

## 5. A GENDER IDENTITY THEORY OF TRANSSEXUALISM.

The first chapters aimed at a comparison of transsexualism with two important related phenomena, transvestism and homosexuality. The purpose was to try and find (some of) the defining characteristics of transsexualism. Knowledge of these characteristics was considered to be a necessary prerequisite for a descriptive theoretical framework of transsexualism.

*Theoretical implications of the results.* It seemed appropriate to start with the work of Docter (1988). He was the first to formulate a theory of (secondary) transsexualism based on a general self-theory. This theory starts with the self as a master self, which maintains relationships and communications with different subordinate selfsubsystems. These selfsubsystems are relatively independent or autonomous but are influenced by the master self and are influencing the master self. It is of note that the empirical studies in the previous chapters did not test this part of the theory. Any self-theory without a master self, for instance one in which the self is simply seen as the set of selfsubsystems that interact with each other and with the environment, would be just as applicable.

Instead of one gender identity subsystem which is either masculine or feminine or which is in part masculine and for the rest feminine, two gender identity subsystems were assumed. A strong, inverse relationship between the strengths of these two subsystems can be expected. In general, a person who is characterized by a very strong masculine gender identity will usually have a weak feminine gender identity. But still, a strong feminine gender identity in this person is a possibility, of which some transvestites are examples. Therefore, there are necessarily two separate dimensions of masculinity and femininity.

Several different levels of masculinity and femininity can be described. The first is a theoretical level of the strength of the gender identity subsystem. At this latent, underlying dimension each person can have any position. This position is the person's gender identity, which is a theoretical position with two coordinates, one for masculinity and one for femininity. It is a theoretical position because this position can only be perceived through the second level. (The relationship between the first and the second level is very much akin to the relationship between latent and manifest variables, in which latent variables underlie the manifest and can only be measured indirectly through the manifest variables). In his definition of gender identity Money also stresses that this gender identity is experienced in self-awareness and behavior (Money, 1985). At this second level, therefore, empirical research on gender identity is performed.

The second level is that concerning the expression of masculinity and/or femininity. The expression has (at least) one important function, self-seeking. This is a hypothesis-testing process. The hypotheses concern the position on the two theoretical dimensions of the first level. This means that a tested hypothesis can also be described by a point with two coordinates. The feedback that is the result of the self-seeking is an indication of whether the hypothesized position on the dimension is close to or far away from the actual first level position. It can also be an indication that the present hypothesis is closer to or farther away from this position than previously tested hypotheses. Close or closer to this position leads to positive feedback and therefore testing these hypotheses was labeled positive self-seeking. Negative self-seeking is related to hypotheses that are far(ther) away. The distinction between positive

and negative self-seeking is very much related to the concepts 'ego-syntonic' versus 'ego-dystonic'. Positive self-seeking, for instance, leads to feelings of "This is what I am really like" or "This is more what I am really like". This distinction between positive and negative self-seeking highlights the position of those who are characterized by both a (relatively) strong masculine and feminine gender identity. Their conflict stems from the experience that the same behavior that is experienced as ego-syntonic and leads to clear positive feedback with respect to the former is at the same time ego-dystonic and provides negative feedback with respect to the latter. It was suggested that their solution could be conditional expression. According to Money (1974) transvestites are characterized by "two names, two wardrobes and two personalities". He thought that in transvestites masculinity was dissociated from femininity. When some conditions (for instance being alone, or with their partners in their own home, or going to clubs for transvestites) are fulfilled, they can live and dress as a female. In those periods they are female and only female. The dissociated masculine gender identity is psychologically absent and will not be disconfirmed. The positive self-seeking of being female is not at the same time accompanied by the negative self-seeking aspect of being male. When the conditions are not met (for instance when they go to work), transvestites are males without disconfirming their feminine side.

An important part of the feedback in the self-seeking process needs to be provided by others. It seemed that the concept of self-verification (Swann et al., 1992a and Swann et al., 1992b) could very well be applied. People have a need to be seen and treated by others in a way that is consistent with their self-view. This is why 'coming out' is such an important moment for (homosexuals, transvestites, and) transsexuals. It is not enough that they know for themselves that they are male or female. It is for others to know how they see themselves. These others must provide feedback that confirms the hypothesis of the cross-gender identity.

