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What does it mean to be a man? Trans Masculinities, bodily practices and reflexive embodiment

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Abstract

Confronted with the centrality of the body for trans-masculine individuals interviewed in the United Kingdom and Portugal, we explore how bodily-reflexive practices are central for doing masculinity. Following Connell's early insight that bodies needed to come back to the political and sociological agendas, we propose that bodily-reflexive practice is a concept suited to account for the production of trans-masculinities. Although multiple, the journeys of trans-masculine individuals demonstrate how bodily experiences shape and redefine masculinities in ways that illuminate the nexus between bodies, embodiments and discursive enactments of masculinity. Rather than oppositions between bodily conformity to and transgression of the norms of hegemonic masculinity, often encountered in idealizations of the medicalized transsexual against the genderqueer rebel, lived bodily experiences shape masculinities beyond linear oppositions. Tensions between natural and technological, material and discursive or feminine and masculine were key for understanding trans-masculine narratives about the body, embodiment and identity.

Keywords: Trans-masculinities; trans embodiments; bodily-reflexive practices; masculinity; reflexivity.

Introduction

In recent years, growing attention has been awarded to trans-masculinities¹ (e.g., Hines 2002). The doings of trans-masculinities became sites from which to understand personal journeys towards masculinity (e.g., Rubin 2003; Prosser 1998; Califia 1997), including the obstacles and constraints faced by trans-masculine individuals (Vidal-Ortiz 2008; heinz 2016; Abelson 2019; Rogers 2020). Whether contingency (Blackwood 2009), contextuality (Abelson 2019), intersectionality and racialization (Pennington 2018), or hybridity (Abelson 2019; Phillips 2020) are highlighted, trans-masculine journeys often imply degrees of defensiveness from abuse or violence (Abelson 2014) and feelings of discomfort with the patriarchal privilege of masculinity (Aboim 2016; Aboim, Vasconcelos and Merlini 2018). Processes of masculinization are not straightforward and, as trans scholarship demonstrated (see Devor 1997; Prosser 1998 or Cotten 2012), the meaning of masculinity has been challenged (see, in particular, Halberstam 1998 or Preciado 2013). After all, masculinity does not exclusively belong to (cis)male bodies and masculine embodiments are, rather, much more plural and enacted by different subjects through a variety of bodily practices.

In the struggle to overcome biologicist views of gender, trans-masculinities have not escaped the struggles of political interpretation. Feminist (Hines 2002) or queer mobilizations (Macdonald 2012) and biologicist views of trans-masculine individuals (as defended by trans-exclusionary feminists) have clashed, while against this backdrop, hoping to deconstruct stereotypical notions, recent studies highlight the multiplicity of trans-masculinities as both (or neither) hegemonic and non-hegemonic (e.g., Devor 1997; Cromwell 1999; Vidal-Ortiz 2002;

¹ Trans-masculinities is a provisional umbrella term we apply to those who challenge the naturalness of gender as emanating from the sexed codification of bodies, whether they identify as transsexual, transgender or gender variant within the masculinity spectrum, such as genderqueer, non-binary, gender fluid, among other designations. For an overview, see Stryker (2008), Valentine (2007), and Halberstam (2018).

Rubin 2003; Green 2005; Schilt and C. Connell 2007). Being trans-masculine is not synonymous with any particular style of masculinity. Rather, as Abelson notes (Abelson 2019, 15), trans-men often display a “Goldilocks masculinity”, which Abelson defines as a form of “hybrid masculinity; it incorporates aspects of nonhegemonic masculinities to sustain the existing gender order amid challenges to its legitimacy”.

Despite expanding inquiry into the plurality (Rogers 2020, 45) and hybridity (e.g., Bridges and Pascoe 2014) of trans-masculinities, we still know little about what it means “to be a man,” as many of our participants noted. Inspired by the narratives of the trans-men and trans-masculine individuals interviewed in two European countries (the United Kingdom and Portugal), we explore how individuals produce masculinity. Conceptual connections between critical masculinity studies and trans-masculinities have yet to come of age (e.g., Gottzén and Straube 2016; Abelson 2014, 2019). Through cross-fertilization between critical masculinity studies and trans-masculinities—two theoretical fields not yet fully connected—we seek to overcome biologicist and essentialist biases that persist in many definitions of masculinity.

For that reason, we must begin with a conceptualization of masculinity suited for understanding the doings of trans-masculinities. As Paul Preciado wrote of his own experience taking testosterone: “Masculinity is only one of the possible political (and nonbiological) by-products of the administration of testosterone” (Preciado 2013, 45). Like Preciado, our participants described masculinity as a changing bodily experience, though not all altered their bodies hormonally or surgically. All participants were doing masculinity. These “body narratives” (Prosser 1998), which we describe in the first person, incited a deeper questioning about the meanings of masculinity at large.

