

Gender Blending Females

Women and Sometimes Men

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In the course of everyday life persons recognized as men are normally males and individuals identified as women are females. In some cases, in public interactions involving persons who are strangers to one another, females are addressed and responded to as men. Some of the females that this happens to are purposely attempting to be perceived and accepted as men, but there are also a number of such women who do not consciously intend to be thought of as men. I call the people in this latter group “gender blending females.”

Gender blending females are those people of the female sex who project gender cues that can be socially interpreted as sufficiently masculine to earn them the social status and some of the privileges of men.¹ But, as gender blending females, they do not do so in a consistent or purposeful fashion. Among their friends and acquaintances, and to many strangers, they are clearly women. The intriguing aspect of their gender status is that they have clear female identities and know themselves to be women concurrently with gender presentations that often do not successfully communicate these facts to others.

Strangers most often mistake gender blending females for men or boys during brief encounters of an impersonal and public nature, in interactions with clerks in stores, servers in restaurants, strangers on the streets or in buses, and the like. In most circumstances, the gender blending female’s awareness that a mistake has occurred begins when a stranger addresses her as “sir,” as in “may I help you, sir?” or when her use of a women’s public washroom is challenged.

For the purposes of this study, fifteen gender blending females were interviewed for one and a half to four hours each.² They were asked about their socioeconomic and demographic situations, their relationships with their family members and peers; inquiries were also made

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about memories they might have had about gender role-learning experiences and a history of their experiences of being mistaken for boys or men. Finally, they were asked whether they felt there were any advantages or disadvantages to their situations, why they thought they were mistakenly identified, and if they had done or would do anything to avoid such mistakes. An analysis of the interview materials sought to discover commonalities that might exist in the women's backgrounds and current experience, and to come to a better understanding of how gender is communicated.

This study involved only fifteen such gender blending females. Each woman's story was particular to her own experience and a reflection of her own personal understanding and memory of the events of her life. Although there were many commonalities among the reports that they gave of the details of their lives, even this small collection of individuals showed great variety. Any generalizations that it is possible to make about these women can only apply to them as individual examples of an unusual gender type. Nonetheless, their experiences suggest interesting interpretations of the functioning of gender on a larger scale.

The evaluation of the information gathered through the interviews relied heavily on Nancy Chodorow³ and Margaret Mahler⁴ for psychological theories of early childhood identification and separation. George Herbert Mead's,⁵ Hans Gerth's, and C. Wright Mills's⁶ theories of self and society were useful in gaining an understanding of the ways in which people negotiate with their social environment. Erving Goffman's⁷ and Harold Garfinkel's⁸ ideas about social collusion as the process of making sense out of everyday experiences also proved to be invaluable tools for understanding the phenomenon of gender blending. Sandra Bem's "Gender Schema Theory"⁹ was the thread that ran through all of the analysis, providing the essential perspective that all theories of gender acquisition and maintenance must be interpreted within the framework of the dominant gender schema that defines what might be considered legitimate gender observations and what might not.

The dominant gender schema in Anglo-American society is predicated on a dualistic and hierarchical biological determinist model. The schema rests on the assumption that all people are members of the male or female sex and that sex is both discrete and permanent. Further, the schema postulates that the physical fact of one's sex causes one to be a girl or woman, boy or man, and that girls and women are innately feminine while boys and men are innately masculine. Sex and gender are so firmly linked in this formulation that they have come to be seen as

virtually inseparable, and although femininity and masculinity are understood by social scientists to be culturally variable, in the popular gender schema used in daily life, gender roles are also believed to be strongly tied to biological sex. Finally, the schema assumes that the significant measure in all matters of sex and gender is the presence or absence of indicators associated with maleness, thus empowering maleness/boyness/manliness/masculinity as primary statuses and deprecating femaleness/girlness/womanliness/femininity to secondary or derivative positions.

Within this dominant gender schema, all gender attributes and categorizations are cognitively confined to the two major divisions of male and female, and their derivative statuses of girl/boy, man/woman, feminine/masculine. Within such a conceptual framework, anything that is not feminine can only be seen and understood as masculine; anyone who is unfeminine is masculine. So females who, for whatever reason, are perceived as unfeminine are perceived to be in the same measure masculine.

GROWING UP GENDER BLENDING

It is hypothesized that the women in this study began life either as children who, close to their time of birth, impressed their parents as in some way unfeminine, or as the children of parents who wanted sons. If they were the sort of children whose parents perceived them as unfeminine (by whatever standards their parents employed), they were probably treated by their parents as unfeminine and so did not acquire a strong feminine identity and traditionally feminine habits early in life. If they were the offspring of parents who had hoped for sons, their parents may have unconsciously encouraged them to develop masculine behavior patterns and an identification with masculinity and maleness.¹⁰ Such an identity and habits could then elicit social interactions that might act as further reinforcements of masculine behavior patterns.

These gender blending females could be said to have been raised to become adults who would communicate their femaleness poorly. Their home environments and family dynamics strongly communicated to them the social superiority of men and the powerlessness and ineffectualness of women. They learned from their parents, grandparents, and siblings that the behaviors and attitudes associated with maleness

(masculinity) earned one power, respect, and authority while the behaviors and attitudes associated with femaleness (femininity) epitomized weakness, incompetence, and servility.

All but three of the women studied came from families where the mother was in the home on a full-time basis for all or most of their youth. Twelve of them came from families having three or more children, and approximately half of them grew up in families that had more than six children. This combination of factors suggests that although most of these women had a visible female role model available to them in their homes, they probably did not have the benefit of a great deal of her undivided attention, a fact that several women mentioned in the course of their interviews. Some of the women viewed their full-time homemaker mothers as having devoted their lives to a job that appeared to them, as children, to have been dominated by thankless drudgery and powerlessness.

Twelve of the fifteen families in which these women grew up were probably governed, to some degree, by traditional values. Six went to Catholic schools or described themselves or their families as "religious"; four grew up in or around the armed forces community; three were raised, at least during their earliest years, by grandparents; and three of the women merely described their upbringings as "strict." Most of these women's families contained within them at least one element that might be presumed to have transmitted to them a conservative framework with which to understand gender and gender roles. A home environment of this type would tend to emphasize the social distinctions between males and females, allow males greater freedoms and privileges, and celebrate masculine accomplishments while disregarding or belittling feminine ones. Several women recalled feeling jealous and competitive with their brothers because of such preferential treatment.

