I began to be free
A Study on Two Trans-active Finnish Men
Titel: Jag började vara fri. En studie av två trans-aktiva finska män

Title: I began to be free. A study on Trans-active Finnish Men

Abstract
This study focuses on Finnish transmen and their life stories. It goes through the practical reality of the gender re-assignment process, but focuses on the personal experiences of two individual men. The study is based on in-depth interviews with informants, material which has been analyzed with the help of Judith Butler’s theory on gender.

Sammanfattning
Den här uppsatsen handlar om två finska transmän och deras livshistorier. Studien går igenom den praktiska realiteten av könskorrigeringsprocessen, men fokuserar på de personliga erfarenheterna av dessa två individuella män. Den är baserad på djupintervjuer med informanter, material som har analyserats med hjälp av Judith Butlers teori om genus.

Keywords: Transmen, transgender, gender re-assignment, Judith Butler, queer

Nyckelord: Transmän, transgender, könskorrigering, Judith Butler, genus
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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii

Sammanfattning .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents ....................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1

Statement of Purpose ................................................................................................................. 1

Method ........................................................................................................................................... 2

Terminology ................................................................................................................................. 3

Disposition .................................................................................................................................... 4

Presentation of trans .................................................................................................................... 5

Gender re-assignment process – what is it? ............................................................................... 6

Transgender practices throughout the world: The Berdache ...................................................... 9

Transgender in the Finnish context ............................................................................................ 10

In the Life of a Transman ............................................................................................................ 12

Life before .................................................................................................................................. 13

Alienation before discovery ....................................................................................................... 16

Discovery and action .................................................................................................................... 18

Operating post-operation ........................................................................................................... 21

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 26

Bibliography .............................................................................................................................. 27
Introduction

Gender is something we tend to take for granted. It is something that defines us from the very moment of our birth – sometimes even before we are born. Whether you are classified as a boy or a girl will have an impact on your possibilities in life. What if you were born a boy, always felt like a boy, but were treated as a girl by those around you? What if the role of a girl was single-handedly forced upon you? This study focuses on such people: transmen.

Transmen possess a stable gender identity of a man, but they have at some point in their lives have had the bodily form of a female. If you were to meet a transman in the streets – at a store or perhaps a party – it is highly unlikely you would notice anything different about them. It is not their current bodily form or gender representation that makes them step away from the norm. It is only their past that makes them differ from any other man.

Transgenderism and variations in gender identity can be found in cultures all over the world. The utilities for handling differing gender representations vary between these cultures – some outright ban and punish them, while some try to categorize them to make them fit in. Native Americans have Berdache (Lyons and Lyons 2005: 298), Indians have their gender-crossing Hijras (Ibid: 310) and in Tahiti there are the Mahu (Ibid: 285). These are accepted, institutionalized forms of transgender, even though its terminology is not fully interchangeable with the Western transgender phenomena. Only until as of late, in the West, cross-dressing and gender-bending has mostly been acceptable only in the theatre world. Today, however, several Western countries have their own treatment policies on how to deal with transgender individuals. In Finland, there has been an organization – TRASEK, working together the Finnish Sexual Equality Organization SETA, solely for the rights different gender minorities since 1984. (Hannuksela and Tölli 1998: 29)

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my study is to find out through conduction of in-depth interviews how two Finnish transmen relate to their life and identity in relation to the gender re-assignment process. Even though on paper the process seems straightforward and linear every individual
has their own version of what happens in reality – pre- and post-transition. My aim is to present you with an image of the version of the two men that I have interviewed.

**Method**

My study relies largely on two interviews I carried out with two transmen in Finland in August 2008. I found these men by asking an admin to post a request on ftmforum.org, which is a closed internet community for transmen. Both of these interviews were in Finnish and thus the quotes that are seen in this study have been translated by me. The names of the men have been changed and any information that might endanger their anonymity has been suspended or changed. The interviews were conducted on the two interviewees’ own terms. Both of the interviews took place in spaces chosen by the informants’ themselves and took about an hour and a half to complete.

Even though I had an approximate interview guide with points and themes that I wished to take up during the course of the interview, I let the interviewees control the situation and focused most of all on the issues that they themselves wished to talk about. It was the specific personal experience of an individual I wished to find out, so it was important to limit my control over the situation as much as possible and so I chose to apply an unstructured interview method. As I wanted to get to know what the men really had gone through, their personal experience, and hear about their lives, it seemed necessary to maintain a high level of informality. (Agar 1996: 140)

The reason for choosing to interview no more than two people is that it enables me to have a much more in-depth look at their lives. I acknowledge that it is not possible to form any kind of large trends or social patterns from the result of this research, but this is not necessary anyway. My meaning is rather to give a glimpse into what it can be to be a transman. It seemed most interesting to me to be able to study two cases closely than several cases on the surface. The results cannot represent transcommunity as a whole or the collective experience of other transmen – they merely represent two individual experiences. These individuals’ unique journey is what is interesting.

