

5 GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE: TRANSEXUALISM

There're only two alternatives in society. You're either a man or a woman. If I don't feel like a woman then it's got to be the other way. . . . Because I didn't feel comfortable in the first position, I'm going into the second. I'll give it a try.

Robert—a female to male transsexual, age 26

There are thousands of transsexuals in the United States today. With few exceptions (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967), the interests of the scientific community have focused either on transsexuals as interesting cases of social deviance (e.g., Feinbloom, 1976) or on the pathology (e.g., Person, 1974), etiology (e.g., Stoller, 1968, 1975), and treatment (e.g., Benjamin, 1966) of transsexualism. In contrast, our interest in transsexuals is not in terms of transsexualism, per se, but only in terms of what transsexualism can illuminate about the day-to-day social construction of gender by all persons. To gather information on this process we conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen transsexuals. The relative uniqueness of our focus was reflected in their reactions to it. As is common among this group of people, they were familiar with the scientific literature on transsexualism (Sulcov, 1973; Person, 1974). Some seemed annoyed, some seemed relieved, and some seemed interested that our only concern was with how their experience could expose universal features of gender construction. All, however, were somewhat surprised that we had little interest in learning the causes of their transsexualism or in questioning their definitions of themselves. In addition to these interviews, we have included, in an appendix to the book, excerpts from letters we re-

ceived from a friend who is a transsexual. The appendix illustrates one person's construction of gender and should be read in light of the points made in this chapter.

It is not just specific behaviors of transsexuals that illustrate the social construction of gender. The existence of transsexualism, itself, as a valid diagnostic category underscores the rules we have for constructing gender, and shows how these rules are reinforced by scientific conceptions of transsexualism.

In Chapter 1 we described the natural attitude and the phenomenological method of "bracketing" this attitude. Temporarily suspending "belief" in the independent, objective reality of social and scientific facts like gender allows us to see how the sense of objective facts is produced in everyday interaction. Harold Garfinkel, in whose work this chapter and this book is grounded, has studied several concrete phenomena in order to illustrate general principles of the social construction of reality. One of the phenomena he has studied is gender, through presenting the case of Agnes, a 19 year old genetic male. Although Agnes had a penis, she claimed to have always felt herself to be female and to have naturally developed female secondary gender characteristics at puberty. She requested the construction of the "appropriate" genitals from the UCLA Medical Center, and was interviewed by Garfinkel under their auspices. Garfinkel was interested in the abstract idea of continuous gender accomplishment in every interaction. However, he did draw some concrete conclusions about what it was Agnes had to do to create a sense of being a "real" woman. In the beginning of his discussion, Garfinkel presents the "facts" which form our natural attitude toward gender. He then shows how Agnes' accomplishment was to produce a sense of those facts even though she was an example of how those facts are not always true.

Our natural attitude toward gender (i.e., the real, objective facts) consists of the following (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 122-128):

1. There are two, and only two, genders (female and male).
2. One's gender is invariant. (If you are female/male, you always were female/male and you always will be female/male.)
3. Genitals are the essential sign of gender. (A female is a person with a vagina; a male is a person with a penis.)
4. Any exceptions to two genders are not to be taken seriously. (They must be jokes, pathology, etc.)
5. There are no transfers from one gender to another except ceremonial ones (masquerades).

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6. Everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another. (There are no cases where gender is not attributed.)
7. The male/female dichotomy is a "natural" one. (Males and females exist independently of scientists' [or anyone else's] criteria for being male or female.)
8. Membership in one gender or another is "natural." (Being female or male is not dependent on anyone's deciding what you are.)

Our discussion in Chapter 2 suggests that these "facts" about gender are not universal; berdache contradict most of them. Nevertheless, these are the "facts" of gender in terms of Western reality.

It might seem that in light of these facts transsexualism cannot be taken seriously. The existence of transsexuals appears to deny at least points 2 and 5. But if we bracket the "facts," what we find is that the transsexual, through his/her concerns with "passing," and the medical and legal professions, through their treatment of transsexualism, reveal the production of the natural attitude toward gender. The transsexual produces a sense of the facticity of gender in social interactions in the same way everyone produces it. The natural attitude allows no exceptions, so the transsexual, an apparent exception, is seen as not an exception after all, but rather an example of the "objective" truth of the facts. This is the paradox that is demonstrated throughout this chapter.