All of these women reported that as girls they enjoyed physical activity and that they were tomboys throughout their early years. Possibly as a result of their enjoyment of physical exertion, each of them has a strong preference for wearing pants whenever possible and many of them recall a clear dislike of dresses. One woman's reasons for her dislike of dresses was typical of the reasons given by others.

I didn't like dresses because I didn't like people seeing my underpants or I didn't like that sort of coyness of if the wind blows or if you bend over, you can't do a head stand or hanging by your knees in the jungle gym. That whole trip, it's embarrassing and degrading and I was aware of that as a kid.

Another explained that she didn't start to seriously dislike dresses until her teens:

I hated dresses, I just hated them. It was a very big deal. . . . They are impractical . . . when I was eight I guess I didn't care if somebody saw my underwear . . . when you get older you have to wear nylons and high heels and you just become this ineffectual little bo-bo staggering around. You can't go out and run, you can't go out and sit behind the bleachers and smoke dope on the grass.

For these women, dresses and feminine attire provided only an impediment to their enjoyment of physical freedom.

Their preference for vigorous physical activities also led them away from the companionship of girls and into activities in the company of boys. Thirteen out of the fifteen women said that when they were very young they either played mostly with boys or were loners. In their youth, teens, and young adulthood, twelve of them considered team sports a very important part of their lives. One woman spoke for most of them when she said, "All my life I associated mostly with boys because the girls . . . just didn't seem to want to have the same kind of fun I do." Two other women were more critical in their appraisals of the activities of most of the other girls that they knew. The first woman explained her preference for boys this way:

I had never found women who were good enough to play with me, who I found challenging. And I really got bored and I didn't like playing women because they weren't good enough, because it slowed me down.

A second woman explained her dislike of other girls this way:

What I saw of girls in school was that they weren't very smart and they didn't do very many things, that they weren't strong in their bodies and they didn't use their minds.

Although all of them played with girls at some times and several of them had best friends who were girls, they seem to have considered other girls to be either inferior creatures or honorary boys like themselves. It seems likely that their many years of activity within the social sphere of boys and under the discipline of team sports would have imparted to these girls value systems and styles of dress, speech, and movement that could easily appear masculine to a casual observer.

The relationships that these women had with their parents and siblings also share some similarities. Twelve of the fifteen women

reported a strong positive identification with an older male present in their family during their early years. Nine of those twelve, and one other woman, indicated a weak identification or negative experience with older females in their early family environment. Additionally, many of them spoke of this pattern continuing throughout their lives.

Many of these women reported that although their mothers were physically present in the home they were in some way unavailable to their daughters. One mother died when her daughter was five years old, another retreated into drug abuse, another was merely out of town a lot, two were holding down the double work day of a full-time job and family responsibilities, and three were just plain busy with so many kids. One woman described her mother as “just really sick of kids, you know by the time I was ten she had been dealing with kids for twenty-five years and she was really tired.” Six of them were “embarrassed by,” “ashamed of,” or “disappointed in” their mothers, and none of them reported a clearly positive overall attitude toward their female parent. One woman described her mother as “a worrying neurotic wimp” and another said that her mother was “everybody’s servant.” While nine of the women had older sisters, only one of them had any praise for her older sisters and three of them strongly disliked them.

This must be seen in contrast with how these women experienced their fathers and older brothers during their youths. Eight women specifically portrayed their fathers as firmly holding the power in their families. Ten women expressed strong admiration and respect for their fathers and a few of them expressed exceptionally strong positive feelings toward them. They spoke of their fathers in such terms as “my first love” and “my idol.”

Seven of these women recalled that their fathers often expressed their power and authority by being disrespectful, abusive, or humiliating toward their mothers. Several women mentioned wishing that their mothers had been more able to assert themselves with their fathers, and being disappointed by their mothers’ failure to do so. This situation might have led the girls experiencing it to see the actual power of their fathers amplified and that of their mothers diminished. Such situations might have increased the attractiveness of their fathers as role models while decreasing the appeal of their mothers as feminine examples. As well, six of the women interviewed mentioned some sort of protective attitude or feeling toward their mothers, younger sisters, or female playmates. In this context, such protectiveness could be seen as one more step in the assumption of a masculine posture.

Perhaps more importantly, many of their fathers took a special interest in their daughters. In these families, the attention that fathers paid to their daughters was akin to that found in the conventional upbringing of boys, at the same time as many of the mothers were providing weak role models. One result of this situation was that many of these gender blending females strongly identified during their youth with men and all things masculine. Following closely on such a masculine identification came the motivation to actively seek out information about how to conform to a masculine role and a desire to do so.

Eight of them came from homes where their fathers acted as if they would have preferred their daughters to have been sons and so enlisted their daughters as surrogate sons. Their fathers could be said to have, in many ways, raised their daughters to be boys. One woman's relationship with her father illustrates this most graphically. Her mother told her that her

father was raised with a bunch of boys and now he got married and wanted to have sons but he had two daughters and although he loved you both very much, he still needed to have a male to identify with.

Her father chose his first born daughter to become his son. He called her by the masculine nick-name "Bud"¹¹ and encouraged others to relate to her as a boy. She recalls:

I can remember people coming up and my father would be talking to them and they'd say, "Well, is this your son?" And my father would laugh and say "This is my son, Sarah." . . . He was really good about it. . . . He didn't think that I had to wear dresses or be feminine to be a girl.

Another told of how her father chose his older of three daughters to share with him those chores that a father might otherwise share with a son.

He taught me a lot of things, outdoors, like fixing a car, everything I know about cars. And he was an electronics tech so I know a lot about wiring of houses. We built our basement in three houses that we lived in, so I helped with that and helped with the wiring and stuff. So a lot of the typical trades I learned from him . . . because he needed help and it was usually me he called on, because there was no way that my sister would have done it.

Others, as girls who only weakly identified with other females, found that the only way to get the attention of their fathers was to excel at sports.

Still others of these women found masculinity attractive as a result of their experiences with their older brothers. One woman told of being best friends with her older brother and almost like twins. Another simply said that "anything my brother did I thought was great!" Still another remembered competing with an older brother for her father's affection. One woman remembered feeling this way about her brother:

I was very conscious of the different ways that boys and girls were treated from an early age. . . . I was a feminist when I was eight. . . . boys got treated this way and girls got treated that way and they got the better deal for the most part and I didn't want to put up with that. . . . They didn't get hassled about hanging out by the river so much. . . . it wasn't such a big deal for them to go off into the hills. I wasn't supposed to go unless my brother was with me when I was little but he could go by himself. I wasn't supposed to play football. I wasn't supposed to get quite as dirty.