As for theory, I will be utilizing Judith Butler and her three books *Gender Trouble* (1999), *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). The key concepts she uses are the
performativity of gender, transgressive gender and the heterosexual matrix. According to Judith Butler, gender is a performance, an act that every individual is compelled to execute. (Sönser Breen and Blumenfield [ed.] 2005: 29) Gender-crossing is a transgressive gender performance, it goes beyond the dichotomies of the two major gender roles. Heterosexual matrix is what defines the lines between what is normal and abnormal – it is the hegemonic structure or grid surrounding all that is social. (Ibid: 131) I find it necessary to point out from the very beginning that gendering is not something anyone knowingly executes. Judith Butler herself writes:

The “activity” of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a willful appropriation, and it is certainly not a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible ...

(Butler 1993: 7)

Terminology
The long-used term for the individuals I wish to study is transsexual, but I find this word to be outdated and highly problematic. The Finnish equivalent for the word transsexual (transseksuaali), has recently been battled against by transgender interest groups and it is right now being replaced with the word transsukupuolinen¹. (URL 1) The term transgendered, though on the surface similar to the Finnish word, refers in its English meaning more to the people that find themselves comfortable in between genders, or merely live out their experienced identity socially, without necessarily wishing for any kind of corrective surgery or other medical treatment. In addition, transgender is used as an umbrella term for several different out-of-norm variations of gender. It is also notable that in Finnish terminology, the word transgender is solely used to describe people outside these two common gender norms. The word I will be mostly using to refer in general to the people that want to or have undergone gender reassignment surgery is transpeople. The social network and organizations that are involved I will be referring to as transcommunity and individual subjects of each

¹ “Sukupuoli” means physical gender, similar to the Swedish word “kön”, the Swedish version of the world being, though rarely used, transkönad.
attributed gender *transmen* (female-to-male or FtM) and *transwomen* (male-to-female or MtF).

**Disposition**

I first aim to introduce you to the subject by briefly explaining the transphenomena and which part of the wide variety I am focusing on. The chapter *Presentation of trans* includes an approximate description of how the gender re-assignment process looks like in practice – that is, the different phases does the individual have to go through. In *Transgender practices throughout the world* I will also show that there are, indeed, other ways that other cultures have used to deal with variations in gender representation.

*In the life of the transman* is a chapter based on my own empirical work, that is to say the interviews I have conducted. Judith Butler’s theory will be used to clarify the interviews. I begin by briefly presenting the interviewees and their backgrounds, and then delve deeper into their lives. The structure of this chapter can be said to be chronological – as it moves from early childhood to youth to adulthood and discovery of identity resulting in the actual process and transformation, finally ending with adaptation or assimilation to the male culture. Finally, the results of my study will be summed up in *Conclusions.*
Presentation of trans

My study focuses on transmen. Transmen are people who were born embodying the physical form of a female but identify more or only with the male gender. They have felt uneasiness in their pre-described gender role, and have been gender-crossing all their lives. These men want to undergo all treatment available to be able to correct the physical gender of their body to match their gender identity and thus be able to live their lives as normal, fully-functioning males.

The word gender refers to, as is widely accepted, the cultural construction of sex. This is, however, not the whole truth:

> Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. (Butler 1999: 11)

In using the word gender, and by refusing to use the word sex, I already make use of Butler’s theory of gender as a regulated performance. These regulations are all inscribed in a matrix through which our gender, our self comes into being. The way I see it, the regulations for transmen, before entering transition, were incorrect; they have been punished for a behavior that was not in accordance with their gender identity, but only the outside world’s perception of their gender.

What stands in focus for my thesis, more than mere biological gender, is the social construction of gender. The phenomenon of transgender, and especially the aim for physical re-arrangement of gender, can be seen to challenge the idea of gender being solely construction, but in addition to the surgical change, much, if not most, of the trans-experience is associated with the social aspect of gender representation, passing. Passing is an important term in queer culture. A gay man may attempt to pass as a straight man, or a transgendered person as either gender. For transpeople, the term can be more serious. A transman wants to pass as the gender he perceives as his own, he wants to be seen as a man, which is his true identity. Why would you need to try to pass as something you already are?
Society must see a woman; otherwise, sex-change surgery or not, one cannot be a woman. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006:323)

Most of all, the concept of passing is needed to materialize the state before you pass – once you do, it becomes almost meaningless. Pre-transition, the society does not see the man that a transman really is. Others see a person with indefinable gender identity, a gender-crossing individual or, in the worst case, a woman. The graded passing is situated in a time between an individual’s failure and success in gender performance. Successful transman loses his status as a transman and he becomes simply a man. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 323)

The Finnish society, much like many other countries, is built on those dichotomies that are seen to exist between a man and a woman. Most of the daily lives of the individuals living in this society consist of constantly reproducing their gender and being surrounded by forces that regulate presentations gender. Even though transgenderism can be seen to question these norms, it can also provide with the comforting idea that people are indeed born with a gender that includes certain inscribed ways of behavior and preferences, but that this gender may not always be connected to the body. The transgender phenomenon can so be used to both support and disarm heteronormativity. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006:561)

**Gender re-assignment process – what is it?**

Gender re-assignment process can be viewed as a medical ritual for purifying the body. (Bolin: 1988) The social pressure on any single person is of such magnitude that it seems impossible for anyone to build his identity completely unrelated to those around them, no matter what his instincts may say. A body that does not appear to match the identity can be seen impure; even monstrous, while at the same time correcting the body, ie. clipping off organs and other unsuitable body parts could be classified as morbid – a drastic but reproductive form of self-mutilation. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 557) Even though my study explicitly does not focus on the medical aspects of the transexperience, I feel that in order to understand the background of transmen, it is essential to know what the process looks like in practice.