Because of the importance of social interaction it might be argued that the social sex roles could be positioned at a third level. These are masculinity and femininity as personality traits and behavioral choices that are culturally stereotyped as more characteristic of men or of women. Since transsexuals do not define their gender consistently with the sex characteristics of their body, it could be argued that they define the gender identity in terms of a felt or desired sex role (Kando, 1970 and Raymond, 1977). Fleming et al (1980) already found that FMs were primarily masculine sex-typed or androgynous. Furthermore, MFs were significantly *more* feminine sex-typed than females. This could be interpreted as a confirmation of the definition of transsexualism as a discrepancy between anatomical sex and social sex roles. However, it may be assumed that sex-typing for transsexuals derives its relevance from the self-verification process. In order to be recognized and treated as a female you must behave, you must present yourself to others, in a fashion that elicits from these other people the categorization, that is, the appraisal as feminine. Behaving in a stereotypically female way ensures that others will not make the dreaded mistake of thinking that you are a male. Social sex roles, therefore, need not be interpreted as a distinct third level, but are part of the second level.

Most transitions are on this level of the expression of masculinity and femininity. For instance, the transitions that, according to Docter (1988), characterize the different stages of transvestism in the development of secondary transsexualism can very well be interpreted as changes in hypotheses that are tested. They need not be seen as changes in the actual gender identity. The view that the gender identity itself changes is incompatible with the theoretical point of view presented above. Behavior is not necessarily the reflection of the underlying gender identity. In negative self-seeking it clearly is not. Changes are motivated by discre-

transsexual. She knew that she should not talk about her sexual arousal when cross-dressed, because treatment would possibly be denied to her. However, she was well aware that the expression of sexuality in her was absolutely impossible through the means of the masculine body. Dressed as a male and functioning as a male she felt she could not get in touch with her sexuality and could not reach sexual fulfillment. Sexuality was completely blocked and turned off. In order to feel her sexual needs and to express them she had to be a female (as much as possible). She decided to acknowledge these feelings, in combination with her preference for females. She is now a lesbian female, who is very happy that she underwent Sex Reassignment Surgery. Her sexual arousal when cross-dressed clearly was not in contradiction with her feminine gender identity. It was much more a confirmation.

Looking at the results several comments can be made. For instance in Table 2.2 it appears that very many members of the two transsexual groups do not take the extreme 'classic' position. TVs have male or mixed preferences and certainly do not downplay their masculine side. Also the cross-dressing variables depicted in Tables 2.3 and 2.4 do not reflect too much of 'classic' transsexualism. In Chapter 3 it is striking that the heterosexual transsexuals do not claim to be more feminine than homosexual nontranssexuals in their early years (see Table 3.2: feminine identification). These results, among others, cannot be interpreted as a confirmation of a generally high level of life-distortion. They reflect the policy of the Gender Clinic of the Hospital of the Vrije Universiteit in which a variety of life-histories is acknowledged. The most important aspect with respect to admission for hormone treatment is the way the person currently feels. A 'true' (nontranssexual) homosexual can have a history of a heterosexual marriage, which is not necessarily unhappy. After it has been discovered, this part of his life presents no reason to doubt his fundamental homosexuality. In transsexuals an active life as a male or as a fetishistic cross-dresser does not necessarily disprove the cross-gender identity. From the point of view presented above it is merely an indication of (a lot of) negative self-seeking.

As was noted in the introduction (Chapter 1) the first three chapters were meant heuristically. Even if it has to be accepted that life-histories are, to some extent, distorted this is not a disaster from a scientific point of view. It may be assumed that the theoretical points of view which are founded in supposedly 'incorrect' data will not hold in subsequent testing on new populations. Therefore, in the following chapters some of the implications of the theoretical framework will be tested.

*A Gender Identity Theory of Transsexualism (GITT).* Each person is characterized by a position on the two dimensions of the theoretical, underlying gender identity. This position is the persons 'true' gender identity. On this theoretical level the most important characteristic of transsexualism is the cross-gender identity. Transsexualism is conceived of as one of two possible positions. Firstly, in the case of an MF, by a strong feminine gender identity in combination with a weak masculine gender identity or, in the case of an FM, by a strong masculine and a weak feminine gender identity. These are 'real' transsexuals. The second possibility is characterized by both a relatively strong feminine gender identity and a relatively strong masculine gender identity. These are people that are in the midposition that described the transvestites. In the event of gravitation towards transsexualism, their feminine gender identity is integrated in the self-system, while the masculine gender identity is dissociated. It has no function in the self-system (anymore). After a period of transvestism these people experience themselves as transsexuals.