Another decided that the only solution was to become a boy, so, together with another eight-year-old girl, she hatched a scheme:

She was the world's best boy and I was the second best boy. . . . we were tough, very tough. . . . We both had brothers and they had a lot of fun. And they had black rubber boots with orange around it and we weren't allowed to have them because we were girls. And they used to get to go out on Saturday mornings and we didn't because we were girls so we called each other boys.

This course of action seemed to be a logical solution to an eight-year-old's frustration with the limitations of the traditional female role.

At least three of these women were incest survivors and one was raped repeatedly by her husband during her marriage. All four made comments that seemed to indicate that they may have turned to masculinity, in part, as a shield against the vulnerability of their femaleness. The woman who had been raped by her husband said simply: "I was raped many times by my husband. So now I decided that I was going. . . . to be the man." All three of the women who reported suffering incest told of very strong desires to become boys during their childhoods; two of them started reading and making inquiries about sex change operations and continued, at the time of their interviews, to find the idea fascinating.

In their early years, these fifteen women were funnelled toward masculinity by some or all of the following factors: (1) They grew up in home environments in which traditional gender values were relatively strong. (2) Their mothers, and/or older sisters, and/or grandmothers either were not prominent in their early years or were seen by these girls as weak and ineffectual people. (3) They had fathers who either enlisted them as surrogate sons or only provided them with affection as a reward for masculinity. (4) Their experience of incest made maleness seem invulnerable. (5) They took pleasure in vigorous physical activity and were encouraged in this direction by other family members and/or peers (usually male). (6) Their peer group consisted mostly of boys who supported and reinforced tendencies toward masculinity while discouraging and punishing femininity. In individuals where all six of these factors were strongly present, the feminine identity of the girl was so deeply suppressed as to result in self-doubts regarding their own femaleness. Three women in this group had seriously considered sex-change operations at some time prior to their interviews.

ADOLESCENCE AND GENDER ROLES

For eight of these girls, puberty and adolescence brought anxieties and conflicts. Anglo-American societies are relatively tolerant of "tomboyism" in young girls. Before puberty, it would seem, there is nothing to be lost by allowing little girls to indulge in boyish pastimes. During puberty, females become biologically capable of performing the social roles associated with procreation. It was at this age that these girls were confronted with intense social pressures, from both peers and family, to abandon their masculine habits and become "ladies." The girls were pushed toward more feminine ways of moving, dressing, and social interaction. They were also pushed toward heterosexuality. But most of these girls were already comfortable with themselves as they were and they resisted many of the sudden changes demanded of them.

One woman remembered her puberty as a difficult time. The changes that were happening to her body were not something that she welcomed, nor were they possible to hide from others.

Grade 8 was the worst year for me. It was the transition year. It was the year that . . . there was this whole new social pressure to dress and look nice at school. . . . It was

just terrible. . . . It bothered me because it meant that I was a girl and I had to start doing something different, that people expected me to do something different. Everybody wanted me to get a bra which I didn't want to do. I was mortified. The whole thing embarrassed me. My mother had never talked to me about it, I didn't have a close sister I could talk to and I didn't have any close girlfriends. . . . I hung out with boys . . . they talked about other things. . . . Things started changing then, there was more of this boy-girl thing. Boys wanted to go out with girls and wanted to feel them up.

Another woman recalled that it was at puberty that her father first began to shape her femininity in earnest. He both stopped supporting her sports activities and started urging her to lose weight and wear dresses.

I remember . . . quite a noticeable about-face . . . when I started menstruating, my parents went from driving me to the ball games, coming to my ball games . . . being real proud of the fact I hit home runs . . . and suddenly it became an embarrassment.

She remembered her father's attempts to correct her way of walking and dressing.

One time I got off the bus at the corner, I was walking down the street and my father was sitting on the front veranda. I had to walk up the street. When I arrived at the porch he said, "I was just noticing you walking along the street, you have a really long and mannish stride. You should shorten your stride, the way you walk. . . . I can remember times that I did dress up . . . I would get all this quote positive reinforcement. . . . And I never believed it so I found that really humiliating. . . . I felt horrible and I really felt like I looked stupid.

One result of the humiliation that this woman felt as a teenager was that she not only developed a hatred of dresses but also a sense of herself as ugly and ungainly.

Two women recalled that as they became adolescents they experienced a gender pressure of a different sort. Their peer group consisted mostly of boys who took a relatively dim view of femininity and discouraged it among their friends, even when those friends were female. One woman told about this incident during her junior high school years:

I sort of was a dual personality. I still wanted to be a boy and I still wanted to wear jeans and climb trees. . . . I remember once I went to my grandmother's house . . . usually I wore my jeans and I'd go through the back lots and back alleys and climb over brambles and under fences to get there. One day . . . I decided that I wanted to be a girl that day. I thought, now what do my girlfriends wear? They wear pedal

pushers and sleeveless cotton blouses and they carry purses. So I put on pedal pushers and this blouse, I'd never worn a sleeveless cotton blouse before, I wore whatever they were wearing, bobbysox and carried a purse and walked down the sidewalk. And I went by this house where there were three boys living, we used to play with when we'd play sports, and they looked up at me, I remember the one kid was my age, and said, "Why don't you go home and change into some real clothes and come back and play with us? Go and get rid of that stuff and come back and play." . . . I thought they were being funny and unimaginative. But it sort of, was a little surprise, you know, that finally I was dressing to be socially acceptable and I was not socially acceptable.

Another remembered that when she got her first bra her pals were less appreciative of its merits than even her own uninspired acceptance of it.

I told the guys and they were just aghast, they didn't know what to make of it. It was like a barrier, which really sort of embarrassed me because I just sort of thought that it was something that, you know, girls have . . . and they've got to wear one. And I thought, fine. . . . Well it turned out to be physically constraining, well I mean it is, it's a god damned harness! . . . That lasted about a year and then I ran into the women's movement who legitimized not wearing a bra. So, you know I pretended that it was political but it wasn't, it was physical comfort.

Neither of these experiences would seem likely to propel a young woman eagerly into a comfortable femininity.

