that the self cannot exist without society – the con-tinuous interactive process between individuals establishes and maintains conceptions of self by reflecting back images of the self as object. What is now

discussed in terms of performativity, symbolic interactionism emphasized decades ago the continually renegotiated character of social action, which produces malleable identities, both allowing and compelling the possibility of contradiction and conflict (Goffman, 1971, 1976; Mead, 1934). This is the 'genius of our individuality, for we are not born with individuality – we create it' (Hansen, 1976: 21).

Erving Goffman developed many of Mead's ideas to argue that human interaction is fragile and maintained through social performances. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1971) Goffman theorizes the self as a process and effect rather than an 'object' with prior ontological status. However, he notes that social interaction is largely governed by a deep belief that objects produce signs that are self-informing. In *Gender Advertisements* (1976), Goffman explores gender as a particularly powerful object which does not exist in any essential way, but whose 'schedule' for portrayal does, and this portrayal is often mistaken as 'essentially real'. As Goffman argues:

> [O]ur concern . . . ought not to be in uncovering real, natural expressions, whatever they might be. One should not appeal to the doctrine of natural expression in an attempt to account for natural expression, for that . . . would conclude the analysis before it had begun.
>
> (1976: 7)

For Goffman, the incisive sociological consideration is that the impressions received from everyday performances are subject to disruption. For symbolic interactionists, the question is not how to discern 'real' from 'false' impressions, but to discern those impressionistic mechanisms that claim people's sense of reality. In other words, Goffman notes that people assume their own, and others' gender from a bare minimum of cues, but that we nevertheless 'do' gender. Thus, 'in short, we all act better than we know' (1976: 80).

Sexuality studies use many of the insights developed within symbolic interactionist approaches. For example, in classic symbolic interactionist style, Kenneth Plummer (1995, 1996) analyses homosexuality as a 'process' and 'ongoing accomplishment' rather than a stable identity (1996: 66). Plummer considers the ongoing social interactions, in terms of both the individual's interactions with others and with her/himself, as the guiding force through which 'life is constantly built, altered, but never completed' (1996: 68).

Symbolic interactionism challenges authenticity arguments because it does not understand identity as a stable, coherent and morphologically-based object. Nor does symbolic interactionism adhere to sex and gender as 'real'. Thus, from this sociological perspective, the problem with the 'authenticity' argument is twofold. First, to the extent that transsexual individuals are able to 'pass' as 'real' women or men, they reveal that sex and gender do not adhere to particular bodies naturally. In effect, transsexuals render visible the invisible signs on which society relies to produce sex and gender. Indeed, one transsexual wryly notes that 'however strange a cross-dresser looks, a genetic woman can always be found who looks even stranger' (Taylor, 1995: 6). Sex and gender are

pre-established performances which transsexuals, *like all other individuals*, are confronted with:

> The more closely the impostor's performance approximates to the real thing, the more intensely we may be threatened, for a competent performance by someone who proves to be an impostor may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorisation to play a part and the capacity to play it.
>
> <div align="right">(Goffman, 1971: 66)</div>

The second, related, problem with authenticity arguments is that they do not take sufficient account of gender as an ongoing product of interaction. For example, because psychology adheres to the 'materiality' of the flesh, transsexuals are not understood to be able to 'know' the genitals of the gender to which they 'feel' they belong. In one of the most recent and intriguing challenges to this claim, Prosser (1998) argues that transsexuals phantasmatically feel surgically constructed genitals as 'real' – in the same way that people who have lost limbs maintain the 'feeling' of those limbs phantasmatically. In another effort, Stoltenberg reverses the claim that bodies produce gender to argue that ideas about gender produce feelings attached to particular body parts:

> Most people born with a penis between their legs grow up aspiring to feel and act unambiguously male, longing to belong to the sex that is male and not to belong to the sex that is not, and feeling this urgency for a visceral and constant verification of their male sexual identity – for a fleshy connection to manhood – as the driving force of their life. *The drive does not originate in the anatomy. The sensations derive from the idea. The idea gives the feelings social meaning; the idea determines which sensations shall be sought.*
>
> <div align="right">(1989: 112, emphasis added)</div>

The process of 'feeling' gender is enabled via narrative restructuring, a mechanism very familiar to sociology. For example, Shilling points out that modern subjectivity is increasingly situated within embodied biography, 'a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity' (1993: 5). Thus, narration is an inherently interactive process. As Gagné and Tewksbury (1998) found from their interviews, transsexuals make sense of their gendered and sexed selves as an interactive process. While Hausman (1995) claims that this interactive narration of the self is the means through which transsexuals 'create' their subjectivity, she fails to recognize this as a process common to *all* individuals. How else does a girl learn her vagina places her within a particular structural relationship to patriarchy, if not through social interaction? As Mead recognized over 60 years ago, every individual necessarily composes the self through narration, told as an ongoing 'story' between self and others. Or, as Prosser notes:

