

TRANVESTISM: THE ORGANIZATION OF MALE FEMININITY

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INTRODUCTION

Social stigmatization gives powerful support to the emergence and continuation of a subculture of disreputed individuals. This has been the experience of such individuals as nudists, homosexuals, dwarfs, sadomasochists, wife swappers, and gamblers. The condemnation of transvestism, has also given rise to a subculture, with its attendant organizations. Transvestites experience social oppression. For the vast majority of transvestites, there is an ever present need to maintain a double life and to master the art of impression management. Involvement in the transvestite subculture buffers the experience of being stigmatized and its consequences for the self concept.

METHODOLOGY

The data derives from interviews with transvestites, analysis of transvestite books and magazines, observation of transvestite activities, and interviews with prostitutes specializing in transvestite fantasies. A snowball technique was used to sample transvestites. A total of fifty transvestites, all located on the East Coast of the United States were interviewed as part of a larger study on transvestism. Transvestites provided data about themselves and the subculture, and information on transvestite books and magazines. Fifteen prostitutes, living in New York City and specializing in transvestism were contacted as well. All were located via their advertisements in a major sex-oriented newspaper and a transvestite contact magazine.

ORGANIZATIONS

Transvestite organizations serve various functions. (1) They act as socialization settings which teach techniques of female impersonation. (2) They provide members with information about social events and making contacts. (3) They enable people to segregate their lives. (4) They provide a source of social support enabling transvestites to view their cross-dressing as socially acceptable. Transvestite organizations are *expressive* organizations as identified by Gordon and Babchuck (1959).

Such groups promote adaptation to stigma and exist primarily to furnish activities for members. Transvestite organizations are also examples of *open* organizations with secret membership as identified by Sagarin (1975:303). They are unlike associations where existence is necessarily kept concealed from the world, such as a spy ring or criminal conspiracy. Through their organizations, transvestites acquire a sense of common fate.

There are two formally organized transvestite "sororities" in the United States. The Society for the Second Self has central headquarters in Tulare, California and is divided into divisions corresponding to geographical areas in the United States; Eastern, Central, Southeastern, and Western. Within each of these divisions there are numerous local chapters. The International Alliance for Male Feminism has headquarters in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Although its membership represents all areas of the country, there are local chapters. It has no regional organization.

Both transvestite organizations publish apologies for cross-dressing. In common with sado-masochistic (Weinberg, 1980) and gay apologies (Plummer, 1975:87) such statements serve to legitimize the interests of their members. For example, The Society for the Second Self publishes a periodical *Transvestia*. On the cover is a face — half male/half female — divided by a lateral curving line. The message on the inside cover explains that the design is symbolic of the wholeness of a human being — not all masculine — mind and reason, abstract and unseen — and not all feminine — beauty, desirability, and appearance — but rather an integration of both.

A but more militant tone is set forth in an editorial in *The Journal of Male Feminism*, a periodical published by The International Alliance for Male Feminism: "We are part of the movement to cope with the excessive masculinism that has characterized the dominant class in modern civilization for the past several centuries." The objectives of the International Alliance are more explicitly stated in a cover letter sent to each new member. Basically, the Alliance encourages and assists males to ex-

press those natural aspects of their personality which society defines as feminine. In transvestite organizations, like other secret societies (Simmel, 1950:364) an aristocratic sense is fostered among the membership. Transvestites come to believe that they are the embodiment of the androgynous ideal. Thus, their cross-dressing is worthy of praise and conventional values of dressing are condemned.

MAKING CONTACTS

Transvestites become aware of the subculture in two ways: (1) through reading drag magazines and newspapers sold in adult bookstores; and (2) through responding to an ad placed in national magazines such as *Playboy* or *Psychology Today* by a leading boutique catering to cross-dressers. The boutique not only supplies information about purchasing items, but also about transvestite organizations and contacts.

The two transvestite organizations have membership directories, through which members may contact one another. No real names are used. In the transvestite subculture, feminine first names are used. Transvestites feminize their real names, choose names based on their initials, or adopt the name of a loved female or movie actress. In the directories, each transvestite is listed as such: feminine name (no last names are used), state of residence, marital status, educational level, and preferred hobbies. If a member is interested in making contact with another member, he sends a letter enclosed in a sealed blank envelope. This, a fee of one dollar, and a letter specifying to which member the initial letter is to be sent is sealed in a larger envelope. The respective national organization's addresses is on the larger envelope. The national offices, with their lists of real names and specific address forwards the sender's letter to the desired member. This procedure is established to assure anonymity.

Periodicals, published by transvestites for transvestites contain advertisements usually listing the region of each advertiser, a code number, and descriptive information. Many of the ads are supplemented by illustrations of the particular transvestite advertiser in feminine dress.

Responding to an ad costs several dollars. The procedure used in responding to an ad is

the same as that used in making a contact through the national offices of the two transvestite organizations. The magazine publishers forward the letters.

Transvestites also use such periodicals to meet women. The transvestite's search is for an understanding woman who will encourage him, or at least accept his "hobby". The following ad is an example: "Colorado — Male. I am new to transvestism. Want to meet women. Need a woman to instruct me in makeup and dress. I am heterosexual. Will write to ALL! Love, 'Sherrie', Box 7174."

In the transvestite subculture, the concept "deadly embrace" describes the situation in which the woman appears to go along while subtly persuading the man to seek a cure. Such a relationship is likely to lead to a disastrous marriage. A woman who reads transvestite periodicals, however, is most likely to be *attracted* to the transvestic aspect of the male's personality.

