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## Part of the Package

### *Ideas of Masculinity among Male-Identified Transpeople*

JAMISON GREEN

*Where does masculinity come from? How is masculinity expressed? How is it perceived? What does it mean to be masculine or to have masculinity? The definition of masculinity remains elusive. While typically (though not always), maleness is conferred with the penis—an accident of birth—masculinity is often held to be “difficult to achieve.” Rites of passage, behavioral conventions, social roles, and political institutions have all been examined as sources for the production of masculinity. Female-to-male (FTM) transgendered and transsexual individuals, sometimes also called transmen, do not follow the traditional prescriptive paths to maleness, yet they often possess an undeniable masculinity. Through personal observation, literature review, and survey research, this article explores some of the concepts and embodiments of masculinity that are manifest among transmen. Some additional sources are Halberstam (Female Masculinity), Devor (Gender Blending), and Cromwell (Transmen and FTMs). These works are contrasted with that of various masculinity scholars.*

*Key words:* transgender; FTM; transmen; gender-variant people; transsexual; male-identified; penis

Female-to-male (FTM) transsexual people are the least studied group of all when it comes to masculinity. While many writers mention transsexualism (albeit superficially) in their analyses of gender, my research shows that so far, only Holly Devor, Henry Rubin, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, all sociologists, have (separately) designed, conducted, analyzed, and published studies focusing on transsexual men. Devor's 1989 book *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* studied “females who, although they thought of themselves as women, didn't always successfully communicate that fact to others” (Devor 1997, xv). That study attempted to make sense of that phenomenon, and the framework for Devor's analysis was the dominant gender schema as informed by a feminist interpretation of gender reformative ideology, concluding that

were people to become no longer distinguishable on the basis of sex, were all gender choices open to all people, were there to cease to be a cognitive system which measured the world in gendered units, the material basis for sexism would cease to exist. (P. 154)

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Years later, in her work on transsexual men (1997), Devor expressed a slightly different view of gender:

Many people who live their daily lives as men carry with them wombs, ovaries, and breasts. Some people live as men without the aid of virilizing hormones. Nonetheless, they live as men. The possession of gender confirming sex characteristics enlarges the sphere in which such persons may move uncontested as men, but the lack of them does not eliminate such persons from the ranks of men. . . . What my contact with transsexual people has taught me is that the time is upon us to reevaluate how we think about gender, sex, and sexuality. It now seems perfectly clear to me that we live in a world which is far more diverse than any number of simplistic dichotomies can describe. . . . It is time that we begin to recognize that there are far more "mistakes of society" than there are "mistakes of nature." (Pp. 607–8)

The difference between these two observations is rooted in Devor's understanding and acceptance of the validity of the masculinity expressed by the transmen she studied. She is pointing out that social validation of gender identity is important for people who may have been gender blending at some time in their lives but who found that landing firmly on one side of the fence rather than the other (in this case, the masculine side), at least in most social contexts, is important and meaningful for some people and that the task of doing so is neither trivial nor disordered nor unnatural, and it is a mistake of society not to recognize this.

Vidal-Ortiz's research with transmen is reflected in his 2002 chapter "Queering Sexuality and Doing Gender: Transgender Men's Identification with Gender and Sexuality" in *Gendered Sexualities*. Rubin's work is contained in his 2003 book *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men*. Both these studies, along with Devor's work, crack open the heretofore hidden world of men who were born with female bodies. Rather than comment on that work here, I encourage readers to engage this material directly. Also, watch for the ongoing work of Aaron H. Devor, now that Holly has undertaken the transition to male himself. I'm sure he will have further insights on masculinity as time goes on.

Two other books are important to mention here because of the originality of the authors' stances with respect to the existing body of literature. First, Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998). Halberstam approaches the topic from the perspective of literary analysis and social commentary ("cultural studies") based on the author's experience of butch lesbians, drag kings, FTM transgendered and transsexual people, and a close reading of film and literature presentations of women with masculine characteristics or identities. Full of interesting and important observations, Halberstam's book is also focused on the interpretations of male presentation from within female bodies and the sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal judgments different communities of people can make about gender expression. For example, in

