

Passing As Privilege

by Jessica Xavier

The concept of privilege is used by feminists as a tool to critically analyze societal and personal power imbalances. While the majority of transgendered and transsexual people are not feminists, most are nevertheless somewhat familiar with male privilege, since we are bashed so often for either retaining it (MTFs) or selling out to obtain it (FTMs). Yet male privilege itself is relative and can vary greatly in men, who have many different types of male socialization experiences. For example, the internalized homophobia experienced by many gay men can subtract from their full ownership of male privilege. While reasonable feminists can now view complete vestiture in male privilege as a function of possessing race, class and straight privilege, there are other, newer forms of privilege that subtract from or otherwise prevent the possession of male privilege. Moreover, these new transfeminist formulations of privilege are far more important to transgendered people, since they address the power imbalances experienced by us.

Birth privilege is being born into a physical sex that matches your internal gender identity, and possessing it allows nontranssexuals to avoid the many deleterious consequences of gender dysphoria. No matter how many surgeries we have, we can never gain birth privilege – a fact that many transsexual women seem to have difficulty accepting. Like other traditional forms of privilege, it's possessors are clueless about it, since they were (surprise) born with it. For the birth privileged, being born into bodies that don't torture them with the absurdity of inappropriate genitalia is simply a given, taken immediately for granted. Without understanding their birth privilege, the nons simply cannot understand transsexual people, a failing which produces and perpetuates a social ill only transgendered people experience - *transphobia*.

The lack of birth privilege is a permanent deficit that not only shapes but dominates our existence. Thus *passing privilege* becomes far more significant to us throughout the course of our lives. Passing privilege is passing undetected as a member of the majority – white, straight or non-transgendered. In his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963: Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ), Erving Goffman established a dichotomy of socially stigmatized groups. Those who lack passing privilege are the *discredited*, with obvious and unconcealable stigma. They cope with their stigma through *tension management* – various tactics which reduce the impact of their stigma on their interpersonal relationships. But the passing privileged are *discreditable* – their stigma is concealable, yet they remain vulnerable to its disclosure. Their concern is with *information control* – "to tell or not to tell, to let on or not let on, to lie or not to lie, and in each case, to whom, when and where."

I use the term *gender variant* to describe people who cannot or chose not to conform to rigid cultural norms for their gender, as based upon their physical sex. While we trans people are familiar with gender variant expressions and cross-gender identities, there are many other forms of gender variance exhibited by all kinds of people - regardless of their sexual or gender identities. The most common examples of gender variance are the reproductive and marriage choices of many nontransgendered women, who choose not to get married, nor to have children. Another is working in a stereotypically opposite gender-based occupation – like men who are nurses and women who are construction workers. There's also grooming (such as men with long hair or earrings, or women with short hair or facial hair), types of male clothing worn by women and girls, and effeminate mannerisms in men or masculine mannerisms in women.

None of these forms of gender variance necessarily makes anyone transgendered – or for that matter, gay. Yet if gender is the entire spectrum of human behaviors, then it also includes sexuality. Thus, although most of them don't realize it, gay, lesbian and bisexual people also are gender variant,

because they are defying cultural gender norms for their sexualities by having same-sex sexual relationships. Because passing privilege explains the power imbalances between overt and covert forms of gender variance amongst the sexual minorities, it becomes equally relevant to gay, lesbian and bisexual people as well as to transgendered people.

With the exception of some no-ho/no-op trans people (who live full-time and are not interested in hormonal and surgical sex reassignment), obtaining the ability to pass in our chosen genders is a major focus (if not obsession) of transgendered people of both *gender vectors* (MTF and FTM), from part-time crossdressers to transsexuals seeking to live full-time. Passing affords all of us physical safety in public spaces, and for those of us living full-time, job security and access to the social, educational, economic and professional pathways of the nontransgendered. Thus the vast majority of MTFs and many if not most FTMs become careful observers of those with birth privilege in their chosen genders. The observations and evaluations we make about gender roles, behaviors and especially appearances are incorporated over time into our own chosen gender expressions. Many of us consider ourselves to be experts about gender expression and passing itself. Thus passing as a member of the majority assumes a saliency in our psyches, while remaining largely unconsidered by the other sexual minorities.

However, passing privilege, like other forms of privilege, is based upon full-time living status. Thus almost all MTF crossdressers, regardless of their ability to pass as women, still have passing privilege – they pass for the majority of their lives as straight, nontransgendered men. Although a small minority of crossdressers retain some overt evidence of their transgendered status (long hair, long fingernails, absence of facial and body hair, etc.) they are more likely to be perceived as gay, not transgendered, due to trans-ignorance amongst the non-transgendered. In this regard, most MTF crossdressers are similar to gay and bisexual men who are straight-acting and straight-appearing. Since same-sex acts are usually not performed in public view, their gender variant behaviors are covert and episodic, and they too have passing privilege – they pass as heterosexual men.

Passing privilege creates a significant power imbalance in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community, since it allows its possessors to escape the intense societal stigmatization and marginalization associated with being queer. Those who pass as nontransgendered or straight simply do not experience as much external oppression as those who do not. The lack of passing privilege makes it far more likely for someone, regardless of their sexual identity, to fall victim to discrimination, harassment and violence. Indeed, anyone who is perceived as queer – regardless of their sexual orientation – either lacks passing privilege or has lost it. One can lose passing privilege by forfeiture (conscious choice), by an overt act (such as a public display of affection for one's same-sex partner), or by being outed.