Garfinkel's assumption (which we share) is that something can be learned about what is taken for granted in the "normal" case by studying what happens when there are "violations." Transsexuals take their own gender for granted, but they cannot assume that others will. Consequently, transsexuals must manage themselves as male or female so that others will attribute the "correct" gender. It is easier for us to see that transsexuals "do" (accomplish) gender than it is to see this process in nontranssexuals. The transsexuals' construction of gender is self-conscious. They make obvious what nontranssexuals do "naturally." Even though gender accomplishment is self-conscious for transsexuals, they share with all the other members of the culture the natural attitude toward gender. The ways transsexuals talk about the phenomenon of transsexualism, the language they use, their attitudes about genitals, and the questions they are unable to answer, point to their belief that though others might see them as violating the facts, they, themselves, believe that they are not violating them at all.

In this chapter we show how (1) the concept of transsexualism

as understood by the medical and legal professions, and (2) the practices of transsexuals in everyday interactions produce the sense of the reality of two and only two genders. The process of gender attribution both in terms of what needs to be done to be taken as the "correct" gender and in terms of what rules others apply to make an attribution is also made clearer by studying these "exceptions" who are, after all, only examples of what is more difficult to see in nonexceptional cases.

CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING TRANSSEXUALISM

We defined transsexualism in Chapter 1 and we have used the term throughout the book without explaining how it is determined whether someone is really a transsexual. Sulcov (1973) wrote an exhaustive treatise on the social reality of transsexualism. In it he differentiates two kinds of definitions of transsexualism. One type of definition explains what transsexualism "really is." This would include what Stoller (1968) refers to as a characterological definition—one based on various psychological criteria. "... A transsexual (is) a person who feels himself (consciously and unconsciously) to belong to the opposite sex while not denying his sexual anatomy" (Stoller, 1968, p. 132). The second kind of definition, the one that Sulcov found to be in accordance with his perspective, is a definition in terms of a system of treatment: A transsexual is someone who is receiving hormone therapy and genital surgery in order to be seen as the gender other than the one he/she was assigned at birth. Sulcov concluded that the social reality of transsexualism is as a particular kind of treatment that facilitates the routine movement between genders and thus legitimizes that movement. This definition allows us, given our research interest, not to be concerned with whether we have interviewed "real" transsexuals. Defining transsexualism according to a system of treatment does present some problems, however. Not all people who present themselves for corrective surgery and hormone therapy define themselves as transsexuals. For example, there are hermaphrodites who request genital surgery to reduce the ambiguity of their genitals and male prostitutes who may want mammary development to aid them in their trade. A second problem is that not all transsexuals request corrective surgery or hormone therapy. Pauly (1974) claims that female-to-male

CREATING GENDER ATTRIBUTIONS

Everyone must display her or his gender in every interaction. This is the same as saying everyone must pass or everyone must insure that the "correct" gender attribution is made of them. The risks of being "disproved," of not being taken as the gender intended, are minimal for nontranssexuals. Although they must avoid giving grounds for doubt, they are generally not concerned with being doubted and consequently are not concerned with their presentations. If nontranssexuals are seen as the "wrong" gender, it is often upsetting, because no preparation has been made for such an event. This is because few people besides transsexuals think of their gender as anything other than "naturally" obvious. A "wrong" attribution in this case turns into an unintentional (and disconcerting) bracketing of the real world. Transsexuals, on the other hand, have planned in advance how to handle these situations and consequently tend to be continually self-conscious about their presentations. They believe that the consequence of not passing is potential devastation.

Goffman (1963) differentiates two kinds of stigmas, those that are externally visible (e.g., a disfiguring birthmark), and those that are hidden (e.g., a secret past as a criminal). Both kinds of stigmas are potentially discrediting. Feinbloom (1976) discusses this notion of stigma in regard to transsexualism and shows how transsexuals must "pass" in order to keep secret their visible stigmas (e.g., an adam's apple in a woman) and their hidden stigmas (e.g., a man having attended an all girls' high school).

The problem with conceptualizing "passing" as discrete management devices is that this emphasizes its deceptive features and overlooks the ongoing process of "doing" gender in everyday interactions that we all engage in. (See Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 164-175 for a critique of Goffmanesque analyses.) We explained in Chapter 1 that in this usage, everyone is engaged in passing, in creating a sense of themselves as being one gender or another. In order for gender to be perceived as "natural," however, it must not be seen as passing. (See Rule 8 of the natural attitude.) According to the natural attitude, real men and women do not pass. When we bracket the natural attitude and see gender as constructed, then passing is not conceptualized as deceptive. It is displaying for others what one intends to be taken as. Passing, in this sense, makes no assumptions about what one "really" is.

To illustrate, Jane Fry, a male-to-female transsexual, served duty

on an all-male ship during the years when she was preoperative (Bogdan, 1974). From her point of view, she was "passing" as a male, since even though she knew she was female, she needed to be seen as male in order to remain on the ship. Because she had a penis, she would not have been considered to be engaging in deceptive behavior by most people. On the other hand, Mike would have been. Mike, a female-to-male transsexual, also served duty on an all-male ship. His behavior might have been considered passing, in the deceptive sense, since he had what others would have judged to be female genitals. Nevertheless, both Jane and Mike managed to create a sense of the reality of their maleness for those with whom they interacted.