The Finnish Trans Support Center lists five phases to gender re-assignment for transmen (six for transwomen). It is important to remember that these phases, though presented in linear manner, do overlap. The five phases are, as listed:
Before being able to enter the transition process, transmen are usually diagnosed for Gender Identity Disorder (GID), which is a psychiatric condition. (Ibid.) Another name for the condition is gender dysphoria (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 14). That is to say, transmen are classified as mentally ill. This is a highly problematic issue, as Judith Butler writes, since to be diagnosed as mentally ill is often an extremely stigmatized matter. (Butler 2004: 79) However, in order to receive full benefits from the state for completing the treatments, it is necessary to classify transgenderism as an illness and gender re-assignment process as its verified cure – this is an issue that my interviewees took up as well and I will bring up later on. There are three qualifications that have to be met before entering the procedure. These are:

A. Will to live and be accepted as a member of the opposite gender. Usually this includes a wish to receive surgical and hormonal treatment in order to transform one’s own body to resemble the wished gender as much as possible.
B. The transsexual identity has been stable for at least two years.
C. It is not a symptom of another mental disorder, for example schizophrenia or chromosomal oddity. [translated from Finnish]

A gender re-assignment process is tightly guarded by the gatekeepers - medical-mental health professionals. The process is for free, but in order to qualify, the individuals must go through several tests and attend therapists. There are two hospitals in Finland, HUS and TAYS, that have a separate specialized transunits, these being situated in two of the largest towns in Finland – Helsinki and Tampere. (URL 4)
The first actual step towards the actual gender re-assignment, after completion of the tests, is hormonal treatment. It is important to monitor individuals before, because some of the features gained from the treatment are irreversible. The hormonal treatments are, as also pointed by one of my informants, perhaps the most influential and desired part of the whole process. For transmen, the effects include (but are not limited to): menstruation stops, voice becomes lower, body hair increases and clitoris grows in size. (Ibid.) The effects seem subtle in the beginning, but in practice they make a great impact on the life of the transitioning individual. With the help of the hormones, it is now possible for the transman to pass as a male in social encounters and so begins the real life test. In theory it is possible to attempt to live socially as a man already before hormonal treatment, but in practice it is impossible in most cases.

After beginning hormonal treatment, becoming a man in a juridical sense is possible. The law says one can change your legal gender if one:

1. Is able to present a medical clearance that he feels to belong to the opposite sex and that he, according, lives in the given gender role as well as that he has been sterilized or that he is, for another reason, unable to reproduce.

2. is of legal age.

3. Is not married or in civil partnership,

4. Is a citizen of Finland or is living in Finland. (URL 5)

There is a possibility to overcome the rule on marriage with a written confirmation from the spouse.

Some people are content with just hormonal treatment, but for transmen to pass it is often necessary to perform mastectomy, that is to say breast removal, which can be performed before or during hormonal treatment. Breast removal is discreet, and not performed with a T cut, that is commonly used for treatment of breast cancer. (Lecture with Gunnar Kratz) The final surgical procedure to be performed is the reconstruction genitalia, which is however such a risqué procedure that many choose not to go through with it.
Even though presented as the final point on Finnish Trans Support Center’s list, “Voluntary support services”, is not to be diminished but seen in fact as one of the main aspects of the process. These organizations include most of all SETA (Organization for sexual equality) and TRASEK (a transgender interest association) and these often work as the first contacts transpeople have to the transcommunity. (Hannuksela and Töllö 1997:29) These two channels are used for finding out information on the phenomenon and most importantly, perhaps, for establishing contact with other transpeople. After the procedure is already done, or almost done, some men find it unnecessary to stay active in interest organizations, as one of my informants put it, they “want to just live their lives.”

Transmen are today able to get treatment that potentially makes them indistinguishable from any man. This treatment includes therapy, hormones and surgeries. It is important, however, to remember gender re-assignment process is not only a clinical procedure. The person who is the main actor in the process of gender re-assignment is the transperson her/himself.