On the second level of the expression of the gender identity (the persons who know themselves to be) transsexuals, through the process of positive and negative self-seeking,

arrived at or came close to their theoretical position. They found out about their position. They feel this is their true self. Those MFs who are characterized by the second position (i.e., a strong feminine gender identity in combination with a masculine gender identity of at least some strength), possibly went through a tentative phase of conditional expression of both masculinity and femininity. This, apparently, was not a final solution for them. They cannot live alternating between male and female, nor can they live only as male.

Transsexuals want to unconditionally express their position, that is, their cross-gender identity, as completely as possible. (In the next chapter the hypothesis will be tested that the public expression is necessary for the integration of the cross-gender identity in the self-system). In spite of their underlying gender identity and their self-experienced gender identity their body, through the primary and secondary sex characteristics, expresses the wrong gender identity. Their social sex roles may (or may not) be cross-gendered to a large extent, but that is absolutely not decisive. The appraisal of others regarding one's masculinity/femininity is not primarily based on one's behavior, but on one's appearance. Whether transsexuals behave in a feminine or masculine way or not, they are (even by the clinicians that treat them) defined according to their sex characteristics. It is as if these actively expose their masculinity/femininity to others. The sex characteristics prompt others to see them and treat them accordingly. While socially and legally an MF is treated as a male, she sees herself as female. The bodily expression by means of the sex characteristics is negative self-expression, resulting in a continuous feedback of 'this is not me'. The term self-seeking of course connotes an active, purposeful process that aims at finding out who you really are. However, the bodily expression is a passive, but inescapable process. Because of this transsexuals feel a strong aversion to their primary sex characteristics, which are unambiguously masculine or feminine. The aversion to the primary sex characteristics is the core phenomenon of gender dysphoria. With respect to the secondary characteristics it is not exactly the same. If they allow for much cross-gender identity expression (an MF, who is very feminine in appearance) then it may be expected that their self-seeking process will be much more positive and that their aversion is less strong. (This hypothesis is the central point of concern in the next chapter). Transsexuals need sex reassignment because they want to be who they really are and need others to see them accordingly. Therefore, the most important aspect of partner preference is that he or she must appraise and appreciate them according to their cross-gender identity. It does not really matter if the partner is a male or a female.

Even though it is, in part, derived from the work of Money (see for instance Money, 1985), the relationship within the GITT between gender identity and gender identity expression is not the same as in Money's concept of G I/R. Money treated Gender Role and Gender identity as two reverse sides of the same coin. G I/R as a concept is meant to enforce the union of identity and role. Gender identity is the private experience of gender role, and gender role is the public manifestation of gender identity (Money, 1985). In order to further clarify the GITT several differences from Money's concept can be mentioned. Firstly, looking at the description from the GITT point of view, it can be interpreted such that both identity and role are part of the second level of masculinity and femininity. The private experience of one's gender role is not the gender identity itself (as meant in the GITT), but an aspect of the expression of gender identity. This experience, for instance who you think or feel you are, may be quite removed from the theoretical, underlying position. A second difference is that there is not necessarily a union between the underlying level of gender identity and the level of expression as illustrated in the concept of negative self-seeking. Negative self-seeking implies that the relationship between gender identity and self-seeking needs to include those expressions that do not indicate to the self and to others the degree to

pancies between the actual behavior and the subsequent feedback it elicits and the (theoretical) position on the first level of gender identity. The changes in the stages of secondary transsexualism, from this point of view, are the result of (are 'caused' by) the underlying feminine gender identity. Homosexuality in homosexual transsexuals was already interpreted in the same vein in chapter 3. The homosexual behavior did not reflect a sexual orientation of homosexuality and can be dismissed as a transitional phase of testing a hypothesis of being a (homosexual) male. There is no need to assume that the position on the latent gender identity dimensions shifted from fundamental male to female. What can be perceived are the changes in the process of negative (i.e., being a homosexual male) and positive (being a heterosexual female and therefore attracted to heterosexual males) self-seeking. The implication is that arriving at the hypothesis that corresponds with the theoretical position will stop the process of change. From then on there will be positive self-seeking which has the function of continuously reaffirming this position and which will gradually stop when the feedback in this process becomes redundant. One important point is that it is assumed that people are motivated to find out about their theoretical position and to make it part of their psychological reality.