Robert, a female-to-male transsexual, looked masculine as a teenager. He was not certain he was a transsexual at that time and tried to live as a female. Because it was upsetting when he was mistaken for a male, he tried to do what had to be done to be taken as female. He learned to walk in a feminine way, avoided wearing pants, and in general tried to look like a female (for which he had the corresponding genitals). Although he was usually accepted as a female and would not have been considered by most people as passing, in his words he "faked being a woman." He had to concentrate his energies on being seen as female. When he later began living as a man he no longer saw himself as passing. That, to him, was just being natural. In the social construction sense, however, he was not doing anything more or less to be taken as a man than he had done to be taken as a woman.

It is not that transsexuals know, in any systematic way, what needs to be done to be taken as the "correct" gender. It is not a matter of a recipelike, systematic presentation. We will discuss four broad areas of self-presentation which contribute to gender attributions: (1) general talk (both what is said and how it is said), (2) public physical appearance, (3) the private body, (4) talk about the personal past. Since gender attributions are made in the initial stages of an interaction, usually long before a person undresses or talks about her/his personal past, we assume that public physical appearance and general talk are the major contributors to initial gender attributions. We postpone a discussion of how much (or whether) gender attributions need to be maintained over time except to suggest that the private body and talk about the personal past probably play a role in maintenance. The methods by which transsexuals provide others with "information" about these four categories is the substance of much of this chapter. It must be kept in mind, however, that we are studying transsexuals not because they create gen-

der attributions in a particularly unusual way, but because, on the contrary, they create gender in the most ordinary of ways, as we all do.

General Talk

Some techniques for "proper" talk can be learned through observation and rehearsal: learning to say "robe" instead of "housecoat" when shopping for men's clothing; learning to talk "dirt" with other men (a difficult task for someone raised as a girl in a strict Catholic family). Joseph, a female-to-male transsexual, claimed to have learned about behaving like a man from reading the *Playboy Advisor*. While the conventional method is to watch the men and women around you, sometimes professional help is required. There are speech therapists who coach male-to-female transsexuals in raising the pitch and resonance of their voices, introducing softening qualities, developing a more "feminine" vocabulary, articulating more carefully, producing a greater range of inflection, and making freer facial movements. (There is a sizable body of recent research on gender differences in vocalizations and language usage, Key, 1975; Thorne and Henley, 1975). It is sometimes suggested that male-to-female transsexuals speak in a whisper or falsetto; if the voice is still deep, it is advised that escorts order for them in restaurants (Feinbloom, 1976). Booklets published by the Erikson Educational Foundation to advise transsexuals in passing techniques offer hints such as: ". . . When introducing herself on the telephone, (the male-to-female transsexual) should begin the conversation by saying, 'This is Miss X.' In that way, should she still need some practice in feminizing her voice, and if the person on the other end of the line is in some doubt as to her sex, this assertion usually will resolve the question in her favor" (Erikson Foundation, 1974, p. 26). This advice illustrates a fact about gender which we will discuss further; once a gender attribution is made, the particulars (in this case the voice) will be filtered through that attribution and used to confirm it; for example, "It is a husky-voiced female."

Public Physical Appearance

Transsexuals not only learn gender-specific speech skills, but also ways of presenting their bodies that go beyond learning to dress as a male or female. The power of physical appearance in forming gender attributions cannot be denied. Female impersonators, men in the

entertainment field whose act (dancing, singing, telling jokes) involves pretending to be female, are aware of how compelling physical appearance is. Newton (1972) notes that in order for female impersonators to prove that they are really men they will sometimes at the end of the act remove their wigs or falsies. Much of the entertainer's skill lies not in merely singing and dancing but in impersonating a female who is singing and dancing. An audience that failed to be convinced of the entertainer's male gender, would be missing a crucial part of the total act.

Transsexuals, in contrast to female impersonators, do not want to give others any reason to doubt what seems to be under their clothes, lest their behavior be seen as a masquerade. "A little extra padding, a scarf, gloves, etc., can all be used to maintain the illusion of femininity . . ." (Feinbloom, 1976, p. 233). In this way, broad shoulders, an adam's apple, and large hands can be camouflaged. Male-to-female transsexuals learn elaborate techniques for concealing the penis, which would be especially important in certain circumstances (wearing a bikini). Female-to-male transsexuals have an opposite problem. They are advised to stuff a pair of socks into an athletic supporter before exercising in a public gymnasium. It is suggested that those who have not had surgery bind their breasts; there are several methods for doing so (Erikson Foundation, 1974).