**Transgender practices throughout the world: The Berdache**

Variations in gender identity and presentation are in no way tied to a specific time or place. It is safe to say that they are a reoccurring phenomenon all over the world, only at times more or less hidden. Gender representations vary unaffected by class, ethnicity or any other background factor. (Stryker&Whittle [ed.] 2006:364) Even if mixing the social practices of the genders, gender-crossing, may be a common factor in several cultures, there are various differing methods as to how a society can cope with the variations. We know now that within the Western context, the most frequently used method is GID diagnosis which is succeeded by a gender re-assignment process and ends in normalization of the individual. I have already mentioned Berdache, Hijras and the Mahu – it is Berdache I have decided to use as an example of the problematic of seeing transgender as a cross-cultural phenomena.

*Berdache* is an institution of South America well-documented by anthropologists. It is not a single category of a certain tribe, but rather a classifying umbrella term assigned for various different systems of several Native American tribes by colonialists (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 208), for example Basongye of Kasai have kiteshas (Lyons and Lyons 2004: 272), the Mohave have alyhas and hwame (Ibid: 257) and so on. The substance of the category of
berdache differs from tribe to tribe – it may involve acts that we could identify as transgenderism, transvestism or homosexuality.

The use of terms like transgender in this context is problematic in itself, as it cannot be said that the institutions dealing with gender variations and their members are interchangeable or can be equated with the concepts that are used to describe the Western phenomena. As Towle and Morgan point out in their article *Romancing The Transgender Native* (in Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 679), “all societies demand a certain degree of gender consistency and conforminity to the prevailing norms.” The prevailing norms, of course, may and do differ – including the possibility for two or more gender roles.

**Transgender in the Finnish context**
There are two major organizations working for the rights gender minorities in Finland – as previous mentioned. TRASEK and Trans Support Centre work as a community for transpeople, as well as a gateway to gender re-assignment process. These institutions also inform and educate people on issues related to transgender. Despite the work of these two organizations, it does often seem that transgenderism is no more than a mere oddity in the minds of the public.

At the time of my interviews there was a controversy that was sensationalized in the Finnish media and described in great detail. I followed this scandal closely. In short, a vicar of the Finnish Lutheran church (which is the main church of Finland), came out publicly as a transwoman. Different newspapers of course picked up this eagerly and the matter was discussed widely. This issue was so important, that both of my informants took it up during their respective interviews.

What caused most problems was the language that the newspapers used. My informants mentioned that practically every major media company used the term "sex change", a term which is offensive and outdated, and most of all inaccurate. It certainly shows the ignorance that still persists in the Finnish media when it comes to transissues and gender in general. Transpeople are still viewed as peculiarities and the phenomenon is not taken seriously. The male culture in Finland is rather conservative and tightly guarded.
In the Life of a Transman

Life is seldom linear and logical, and seldom do things have a single cause. The transition of a transman can never be separated from his past. It is apparent that the two men I have interviewed were transgressing gender all their lives, from early childhood up until the very point they could finally call themselves “real men” and pass full-time. What does it mean to be outside of such a fundamental norm all of one’s life, but then, at a point – be able to live fully, perhaps for the first time in one’s life?

As Judith Butler puts it, already the moment of exclaiming "It's a girl!" - often the very first words used to describe the new human being, places the individual within the gender norm, and ultimately the heterosexual matrix. (Butler 1993: 231) Even if there is no “person” who takes on a gender norm and it is not so that an individual willingly takes upon the role by choice, it is by gendering he is made human. (Butler 1993: 7) Butler writes:

"Femininity [sic] is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment."

(Butler 1993: 232)

These men have, all their lives, been "disciplined, regulated and punished" on their failed portrayal of the feminine norm and it is only through the physical and social transformation, that they can, in fact, feel that this disciplination (because it still will occur, of course) is good and fair. Their self-identity has been that of a male, while for the outside world, their bodily form has remained feminine and so, the act of regulation has been wrongly directed. Post-transition, their regulated gender as well is that of male and matches with their own perception of self-identity.

For the purpose of my study, I have conducted interviews with two Finnish transmen, whom I call Mikko and Alex. Both of these men, at the time of the interviews in 2008 were employed, lived in a relatively large Finnish town, and were over 30 years old. Both of these men already pass full-time in their everyday lives and have most of their surgeries and treatments behind them. In order to provide with a more personal image of the men, I have compiled a short presentation of each them:
Mikko is an extremely individualistic extrovert. He is in his mid-thirties and having started his process relatively long time ago, most of his treatments were already done by the time I met him. He grew up in a religious, working-class home and his conservative family made it especially difficult for him to find his identity. Even though he began his life and adulthood isolated, he now enjoys his social work place.

Alex is a man in his thirties, though you would never guess he is a day over 25. He has felt like a boy for long and now is taking his first steps to real manhood and all its responsibilities. He has an upper middle class background, but broke away from the strict norms set by his family background quite early on and decided to follow his passion instead and he now works within the educational field. He has been in the gender re-assignment process for some years and most of the procedures are in his past. Even though he is somewhat active in the transcommunity, he mostly wants to focus on his new life as a heterosexual man.

