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Transsexuals' Narrative Construction of the "True Self"*

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The study of self-narratives thus far has sought to discern the internal structures of the stories people tell to give meaning to themselves. This approach, however, neglects the interactive processes through which self-narratives are constructed. By studying preoperative transsexuals, who are preparing for a radical identity change, one can observe the interactive processes through which stories are used to construct a new self. Based on participant observation in a transgender support group, in-depth interviews, and analysis of written materials, the present study shows how transsexuals collaborated, through modeling, guiding, selective affirming, and tactful blindness, to fashion biographical stories that defined into existence a differently-gendered "true self." It also shows how dominant gender ideologies provided resources for fashioning plausible self-narratives.

Stories are like containers that hold us together; they give us a sense of coherence and continuity. By telling what happened to us once upon a time, we make sense of who we are today. To fashion a biographical story imposes a comforting order on our experience, but how do we arrive at stories that feel right, that point to authentic selfhood? One way to find out is to examine how people create new self-narratives to support a radical change in identity. We might find, as Gergen and Gergen (1983:266) have suggested, that stories are not simply told about a preexisting self but that stories, and their collective creation, bring phenomenologically real "true selves" into being.

Transsexuals provide an intriguing opportunity to study this process of self-construction. The desired identity change is indeed radical: from one gender to another. Typically transsexuals, like those described here, believe they were born in wrong-sexed bodies and want to remedy the mistake, eventually through surgery. The process entails relearning how to do gender, down to the smallest details of self-presentation. The process is also anguishing, in that transsexuals often face rejection from family and friends. In addition, there are the problems of finding ways to pay for therapy, electrolysis, hormone treatments, and surgery. To be willing to endure this process, one must believe firmly that the "true self" demands it.

We already know a great deal about how transsexuals manage stigma (Feinbloom 1976; Kando 1973) and how they learn to do gender differently (Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978). We have many hypotheses about the causes of transsexualism, including theories that emphasize biology (Benjamin 1966), socialization (Stoller 1968), labeling (Risman 1982), patriarchy (Raymond [1979]1994), and capitalism (Billings and Urban 1982). More difficult to penetrate, however, is the *process* whereby transsexuals themselves fashion a new sense of self after the old self begins to unravel. Transsexuals face a peculiar difficulty in this regard because their bodies, as signifiers, belie the new gender identities they want to claim. Moreover, in Western cultures the body is taken to be an unequivocal sign of gender; thus it is not easy for those born with penises to define themselves as "female inside."[1] The implication is that transsexuals must look elsewhere, beyond their natural bodies, for signs of the gendered character of their "true selves."

One place where they learn to look is the past. Through participating in the so-called "transgender community," they learn how to scan their biographies for evidence of a differently gendered "true self." In this paper I focus on how transsexuals learn to do this—that is, how they learn, from others in the transgender community, to find biographical evidence of a differently gendered "true self" and to fashion this information into a

[1] As Young (1989:152) puts it, "For us, the body is the locus of the self, indistinguishable from it and expressive of it."

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story that leads inexorably to the identity "transsexual." By studying this process among transsexuals — whose identity dilemmas are severe and thus call for a highly visible response — we can gain insight into the generic process of self-construction through narrative.

Before presenting the data, it will be helpful to speak about the social psychological issues that surround the analysis of self-construction through narrative. A key issue concerns what is meant by a *true self*. Erickson (1995) argues that people invoke the notion of a "true self" or "real self" when they believe they are acting consistently with closely held values — that is, when they are acting "authentically." As shown by Turner (1976; Turner and Gordon 1981) and Hochschild (1983), considerable cultural, historical, and situational variation can exist in people's experiences of being authentic and of enacting their "true selves." In this view, which I follow here, the "true self" is an artifact of a folk theory; it is a nonanalytic label for experience rather than a psychological entity that social psychologists should look for.

Yet the "true self" is a powerful fiction. People in Western cultures can feel bereft, incomplete, and confused without this construct, and may go to great lengths to find or create it (see Hewitt 1989; Klapp 1969). The desire to experience the "true self" and to feel authentic is thus a powerful source of motivation (Gecas 1991). It also seems reasonable to suppose that this motivation may grow stronger when the complexity and pace of social life make it difficult to hold firmly to any one clearly defined, culturally valued identity. Under such conditions, people may want to believe all the more in a "true self" that remains constant and solid beneath their shifting performances for diverse audiences (Gecas and Burke 1995:57). Attention to the construction of the "true self" as a phenomenological reality is thus important for understanding motivation and behavior.

As suggested above, stories about one's self can give the appearance of coherence to the buzz and bloom of biography. Such stories, or self-narratives, constitute an "individual's account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time" (Gergen and Gergen 1983:255). The idea is that these stories order one's life events so as to make them appear to be a meaningful whole

(Polkinghorne 1988). This "meaningful whole" seems to provide evidence of a "true self" that is continuous over time. This is not to say that the self is viewed as immutable; rather, throughout whatever changes an individual undergoes, a continuous thread constituting the "true self" is imagined to exist. This thread is spun by the stories.

These stories are also links between culture and the self. The story-patterns on which self-narratives are based are resources that individuals use to construct themselves. For example, Weber, Harvey, and Stanley (1987) have suggested that people's stories about falling in love are typically variations on a "master account" of falling in love that circulates in Western culture. Similarly, Murray (1989) has shown how people use romantic and comic narratives to construct images of themselves that lead to decisions about such questions as whether to run a marathon or to travel abroad — experiences that lead in turn to new self-conceptions. In these cases people are using the master story-patterns of a culture to frame their experience and make it sensible to themselves and others (Bruner 1994; Shotter 1984:218).

In this process of sense-making through story, the master patterns are adapted, modified, and later passed on in slightly altered form. Variations multiply, and so does the number of possible selves. And as lives are fitted to stories, lives may be led differently and new stories thereby created. From this perspective we can see how self-making is a collaborative process extending over time and acting back on culture. We can also see the need to observe how people collaborate to create the resources necessary to construct selves. Attention to this process would seem essential to the social psychology of self-construction.

Although the importance of studying the narrative construction of the self as a process is widely acknowledged (Barclay 1994; Bruner 1987; Gergen 1994; Gergen and Gergen 1983; Shotter 1984), this is seldom done. Snow and Anderson (1987:1359) come close to doing so in showing how the homeless use "fictive story telling" to "assert a positive personal identity." Their data and analysis, however, focus primarily on *individual* identity work, and thus reveal little about how the homeless collaborate to learn, share, create, and tell stories about themselves. Recent studies of children have shown how

they tell stories either with the help of probing questions by parents (Fivush 1994) or by repeating stories they overhear adults telling (Miller 1994). Although these studies show how we learn to tell stories, they do not help us understand how adults create and use self-narratives in interaction to construct a shared identity.

