

Crossing the divide

Do men really have it easier? These transgender guys found the truth was more complex.

By **Tara Bahrapour**

Photos by **Evelyn Hockstein**

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In the 1990s, the late Stanford neuroscientist Ben Barres transitioned from female to male. He was in his 40s, mid-career, and afterward he marveled at the stark changes in his professional life. Now

that society saw him as male, his ideas were taken more seriously. He was able to complete a whole sentence without being interrupted by a man. A colleague who didn't know he was transgender even praised his work as “much better than his sister's.”

Clinics have reported an increase in people seeking medical gender transitions in recent years, and [research](#) suggests the number of people identifying as transgender has risen in the past decade. Touchstones such as Caitlyn Jenner's transition, the [bathroom controversy](#), and the Amazon series “[Transparent](#)” have also made the topic a bigger part of the political and cultural conversation.

But it is not always evident when someone has undergone a transition — especially if they have gone from female to male.

“The transgender guys have a relatively straightforward process — we just simply add testosterone and watch their bodies shift,” said Joshua Safer, executive director at the Center for Transgender Medicine and Surgery at Mount Sinai Health System and Icahn

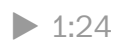
School of Medicine in New York.

“Within six months to a year they start to virilize — getting facial hair, a ruddier complexion, a change in body odor and a deepening of the voice.”

Transgender women
have more difficulty
“passing”; they tend to be bigger-boned
and more masculine-looking, and these
things are hard to reverse with
hormone treatments, Safer said. “But
the transgender men will go get jobs
and the new boss doesn’t even know
they’re trans.”

We spoke with four men who
transitioned as adults to the bodies in
which they feel more comfortable.
Their experiences reveal that the gulf
between how society treats women and
men is in many ways as wide now as it
was when Barres transitioned. But their
diverse backgrounds provide further
insight into how race and ethnicity
inform the gender divide in subtle and
sometimes surprising ways.

(Their words have been lightly edited
for space and clarity.)



‘I’ll never call the police again’

Trystan Cotten, 50, Berkeley, Calif.

Professor of gender studies at California State University Stanislaus and editor of Transgress Press, which publishes books related to the transgender experience. Transitioned in 2008.

Life doesn’t get easier as an African American male. The way that police officers deal with me, the way that racism undermines my ability to feel safe in

the world, affects my mobility, affects where I go. Other African American and Latino Americans grew up as boys and were taught to deal with that at an earlier age. I had to learn from my black and brown brothers about how to stay alive in my new body and retain some dignity while being demeaned by the cops.

One night somebody crashed a car into my neighbor's house, and I called 911. I walk out to talk to the police officer, and he pulls a gun on me and says, "Stop! Stop! Get on the ground!" I turn around to see if there's someone behind me, and he goes, "You! You! Get on the ground!" I'm in pajamas and barefoot. I get on the ground and he checks me, and afterward I said, "What was that all about?" He said, "You were moving kind of funny." Later, people told me, "Man, you're crazy. You never call the police."

I get pulled over a lot more now. I got pulled over more in the first two years after my transition than I did the entire 20 years I was driving before that. Before, when I'd been stopped, even for real violations like driving 100 miles an hour, I got off. In fact, when it

happened in Atlanta the officer and I got into a great conversation about the Braves. Now the first two questions they ask are: Do I have any weapons in the car, and am I on parole or probation?



Left, Trystan Cotten relaxes after skateboarding in Mission Dolores Park in San Francisco. Right, Cotten and Roxy Kermani dance during a group beginner tango class in San Francisco.

Race influences how people choose to transition. I did an ethnographic study of trans men and found that 96 percent of African American and Latino men want to have surgery, while only 45 percent of white respondents do. That's because a trans history can exacerbate racial profiling. When they pat you down, if you don't have a penis it's going to be obvious (or if you're a trans woman and you have a penis, that becomes obvious). If they picked you up for popping a wheelie or smoking

weed, if they find out you're trans it can be worse for you.