**The presentation in a favorable way.** The conclusions of the previous three chapters were reached by comparing heterosexual and homosexual and transvestitic control groups, who could give their answers on the BVT (a biographical questionnaire used in all three studies) anonymously. The transsexual groups, on the other hand, were investigated in a quite different setting. They gave their answers as part of the intake procedure for the treatment of transsexualism. Blanchard et al. (1985) pointed out that the "potential heuristic value of differences in such self-report depends on the extent to which they are affected by the desire to create a favorable impression on the examiner" (p. 506). Already in 1955 Worden and Marsh concluded that the similarity of the histories given by their transsexual patients was a product of the distortion and selection of memories.

From the summary on the typology of homosexual versus nonhomosexual transsexualism in Chapter 1 it must be clear that Blanchard, who did a lot of research on this topic, saw the homosexual transsexual as the 'real' transsexual. He therefore expected this distortion to be more important in the nonhomosexual group. Blanchard et al. (1985) related the distortion of life-histories to social desirability. The 'social desirable presentation' of a heterosexual male gender patient is one that emphasizes childhood femininity and erotic interest in males and downplays fetishistic arousal and erotic interest in females. Freund (1985) found that heterosexual transsexuals, as opposed to transvestites, almost always produce memories of childhood femininity. Along with Blanchard he assumed that it is true that virtually all heterosexual transsexuals pass through a phase of simple transvestism. This means that in this phase they cross-dress and get physically aroused by it, but are not gender dysphoric. If indeed this is true then, according to Freund, it is likely that their self-report of feminine gender identity in childhood is untruthful reporting or is based on paramnesia. Freund also questions their claims of becoming more attracted to males.

It is inescapable that most knowledge of transsexualism stems from the self-report of adult individuals describing their experiences in their youth. Therefore it is relatively strange that there is agreement on the 'fact' that heterosexual transsexuals pass through a phase of simple transvestism, while these same persons themselves tend to deny such a phase. How, then, was this conclusion reached? How did clinicians arrive at the image of a 'classic' transsexual who is "a textbook case of the biological male who has felt and acted feminine from the earliest childhood, has never been sexually aroused by women's apparel, and is

romantically inclined towards males" (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 508)? Buhrich and McCannagh (1977) attempted to go beyond self-report data by comparing self-report with penile responses in a group of gender dysphoric males. The group that reported more interest in males also showed more response to pictures of nude males, thereby validating that self-report. Blanchard et al. (1985) comment that unfortunately, "the usefulness of phallometric testing is limited by the well-documented ability of many subjects to exert some control over erectile respons" (p. 508). Agreement between self-report and phallometric respons could therefore not be seen as a validation of self-report. A picture emerges in which anything that is empirically found and that contradicts the expectations of the researchers on (subtypes of) transsexualism is to be discarded. Benjamin (1966) pointed at the tendency of many transvestites to minimize the connection between cross-dressing and erotic arousal. He thought that this desexing attempt is merely one example of the frequent lack of realism among transvestites and their ever-present capacity for illusion and self-deception.

One attempt to study the life-history distortion was made by Blanchard et al. (1985). They suggested that social desirability can be seen as attempts to achieve the approval of others. They hypothesized a relationship between social desirability and the tendency to present a favorable 'classic' picture of transsexualism in heterosexual transsexuals, since this would lead to the approval of the examiners. They found significant correlations between social desirability and a series of cross-gender items/scales, which were absent in homosexual transsexuals. They concluded that "the socially desirable presentation in a heterosexual transsexual male gender patient is one that emphasizes traits and behaviors characteristic of 'classic' transsexualism" (p. 513). These findings can be considered consistent with results of Fleming et al. (1980). They reported high correlations between femininity (Bem's Sex Role Inventory) and social desirability. The conclusions of Blanchard et al., however, are not correct and not consistent with the aim of their investigation. They wanted to show that heterosexual transsexuals as a group distort their life-histories. With respect to this aim the within-group variance is error variance. Between-group differences are the adequate source of information. Compared to the homosexual transsexuals the heterosexual ones scored much lower on the Feminine Gender Identity scale. They scored quite opposite to homosexual transsexuals on the Modified Androphilia and Gynephilia scales, thereby clearly acknowledging their preference for females. They also reported cross-gender fetishism, arousal and masturbation when cross-dressed. Furthermore, their social desirability scores were *lower* than those of the homosexual transsexuals. Fleming et al. found that transsexuals scored lower than nontranssexual norm groups on the social desirability scale that they used. If one conclusion, therefore, is justified, then it must be that (heterosexual) transsexuals do not try to create a favorable impression. In spite of the preconceived and prejudiced ideas in the heads of clinicians, of which transsexuals are well aware, they report very much unfavorable behavior and preferences. In ignoring this information the impression of a readiness to disqualify heterosexual transsexuals, which is related to a readiness to accept the accounts of homosexual transsexuals, is confirmed. As a group they scored close to the extreme cross-gender position on all questions/scales, with very small standard deviations. In spite of this extremely favorable position "it is likely that the homosexual subjects were, in reality, virtually devoid of certain characteristics, such as a history of sexual arousal with cross-dressing, that are common in heterosexual gender patients" (Blanchard et al., 1985, p. 514). They supposedly had lesser need to distort.