In contrast, the study of transsexuals reported here shows how narrative forms were transmitted and adjusted to fit individual experience, in a group. In this setting individuals did not simply learn new labels for themselves; the changes were more profound. The power of self-narratives, and of group affirmation, brought into being a new "true self" — one almost antithetical to the old. In learning to tell different stories about themselves, transsexuals learned to be different people. This happened only because they encountered the transgender community and learned to use its storytelling tools.

THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

My involvement in the transgender community[2] began after I found an advertisement for a therapist who specialized in "transgender issues." When I called her and explained my research interests, she said that she co-led a transgender support group and invited me to the next meeting.

I attended eight (of a possible 12) of these meetings over a 15-month period. Each meeting lasted about three hours. Between 10 and 26 cross-dressers, transsexuals, and sometimes their significant others were present at each meeting. During the first half of each meeting, members discussed and sought advice on personal issues. The second half of the meeting usually consisted of an instructional program — for example, a makeup seminar, a video lecture on voice alteration, or a presentation on the legal rights of transgenderists. Beside the regular meetings, I also attended the group's annual

Christmas party and went to a hockey game with a born male dressed as a woman. I wrote field notes as soon as possible after each meeting.

I also read magazines, pamphlets, and short articles written and distributed by various transgender organizations. In addition, I found an Internet community of transgenderists and consistently read two Internet newsgroups, subscribed to a "semi-private" e-mail list, and lurked on a weekly real-time support group for transgenderists on America Online. Sometimes I took notes off the screen; at other times I downloaded relevant public documents. I interviewed three transsexuals via e-mail, and conducted one face-to-face interview with an erotic transvestite I met over the Internet.[3]

Other data derived from interviews with 10 transsexuals whom I met at support group meetings. The interviews lasted 2 to 3½ hours; I recorded and transcribed them in full. I used an interview guide that consisted of a list of orienting questions; the interviews were otherwise unstructured. Nine of the interviewees were biologically born males; one was born female. None of the interviewees had undergone sex reassignment surgery, although all but one expressed a desire to do so. In regard to sexual orientation, the born female saw herself as a heterosexual man. Three of the born males viewed themselves as lesbian women, three as heterosexual women, and three others said they would try out both orientations. All of the people I interviewed were white and ranged in age from 31 to 47. Eight of the 10 held middle-class jobs in professional or technical fields or were working on graduate degrees.

Throughout this study I wrote numerous analytic memos in an attempt to make sense of the data (Lofland and Lofland 1984). At the beginning of data collection, I used these memos to try to answer the question "What is going on here?" This helped to jump-start the process of analytic induction (Manning 1991). As I wrote these memos, the signifi-

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[2] This community includes *transsexuals*, who believe they were born in wrong-sexed bodies and who often seek surgery to correct the problem, and *cross-dressers*, who wear gender-discrepant clothing in order to express themselves more authentically. People who cross-dress for erotic reasons, referred to as *transvestites* by members of the subculture, are generally *not* accepted as legitimate members of the transgender community. *Transgenderist* refers to the community's legitimate members, namely transsexuals and cross-dressers.

[3] I found this process awkward, time-consuming, and inefficient. I never really knew whether rapport was established, and couldn't know whether they were only pretending to be self-defined as transsexual. Furthermore, a great deal of time was required to send questions and answers back and forth, and Internet respondents often did not give complete answers to my questions. Sometimes they did not attempt to answer.

cance of storytelling began to emerge. Toward the end of data collection I began to categorize and sort the data, following the techniques described by Strauss (1987). For example, I categorized the stories by theme and then generated subcategories. I also coded the data in terms of process — that is, by searching my field notes to learn how storytelling unfolded during interaction. Through these procedures I came to understand the "how" and the "what" of transsexuals' self-narratives.

MAKING THE DIFFERENTLY GENDERED "TRUE SELF"

"A girl brain in a boy body," said one interviewee when I asked her what it meant to be transsexual. Transsexuals believed they were *born* into the wrong-sexed bodies. Through biological miswiring, they felt they had been given a body signifying a gender different from that of their "true self." This biological view of gender implied that transsexuals' differently gendered "true selves" had existed from birth. Consequently, to be secure in their new self-definitions, they had to find evidence that they had *always* been different. Together they found such evidence in their biographies. That is, they collectively reinterpreted certain past events as evidence of transsexuality. This reinterpretation took place while presenting their self-narratives to each other. Transsexuals most often told stories of childhood events. This was where the remaking of the self began.

Childhood Stories

During an interview, one male-to-female transsexual had difficulty defining transsexualism. She said that nobody had ever asked her to do that before, and added:

> I guess that it would be whatever the medical term or psychological term is. I'm not exactly sure. But it always has been there since I can remember; probably at four years old I felt more female than. . .male.

During support group meetings and interviews, and on computer networks, transgenderists often said, "I've felt different *as long as I can remember*." Early memories of feeling ambivalent about gender, or memories of doing gender unconventionally, were regarded as key pieces of evidence for transsexuality. Transsexuals viewed child-

hood as a time when their authentic impulses had not yet been stifled by restrictive gender boundaries. At that time, the "true self" reigned. To construct their new identity, transsexuals most often told childhood stories about (1) actual or fantasized cross-dressing experiences, (2) getting caught cross-dressing, and (3) sports participation. What mattered was how these stories were interpreted.

Early cross-dressing stories. Children learn early to attribute their own and others' gender on the basis of clothing (Cahill 1989), and as adults they take this cultural sign of gender for granted. Male-to-female transsexuals viewed early cross-dressing experiences as evidence of always having possessed a differently gendered "true self."[4] The cross-dressing activities described in these stories varied considerably in duration and frequency. Some transsexuals recounted elaborate stories of cross-dressing throughout childhood. For example, one male-to-female transsexual in her mid-forties offered the following story in an interview:

> I was five years old and I had a female cousin that was the same age as me. . .our grandmother kept us during the day while my mom and her mom worked. . .I think I initiated it, I believe, I can't exactly remember, but it was like, "Let's just change clothes." It was a two-story house; we always played upstairs. We kind of had the run of the house 'cause Granny couldn't negotiate well. We just changed [clothes] for one afternoon: I was basically Jane and she was John. . . . I always thought that it seemed like little girls were so much different, and that's the way I really wanted to be. I saw myself more as her than I did as the little boy. And that's when it all started. And we did it quite often over the course of probably two years. (Q:[5] Do you remember how it made you feel when you first started dressing?) Yeah, I felt really — it was exciting, it felt strange, but it felt good. I didn't feel self-conscious, which was the strange thing about it. I didn't feel odd or awkward. . .it was just like, this is the way it should be.

