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An Exploratory Investigation of the Shopping Behavior of Female-to-Male Consumers: Before, During, and After Transition

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ABSTRACT

Few things are written about transpeople’s everyday lives and experiences, especially not their interaction with the marketplace. The situation of someone raised as a member of one sex with the accompanying gender role socialization, who transitions to the other through a combination of physical and/or social means, provides an especially interesting opportunity for consumer researchers to investigate the complexities of both sex and gender and their impact on consumer behavior. This paper looks at the lives and shopping behavior of several individuals who were raised as females, and then transitioned later in life to become males.

INTRODUCTION

Gender has been somewhat widely studied in the field of consumer behavior, with emphases mainly on the differences between men and women, gender biases, and sex-role variations (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes 2000). The more enlightened assumption (in consumer behavior as well as in most social sciences) is that each individual fits into one of the two sex categories biologically, but may vary along a gender and/or sexuality continuum. That is, there is an accepted critique of gender as not dichotomous (Smith 1992). Each sex is associated with a range of gender role behaviors that vary in typicality, that are acknowledged to be largely socially constructed, and that range in acceptability depending on surrounding cultural and social circles. The notion that an individual might never be clearly male or female, or that one might shift along the physical sex dimension or completely transition from one sex to the other has not been considered by consumer researchers.

The field of queer theory has brought the study of transsexualism and transgenderism to the social sciences. But even in this body of literature, few things are written about transpeople’s everyday lives and experiences (Namaste 2000), especially not their interaction with the marketplace. The situation of someone raised as a member of one sex with the accompanying gender role socialization, who transitions to the other through a combination of physical and/or social means, provides an especially interesting opportunity for consumer researchers to investigate the complexities of both sex and gender and their impact on consumer behavior. This paper looks at the lives of several individuals who were raised as females, with no regard for their internal psychological identification as males,
and then transitioned later in life to become males.

**TERMINOLOGY**

In American and European cultures, the term transsexual refers to "individuals who have been born with 'good' male or 'good' female bodies," but who "envision themselves as members of the 'opposite' sex." Each such individual has a strong drive to "have his/her body conform with his/her psyche" (Fausto-Sterling 2000, p.107). Transsexuals can be male-to-female or female-to-male. The term intersexed refers to individuals whose bodies have a mixture of male and female parts. The typical treatment is to surgically and/or hormonally alter the body to fit one of the two acceptable sex categories. Gender identity refers to the private experience of one's individuality as male, female, or neutral/androgynous (Fausto-Sterling 2000). The word transgender is "an umbrella term used to refer to all individuals who live outside of normative sex/gender relations" and "whose gendered self-presentation (evidenced through dress, mannerisms, and even physiology) does not correspond to the behaviors habitually associated with the members of their biological sex" (Namaste 2000, p.1). Transgenderism represents a more radical re-visioning of sex and gender along a continuum and accepts the connection among those who share gender-variant identities. The term transgender is a move away from a physically-based definition to a more socially-based definition (Cromwell 1999).

The differences within and among the various identities represented by the terms above are largely ignored (Namaste 2000), and terms are often interchanged. This is a problem since there are numerous sensitive issues regarding identity and belonging. For example, many transsexuals feel their situation and agenda is more specific and resent being lumped in with the transgender movement, which includes those who move between genders or blend genders in a gender fuck way. But the term transsexual is laden with the accompanying "medico-psychological agenda" from which it sprung in the mid-twentieth century (Cromwell 1999, p.24). Ironically, such "discovery" of transsexualism led to the reinforcement of the two-gender system by allowing access to hormones, surgery, and medical recognition only to those who convinced their doctors that they would be the most stereotypical members of their gender-to-be (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

As a result of some of these issues, various terms have emerged to refer more specifically to the group that this paper is primarily concerned with, female-to-male individuals. Some of these terms are FTMs, transmen, female-bodied men, or female-bodied transpeople. These terms reinforce the fact that they have a female socialization and history. However, one of my informants is intersexed and does not feel that he fits into the female-to-male transsexual category, even though he was raised as a female and has transitioned to become a male. The key idea is to avoid labeling anyone in a way that they find inappropriate.

