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## V. Construction of Masculinity: A Look into the Lives of Heterosexual Male Transvestites

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The sex of the new-born child, in the United States, is the biological criterion used to classify a baby as either female or male (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Martin and Voorhies, 1975). This pattern of mapping out gender roles is started at birth and continues throughout the life cycle, demonstrating social norms, and creating differences between both sexes that are not 'natural, essential or biological' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 137), but socially constructed (Oakley, 1972; Benjamin, 1977).

Psychology has usually studied sex and gender with the male experience as its norm. Feminist scholars (Squire, 1989; Harding, 1989; Griffin, 1986) are moving away from what they consider an androcentric way of doing science to develop a perspective which will enable researchers to analyse sex and gender in order to bring about a more egalitarian discipline (Squire, 1989; Condor, 1986). Squire (1989) states that 'feminism and psychology are important for each other', and that research in the area of gender difference will prove to be an important step in looking at the development of identity (Squire, 1989), personality (Williamson et al., 1982) and sexuality (Freud, 1962). Studying transvestism can reveal that gender is not dichotomous but constitutes a spectrum for both men and women.

Transvestites are probably one of the most misunderstood group of people. Sometimes they are thought of as 'gay', 'drag queens', 'transsexuals', or, sometimes just 'degenerative perverts' (Ellis and Arbarbanel, 1961). Some might even think they fall into the category of 'nuts, sluts and perverts' (Liazos, 1972). Many researchers, for example Benjamin (1966), Brierley (1979), Docter (1988), Talamini (1982a, 1982b) and Woodhouse (1989) have investigated dif-

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ferent aspects of transvestism; further, different modes of describing transvestism have also been utilized, such as medical (Benjamin, 1966; Masters et al., 1986), psychological (Brierley, 1979) and sociological (Devor, 1989; Woodhouse, 1989).

The aim of this study is to look at transvestism as a way of investigating gender roles, the continuum of masculinity, and the problems some men may develop when they deviate from what society dictates is acceptable gender behavior.

## METHODS

### *Procedure*

I made contact with my participants after seeing an advertisement for their support group in a Phoenix newspaper during the summer of 1987. I was invited to attend their gatherings after meeting with the 'first lady' of the group. The preliminary ethnographic field research consisted of observations, informal interviews and written correspondence that originated at those gatherings.

### *Participants*

Letters written to me have been used for this paper, and were from white males ages 35–71. There were ten participants. Three were married, and one was single but has been married twice. Three of them have children who ranged from 5 to 43 years, with only the older children (ages 41 and 43) knowing that their father cross-dresses. They all had completed high school, two have Bachelor of Science degrees and one has a Masters in Computer Science. All of the participants' feminine names have been changed with the exception of 'Nancy Ann', who specifically asked me to let 'hers' remain as it is.

### *Methodology*

Goffman argues that a biography is a special way of defining a person (Watson, 1990: 190). Writing one's history provides the author with a way of ordering his or her life, constructing a coherent self-description. The letters that I have collected helped me accomplish this by revealing insight into the history of the heterosexual male transvestite's life, providing an outlet for the person who is writing to express his feelings, and talk about his life.

The letters are highly emotional, and intense. Almost all of them were written on feminine stationery. Some had little bears or hearts, similar to what adolescent girls might use. Others were written on pastel or colored paper with pink or purple ink. It became clear to me as I reread the letters that the men were, for the most part, into their 'female' role while writing.

## RESULTS

The life of a transvestite is not easy. It is filled with the pain of living a double life. Sometimes it is one where the man lets very few, if any, know of his secret. His childhood has often times been very rough, because of the guilt and confusion that stems from knowing his activities were outside the realm of acceptable male behavior. 'Nancy Ann' states:

I had one brother and one sister. The joy and pleasure of dressing up was greater than the teasing, pain, and ridicule resulting from those actions. Thus I was driven into the closet to continue enjoying what I now call my fantasy.

And 'Kate' says:

I do not feel it is acceptable to society for me to do what I like to do ... I carry a sense of guilt and shame for doing what I like to do ... Those of us blessed with the desire (compulsion) to dress, act, and feel the way we do carry a big burden for fulfilling those desires.

For many transvestites, the contact with cross-dressing started very early in life. It usually began quite innocently, by finding their mother's or sister's clothes, wondering how it would feel, and trying them on. 'Nancy Ann' writes:

I can remember even as a youngster (around 4 or 5) the pleasure and excitement involved with dressing up in whatever I could get my hands on. As a young boy, I was bashful and never thought I was good enough to be friends with girls although I admired them from a distance. So I made my own girl-friend, which was my other inner self. At the age of 6 or 7 I just had to try on my sister's yellow one piece swim-suit. I was caught and punished for doing it. I don't remember the spanking that I got, but still to this day remember that swim-suit and how natural it felt.

For others, the precipitating event could have been dressing as a girl in a school play or Halloween and liking the way it made them feel.

