

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Sociology Faculty Research and Scholarship

Sociology

2020

(Review) Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity

Piper Sledge

Bryn Mawr College, psledge@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/soc_pubs



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Custom Citation

Sledge, Piper. 2020. "(Review) Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity." *Contemporary Sociology* 49.1: 89-90.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/soc_pubs/22

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity, by Arlene Stein. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2018. 339 pp. \$27.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781524747459.

Piper Sledge
Bryn Mawr College
psledge@brynmawr.edu

Categories: Sex and Gender, Sexualities, Medical Sociology
Word Count: 1048

In *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity*, Arlene Stein provides a thorough, engaging, and easily accessible analysis of contemporary gender scholarship and the lived experiences of three transgender men and one “gender bender” (Stein 2018: 40). On the whole, Stein’s work introduces the reader to the history of scholarship on transgender as both a concept and lived experience in sociology and medicine, while also compassionately portraying the stories of the four focal participants in this research: Ben, Lucas, Nadia, and Parker.

Throughout the book, Stein interweaves the stories of these four individuals as they pursue chest masculinization surgery (i.e. top surgery) with the history of health care for trans* people (both physical and mental); interviews with physicians, therapists, family members, and friends; and scholarship on gender. The amount of theoretical and empirical ground covered in *Unbound* is extensive. Stein’s writing is open and fluid, almost as if reading a memoir. This is a refreshing approach and invites the reader to remember that the experiences of the four research participants are more than simply empirical data. Rather, these are four stories that help map the current terrain of masculinity and trans*/ gender non-conforming experience in the United States. Additionally, Stein’s take on this subject provides an intervention into debates concerning the relationship between transmen and butch lesbians that has percolated within the LGBTQ community for some time.

Although Stein chose her participants randomly (first by meeting Ben and then securing the participation of three other people scheduled for surgery on the same day as Ben, with the same surgeon), these four each provide a distinct window into the experiences of trans* masculine people. Ben, the central informant is first introduced in the introduction. The other three participants emerge in

“Pre-Op.” Although Stein notes that these four people “are hardly an exhaustive portrait of individuals who seek out top surgery,” they are, nevertheless, a useful starting point for recognizing the breadth of experiences and identities that might lead someone to such a decision (Stein 2018: 40). Ben identifies as openly transgender, Parker prefers to be seen as male (not as transgender) and readily understands his decisions about top surgery through a feminist lens, Lucas finds the gender binary troubling, and Nadia identifies as female. Although there are more experiences and identities that might lead to top surgery, Stein’s inclusion of these four allow her to engage with feminist scholarship on gendered embodiment, medical narratives that assume that all trans* people are born in the wrong body and require medical intervention to remedy this situation, and cultural expectations about what it means to be a man in today’s society.

Each chapter of *Unbound* uses interview data as a link to the review of relevant academic research. In the introduction, Stein neatly juxtaposes personal stories with scientific narratives (2018:11). It is the thoughtful use of personal stories as a means by which to interrogate the dominant scientific narratives (including those of sociology) that mark the key strengths of this book. For example, Stein uses Ben’s difficulty deciding whether or not to pursue therapy to introduce the history of pathologization and treatment of transgender people within the psychiatric community. This back and forth between the lived experience of the four key participants with scientific narratives and interview data from health care providers illustrates the tension between transgender people and the various medical gatekeepers who provide services to legitimate the identities of trans* people and to assist in the physical modifications through surgery and hormones.

Not only do these comparisons show the potential tensions in interactions between trans* people and health care providers, but they also make clear the multiplicity of perspectives on the meaning of gender and how these meanings are deployed to explain identity and justify medical interventions. In the chapter, “Designing Men,” Stein presents data from interviews with surgeons who

specialize in top surgery as a way to provide an overview for a perspective on gender that roots identity in the body, particularly in the brain. Against this, she draws on statements by psychotherapists who expressed a more holistic view of gender that counters a belief that there is some location in the body that can provide the truth of gender. While the debate between essentialism and constructionism with regard to gender is longstanding, Stein's treatment leaves open the possibility of both being perspectives that can lead medical practitioners to support transmen's decisions about their bodies.

Stein not only engages with medical perspectives on gender but also lesbian feminist views and the role of consumerism in contemporary health care. The former analysis is particularly apparent in chapter seven, "The Last Butch Standing." Here Stein attempts to provide insight into the relationship between butch lesbians and trans men. In so doing, she lays out the sociopolitical contexts in which decisions about whether to transition to male, or not, are made. What Stein makes clear is that although throughout history there have been individuals assigned female at birth who identified in masculine ways, changes in medical care (i.e. more surgeons willing to provide care) and changes in the social world have created new options for this group of people. As such, Stein is able to call into question taken for granted assumptions about gendered embodiment, to present new ways of embodying womanhood, and to point out the continuum of embodied experiences that can create affinities between butch lesbians and transmen rather than antagonisms.

What Stein manages in this book is the compassionate presentation of the experiences of Ben, Parker, Lucas, and Nadia alongside a wide ranging engagement with the bulk of research that comprises our understanding of gender and medical care for transgender people today. This is hardly a simple task. Stein accomplishes this in a way that is thoughtful, modest, and clear. The stories, rather than the scientific narratives have center stage. As a text to introduce the lay public and students to the array of issues relevant to transgender people and gender scholarship, this book is a great success. As a work of scholarship, the appendix could have provided a bit more detail about Stein's methods and the

epistemology that drives them. Despite this minor critique, *Unbound* is a wonderful read that would be ideal as a centerpiece for organizing an introductory level undergraduate course on gender and sexuality.