

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry [copyright 2008 the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists]; the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry is available online at: <http://journalsonline.tandf.co.uk/>

THE PREVALENCE OF TRANSSEXUALISM AMONG NEW ZEALAND PASSPORT HOLDERS

Jaimie F. Veale, M.A.¹

School of Psychology, Massey University, Auckland Campus, New Zealand.

ABSTRACT

Most previous studies of the prevalence of transsexualism have used data from individuals seeking sex reassignment surgery. New Zealand is unique in that transsexuals can apply to have an “X” for the sex of their passport if they have a name on their birth certificate that is congruent with the sex opposite to their birth assigned sex, and provide a statutory declaration stating they have lived as a member of that sex. From information provided by the New Zealand Passports Office, it was ascertained that the prevalence of transsexualism among New Zealand passport holders was at least 1:6,364. The prevalence of male-to-female transsexualism was estimated at 1:3,639, and the corresponding figure for female-to-male transsexualism was 1:22,714. These estimates were higher than most previous estimates of transsexualism prevalence. There was also a larger than expected ratio of male-to-female transsexuals to female-to-male transsexuals (6:1) which could in part be due to female-to-male transsexuals being relatively over-represented among those transsexuals that we did not have data on whether they were male-to-female or female-to-male, or this may be indicative of the demography of transsexualism in Australasia.

KEY WORDS: transsexualism; prevalence; demography; sex-ratio.

INTRODUCTION

Previous prevalence studies of transsexualism have varied greatly in their estimates. Most estimates of male-to-female (MF) transsexualism have ranged between 1:12,700 and

¹ School of Psychology, Massey University, Auckland Campus, Private Bag 102- 904, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland, New Zealand; e-mail: j.f.veale@massey.ac.nz

1:45,000, and between 1:30,400 and 1:200,000 for female-to-male (FM) transsexualism (see De Cuypere et al., 2007 for a review). Exceptions to this have been Pauly's (1968) estimates of 1:100,000 (MF) and 1:400,000 (FM) which are now likely to be outdated, and Tsoi's (1988) relatively high estimates of 1:2,900 (MF) and 1:8,300 (FM) in Singapore which may be due to their comprehensive tracking system of transsexuals and/or cultural or biological differences in Singapore which influence the prevalence of transsexualism.

Prevalence studies of transsexualism have reported ratios of MF transsexualism prevalence to FM transsexualism prevalence of between 2.5:1 to 4.4:1 (De Cuypere et al., 2007) with one exception – Ross, Walinder, Lundström, and Thuwe (1981) reported a ratio of 6.1:1 among transsexuals in Australia. There are also reports that this ratio is reversed (there is a greater prevalence of FM to MF transsexuals) in Eastern Europe (Godlewski, 1988) and Japan (Okabe et al., 2008).

Many of these prevalence studies have relied on reports of transsexuals completing sex reassignment surgery (SRS). However, this may result in an underestimation of the prevalence of transsexualism because it excludes those transsexuals who are socially transitioned but do not undergo SRS (reasons for this could be medical, financial, or personal preference). New Zealand is unique in that since 1995, passport holders have been able to apply to have the sex omitted on their passport (in these cases sex is shown as "X" on the passport) if they provide a statutory declaration stating they live as a member of the sex opposite to that on their passport. Epidemiological data on transsexualism in New Zealand has not been previously reported, and information on the number of passport holders who have, or have had an X for the sex on their passport can give an insight into the prevalence of transsexualism in New Zealand.

METHOD AND RESULTS

Contact was made with the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs Passport Office who provided the information reported in this section.

Department of Internal Affairs confirmed that for a transsexual to get an X on the sex of their passport they must provide a statutory declaration stating "how long the applicant has lived as a member of the opposite sex" and "the applicant must have changed their name by Name Change Declaration to a name more suitable to a member of the opposite sex, or have a unisex name". This system is not used with persons with intersex conditions. If a transsexual

undergoes SRS they can change their birth certificate and passport to reflect this new sex – M or F (Department of Internal Affairs, personal communication, February 18, 2008).

Table 1 shows the numbers of transsexuals who have, or have had an X on their passport. Those individuals with “X to M”, “X to F”, and “X only” would have provided the statutory declaration to get the X on their first New Zealand passport. In addition to the 385 individuals reported in Table 1, there were six individuals who had progressed from M to X to M, one from F to X to F, and one from M to F to X (Department of Internal Affairs, personal communication, March 28, 2008) – these individuals were excluded from the analysis because of the possibility they are not transsexual.