The difficulties that many of these women had with puberty were compounded by the fact that many of them were tall for their age. One woman is 6'1", one woman is 5'10", two are 5'9", ten of them are between 5'5" and 5'7", and one is 5'3" tall. All but one of these women are taller than the average North American woman, three of them reach the average height of North American men, and one is tall for a person of any sex. The experience of the tallest woman of the group strongly suggests that height is indeed a factor in gender ascription. She found that people seemed to address her size rather than her appearance and that mistakes have happened to her even when she had been dressed in a most obviously feminine manner.

I think it's a psychological kind of way when you look up at somebody, they quite often address that person as sir and it's a kind of automatic thing. Because that happens a lot to me. It doesn't matter what I'm wearing . . . they'll say "Can I help you sir?" and then they'll right away notice . . . I can be in a dress, make-up, earrings, perfume, the whole bit. . . . So in that sense I don't think it's the clothing or the appearance but it's the actual psychological way of looking at me.

It would seem likely then that other taller-than-average women might also be subject to this effect to a lesser degree.

Adolescence brings with it a kindling of sexuality and an awareness of others as sexual beings. Eight of these girls, by this age, had a best girlfriend or a small group with whom they played sports. By their preteens they had grown more distant from the boys of their youth, playing sports with them but sharing secrets and understanding with their girlfriends. When their sex drive became active, these girls were having their most intense emotional experiences with their girlfriends and their peer group had not yet become fully oriented toward heterosexual dating and flirtations. Thus it seems likely that their earliest sexual feelings would have been directed toward the girls with whom they were closest at the time. This situation might serve to explain, in part, the sexual orientation of some of the eleven lesbians in the group.¹²

A growing sexual and romantic interest in girls might also have served to reinforce a growing masculine self-image in some of these girls. Many definitions of femininity and female role of the 1960s and early 1970s included a heterosexual orientation as a parameter. Even today it is not unusual to hear that lesbians are not "real women" because they are not sexually and romantically interested in men. For one woman, the fact of her attraction to women, coming after a lifetime of boyish interests, was one more step that made her not only doubt her femininity but her very femaleness.

When I was fifteen I went to my brother. . . . I had read this article about the tennis player Rene who had had a sex change and for the first time I started thinking, aha, maybe this is the problem. . . . I got very mixed up and I said, "Ok, I like cars, I want to be a doctor and I like girls. What's the problem?" So I thought I had a problem and I thought well I'm supposed to be a boy and then I started remembering when I was kid [he] used to joke "She's supposed to be a boy, look at her muscles. . . . look at her jaw, she'd got this big jaw and look at her shoulders. I've never seen any girls like that."

Fortunately for her, her brother did not support the idea of a sex change, but he did encourage her to pursue whatever her interests might be regardless of social pressures.

Some of the lesbian women may also have found a haven in the common stereotypes about lesbians. It would seem likely that few of them had any more information about lesbianism than what they had

gathered from the distortions of the media and their peers. If that were the case then they may have held a vision of lesbians as mannish women. For some of these women such an image might have offered them an explanation of their own predilections for masculinity and an identity that still allowed them to reach adulthood as women. As lesbians they could escape from femininity without having to think of themselves as men trapped within women's bodies.

It would also seem likely that some of the nine women who became lesbians during their young adulthood were simply following in the path that they had been following for years. Many of these girls were quite masculine throughout their youths and had experienced many of the social pressures toward masculinity that little boys experience while they are growing up. Six of the women who became lesbians specifically stated that as children they were often male in their fantasy life. It seems a logical step for a masculine youth to develop a masculine sexual orientation, that is, a sexual orientation toward women.

It is interesting to note that all four of the heterosexually oriented women in this group commented that they were quite late in developing any romantic or sexual interest in boys. These same women also recalled that they continued to have mostly male friends into their late teens, well after most of their friends were already dating, and that they only abandoned their male friends when they were forced to do so by the boys themselves. The girls who became heterosexuals had more years of masculine peer group socialization than the other girls around them and were probably still passing most of their time in the company of boys as they came to their sexuality. Their heterosexuality may in part be explained by their being surrounded by an actively heterosexual peer group while being emotionally bonded to males at the time that they developed their sexuality.¹³

Three of the fifteen women did not fit the family pattern of strong identification with an older male and weak identification with an older female figure but in all other respects were similar to the rest of the group. They differed from the others only in that they had a weak or ambivalent identification with adults of either gender and therefore did not use either of their parental figures as strong role models. As they reached maturity these women possessed physical characteristics that, when overlaid on a youthful tomboyishness and a tendency toward masculinity, brought them to adult experiences very similar to the rest of the group. One woman gradually developed full facial hair, another sprouted a mustache, and the third was a larger than average, thick-

boned woman who had a low pitched speaking voice. These physical features combined with other masculine aspects of their appearances and personalities projected masculinity to others as strongly as the personalities and mannerisms of the more clearly masculine identified women.

THE ADULT DILEMMA

By the time these women reached adulthood, they seemed to have developed a tremendous ambivalence about femaleness. They seemed to believe, as do most members of Anglo-American societies, that although they did not participate in the more blatant forms of femininity, because they were female, whatever they did was somehow inherently womanly or feminine enough that it should have distinguished them as female. When it repeatedly failed to do so, their stereotypical beliefs and the reflexive nature of social communication led them to doubt their own abilities to communicate their femaleness and the very fact of their femaleness. Over a period of time they became increasingly resigned to the fact that, in the eyes of the public, they appeared to be men.

As adults they adopted similar styles of dress and mannerisms. All of them wore their hair cut in simple, short hairstyles that required little care. Only one of them dyed, curled, or otherwise attempted to alter the natural lay of her hair. Only one woman regularly wore make-up and those who did wear jewelry as a part of their everyday dress wore only the simplest and least conspicuous types. A few wore earrings on occasion, but as one woman said, "Sometimes I wear earrings but . . . the boys wear earrings now, too." The women who did wear earrings mentioned that they only wore very small, stud-type earrings; only one woman wore large or dangling ones. All of them described their normal clothing as pants (usually jeans); T-shirts, work shirts, tailored, or men's shirts; and runners or work boots. One woman defended the femininity of her appearance by saying, "I thought a girl looks like a girl no matter how her hair is."

These women generally felt that their appearances were neither masculine nor feminine but "neutral." They correctly observed that many other women wear basically the same style of clothing and are recognized by others as women. They were therefore forced to conclude

that there was something else about each of them that set them apart.

