

MALE-TO-FEMALE TRANSSEXUALS' IMPRESSIONS OF BLANCHARD'S AUTOGYNEPHILIA THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Ray Blanchard presented a theory of male-to-female (MTF) transsexualism based on a typology, classifying MTF transsexuals as autogynephilic or homosexual. This theory has produced much debate, and many transsexuals have disagreed with it. In this research, comments from a convenience sample 170 mostly white/European internet using MTF transsexuals on Blanchard's theory were collected through an anonymous questionnaire. Positive responses to the theory were given by 15.9% of participants, 31.9% were neutral, and 52.2% were negative. The most common theme of the responses was that the theory was too narrow and restrictive. Other common themes were that the theory was simply wrong, that it did not apply to the participant's experience, acceptance of the theory, belief that the theory was not important, something that only applies to crossdressers, and questioning the motives of the theory. Some participants reported they experienced autogynephilia in the past and some reported changes of their sexual orientation. Given the anonymity of participants' responses, transsexuals were unlikely to consciously distort their responses. Although there were sampling limitations, this study gives insights into the proportion of MTF transsexuals who are supportive of/opposed to Blanchard's typology and the reasons why some are opposed to it. The findings are of interest as transsexuals' reactions to the theory can and have been used to theorize about the nature of autogynephilia.

KEY WORDS: autogynephilia; transsexual; sexuality; cross-gender eroticism; qualitative research.

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INTRODUCTION

This article describes research conducted with male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals, eliciting their impressions of Blanchard's (1989) autogynephilic vs. homosexual MTF transsexualism typology. Blanchard (1989) proposed there are two types of MTF transsexuals, which can be distinguished by their sexuality. According to Blanchard, *autogynephilic* transsexuals are sexually attracted to females (gynephilic), both sexes (bisexual), or neither sex (alloerotic); they are not unusually feminine in childhood; and prior to transitioning often live outwardly successful lives as males, frequently marrying and having children. These individuals also experience *autogynephilia*—a term which Blanchard used to refer to “a male's propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought of himself as a female” (1989, p. 616). Blanchard's *homosexual* transsexuals are exclusively sexually attracted to males (androphilic), do not experience autogynephilia, are markedly feminine in their childhood, have less success with attempts to live in the male role, and generally present for treatment of their gender dysphoria at a younger age (see also Blanchard, 2005). Blanchard's formulation has had influence within the psychiatric community, as evidenced by autogynephilia appearing in the text revision of the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

By dividing MTF transsexuals into these two groups based on their sexual orientation, Blanchard (1985, 1988, 1989) and others (Freund, Steiner, & Chan, 1982; Johnson & Hunt, 1990; Nuttbrock et al., 2009; Smith, van Goozen, Kuiper, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2005; Veale, Clarke, & Lomax, 2008) have found evidence for average differences between these groups that were proposed by Blanchard. However, some of these findings have been inconsistent with Blanchard's theory. Veale et al. found that the MTF transsexual group reporting higher levels of autogynephilia had higher levels of androphilia (sexual attraction to adult males) and none of these MTF transsexuals reported alloerotic sexuality. Nuttbrock et al. reported the relationship between transvestism (an aspect of autogynephilia) and gynephilia was linear, not curvilinear as Blanchard (1992) proposed. Moreover, although Blanchard's theory is deterministic, these average group differences have been described as “large (but not deterministic)” (Nuttbrock et al., 2009, p. 247; see Nuttbrock, Bockting, Rosenblum, Mason, & Hwahng, 2010, 2011, and Lawrence, 2010, 2011 for further discussion).

Bailey's (2003) book explaining Blanchard's theory to a layperson audience sparked heated debate, with a number of activists in the transsexual community speaking out against

Blanchard's theory (see Dreger, 2008). Activists' responses were that the theory is incorrect, offensive, and potentially politically damaging to a marginalized group. This is because Blanchard's theory assumes that MTF transsexuals are essentially male, and it is because of male-typical sexuality variation that cause their transsexuality (Dreger, 2008; see also Meyer-Bahlburg, 2011 for discussion on this). It has been noted that MTF transsexuals believe their transsexualism is a result of an internal gender identity, rather than their sexuality (Doorn, 1997; Dreger, 2008; Lawrence, 2004; Wyndzen, 2003). While the views of transsexual activists have been made clear, the views of other transsexuals about the theory have never previously been studied.