> Heterosexuals who believe that their penises and vaginas are the 'cause' of their pleasure or desire literalise them and 'forget' an/other body: both the (once loved) homosexual body, the body of the other, and their own imaginary or phantasmatic body. (1998: 39)

Ethnomethodology

For ethnomethodologists, like symbolic interactionists, social facts are the accomplishment of members of any group. As such, ethnomethodology is most interested in the accounting practices that people use to establish and maintain social facts. Two texts, Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967) and Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (1978), remain definitive ethnomethodological analyses of accounting practices of gender.

Garfinkel presents one of the most widely-cited examples of the ways in which sex and gender are situationally-specific, managed accomplishments. Garfinkel and Stoller's work with Agnes, who presented as a 'normal young woman' with a penis, details the techniques of 'femaling' through which Agnes learned to be a woman.[7] Indeed, it was only in particular circumstances (such as having sex with her boyfriend) that her penis and lack of vagina presented problems. Their work with Agnes and her negotiation of gender led Garfinkel and Stoller (1967: 122– 8) to observe eight everyday accounting practices that establish gender as a social fact. These include the following beliefs:

(1) there are two genders, and only two genders;
(2) gender is invariant;
(3) genitals are the essential sign of gender;
(4) exceptions to two genders should not be taken seriously, but only considered jokes or examples of pathology;
(5) there are no transfers from one gender to another;
(6) everyone must be classified as either one gender or another;
(7) the 'female'/'male' dichotomy is natural; and
(8) gender membership is natural.

Applying these accounting practices to transsexualism, Kessler and McKenna reverse the relationship between sex and gender to argue that 'biological, psychological and social differences do not lead to our seeing two genders. Our seeing two genders leads to the "discovery" of biological, psychological, and social differences' (1978: 163). Interested in *how* gender attribution works, Kessler and McKenna note the insistence with which people need to know whether they are interacting with a woman or a man, and the acute uneasiness people feel when gender attribution cannot be made instantaneously. Gender attribution is ostensibly based upon genitals, but since we do not see most people's genitals when making gender attributions, other visual cues are substituted. In other words, the imperative to maintain the natural attitude towards gender compels individuals to rely upon *cultural genitals* to make gender attributions. As Kessler and McKenna write 'the reality of "gender" is proved by the genital which is attributed and at the same time the attributed genital only has meaning through the socially shared construction of gender attribution' (1978: 155).

In sum, performative, symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological theories argue that the focus on authenticity reveals the salience of gender and sex in modern society. As Prosser notes, transsexual narratives 'produce the sobering realisation of [gender's] ongoing foundational power' (1998: 11). Within our current discursive field, to exist at all means being a woman or a man; 'sex is the norm by which the "one" becomes viable at all' (Butler, 1993: 2). This explains, in part, why individuals continue to demand sex-reassignment surgery, despite the fact that sex and gender are primarily observed and judged by 'various visual and vocal signals such as hair, clothes, body shape, and movement, gestures and facial expressions, voice and speech' rather than by the appearance of genitals (Woodhouse, in MacKenzie, 1994).[8]

Performativity to Transgression?

The final typology concerns the extent to which transsexualism renders obsolete the modern relationship between sex and gender. Recent transgender and queer studies, drawing heavily on the sociological foundations outlined here, employ transsexualism as a key queer trope in challenging claims concerning the immutability of sex and gender. As such, transgender studies invest heavily in transsexualism's 'transgressive' potential. For example, Feinberg (1996) refuses to legally conform hir sex to hir expression of gender, instead directing hir efforts towards questioning society's need to categorize by sex at all – the requirement to 'pass' for Feinberg is itself a product of oppression. Kris asks 'does the fact that everywhere I go everyone calls me "sir" make me a man? Does the fact that I have breasts and a cunt make me a woman?' (in Feinberg, 1996: 158). Bornstein (1994: 8) remarks:

> I know I'm not a man – about that much I'm very clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people's rules on this sort of thing.

Bornstein argues that transsexuals are not men or women, not because they are 'inauthentic', but because transsexuals, by their very existence, radically deconstruct sex and gender. Emerging narratives, and recent conferences devoted to transgenderism increasingly focus on deconstructing the modern two-gender system.[9] As Zita writes: 'queer scramble[s] the categories of heterosexual sex/gender ontology and open[s] up the possibility of playing against the edge of meaning with the body' (1998: 55).