Situating our analytical efforts within the field of critical masculinity studies, we reinforce that masculinity is an embodied experience. As Devor (2015) highlighted, trans studies were key for theorizing bodies, embodiments, and identities. Therefore, while

masculinity can be seen as an effect of practice (e.g., Aboim 2016; Aboim, Vasconcelos and Merlini 2018), we still need a theory of embodiment that places the body at the center of gendered processes and envisages masculinity as produced through the multiple expressions and practices of the body. For most trans-masculine individuals within our study, whether they self-define as FtM transsexuals, genderqueer, or non-binary, confirming or constructing masculinity emerged as powerful bodily experience that molds their diverse autobiographical narratives. The diversity of trans-masculine bodily experiences is fundamental for understanding masculinity as a product of practice, whether testosterone intake or other bodily experiences are at stake.

Following Connell's (1994) early call to include bodies in political and sociological agendas, we suggest that bodily-reflexive practices be given center-stage. After all, bodily-reflexive practices incorporate both the individual and their context, both material and discursive dimensions of bodies. In the next section, we discuss Connell's notion of bodily-reflexive practice. Then, by redefining and expanding the concept, we propose that bodily-reflexive practice is a theoretical tool suited for giving an account of the production of trans-masculinities. We illustrate our argument through trans-masculine bodily journeys.

Bodies matter: masculinity and embodiment

The body remains a contested site within feminist and gender theorization. Bodies and embodiments have long been interpreted through the theoretical lens of post-structuralism, including in masculinity studies. Consequently, embodiment has not been central in accounts of masculinities (Whitehead 2002, Stephens and Lorentzen 2007). While trans scholarship has emphasized the role of bodies (e.g., Salamon, 2010, Devor 2015), and demonstrated how agency produces bodily practices, few efforts to overcome the conflation between men and masculinities addressed the role of bodies and their conceptualization. Connell (1995, 63)

argued that embodiment is the essence of masculinities in the form of “body-reflexive practice”. Societal influences shape bodily practice and gender identification, but individuals also shape gender practice by relating their own bodily experiences to the social influences. Hence, if “bodies do matter” (Connell 1995, 51), redressing the conceptual connection between bodily-reflexive practices and masculinity depends on envisioning bodily experiences as constitutive practices of masculinity. From this angle, against all common essentialist assumptions, masculinity can be seen primarily as a reflexive-bodily practice through which individuals confer meaning on their own masculinity and present it to others. Such a formulation suggests that practice affects bodily experience, and that bodily experience is practice. Masculinity might then be better understood as the product of bodily practices enacted by subjects capable of reflexive embodiment insofar as individuals are “always already” (Butler 1993, 83)² subjects.

Therefore, in our reinterpretation of Connell’s theorization, becoming masculine results from multiple and flexible bodily practices that enable bodily change, which, in turn, produce successive reflexive embodiments (Prosser 1998). Asserting the agency of bodies, Connell wrote that “at the boundaries of gender categories, bodies may travel in their own right” (Connell 1995, 59). As simultaneously objects and agents of practice, bodies should then be conceptualized through patterns of body-reflexive practice that emerge from the connection of individual and social structures to form both (masculine) lives and the social world.

² By using “always already”, we follow Butler and her use of Louis Althusser’s notion of interpellation, noting that individuals are always already subjects, that is, “always-already the embodiment of the field of society-power-ideology” (Davis 2012, 881).

Reflexive embodiments

While Connell has extensively addressed reflexivity, there is still room to refine the concept. Following Lahire's (2011) critical revision of Bourdieu's disregard of agency, we note that individuals are produced by their own reflexivity over social processes and are the product of multiple and contradictory external constraints. Embodiment must be seen as an exercise of agency, as Lahire writes. For Lahire, the past trajectory is fabricated by a succession of reflexive acts—and so can the future be. Margaret Archer (2007), whose theoretical work on reflexivity is a landmark, emphasized the role of reflexive projects towards the future, projects that shape both bodies and discourses. In fact, sociological theorizations of the body have come to emphasise agency and reflexivity, namely with the notion of reflexive embodiment, or “the capacity to act upon one's own body” (Crossley 2006, 13). For us, bodily-practices are reflexive: individuals learn from past experiences, and orient their actions towards the future. The past constitutes embodiments, as do projects, aspirations, and desires. In this sense, masculinity (trans and cis) is necessarily biographic and dynamic; it is produced along the biographical journey, which is, first and foremost, a bodily journey.

Bodily-reflexive practices may be physical, discursive, or enacted. Physical interventions on the body (performed by medical experts or self-administered) and forms of enactment (appearance, dress, hexis)³ are material. Discursive practices involve processes of naming and classification, whether legal or self-identified gender identity, cultural or socially shared and recognized by others. This formulation, connecting gender identity, naming, body

³ In line with Bourdieu's redefinition of the Aristotelian concept of stable disposition, for us bodily hexis also refers to “a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu 1977, 93-94). What matters for our analysis is Bourdieu's conceptualization of the body as simultaneously acted upon and acted with, always formed through social practices and discourses.

appearance and enactment, illuminates how those who identify with trans-masculine labels construct and reconfigure masculinity.