There are a number of reasons why studying MTF transsexuals' impressions of Blanchard's autogynephilia typology is useful for our understanding of the development of transsexualism. Moser (2008) reminded us that politics influence science and that transsexuals' views about themselves need to be respected by health professionals and those researching the group. Furthermore, theorizing about the nature of autogynephilia (Lawrence, 2007) and its relationship with social desirability (Blanchard, Clemmensen, & Steiner, 1985) has been undertaken based on MTF transsexuals' impressions of autogynephilia. A greater understanding of these impressions will assist future theorizing. Moreover, a study of the objections and other comments that MTF transsexuals have about the theory can provide useful information for professionals working with transsexuals about the type of reactions they might expect by talking about it. Information can also be gathered about the proportion of transsexuals are supportive or opposed to the theory.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited for a survey investigating the sexuality of MTF transsexuals through worldwide online forums and mailing lists, and New Zealand transgender social and support groups (see Veale et al., 2008). This comprised of 150 preceding multiple choice questions before participants were given the opportunity to comment on Blanchard's theory. All participants identified themselves as MTF transsexuals. In total, 209 transsexuals responded to the survey, but only 170 completed the preceding questions to be given the opportunity to comment. Of these, 51 did not comment, leaving responses from 119. Six of these responses were collected using a paper survey, and the remainder via the Internet. The average age of participants who commented was 40.6 ($SD = 15.3$, median = 42.0). All

participants who responded to the ethnicity question identified as White/Caucasian/European, two participants also identified as Māori, and two participants also identified as an “other” ethnicity. Five participants did not give an ethnicity. No data were collected about participant's country of residence, although all of the participants completing paper surveys were New Zealanders. These participants were also mostly not exclusively androphilic, thus fitting Blanchard's autogynephilic category (Veale et al., 2008; see also Lawrence & Bailey, 2009).

Procedure

Participants first completed a 175-item multiple-choice questionnaire (see Veale et al., 2008). After completing this, participants were presented with a summary of Blanchard's theory, adapted from Lawrence (2000) and reproduced in the Appendix. Participants were then given the opportunity to give any “thoughts, comments, or feelings” they had about the theory. These comments are the data used for this article.

The questionnaire was anonymous. Because participants had to complete this lengthy questionnaire with before being able to comment on Blanchard's theory, there may have been a deterrent from one participant making more than one response. We did not observe any malicious or otherwise undesirable responding such as a lot of questionnaire submissions in a short time period.

Themes were identified and coded by the first author. Responses were also coded for the overall theme of their response as positive, neutral, or negative according to the first author's interpretation.

Results

1. The most common theme was that Blanchard's typology is too narrow. Thirty-three responses included this theme. Examples of these responses include:

I fall in both categories.

It holds up this idea that there are only two types of transsexuals, and that they have to fit in either category. Well first off, being a very active member in the trans community, I can say this isn't so. There is such a huge spectrum of gender and/or sexual variants in the trans community.

It is society trying to put transsexual people in a box. Some like me are a mix.

Far too simplistic a reduction of human sexuality. Denies the existence of feminine lesbian M2Fs [male-to-female transsexuals], when I've met a few so know they exist.

I think that there may be some cases of transsexuals who are really gynephilic [sexually attracted to adult females], or partly so, but I do not accept the theory as encompassing ALL transsexuals. I am androphilic in Blanchard's terms in that I am attracted to males, but autogynephilic in terms of having had (IN THE PAST) sexual arousal at the thought of forced feminisation, and most commonly the fantasies centred round being forcibly raised as a girl from a young age (5 or 6).

There are not two separate groups of MTFs, rather a broad spectrum between two poles.

I believe there are probably people who suffer from autogynephilia but I do not believe it is as prevalent as Blanchard makes it appear to be.

I don't doubt there may be MTF autogynephilics, ...but I resent people trying to generalise their own personal predilections, fantasies, or misogynistic theories onto every other MTF.

Well to begin with, I think trying to fit us into groups is total bullshit. Sure, many of us exhibit shared commonalities, but we are all individuals, coming from a wide spectrum of variables – childhood years, family relationships.

2. The next most common theme was that Blanchard's theory of autogynephilia is simply wrong. This category covered a wide range of aversive responses that generally did not offer any conceptual critique of the theory. Responses coded with this theme also tended to show a significant amount of hurt and anger about the theory. Nineteen responses included this theme, for instance:

Pseudoscientific rubbish.

Autogynephilia is a load of crap. Blanchard's theories are junk.