These two stories are quite different in the way that Alex had knowingly attempted to succeed in his femininity and failed, whereas Mikko described himself as relatively gender neutral but suffering because of the female identity that was forced upon him. Alex emphasized gender as something that comes from within, while Mikko was more inclined to support the view of it as a social role. However, as it turns out, they do have several things in common.

Life before

Life before school, for both Alex and Mikko, had been relatively easy. Children are allowed much freedom in their presentations of gender, and as Alex pointed out during our interview, children of both genders look pretty much the same - it is mostly the pink color or the occasional skirt that distinguishes femininity from masculinity. Children are usually not required to know how the two genders operate socially, and for girls being a tomboy is not a negatively stigmatized category (as a contrast, I want to point out that in Finnish, there exists no such category for feminine boys). Alex had not been forced to act as a girl in his childhood. He recalls getting the toys that he asked for. He pointed out specifically that the toys he played were explicitly not dolls.
Consider where precisely the norm operates when David claims, “I looked at myself and said I don’t like this type of clothing.” To whom is David speaking? And in what world, under what conditions, does not liking that type of clothing provide evidence for being the wrong gender?

(Butler 2004: 70)

Mikko grew up in a deeply-religious family. His mother, especially, was extremely conservative, but the significance of dress or a skirt is not limited to a conservative background. The traditional horror image of a mother that forces a skirt on the poor little transboy was replicated in both of the informants’ lives. In this context, the skirt becomes more than a piece of cloth – it becomes a symbol for oppressed gender representation. Alex says:

Clothing… That was the only thing that came [to be a problem]. At times you had to go to a fancy party and then you had to put the dress on. It was like that I would just wait for the moment I got home and could put the trousers on.

Alex

It is not until a social context where gender is forced upon you that you feel that your preference for one thing or another is what makes you succeed or fail in the performance of your gender identity. Beginning school is a time when these conflicts multiply. With the presence of other children, Alex and Mikko were able to see that they do not function exactly like the other boys and girls do. Already at the age of ten Mikko is very clear about where he stands when it comes to social behavior:

I played with the boys so I was like tough, rough. The girls were afraid of me. (laughs) … if [I have to hang with the girls], it won’t do – I would rather be alone. I never felt I had anything in common with girls at any point. Never.

And then I already thought: “Well, I must be a bit strange.”

Mikko

Social relations are compulsory at school and these social relations are of course strongly gendered and regulated – so strongly that any step away from normativity can potentially be punished. (Butler 1993: 232) The boys – though then still socially treated as girls most of all the time - began noticing they are not quite like the others. Mikko was teased, not severely,
but still enough for him to want to mention it to me. Alex’ problems began to culminate in the high school world.

I never told anyone about it, it was my secret. And well, I somehow felt guilty because of this so that I am somehow sick or I should be like this and that but I am doing it. And then I thought I will grow out of it and it will disappear on its own.

Alex

Puberty is not easy for anyone, and it brought its conflicts upon both Alex and Mikko and at this time there were troubles both in school as well as at home. Alex had a lot of problems at home, unrelated to his gender dysphoria, and his body's transformation to the wrong direction did not make things any easier for him. He had had male friends, but as the boys grew older, romantic feelings started to complicate things. He had no romantic interest in the male gender, and the boys had a difficult time staying just friends. When it comes to having female friends, the problem was reversed – this time it was Alex who fell in love. So he began to get isolated from other people.

Mikko, too, was spending more and more time alone. The boys did not want him, and he experienced that the girls hung out with him only for pity. Mikko found this extremely humiliating, and, as he had already decided in his childhood, would rather be alone than be with girls. In fact, he had developed almost a hate for all girls, which he would, however, get rid of with the help of the re-assignment process. Home was not much better, in fact, home was possibly even worse. He desperately wanted to move out. And both Alex and Mikko did move out, at a relatively young age – before their twenties. But childhood’s troubles had its consequences:
But it did leave its marks that they tried to put a skirt on by force and such. … I was just asked last week about what has been the hardest thing and what has left its marks. I have a hard time [showing the real me], in a real way, like: “Hey, this is how I feel!” There is like a lock inside of me. But maybe it will go away with time.

Mikko

**Alienation before discovery**

When Brenda looks in the mirror and sees something nameless, freakish, something between the norms, is she not at that moment in question as a human, is she not the spectre of the freak against which and through which the norm installs itself?

(Butler 2004: 69)

The period before discovery or acceptance of the true gender identity is marked with a strong sense of alienation. It is just this namelessness that Butler describes that had been a reason for a great distress for both Alex and Mikko. Being outside of norms is often a curse, and being stuck outside of a set of norms as foundational as the heterosexual matrix is on a borderline to lethal. Suicide rates for untreated transpeople are worryingly high.

It was like isolating myself - which is usual, I’ve heard, with other transmen as well. But I was missing people. I had a great longing.

Mikko

Alex recalls a time before he had begun with his gender reassignment when he had been looking at himself in the mirror and not seeing himself, but someone else or rather - something else. Alex had a multitude of personal problems and frequented psychologists. Though never taking up his unease within the given gender role, he was diagnosed for various mental disorders. He was unhappy, to say the very least:

I have, for a long time thought that you always have to feel bad and always feel alienated.