Also partly due to the complexity in terms are problems of invisibility for transpeople. One issue is they are at once neither male nor female, and both male and female if both sex and gender identity are taken together. An inability to tell the "whatness" interferes with identifiability (Smith 1992). In the case of FTMs, pre-operative/pre-transition females are seen as women by our binary sex-typing system, and often as
pathological women or lesbians (Cromwell 1999). Post-operative/post-transition males often become invisible by living as men and behaving like men in their respective communities. However, the possibility of being discovered and treated as "less than real" and marginalized or even being put in danger makes this path precarious (Cromwell 1999). Finally, just by being born/raised as women, invisibility occurs simply through not having their stories told (Cromwell 1999). One effect of this invisibility is a lack of accommodation in the marketplace.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Sex and Gender in the FTM Context

The femininity and masculinity dimensions of gender are subject to active construction, and are distinct from sex, which is usually treated as a given. The basic variable used to identify femininity is passivity (Levy 1999), even though "femininity in all its contrivances, is a very active endeavor" (Brownmiller 1984, p.16). Masculinity is seen to center around independence and confidence (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes 2000). Masculine/feminine behaviors and traits are diffusely associated with each sex as gender roles (Smith 1992).

Gender identity focuses on the psychological and social aspects of believing oneself and being believed to be female or male. Someone who identifies as being male but with a female body is caught in the social and psychological difficulties of seeing a soul identified apart from its body (Smith 1992). Not only do such individuals find demands for femininity impossible to achieve and difficult to evade, but their bodies seem to betray them, especially at adolescence when menstruation begins, breasts develop (Devor 1997), and tomboyishness loses its favor (Rees 1996). In the many FTM accounts I have read and with all my informants, the word "traumatic" appears over and over to describe this conflict between body and mind.

Products as Gender Props

Sex and gender are cued by everyday appearances and behaviors, many of which involve consumption in the marketplace. Almost all societies have some disposition of what material objects are associated with men and what ones with women (Levy 1959). From grooming rituals to dress to interacting socially, products are central to enacting gender roles (Rook 1985). Sexuality, often the medium through which people define and are conscious of themselves, is obsessively pursued by consumers in the marketplace (Fausto-Sterling 2000). In short, people seek products and services that are congruent with their self-perceptions, both who they are and who they would like to be (Levy 1959).

Transpeople are particularly aware of the constructed nature of gender, and construct their identities through what has become significant to them (Cromwell 1999). They are also cognizant of what has come to be known as the "tyranny of passing," which refers to the constant need to live up to imposed societal roles and expectations (Denny 1998); i.e., to fit in the chosen sex/gender and be perceived so socially. Appearance and dress are central to this process. Crossdressing is the first part of the "real-life test" (from the Standards of Care) to determine FTMs' satisfaction with living as men (Devor 1998).

Healthcare products and services often become a critical part of and a major
expenditure related to FTM identity construction. Many FTMs feel that it would be impossible to live successfully as men without the aid of medical intervention before presenting themselves publicly as men (Devor 1997). This can include access to psychological therapy (part of the recommended treatment and usually required to get hormone prescriptions) and to hormones, along with the need for careful screening and continuous medical monitoring due to serious potential health risks of hormone therapy. Surgery is often undertaken, beginning with bilateral mastectomy, and often followed by hysterectomy (Denny 1998). Due to the difficult, expensive, risky, brutal and often unsatisfactory nature of genital surgical techniques, many FTMs prefer various sorts of prostheses (Rees 1996). There is an emerging organized consumer activist movement in the transcommunity to exercise collective power over how and what medical services are provided (Namaste 2000).

THE STUDY

This paper is an exploratory investigation of the consumer behavior of female-to-male individuals. Through depth interviews of several key informants I hope to shed light on the role products play in the sex/gender transition and on the challenges and difficulties shopping presents to transmen.

Informants

Having been very close friends over a period of ten years or so with an FTM individual before he went through the transition, during the transition, and after, I was able to witness the complex processes first hand. This informant, James (pseudonyms are used throughout the paper), has been an invaluable source of information. He has not only been a helpful respondent, but has connected me with several of his friends (all of whom I have met over the years) who have agreed to participate in this study.