These techniques are mentioned by transsexuals and in the literature as being things that *should* be mastered in order to be taken as real men or women. We know, however, that people often have very distorted ideas about real men and women. The entire field of "sex-role" stereotyping attests to this. "We define what a man or woman is according to what will enable us most unequivocally to classify ourselves in the desired gender group" (Kando, 1973, p. 28). Women with small breasts who are confident about their femaleness do not use breast size as a criteria for gender decisions. On the other hand, what transsexuals believe constitutes a credible male or female may be related to what troubles them personally about passing. Mike, a middle-aged female-to-male transsexual with a slight physique, talked to us about how important it is for a man to be physically strong. He exercises his hands especially, because he is self-conscious about their smallness. Transsexuals who see gender characteristics as totally dichotomous are reminded by professionals that there are many hairy, muscular women, women with husky and attractive voices, and short, hairless men.

Herschberger (1970) discusses the psychological effects of the word "normal." According to her, the word is so powerful that a man in

our society may only feel totally male when in the presence of a woman shorter than himself. When confronted with a taller woman he must either accept his own "abnormality" or conclude that the woman is abnormally tall and even masculine. Marian, a male-to-female transsexual, feels more like a woman in the presence of men than in the presence of other women. She thinks this is because other women are a reminder to her that she is not a "real" woman.

If nontranssexuals, who have minimal concern with being doubted, need to exaggerate maleness and femaleness, transsexuals ought to have even more distorted views. In fact, given their life experiences, it is to be expected. A younger female-to-male transsexual spoke about how "turned off" he was by older transsexuals who seem preoccupied with "How have you been the 'male' this week?" He, on the other hand, claimed to be less concerned with making "that perfect masculine image." He knows that it is not necessary to exaggerate mannerisms, and although he mentioned a number of stereotypical male mannerisms (e.g., loping walk) when we asked him what makes someone a man, he admitted that none of them were really important. What is important is the initial presentation. "Once you tag somebody you're right, and that's it. A lot of transsexuals don't believe that."

The Private Body

Postoperative male-to-female transsexuals have little or no reason to protect their bodies from being viewed. Breast development occurs with estrogen therapy and can be supplemented with silicone implants. Genital surgery is often so successful that even experienced gynecologists do not question the authenticity of the transsexuals' genitals. Janet, a male-to-female transsexual, described a visit to a gynecologist who, not knowing that Janet was a transsexual, told her that there was a cyst on one of her ovaries. Janet protested that this was impossible. The doctor explained that he ought to know since he was a gynecologist, whereupon she countered with, "Well, I ought to know; I'm a transsexual." This example not only attests to the excellence of male-to-female genital surgery, but it also provides a good illustration of the construction of gender. The doctor, having decided by visual inspection (undoubtedly prior to Janet's undressing) that she was female, would interpret anything else he saw or felt in light of that attribution. The swelling beneath her abdominal walls must be a cyst; there was no reason to expect

it to be a prostate gland. As a nurse who heard this story so aptly phrased it: "If you hear hoofbeats, you don't look for elephants."

Preoperative male-to-female transsexuals and virtually all female-to-male transsexuals manage their bodies in such a way that others do not see them undressed. Major problems center around using public restrooms and avoiding required physicals. The Erickson manual (1974) is quite conservative on these points and advises transsexuals not to use public restrooms if possible and not to apply for jobs with large companies, since most require complete physicals of new employees. The following examples from interviews with female-to-male transsexuals illustrate some of the ways transsexuals manage their private bodies.

Mike, a female-to-male transsexual, joined the merchant marines in his early twenties (even though at that time he had had no surgery and was not taking male hormones). He volunteered for the job of cook not only because it required less physical strength, but because he would have to get up earlier than the others and could use the toilets and showers privately. Even so, he always selected the last shower stall in the row. Once when asked by his buddies, "Did you ever lay a girl?", he failed to think fast enough and told them no. They took him to a whorehouse where, unbeknownst to his friends, he spent his time talking to the prostitute. He explained to her that he did not want to have sex because he had a girl back home to whom he wanted to be faithful. This was apparently a legitimate reason to keep his pants on. Afterwards he told his friends that he had "a great lay."

The Erikson guide for transsexuals (1974, p. 7) suggests that male-to-female transsexuals should always urinate in a seated position with their feet pointed outward. Aside from the concern of being seen, the manual cautions about auditory signs. ". . . Female-to-male transsexuals are advised (to) keep the toilet flushing while making use of the cubicle for urination." The sound of the urinal stream may be one of the more subtle gender cues.