Patterns of body-reflexive practice (Connell 1995, 61) implicate labor on the body (Turner 2008, 159) and through the body (in a sense that is closer to Bourdieu's [1977] theory of practice). Body and practice are complex, contested and elusive concepts (Lennon 2019), yet we believe that bodily-reflexive practices are heuristic and helpful if free of reductionism, be it the biologicism of supposed pre-social bodies or the structural determinism of automatons. The body is neither a final destination, imprisoned in a pre-determined sex/gender position, nor a free-floating signifier. In between poles, the space for resignifying gender and masculinity is open to resistance. Such reformulations, however, are not only attained via discursive practices but firstly and foremost by bringing in the body as a site of and for the materiality of gender.

Methodological considerations

Our analysis builds upon 31 life-stories of trans individuals who identify as trans-men or as masculine along the spectrum of trans-masculinities. We conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews in the United Kingdom (17 participants) and Portugal (14 participants) between 2016 and 2018. The two trans-masculine samples have more commonalities than differences, despite cross-country dissimilarities. While the UK has a history of transgender support groups since the 1970s followed by politically organized activist groups since the 1990s, trans-activism only became relevant in Portugal in the 2000s. Nonetheless, the pace of change was rapid, as made evident by the approval of a new gender identity law in 2018 (Law 38/2018 of August 7). Portugal was, in fact, the eleventh country in the world to enforce a legal gender recognition procedure based on self-determination, which permits the separation of medical

protocols and legal entitlements. The right to legally identify with a self-elected gender category without contingent requirements is still elusive in the UK.⁴

In both countries, we recruited participants through personal contacts and networks associated with trans-rights organizations, and used a snow-ball method to recruit beyond the initial sample. Convenience samples (Given 2008) were constructed to display the diversity of trajectories and modes of self-definition beneath the trans-masculine umbrella. Overall, our study intended to reconstruct trans and gender-nonconforming people's trajectories and identifications as well as concerns and aspirations. For that reason, all the interviews followed an open interview-schedule and privileged a narrative approach suited for capturing individual singularities. We conducted the semi-structured qualitative interviews in locations chosen by the participants. The interviews lasted between 2 and 4 hours, and were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized and translated into English, always respecting the linguistic specificity of the terms, when relevant.

We provided participants with detailed information, including that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at will, and explained that results would be anonymized. We gave all participants pseudonyms and, when relevant, omitted or modified potentially identifiable socio-demographic data or specific life events without compromising the validity of participants' stories and voices. We follow participants' use of pronouns and gender identity terminology when describing the participants' life-stories, narratives of past events and aspirations. With the help of coding software (MAXQDA-12), we conducted a thematic analysis of all transcripts and identified the core themes that structure participants' narratives about their trans journeys. A longitudinal analysis of the transcripts was also carried out to list all relevant life events. Ethical approval was granted by the Institute of Social Sciences of the

⁴ For an overview of legal frameworks and trans-activism in Portugal and the UK, see Aboim 2020.

University of Lisbon and the European Research Council Executive Agency. Clearance was also given by the Portuguese National Commission for Data Protection.

Our analytical inquiry (e.g., Sharp, Bye and Cusick 2019) reflects the recurrence of the body and bodily practices as a central topic in participants' reflexive narratives: from the subjective relationship with and feelings towards the body to the effective practices of bodily modification, from the role of the body in interaction and the downsides of misrecognition of the body as a site of contestation and resistance. The body and bodily experience are, therefore, central for participants in both countries.

Although we cannot claim to know all bodily journeys of becoming trans-masculine, nor linearly compare countries, we achieved our initial purpose and, even, a considerable saturation of the most common processes. Our assumption is supported by the comparison with former studies in the field (for instance, Devor 1997; or Ekins and King 2006). Without unintentionally incurring in "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008), we prioritized the participants' accounts of their bodily experiences of masculinization. Cross-country differences as well as variation in class, race and ethnicity, age or other element were considered when relevant or viable. Twenty-five participants are white; six are people of color. Blue collar workers are likewise underrepresented: only three Portuguese individuals have less than nine years of schooling (see Table 1).

Within our samples, the majority of participants self-define as man/male or as trans-man/trans-male, the latter primarily among British participants (12 out of 17). Among Portuguese participants, more self-define as men (5 out of 14). While most participants identify as a trans-man or as a man, some define themselves as non-binary masculine individuals, whether genderqueer, hybrid or gender fluid (4 participants in the UK and 5 in Portugal). Notably, rarely was a single definition enough to account for gender identity across life-

courses. Categories such as cross-dresser, drag-king or lesbian were often associated with former life stages.

Participants' ages range from 23 to 55 years old in the UK and 19 to 58 in Portugal. However, the majority of Portuguese participants are in their twenties (6) and thirties (4). In the UK, nine participants are 40 or older and just four are still in their twenties. The different age profile is well reflected in the length of transition processes (as self-stated). Indeed, the majority of British participants initiated their transition more than ten years ago. In contrast, among Portuguese participants, many are still in the earlier years of the transition, with just four stating that the process was initiated more than ten years before. Nonetheless, the majority (10) had legally changed their identification and undergone body modifications, largely through testosterone hormone therapy (11). In the UK, fifteen individuals had legally changed their name, and six had obtained a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC).⁵ The majority also had some degree of body modifications—fifteen participants had undergone hormone therapy.