Alex
While Alex’ bad feeling manifested itself in seemingly irresolvable mental symptoms Mikko actively isolated himself from social encounters. He took up a job as a guard and mostly worked night shifts – just because he did not stand to be around other people. He recalls days when he had trouble just going outside during the day or taking the bus. Other people simply annoyed him, to the point where he did not wish to have any contact with people, whatsoever:

I didn’t go to work during the day because I didn’t feel like I belong with those people. At one point it was very irritating to just have to be around those people.

Mikko

Discomfort with your own body is what came up several times during the interviews. Alex recalls an occurrence in his past when his friend – a girl – had insisted on putting on makeup and styling him. This happened before his entry to the process. After some persuasion, he had agreed, but:

When I looked at myself in the mirror – the male me said that – “That’s a transvestite. I look just like a transvestite!” I was just thinking that “a man in makeup”. You know?

Alex

Despite his apparent dissatisfaction with the results of the stylizing, he did not want to hurt the girl’s feelings and so he went out to party in town in his feminized form. Feeling so out of place in this mask that was forced upon him, he was wondering if the others might be able to point out that he does not belong:

Then all the time I thought that those other people must see that this is a man in makeup. I was expecting someone to say something.

Alex

Of course no one said a thing. It was not other people’s perception of his gender that was troubling – it was his own discomfort in operating within it. Alex’ attempts to carry out the feminine role were highly unsatisfying. In the end, he "understood that being a woman does not lead to anything. ... Those inner feelings will not go anywhere." And so began the process towards transition.
Well, [before] I heard for the first time that there exists such people as transpeople … before that I knew – I was just wondering – what am I and if I am crazy / ... /

Mikko

**Discovery and action**

When I heard these words and I got to know what they mean I was first like ”Wow!”; that I’m not some wacko after all. That there are others like this.

Mikko

It is only through self-realization that self-actualization can begin – thus the adoption of a translabel is dependent on information. Even though, or perhaps because, our society is practically built upon the performance of gender, deeper knowledge of its variations is not freely available. The norm is so powerful that all else is unthinkable. Both of my informants blamed their ignorance on the subject for their relatively late discovery of identity. Discovery and eventual adoption of an identity as a transman was a clear turning point for both Alex and Mikko. The process included, first of all, finding the terminology, defining it and meeting others to relate to. When Mikko is first confronted with the terminology, he is puzzled:

I was asked if I am trans or intergendered and I said: “What are those?” I had never even heard of it.

It is evident that right away when Mikko had heard of the concepts he had a thirst for more knowledge, and found his answers mostly online – and when he finally understood them he was overjoyed. For Alex, it seemed, it was rather so that the words that he was already somewhat familiar with had simply seemed too frightening:

And then [when] at one point I started to get more information on these things at first I was like “Nooo...” I was somehow terrified by the whole thing.

Alex

Finally, it is, however, a relief for him to see himself in something, to be able to be understood and share his lifestory, and so he adds:

… But then, little by little, it started to feel like I could recognize myself in the stories of the others.
This recognition that the both men felt was what drove them towards gender re-assignment process. Both of them had taken contact with Trans Support Centre, and found other transpeople to talk to, and share experiences with. It seems that this network, and the transcommunity at large, had been a major part of their process pre-transition. Powerful words that came up up in the interviews such as "re-birth" and "new self", show that there is a sort of a religious/spiritual undertone connected to the transformation. Mikko explains the day he received the recipe for hormones with the help of the concept of peak experience:

Like a peak feeling – a peak experience that a person feels when a person experiences something extremely fantastic or something – that’s what that moment was like. It was the first, the most wanted things sort of, of the things [I] had waited for. And then I got it.

Mikko

People, who have not been raised to be men or have been treated as men for all their lives, do not have the silent knowledge that any other male gets automatically. If you were born a transboy, you had perhaps tried to copy your father's behavior but you were discouraged, or perhaps you did succeed to copy it, but never received feedback on your success. A normative, heterosexual person is constantly disciplined and rewarded on her behavior accordingly. If she succeeds to be feminine, and just feminine enough, she will be accepted and at times congratulated. A transman, then, for as long as they are treated as a woman, receives negative feedback when he attempts to act according to the male culture. Isolation from anyone who will treat you as a female is crucial in the liminal phase. (Bolin 1988: 90) Both Mikko and Alex moved to another town and changed jobs as a result of their self-realization. This is, as evident from literature, a common method. (Bolin 1988: 142)

... [It] is for the most part the gender essentialist position that must be voiced for transsexual surgery to take place ...

(Butler 2004: 71)

Butler writes that the GID diagnosis is built upon the assumption that “we all more or less ‘know’ already what the norms for gender—“masculine” and “feminine”—are”. (Butler 2004: 81) I found my informants to be experts in this field. They acknowledge being outside of
these norms, and have distinctively felt this for long, since very early childhood. Gender re-assignment process is a way for a non-normative individual to reach before unreachable and unimaginable level of normativity. It is an extremely powerful ritual, even if a secret ritual that transforms most of all the inner self. Through hormonal and surgical procedures, the gender performance of the patient is perfected. His gender is being justified, and his identity cemented to a practically irreversible level.