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[4] Cross-dressing stories were not central to female-to-male transsexuals' self narratives, probably because our culture accepts girls wearing boys' clothing, but not the reverse. Boys and men endanger their privileged status by wearing women's clothing; thus the act is viewed as more consequential and is not undertaken lightly. When girls and women dress in men's clothing, perhaps it is more likely to be seen as merely "playing with fashion."

[5] *Q* refers to a question that I asked. *C* refers to a comment I made.

Most stories of early cross-dressing suggested that at first it was undertaken almost on a whim. This account by a 40-year-old was typical:

> I was five years old. We lived in town, but there was an old family homeplace that nobody was living in at the time. . . .I was just exploring in the attic one day and found a black dress hanging from a nail in the rafters. I just tried it on and it felt good. I started going through all the drawers, finding other things to try on. And over the years following that – the house had no closets; they used wardrobes – I emptied out one of the wardrobes and turned that into my wardrobe. As I found bits and pieces of clothing that appealed to me, I just added them to my wardrobe.

This person remembered cross-dressing at the homeplace until she went to college. When she told a similar version of this story at a support group meeting, several members smiled and nodded. These responses not only affirmed the individual narrator's transsexual identity, but also conveyed the message that telling stories of early cross-dressing was an acceptable way to show that the identity fit.

Remembering the *feelings* associated with these experiences was crucial because support group members, like most people, took them as signs of the "true self" (Gordon 1989; Hochschild 1983). Discussing feelings when telling self-narratives can help storytellers reexperience these feelings; which, in turn, makes the feelings seem intimately connected with one's sense of self (Barclay 1994; Shotter 1990). As in others' accounts of cross-dressing at an early age, the previously quoted transsexuals explained that it felt "right," "good," "natural," and "the way it should be." At support group meetings, revealing these "true feelings" indicated to newcomers that childhood cross-dressing wasn't undertaken for mere amusement, but was the expression of a deeper self.

Other transsexuals did not cross-dress for long periods during childhood, but they remembered a brief time when they tried it or told of fantasizing about it. In an interview, a male-to-female transsexual told the following story:

> I know a lot of people start [cross-dressing] when they are five years old. At that age I really didn't have that much of an opportunity. That was about the age when my sister moved out of the house. My mother was a fairly intimidating person. . . .I do remember that when I was growing up there were mostly girls in the neighborhood; there were very few boys. I was over at a house. . .and saw a [woman's] bathing suit and started to try it on. Somebody came in and saw that and said "I'm going to tell," so I stopped and nothing ever came out of that. Then for a long time it was just fantasizing about dressing as or being a girl.

During another interview, a transsexual answered as follows when I asked whether cross-dressing was part of her childhood:

> No, it really wasn't. I've thought a lot about this, and when I was a kid I had this fantasy that some girl that I liked at school would put her clothes on me and that I would be a girl. And I think that the clothing was the most significant marker of gender. And so, I guess the idea – a lot of it was this idea that wearing girls' clothes would make me a girl.

Transsexuals' stories about early cross-dressing varied considerably. Some said they did it consistently for a number of years; others said they only fantasized about it. Three group members only recalled their earliest memories of cross-dressing while under hypnosis. In view of the power of suggestion (Loftus 1993) and the questionable nature of recovering "repressed memories" (Neisser 1994), these transsexuals may have remembered events that hadn't happened. The main point, however, is not the accuracy of the accounts but the fact that during support group meetings, all variations of the narratives were affirmed as evidence of transsexuality.

The most commonly accepted evidence of transsexualism in the transgender community was cross-dressing or fantasizing about cross-dressing *as a child*. The age at which one began such activities was significant, because transsexuals believed that the "true self" was most likely to express itself at an early age. One person I interviewed said she remembered beginning to cross-dress at age 3. Transsexuals believed that the "true self" was more likely to govern one's actions in childhood because its impulses had not yet been constrained by parents, teachers, and peers.

The age at which a person began cross-dressing was also viewed as a way to distinguish transsexuals from both erotic transvestites and cross-dressers. By emphasizing the early age of actual or fantasized cross-dressing, transsexuals dissociated them-

selves from transvestites, who usually told of beginning to cross-dress during adolescence for erotic purposes. By stressing that their early feelings and activities reflected an *exclusively* gendered "true self," rather merely an *aspect* of self, transsexuals distanced themselves from cross-dressers, who often talked about cross-dressing as if it were a hobby. By emphasizing differences, support group members policed the boundaries (see Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) between the three closely related identities: transvestite, cross-dresser, and transsexual.

It was especially important to make such distinctions because most transsexuals formally had defined themselves as cross-dressers. Policing also took place when support group members told stories about dressing in women's clothing as adults. At one meeting several *cross-dressers* exchanged detailed accounts of dressing up as women for Halloween, with emphasis on humorous aspects of fooling friends or restroom episodes. No transsexuals joined in with similar stories. A construction worker − a newcomer who hadn't yet publicly labeled herself a cross-dresser or a transsexual − was asked by a cross-dresser if she had ever "dressed up" for Halloween. She replied:

Halloween is for dressing in costumes, and this is not a costume. It is part of who I am, part of me. If I dressed at Halloween it would be like saying that this is false, but it isn't, it's real. Femininity is an art form. I practice the art of femininity.

Transsexuals affirmed her story with comments such as "I know what you mean." One male transsexual, who lived full-time as a woman, added that she now dresses in women's clothes daily, and it's just "the natural thing to do." Transsexuals' reactions indicated that, as a group, they were indeed different from the cross-dressers − and thus also showed the newcomer whom she resembled most closely.

Getting caught cross-dressing. One meeting, which was called "Family Issues Night," started with an exchange of stories about coming out to family members. During a lull in the conversation, the group leader asked a longtime member to talk about her family situation. She told the group about cross-dressing as a child and gave a detailed account of getting caught cross-dressed. Her parents sent her regularly to a psychiatrist for

several months, until she learned to tell the man "what he wanted to hear." This experience, she said, led her to question for many years the normality of cross-dressing. Other transsexuals responded by telling their own stories about getting caught; often they emphasized that it made them ashamed.