Some informed transvestites do not enter the subculture. Seeking to avoid the negative status of cross-dressing (Talamini, 1981:74), such a transvestite dresses alone.

An individual who becomes involved with the subculture is provided with a supportive milieu where cross-dressing is socially acceptable. Meeting like-minded individuals who come from all walks of life destroys his negative conception of cross-dressing. This process is known as *coming out*. The individual thus moves from a world marked by solitude and secrecy to an underworld where transvestite role models are available and "coaches" are willing to guide him into finer facets of cross-dressing and female deportment.

After initial contact, however, some cross-dressers maintain a marginal status. Some only get an occasional "kick" out of cross-dressing and discover that they have no continuing need for legitimization by contact with the subculture. Benjamin (1966:36) does not classify these individuals as true transvestites.

TRANVESTITE FANTASY

To understand the organization of the transvestite scene, one must recognize the importance of fantasy to its participants. Every transvestite fantasized himself dressed in female clothes, with wig and makeup. The subculture provides a broad opportunity to enhance the

feminization fantasy.

Local chapters have monthly meetings which are held at a member's house or apartment. Members arrive dressed in their male attire carrying suitcases with their female garb. There are food and refreshments. After changing dress, participants converse in feminine garb. There is no sexual activity. Women's names are used. Notes are compared regarding various transvestite activities going on around the country. Participants usually share photographs of themselves in feminine dress and photographs are taken at the gathering.

Transvestites, like homosexuals (Plummer, 1975:162) and sado-masochists (Weinberg, 1977:7) use a special argot which those outside of the sphere of the particular sexual orientation do not understand. Thus, transvestites utilize linguistic collusion at these meetings which contributes to an "in-group" feeling. They refer to themselves as "TV's" or "FP's" (femmephiles); Genetic girls are "GG's".

The ultimate fantasy is the annual Fantasia Fair, a nine-day extravaganza sponsored by transvestite organizations, held in Provincetown, Massachusetts. During this period, transvestite participants are free to move about the town in feminine garb without hassle — window shopping, having meals in restaurants, and walking along the seashore. Many social gatherings are offered to explore aspects of transvestism. A fashion show, formal dinners, bike tours, and picnics are some of the events planned for transvestite participation. Consultants are present to help transvestites with makeup, wig styling, body movement, and also to provide information on medical and legal aspects of transvestism. A similar event is "Dream", held in Oregon sponsored by West Coast transvestites. It attracts transvestites throughout the United States. Transvestites can dress for seven days as women.

Another rich source for transvestic fantasy is the transvestite underground press. Many of these are pictorial magazines with photos of men dressed as women. Examples are *Guys in Drag*, *Female Mimics*, *Drag*, and *Male She*. Some presses publish only transvestite fiction. The themes of the stories concern a male who, in various ways, undergoes a feminization process. For example: *Schoolgirls In the Secret Service* - Two young boy cousins become girls, attend girls' school to work with the

British Secret Service, which leads to many adventures as girls.

Throughout the country, shops provide women's clothes, cosmetics, wig styling, cosmetic instruction, or women's shoes for transvestites. Many of these are conventional establishments which provide their services to transvestites after hours. They advertise in transvestite periodicals to attract clientele or service them in a given locale.

A few transvestites have fantasies of being forced to dress as a girl by a female. This protects the transvestite from admitting that he really *desires* to dress as one. The sadist in such fantasies is always a woman. The use of a female dominatrix rather than a male dominator avoids the connotations of homosexuality. The underground transvestite press caters to these specific needs publishing fictional stories. The House of Milan, in particular, publishes a number of such magazines for people who enjoy reading about female domination of males. One such publication, *Aggressive Women*, contains stories, letters to the editor, as well as ads from females who specialize in dominance-submission fantasies.

As noted above, the prevalence of transvestism in American society is indicated not only by the circulation of fictional publications and contact magazines, but also by a range of businesses, such as specialized boutiques and conventional establishments. Another aspect of the commercialization of transvestite fantasy is its appearance as a sub-specialty of prostitution. Many professional prostitutes advertise not only in transvestite contact publications, but also in broader sex-oriented publications. If you want an experience that is unique, come and see me." Professional prostitutes who specialize in transvestism provide shoes, dresses, makeup, and wigs for transvestites. Some of the clientele desire intercourse dressed as a female, whereas for others dressing and conversing with the prostitute — "woman-to-woman" — is sufficient. Fees range from fifty to one hundred dollars for an hour's "session".

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these families are deviant they behave in the ways that are popularly reported. The cultural variant theory admits that behavior in black families is deviant, but argues that it results from efforts to cope with the unique problems of life in the black community. This theory does not bother to describe or evaluate this family behavior.

CONCLUSION

Sociological theories are not always couched in jargon, stated abstractly, and devoid of practical use. Good theories are likely to be simple, clear and very useful. Such theories can help lay persons as well as social scientists to understand, interpret and explain a body of facts.

I have also shown how a set of facts about black families can be interpreted in opposite ways by different theories. Each theory is useful but for a different purpose. The cultural deviant theory reveals how the family behavior of poor black families is perceived and interpreted by the middle classes. The cultural variant theory seeks to explain why black people in poor, disadvantaged families act as they do without evaluating that behavior. Sociological theories are practical useful tools of observing and thinking and nothing is better for these purposes than a *good* theory.

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