James is 47 years old, has a working class background, and was born and raised in a small town in Kentucky. As a female, James acquired a master's degree and work experience, and became a university instructor in a small college town in the Southern US. In his late thirties he began the FTM transition process with the recommended one-year psychological therapy. He was given a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as, "a persistent sense of discomfort and inappropriateness about ones anatomic sex and a persistent wish to be rid of ones genitals and to live as a member of the other sex" (Denny 1998, p.130). Then he was able to begin testosterone injection therapy and the "real-life test," which includes cross-dressing and living as a man. Shortly thereafter he went to Canada for the chest surgery, after which he passed full-time as a man, keeping his position as university instructor for a few years. Because of his non-tenured position, he lost his job, and began applying for similar positions at other institutions. However, the school his degree was from refused to change his female name on his transcripts, insisting it was a matter of historical record, and after a traumatic experience trying to explain his situation at a teaching job interview, James left academics, effectively losing his credentials. Primarily because of financial difficulties, he has not yet had any lower surgery.

John is 42 from a middle class background, raised in a large midwestern US city. John has found out in
the last four years that he is intersexed. Up until this point he was told he was female, but had to take female hormones since high school. John was told as an adult that cosmetic genital surgery was performed on him shortly after birth. He and James met at the Southern Comfort Conference in Atlanta, a large annual gathering of cross-dressers (overwhelmingly men who like to dress as women occasionally, but still live as men), transsexuals (mostly male-to-females, reflecting the actual numbers in the population), and various transgendered people. James said of the Conference (referring to the strong MTF and transvestite presence), "That market is huge--lots of vendors with bra-stuffers, hair removal, feminine shoes and underwear, wigs, make-up, deportment tips...they would go on a shopping spree all day, organized by the Conference. We were sort of on our own--short men's catalogs were available." John is a physical therapist who changed jobs several times during the transition, and later moved to another large mid-western city. He and James had chest surgery at the same time, but John, like James, has not had FTM genital surgery, mostly due to medical complications.

Brad, 43, is also from a large mid-western city with a middle class background. He knew John through friends and met James through John. He has maintained his job as a special-ed high school P.E. teacher throughout the transition. He is married to a woman he began dating after his decision to change sexes, but before he had begun the process. Brad has had the lower surgery, but has not been satisfied with the results and plans on undergoing additional corrective surgery. He benefited from learning from James' and John's experiences and has been able to go through the transition much more smoothly. For example, he learned to use an attorney with a court order to get through name and gender changes on personal documents. A fourth informant had to decline participation due to a medical crisis.

Method

After many long conversations with James over the years, and based on my familiarity with gender research in consumer behavior, I decided to formally investigate the FTM phenomenon from a consumer behavior perspective. Taking an exploratory, holistic approach, I formulated a list of broad questions focussing mainly on the actual transition from female to male, dealing with "before" and "after" impressions regarding appearance, clothes, and shopping experiences. The advantage of using a qualitative approach for this project is that a complex situation such as that of FTM consumer behavior can be hiding a system of interrelated elements based on the underlying constructs of gender and sex that can only be discovered through the close study of individual cases (Levy 1999). Each of the three informants participated in depth interviews over the telephone, each lasting several hours.

MAJOR FINDINGS

In order to get a feel for the changes that these FTM individuals experienced, I began by asking them to recall childhood memories regarding gender awareness, dress, and social situations. Then I asked informants to describe their feelings about shopping, grooming, clothes, appearance, and general interaction with the marketplace before, during, and after their transitions. From these interviews, several interesting patterns emerged.
regarding the informants' feelings toward shopping as well as actual shopping behaviors. Also enlightening are the findings regarding gender construction and its interactions with sex and gender identity. Problems that the informants have experienced point to the deeply engrained binary two-sex system that pervades the marketplace.

**Early Childhood**

From about age 4 to 5, all three informants recall the embarrassment of having to dress like a girl while feeling certain they were boys. Brad states,

"When I knew the difference between boys and girls, I knew I was a boy…. Wearing the dresses was public humiliation. It was pretty miserable--you couldn't say what the problem was."