Overall these stories helped to create the notion that the "true self" was constrained by forces *outside* the individual. Because the transsexuals felt that their differently gendered "true self" had always existed, the stories helped to explain why they had denied its existence for 30 to 40 years. By stressing the negative social consequences in telling each other these stories, getting caught became a "turning point" in transsexuals' self-narratives (see Mishler 1992). The turning point, however, did not bring them closer to self-actualization; rather, it estranged them from the "true self." Any periodic cessation of cross-dressing thus could be attributed to pressure from others. A previously quoted transsexual exemplified this point in telling how she and her cross-dressing cousin were caught by an older cousin:

A cousin of mine that was probably ten years older caught us one day and she just about came unglued. She thought it was about the worst thing that any kids could ever do. . . .It was a big long lecture. I will never forget it. . .threatening to tell my parents, and her parents, and our grandmother, and all this stuff. Sort of put the fear of God into us for a while. I think after that it sort of started winding down with the two of us because we realized. . .that "hey, maybe this is not right, this is not the way." Before, it was kind of fun and games; there was nothing real serious about it.

One born male in her mid-thirties (who started to live full-time as a woman about five months after the interview) felt that being prohibited from cross-dressing squelched the natural development of her differently gendered "true self." In an interview she said:

I knew it was antisocial behavior [but]. . .looking back on it, I wish it had been different. I wish I would have been like the kid in school that was beat up because he was a sissy, just because maybe now I'd be much farther along. . . .I have about two or three years before I can get the surgery. I feel that had I been more honest with my feelings at an earlier age, or allowed myself to express myself the way I wanted to at an earlier age, that I'd be different − more of a complete person now. About that age I started to internalize my feelings and my tendencies, and bury it.

Negative social reactions to cross-dressing or other "cross-gendered" activities, such as little boys acting feminine, were seen as building up barriers to the expression of the differently gendered "true self." Transsexuals regarded such negative responses as the foundation for full-blown denial (which I will discuss in detail below). Stories about getting caught thus linked childhood cross-dressing stories with denial narratives. Weaving these stories together made them appear, at least on the surface, to be seamless constructions of self-meaning.

Participation in sports. Evidence of a differently gendered "true self" was also common in the transsexuals' stories about participating in sports as youths. Because participation in sports is one of the most common and potent signifiers of masculinity (Messner 1990, 1992), these stories were powerful resources for constructing a differently gendered "true self." Most of the born males emphasized that they were naturally inept at sports, while the born female stressed her athletic prowess as a child.

During support group meetings the born males often casually mentioned their lack of athletic ability. At one meeting, for example, a male-to-female transsexual gave a detailed account of an early cross-dressing experience and added, "I was also the last one picked for team sports." This abrupt change of topic threw me off guard; yet the group members took it in stride, and many nodded in agreement. These short utterances, often made without warning or elaboration, seemed like misplaced fragments, but in fact they created further evidence for the existence of a differently gendered "true self." They were like transsexual identity slogans.

When the transsexuals offered self-narratives, these identity slogans blossomed into elaborate stories rich in color, with the distinct air of the differently gendered "true self." One born male, whose father and older brother had been successful in multiple high school sports, told the following story in an interview:

> When I was in elementary school still, something that was real significant for me was that I'm not very good in sports. One of my vivid memories was in gym class. They'd choose two captains for the teams, and then the two captains would go back and forth. . . .picking other team members and picking the best people first and the worst for last, and — which I think is a terrible thing to do,

> I can't believe they do that to kids — and I would always be down near the bottom. And it was just such an agonizing thing, just sitting there waiting and waiting, three people left, two people left. So that was something that was really traumatic for me all throughout my childhood. . . .Playing little league baseball, basketball, and football — spectacularly unsuccessful. And finally by the time I was sixteen, baseball was the last thing that I dropped out of, and I felt like a real failure.

Another male-to-female transsexual, who was in her mid-forties, described her experiences as a boy in elementary school:

> People other than your parents start putting the binary notion of gender identity onto you, and that's when I started feeling bad. (Q: How do you mean, bad?) Out of place. Even in grade school I didn't want to play with the boys. I didn't want to play football, or basketball, or baseball, or any of those things. I wanted to play jump rope with the girls. By the time I got to third grade, the teachers didn't want me to do that anymore. . . .Of course, I'm sure you've heard this before, I was always the last person picked for the teams when the boys chose up sides, just because I had no interest whatsoever in those kinds of things. So I was ostracized continuously for my lack of athletic prowess, which didn't bother me at all because I had no interest whatsoever in having athletic prowess.

Telling stories about their lack of accomplishments in sports helped male-to-female transsexuals create evidence of their differently gendered "true self." Because they believed they were born in the wrong body, they felt they had always had a female "true self." Consequently, if they had not excelled at sports, as they believed "real" boys do, they saw this as further proof of transsexuality.

In contrast to male-to-female transsexuals, the born female I interviewed stressed his physical ability. Although he didn't participate in organized sports as a youth, he raised the issue of physical toughness, which is often part of athletics. He thus stressed characteristics and activities that are conventionally associated with maleness and masculinity in our culture. When I asked him what he meant by calling himself a tomboy who "liked to climb trees," he said:

> Well, I have younger brothers and sisters, and growing up I was the one who would have to protect them when they got into situations with

older children. I had the tendency of somehow getting under the skin of some people and I was always having to defend myself. Girls in particular. . .would not have a one-to-one confrontation; it was usually three-to-one against me. . . .If you really want to cause pain, pulling hair really doesn't do it; you twist. All you have to do is pull their hair and twist it, and they would let go and it was over in a short period of time.

This female-to-male transsexual reinterpreted these biographical episodes as evidence of transsexuality. Support group members agreed, believing that the aggressive behavior exhibited by this born female as a young girl was evidence that he had always had a differently gendered "true self."

Stories of Denial

Interpreting early cross-dressing and sports experiences as signs of a differently gendered "true self" helped the transsexuals define themselves as having been born in the wrong-sexed body. Yet they also had to explain away prior involvement in activities that signified their unwanted gender identity. If a male-to-female transsexual had been successful at sports or had signified conventional masculinity most of her life, this history had to be reinterpreted to support her new gender identity. If it was not reinterpreted, she might doubt that she was really a transsexual. If the transsexuals had been trying to present a virtual identity to others, they simply could have avoided giving discrediting information (Goffman 1963:95). But because they were doing identity work to create a phenomenologically real "true self," they had to find a way to reconcile discrepant biographical data.