Doing trans-masculinities

We explore how masculinity is produced in trans-masculine journeys according to the narratives of our research participants. Although multiple and diverse, the journeys of trans-masculine individuals demonstrate how lived bodily experiences shape and redefine masculinities in ways that illuminate the nexus between bodies, embodiments and discursive enactments of masculinity. Although gendered embodiments may often be achieved unwittingly, reflexive embodiments are key for building one's own masculinity. Indeed, in our

⁵ According to the British Gender Recognition Act of 2004, while changing identification documents (driver licenses, passports, etc.) implies a medical diagnosis, a Gender Recognition Certificate, which enables to legally change gender status for all purposes, including birth certificates, forces an evaluation by a Gender Recognition Panel composed of an administrative team and a judicial panel formed by legal and medical members.

view, bodily constitution grounds our sense of self since personal reflexivity is “relatively autonomous from and possesses causal efficacy in relation to structural or cultural properties” (Archer, 2007: 15). Therefore, it is only through bodily-reflexive practices that masculinity becomes a signifier and a materialized reality for self and others. Participants’ autobiographical narratives showed a range of meanings and interpretations of masculinity, the body emerges as a common ground for constructing and enacting masculinities.

In both the United Kingdom and Portugal, we discovered hybrid constructions of masculinity (in line with Abelson 2019) rather than an opposition between bodily conformity to and transgression of the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, rather than oppositions between material and discursive dimensions of masculinity, we found multiple and nuanced patterns of bodily-reflexive practices, with masculinization processes resulting from both material interventions to the body and internal conversations with oneself. Finally, rather than a linear opposition to the feminine and femininity (see Bauer, 2016), trans-masculine individuals expressed a more nuanced interpretation of the gender binary, and their own bodies. We identified three main tensions: between natural and technological, material and discursive, feminine and masculine. Along their journeys, trans-masculine individuals demonstrated how fragile these apparent distinctions are. Importantly, trans-masculine narratives reveal how the meanings of masculinity are constructed through, transformed by, and, ultimately, dependent upon body-reflexive practices.

Beyond natural and technological

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 851) note that “The need for a more sophisticated treatment of embodiment in hegemonic masculinity is made particularly clear by the issue of transgender practices.” While Connell’s (1995) practice-based conceptualization can avoid reducing masculinity to discourse or a symbolic construct, it leaves some important problems

unresolved, many of which have attracted degrees of criticism. The common conflation between masculinity and cisgender male bodies and practices (Hearn 2004) may produce reductionism, risking falling into what Connell (1987) critically labelled categoricalism. More, it might foster cisgenderist interpretations of masculinity as emanating from a body assigned male at birth. As Abelson (2019, 15) rightly contends, “the lack of focus by masculinities scholars on masculinities practiced by women or transgender people means that the field evidences a cisgender and biologically essentialist bias.”

In a sharp critique of biologicist essentialisms, Preciado (2013, 128) wrote that “in ontopolitical terms, there are only technogenders. Photographic, biotechnological, surgical, pharmacological, cinematographic, or cybernetic techniques come to construct the materiality of the sexes performatively.” In her landmark theorization of the cyborg, Donna Haraway had already defended that all bodies are necessarily biotechnological, both the object of multiple technological interventions and regulations and the product of biologicist discourses about the naturalness of “sex” (Haraway 1988, 591-592). In this sense, the great majority of our participants in both countries refused the idea of their body as a fake construct, supposedly opposed to the naturalness of cis-male bodies. For trans-masculine individuals, whether transsexual or genderqueer, there is no fakeness, but a variety of technologies (almost in a paraphrase of Marcel Mauss’ [1935] notion of technologies of the body) that enable the bodily construction of masculinity. In this sense, masculinity is above all a performative achievement materialized through a set of bodily-reflexive practices.

As Rubin also highlighted (2003), trans-masculine subjects are, individually, unitary, and significantly deny any division between natural/real and fabricated/fake. Our trans-masculine participants denied any “evil deceiving or make believing” (borrowing Bettcher 2007). For this reason, readjusting Preciado’s notion of technogenders (Preciado 2013, 128), we envisage all trans-masculinities (and cis-masculinities) as techno-masculinities. For some

trans-men, medical interventions to the body are deemed necessary, but for other participants, masculinity is achieved through techniques from hair styling and dressing to the performance of a reflexive bodily hexis. Moving and talking in a certain way constructs masculinity, after all. The embodiment of masculinity is not independent of bodily materiality. These bodily transformations, whether medicalized or not, construct masculinity.

Among our participants, trans-men who more closely self-identify with the medical categorization of transsexuality⁶ are more likely to draw on medical technologies. Usually, individuals undergo treatments such as genital surgery, wishing to “migrate” from one gender (assigned female at birth) to “the other”. Often declaring they were born in the “wrong body”, they emphasize bodily transformation as a means to become a man who can be publicly recognized as such, regardless of the years lived in a body perceived as female. Some participants still genitalize gender, even if this is an over-simplification (e.g., Edelman and Zimma 2014; Cotten 2012). As Ames (2005) noted, although the transsexual journey is a quest for the correct gender, it is also a journey of identity and self. Indeed, many individuals mix the medical construct with other discourses, displays and bodily-reflexive practices.