There are also ways in which men deal with sexism and gender oppression that I was not aware of when I was walking around in a female body. A couple of years after my transition, I had a grad student I'd been mentoring. She started coming on to me, stalking me, sending me emails and texts. My adviser and the dean — both women — laughed it off. It went on for the better part of a year, and that was the year that I was going up for tenure. It was a very scary time. I felt very worried that if the student felt I was not returning her attentions she would claim that I had assaulted her. I felt like as a guy, I was not taken seriously. I had experienced harassment as a female person at another university and they had reacted immediately, sending a police escort with me to and from campus. I felt like if I had still been in my old body I would have gotten a lot more support.



Cotten looks out from his boat, New Beginnings.

Being a black man has changed the way I move in the world. I used to walk quickly or run to catch a bus. Now I walk at a slower pace, and if I'm late I don't dare rush. I am hyper-aware of making sudden or abrupt movements, especially in airports, train stations and other public places. I avoid engaging with unfamiliar white folks, especially white women. If they catch my eye, white women usually clutch their purses and cross the street. While I love urban aesthetics, I stopped wearing hoodies and traded my baggy jeans, oversized jerseys and colorful skullcaps for closefitting jeans, khakis and sweaters. These changes blunt assumptions that I'm going to snatch purses or merchandise, or jump the subway turnstile. The less visible I am, the better my chances of surviving.

But it's not foolproof.

I'm an academic sitting at a desk so I exercise where I can. I walked to the post office to mail some books and I put on this 40-pound weight vest that I walk around in. It was about 3 or 4 in the afternoon and I'm walking back and all of a sudden police officers drove up, got out of their car, and stopped. I had my earphones on so I didn't know they were talking to me. I looked up and there's a helicopter above. And now I can kind of see why people run, because you might live if you run, even if you haven't done anything. This was in Emeryville, one of the wealthiest enclaves in Northern California, where there's security galore. Someone had seen me walking to the post office and called in and said they saw a Muslim with an explosives vest. One cop, a white guy, picked it up and laughed and said, "Oh, I think I know what this is. This is a weight belt."

It's not only humiliating, but it creates anxiety on a daily basis. Before, I used to feel safe going up to a police officer if I was lost or needed directions. But I don't do that anymore. I hike a lot, and if I'm out hiking and I see a dead body,

I'll keep on walking. I'll never call the police again.

Listen to Zander on patience

▶ 0:54

‘It now feels as though I am on my own’

Zander Keig, 52, San Diego

Coast Guard veteran. Works at Naval Medical Center San Diego as a clinical social work case manager. Editor of anthologies for transgender men. Started transition in 2005.

Prior to my transition, I was an outspoken radical feminist. I spoke up often, loudly and with confidence. I was encouraged to speak up. I was given awards for my efforts, literally — it was like, “Oh, yeah, speak up, speak out.” When I speak up now, I am often given the direct or indirect message that I am “mansplaining,” “taking up too much space” or “asserting my white male heterosexual privilege.” Never mind that I am a first-generation Mexican American, a transsexual man, and married to the same woman I was with prior to my transition.

I find the assertion that I am now unable to speak out on issues I find important offensive and I refuse to allow anyone to silence me. My ability to empathize has grown exponentially, because I now factor men into my thinking and feeling about situations. Prior to my transition, I rarely considered how men experienced life or what they thought, wanted or liked about their lives. I have learned so much about the lives of men through my friendships with men, reading books and articles by and for men and

through the men I serve as a licensed clinical social worker.

Social work is generally considered to be “female dominated,” with women making up about 80 percent of the profession in the United States.

Currently I work exclusively with clinical nurse case managers, but in my previous position, as a medical social worker working with chronically homeless military veterans — mostly male — who were grappling with substance use disorder and severe mental illness, I was one of a few men among dozens of women.



Zander Keig, a Coast Guard veteran and a board member for the Transgender American Veterans Association, attends its meeting in Washington.