To resolve this identity dilemma, transsexuals gave accounts of being "in denial" before they came to terms with transsexuality. Denial narratives were perhaps the most powerful identity-making resource shared in the transgender community. These narratives were fashioned from psychological rhetoric and thus had scientific legitimacy. To transsexuals, denial meant repressing their "true selves" and thus denying who they really were. This allowed male-to-female transsexuals to interpret the past expression of masculinity as the presentation of a false self (and vice versa for born females). Thus denial narratives helped them explain away

things that might have undermined their claims to possessing differently gendered "true selves."

Presenting a denial narrative could facilitate a complete change in identity over a short period, as in the following example. A born male who had been attending meetings for several months consistently introduced herself as a cross-dresser until one meeting, when she introduced herself as "just myself." She explained that she wasn't sure anymore what it meant to be a cross-dresser. As I wrote in my field notes, she

> talked about a story that happened earlier in the week. She got a catalog in the mail and said, "I was flipping through the catalog and got to the lingerie section. They have live models who model the bras and panties and I was looking at a bra and you could see a significant portion of her breast and I sort of wondered if that was for sale also."

This story expressed the narrator's desire to change her body, not only her clothing, and primed the group for her identity transition. At the following meeting she introduced herself, with some hesitation, by saying, "I'm coming to realize that I'm a transsexual." She went on to explain that it was difficult to say this in front of the others because she had been "struggling to get through denial." Group members offered her support; some said she was brave and courageous for taking such a big step. By invoking the denial narrative she completed her identity change in the eyes of the group. No one dared ask whether she really had been in denial because so many others relied on denial narratives to sustain their own claims to transsexuality.

Like other stories considered acceptable for transsexual identity-making, allusions to denial were constantly worked into group discussions. Denial was often mentioned in brief but significant ways during support group meetings. Transsexuals got the most mileage from denial narratives, however, when telling their complete life histories. These accounts of denial referred to three principal kinds of experiences: (1) self-distractions, (2) masculinity/femininity pursuits, and (3) self-mislabeling.

Self-distractions. Tales of denial emphasizing self-distractions were accounts of life events that diverted transsexuals' attention from seeing their "true selves." Interviewees said they turned to drugs or sources of bliss to

hide their transsexuality. Many said that awareness of the social consequences of stigmatization caused them to find ways to suppress their unconventional "true feelings." One transsexual in her mid-thirties explained in an interview how she was able to repress her "true self" through substance use:

> In high school I smoked a lot of pot and drank a lot, which covered up the emotions really well. At that age, about sixteen or seventeen, I found out that I could escape through drugs and alcohol. I got to college and pretty much did the same thing. Somehow, miraculously, I was able to graduate with a very decent GPA — and I drank like crazy the whole time and did drugs. I guess I was able to control it enough to manage my life and appear to the rest of the world to be a sane, normal person. But at the same time, I was drinking almost constantly, burying these feelings. . . .I could feel like dressing up like a girl but open a beer instead — and maybe belch and feel all better.

As this person went on to say, even the euphoria of love was a drug that could mask the "true self":

> While we were in the euphoria of love, I didn't drink, which was okay. I just wanted to be on the same plane she was. Then all of a sudden, about three months later, the euphoria of love started to wear a little thin and those feelings just came flying in for the first time in about 10 or 15 years. It all came back. (Q: The dressing?) The dressing and the transsexuality. Before, I could keep it at bay.

Transsexuals felt that denial, although often strong enough to shut out the "true self" for many years, was always at risk of collapsing. When transsexuals presented denial narratives, they split the self in two: (1) the protagonist or "true self," who worked relentlessly to tear down the barriers of denial, and (2) the antagonist or socially aware "self," who struggled to make repairs. Eventually, they felt, the "true self" proved to have more stamina and the barriers could not withstand the pressure; the "true self" thus won out in this "romance narrative" (see Gergen and Gergen 1988; Murray 1985).

Although stories of substance abuse were most common, self-distraction narratives included a variety of preoccupations. For example, the born female said he had so many other problems in his life, including health difficulties and family problems, that he wasn't able to focus on gender-related issues until very recently. Transsexuals could search their biographies for virtually any event in their lives that demanded a great deal of time or emotional energy, and could reinterpret it as a period of denial.

Masculinity/femininity pursuits. Whereas self-distraction narratives focused on doing things or being in situations that inhibited self-reflection, masculinity/femininity pursuits were stories about trying to conform to conventional notions of gender. By defining as *denial* the behavior stereotypically associated with the gender category they were leaving behind, transsexuals were able to gloss over these biographical contradictions. For instance, one born male had been a successful football player in high school. Later, as an adult man, this person had won a community award for organizing and coaching Little League sports. At the time of the interview, she viewed what others called "successes" as efforts to sustain denial.

When I asked one transsexual when she first wanted to cross-dress in public, she responded with the following story of a masculinity pursuit:

> Wishing to do so? I didn't let myself wish to do so. Like I said, I was wearing a mustache so I wouldn't even attempt to do so. I'd shave it off every once in a while. I would pretend that I was shaving it off so I could get it to grow back thicker, but what I was shaving it off for was because that way I could cross over. I wouldn't have to stick my fingers above my upper lip to try to see what I looked like.

She saw her previous cultivation of a mustache, a physical sign of masculinity, as a way to deny her differently gendered "true self." Similarly, another born male I interviewed told of previously lifting weights in an attempt to make her body more muscular and more masculine. The transsexuals viewed as denial their past attempts to sculpt their bodies to "give off" (Goffman 1959:2) signs of masculinity because these attempts contradicted what they currently felt existed deep inside themselves.

Besides the display of physical signs of masculinity, sometimes the main theme of masculinity pursuits was overconformity to traditional gender norms. During one interview a transsexual — who, as a man, had had three unsuccessful marriages to women — explained that she had signified a particularly abusive aspect of masculinity in sustaining denial:

> When it came to women, I was a son-of-a-bitch.

. . . I really was. I treated women like dirt. [I'd tell them], "You don't know what you're talking about. Let me just do everything, you just sit back and go with the flow. You're not smart enough. You don't know what's going on in the world." . . .to quote it on your tape, it may not seem right, but "Finger them, fuck them, and forget them". . . was my attitude: Let's see how many women I could lay in the course of a week, or in the course of a month. It was like a game, but even when all of this was going on, inside I was hating what I was doing. [I'd think,] "I don't know this person; the real person is in here." And when I am seeing the woman that I am with, I am thinking, "I would love to *be* you." I would love to be them. . . .it was like I was a different person. It was almost like standing back and watching somebody else do these things. Even now, especially now, when I look back it's like I don't believe all that. (C: And you were doing those things to −) To compensate for − I thought that if I'm real macho, if I'm a real "*man man*" or "*boy boy*" or teenager, or whatever it is, then people aren't going to notice this little feminine side in me that's wanting to come out and just touch somebody or be real gentle.