Transitioning is a horribly painful thing. I've lost friends, good friends, family, have been thrown on the street by my family. Why would someone go through that for a sexual thrill?

Practically, I wonder how much brainwashing Blanchard's subjects underwent, because none of the transsexuals I have known recognize their experience in his theory.

Tries to pass off all versions of transsexuality as some sort of paraphilia rather than an expression of one's inner self.

3. Fifteen participants' responses indicated that Blanchard's typology did not apply to them, for instance:

It doesn't apply to me.

It never really sexually aroused me to be (a woman) (neither were men the aspect to transition).

My reasons for being an MTF are as far from that as one could imagine, and so too for those I trust and respect most.

Discarded the thought - it has no relevance for me!

I am not sure I agree with this theory. I never really thought of myself being sexually aroused by the two areas he suggests.

I also feel that this classification ignores me: I never had a history of dressing as female before my transition.

4. Fifteen participants' responses showed acceptance for the theory, for instance:

It's perfectly sound and probably affects many male to female transsexuals.

I only admitted to myself I am transsexual at the age of 45 after a life of marriage and children, I was not feminine in appearance or action. So it seems to fit my case well.

When I first heard about the theory I did find it quite disturbing and didn't think one would do that, until I met one that fits perfectly in Blanchard's picture of

autogynephilia and although I think that it's wrong to transition just because of sexual arousal, if it makes this one person happy and helps him/her leading his/her life than who am I to judge?

I'm quite sure some trans girls in their early years of crossing gender lines, would fit the autogynephilia criteria. I think though, that many progress or evolve beyond that sexual high over time. Possibly the cross dressing high diminishes over time and they seek to heighten it by becoming more female? If this were the case, I could see some individuals becoming confused about their gender identity.

I think that for some of us it plays a very large part in our make-up. For me, it plays very little although it is clear that it does play a part.

5. Nine participants' responses indicated that the theory was not of any importance to them, for instance:

It is not important to me.

Really do not have a thought on it or understand it.

Far too much theorising but that's what academics do! :)

6. Seven participants' reported that they used to have autogynephilic sexual feelings, but they no longer had these. For instance:

I used to be aroused, probably 40 years ago.

Since I have started on the hormones all thoughts and feelings have gone. I am what I should have been and now I don't have to fantasise about it.

Personally, I have always felt sexually aroused as a child when dressed as a girl (secretly), and felt a very strong attraction to guys when dressed. And how this applies to me: I have always had the fantasy of being a woman, which I found very sexually attractive. But looking back on it, actually being a woman and having vaginal intercourse with my husband is far more sexually stimulating to me than any of my childhood fantasies ever were.

7. Six participants' responses indicated the belief that autogynephilia was something that applied to transvestites or cross-dressers, but not to transsexuals, for instance:

I believe that people that identify as cross-dressers are more in the group of autogynephilia I am not a cross-dresser I am transsexual.

I believe that as society to some extent has becoming more accepting of transsexual people it has become a lot easier for transvestites to take their hobby, sexual fantasies a little too far.

I think it relates more to the experience of some fetish cross-dressers.

8. Five participants questioned the motives of the theory of autogynephilia, for instance:

What purpose does such a definition/explanation serve other than to encourage “elitist divisionism” within the transgender community and to give...bigots a hook on which to hang their own transphobic “sexual perversion” theories?

Sounds to be an unsupported method used by conservatives to make transsexuals look like sexual deviants.

9. Five participants reported changes in their sexual orientation, for instance:

Certainly it has always felt 'unnatural' for me performing penetration sex on women, and I felt no sexual attraction towards men at all until after I had started HRT & living as a social female, and could allow my true feelings/emotions/mannerisms/sexuality to emerge. (I did have occasional fantasies of being made love to by men when I was in a particularly femme head-space and could imagine myself with a feminine body.)

10. Five participants did some theorising of their own in their response, for instance:

I feel that the “autogynephilic qualifiers”... are possibly (certainly in my case at least) a misinterpretation/ misrepresentation of not being able to feel sexually aroused, or not being comfortable with one's true (feminine?) sexuality while having a male body and/or presenting as a male ... one tends to suppress one's true sexuality and it is necessary to either imagine oneself as a female or to feminise one's physical appearance & make-up in order to “allow” one's natural mannerisms and sexuality to emerge.

Participants' comments were also coded as 16.0% positive, 31.9% neutral, and 52.1% negative. Comments that were coded as positive can be found in categories 1 and 6; comments that were coded as neutral can be found in categories 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10; and comments that were coded as negative can be found in categories 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8.