The impact of passing privilege on the political "LGBT" movement have been painfully obvious. Because the majority of gay men and lesbians possess it, they have the luxury of dominating the movement with their gay and lesbian identity politics, which erases the sizable, visible gender variance within their own communities. Gay and lesbian identity politics dumbs down the reason for their oppression to invisible acts committed mostly in the privacy of bedrooms. But who you sleep with doesn't get you into trouble – it's what you look like and how you act. One would think that visibly gender variant gay men and lesbians – butches and femmes, drag kings and drag queens, leatherfolks – would be our immediate allies, but traditionally they have been almost as marginalized as trans people by their passing privileged peers. The covert and overt forms of gender variance, as manifested by the passing privileged and the visibly queer, have created deep divisions within and amongst the sexual minorities. The best example of this is a "civil rights" movement that seeks to protect only the (already passing) privileged, with a leadership all too willing to sacrifice its community's most vulnerable members, as it panders to the genderphobia of straight legislators.

But the impact of passing privilege is felt far beyond just the LGBT political movement. Passing privilege differs from other traditional forms of privilege which are bestowed at birth, since it may be acquired during one's lifetime. Some but not all transgendered and transsexual people seeking to live full-time may gain passing privilege through the administration of exogenous hormones and various cosmetic procedures and surgeries. Yet many of them, especially MTFs, ultimately fail to obtain it, ironically prevented by their lack of birth privilege. There are simply too many physical characteristics produced by the surge of hormones during male adolescence that cannot be erased by hormones and surgery in later years. Moreover, accessing these medical technologies is difficult and expensive, and usually a function of class and race privilege. It also can take many years for hormonal sex reassignment to affect sufficient changes in secondary sexual characteristics to gain a passing appearance. Even those who pass well enough while clothed or made-up lose their passing privilege in intimate situations – which is why many do not get routine medical check-ups, or even seek treatment for acute illnesses. Lack of passing privilege becomes not only a significant barrier to accessing health care, but also a barrier to equal educational, employment and housing opportunities. Thus almost all transgendered people who gender transition will lack passing privilege – most when they begin transition, but for many others – perhaps the majority – for the rest of their post-transition lives.

Goffman presented an interesting paradox, in that those with the ability to pass and conceal their stigma are simultaneously admired and despised by those who cannot. Not surprisingly, possession of passing privilege has established an unspoken hierarchy amongst transsexual women, which creates friction in our support groups between those with and without it. In my own estimation, only about a third of transsexual women pass perfectly – thus allowing them to conceal their transsexual status. The passing privileged are usually a group's most popular members, and coveted as companions. Sadly, those who lack passing privilege are often rudely rebuffed by those who possess it when their friendship is sought. Thus passing privilege creates divisiveness within our support groups, as it destroys solidarity and cripples our community-building efforts.

However, Goffman also noted that the passing privileged must pay significant psychic costs, in order to continuously maintain the concealment of their stigma. Transsexual women living in stealth must not only remain constantly on guard, but also silently accept the nontransgendered majority's pejorative perspective of themselves when they encounter it. For example, I know one transsexual woman who must listen silently to her intensely transphobic but unknowing husband rant and rave through any talk show featuring trans people. I am amazed at how these stealthy transsexual women can suffer the emotional and spiritual consequences of living in stealth, their new lives made possible solely through their passing privilege. Surely this must be our Faustian bargain – the costly price we must pay for 'real' womanhood, that total assimilation extracts and subtracts from us.

Yet transsexual women will still move heaven and earth to obtain the prize of passing privilege which, for many, is still sadly beyond their physical reach. There are even those of us who are post-operative and passing privileged, who nevertheless continue to undergo additional surgeries in a fruitless pursuit of that which they will never have – birth privilege. No privilege of any kind can ever erase the facts of our births – we will never be nontranssexual.

It is interesting to contrast this passionate pursuit of passing privilege by transsexual women with the attitudes of transsexual men regarding it. I estimate that 90% of transsexual men eventually gain passing privilege, but there is a painful irony here. Spending half-lives developing a queer consciousness within their lesbian communities, many transsexual men of my acquaintance are not only aware but also ambivalent about their passing privilege. Passing perfectly as nontransgendered, usually straight men, their queerness becomes erased and taken from them. They even become viewed as the oppressor (if white) or as a potential predator (if black) by their former peers. Some therefore consider their passing privilege to be a curse, echoing Jess Goldberg's lament from *Stone*

Butch Blues:

"As far as the world's concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me. No one really sees me or speaks to me or touches me."

The unwitting possession of privilege perpetuates the oppression caused by it. Those who are not part of the solution are not part of the problem – *they are the problem itself*. To own one's privilege is not only to acknowledge it, but also to take responsibility for the underlying social constructs that gave it to you in the first place. When informed consciousness is transformed into sociopolitical action, change results.

One of the tasks of transfeminism then, must necessarily be to raise the consciousness of those trans people who are passing privileged – a challenge, to be sure. Many FTMs have little use for any form of feminism that bashes them as sell-outs for a male privilege few if any come to possess. Most MTFs, from heterosexual male socialization experiences, are utterly lacking in any form of political consciousness whatsoever. Yet when compared to other forms of privilege, the possession of passing privilege is much more obvious. Trans people who live full-time know when we begin to pass in our new genders, since gender recognition becomes obvious from the validation of so many social cues.

Unfortunately, that awareness has motivated only a few of us to own our privilege – and to fight transphobia as best we can. Our past pain and our future fears dominate our present existences. The traditional model of transition, surgery and assimilation is in effect a long struggle to obtain passing privilege, thus avoiding the stigma of transsexualism and all the ill effects of transphobia. Once it is obtained, most of us forget our passing privilege – while others like us suffer mightily due to their lack of it. The challenge of raising consciousness is, for transfeminists, commensurate with that of traditional feminists, who must continuously struggle to focus the attention of other women and male allies on the social ills of sexism and homophobia.