lesbian space, drag king performance often satirizes masculinity, particularly white, middle-class masculinity, replayed in hyperbolic satire and parody, exposing the vulnerability of male midlife crisis (pp. 259–60) or poking fun at male homosexual panic (pp. 265). Black and Latino drag kings have other cultural stereotypes to play off of in addition to these, such as gangsta, stud, or macho lover, and Halberstam notes that most white drag kings (though not all, to be sure!), when not playing cultural icons like Elvis or John Travolta, seem to have trouble making theater out of their presentations (pp. 248). The net effect of Halberstam's observations are, to me, that there are legitimate taxonomies for representing and interpreting female masculinities, and there is still a struggle playing out between ideas of legitimacy of masculinity represented by female bodies and the very real analyses of masculine supremacy, masculine normalcy, and/or masculine dominance that are made possible by examining masculinity as experienced from within a female body. She also rightly notes that "there are transsexuals, and we are not all transsexuals; gender is not fluid, and gender variance is not the same wherever we may find it. Specificity is all. . . . Who . . . can afford transition? . . . Who can afford metaphors? I suggest we think carefully, butches and FTMs alike, about the kinds of men or masculine beings that we become and lay claim to: alternative masculinities, ultimately, will fail to change existing gender hierarchies to the extent to which they fail to be feminist, antiracist, and queer" (p. 173). These are ideas that I have written about repeatedly in the pages of the *FTM Newsletter* since 1991 in an effort to encourage an analysis of masculinity within the burgeoning FTM community. That effort has not yet come to fruition.

Jason Cromwell's *Transmen & FTMs* (1999) is an insider's view with an anthropological perspective. Cromwell immersed himself in the west coast FTM world in the 1990s (though he transitioned much earlier) and records his observations and analysis. His anger at being marginalized his entire life, even while functioning as a white, middle-class male, comes through strongly. He analyzes the dominant medical discourse about FTM transsexualism and deftly displays its biases and shortcomings. He gives an idea of the diversity and variety of interpretations that are possible for all facets of life through FTM experience. Hegemonic masculinity is not a universal goal for transmen, contrary to the opinion of several medical professionals and Janice Raymond. While Cromwell does not directly discuss the concept or meaning of *masculinity* or the nature of assumptions of masculinity among FTM-identified people, he does present the first insider's attempt at a comprehensive view of FTM experience within the context of North American culture, and he frequently refers to masculinity and maleness as markers of that experience.

One of the greatest challenges in discussing masculinity is the contemporary preoccupation with gender as a system of power. As I have written previously,

If we agree that man and woman are words that signify male-bodied or female-bodied people (respectively), or at least people whose clothed bodies appear to be male or female, then we may also agree that the terms man and male and woman and female refer to specific types of bodies (or representations of those bodies) in a way that connotes a social role, such as the wearing of certain clothing that indicates the body. But through our agreements we are not creating a capacity to observe the gender of the people to whom we are referring. It is a logical leap to suppose that the man who is male is also masculine, or the woman who is female is also feminine, regardless of the clothing he or she is wearing. If gender distinguishes the "nonbiological features resulting from a person's ascribed status of either female or male" (Doyle and Paludi, 1998, p. 6), then gender studies are focused on the social differences between persons with (presumably) male and female bodies. This is not really talking about gender, but about sociology and politics, which are fine, important topics, but they still are not gender. Like the notion that "femininity unfolds naturally, whereas masculinity must be achieved" (Herdt, G., quoted in Gilmore, 1990, p. 146), our biases about gender are rooted in biological theory, sociobiological functions, and the extent of our resistance to these positions.

We find it easy to trivialize gender expression. The very term "gender role" connotes its pliability, its lack of serious reality for students of social science and others concerned with definitions and the social processes. At the same time, the baseline values of Western culture have encouraged us to trivialize gender diversity as a means of retaining social order, particularly with respect to sexual behavior, as reflected in the widespread assumptions that men with feminine characteristics are homosexual, women with masculine characteristics are lesbians (and all lesbians want to be men!), men who cross-dress are homosexual (that is, they want to be women), and female cross-dressers simply do not exist. Here, the conflation of assumed meanings for bodies and derived signals for gender becomes the basis for misinformation because for someone who does not understand gender diversity there is supposed to be a correlation between a body and its gender and all that gender is "supposed" to stand for: sexual orientation, sexual behavior, physical appearance, social role.

When it comes to gender, if we are invested in the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as a system of socially constructed power distribution, we will never be able to value the naturalness or artfulness of an individual's gender expression because we will always suspect the individual's motives: anything out of the ordinary must be a quest for power, and is therefore victimizing someone. But gender, like race, is not a power system in itself; gender, like race or like language, is a physical trait that some people use to gain or distribute power. Like language, our gender is both natural and artificial; the ability to have gender and language both reside in the natural or native beingness of individuals, whether their expressed gender reinforces, contradicts, or is randomly confused by an observer's cultural concepts of their body, or whether their ability to speak is compromised by physical deformity, or they happen to speak a different language than their listener can comprehend. (Green 2001, 61-65)

I do not believe that it is gender that gives certain individuals certain types of power in society but that actual bodies in concert with other arbitrary factors like heritage, wealth, and particular skills and abilities do so. When we focus on the proposition that dichotomous gender is the bellwether of social privilege, and when we view transsexual people as social constructions of

social constructions in an attempt to understand how gender conventions are learned or manipulated, we actually deny the incredible potential of gender variance and its natural diversity, and we categorically deny both transindividuals and non-transindividuals agency in experiencing or freely expressing their own genders. We also set up the paradigm that women are good and men are bad; hence, the constant refrain of apology from within the ranks of profeminist men, and the teasing, goading, and baiting that women engage in when criticizing men who are perceived as SNAGs, or sensitive, new-age guys. Making everyone else wrong is easy; understanding difference as complimentary rather than oppositional seems to be a much more difficult project.