Plenty of research shows that life events, medical conditions and family circumstances impact men and women

differently. But when I would suggest that patient behavioral issues like anger or violence may be a symptom of trauma or depression, it would often get dismissed or outright challenged. The overarching theme was “men are violent” and there was “no excuse” for their actions.

I do notice that some women do expect me to acquiesce or concede to them more now: Let them speak first, let them board the bus first, let them sit down first, and so on. I also notice that in public spaces men are more collegial with me, which they express through verbal and nonverbal messages: head lifting when passing me on the sidewalk and using terms like “brother” and “boss man” to acknowledge me. As a former lesbian feminist, I was put off by the way that some women want to be treated by me, now that I am a man, because it violates a foundational belief I carry, which is that women are fully capable human beings who do not need men to acquiesce or concede to them.

What continues to strike me is the significant reduction in friendliness and kindness now extended to me in

public spaces. It now feels as though I am on my own: No one, outside of family and close friends, is paying any attention to my well-being.

I can recall a moment where this difference hit home. A couple of years into my medical gender transition, I was traveling on a public bus early one weekend morning. There were six people on the bus, including me. One was a woman. She was talking on a mobile phone very loudly and remarked that “men are such a–holes.” I immediately looked up at her and then around at the other men. Not one had lifted his head to look at the woman or anyone else. The woman saw me look at her and then commented to the person she was speaking with about “some a–hole on the bus right now looking at me.” I was stunned, because I recall being in similar situations, but in the reverse, many times: A man would say or do something deemed obnoxious or offensive, and I would find solidarity with the women around me as we made eye contact, rolled our eyes and maybe even commented out loud on the situation. I’m not sure I understand

why the men did not respond, but it made a lasting impression on me.

Listen to Chris on identity

▶ 1:06

‘I took control of my career’

Chris Edwards, 49, Boston

Advertising creative director, public speaker and author of the memoir “[Balls: It Takes Some to Get Some.](#)”

Transitioned in his mid-20s.

hen I began my transition at age 26, a lot of my socialization came from the guys at work. For example, as a woman,

WI'd walk down the hall and bump into some of my female co-workers, and they'd say, "Hey, what's up?" and I'd say, "Oh, I just got out of this client meeting. They killed all my scripts and now I have to go back and rewrite everything, blah blah blah. What's up with you?" and then they'd tell me their stories. As a guy, I bump into a guy in the hall and he says, "What's up?" and I launch into a story about my day and he's already down the hall. And I'm thinking, well, that's rude. So, I think, okay, well, I guess guys don't really share, so next time I'll keep it brief. By the third time, I realized you just nod.

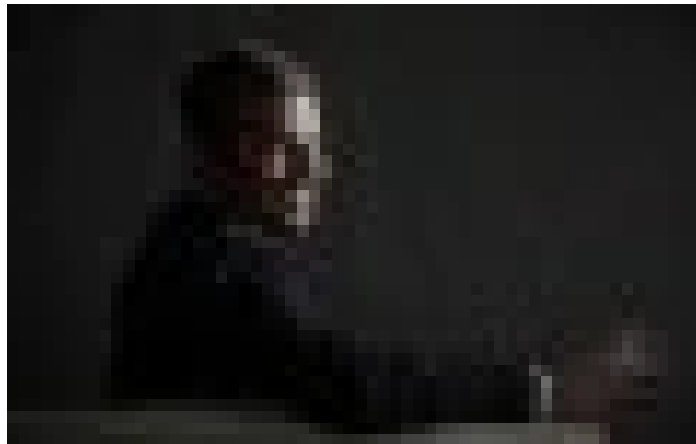
The creative department is largely male, and the guys accepted me into the club. I learned by example and modeled my professional behavior accordingly. For example, I kept noticing that if guys wanted an assignment they'd just ask for it. If they wanted a raise or a promotion they'd ask for it. This was a foreign concept to me. As a woman, I never felt that it was polite to do that or that I had the power to do that. But after seeing it happen all around me I decided that if I felt I

deserved something I was going to ask for it too. By doing that, I took control of my career. It was very empowering.