John recalls,

"I was basically able to dress like a little boy, but it was a struggle with my family--it was a battle. They tried to dress me on Easter--I had to give in. If you put a little boy in a girl's Easter outfit, he's gonna feel like he wants to break out of it. It interfered with what I needed to be doing…it didn't fit. I didn't want to be seen by my male friends--to have that on me, it was horrible."

Similarly, James remembers Easter as a particularly traumatic event:

"Easter was the peak of frilly girliness--I had to wear patent leather shoes…it was embarrassing since the other boys saw this and they were in their suits."

Informants expressed concern about their parents and others having difficulty dealing with them, but felt powerless to do anything to help the situation. James recalls,

"I was always wearing the wrong clothes. I felt sorry for people trying to figure out my gender. I felt like I stuck out--I just wanted to fit in. I chose clothes that would diminish my actual sex--I looked for things that were neutral, a little male, acceptable to society. I would persist with my mom to get me things that weren't girly or frilly."

Brad has an early childhood memory that affected him deeply:

"When I knew the difference (between boys and girls), I asked my mom to make me a boy then. Her response let me know that it was taboo. From then on I knew that it would be like committing social suicide--I would lose everything if I had a sex change."

John, reflecting on the particularly difficult situation of being intersexed, says:

"It must have been traumatic for my parents. It was a mess. They were trying to do what the doctor suggested and raise me as a female…they were following through with the whole thing. They wanted me to fit in, and they wanted me to be happy.... I can't talk about my clothing--it was so central and traumatic to what's happened to me. It wasn't meant to be. I wasn't supposed to be in those clothes. My parents thought, 'We're going to make this work--if we socialize the child as a girl, it will be a girl.' Everything was out of whack. If something doesn't change, you just can't take it
anymore. Inevitably, something will break down, it doesn’t work. Any type of trying to put me into clothing that was against who I was was traumatic. My parents tried to accommodate my wishes some because of the love they had--it was traumatic for them watching me not be the little girl they wanted me to be."

Before the Transition

All three informants, not deciding to go through a sex change until their late thirties, developed various ways of coping with their gender/sex conflict. The fine line between not being too female or too male was difficult to achieve, especially before androgyny was as widespread and acceptable as it is today. James seems to have been the most conscientious about it:

"I wanted the clothes to be as plain as possible. Terms like blouse (vs. shirt) or perfume (vs. cologne) or panties (vs. underwear) made me sick. If I had to wear a skirt, it had to be a solid color. Things like toothbrushes, sweaters, washrags and towels, curtains and sheets had to fit a narrow range of colors--grey, brown, dark green, navy, or black--no women's colors like pink or bright or pastel colors. Mugs, salt shakers, paper towels, silverware--no swirly, flowery stitching. I was conscious not to go too masculine. I wanted to look male, but socially I was afraid of it. I wanted to go as close to the boundaries without drawing attention to myself. In decorating my place, I made it look not like a woman's touch with plaids, solid colors and trim without design."

Similarly Brad says,

"I never seriously thought of myself as a lesbian. I tried denial, went out with guys. I was always very conscious of my gender. Several times I went out and bought a girly t-shirt to not look so masculine. I wore them once and then threw them away. I dressed as plain and nondescript as I could with the least bows and frills. I looked for androgynous things with a lack of flowery stitching. I was conscious not to go too masculine. I wanted to look male, but socially I was afraid of it. I wanted to go as close to the boundaries without drawing attention to myself. In decorating my place, I made it look not like a woman's touch with plaids, solid colors and trim without design."

John is more upset by the whole period of "not feeling comfortable in his skin," as he puts it:

"When I was living my life as a female, it was so incongruent with what I was, that I was hiding and hanging my head down. I think it
affected my self-esteem. You feel better when you're who you really are--it's a gift to be able to see the two sides, to step into the shoes of another entity, but that's not who I was. It was very, very hard. I am trying to have it covered medically. There were a lot of things going on that I haven't explored and really didn't know were going on."