This is the case of Daniel (26, African-Portuguese, bachelor degree, painter and decorator). Daniel matches the canonical medical definition of transsexuality and felt trapped in the wrong body since childhood. Reverting the canons of biologicism, his female-born body was the fake one, the stage of a performative farce. His diagnosis was swift and unproblematic, as was hormonal treatment and mastectomy. Having achieved a male bodily appearance

⁶ Gender Dysphoria is defined by the DSM-5 as the “distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender” (APA, 2013:451). It is expected that changes in DSM will follow the alterations in ICD-11 adopted by the World Health Assembly in June 2019. The term Gender Dysphoria has been replaced by Gender Incongruence and is now placed under the umbrella of conditions relating to sexual health.

complete with beard and deep voice, his main problem is the lack of a penis, which he replaces with strap-ons. For him, masculinity will be achieved more permanently when genital surgery is completed. However, he defines himself as a man and masculinity is already inscribed in his body and hexis. Masculinity is reinforced by hormonal intake, which paved the way for a number of bodily-reflexive practices. Each new facial hair is a marker of masculinity. As an African-Portuguese, Daniel situates his masculinity within the realm of blackness, when asked about facial hair in particular:

But I want a beard! I really want a beard. It has to be real. Let it come right out of here, right now. But it is taking time... It is also often associated with darker skins... We have less [facial hair]. And Asians have practically none! Being like that, mulatto, which for me is a word that's not offensive at all - also explains my problem. I think that if I was like, for example, blonde, I would probably notice my beard more!

When inquired about masculinity, what mattered for Daniel was “gaining” a male body that could be seen as “genuinely” male and sexually functional. He strongly equates masculinity with stereotypical white cis-bodily maleness and emphasizes masculinizing traits, such as facial hair. In her historical study on race and beards, Stein (2015) demonstrates how stereotypes that black men lack facial hair still matter. Comparatively, more hirsute white European men would have a more visible masculinity legitimized by their beards.

For Daniel, performative or discursive strategies cannot provide what is lacking; only a reconstruction of the body itself will do, as emphasized by Rubin (2003). Without the body, Daniel's and many other participants' journeys towards masculinity loses its bearings.

Yet, masculinity remains diffuse and permeated by myriad normative references and styles. Certainly, many welcome the gains of masculinity – being perceived as men allows them a share of the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995; Schilt 2010). As Fernando (white Portuguese, 35, self-employed), says: “because we live in a heterosexist society, many people feel that I'm ascending in the social ladder; and that's mostly true.” Many also feel empowered

by masculinity, but without a bodily metamorphosis, the transition to becoming a man is not felt as complete. However, for participants who self-define as transsexual or genderqueer and non-binary alike, embodiments of masculinity always imply multiple bodily interventions. In an emic definition, masculinization processes are far from medicalized interpretations.

Conversely, some trans-masculine individuals extend the meaning of masculinity. They embody masculinity through redefining the conventional nexus between material body and discourse, between physical shape and gender categories. The absence of physical transformations and, at times, even of a perceivable masculinized bodily hexis, tends to disrupt “the political terms that are meant to establish a sure or coherent identity” and “are troubled by this failure of discursive performativity to finally and fully establish the identity to which it refers” (Butler 1993, 210). However, rather than just discursive performativity, bodily practices are key. It is through disconnection that acts of redefinition take place, regardless of potential misreadings. Indeed, despite the recent visibility of non-binary genders, our participants reported frequent misinterpretation. They also see it as a weapon against gender binarism and the normative restriction of masculinity to the stereotypical cis-male body. As all agree, gender is not about the body, although the material body serves the purpose of portraying an intended (dis)identification.

Lee (44, white Portuguese, university education, artist) identifies as non-binary and gender fluid, though he uses male pronouns, and recently changed his legal gender to masculine. As he declares:

I’m not a man, I’m not male. But I’m even less female, never been a girl, a woman. I’m definitely more masculine, I have a masculinity that I like, that is more me. I’m gender fluid and it varies a lot, but sometimes I feel really masculine and never feminine. I know this is just a stereotype, and that’s why I think I have my own gender and I need to express that. That’s why I use male pronouns. People don’t understand, but that’s my way of also trying to change things. It puts me in trouble a lot, but I have to do it.

Lee insists on redefining masculinity mainly as a range of gender identifications and performances that are seen as different from femininity, even if compatible with a stereotypical female-looking anatomy and outward appearance. Lee has undergone no hormonal or surgical procedures and presents himself, quite often, in stereotypical women's clothes. No make-up or pink dresses, but jeans and a sweater combined with long hair pulled into a ponytail complete his attire. For Lee, gender identification falls within the spectrum of masculinity, although masculinity seems hard to define outside the canon of heteropatriarchal hegemony. If masculinity can be conceived as hybrid and fluid, it might be even better expressed through a non-conforming body. As Lee notes, "breasts are just a piece of flesh, nothing more, and my gender is not just a piece of flesh". Lee is inventing a new masculinity through explicit disidentification. Following Muñoz's (1999, 31), disidentification is "about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning," and it uses the normative codes of dominant majorities "as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture (Muñoz, 31). Through this frame of reference, we can understand Lee's accounts of violence and misgendering. Lee describes being mistaken for a woman as both a negative experience and a positive effect of the rupture he is hoping to produce against normalization. As Lee states:

It's violent and at first, I felt depressed and humiliated. But now I try to use that for a better purpose. People are asleep and they need to be shocked, to be confronted. Of course, sometimes I'm afraid, for instance, sometimes I don't even go to the men's toilet, even with my ID to prove that I'm legally male and I have the right, but something bad can happen... but sometimes I go and don't care about the stares and when they take pot-shots at me. We have to shake things up, and they will not forget...