Ten of them identified themselves as assertive or aggressive and felt that this was part of why they looked masculine to others. Several women implied that mistakes happened more often when they felt greatest self-confidence. One woman said:

If I feel particularly good, I feel really vibrant and like the whole world is there and I'm just going to charge right through it . . . I get called "sir" a lot more.

Another woman thought that she was mistaken for a man because she took up more physical space with her mannerisms than most women.

I think a lot of it has to do with my attitude, how I perceive myself in the world, physically . . . women generally don't talk loud, they don't flail their arms around when they're talking, they don't laugh out loud, they don't walk with the full length of their leg. They aren't boisterous, they don't take command.

A third woman expressed a similar analysis of her situation.

I think that some of the things that are attributed to femininity are really a lot of shit and so becoming more in control of my life and putting forth my ideas and looking people in the eye and not apologizing for everything when I don't really mean it could be considered becoming more masculine. But I look on that as unlearning a lot of negative things.

It seems that not only were these women identifying some of the characteristics that others consider signs of maleness but they were also demonstrating that they too believed that masculinity was in many ways superior to femininity. One woman told about the day that she realized that she had accepted a masculinist vision of gender. As a youth she had admired her brother and wanted to be a boy like him and in her fantasy life had imagined herself in a "biker gang." Then, at the age of 27:

I had a big personal catharsis when I woke up one day and realized . . . that I never wanted to be a woman. I always felt that I was weaker, stupider, had less opportunity, which was certainly true. So I enlightened myself. . . . [Now] I'm a feminist, and I think women are better than men and I have no reason to want to be a man.

Several of the women made similar clear statement about having no desire to be a man, but, nonetheless, seven of them seemed to see more value in masculinity than in femininity and all of them were certainly

more comfortable with the postures and prerogatives of masculinity than with the restrictions and requirements of femininity.

For twelve of these women, being mistaken for a boy or man was a daily or almost daily experience. They found these situations “frustrating” and “embarrassing” and they were often angered by the continual mistakes. Several of them commented that at first the novelty of the experience was rewarding for them but with time and repetition the mistakes became “boring” and “tedious.” None of the women said that they enjoyed being mistaken for a man, but all but two of them were able to cite some advantages to their situation.

The women were aware, to some degree, of the causes of the mistakes in that they were able to identify some of the reasons for their being mistakenly identified. Only two of the women said that they regularly corrected people who misidentified them, three said that people usually figured their mistakes out by themselves, and five women reported that people sometimes corrected themselves. One woman was particularly articulate as to why she didn’t correct people.

When it first started to happen regularly, like every day, I started to take it on, like I was a freak and I had to learn how to live my life as a freak, something that everybody could stare at whenever they wanted to comment about whenever they wanted to. . . . Well, if they thought I was a man from beginning to end then I wasn’t a freak. The freak was in the mistake, so I didn’t correct them. I just sort of shrunk a little bit inside of myself, but I didn’t correct them.

Other women also remarked that the situations were easier for them to endure if nobody else knew that there was anything amiss. The women often mentioned desiring to be able to just go about their daily business without having to discuss their gender with strangers. This was possible for them if they left the mistakes uncorrected and took steps to ensure that it would not become detected during an interchange with a mistaken stranger.

Over time this sort of duplicity wore on the self-images of the women who employed it. They found themselves in situations where their choices seemed to be to expose themselves to ridicule and embarrassment by disclosing that they were women or to comply with the expectation of others and act like men. Some seemed to have begun to believe that by avoiding confrontations they were somehow responsible for the mistakes, and their acceptance of this responsibility may have further reinforced their sense of themselves as masculine. As well, the ploy that many of them used to avoid embarrassment probably exposed them to

the social pressure put on men to act masculinely. The contrast between public censure of life as a masculine woman and the ability to quietly move through social interchanges as a man must have acted as a powerful reinforcer of masculinity for at least some of these women.

The attractiveness of the masculine stance was bolstered by the obvious preferential treatment that many of them encountered as men. One woman recalled the first time she walked the street at night as a man.

I was walking down the street and men were looking me straight in the eye with this incredible amount of respect. I didn't know what the fuck was going on. . . . Like it was totally different . . . this feels like being in another world, it was like being a human being. I couldn't believe the sensation. What a power trip, it was wonderful, so I started to learn, hey, if I looked like a guy no one is going to hassle me.

Compare this to what another woman had to say about her experience as a woman in public places:

It's awful to be treated like a girl by the general public. . . . They think you're dumb, they think you don't know anything.

A third woman came to this understanding of the social advantage of masculinity:

I guess a lot of it is that men are so in control of the world, and this is an awful thing to say. . . . I'm shocked that I even think it . . . men, in this world, are so dominant that everything seems to go towards them, that sometimes to be mistaken, to look like a man, can be an advantage. . . . if by accident you can look like a man, you have more chances than if you look like a woman.

These women received a clear message that as women they were deficient, but as men they were advantaged.

The kinds of advantages that these women mentioned most often had to do with freedom of movement. Ten women cited the feeling of safety on the streets at night, or safety from the threat of rape, to be very valuable results of their masculine appearances. Six women said that they felt that as men they received more "respect" than they did as women. Two women felt that it gave them an advantage in male-dominated work situations and three women felt that being mistaken for a man was an advantage for them as lesbians because it allowed them to publicly express affection with their lovers without attracting undesirable attention.

The stories they told about trying to pass through the world as unremarkable females were far less pleasant. Many difficult situations could be avoided by quietly allowing mistakes to go uncorrected, but because all of these women identify as women, not as men, there were certain situations that they could not bring themselves to conveniently avoid by passing as men. The most common area of complaint was with public washrooms. They repeatedly spoke of the humiliation of being challenged or ejected from women's washrooms. Similarly, they found public change rooms to be dangerous territory and the buying of undergarments to be a difficult feat to accomplish. This washroom story was typical:

I've been chased out of washrooms. Old ladies with umbrellas, a cleaning lady with a broom stick, like I don't have a chance. I walk in there and all of a sudden they—a couple of times they just bang me on the head and I'd go running . . . They actually hit me on the head, no questions asked, wham. Then I'm out of there and they go on and on . . . saying boys aren't supposed to be in women's washrooms. I didn't have a chance to say anything.