Apparently, people were only holding the door for me because I was a woman rather than out of common courtesy as I had assumed. Not just men, women too. I learned this the first time I left the house presenting as male, when a woman entered a department store in front of me and just let the door swing shut behind her. I was so caught off guard I walked into it face first.

When you're socially transitioning, you want to blend in, not stand out, so it's uncomfortable when little reminders pop up that you're not like everybody else. I'm expected to know everything about sports. I like sports but I'm not in deep like a lot of guys. For example, I love watching football, but I never played the sport (wasn't an option for girls back in my day) so there is a lot I don't know. I remember the first time I was in a wedding as a groomsman. I was maybe three years into my transition and I was lined up for photos with all the other guys. And one of them shouted, "High school football pose!" and on cue everybody dropped

down and squatted like the offensive line, and I was like, what the hell is going on? It was not instinctive to me since I never played. I tried to mirror what everyone was doing, but when you see the picture I'm kind of "offsides," so to speak.



Chris Edwards, an advertising creative director, at his home in Boston.

The hormones made me more impatient. I had lots of female friends and one of the qualities they loved about me was that I was a great listener. After being on testosterone, they informed me that my listening skills weren't what they used to be. Here's an example: I'm driving with one of my best friends, Beth, and I ask her "Is your sister meeting us for dinner?" Ten minutes later she's still talking and I still have no idea if her sister is coming. So finally, I couldn't

take it anymore, and I snapped and said, “*IS SHE COMING OR NOT?*” And Beth was like, “You know, you used to like hearing all the backstory and how I’d get around to the answer. A lot of us have noticed you’ve become very impatient lately and we think it’s that damn testosterone!” It’s definitely true that some male behavior is governed by hormones. Instead of listening to a woman’s problem and being empathetic and nodding along, I would do the stereotypical guy thing — interrupt and provide a solution to cut the conversation short and move on. I’m trying to be better about this.

People ask if being a man made me more successful in my career. My answer is yes — but not for the reason you might think. As a man, I was finally comfortable in my own skin and that made me more confident. At work I noticed I was more direct: getting to the point, not apologizing before I said anything or tiptoeing around and trying to be delicate like I used to do. In meetings, I was more outspoken. I stopped posing my thoughts as questions. I’d say what I meant and what I wanted to happen instead of

dropping hints and hoping people would read between the lines and pick up on what I really wanted. I was no longer shy about stating my opinions or defending my work. When I gave presentations I was brighter, funnier, more engaging. Not because I was a man. Because I was happy.

‘People assume I know the answer’

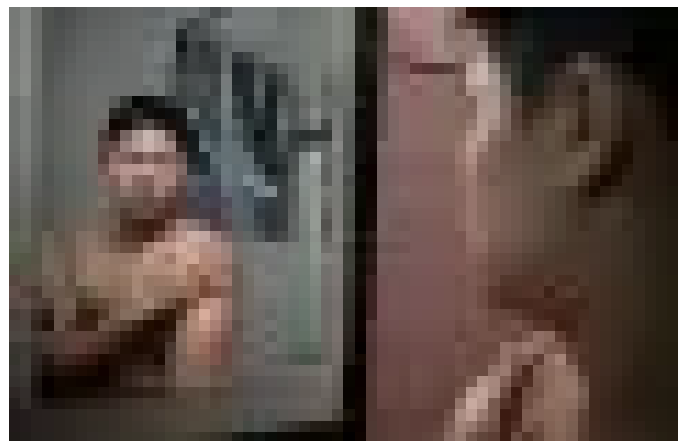
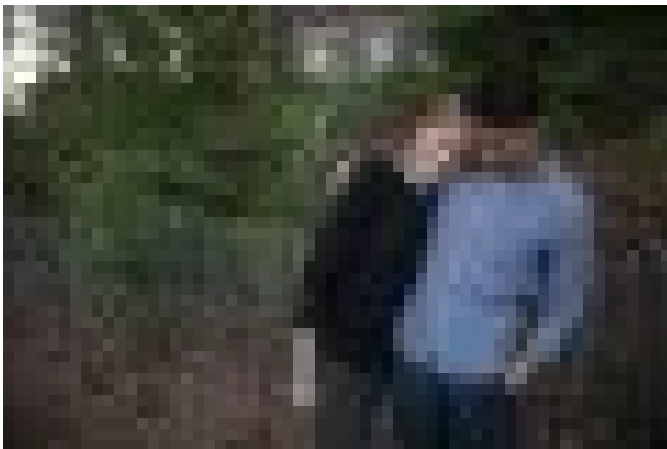
Alex Poon, 26, Boston

