

## TRANVESTISM: EXPRESSION OF A SECOND SELF

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**DEFINITION** Transvestites have a stigma hidden from others, in contrast to those whose stigma is obvious, as with the physically disabled, deformed, or obese. In the public mind, transvestites are sometimes confused with hermaphrodites, bisexuals, drag queens, trans-sexuals, and female impersonators. Transvestites are heterosexual, and their only unique characteristic is their desire to wear women's clothes clandestinely. Our observations are based on interviews with 50 transvestites from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, representing both middle class and working class men of many occupations. The snowball sampling technique was used, since each respondent knew at least one other transvestite. They have meetings, and may belong to a secret transvestite society, such as the Society of the Second Self, or the International Alliance for Male Feminism. The respondents ranged from 30 to 60 years of age, and most were in the mid 40's; 32 were college graduates; 34 were or had been married, and many had performed military service in World War II, Korea, or Vietnam.

**BECOMING A TRANVESTITE**

. The transvestite usually begins in childhood by wearing his mother's or sister's clothes, or by masquerading in women's clothes at a Halloween party or a play. One said: "I began putting on my mother's clothes when I was about 12. The first time I did it, I got very excited. When I looked into the mirror I felt as if I was transformed into a woman, and I was in ecstasy. I would do it every week thereafter, when my mother was out."

. The transvestite who dresses alone at an early age has confusion and guilt feelings, since his behavior is not in accord with the culturally sanctioned male role. Many transvestites lead a lonely life. But when they enter

the transvestite subculture, in the "coming out" process, they enjoy a supportive milieu.

. The act of purchasing women's clothing is a problem for many transvestites because of their own guilt feelings and their tendency to worry that sales personnel will know that the item is actually for them. Some estimate their clothing size and order from a mail-order retailer. Ill-fitting clothes can be returned without having to face anyone at a ladies' store. In personal shopping for women's clothes, the transvestite may claim that the cosmetics are for a masquerade party, or that the purchase is for the wife or girl friend. There are special boutiques for transvestites in large cities throughout the United States. There, clothes and cosmetics are expensive because of the limited clientele.

. Being inexperienced as a woman the transvestite tends to overdo femininity. He wonders if his female dress and makeup is convincing. Those with understanding wives, or with transvestite friends can benefit from expert opinion. Those who belong to a transvestite club or "sorority" often take female names, or feminize their own name, like Roberta, or Carla. Or they may use their own initials for a female name, or take the name of a loved female or movie actress.

. A transvestite who feels that he can pass as a woman ventures forth in public for short appearances. He shops, goes to a movie or restaurant, or rides buses and trains. Drinking establishments are taboo territory for the transvestite because of the danger of being approached by another man who is fooled by the feminine guise. Some go out in public with another transvestite who wears conventional male clothing. Some have a problem of storing their feminine clothing if they live with a typical, conventional family. They may keep them in public

lockers, or at the home of a transvestite friend.

. In his own subculture, the transvestite uses an argot which outsiders do not understand. It contributes a sense of solidarity and exclusiveness. The terms, TV, FP, and GG refer to transvestite, femmiphile, and genetic girl, respectively.

. According to Becker, deviance may assume a master trait, or a master status. Transvestism is no exception. According to the conventional stereotype, the transvestite is consumed by his deviant status and behavior. No other status looms so relevant.

#### MOTIVES FOR CROSS-DRESSING

##### Relief from male pressures.

The transvestite periodically wants to be free of the rigid demands of being a man, with the attendant requirement for masculinity. As a man, the transvestite is expected to perform a sex role which he may sometimes want to avoid. When dressed in woman's clothing, the transvestite feels freer to express tenderness, grace, and other qualities which society defines as feminine. Dressing enables him to relax and express the suppressed side of his nature. As one respondent put it: "I feel a gender comfort when I cross-dress. I feel relaxed, very passive, sweet, and warm. I'm a very aggressive person when acting out my male role - very dominant. When I dress as a woman, I feel this offsets the other side of my personality. I feel more together. Although I am a man, I envy qualities of females: sensitivity to others, and gentleness."