Robert takes a book with him into public toilet stalls. He tries to use stalls with doors, but if none are available he just sits down with his pants pulled high above his knees. At first he was concerned about this but he reassured himself: "Men sit down. So I can sit down without being suspected." He no longer worries that the other men at work have not seen him at the urinal since he does not remember seeing each of the other men standing there. A non-transsexual male probably would not wonder whether he has seen

other men at the urinal. A lack of concern with gender is part of its naturalness and highlights how gender is unproblematic in the fabric of everyday life. Until transsexuals understand this, they are continually concerned with "passing" techniques.

The Personal Past

The reason that protection of the genitals from public viewing is so important should be obvious. If genitals are the major insignia of gender (and if, as we will discuss in Chapter 6, gender attribution is essentially synonymous with genital attribution) then it is necessary that everything be done to protect the body. But it is also clear that very few of our interactions involve a public viewing (or potential viewing) of our genitals. We must give the impression of having the appropriate genitals to people who will undoubtedly never see them. This is the same as saying we must give the impression of being and always having been the gender we lay claim to. Gender is historical. In concrete terms this involves talking in such a way that we reveal ourselves to have a history as a male or a female. Transsexuals must not only conceal their real past (in most cases), but they must also create a new past. Marian stated that she worries about referring to her past because she thinks of her past as involving the activities of a social male. Clearly what must be accomplished if the current presentation is to succeed, is for the social past to be reevaluated for the self before it can be constructed for others (e.g., "I wasn't a feminine boy, I was a stereotypical girl").

Some things may be relatively easy to change (e.g., name); other things may be more difficult and in some cases impossible (e.g., school and medical records). At all times the transsexual must remember what details from her/his real past have been included in the new history and which of these have concrete documentation. Feinbloom (1976) states that it is essential for the transsexual to remember what was said in one place in order to escape detection and "to explain the gaps of time produced by those events in the earlier life that he or she cannot acknowledge" (p. 237). For a male-to-female transsexual who spent two years in the army, there are several alternatives: She could tell people that she spent two years in the army as a WAC; or she spent those two years engaged in some other activity like going to college. Or she could be evasive regarding her background and never mention those two years.

Obviously the least problematic course of action (the one that requires the fewest number of additional constructions) is to use

actual details from the past. It is because initial gender attributions are so powerful that most biographic details can be credited to either gender category. Once it is decided that you are female (or male), most items you reveal about your past will be seen as female (or male) history.

One female-to-male transsexual in describing his childhood can state with no dissimulation that he played ball, climbed trees, and was generally rough and aggressive. This was, in fact, his childhood as a "tomboy." He supports this description of his past by using such phrases as "when I was a kid."

When Robert is asked about his first dating experiences he describes the girl from his high school he would have liked to date. Thus he draws upon his actual teenage fantasy life to create his biography.

The transsexual's family can be a source of difficulty or they can be a useful tool in passing. Sulcov (1973) claims that most "slips" are made by family members—saying "him" for "her" and vice versa. Wanda, a male-to-female transsexual, told us of her horror when her mother introduced her "new" daughter, Wanda, as "my son." Wanda and her husband were so embarrassed that they left the scene. Wanda assumed that the slip was inevitably discrediting, and yet if we imagine the same event occurring to a nontranssexual female, it is likely that the mother's behavior would be treated as a joke. Everyone would laugh and say something like, "Poor mother must be getting senile." In more intellectual circles the mother might be teased as having committed a Freudian slip. Thus, it is not the slip, per se, which is discrediting; it is the handling of it.

One Hispanic transsexual said her family's solution was to stop referring to her with gender-linked pronouns and names. Another transsexual was aided by his mother who created for the neighbors a mythical twin sister for her son. In this story the twins do not get along and consequently they never visit the mother at the same time. As the transsexual begins to live more continuously as a man, presumably the "sister" will move away.

Part of what it means to give a credible biography involves giving good reasons. A good reason is one that does not jar with one's gender presentation—that does not arouse doubt. It may not be clear to a transsexual (or anyone creating a new biography) what constitutes a good reason until a mistake is made. And again, it is unlikely that giving one bad reason would be enough to alter a gender attribution.

Those few times when transsexuals' reasons impressed us as not very good were when they were sweeping generalizations about

gender-role behavior. Janet, a thoroughly credible woman, when asked by us what she says when she and her female friends talk about their first menstruation, responded, "Women don't talk about those things." Had she told us that, "My friends don't talk about such things," we would have found her answer less striking. We feel sure that her answer would have gone unnoticed by anyone who knew nothing of her real past, yet it could have been used as evidence of her transsexualism by someone looking for evidence.

A similar example involves a female-to-male transsexual, who when discussing his hesitancy to use public bathrooms, said, "Men don't like to go to the bathroom when other guys are there."⁸

The best kinds of reasons are those that are multifunctional. They not only provide the transsexual with many excuses for the cost of one "fabrication," but they allow other people to use the information for interpreting many of the transsexual's behaviors.