Another woman told of resorting to buying hew underwear through a mail order catalogue because she shared the experience of another woman, who felt humiliated because she was treated as “some kind of pervert pawing through the underwear.”

As well, most of these women were lesbians; they socialized and found many of their friendships within a less public community of lesbians. Stereotypically lesbians have been typecast as masculine women, and the lesbian community has historically condoned a percentage of its women taking on the “butch” role. Certainly this is not true of all, or even most, lesbians, but one woman seemed to be speaking the truth when she said, “I think that for the most part lesbians are supportive of women who look even more like men than I do.”

All but one of the lesbian women were also feminists, and as lesbian-feminists they had theoretically relegated butch roles to history. Still, the lesbian or lesbian-feminist community does not encourage femininity and quietly condones masculinity. One woman summed up the lesbian-feminist position this way:

We sort of dress in what's comfortable, in a way a uniform of wearing butchy clothes, but we don't wear them because we want to be like men, but because we want the privilege of dressing comfortably.

Another woman recalled that her episodes of being mistaken for a man increased in frequency after she became acquainted with lesbian-feminists. They gave her permission to abandon many of her previous attempts at femininity.

I had all these wonderful new friends and I was getting pretty constant positive reinforcement that I was just fine. And so when I was with them I felt totally normal.

She had acquired new friends who shared her predicament and helped her to view it as normal. She told about joining a friend one morning at a restaurant. The waitress approached them and asked:

“What would you gentlemen like for breakfast?” . . . I said nervously “Oh, ah, we’re not gentlemen,” and Lynne said, “We’re not even men!” and threw her head back and laughed all over the restaurant. She was a great role model for me.

These lesbian women lived in both a public and a private world that rewarded them for their masculinity and left them feeling vulnerable and foolish when they attempted femininity.

All of the heterosexual women in the group reported some support for the ideas of feminism and found support for themselves in the writings of feminists. Three of these women lived and worked among people who espoused feminism and found support for their gender choices among those people. One woman called her appearance “a political statement” and counted feminist support as an important factor in her comfort with herself as she was.

The thing is that I’ve got a terrific support network, through my companion, through my family, through people like that who do not give me too bad a time about the way I dress.

Another of the heterosexual women found some support from her lovers, but her only contact with feminism was through books that she had read. She, among all the women in this group, seemed to have suffered the most self-doubt and raging anguish about her gender. She had, at one point in her life, attempted to qualify for a sex-change operation and had suffered physical and mental ailments that she believed to be sourced in her gender problems. Her friends and lovers had all been hypermasculine men and at the time of her interview she

stated that "I'd never really be a man, but if I had the choice I'd still be a man. I don't really like being a woman." But she did say that "if I could find strong women who think a lot like I think, then, yeah, I'd like to have women friends." But even this woman was able to call upon some feminist analysis as a validation of herself and a criticism of the society around her:

The source of my problem is society's attitude, I mean lot's of people's attitudes towards the way they think women should look. It's not my problem really, it's their problem, but I'm the one who gets the shitty end of the deal it seems . . . I used to think it was my fault . . . I always wanted to kill myself because I thought I was worthless because people knocked me down so much.

Many other women also reported feeling very badly about themselves as a result of their ongoing experiences of being mistaken for a male. All of them had at some time considered what they might do to prevent the mistakes. Most started with the assumption that they had certain physical qualities that were beyond their control to change. When considering how they might change the way they dressed or groomed themselves to increase the possibility of their being recognized as women, they seemed to believe that extreme and anachronistic femininity would be necessary to accomplish the task. Seven of them stated that they would feel foolish in obviously feminine clothing. Seven women said that they would feel like transvestites if they were to wear dresses and two women said that they had been called transvestites when they had done so. One woman expressed this exaggerated vision of the requirements of femininity:

I'm not really interested in stiletto heels, nylons, and short skirts, or any of those things, because I feel strongly about freedom of movement and being comfortable as the same time.

Another woman critiqued femininity on a political basis:

You explain to me objectively how standing two inches above your natural heels' placement, how wearing things which constrain you, nylons which dig into your body, bras which harness you, and clothing which seems to fundamentally pull out at every layer and then walk around as if your shoulders are two inches closer together than they actually are, how physically free is this? It is not. It is signs of oppression . . . I'm not stupid, I could wear a skirt if I wanted to. I'd be uncomfortable but I could force myself.

Probably as a result of such ideas about feminine appearances, twelve of the fifteen women said that they were not at all willing to change the way they dressed.

Even though all but one of these women were feminists and most were romantically and sexually involved with women, they did not seem to hold very positive views of other women in general. When speaking of "average" women, one woman referred to them as "a bunch of jerks" and another called them "pretty wimpy." Still another woman described her male coworkers as "okay on a certain level," but had this to say about the women she worked with:

[They are] really hard to comprehend because they're willing to be clerical workers for all their lives . . . and the way that they dress, the amount of money that they spend on clothes so that they can look a certain way, and the shoes that they wear, the total obsession with the way they look . . . It's dumb! It's very exasperating to be around them!

Such attitudes contrast sharply with the sorts of opinions that some of the lesbian women expressed about other lesbians. By and large, they considered them to be exempt from their criticisms of the feminine role, probably because they considered lesbians to be generally less feminine than most women and more masculine like themselves. One woman remembered the first lesbians that she knew as "the kind of women that I liked to be with. They cursed and they didn't take crap from anybody." Another implied that being mistaken for a man might be a side-effect of lesbianism:

Being mistaken for a man would happen to lesbians a lot just because we . . . like ourselves and our bodies more. We're not into wearing high heels and mincing down the street to impress whoever happens to be looking out the window at us.

By rejecting traditional femininity and elevating lesbian masculinity, they acquired for themselves a female group with whom they could identify and feel "normal."

The heterosexual feminists were less harsh in their criticisms of women who seem to wholeheartedly embrace femininity but still chose to see themselves as belonging to a different class of women than the average. One woman put it this way:

Instinctively I would say that I'm not very feminine because feminine means oppressed . . . but if you said to me, "You're not very female," I would deeply resent that.

Another said:

I hate being treated or seen as a female—I'd rather be seen as kind of a human being. . . . Let's say that being mistaken for a "typical female" bothers me a lot more than being mistaken for a man.