Project manager for Wayfair, an online home goods company. Alex is in the process of his physical transition; he did the chest surgery after college and started taking testosterone this spring.

Traditional Chinese culture is about conforming to your elders’ wishes and staying within gender boundaries. However, I grew up in the U.S., where I could explore my individuality and my own gender identity. When I was 15 I was attending an all-girls high school where we had to wear skirts, but I felt

different from my peers. Around that point we began living with my Chinese grandfather towards the end of his life. He was so traditional and deeply set in his ways. I felt like I couldn't cut my hair or dress how I wanted because I was afraid to upset him and have our last memories of each other be ruined.

Genetics are not in my favor for growing a lumberjack-style beard. Sometimes, Chinese faces are seen as “soft” with less defined jaw lines and a lack of facial hair. I worry that some of my feminine features like my “soft face” will make it hard to present as a masculine man, which is how I see myself. Instead, when people meet me for the first time, I'm often read as an effeminate man.



Left, Alex Poon hugs his girlfriend, Gabi Serrato Marks, at Wellesley College, where he was a student. Right, Poon applies hormone gel to his shoulders in his apartment before heading to work.

My voice has started cracking and becoming lower. Recently, I've been noticing the difference between being perceived as a woman versus being perceived as a man. I've been wondering how I can strike the right balance between remembering how it feels to be silenced and talked over with the privileges that come along with being perceived as a man. Now, when I lead meetings, I purposefully create pauses and moments where I try to draw others into the conversation and make space for everyone to contribute and ask questions.

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People now assume I have logic, advice and seniority. They look at me and assume I know the answer, even when I don't. I've been in meetings where everyone else in the room was a woman and more senior, yet I still got asked, "Alex,

what do you think? We thought you would know." I was at an all-team meeting with 40 people, and I was recognized by name for my team's accomplishments. Whereas next to me,

there was another successful team led by a woman, but she was never mentioned by name. I went up to her afterward and said, “Wow, that was not cool; your team actually did more than my team.” The stark difference made me feel uncomfortable and brought back feelings of when I had been in the same boat and not been given credit for my work.

When people thought I was a woman, they often gave me vague or roundabout answers when I asked a question. I’ve even had someone tell me, “If you just Googled it, you would know.” But now that I’m read as a man, I’ve found people give me direct and clear answers, even if it means they have to do some research on their own before getting back to me.

A part of me regrets not sharing with my grandfather who I truly am before he passed away. I wonder how our relationship might have been different if he had known this one piece about me and had still accepted me as his grandson. Traditionally, Chinese culture sees men as more valuable than women. Before, I was the youngest granddaughter, so the least important.

Now, I'm the oldest grandson. I think about how he might have had different expectations or tried to instill certain traditional Chinese principles upon me more deeply, such as caring more about my grades or taking care of my siblings and elders. Though he never viewed me as a man, I ended up doing these things anyway.

Zander Keig contributed to this article in his personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this are the author's own and do not reflect the view of the Department of Defense.

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