Although transgender and queer studies offer very interesting analyses of the gender system, sociological analyses remain ambivalent about the potential of transsexualism to render sex and gender obsolete. The principle problem for sociology is that although queer theory contests the attribution of any character to masculinity and femininity, performing or 'doing' gender seems to principally consist in combining or parodying existing gender practices, for example, in assertions of a 'third sex' (Taylor, 1995). After the meteoric rise of *Gender*

Trouble as the definitive work on gender transgression through drag, Butler spent some time in clarifying her position. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler asks whether 'parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms'. Butler goes to some length to clarify that 'there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion': this relationship is more accurately ambivalent in the sense that the parodic imitation is always implicated in the power that it opposes (1993: 125). The extent to which this imitation is subversive depends upon the degree to which it reflects the imitative structure of all gender. Thus Butler argues that when Venus Xtravaganza performed hyper-heterosexual femininity in the film *Paris is Burning* (1991), she was subverting hegemonic gender. However, this subversion breaks down the moment that Venus reconsolidates hegemonic norms by speaking of her desire to become a whole woman by undergoing genital surgery, finding a husband and living in the suburbs. It is difficult for transgender studies to avoid, for example, concerns that hormonal and surgical intervention serves only to confirm and reify hegemonic gender rather than subvert it in any way. Put another way, sociologists may well argue that those forms of transsexualism which continue to prioritize genital surgery remain dependent upon sex and gender as 'real' objects, defeating the entire aim of transgression.

The overarching concern is that *all* modern expressions of sex and gender identity depend upon the current two-gender system, and subversion is not guaranteed through imitation, particularly if that imitation remains focused on femininity and masculinity. At her plenary address to the BSA conference in 1999, Liz Stanley argued that sociologists must question the 'perceived radicalism' of transgenderism. She went on to ask:

> [I]f you don't want to be a woman then why want to be a man, and if you don't want to be a man then why want to be a woman, rather than, for example, a zebra or a cherub?
>
> (2000: 3)

This is not to dispute the very positive impact of transgender theory – indeed transgender theory has done much to raise important questions about the relationship between bodies, sex and gender. Moreover, it is vital to present challenges to psycho-medical treatment models that pathologize transsexuals while reifying the two-gender system. However, the question of transgression is a complex one, and it is difficult to argue that all forms of transsexualism are subversive.

Conclusions

In summary, I have offered a typology of theories of transsexualism that pivots on the understanding of sex and gender as either objects of 'reality' or performative effects of social interaction. I have suggested that the shift in concerns

about the 'realness' of sex and gender reflects a basic divergence in the funda-
mental philosophical foundations of psychology and sociology.

As Brunsdon (1997) notes, most typologies end with a particular preferred
approach. However, like Brunsdon, such a 'theoretical clean getaway' is both
impractical and undesirable. I have certainly argued that sociology offers greater
purchase on analyses of the social organization of sexual difference. But the mal-
leability of both sex and gender does not in itself guarantee the subversion of
sexual difference. Transsexualism is a complex social phenomenon, and involves
many issues, not least of which are the contradictions and divisions within trans-
sexual narratives. Further sociological analysis might fruitfully be applied to
analysing these contradictions and divisions in terms of their transgressive
potential. Indeed, it is the possibility of transcending sex and gender altogether
that offers, from a sociological perspective, the most interesting possibilities.

Notes

1   The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments received
    from Professor John Brewer and the anonymous reviewers and editors on an
    earlier version of this article.
2   The International Classification of Diseases–10 (ICD–10) also provides criteria
    for acceptance for sex-reassignment surgery.
3   It is interesting that both psychoanalysts and feminists employ the same
    discursive mechanisms to exclude transsexuals from their identified sex. In
    reporting an interview with FTM Lou Stothard, Jeffreys (1990) consistently
    refers to him as 'she'/'her'.
4   Whittle (1998) points out that MTF transsexuals seek inclusion within the
    group (i.e. women) that patriarchy oppresses, leaving behind whatever benefits
    they derived from their male status.
5   For more on sociological critiques of the modern division between sex and
    gender see Delphy, 1984, 1993; Hird, 2000; Laqueur, 1990.
6   The permanence of transsexual cross-identification makes its performance
    much more enduring than the occasioned performance of drag.
7   Garfinkel and Stoller 'diagnosed' Agnes as intersexual with testicular feminiza-
    tion syndrome. It later transpired that Agnes had been taking her mother's birth
    control pills for years in order to appear feminine.
8   Given the social stigma, intimidation and violence that transsexuals face, it is
    unsurprising that so many attempt to 'pass' without recognition.
9   The Renaissance Transgender Association hosted the 4th International
    Congress on Crossdressing, Sex and Gender in October 2000. GENDYS 6th
    Gender Dysphoria Conference was held in Manchester in September 2000.

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