When asked about shopping experiences in particular, the informants repeatedly mentioned being embarrassed and feeling uncomfortable. Embarrassment in the purchase context can be defined as, "an aversive and awkward emotional state following events that increase the threat of unwanted evaluation from a real or imagined social audience" (Dahl et al. 2001, p.474). Such embarrassment increases as familiarity with a given purchase decreases (Dahl et al. 2001), a situation common to FTMs. Emotion-laden processing and decision-making are often characterized by avoidant behaviors, and tend to be more selective and attribute-based (Bettman et al. 1998), as was found to be the case with the transmen in this study. Brad states:

"Buying underwear and bras was pretty gross--embarrassing and humiliating. I generally wore Jockey sport bras so I wouldn't have to try them on. I did a lot of shopping by mail so I could buy clothes without the embarrassment of checking out or trying it on. I'd act like things I bought in the men's shops were for a gift."

John was more brief:

"I had to shop in the women's department for society, but the men's felt more natural."

James’ comments highlight his unfamiliarity with men’s clothes and fear of social judgment:

"I always stopped and looked at men's clothes--Sears catalogs, people in the street--I was always acutely aware of men's clothes, but I wasn't free to really look. Once in the back of a junk car I found a bag of old green military clothes--I thought I'd found a treasure. I hid it and didn't want to share it with anyone. In college I bought my first males clothes--Levis jeans and a black vinyl jacket. I got flack from my mom--she sent my sister to tell me that she was worried I was dressing like a man. It was very stressful. But going in women's dressing rooms was humiliating and traumatic. In stores, I used to have to steer clear of the service people, lie, take things home to try on. If I found something that fit, I was very loyal to it. Like Levis, I know the sizes and how they fit. I developed store loyalty--if they were receptive and didn’t bug me, I'd go back. Hardware stores, grocery stores, gas stations--if they didn’t look at me like I was odd, I'd go back. I was uncomfortable as a shopper."

During the Transition

The period of a year or two after an individual begins the sex change, known as the passing phase, is awkward and fraught with embarrassment as well. This period is marked with excitement and heightened self-consciousness. As James points out:

"You have no hair on your face at first. Once it grew, I didn't want to shave it, but I did for granddad's funeral when I had to go as a
woman, since I wasn't passing yet and my family didn't know yet. This period was tricky—you wanted to wear it all, but you would get looked at and treated funny. After the top surgery I could wear a t-shirt flat on my chest—it was a big deal! I had to have a masculine haircut. I went to a barber shop—it was a big thrill to get to go—an ecstatic experience. I was really selective with dentists, haircutters who might have a reason to be suspicious, especially when I first started transitioning. Technically, you are supposed to dress, socialize and work as a male from day 1 of the transition. But I didn't want to draw attention to myself. It was a progression, like through puberty. You want to go whole hog, but your body doesn’t look right, so it takes some time to build your male wardrobe without drawing attention to yourself. Shoe sizes were really difficult—the European sizes have helped; I didn’t want to appear stupid. I had to be observant and notice things and not appear to be clueless as a 40-year-old male. I would try things I didn’t know what the name stood for, to see what it was and if I liked it."

Brad's experience highlights one of the main difficulties encountered by FTMs: to pass as a grown man. This has been referred to as the "imitation man look," in which a transitioning FTM looks diminutive, like a small boy in his father's clothing, cute but not authoritative. There are publications with tips for the FTM to look older (Garber 1992, p.44). As Brad states:

"I wore a loose t-shirt and a shirt over it. I made a latex 'packy' to wear in my pants—I created a pouch in my underwear. The first one I wore was uncomfortable. I wore darker button-down shirts and t-shirts. It was hard to pass as a 37-year-old man—I looked like a 15-year-old boy. I got carded a lot for quite awhile. I never had much hair growth on my face, so I couldn’t grow a beard, but I let it overgrow a little. My chest surgery in Montreal was a fun, exciting time. I healed right up—it was really easy. It didn’t look as good as I wanted, but it was a relief."