For both the heterosexual and lesbian women in this group, feminist criticisms of the traditional feminine role justified their stance and allowed them the luxury of a moral correctness. These women experienced their femaleness as a liability when they were in the public eye. At the same time, because they were adult females, they found that their masculinity also made them vulnerable to embarrassment, ridicule, or undue attention. The smallest tasks often became the occasion for unwelcome intrusions into their privacy. Interchanges that would normally remain entirely impersonal often became times of brief but intense personal exchange. Buying a package of cigarettes or having lunch often resulted in uncomfortable explanations and embarrassed apologies about a woman's gender and an observer's gender assumptions. One woman seemed to speak for many of them when she said that it was just too much trouble to go around explaining herself all the time to strangers. She felt that the easiest way to deal with the problem was just to allow people to believe what they wanted and to thus maintain her privacy, but the way she expressed herself said something more basic about her attitude toward being a woman:

The people I know, they know I'm a woman. Everybody out there in the world doesn't have to know I'm a woman.

In this statement she implied that being a woman was information that requires careful management in order to avoid unpleasant social consequences.

As gender blending females, these women were in a position to make a comparison between the kinds of treatment one receives in public as a woman, as a man, and as a woman who looks like a man. They discovered that as men they were treated better than as women, and that as masculine women they were most often treated with scorn. They discovered that as men they were generally afforded more public respect than they were as women, and the lesbian women found that appearing to be men allowed them the freedom to publicly display their affection while being sheltered by the guise of heterosexuality. But of most

profound implications was the fact that they matured into adult females who had experienced very little of the institutionalized fear of male violence that normally shades all facets of feminine life. They learned that they could use their gender role to their advantage to gain some access to both male privilege and masculine freedom of movement while at the same time avoiding some of the more odious aspects of being female in a society predicated on male dominance. While most of these women felt that the advantages of their situation outweighed the disadvantages, not all of them were willing to state this unequivocally and only six of them gave a clear "yes" to the question, "Do you want it to stop?"

GENDER LOGIC

The experience of these women demonstrates that maleness is not a necessary condition for masculinity, that persons of any sex can be raised to be masculine and can be masculine to any degree, and that sufficient masculinity characterizes one as a man. Persons of any sex can, and do, become socially recognizable men. For these women, their sex did not determine their gender role, but, in the eyes of strangers, their gender role did determine their gender. In other words, although they were females, they became masculine and that masculinity was sufficiently developed that strangers recognized them as men.

The masculinity of these women was a matter of appearances, mannerisms, and attitudes, all of which can be adopted by any person of any sex,¹⁴ although possibly not at any point in their lives. For these women, their earliest years and the years around puberty seemed to be crucial times in the formation of their gender roles and their gender identities. They adopted styles of movement and personality that indicated to others an unapologetic command of themselves and a forthrightness usually only seen in boys and men.

They displayed these qualities in a world dominated by a rigid patriarchal gender schema. According to this schema, there are certain qualities that are considered to be uniquely associated with males and certain ones that are uniquely associated with females. These women grew up publicly exhibiting many characteristics strongly associated with maleness and few associated with femaleness. As such, they often

found themselves to be mistaken by strangers for boys or men on the assumption that anyone who appeared to be more masculine than feminine must be a male.

In fact, there is a disjuncture between the postulates of the popular understanding of sex and gender and the way it actually can be seen to work. Popularly it is thought that one's sex defines whether one is a boy or a girl and that gender identity then defines whether one is masculine or feminine. What appears to actually be the case is that sex and gender can be quite separate and that gender role behavior socially defines and identifies gender. In other words, gender is a social status: (1) persons of any sex can become boys and then men, or girls and then women, and (2) in terms of nonintimate social interactions, gender is ascribed on the basis of gender role and one's sex is assumed on the basis of that information.

What this means in practice is that when an individual appears to be masculine and there are no major and compelling feminine contraindicators, that person attains the social status of man or boy. When an individual appears to be predominantly feminine and has no major masculine contraindicators, that person attains the social status of woman or girl. It would seem from this study that when an adult exhibits a blend of characteristics that are not sufficiently masculine to consistently earn the label of man, that person will more often than not be assumed a man. A possible explanation for this situation could be that such persons are given the benefit of the doubt within a patriarchal context that values men more highly than women. If an observer does not wish to give offense, there would be less offense in erring in the direction of affording someone higher status rather than lower.¹⁵

Once a gender status has been ascribed to a person, a belief in the popular gender schema leads one to assume the corresponding sex and to ignore or rationalize away any indications to the contrary. Once an assumption of maleness has been made, the masculinity of the individual can be stretched limitlessly without that assumption of maleness being called into doubt. What is crucial is the depth of the initial impression of masculinity. If that initial impression is insecure, the assumption of gender and sex will remain open to further clarification, but if an observer is secure in the appraisal of a person's gender and sex, the observer will resist contrary evidence because the popular gender schema postulates that one's sex is, and can only be, at all times evident to all observers. It remains possible, within this schema,

to take a moment to gather all of one's gender cues before ascribing gender, but it is unthinkable that a firm and unquestioned gender ascription might be wrong.

The net result is a circular thought pattern. When one observes someone who appears to be predominantly masculine, one will ascribe to that person the status of "man" and assume that if that person is a man then he must also be of the male sex. The circularity arises wherein the assumed maleness then becomes the undeniable basis for the status of "man," which in turn becomes the basis for the justification and rationalization of all that person's actions as inherently masculine. Once these assumptions have been made, any indications of femininity, womanliness, or femaleness will be ignored or rationalized as an aberration within that person's manliness.¹⁶ In this way it becomes possible to force all persons to fit within one of the two gender statuses postulated by a patriarchal gender schema.

In practice, what sex usually determines is the type of rearing that a child will experience. That rearing, in most cases, produces an individual whose personality and appearance conforms to a sexual determinist model. When that is not the case, the gender ascribed to a person by nonintimate others is a product of that person's degree of masculinity or femininity, and the gender identity attained by individuals is a product both of how others see them and of their own knowledge of their sex. To the public eye, sex and gender are ascribed on the basis of gender role behavior; in everyday life, sex is irrelevant to the ascription of gender. In day-to-day interactions with strangers, one's gender role behavior determines whether one is a man or a woman, and the status of man or woman carries with it the assumption of a corresponding sex. This means that the reality of everyday gender communication and the theory of the popular gender schema are in opposition to one another.