Judith Butler writes in *Undoing Gender*, much of the problemacy of the diagnosis of gender identity disorder.

To be diagnosed with gender identity disorder (GID) is to be found, in some way, to be ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal, and to be suffering a certain stigmatization as a consequence of the diagnosis being given at all.

(Butler 2004: 76)

Mikko took up this very fear of stigmatization during the interview. He explains he had initially a:

Fear of being labeled a wacko, because right now in Finland it is so that when you go get treatment from the public sector, it will be classified as psychiatric.

Mikko

Being mentally ill is a heavily tabooed issue in the Finnish society, and is not discussed much in public. There exists a problem with GID or gender dysphoria being a mental illness just for this reason, but since it seems to be the only way to justify public funding, it can be said that the diagnosis is politically justified as a means to a greater end.

[Diagnosis] can be regarded as an instrument by which to further one’s self-expression and self-determination. Indeed, it can be counted among the very fundamental instruments one needs in order to make a transition that makes life livable, and that provides grounds for one’s flourishing as an embodied subject.

(Butler 2004: 88)

The diagnosis so was a tool for Alex and Mikko to finally find their identity and feel free. On what he has learned along the way, Mikko comments:
I have grown as a person. I have grown as an individual and become more balanced and now I know exactly what I am, what I am capable of, what my strengths and weaknesses are.

Mikko

And well, somehow this whole process-thing is life that I have already left behind me. That I have not told everyone I have ever known about these things. I don’t see any reason for that because, …, I don’t want any life with them. If they hear it from someone, then they hear it. But I won’t actively try to advertise it a lot.

Alex

After transition, when they finally started to pass full-time, both men got new jobs and started living their normal lives – only considerably happier. Alex presented an astonishing number - of those transmen that he knows of, that had started their transition around the time he had - 9 out of 10 (according to his estimation) can easily pass full-time.

Only once I have gone out to live my own life, then I’ve heard of things and known that I can, like, express myself.

Mikko

The only regret both men admit having is not going to get treatment earlier. There are, however, different challenges in the post-operational world. How to be a man? Will anyone know?

Operating post-operation

I now understand things that I couldn’t have even thought of before. I have feelings like “life can be good”, “you can feel good”, and “your normal state can be good”.

Alex

There are two factors that the gender re-assignment process in its successful form achieves. These are recognition of self-identity and passing. As Alex was looking in the mirror, he did not see himself; he saw person with a feminine body form that he did not recognize as
himself. Now, after the surgery, he can look in the mirror and see himself! The second factor is successful passing. Just as the American transgender activist Jamison Green points out in his article in Transgender Studies Reader, the success of a transition is dependent on the invisibility of the transition. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 499) When acquiring the status of a “good” transman, the transman loses the defining prefix of trans. Only for the duration of the process, is the identity of a transman active:

I have always thought of myself as a man and that transthing hasn’t, it hasn’t changed it or affected it.

Alex

It is then, perhaps not the identity that has been transformed – but their self-confidence. Mikko says:

I can just freely let my feelings run free – [I felt] a kind of an inner freedom. I began to be free. I can be, I can feel. I don’t need to hold it all in. I can just live.

Mikko

Taking hormones, transforming your genitalia and clipping off or modifying certain body parts does not make you magically just “become the gender”. As transpeople have often not had the privilege of learning their desired gender identity straight from birth – ie. they have not been socialized into their gender with the help of their parents and other social networks (family members, friends, school, media and so on), they must learn the techniques of passing through other channels. Even though it is hardly fair to say that the transbody is solely dependent on the social context in which it is enclosed, being socially accepted is a major part of a happy life.

When you go to the store to buy groceries, you may be afraid that the person at the cash register will look at you funny. When you get caught speeding, the policeman or woman might see on your id that you are a woman. When you meet new friends, they might guess your past. Alex said that he often feels insecure in his male role, if he is indeed acting according to the unspoken set of rules. Many fears are very irrational and bordering paranoid, but for a man that has worked so hard for the sake of having a whole identity, it will surely be frustrating to have his identity crumble away in the eyes of a complete stranger. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006:709f)
Once a transman has begun their process and received the hormones, they can and must start living as a man. Even though testosterone is a very effective hormone, effects cannot be seen overnight and if you do not have naturally masculine body structure, there will be times you do not pass as a man. Even though the process is easier for men, as there is more space for masculine than feminine styles and ways of behavior, it is still just that you must learn: rules of the male culture.

In men’s word it is often so that you have to earn your manliness. That you don’t just “exist” in that manliness. That you have to earn that respect, especially from the other men.