In the summer of 2002, I asked a group of eight transmen at an FTM International meeting a series of six questions about their notions of masculinity, and I also had similar dialog with four other individual transmen, privately, outside of the group context. In addition, I asked the same questions of four non-transmen, and I was intrigued by the similarities in the responses. I would not claim this investigation was scientific in any way, so the results remain anecdotal; I offer them to further the discussion.

First, I asked whether maleness and masculinity are the same thing. The universal response was “no.” I would suggest, then, that the majority of the literature about masculinity (at least, that which I have reviewed) is not sufficiently subtle or specific in its use of terminology. In other words, I think most of the literature makes an assumption that only male bodies express masculinity.

Second, I asked whether masculinity depends on having a male body or on having a penis. Again, the universal response was “no.” I must admit my sample was somewhat skewed since I expected the transmen to resist this type of essentialism, and the non-transmen that I asked about this are sufficiently exposed to transgender culture and sensibilities (though none of them is transgendered or transsexual himself) to possess a level of sophistication that I would not expect to see in the mainstream culture. Because of the kind of questions I am asked in university and college human sexuality courses (I lecture to roughly thirty classes every year), I think that most people still believe that the body is the marker of gender and that gender and sexuality are dictated by the genitalia; thus, I believe most non-transmen or nonqueer people who have not had to analyze some aspect of gender variance in making sense of their relationship to society would indicate that a male body was a prerequisite for masculinity, in spite of a more common recognition that women are more capable today of cultivating masculine qualities without becoming male or even butch. I suspect that the “normative” quality of masculine subjectivity (as critiqued in Whitehead [2002], May [1998], and Bourdieu [1998/2001]) is informing these assumptions, and it requires either a marginalized or specifically reeducated point of view to observe or perceive

things differently. Vidal-Ortiz's (2002) work explores this much more deeply.

Third, I asked, "How did you, as a transman or FTM (or man—if the subject was nontrans), come to understand your masculinity?" Here, there were two different classes of response: the first was external—that is "people told me"; and the second was internal—that is "I felt different from girls or women." It was interesting to me that all of the non-transmen noted that the internal understanding was primary for them and only three of the twelve transmen felt this way. The rest of the transmen (numbering nine) stated that they knew they were masculine because other people told them so. Of these nine, five further stated that they also felt different from girls or women. For the non-transmen, when I prodded them about being told they were masculine, they said, "Well, sure, of course I got told that," but this event was minimized because of their assumption that it was because of their male body that the masculine label was placed on them. In their minds, they had either had not earned that label yet or it was a "natural given," which indicated to me either that even well-educated non-transmen could fall back on normative presumptions or essentialist positions in moments of unconsciousness or that they were aware of the normative presumptions on the part of others and expected that essentialist prescriptions would be projected onto them because of these presumptions.

Fourth, I asked, "Where does masculinity come from?" Most of the responses indicated that since masculinity is determined by behaviors or actions—that is, by extroverted expressions of qualities that are ascribed to males—and that these qualities and associated roles are based on the expectations placed on people with male bodies in a given culture, that masculinity comes from a person's ability to correlate his or her behaviors and/or actions with those expected from people with male bodies. I thought this was interesting considering the fact that everyone had also said masculinity was not contingent on possession of a male body; therefore, I caution readers against leaping to the conclusion that these respondents believe a male body is required for masculine expression in spite of their declaration that it is not. I want to emphasize that the respondents seemed very clear that masculinity is judged based on cultural understandings of maleness ascribed to male bodies, but the expression of masculinity is not solely the province of male bodies. There was also no indication among the respondents that there was any negative association with respect to female bodies that expressed masculine qualities or behaviors, and that applies equally to the responses of non-transmen. This group seemed to be particularly neutral with respect to sexist attitudes about masculinity.