Ironically, this person wanted to be the kind of person he treated so badly. She said she didn't like the things she had done, but did them because she was trying to be a man. This guilt (about treating women badly) helped solidify the interpretation of denial because it was interpreted as signaling that *something* was wrong with how she had acted as a man.

Masculinity/femininity pursuits also took the form of hobbies. When I walked into the living room of one interviewee's townhouse, the first thing I noticed, with some unease, was a collection of large hunting knives, a few pieces of which were on display on a coffee table. This born male said she had collected these knives in an attempt to conform to traditional masculinity. In addition, this 44-year-old newly self-defined transsexual told the following story of denial:

Then I started, over a period of a couple years, going through these cycles of really getting into [cross-dressing] and saying "I'm going to go forward," and then stopping and saying, "No, this is out of hand" and engage[ing] in some hobby or activity that would serve as a vehicle for repression. I went through a bit of collecting guns, going to gun shows, and doing a lot of shooting, 'cause that was a really *manly* thing to do. I went through a bit of wearing Redman hats and driving around in pickup trucks and going to

mud bog races and those kinds of things 'cause that's the *manly* thing to do. I bought a Harley and went down to Daytona for bike week with half a million Harley riders. Did that for several years because that's the manly thing to do. Of course, the last time I did it I wore a pink lace camisole and stockings and garter belt underneath my leather jacket and my jeans.

Masculinity/femininity pursuits sometimes involved attempts to become involved in single-gendered groups. The born female I interviewed described his attempts to get involved with a group of women whom he had worked with as a "she." As he explained:

I had tried to get involved with the females in the departments. A few of us would. . .go out to eat one night [a month] and kid around − and I just felt isolated in talking about what dresses they were wearing, or makeup. Just those kinds of things; they don't seem to interest me. I don't wear much makeup. I don't like wearing heels, stockings, and jewelry, and to talk about the patterns for material for curtains and the latest recipe. Every once [in a while I'll] talk about a recipe. But spend the whole evening involved with those kinds of things? It wasn't me. I'd rather talk philosophy, gardening. There was a limit in how much I could fit in women's groups.

In attempting to do gender in a traditionally feminine manner, this transsexual remembered feeling uncomfortable. Only after joining the transgender support group and hearing dozens of stories about feeling inauthentic while doing gender conventionally did he interpret his feelings as signs of a differently gendered "true self."

Self-mislabeling. Beside attempting to align the narrator with gender-appropriate activities, some transsexuals' stories of denial emphasized "self-mislabeling." These accounts most often involved defining oneself as a transvestite or cross-dresser, although labeling oneself homosexual, androgynous, or even a sensitive male was not infrequent. After becoming active in the transgender subculture, transsexuals learned to interpret their experiments with these identities as denial. One born male, who recently had begun living full-time as a woman, said in an interview:

At one point I thought,. . . "I like dressing like a girl but the only thing I know is there are gay people and straight people, [so] I must be a gay person," and that pushed me into that life for

awhile and I stayed there before I realized that I didn't quite identify [with them].

In this person's account of self-mislabeling, she implied that a limited knowledge about alternative identities, specifically *transsexual*, led her to falsely identify as homosexual, thus denying her "true self."

Eight of the nine male-to-female transsexuals I interviewed had previously labeled themselves transvestites or cross-dressers. Unlike other stories of denial, these accounts were often brief and vague. Interviewees often tried to gloss this prior identity confusion by making statements such as, "When I was in denial I thought I might be a transvestite." At the support group meetings, no one was ever asked to clarify such statements. One possible reason why they avoided moving beyond surface details was that doing so could raise a potentially embarrassing question: How could they be sure that the label *transsexual* was correct and not just another mistake? Honoring vague accounts at strategic moments thus helped maintain the power of denial narratives and sanctioned the identity *transsexual*.

When I asked one transsexual how she realized she wasn't a transvestite, she first brought up other narrative evidence – talking about cross-dressing at an early age. Then she raised the following dilemma:

> The problem is if you asked me that question in 1985, I would've told you that I dressed for erotic stimulation and that I was a transvestite, and it was not a means of denying transsexualism.

Another born male – who had started defining herself as transsexual only a few months before our interview – framed the dilemma more sharply:

> I know up here (pointing to head) something is not male. And yet there is absolutely no direct sensory input that confirms it. None. And this builds up an undercurrent of skepticism that can just undercut everything. If I don't dress [as a woman], I'm denying part of me that I know exists. If I do dress [as a woman], I'm denying part of me that I do see. So, which is denial?

As these quotes imply, it is often hard to grasp what constitutes denial, especially if one attempts to distinguish between truly being in denial and falsely thinking that one is in denial. What criteria does a behavior or attitude have to meet in order to qualify as denial? In the transgender community, an account was viewed as an instance of denial if it fit with other acceptable self-narratives. That is, as long as a story pointed to the existence of a differently gendered "true self," it was legitimate and unquestioned in the group.

SELF-NARRATIVES AS COLLECTIVE CREATIONS

Although an isolated individual who felt inauthentic doing gender conventionally could have invented stories similar to those discussed above (because they relied heavily on stereotypical views of gender), they would have been much less powerful without group affirmation. It was the transgender *community* that cemented the interpretation of gender nonconformity as evidence of transsexuality rather than homosexuality.[6] In this community in the United States, with its over 200 local support groups and national and regional conferences, the templates for self-narratives were made and used. These narrative forms also were maintained and transmitted through community publications, computer networks, and television talk shows. The community functioned in four key ways to help individuals fashion their own self-narratives: (1) modeling, (2) guiding, (3) affirming, and (4) tactful blindness.

Modeling

At support group meetings, the narratives were maintained and transferred to new members largely through *modeling*. In this process, first of all, those transsexuals who were adept at telling self-narratives did so voluntarily. In telling their stories, they gave the new members clues about the types of significant events to look for in their own biographies. If the newcomers listened closely, they could find the rhetorical tools

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[6] Lesbians and gay men often tell stories like those told by the transsexuals (for example, see Sears 1991); the main difference is that transsexuals rarely talk about same-sex attractions. I suspect that this is not because transsexuals never experienced such attractions, but because the transgender community discourages overt discussion of sexuality as a way to avoid being stigmatized as "perverts." This in turn helps reinforce the notion that gender nonconformity has everything to do with *gender* identities and little to do with *sexual* identities.

that could be used, with some slight alterations, to signify their own differently gendered "true self."