Alex

I asked each of the men what they believe an ideal Finnish man is like. Mikko specified the ideal man as emotionally repressed and places him in the past:

Male culture has become softer. In the fifties, you were not supposed to show your feelings, no matter how soft you are, and not cry in front of others.

Mikko

Alex’, in turn, while also admitting a continuing transformation in the ideal, still places the man in today’s world:

Ideal Finnish man is… He never complains. He works hard. And he can take care of his family and himself. These are the kind of basic… It is slowly changing but [I think] those things will stay.

Alex

Those born in the 50s or 60s were viewed as portraying something called “classic masculinity”. This is a very tight portrayal of heteronorm, bipolarization of the two dominant genders. Alex, however, expresses his satisfaction in having to live up to the role of a man and both men seem comfortable with who they are.

The Finnish heteronormative masculine identity is strongly connected to homosociality. So, in order to a transman to succeed in his gender representation, he must know how to act
correctly within a group of males. If he had lived as a woman at one time or another, he might have had hard time getting into male groups or perhaps even belonged to female groups instead. This can be a major source of worry for transmen. When I asked Alex how one can acquire this secret knowledge, he said it was only male-dominated hobbies and other men that can help you with that.

Army was mentioned by Alex as a good way to acquire access into male culture. It is notable, that in an army context you are rewarded, regardless of your gender representation, of traditionally masculine behavior. Alex had not gone to army, while Mikko had. Mikko had enjoyed his time in the Army very much, but expressed regret at having gone through with it while still embodying a female form. What he liked most about the experience was the orderliness and the collective identity.

After the process, even though the men might feel insecure in their role, there is virtually no chance of being "unveiled" by a stranger. Both of the men had a negative attitude towards coming out. It is often so that transmen are keen to stay out of the spotlight and simply forget about their identity as a transman after all the treatments are done – and to just live.

How should a Finnish man be? The answer to this question was similar from both men. Masculinity is seen as something connected to the given generation. This masculinity is not something desirable. Mikko reminicines about his father, who seemed on the surface to be a model of this ideal man, but even he emphasized how important feelings are.

Neither of the men had a positive attitude towards coming out. Both thought that visibility is important, but that so much can be at stake that, at least for them, personally it would not be worth it. Jamison Green (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 499f) talks of this very dilemma. On one hand the treatment aspires to make the transpeople invisible, but at the same time visibility is an important tool in activism and the only way to show that transpeople are just like anyone. (Stryker and Whittle [ed.] 2006: 500) Despite their apparent reluctance in coming out, they both did seem to keep contact with other transmen in the transcommunity, this peer support should be seen as a major part of post-op treatment.

Embodiment is a process of storytelling.
One aspect of peer support is sharing your life story – and recognizing oneself in others’. An identity that has been realized through treatment is can be additionally strengthened by the help of a narrative. Childhood memories are often taken up: as was in the both men's case. The mother of Alex had told him many stories of time when he was too young to understand – this is how an evidence of early childhood transgressive activity is given. Mikko says:

At that point they [the family] have come then, they have remembered those things from the childhood. It is, in a sense, strengthened my re-birth, my final identity.

Mikko

Alex and Mikko are, in their current form, not transgressing their gender. While women, they did transgress, but now that they are in fact embodying a male form, they are staying within the norms. They have gone through horrors for their dysphoric identity form and now may live a full life feeling home in their identities. Gender re-assignment process has reached its goal.
Conclusion
The journey of both Alex and Mikko was far from easy, but both of the men thought it was well worth it. In this thesis, I have unveiled their life stories – from their childhood to the day of the interview. Though much has been left unsaid, I believe that my thesis serves its purpose and I have presented a vivid image of what it can be to be a transman. Behind all these medical realities and sensationalization of the media, stand people, just like you and me, whose only problem is one they did not choose, but were assigned at birth. You are not allowed to try out each gender in advance and make an intelligent choice, but the role is simply forced upon you purely based on the shape of your genitalia or your exact chromosomal count. I feel that the experiences of these transmen are evidence of how dangerous this kind of presumption potentially is.

I am very impressed with the living results of the treatment procedure called gender re-assignment process. The two men I interviewed once felt terrible outside of the norms, and were on the verge of suicide, and now they feel comfortable, even happy – and considerably healthier. I am convinced that for the treatment of Gender Identity Disorder, out of all existing possibilities, gender re-assignment process in its current form is the best treatment.

It is important to remember that, as Judith Butler says as well, there is no real person behind the heterosexual matrix, operating and regulating the existing gender norms. Individual people cannot be held responsible for the existing structure, and neither can a person be accused for being inside or outside of the current set of norms. It is, however, obvious that the gender essentialist position flourishes in gender re-assignment process, it could even be said that the whole process is driven by this dichotomization. How or if this should be overcome, I cannot say.

From the basis of my study, there are multiple possibilities for additional research. Virtually every chapter of my study could be developed into a whole research project for example the moment of discovery or the problematic of the diagnosis. There are also questions that were left unasked – like the impact of the process on sexual activity or romantic relationships. There are many threads that can be followed.
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*Interviews and lectures*

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