In general two types of transvestite evolve from the childhood experience. One derives emotional or sexual relief from dressing as a woman. This type, a fetish cross-dresser (Feinbloom, 1976; American Psychiatric Association, 1987; Docter, 1988) has an emotional attachment to women's clothing and can derive sexual excitement from holding, touching or wearing women's items of clothing. Another kind of transvestite is one who becomes very attached to and involved in the feminine way of life. It feels nice emotionally, sensually and perhaps spiritually. Whatever the feeling, it has an alluring effect, that draws the cross-dresser back time and time again.

Often at the beginning it is enough for a transvestite to see himself in women's clothing. Yet, the combination of the excitement and the guilt are what sometimes makes him dress again and again. After awhile he might not

be satisfied any more with just dressing at home. A strong desire to go out dressed up can develop. 'Nancy Ann' talks about his first time out:

I couldn't believe how much I enjoyed it. I slipped out of the house, it was late at night and walked around our neighborhood. It was a cool breezy evening and my skirts were really caressing my legs. The cold didn't bother me, all I could think of was the delicious feeling of being like a girl. When I got back home I wanted to wake everyone up and show them what I was doing. I was so excited. I was hooked for life.

And although 'Nicki' does not really believe he is out completely, he writes:

I came out one night in the deep and dark back roads of this town. I was scared to death, I packed into a plastic bag my wig and shoes and left my apartment for my trip. I had on underneath my male clothing, my hose, bra and the necessities that my heart required. I drove to the darkest place that I could find and I removed my male clothing, put on my wig, Levi skirt and blouse within the darkness of the car. I stepped out of the car and left that safe zone, walking along that dirt road for about 300 feet and loving the sense of freedom that I had and the feeling that it was so right.

'Passing', going out in public as a woman, is usually the next step a transvestite will take. Docter (1988: 12) states that 'passing is highly valued' by the transvestite and something that he wants to do. Yet, transvestites have different degrees in which they want to pass. For some, it is a walk around the block at three in the morning. For 'Tracy', it started by going to church as a woman. He felt no one would look at him closely there and he would be safe. 'Denise' went to the shopping malls and looked forward to being approached by the market research lady,

If the lady put an X into the female box without asking me the question, that meant I passed for sure. I was in ecstasy!!!

Although a few male cross-dressers are gay or bisexual, the majority are heterosexually oriented (Stoller, 1985; Talamini, 1982a, 1982b; Docter, 1988). If the man is single and has actively been cross-dressing for sometime, the secret can be a heavy burden to bear. 'Nicki' reveals:

Because I am orientated as a 'normal' male, I continued having relations with women. I never did confide in any of them my innermost feelings and desires. I feel this puts a huge road block in our potential for true intimacy. Two or three discovered my 'cache' and were quite disturbed — eventually leading to the demise of our relationship. Being found out, lack of communication, or fear of rejection always led to the break up.

Many of these men state that they are happily married. Telling their wives their secret can be very difficult. Some never tell, others do and end up paying a

price, while others are able to incorporate their desires into their total marital lives. Once the husband has 'come out of the closet' a surprising number of wives prove to be understanding and sympathetic. 'Katie' says:

After 18 years of marriage, I figured that our relationship could stand it. In fact I owed it to her — the emotional strain in keeping an important part of me hidden was affecting our lives. Our relationship is stronger than ever. She still has problems dealing with my dressing, but she accepts that is part of my Me-ness ... yet she is still not comfortable with my dressing and much prefers not to be involved or even to be reminded of it.

Some wives do not see this as a healthy situation, but go along with it for the sake of the marriage. The transvestite feels that the ideal wife should love her husband and stick by him no matter what he does. He wants a woman who believes in partnership without reservation and who will become knowledgeable about transvestism. 'Nancy Ann' states:

My wife at least accepts my feelings, but does not really understand. She is cooperative and even buys items for me to wear as little surprises and gifts. I have dressed in her clothes, but usually do it in private ... As a concession to my wife she has her husband during the day, but not at night and I have promised her I would not go out dressed.

All of the men I spoke with or who wrote to me were very willing to tell their stories. Some felt it was a relief to finally be able to talk about it with someone and believed that explaining to others was important and worth it for them if it took away the pain for someone else. When I asked them for permission to use their letters, their response was unanimous that I could use their information and they would help me with more as I needed it. They all believe that it is necessary information that could even help others. 'Bev' says:

It is mandatory for a better understanding of TVs in society. I have carried the burden of guilt, shame, non-acceptance and personal non-understanding my whole life. Through efforts, strength, and unity of the community (TV) now maybe the lives and desires of the others and those to follow will be a little easier.

## DISCUSSION

The data that I have analysed in this paper are just the beginning of my project. Currently I am sending out questionnaires to transvestites around the country. If you are working in these areas, I would be very interested in hearing from you.

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