The popular gender schema provides a basis for a sexist society by propagating an ideology of an innate, and entirely pervasive, sexually determined social structure. This schema conditions members of society to see a clear, unbroken, causative link leading from one's physical sex to one's gender status to one's gender role, and allows people to see and govern all human situations through a binary matrix of male and female. In the course of normal everyday life, people use the popular gender schema to help them make sense of their experiences as follows:

- (1) All people are assumed to be either male/men/masculine or female/women/feminine.

- (2) Physical characteristics, mannerisms, and personality traits are recognized as masculine or feminine on the basis of the popular gender schema.
- (3) Observed gender cues are instantaneously and unconsciously weighed and a gender status is ascribed on that basis, that is, feminine people are women, masculine people are men.
- (4) Once a gender status has been ascribed to a person, a sex is assumed in accordance with the schema, that is, men are male, women are female.
- (5) The assumption of sex and the postulates of the gender schema then combine to provide explanations for any lingering misaligned gender cues; for instance, a prominent chest on a male-identified woman might be explained away as large pectoral muscles, or simply fat on the upper body.

In other words, gender role determines gender ascription and sex is assumed on the basis of that gender ascription. One may change one's sexual status, in a sexist society, by altering the gender role that one communicates to others, and the pressures of social expectations and rewards can be powerful enough to induce one to do so.

The gender blending females in this study are not exceptional because of the attitudes that they hold about gender, and gender roles, or because of their personality types. What makes women of this type stand out is that they do not effectively display evidence of their femaleness at all times and under all circumstances. Because the schema recognizes only men and women and no other gender status, these women found themselves becoming men by default.

By not differentiating themselves as women, they have been able to, on some occasions, usurp the power of males. Most importantly to most of these women, and I believe the major reason why many have allowed the mistakes to continue for years, is that they have been able to largely avoid the institutionalized physical control and confinement of women by men. By refusing to mark themselves with the stigmata of womanhood, they have largely escaped the threat of physical and sexual violence that acts as an invisible corral containing women within those hours and places that the patriarchal system has chosen as appropriate for females to occupy.

While this course of action offered these women an escape from some of the normal limitations of being female in a patriarchal society, it did cause them a great deal of anxiety. One of the ways that they assuaged some of the anxiety was by negating those who might condemn them through a criticism of the rigidity of the sex/gender system under which they live. Most of the women in this study justified their gender choices on the basis of a feminist criticism of femininity and sexism. What they

have failed to take into account was that by allowing themselves to be perceived as men they posed no threat to sexism. In order for their gender choices to effectively challenge the limitations of the female role, they must be visible as females. In order to challenge the idea that there are two and only two gender categories, they must appear to be neither men nor women. To allow themselves to be mistaken for men and to not identify themselves as women allows the formula masculine = man = male to remain unquestioned. To be sufficiently gender blended so as to not be identifiable as either a woman or a man is not a task that an individual can accomplish alone. Gender is very much in the eye of the beholder and one's gender is as much in the reading as in the telling. In a sexist world, our vocabulary is limited.

A PROPOSAL

A gender schema that would more accurately describe the present reality and allow for a less sexist future might be based on the concept of gender blending. A less sexistly biased appraisal of our present social structure would have to take into account the tremendous gender variation both between the sexes and among those of the same sex. Furthermore, an analysis undertaken from this perspective would have to conclude that all individuals, of any sexual or gender status, have personalities that are comprised of an infinitely varied, and constantly shifting, blend of what we now call gender characteristics.

In such a schema, characteristics that are now associated with personality types called masculine and feminine would gradually become divorced from the male and female sexes. Human personalities would come to be recognized as being far more complex than the concepts of masculinity and femininity now allow, and the world would come to be seen as peopled by men, women, and many other types of persons who are neither women nor men. All persons would be thought of as possessing some characteristics that might be called masculine or feminine, while the mature state of humans would be seen as consisting of a blend of what we now call gender characteristics.

In time, the concept of gender, as we presently conceive of it, would become meaningless. As gender characteristics became unclustered, remixed, and blended, they would naturally become conceptually separated from sex. It would become necessary to identify personality

characteristics according to behaviors and attitudes, rather than through a sex-based gender shorthand. Such a gender blending schema could then serve as a transition between our present sexist gender schema and a future schema that would make it possible to conceptualize human personality in more of its infinite variety.

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

NOTES

1. Where I use the term "sex," I mean only those biological or physical characteristics that together define one as either female or male. Where I use the term "gender," I mean the identification of oneself, or of another person, as being either a girl or a boy, a man or a woman. Where I use the term "gender roles," I mean the ways in which people look, sound, think, or act that distinguish them as men or boys, women or girls.

2. The women ranged in age from 22 to 41 years of age. Fourteen were white and one was black. Six were from rural areas or small towns and nine were from cities. Fourteen grew up either in Canada or the United States and one moved to Canada from England when she was in her mid-20s. Fourteen were Anglophones and one was a Francophone. All but one completed high school and at least some university. They grew up in families supported by welfare, and in working class, middle-class, and upper-class homes. They had worked mostly in fields either dominated by men or shared by men and women. All but one identified themselves as feminists, or feminist sympathizers. Four women were heterosexual, eleven were lesbian.

For all but three of the women misidentifications happened as often as several times a week and for most of them they were an everyday occurrence, to the point where they no longer automatically expected to be correctly identified as females by strangers. Eleven of these people had been regularly addressed as males for at least ten years and all but one of them had experienced this situation for more than five years; for five of them, such mistakes were a lifelong experience.

3. See Chodorow, 1978.

4. See Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975.

5. See Mead, 1932/1962.

6. See Gerth and Mills, 1953.

7. See Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1974, 1976.

8. See Garfinkel, 1967.

9. See Bem, 1981, 1983.

10. See Biller, 1981, especially p. 325; Buck, 1977; Stroller, 1979.

11. All names have been changed.

12. For a fuller explanation of this theory of erotic orientation development see Stroms, 1981.

13. For a fuller explanation of this theory of erotic orientation development see Stroms.

14. Consider Kessler and McKenna's tongue-in-cheek quip that "Beards, breasts and other gender characteristics can be bought in a store." See Kessler and McKenna, 1978.

15. For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon from a more empirical perspective see Kessler and McKenna.

16. Many of the women interviewed told stories of being mistaken for effeminate men: transvestites, transsexuals, and male homosexuals. The people who made these assumptions were probably attempting to rationalize obvious femininity in the "men" standing before them.

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