Table 1. *Number of transsexuals who have had an X on their passport, and where available information on the sex on their passport before and/or after having the X.*

F to X	27
X to M	8
F to X to M	3
M to X	163
X to F	33
M to X to F	32
X only	119
Total	385

Although it was not possible to ascertain the birth-assigned sex of all of the transsexuals, among those where it was possible (266 individuals, 69%) there was a 6:1 prevalence of MF transsexuals to FM transsexuals. Given there are approximately 2,450,000 New Zealand passport holders over age 15 (Department of Internal Affairs, personal communication, June 9, 2008), this equates to a prevalence of transsexualism of 1:6,364 among all New Zealand passport holders, and 49.01% of these are male and 50.99% are female, this equates to a prevalence ratio of 1:3,639 for MF transsexualism and 1:22,714 for FM transsexualism. Age 15 is used here because this has been used in most previous studies estimating transsexualism prevalence (e.g. De Cuypere et al., 2007; Ross et al., 1981; Tsoi,

1988); however New Zealand transsexuals are not able to legally change their name without parental consent until they are age 18.

DISCUSSION

With the exception of the Singapore study (Tsoi, 1988), this estimate of the prevalence of both MF and FM transsexuality is higher than previous estimates. However this continues a trend of higher estimates of transsexuality over time. This trend is likely to be due to increased access to treatment for transsexuals and increased societal acceptance of transsexuality among the countries that have been surveyed, but also may be due to methodological differences between studies (Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999).

These prevalence figures should be regarded as underestimates because there are many transsexual New Zealand passport holders who choose not to have an X on their passport. A recent enquiry into the status of transgender people in New Zealand found that many transsexuals chose not to have an X because of not wanting to disclose that they are transsexual to officials, difficulties explaining the situation in countries where officials do not speak English or are not understanding of transsexualism, and some did not believe that an X represented them any better than the letter of their birth-assigned gender (Human Rights Commission, 2008). There may also be some New Zealand passport holders who would be eligible for an X on their passport but not have done so because they weren't aware this is an option, or had not yet got around to doing so (perhaps because of not needing to travel). Unfortunately the Department of Internal Affairs was not able to give figures on the number of individuals who had changed their passport directly from F to M or M to F (without going through a stage of having an X). The Human Rights Commission (2008) reported that 114 individuals had applied to the Family Court to change the sex on their birth certificate after having undergone SRS. From the passports data we know that 77 individuals had altered the sex on their passport after previously having an X, leaving 37 Family Court applicants who either 1) do not have a passport or 2) changed their passport directly from M to F or F to M. Given that the majority of transsexual New Zealanders who have undergone SRS have done so overseas (Human Rights Commission, 2008), the majority of these 37 individuals are likely to fall into the latter category.

One notable finding is the particularly high ratio of MF transsexuals to FM transsexuals (6:1). This may in part be due to FM transsexuals being relatively over-represented in the "X only" group. There are two reasons why more FM transsexuals may be

more likely to have only ever had an X on their passport: 1) FM transsexuals transition at a younger age on average than MF transsexuals (Smith, van Goozen, Kuiper, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2005) so would be more likely to have an “X” on their first passport, and 2) fewer FM transsexuals undergo SRS than MF transsexuals (reasons for this include greater cost, and less cosmetically desirable results) so would be less likely to move from the “X only” group to the “X to M” group. Interestingly, the only previous research which has found such a high MF:FM ratio was conducted in neighboring Australia (Ross et al., 1981). Ross et al. postulated that differences in equality between the sexes and attitudes towards homosexuality between Australia and Sweden play a role in both the higher prevalence of transsexualism and higher MF:FM ratio reported in Australia. It is also possible that biological factors predispose a person to transsexualism (e.g. genetics, prenatal hormone exposure) are differently allocated in Australasia. Further research should be conducted to verify this MF:FM ratio in Australasia, however.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Dr. Dave Clarke for his guidance with this paper.

REFERENCES

- Cohen-Kettenis, P. T., & Gooren, L. J. G. (1999). Transsexualism: A review of etiology, diagnosis and treatment. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 46, 315-333.
- De Cuypere, G., Van Hemelrijck, M., Michel, A., Crael, B., Heylens, G., Rubens, R., et al. (2007). Prevalence and demography of transsexualism in Belgium. *European Psychiatry*, 22, 137-141.
- Godlewski, J. (1988). Transsexualism and anatomic sex ratio reversal in Poland. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 17, 547-548.
- Human Rights Commission. (2008). To be who I am: Report of the inquiry into discrimination experienced by transgender people. Retrieved April 7, 2008, from http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/21-Jan-2008_19-03-12_Transgender_Final_2.pdf
- Okabe, N., Sato, T., Matsumoto, Y., Ido, Y., Terada, S., & Kuroda, S. (2008). Clinical characteristics of patients with gender identity disorder at a Japanese gender identity disorder clinic. *Psychiatry Research*, 157, 315-318.

-
- Pauly, I. B. (1968). The current status of the change of sex operation. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, *147*, 460-471.
- Ross, M. W., Walinder, J., Lundström, B., & Thuwe, I. (1981). Cross-cultural approaches to transsexualism: A comparison between Sweden and Australia. *Acta psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *63*, 75–82.
- Smith, Y. L. S., van Goozen, S. H. M., Kuiper, A. J., & Cohen-Kettenis, P. T. (2005). Transsexual subtypes: Clinical and theoretical significance. *Psychiatry Research*, *137*, 151-160.
- Tsoi, W. F. (1988). The prevalence of transsexualism in Singapore. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *78*, 501-504.