1. Mike tells people that he did not serve in the army because of a bad back. This same reason excuses him from lifting heavy objects.
2. Kando (1973) cites the example of a male-to-female transsexual who told her husband that she was unable to bear children because of a hysterectomy. Her prior hospitalization for genital-change surgery was then seen by the husband as hospitalization for the hysterectomy.
3. Although Robert was self-conscious about his pierced ears, he explained them as having been a requirement for the street gang he belonged to. This story also supports his biography of a "real boy's" childhood.

While we have been careful not to characterize these techniques as deceptive, a number of the transsexuals (especially the younger ones) we interviewed were concerned by what they perceived as the necessary "lying" they must do. Such attitudes ranged from feeling bad about having to give a lot of excuses to actually denying that they had to do so. One woman who denied that she had to "lie" at all may have been trying to prove to us that she was such a natural woman that she did not need to fabricate anything about her past—her past was the past of a "real" woman. Under more careful questioning she admitted that there were some aspects of her life that she could not talk about to most people.

A female-to-male transsexual, prior to a mastectomy, needed to

explain to acquaintances why he did not remove his shirt at the beach. Even though he saw his excuse as a good (i.e., necessary) one, he still felt bad. "Feeling bad" would in no way keep him from making the required excuses since he believes his gender status to be at stake. He claims, though, that many transsexuals are not good at giving excuses because they are scared.

Transsexuals who need help constructing biographies and learning good reasons can consult other transsexuals. One physician conducts role-playing sessions where female-to-male transsexuals can give male-to-female transsexuals advice on how to pass as women and vice versa. A male-to-female transsexual was role-playing the following situation. "She's having lunch with the other girls from the office and someone says, as women will, 'I feel out of sorts today. I just got my period. I was going to go to the beach this weekend, but I don't like to swim when I'm menstruating.' And then someone turns to the transsexual and asks, 'Do you prefer to use Tampax or Kotex?'" The role-playing transsexual was stunned by this question which she had never anticipated. It took a female-to-male transsexual with a girl's history to invent such a situation based on his past experience (Erikson, n.d., p. 15).

We have discussed those aspects of gender that may be specifically taught to transsexuals. However, much of what it means to be a woman or a man can not be exhaustively articulated and can not be learned by rote. Many of the transsexuals we interviewed talked about just "picking things up as they went along." The way they talk about learning to pass is like someone explaining how he/she learned language as a child.

The "trick," if there is such a thing, seems to be confidence. Both the literature and the transsexuals, themselves, mention the need to feel and act confident. ". . . The newly emerged transsexual is constantly on guard and overly sensitive to all nuances in relationships. With experience he or she learns that others are not as quick to sense, or as alert to notice as expected" (Feinbloom, 1976, p. 238). ". . . Most people will take you at face value . . . if you are not apologetic in your manner . . . The key to being accepted by others is your own self-acceptance. . . . An attitude of quiet self-confidence will get the best results" (Erikson, 1974, p. 6, 12). ". . . The transsexual gradually acquires a comfort and spontaneity . . . that smooths the rough edges off his (sic) manner and makes it unremarkable and convincing" (Erikson, n.d., p. 9). The key word is "unremarkable." Several transsexuals mentioned "not overdoing it." One talked about

the need to be "cool," not to react without first thinking. Another suggested that if you are really confident, then you do not worry about the "small stuff."

Garfinkel (1967) has explained that passing is an ongoing practice. This is because gender is omnirelevant to the affairs of everyday life. Although transsexuals must be and act confident that no one is going to discover their stigma, they must consciously, continually, make a presentation that will not allow anyone to discover it. Gender is a necessary background to every act. That successful passing requires the continual need to work at routinizing daily activities indicates this background feature of gender.

For Agnes such work involved always anticipating what might be asked of her and answering questions in such a way that they would appear to require no further explanation. She avoided employers' "checking up" on her past by providing them with answers that portrayed her as not unusual in any sense. With the doctors who interviewed her she managed her gender presentation by withholding information—speaking in generalities and pretending not to understand questions whose answers might be used to see her as a male.

For Mike, on board ship, his routinizing involved presenting a total persona of shyness and naivete. Consequently everything he did (any potential errors he might have committed) were seen as arising out of his particular style. His failure to undress in front of others was interpreted in this overall personality context as modesty rather than femaleness. In later years he kept his private life (among people who know of his past) and his professional life (among people who do not) completely separate.

Marian developed a similar technique. In work situations she presents herself as quiet and reserved, thus insuring that other employees will not probe into her personal life. With friends who know about her transsexualism, she is very different.