Denaturalizing postures entail apparent contradictions in the face of dominant archetypes. For Lee, changing masculinity is not enough if the overall gender binary remains untouched. Renaming one's gender seems more effective when the socio-normative ties that

impose a nexus between material and discursive bodily practices are broken. Disrupting the order of gender implies embracing the contradiction that emerges when material bodies seem at odds, for others, with gender identifications. Masculinity reflexive-embodiments can destroy that normative connection.

Beyond material and discursive

Many fields of scholarship, including the sociology of the body, new materialisms (e.g., Barad 2003), Connell's formulation of body-reflexive practices, and the critical developments of trans studies, center the linkages between material and discursive dimensions of gendered embodiments. Whether the body itself is material flesh or an image that acts upon materiality and resignifies the meaning of (in this case, masculine) bodies, as argued by Salamon (2010), the truth is that bodies' surfaces are where experiences of bodily images become inscribed, as put forward by Prosser (1998).

The medicalized codification of gender dysphoria is far too linear to accommodate the journeys of the vast majority of trans-masculine individuals. While it is true that some transsexual men described their body of birth as "wrong," for many of our participants the embodiment of masculinity implied connecting images of masculinity and their capacity to act upon the body through transforming practices. Masculinity is very often presented as a process of becoming, as an aspirational code learned through the body that cannot truly exist without body materiality. In our analysis, it was impossible to separate the material and the discursive. Even for individuals who demonstrate a degree of ambiguity between the desire for bodily masculinization and critical views on gender normalization, the body is a central agent. It must represent the desire for nonconformity. Only through gaining a material shape can masculinity be resignified far from hegemonic models.

Some trans-masculine individuals express queer self-identifications and hope to transcend the gender binary and reconstruct the meaning of masculinity outside any hegemonic pattern. As Derek (27, white British, university degree, care worker) mentions:

I often wonder if I lived in a world where I was able to be treated as male without changing my body, whether I would have bothered. I hated my breasts, but I think I only hated them because they marked me out socially as female. Where people look at me and would be unsure, they would usually start gendering me as male, then see my breasts and reassess...

Derek identifies as a non-binary trans-man, and seeks to transpose the conventional norms of gender while reinventing masculinity. He sees bodily masculinization as an image that must be carefully constructed through bodily practices of hybridization. Too much bodily masculinity might for some individuals create situations, often described as uncomfortable, of “passing in the eyes of others.”

Genderqueer as a discursive achievement that is opposed to the medically masculinized FtM transsexual is hard to find in real trans stories. Rather, discourse and materiality appear profoundly entangled in bodily constructions of masculinity. Against this backdrop, some criticize Connell’s theorization of masculinity for underemphasizing the role of reflexive subjectivity and agency (Waling, 2019). Yet, defining masculinity as a discursive practice (e.g., Wetherell & Edley 1999) pursued by the “constant engagement in those discursive practices of signification that suggest masculinity” (Whitehead 2002, 210) is not suitable either. From this angle, bodies would have little significance and masculinity would be essentially a discourse performed by undefined subjects, offering few tools to understand the bodily experiences of trans-masculine individuals (e.g., Prosser 1998, Rubin 2003, Cromwell 1999, heinz 2016, Abelson 2019).

Interpreting trans-masculine journeys through the lens of bodily reflexive practices might illuminate the various ways individuals construct and give meaning to their masculinity. For Prosser (1998, 72) and many of our participants, one can only feel “at home in one’s skin”

if material body and body image correspond. In many cases, however, “home” is a place of contradiction and multiplicity, where bodies might be interpreted under a new light as masculinity becomes independent from cisgender males and is performatively produced by different bodies (Bauer, 2016). In *Female Masculinities*, Halberstam (1998, 2) claimed that it was possible to do masculinity without (cis)men and that “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects”. Likewise, when Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) recognize that professional “bourgeois women” are nowadays appropriating masculinity, masculinity becomes detached from narrow essentialist interpretations and available to a wider number of individuals. However, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 842) also recognize, there are limits to discursive flexibility. Masculinity, we add, only comes to surface through bodily manifestations. Within the plural embodiments of trans-masculinities, we can observe how apparent contradictions engender new manifestations of masculinity. In this sense, masculinity is hardly a disembodied reality. It can, however, take many forms as masculine bodies are reinvented outside the canons of hegemonic masculinity.