It seems, overall, that the conclusion is warranted that the level of life-history distortion in transsexuals in general, and in heterosexual transsexuals in particular, is not as high as is suggested by many. This conclusion is illustrated by the story of a heterosexual MF

which one is male or female. These expressions indicate to others what kind of hypotheses are tested. The hypotheses can very much be the wrong ones. Only when the coordinates of the tested hypotheses are close to or identical to the coordinates of the gender identity can this gender identity and gender identity expression be seen as two sides of the same coin. Only then can one speak of a union between identity and its expression. A third difference is that the union between identity and role implies that a radical change in gender role is a reflection of, or is reflected by, a change in gender identity. Within the GITT a change in gender identity expressions are an indication of the fact that until that moment the right hypothesis was not tested. The gender identity itself did not change.

In sum, transsexualism is hypothesized to be defined by a (large) discrepancy between the theoretical position on the two dimensions of gender identity and the bodily expressions, that are interpreted (both by the person him/herself and by others) as unmistakable signs of maleness or femaleness. Primary sex characteristics are direct sources of negative self-seeking, while secondary sex characteristics may (or may not) invoke positive self-seeking. Gender dysphoria is the subjective experience of the difference between the (two coordinates of the) cross-gender identity and the (two coordinates of the) bodily expression.

In the following chapters some implications of this theoretical point of view will be tested. A first implication, as mentioned above, is the importance of the bodily expression of masculinity and femininity (by the secondary sex characteristics), and the ways in which this affects the self-seeking process are studied. It is hypothesized that secondary characteristics that fit the anatomy of the body will enhance negative self-seeking. Those that enable, to a larger extent, the expression of the cross-gender identity will enhance more positive self-seeking. This should be demonstrated in cross-dressing behavior and a more positive attitude towards the body. The positive self-seeking should lead to a better integration of the cross-gender identity in the self-system and also to a more positive attitude towards (starting) treatment. These hypotheses will be tested in Chapter 6.

It is important to compare the view presented in this chapter to the conflict hypothesis summarized in Chapter 1. Several points of fundamental difference can be addressed of which the psychological dysfunctioning is the most important. Proponents of the conflict hypothesis consider transsexualism as an indication of very poor ego-functioning. On the other hand the presented view, along with the biological point of view, do not relate (the development of) transsexualism to ego-dysfunctioning. It is assumed, therefore, that the conflict hypothesis needs to be clearly falsified in order for the present point of view to be accepted. Therefore, in Chapter 7, transsexuals will be compared to psychiatric patients in order to determine whether they dysfunction psychologically to the same degree as the patients. The level of dysfunctioning of subtypes of transsexuals will also be studied. Particular attention will be paid to differences between those who had a history of positive self-seeking and those who were characterized by negative self-seeking.

Finally, it is clear that if this theoretical framework is correct, certain characteristics of transsexualism must predict the success of the sex reassignment treatment while others should be irrelevant. Contrary to what is generally believed, early versus late onset of transsexualism, along with age at the moment of presentation at the clinic, sexual preference, and autogynophilia should all appear to be irrelevant with respect to this prediction. Gender dysphoria, a partner who confirms one's cross-gender identity, secondary sex characteristics that are concordant with the cross-gender identity, continuously living in the cross-gender role as much as possible, a cross-gendered self-perception, and a definitive, inescapable choice for the treatment should be important predictors. This is put to the test in Chapter 8.

In these chapters the life-history distortion will not be a topic. It returns in the last chapter, which will also summarize the following chapters and discuss some of the theoretical as well as clinical implications.

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