"Working" at gender can even go so far as creating a physical presence that does not provoke notice. Male-to-female transsexuals who are especially concerned not to be mistaken for drag queens say that it helps to be ordinary looking.

While we agree with Garfinkel that gender is omnirelevant in everyday interactions, and that gender "work" is required, we do not believe that the bulk of the work is required of the one displaying gender. Rather, we assert that most of the work is done for the displayer by the perceiver. The displayer creates the initial gender attribution, probably by his/her public appearance and present talk.

However, after that point, the gender attribution is maintained by virtue of two things: (1) Every act of the displayer's is filtered through the initial gender attribution which the perceiver has made; (2) The perceiver holds the natural attitude (e.g., gender is invariant). In short, there is little that the displayer needs to do once he/she has provided the initial information, except to maintain the sense of the "naturalness" of her/his gender. Passing is an ongoing practice, but it is practiced by both parties. Transsexuals become more "natural" females or males and less self-consciously transsexuals when they realize that passing is not totally their responsibility. This realization gets translated into confidence that the other will contribute to making and sustaining the gender attribution⁹ and confidence that unless a monumental error is made, the initial gender attribution will not be altered. "Proselytizing transsexuals" who object to their gender not being taken seriously have made it difficult, or impossible, for others to share in the maintenance of their gender by continually confronting others with a blatant violation of the natural attitude.

The extent to which "errors" can be overlooked is illustrated in the following example. We had met Rachel, a male-to-female transsexual, when she was still living as a male named Paul. When she had just begun to "be" Rachel we were with her in a social situation where only the three of us knew about her background. On this occasion we called her "Paul" several times and even referred to her as "he." Yet she continued to be treated and accepted as a female with no questions asked.¹⁰ An interpretation consistent with the argument we have just proposed is that the other people had made an unambiguous initial gender attribution of Rachel as female and either assumed they had misheard us or did not hear us in the first place. They maintained the gender attribution for Rachel. There was nothing that she or we needed to do to "save" the situation. Once a gender attribution is made, virtually anything can be used to support it. (Analogously, once it is discredited, then anything can be used to support the discreditation, e.g., "I always knew he wasn't a woman because his hands were so large.")

The kind of confidence exhibited by transsexuals who recognize other people's role in contributing to gender attributions is illustrated in the following incidents:

1. Jane Fry, a male-to-female transsexual tried to get an I.D. card from a clerk who noted that Jane Fry was listed as John Fry in the records. The clerk asked, "Are you female?" Jane answered

in an inflamed tone, "What do you want me to do? Strip and prove it?" The clerk got flustered and gave Jane the I.D. card (Bogdan, 1974, p. 182). The fact that Jane was preoperative at the time, and if she had stripped would have revealed a penis, is important insofar as it testifies to her confidence that the clerk held the natural attitude toward gender; in seeing Jane as female, the clerk knew the "correct" genitals would be there.

2. Robert, a female-to-male transsexual, needed to get the gender on his birth certificate changed. He self-assuredly explained to the clerk in charge that someone had obviously made a mistake. He said that his mother only spoke Spanish and the error was probably due to that. The clerk, looking at the handsome, bearded young man standing before her sympathetically responded, "They're always making mistakes like that." According to Robert, "If you apprehend trouble, you make it." From our point of view the clerk interpreted Robert's reasonable complaint in the context of the visual and auditory information available to her. The immediate gender attribution was so strong and his presentation so credible that she could not have seen Robert as other than male. The only explanation possible was that there had been a clerical error in issuing the original birth certificate.¹¹
3. Robert had a similar encounter with a dermatologist who wanted to give him a full examination. Robert's reaction was, "That's out of the question." While that may seem like a suspicious response to someone reading this account of a transsexual's behavior, it was obviously acceptable to the doctor who responded, "I understand how you feel." The doctor probably interpreted Robert's answer as that of a particularly bashful man. While it may not have been common behavior in a doctor's office, it was legitimate behavior, and thus not discrediting of gender. Once a gender attribution has been made, anything a person does will be seen as congruent with that gender attribution. There is no reason to think that someone is taking androgens unless you have already begun to doubt that they are male. Robert's encounter with the doctor highlights the point that transsexuals can engage in behavior that may bring into question their normalcy, but which need not bring into question the status of their gender. Gender, then, has

primacy over other attributes. When confronted with atypical behavior, one decides that the performer is a "strange" man long before deciding that the performer is not a man after all, but a woman. The latitude that a person has in performing atypical behavior, before that person's gender is called into question, is a crucial issue.

4. Robert made a visit to his old neighborhood as his "new" gender. A friend from high school stopped him on the street, told him he looked familiar, and asked if he had any sisters. Rather than getting upset or defensive, Robert answered "yes" and calmly named all his sisters.