Diniz (27, white Portuguese, university student), for instance, defines himself as a non-binary genderqueer FtM individual, with a “pansexual” orientation. Affiliated to queer activism, he is an active member of a “radical” LGBTIQ+ organization. He refuses all forms of gender conventionalism and binary categories. However, despite his critical political engagement, Diniz sought a medical diagnosis in order to access hormonal treatment and a mastectomy. Unsurprisingly, the contradiction between his ideological positioning and the requirements of the medical apparatus made it difficult for Diniz to adjust to medical standards of transsexual/transgender diagnosis. Before starting medical procedures in Portugal, he spent some time in a Scandinavian country, but disappointed with the medical system, migrated to Belgium, where he received a diagnosis that finally enabled him to change his legal name.

Diniz acknowledged that he now feels more like a man and wants to pursue further body modifications.

Likewise, Ayden (34, white British, Master degree, self-employed), does not vehemently reject the “route of surgery”. Ayden thinks he will, most likely, not need genital surgery as hormones and chest surgery were “just enough”. The feeling of bodily discrepancy ended after starting hormones, and now his body is “just functional for what I want it to be functional for, it does its job and it feels fine.” Ayden explains:

My body reflects my identity. It’s a mix, if anybody were to see me with no clothes on, it’s very clearly a mix and that reflects how I feel. I don’t have any issues with it regarding its original biological purpose, if you like, of childbirth. I don’t see it like that, it doesn’t affect me like that.

Juggling between FtM identities and the queer canon, both Diniz and Ayden find it difficult to construct a disembodied non-binary gender identity and try to justify their choices as non-conventional in terms of gender and masculinity. Interestingly, they seem quite aware of the privileges of masculinity. As Ayden recognizes: “trans guys get it easier, which is awful, because again it’s privilege. Both Diniz and Ayden reflexively state the structural gains of being a man as deeply rooted in the mere fact of looking like a conventional one. Once again, and against first impressions, the body gains ascendancy, even if discomfort is felt by both. As Ayden indicates, “identity is not permanent.” Even if it fluctuated and fluctuates still within the “realm of the masculine”, it is important to both participants to construct a body that represents a mix and adjusts to context, with a degree of malleability to being more masculine or hybrid as convenient. In this way, the body resists to harboring too much masculinity. Rather, they interpret the body as a site of resistance and contestation against all forms of normalization. Becoming more physically masculine, for them, involves resistance to “sexist masculinity” and being engaged in gender transformations. After all, a degree of bodily resistance to the “excesses of cis masculinity” is a way out from reproducing “toxic

masculinity”, which many feel is their task to challenge and transform. As far as possible, the desire for bodily masculinity is in tandem with the refusal of hegemonic masculinity.

Beyond masculinity and femininity

For Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity is constructed against femininity and subordinate masculinities. Women and gay or effeminate men are stripped of power and are the main object of patriarchal domination. As Connell wrote in 1987, “It is the global subordination of women to men that provides an essential basis of differentiation” (1987: 113). Scholars later re-evaluated the hierarchical model that opposed masculinity to femininity as too simple (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846–7). In the face of challenges posed by LGBTIQ+ rights and women’s liberation, the authors recognized that “Clearly, better ways of understanding gender hierarchy are required” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 847). Trans-masculine journeys are a central example of how masculinity can be constructed in alliance with femininity in ways that call for both renewed forms of conceptualizing masculinity and gender and measuring transformations in patterns of hierarchization beyond the binary model of masculine versus feminine.

Evidencing the entanglement between femininity and masculinity, some trans individuals embrace their feminine inheritance. They seem to closely tie bodily-reflexive practices of masculinization to their past “lived as a woman”, as Brian (36, white British, bachelor degree, sales clerk) notes. Rather than an eraser of femininity, they slowly discover masculinity along the journey of bodily transformation. Brian weaves together elements of masculinity with elements typically associated with femininity, often resisting stereotypical cis-masculinity by queering his gender expression (Corwin 2017). As Brian notes:

I do like fairly typically masculine clothes and presentation, beard and things. In other aspects of my life, I would say I do resist certain elements of masculinity, so, for example, I like rosé

wine (...) I think there are some cultural expectations which I actively resist being sucked into and sometimes I look at cisgender men and think, well actually you are being sucked into that (...) in terms of my physical gender expression and presentation I am pretty standard, but I went through a kind of explorational thought process of maybe I should look a bit more queer – more trans.

Another exemplary case is that of António (26, white Portuguese, bachelor degree, life coach). António has struggled to get his transsexuality (“gender dysphoria”) diagnosis for the past five years. As he says, he is a “nine out of ten” in his own perception of what it means becoming a man. He always felt he was not a woman, though he was not completely certain of his condition or desires. As a bisexual trans-man divided between medical knowledge and queer formulations of identity, he found it difficult to make sense of himself. He started hormonal treatment, a step that left him extremely proud of his physical transformation. Each hair on his body “is a victory” and he says masculinity is “growing” on him. He does not see a penis as mandatory, as for him masculinity is not so dependent upon stereotypical full bodily maleness, but he sees a masculine attire as key and plans a mastectomy in the near future. Like Brian, António does not wish to forget or deny his past, even if he needs a quantum of bodily maleness. Aside from the body, to him masculinity seems an obscure topic. António explicitly notes that he will know what it means when his body is further transformed. As he reckons, the body will play its part and teach him how to be masculine, or, in his own words, “what a man really is”. Refusing stereotypes, he waits for the revelation through the body. He learns masculinity as his body slowly changes and can only enact it in that same measure—not against femininity, but as a construction set upon a body with a gender history that cannot be erased.

