
Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men. By Henry Rubin. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003, 224 pp., \$49.95 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper).

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A recent *Oprah* episode featured “transgender kids,” children between the ages of 5 and 11 who expressed a desire to live as the “opposite” sex. The bewildered parents of one child, a 5-year-old boy, reported that since he could speak, he had expressed the desire to grow up to be a woman, even in the face of his father’s extreme opposition to the topic. While this child may or may not transition to become female in the future, this appeal to a core gender identity at odds with one’s body surfaces often in research on transsexuals, individuals who move from one recognized gender category to another via hormone therapy and often surgical procedures. Illustrating this, the 22 female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) interviewed in *Self-Made Men* (a group varying in age and class but predominantly white), drawn from established transgender networks in San Francisco, Boston, and New York, report being “always already men” despite being born with female bodies. As Henry Rubin points out, gender scholars adopting a social constructionist approach have explained these accounts away as false consciousness or processes of doing gender. However, Rubin departs from this stance, issuing a challenge instead: Can sociology recognize and analyze essentialistic accounts given by transsexuals without writing them off as false consciousness? To this end, he adopts Foucault’s genealogy approach blended with phenomenology, making experiential accounts of embodiment central to his approach to understanding gender.

Exploring theories of etiology, treatments, and the development of the category of transsexual, Rubin’s genealogy chapters can be read as an FTM companion to Meyerowitz’s (2002) historical work *How Sex Changed*, which focuses predominantly on male-to-female

transsexuals. Rubin shows how male-identified women were able to pass as men more easily without surgery or hormones than were their male counterparts, making them more historically invisible. Rubin also traces the rise of FTMs in the 1970s, a phenomenon he explains through an analysis of the effects of lesbian feminism ideology on male-identified women. He argues that many male-identified women lost a safe space in the lesbian community during this period and moved toward gender transitions to maintain their male identity. Rubin ends this section by engaging the ongoing question in transgender studies of where the boundaries are between FTMs and butch lesbians. He argues that the difference between a transman and a butch lesbian is how they experience their bodies and gender identity, an experiential distinction best understood through a phenomenological approach to the accounts of his interviewees.

The most provocative part of Rubin's book is his analysis of the accounts his interviewees offer about taking testosterone. Some men report an increase in aggression, while others find themselves feeling calmer. However, the majority of men in his sample report an increase in sex drive, particularly at the beginning of hormone therapy. Rubin points out that many of these men come from feminist backgrounds and understand the dangers of using biological determinist arguments yet honestly feel that this is their experience of testosterone. In a provocative footnote, he points out that while these accounts may not fit feminist or social constructionist agendas, it is problematic for individuals who have not had the experience of taking cross-gender hormones to write off the experience of individuals who have. This section of the book, which he calls a "sociology of testosterone," then, brings back the challenge of the introduction, how to make sense of these accounts without denying subjectivity to the interviewees, a challenge he solves by adopting a phenomenological approach to these accounts that accepts them as true because his interviewees experience them as true.

Rubin's book makes a strong contribution to the budding discipline of transgender studies as well as the sociology of gender. He dispels many myths about FTMs, pointing out that transmen do not monolithically embody hegemonic masculinity but rather are often involved in creating new types of men. Also, he gives subjectivity back to transsexuals, something missing from much of the scholarship in this area. However, his reliance on phenomenology is not always convincing. There is little room to investigate his argument, as you either take the interviewees at their word or you are put in the position of denying their experiences. There is no accounting for the sociocultural context that gives meaning to hormones, making his interviewees at times appear somehow outside of culture due to an internal gender identity. That said, Rubin's challenge to sociology, particularly the sociology of gender, is provocative and hopefully will open the door to more investigation of these issues of gender essentialism, hormones, and core gender identity.

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REFERENCE

Meyerowitz, Joanne. 2002. *How sex changed: A history of transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.