Although Robert is a totally credible man and has "passed" in countless situations, he is still uncomfortable when the topic of transsexualism is discussed in his presence by people who do not know about his past. He is not sure what a "normal" male reaction is and whether he will give himself away if he should defend the legitimacy of transsexualism. He admits that, as in all new situations, he will feel threatened until the first time he tries it; and in trying it he will simultaneously be *doing* "natural" behavior and *learning* "natural" behavior.

What we have been calling "confidence" when exhibited by transsexuals is what, for nontranssexuals, would be seen as a display of the natural attitude. Transsexuals are confident once they accept their gender as unquestionable because gender (in the natural attitude) is unquestionable once an attribution has been made.

Gender for the nontranssexual is not problematic. It is a background feature of everyday life, but it need be of no concern. Transsexuals, in routinizing their daily activities, are managing themselves deliberately—sometimes more deliberately than nontranssexuals—but the aim of this management is to keep their gender from being problematic for other people as well as for themselves. The difference between the confident attitude of the transsexual and the everyday attitude of the nontranssexual lies only in the history of the individual. However, in the process of gender attribution history is irrelevant. There are only people who succeed, during ongoing social interaction, in being, for each other, either males or females. All persons create both the reality of their own specific gender and a sense of its history, thus at the same time creating the reality of two, and only two, natural genders.

NOTES

1. All names of transsexuals and any identifying information have been altered.
2. The natural attitude toward gender as detailed by Garfinkel and the "facts" about gender which, according to Kohlberg (1966), young children do not know, are strikingly similar. In light of our analysis of the development of children's ideas about gender, this is not surprising. It is also interesting to compare the natural attitude with Money and Ehrhardt's (1972) "formula" for insuring that a child develops an unambiguous gender identity (p. 152). The "formula" can be seen as a scientific statement of the natural attitude.
3. We are not the first to note that "liberals" in the field of transsexualism often hold a biological view which is the reverse of what one usually finds. (On issues such as race and intelligence liberals generally look for social-psychological causes.) Some (e.g., Raymond, 1977) claim that this "liberal" perspective disguises a basically conservative and sexist attitude toward gender roles.
4. Judicial rulings regarding change of gender status include: *Anonymous v. Weiner* 270 N.Y.S. 2d, 319-324, 1966 (unfavorable ruling); *In re Anonymous* 293 N.Y.S. 834-838, 1968 (favorable ruling); *In re Anonymous* 314 N.Y.S. 2d, 668-670, 1970 (favorable ruling); *Corbett v. Corbett (otherwise Ashley)* 2 W.L.R. 1036, 2 all E.R. 33, 1970, (unfavorable ruling); *Matter of Fernandez*, *New York Law Journal*, 3/15/76, p. 12, col. 2 (unfavorable ruling).
5. The term "sex reassignment" is now being used as a substitute for "sex change" in the professional literature on treatment of transsexualism. The former term implies a rehabilitative process, while the latter implies that a person was once one gender and is now the other. Because of our perspective we think "reconstruction" is yet a better term.
6. This doctor's use of the feminine pronoun to refer to the female-to-male transsexual suggests an underlying attitude of skepticism toward the legitimacy of the transsexual's gender claim. And yet this doctor was presented as being sympathetic toward transsexualism and an advocate of corrective surgery. Stoller, an eminent clinician in the field of transsexualism measures the strength of patients' gender identities by the pronouns he finds himself automatically using (Stoller, 1968, p. 235). However, we think the pronoun he uses is a measure of the gender attribution Stoller has made, since as he indicates earlier in his book (p. 192) gender identity can only be measured by asking the person.
7. It is not clear whether by "illusion of femininity" Feinbloom means that femininity in general is an illusion or that the transsexual's femininity (or femaleness) is.
8. We did not find this statement suspicious (having no firmly developed

ideas about males' bathroom idiosyncracies); however a male colleague who listened to the interview tape (and who knew the interviewee was a transsexual) characterized the comment as not a good reason.

9. Under certain circumstances, it is expected that the perceiver will contribute minimally to the gender attribution, and consequently the transsexual must be more self-conscious about her/his presentation. For example, when a transsexual is interviewed by a clinician who must determine whether the transsexual is "really" the gender she/he claims, the clinician may attempt to withhold a gender attribution and try to judge each of the transsexual's acts independently without seeing the act as emanating from a male or female. We believe that this is such a formidable task that this stance can be maintained only for the briefest period.

10. This example illustrates in two ways the resistance of initial gender attributions to change: the power of the other people's gender attribution to Rachel as female, and the power of our initial gender attribution to Paul as male.

11. As transsexualism becomes a more socially shared reality, birth certificate clerks and others in similar positions may come to see that there are other explanations besides clerical errors. In doing so, however, their ideas about gender will necessarily change.