For many, being interpreted as masculine through body and discourse is important, though they are sometimes uncomfortable if they feel too much pressure to conform to a conventional male body configuration. For London (44, African-British, university education, unemployed), a non-binary person with trans-masculine experience, gender is both personal

and political. London recalls initial experiences of discomfort with their “female-looking” body shape in many social circumstances from daily interactions to work environments and even trans activist settings.

I was very aware of my discomfort at T with my breasts, which was highly unlikely to be coming from some issue from myself, so I was reacting to something that I perceived, something that was exclusionary. It felt quite upsetting and I was a little bit angry, hurt, put out, I sensed wanting to say “how dare you”!

Like Brian and António, London is committed to changing gender stereotypes and redefining both masculinity and trans-masculinity. For London, the body can be the teacher in their gender journey towards masculinity.

If you don’t talk about what it means to be a man, then we can’t help but start adopting bits of nonsense and stereotyping. We will grab from the cisgender world, the gay man world and then how we treat women, everything will become horribly skewed. There is evidence of that weirdness, probably as much from the LGBT as from the cisgender world and how we are perceiving woman and trans-woman.

London’s aspirations are lived through the body. As they assert:

Fluidity is a massive issue and also people being comfortable with fluidity and changes and not seeing it as “oh you are confused and haven’t made your mind up”. I have thought on and off for years about having my breasts removed and stuff, I mean it is fine that they are there, but it would also be quite nice for them not to be, but I wouldn’t do it, because I am not remotely interested and that’s great that I no longer worry about it, it’s fine.

For London, redefining gender and masculinity implies transforming the gender order, and that can only be achieved by disrupting the apparent stability of the gender binary and its parameters of bodily differentiation between feminine and masculine. In this sense, masculinity and femininity cannot and should not be opposed.

Conclusion

While recent literature describes the plurality of trans lives and identities (e.g., Ekins and King 2006; Stryker and Whittle 2006; Hines and Sanger 2010; Brubaker 2016; Halberstam 2018; Pearce et al. 2019, amongst others) and investigates the plurality of trans masculinities (e.g., heinz 2016; Abelson 2019; Rogers 2020), we underline the centrality of bodies and embodiments in the construction of masculinities. In line with previous research on trans-masculinities, this study reiterates that trans-masculinities are significantly plural, hybrid and not especially associated with any particular style of masculinity. In both Portugal and the United Kingdom, trans-masculinity seemed stripped from any clear definition or ideological content that might be linearly related to hegemonic constructions of masculinity (Paechter 2006). The ground was more fertile when, inductively following the narratives of trans-masculine individuals, we inquired about the doings of masculinity.

As we sought to demonstrate, masculinity can be more clearly defined when it is not naturalized as emanating from a cis-male body. Although masculinity is not located in (nor confined to) the body, as Halberstam (1998) or Preciado (2013) noted, it cannot be understood without considering the materiality of bodies, regardless of their diversity and transformations. Trans-masculine individuals within our British and Portuguese samples embody masculinity in multiple ways through different patterns of bodily practices. Nonetheless, they share a view of the reflexive labor of the body as an expression of masculinity. Whatever their style of masculinity, the bodily experience produces it. For that reason, we argue that bodily-reflexive practices are always the first and foremost dimension for the embodiment and materialization of masculinity.

The journeys of trans-masculine individuals in this study demonstrate how lived bodily experiences shape and redefine masculinities, beyond the linear oppositions that are still pervasive in interpretations of gender embodiments. Tensions between natural and

technological, material and discursive or feminine and masculine were particularly relevant for understanding trans-masculine narratives about the body, embodiment and identity. Along the journey, bodily-reflexive practices construct trans-masculinities in ways that render these distinctions ill-suited to account for the real lives of subjects. Emphasizing the reflexive dimension of body practices produced more promising results. While body-reflexive experience is necessary for masculinity to gain shape, masculinity can be deeply reinvented when individuals seek to deconstruct the linkages between cis-normative bodily maleness and masculinity. New avenues can open for embracing the complicity between femininity and masculinity, in ways that are neither domination nor appropriation, but, instead, give center-stage to non-binary enactments of masculinity. In this sense, each act of deconstruction depends on the body to produce disruption and redefinition. Among our participants, the rereading of the body often implies an intensive reflexive bodily labor. The body is, after all, via bodily-reflexive practices, both the bearer and the agent of masculinity.

Preciado (2013) is not wrong when he writes that masculinity is just one of many potential by-products of testosterone. However, discursive practices are not enough, either. Doing masculinity cannot be reduced to a text, a recitation, or even to performative exaggeration, as argued in some versions of queer contributions. Rather, playing with Butler's famous title (Butler 1993), bodies do matter not only because discursive practices produce materialization, but also because they have a material agency and a shape, defining self-perception and perception by others. Otherwise, even unreadable and abjected bodies could not challenge the regulatory norms of gender and gain political agency. Bodies matter, after all.

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