After the Transition

Currently all three informants are living very happily as men. Their attitudes toward shopping have changed greatly. They feel better about themselves and their appearance, and now have a chance to explore the male world. However, they had to go through a process to get there. James reflects on his early years as a man:

"At first I had an imprinted impression from youth about what said 'man,' even though it wasn't stylish. Any new styles looked sissy to me. Sometimes I felt like I was stuck in an old movie. I thought men should wear clothes that look like a man. Shirts with swirlly European patterns I don’t like—I went for the straight-up masculine. When I was younger, I didn't get to have things like high-top Converse tennis shoes—they say 'man' to me—so I had to go out and get them. They hurt my feet, so I don’t wear them, but I had to have them. Getting a pocket watch was a rite of passage—every classy man owns a pocket watch. And suspenders and vests—I could never wear them as a woman with breasts. I got a suit and tie and wingtips for going out. I had to get boxers and Old Spice cologne—
things my dad wore. But suits are not comfortable, boxers bunch up, and Old Spice smells too heavy and strong--I don't like it. I'm not comfortable in men’s dress clothes. A suit is a $300 investment that sits in your closet. I'm more casual; so now my mind kicks in over image. In your mind you make adjustments, you have to have a reality check. In a sense, I've been frozen in time with the 1950's and '60's styles. I had to get over that, I had to find clothes. A lot of the old smells and styles passed out of favor after wearing and trying them. I've gone towards outdoorsy styles. I bought a book, The Modern Man's Guide to Life, it has stuff in it about folding clothes and luggage and all kinds of things. I had a problem with sizes--even now I don’t know what 40Long is. Buying things to fit is still a challenge."

Brad remembers buying certain items of clothing that were central to his male identity:

"Plaid, button-down short-sleeved shirts are totally butch--I couldn't wear them then, so I do now, even though they're geeky. I went through a phase of buying blue dress shirts. I bought quite a few, more than I wore, because they were taboo before. I got suits and suit jackets and a certain style of semi-formal dress shoes, but I didn't really wear them. The first doctor I needed to go to I had my wife go first and ask if he'd feel comfortable and interested in seeing a transsexual (a friend). If I had gone first, it would have taken them off-guard. I did that at Walgreens to change my name for prescriptions, too." Now all three informants are more comfortable about shopping and more secure in their masculinity. They are more focused on their personal styles and less on gender stereotypes. This can be seen in John's reflections:

"Now I walk more confidently, hold my head up, act in a more self-assured way. Pink shirts still stick out with some people. Personally, I like all colors. I kinda go with what I like--I like white and blue. I'm grateful to God that I can be the man that I always have been. That makes me comfortable. I need to do a whole lot more connecting with other intersexed people who have gone through what I did. It would be a comfort to know that others had these feelings. I was so grateful that the movie 'Boys Don't Cry' was made paying tribute to Brandon Teena. It was hard to watch, but it was trying to make a difference. I don’t mind crying now--I feel that tears and expressing your feelings are something that people can appreciate."

Brad can now express himself more honestly as well:

"Now I'm not afraid to get cutesy things. I used to associate them with being feminine. Like flowers, I'd mow over them--I associated them with feminine. Same with birds. Now I grow flowers and have birds as pets. I'm not afraid to buy something now and say I like it. I always liked 'Piglet' things (from Winnie the Pooh)--now I get them--to collect, not wear. Shopping is more free, more fun. I like going in the men's department. I don’t mind going in the women's department for gifts for my wife. I don’t mind buying tampons--"
they're not for me, so there's no humiliation."

James is also more in tune with himself in the marketplace:

"Now I make more educated purchases, based on new smells and styles and what I like. I buy things that aren't too harsh--a lot of the men's products irritate my skin, so I have to make concessions and buy things for sensitive skin. If something irritates me or is too expensive, I won't put up with it--I don't want the 'Corvette syndrome' that a lot of guys have. I have grown to not stereotype; intellectually, I can accept that, but I'm guarded about being a man--I'm still insecure. I need masculine projects. Before, I bought things to minimize my femininity; now, I shop for clothes that enhance and complement my gender--things that will make me attractive to the opposite sex and make women turn their heads. I can explore being attractive! I'm tuned into ads that promote sex appeal, but I am limited by my finances. I used to observe like a spectator, now I'm a participant! I used to hate to shop, now I have a whole new shopping experience. I feel comfortable when I'm shopping. I am enthusiastic about shopping. I would be careful, though, now if I had to buy something for my girlfriend not to say too much, or give away what I know. I've explored what my own style means now, not just male-imprinted things. Nobody raises an eyebrow now when I'm shopping. I go straight in the men's department and let them give me advice....they can't wait to help me. Now I'm letting women help me with shirts, ties, colors--they've got an eye for what looks good on a man. Now I go to regular people to get my hair cut and car fixed."