One way in which established members did this was by tagging on relevant identity slogans while ostensibly talking about something else. At several of the meetings, transsexuals introduced themselves as "transsexual" and added something like "and I've been cross-dressing since I was five years old." This was somewhat of a ritual; if one person started it, most of the other transsexuals followed with similar introductions. Referencing acceptable self-narratives in this way alerted new members that talking about childhood cross-dressing was linked somehow to transsexualism. In addition, the modeling, or ritualistic repeating of the introduction by those already "in the know," helped to legitimate and sustain childhood cross-dressing stories as an acceptable way to claim a differently gendered "true self."

To make modeling work, it was particularly important for transsexuals well versed in their self-narratives to publicly declare themselves as *transsexuals*, because both crossdressers and transsexuals attended the meetings. This allowed newcomers who weren't sure what identity to choose to distinguish between the self-narratives of transsexuals and those of cross-dressers. Then they could examine their own biographies to see which kind of story fit them better. For instance, when one transsexual went to her first support group meeting, told her story, and then heard other stories, she said she was "amazed" and felt as though she had "come home." Despite her uncertainty about her identity before the meeting, hearing transsexuals tell stories similar to hers helped convince her that she was a transsexual.

Transsexuals also could learn to model the narratives by reading transgender community publications. On the semiprivate e-mail computer list to which I belonged (which had more than 300 subscribers), new subscribers were required to submit an "intro" to the group after about a month. Most of these intros were autobiographical and pointed to certain life events that could be interpreted as clues to a differently gendered "true self." In these biographical statements, new subscribers mimicked the postings of regular members; thus they often wrote about feeling different as long as they could remember, the time when they first cross-dressed, and failure at sports.

In many stories in *Tapestry*, the most popular magazine of the transgender community, the authors referred to these community narratives.[7] In one such article (Montgomery 1993), a female-to-male transsexual wrote about his life before he came to terms with his differently gendered "true self":

> I kept running as fast as I could, burning the candle at both ends. . . .I couldn't remember what someone had said a second after they had said it. Alcohol and drugs had eaten my mind, my feelings and my heart away.

He went on:

> Something was missing. I didn't know what and I was too scared to find out. . . .The something that was missing was me; the part that I kept running from all these years. I didn't begin to feel whole again until I started to validate me, the one I had stuffed so far down he was killing me for not letting him out. My soul was dying.

In the first passage the author used a self-distraction denial narrative, implying that alcohol and drugs had numbed him. A prospective transsexual who read this article might reflect on his or her own use of drugs or alcohol and might redefine this behavior as denial. In the second passage, without using the word *denial*, the author clarified what denial means. He interpreted feelings of emptiness in his life as signifying that he was repressing his "true self."

Overall this passage might lead a reader to interpret a lack of personal meaning or sense of belonging, or anything related to feeling that "something was missing," as signs of repressing his or her differently gendered "true self." Some members of the support group apparently had picked up this message from the transgender community. Four said they were so depressed before they "came to terms" with transsexualism that they sought professional help. At the time of their interviews, they all interpreted these periods of despair as evidence that they were repressing their differently gendered "true selves."

The identity "transsexual," although stig-

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[7] *Tapestry* was ranked as the most popular magazine of the transgender community in an August 1994 poll of readers of a transgender Internet news group. It was also the magazine most often mentioned at support group meetings.

matized, is becoming culturally viable (Garber 1992), largely because of the legitimating power of the medical community (Raymond [1979]1994) and the work of activist organizations (MacKenzie 1994). As a result, transsexuals' self-narratives can be heard on television talk shows and, recently, in feature films. One interviewee said she first heard transsexuals' stories on the *Sally Jessy Raphael Show*. She saw parts of her life in their stories, called the "expert doctor" who had appeared on the show, and then drove across four states to see him. The doctor "diagnosed" her as transsexual (or affirmed her narrative) and helped her find a support group.

Guiding

Whereas modeling concerned studying others' stories and figuring out how to apply them to one's self, guiding was more interactive. Established members often asked newcomers questions about their pasts, which drew out stories that fit the subculture's acceptable narrative forms. This process was like the collective opening up of a person's biography to highlight life events that the group perceived as evidence of transsexuality. The new member then could tell stories about these highlighted biographical passages at this and future gatherings, and his or her differently gendered "true self" thus could be affirmed by others.

For example, when a new member voluntarily revealed a little about himself or herself (showing willingness to self-disclose) but didn't use an acceptable self-narrative, a regular member sometimes asked, "So when did you *first* cross-dress?" After introducing myself at the first meeting I attended, I was asked if I had ever dressed or been dressed in "female clothes." After I said that my older sister once might have dressed me as a girl, one member uttered a conspicuously satisfied "Hmmm."[8] If my agenda had been to look for my "true self" rather than to conduct research, I might have seen this early life event as a sign of "who I really am."

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[8] I suspect that some members of the support group thought I was in denial. At my fourth meeting, after introducing myself, a longtime member said to newcomers, "Doug's job is to figure us out, and our job is to get him in a dress." Thinking about how I might deny this allegation led me to see the paradoxical nature of denial: there is no logical way to deny not being in denial.

Guiding was sometimes more overt. At two of the eight meetings I attended — each of which included several first-timers — the co-leader/therapist asked if anyone had ever "purged their feminine clothing." Almost everyone raised a hand. On both occasions, a longtime member explained that she had conducted more than 10 purges in the past 20 years, and added that she had only recently realized that her feelings were not going to fade. Similarly, on one of these occasions a member in her sixties told the group:

> I went through phases of purging for close to fifty years. I've burned enough clothes to fill this entire room. I'm really serious, this entire room. I just don't do it anymore because I know I'll regret it later.

These exchanges helped newcomers to define past purges as futile attempts to deny "who they really are." In addition, they helped preserve purging stories as identity-making tools for everyone. Because these occasions were initiated and guided by the therapist, who "specialized in transgender issues," the self-narratives seemed all the more legitimate means of claiming a differently gendered "true self."

Guiding and modeling pointed to pieces of biography that were crucial parts of the transsexual narrative. Newcomers who learned what these were could then use them in assembling the puzzling pieces of their differently gendered "true selves." The passing down of the narratives to newcomers not only aided in the newcomers own quest for personal meaning, but also preserved the rhetorical tools as they became old-timers themselves. Eventually they would become the givers, rather than the receivers, of identity-making clues.