Fifth, I asked, "How is masculinity expressed?" It was interesting to me that the respondents here resorted to stereotypical divisions, noting that masculinity is expressed in body language, behavior, occupation, speech, vocalization, inflection, content, and cultural stereotypes of appropriate actions

for people with male bodies. The understanding seems to be that if one is to be properly interpreted by others as male, then one must know the language of masculinity. Transmen, on the whole, did not seem particularly concerned about being perceived as insufficiently masculine, but they did worry about being perceived as male. Early transition transmen (those with one to five years living as men) indicated that they were more likely to deliberately exhibit behaviors designed to communicate masculinity when they were worried about being perceived as not male in male-dominated spaces, potentially in the workplace or in superficial social exchanges such as at a gasoline service station or a hardware store. Transmen who had been living as men for more than five years did not have the same anxiety. Transmen who had very male appearances commented on the necessity for self-confidence as a factor in one's expressed masculinity quotient: an appearance of maleness did not always correlate to a strong sense of masculinity within a subject, nor did a subject's masculinity as perceived by others (in the group setting) necessarily correlate to the person's sense of his own masculinity, which is separate from his sense of himself as male.

Finally, I asked, "What does it mean to be masculine or to have masculinity?" Here is where the greatest divergence between transmen and non-transmen appeared. Transmen reflected on the changes in their experience since acquiring a socially readable masculinity, and they were quite conscious of the ways in which masculinity is interpreted as power, of the ways it confers privilege, but also of the ways masculinity placed them at risk. Part of that risk is the violence that men visit on other men, but part of it is the fear of being persecuted as transmen, too. For the non-transmen, having greater continuity in their male bodies, and possibly less fully developed feminist consciousness compared to transmen, having masculinity meant a particular psychic destiny that is opposite and complimentary to that of femininity. To them, masculinity meant a trajectory of unity, separation, and reunion, a journey or a quest, not a state or quality, but something lived. These men expected to live lives marked by separations from other people, particularly women, culminating (if they are lucky) in a reunion, symbolized by a relationship with the right partner (male or female). They viewed the feminine as the maintenance of unity, integration, relationship, and communion. These are very Jungian concepts, heroic in the Joseph Campbell sense of mythological underpinnings to social organization, even in today's society, and they show a different kind of mental organization with respect to the men's reflections on the meaning of their own masculinity as compared with that of transmen.

All this leads me to theorize that masculinity is a socially negotiable quality that is understood through agreed-on symbols (such as the body and its secondary sex characteristics) and signals (such as clothing, behaviors, occupations, speech patterns, etc., understood within a given cultural context) that together inform other people in that context concerning the individual person's status in a given group. However, I think this is not a simple equation.

High masculinity does not always equate to high status in every social situation. And high masculinity does not necessarily equate to elevated social power, or dominance, either. Furthermore, there are multiple taxonomies of masculinity, as Halberstam (1998) and Whitehead (2002) explicate, within given cultures. The idea that high masculinity is equivalent to high testosterone, and therefore may be toxic, is reductive and unnecessarily divisive. From my personal transmale perspective, I believe masculinity is a collaborative project that starts with innate characteristics and behaviors (whether the expressor has a female body or a male body), and these are emphasized or deemphasized by social interactions (both sexual and nonsexual) in such a way that the innate characteristics and behaviors are magnified, elaborated on, or suppressed, and ultimately the individual internalizes these characteristics and behaviors, incorporating them into her or his personality. The measure of social adaptability, acceptability, and success that an individual experiences with this constellation of characteristics and behaviors is dependent on multiple factors, particularly the extent to which the individual is capable of empathy and consciousness in the application of his or her own values and beliefs to the social relationships in which one engages. Masculinity by itself is not the problem for feminism; maleness is not the problem for women. The problem is the paradigm that frames females as inferior and encourages men (and women) to see maleness and masculinity as “not feminine.”

In the August 24, 1995, issue of the *San Francisco Bay Times*, reporter Jack Fertig wrote an article titled “The World’s First FTM Conference Held in SF” in which he noted that

FTMs [are] some of the sexiest men on the planet. In a way, they are real men as no other men are. For the most part, straight men take their masculinity for granted, acting out scripts without questioning. Gay men have had to struggle with sexual issues and have a certain amount of freedom and insight. FTMs have had to construct their masculinity from the ground up, to overcome everything around them just to be men. Our mythos of masculinity tells us that this is what a “real man” is—self-creative, independent, willing to stand up to convention to be himself, to live a life of honest responsibility.

The reason Fertig (1995) found FTMs to be “some of the sexiest men on the planet” is that they are men who have the capacity to fully integrate feminine experience, qualities, and behaviors (however limited or unexpressed in their masculine psyches) without feeling threatened. They have a very real sense of the compatibility of the two extremes of gender because they have brought them together in dynamic combination, and they have found a home in their bodies for the conscious balance they have found in their psyches. For transmen, it is the bodily confirmation of the male identity that matters. Once that has been achieved to a transman’s satisfaction, he can start to integrate his personality in the same ways that non-transpeople do. Trans or nontrans, when individuals realize that they can give up the struggle of trying to prove

who they are, or how butch they are, or how male, or how masculine, they can realize that whatever qualities of character they have, they are all part of the package.

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