Also, female-to-male individuals still experience some problems working, socializing, and shopping as men, as revealed by James' comments:

"Blue collar men are disposable in the job thing--like construction, if you get hurt or toxicized you're supposed to tough it out. Workin' and sweatin' next to other guys, though, gave me a chance to be around real men. Everything is a sensual experience to blue collar guys--they don't go beyond this. They're more physical and absolutely male/female oriented. But it is difficult to hang out with men--I don't have the background--sexual slang, stories, sports. I don't have the experience of jack-offs, prostate exams, wet dreams, sexual exploits, hard-ons, and dating as a man. I have to be careful what I talk about. I miss a lot of jokes. Penis lingo is hard for me. I don't do well at 'guy' conversations--I don't have the lingo, so I present myself as an intellectual, I listen a lot and say, 'yeah.' I say I was married when I was younger so they don't think I'm gay. It's difficult to repeat a lie the same way each time--I have to rehearse telling the details. I'd been living in an alternative lifestyle all these years before the transition, and am still in alternative category—that was one of the hardest things to accept.”

James continues about the difficulties he has faced:

“The job market has been tough for me, too--you have to account for yourself for the last 10-15 years. A
physical exam for a job is the worst nightmare—you have to tell them. As far as problems in the marketplace go, buying clothes off the rack is difficult. It's better now that the Mexicans have come in—shorter pants are available. Shirt sleeves are too long, watchbands for men's watches are too big, and my feet and hands are very small—finding a pair of shoes to fit is a challenge. Getting dentist and doctor records is problem due to the name change, and finding a doctor for the hysterectomy has been hard. Also, they don’t make a good, comfortable prosthesis and testosterone prices have gone way up."

Finally, differences in treatment as males versus females in retail outlets were noticed by several informants. Brad and then James say, respectively:

"You may get a little better service as a male than a female. Women seat you faster. I notice in auto repair shops no sugar coating now. As a butch female, I was treated rudely, looked at peculiar. Now service is better, more friendly. I think it is more of a lesbian/gay issue. I did think I would go out to dinner as a guy more, and dress up more than I do."

"I noticed that in the cafeteria in the mall they give me much bigger portions. In restaurants waitresses respond faster and give me more attention and eye contact now. I think it's because they think you're gonna tip more. When I'm in line at McDonald's, they'll make eye contact faster and apologize more for my having to wait. If I'm with a construction crew at a diner, they react in a different way—they're trying to do something for you, mother you a little step further than when you're a woman."

DISCUSSION

Several major findings from this study are quite interesting and require further exploration looking at a broader, more diverse sample. First, everything about the shopping experience and process changed for the female-to-male individuals as they went through their transitions. Their role as shopper changed from unsatisfied participants, and even excluded observers, to enthusiastic shoppers, comfortable in the retail environment for the most part. Their information search moved from embarrassed, hurried avoidance to a much more relaxed, subjective, in-store process. Their purpose changed from finding acceptable alternatives while minimizing certain features to exploring personal style and tastes. Their number of suitable alternatives went from few to many, as they moved from unfamiliarity to familiarity within many product categories. Before, during and after the transition, the female-to-male informants were aware of and participated carefully in constructing their genders. The outcomes of this process changed from dissatisfaction and unattractiveness, leading to low self-esteem, to the informants looking and feeling good.

The social pressure to fit into given gender categories, accompanied by the role of marketers in enforcing the dualistic two-sex system, led to much anxiety, stress, and trauma for the informants. The unaccommodating nature of retail outlets and service providers experienced by people who do not nicely fit into "male" or "female" categories does not represent good marketing even if it might follow good segmentation practices.
The Internet has brought with it many more opportunities for FTMs to network, engage in word-of-mouth about products and services available, and organize to improve their situation. One problem on the Internet, however, is that when one enters "transsexualism" as the search word, graphic porno sites and ads pop up. This is demeaning for transpeople in the early stages of transitioning, when they are desperately searching for information and contacts, and reinforces the idea that their situation is sick and depraved. There is definitely room for more education about the transcommunity, both on the part of marketers and society at large. This paper represents one such effort.

REFERENCES


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