Affirming

Modeling and guiding worked, especially in interactions, because of the audience members' reactions to the stories. Identities, like all things, become meaningful through the responses of others (Stone 1981). At support group meetings, when someone talked about recent events in his or her life, he or she might touch on one of the acceptable self-narratives. After mentioning a significant piece of biographical evidence, others reacted in subtle ways — usually with "um-hums," nods, smiles, or sometimes sighs or "ahs." These "murmurings" (Goff-

man 1974:541) validated the story as well as the narrator's identity.

At one meeting, for example, a participant described being tormented by the question of whether she wanted to tell a friend, who knew her as a man, about her desire to become a woman. When asked why she wanted to tell, she explained that it was becoming difficult to continue presenting an inauthentic self to someone who was close to her. She added that she had been in denial for a long time and did not want to deny her "true self" to a good friend. When denial of the "true self" was brought up, some members nodded or smiled. The speaker had touched on an acceptable community narrative for self-construction. The listeners' responses delicately but unmistakably reinforced the speaker's differently gendered "true self," and also marked denial narratives as a resource on which transsexuals could draw to fashion a new identity.

Tactful Blindness

Beside making overt responses, transsexuals sometimes affirmed self-narratives by *not* questioning their validity or logical coherence. Self-narratives always have loose ends and can be unraveled by anyone who wishes to do so. Transsexuals thus practiced "tact" (Goffman 1967:29) when they ignored discrepancies and implausibilities in each other's stories. By doing so, the support group members nurtured the fragile new identities they were trying to acquire. This collective "looking the other way" also shielded the practice of using self-narratives to create evidence of a "true self" that did not yet exist.

Thus a certain tactful blindness allowed people with diverse biographies to see themselves as possessing similar "true selves." At one meeting, for example, a born male who had been a competitive cyclist and remembered (under hypnosis) cross-dressing just once as a child was sitting next to a born male who had never participated in sports and had cross-dressed throughout childhood. Both identified as transsexual; this identity was affirmed and supported by group members when they told their contrasting stories. No one ever questioned how such different experiences could be unequivocal evidence of the same kind of "true self."

Overall the creation and maintenance of acceptable narratives was a community effort.

The transgender community created the culture, which in turn provided resources for identity work. The resources available to transgenderists often fed on each other. For example, transgender support groups, including the one I attended, often had libraries of publications to help newcomers understand what they were experiencing. National publications listed local support groups, Internet groups, and places offering therapeutic and medical help. People I interviewed passed all sorts of information about transgender issues between themselves and (on a few occasions) to me. The narrative construction of "true selves" required a great deal of cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Transsexuals used self-narratives to convincingly invent a differently gendered "true self," but they didn't invent or use self-narratives in isolation. Subcultural involvement, at some level, was essential. My analysis shows that not only frameworks for interpreting identities (e.g., Becker 1963) but also symbolic resources for making those identities are created subculturally. Through modeling, guiding, affirming, and tactful blindness, transsexuals created and learned the narrative forms that sustained an identity which their physical bodies could not.

Focusing on subcultural process moves the analysis of self-narratives beyond the deconstruction of texts. Here I have tried to show how people collectively create those texts in ways that meet their needs for authenticity and coherence. Instead of examining the structure of self-narratives to see how stories unfold, my analysis reveals how group interaction unfolds to produce acceptable stories. A further path would be to examine how self-narratives are linked to social structure.

Studies of working-class male youths (MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977) have suggested that their identity dilemmas arise from a contradiction between an ideology (in this case, "work hard and you will succeed") and the material conditions in which they live (an extremely low chance of class mobility). This situation generally decreases their chances of displaying some conventional signs of masculinity, such as material success, and leads them to signify masculinity using the resources available to them, namely physical toughness and risk taking. In MacLeod's

study, for example, the "Hallway Hangers" produced a local culture that defined as "good" what is usually considered "bad": excessive alcohol and drug use, physical violence, doing poorly in school, and committing crimes.

The transgender community worked in an analogous way. The problem faced by transsexuals stemmed from contradictions between gender ideology (in this case, "sex determines gender") and self-definitions of gender (whereby gender identity doesn't correspond to sex). In other words, the transgender community arose from a conflict between a desire for authenticity and a highly-constraining gender order. Transsexuals used narratives to construct and affirm an identity that most people regard as morally suspect and as less real than "normal" gender identities. In their support groups and other forums, they did "oppositional identity work" (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996); that is, they deflected the stigma imposed by, and subverted (at least partially), the identity codes of mainstream culture.

Although the transsexuals challenged some cultural ideas about gender (namely that sex equals gender), their self-narratives reinforced others. Because most people believe in gender differences and assume they are biologically based (Epstein 1988), transsexuals used these essentialist ideas to give plausibility to their stories. Their self-narratives thus supported gender polarization (Bem 1993) and the naturalization of gender (Connell 1987). Thus, even while they sought radical change as individuals, their self-narratives actually reinforced a highly conservative view of gender.

Transsexuals are not the only ones who construct their identities through storytelling. Groups dealing with illness (Maines 1991; Sandstrom 1990), reconciling sexuality and religion (Thumma 1991), giving up a child for adoption (Modell 1992), and consciousness raising (Kalcik 1975) turn to storytelling in an attempt to solve identity dilemmas. Goffman (1974:504) pointed out that much self-presentational talk consists of "replaying" past personal events. This centrality of storytelling to social life suggests that social psychologists should look more closely at the creation of self-narratives as a topic in its own right. We must examine more closely how storytelling is done and what it accomplishes in everyday life.

Postmodernists may be right (but perhaps for the wrong reasons, as Schwalbe [1993] suggests), in believing that a sense of continuity and coherence is difficult to sustain in our present society. Indeed we may face complex situations and diverse self-presentational demands that can make us feel fragmented. Living in such a world increases opportunities to contradict ourselves. Adding to the problem is the fact that all of us have conflicting impulses to act. Over the life course the self-contradictions multiply; thus it becomes more difficult to maintain a coherent self. Under such conditions, self-narratives may become even more important for self-making because of their power to create order out of chaos.

To maintain a sense of wholeness and continuity, we must revise, edit, and sometimes completely rewrite our "true selves." Sometimes we can do this alone. At other times, when the stakes are high or when the confusion is great, we may need to turn to others for help. Doing this work with similar others guarantees the existence of an audience willing to affirm a new "true self," regardless of what outsiders may think of it. As the case of transsexuals shows, interacting with others gives us what we need to make the self as real and true as it can ever be.

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