Role playing. Many actors and actresses find their work rewarding because they can portray other people enmeshed with a different set of expectations. Costume parties give one the same sort of fulfillment. A transvestite who goes out in public and passes as a woman gains immense satisfaction in enacting the role. "I love to go out in public dressed as a woman. It's amazing how many people take me for a female. I

ride on buses and shop when dressed. I really get a kick out of fooling people. It's amazing how many people take appearance for granted."

Eroticism. The transvestite gets pleasure from the sensuality of feminine clothing. Many transvestites are unders, that is, they wear articles of female clothing under their male clothing. However, most embrace a complete female wardrobe.

. There is an element of narcissism for the man dressing in woman's clothes. Transvestites like to show pictures of themselves in female dress. They also usually enjoy eyeing their feminized selves in the mirror. When dressed, they feel sexy, and attracted to themselves. One respondent said: "I feel very sensuous when I put on lingerie and hose. Satin and silk make me feel very feminine and cuddly, I am pretty when dressed as a woman, and get mesmerized by my transformation."

##### Adornment & Display

To the transvestite, women's clothes are more attractive, and they suggest the freedom to be expressive. He feels restricted in men's clothes, and fulfills his need for adornment by entering the more esthetic world of feminine dress. One transvestite said: "Men's clothes are very drab, with dark colors. Every day I put on the same outfit to go to work: a business suit. When I wear women's clothes I feel I'm expressing the esthetic side of my personality." Another respondent said: "I like to be beautiful. Making myself up is exciting. I have my wigs professionally styled. Rustling petticoats, fine lingerie, pastel-colored blouses, flared skirts - my desire to display myself encompasses all these things."

#### STIGMA MANAGEMENT

. The power of conventional definitions of masculinity leads many transvestites to accept the dominant society's lowly evaluation of themselves. They interact with

normals, defined by the mainstream conception of male sexual orientation. They feel ambivalent about themselves, and manifest feelings of alienation from self. This condition manifests itself as a form of self-hate beginning at a young age. Many older transvestites buy clothes and later destroy them from a sense of guilt and disgust with themselves.

. Deviants try to nullify the negative status which others accord them by 4 processes: 1) denial; 2) excepting; 3) excusing; and 4) normalizing (Goode 1978 75). Transvestites who dress secretly, alone tend to deny their deviance in order to escape stigma. Several respondents implicitly used denial when they could not admit in plain language that they were one of those people. Many transvestites stress that they are conventional in all other aspects of their lives. In their self-image, they point out that they are many things, such as a good father, husband, and worker. These good qualities mitigate the stigma.

. Excusing is the third form of neutralization. Blame is deflected to a force beyond the transvestite's control. The transvestite sees his compulsion as similar to that of the alcoholic. Some use the assumption of biological determinism, that their compulsion is in the genes, or that they happen to have excess female hormones. Some cite the astrological influence of stars and planets which chart their destiny. Others claim reincarnation from a previous life when they were a woman.

. Normalization is the transvestite's strategem to condemn conventional behavior, and praise their own honesty. One respondent said: "All people contain the potential for transvestism, but it is repressed by society." Another claimed: "Women are becoming more assertive and entering the world of work, but men are afraid to express their feminine qualities such as tenderness and gentleness. Cross-dressing helps me to do this."

. Such statements seem to provide a springboard for action, and manifest what can be labeled conversion from stigma; that is, a sense of rebirth into a new identity. A similar process is identified among homosexuals (Humphreys 1972 142). For the transvestite, this is the assumption of the androgynous ideal. Sexual humor is another way of dealing with the inner conflict. Transvestite jokes and cartoons are attempts to find a socially acceptable means of expressing the aggression and conflict. Such humor is private, and is limited to the transvestite subculture.

. The term rationalization is inappropriate. It is a conversion process, and the statements are beliefs. The transvestites also deal with ambivalent feelings by showing displaced aggression toward homosexuals. They are particularly sensitive to the drag queen homosexual whose parading in womens clothing tends to give the heterosexual transvestite a bad name in the public mind.

CONCLUSION At first, most transvestites accept the conventional condemnation of this behavior. The transvestites feel shame, disgust, and guilt. Still, they feel compelled to explore their desire by using women's clothing, cosmetics, and mannerisms. They derive sexual, esthetic, and escapist satisfaction. Confronted with the contradiction between their conventional values and their deviance, they rationalize to mitigate their conflicted sense of self.

#### REFERENCES

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