DISCUSSION

Overall, participants' views of Blanchard's theory were more often negative than positive. A large number of MTF transsexuals reported disagreement with Blanchard's theory, although a small but notable proportion believed it applied to them. These results help our understanding of the proportion of white/European nonandrophilic MTF transsexuals who are supportive, neutral, or opposed to Blanchard's theory. While some responses gave a rejection of Blanchard's theory without giving a reason for this, more often participants gave some insight into the reasons they do not agree with Blanchard's typology. The most common comment made about autogynephilia was that the theory is too narrow: A notable proportion of participants did not believe that MTF transsexualism could be completely explained using two groupings, and many did not feel that they fitted clearly into either of Blanchard's two groupings. Some participants reported diminishing of autogynephilia with age. This was also observed by Blanchard (1991). A number of participants reported changes in their sexual orientation following transition. This has also been previously reported among MTF transsexuals (see Lawrence, 2005).

There is evidence that autogynephilia is not unique to MTF transsexual women, but also experienced by nontranssexual women (Moser, 2009; Veale et al., 2008). Moser suggested that autogynephilia is characteristic of female sexuality. Interestingly, this counter-argument to Blanchard's theory was given little comment by MTF transsexuals. This may be because those in the sample did not presume to speak for the sexuality of others with different experiences.

These results should be considered along with the limitations of this research. The sample is likely to over-represent transsexuals who had the time, resources, and interest to complete lengthy questionnaire on their sexuality usually on the internet. Moreover, those who had strong feelings about Blanchard's theory may have been more likely to respond. Because only a minority of MTF transsexuals in this sample reported being exclusively androphilic, the majority were more likely to purportedly fit into Blanchard's autogynephilic category (cf. Veale, Clarke, & Lomax, 2009). Participants were overwhelmingly

white/European. Although information was not collected on participants' country of residence, it is likely that the majority of participants lived in New Zealand or the United States of America, with the remainder living in other English-speaking countries (cf. Veale, Clarke, & Lomax, 2010 for country of residence in a similar study). The responses were coded by only one rater. This means it was not possible to assess the reliability of coding. A significant proportion of the participants' responses were able to be quoted in this manuscript, allowing the reader to judge the validity of the coding for themselves.

Implications for Blanchard's Typology

There are two aspects of these results which challenge the assumptions underlying Blanchard's typology. Firstly, more participants felt that Blanchard's typology did not fit with their experience than did, and secondly the most common objection to this typology was that it does not fit all experiences of MTF transsexualism.

Proponents of Blanchard's typology are aware of these criticisms and explain them as autogynephilic transsexuals consciously or unconsciously denying their autogynephilia (Bailey, 2003; Blanchard et al., 1985; Blanchard, Racansky, & Steiner, 1986) and having their autogynephilia manifest in a way more similar to romantic love than sexuality (Lawrence, 2007). It is possible that the transsexuals in our research were consciously or unconsciously distorting their responses. Variations of erotic arousal that differ from what is considered normal in our society are highly stigmatized and difficult for people to come to terms with and be open about. Therefore, some distortion of responses is understandable. However, participants would be less likely to consciously distort their responses in our research than studies conducted by Blanchard (i.e. Blanchard et al., 1985) because their answers have no implications for whether they will receive treatment in a clinical setting, and because of their anonymity.

The results of this study shed more light onto the impressions of a subgroup of MTF transsexuals of Blanchard's androphilic vs. autogynephilic MTF transsexualism typology. As outlined above, it was proposed that the political context needs to be considered in the promotion and interpretation of scientific theories of transsexuals and other marginalized minority groups (Moser, 2008) and the theory of the nature of autogynephilia has been influenced by MTF transsexuals' reactions to the concept (Lawrence, 2007). This research advances our understanding of the current political context and the impact that Blanchard's typology might have within this. While transsexuals struggle for access to basic healthcare,

freedom from discrimination, and other human rights, the findings of this article suggest that Blanchard's typology is politically unpopular and a number of participants questioned whether it could be used to negatively impact the rights of transsexuals. Moser reminded us that researchers need to treat those being researched with courtesy and respect in the way they present their research, and noted that some of the ways of describing transsexuals used by proponents of Blanchard's typology have been inappropriate and inflammatory. Theories such as Blanchard's should be framed in a way that is not challenging the hard-won rights of transsexuals.

This article advances our understanding of the nature of MTF transsexuals' reactions to Blanchard's autogynephilia theory and the relative support, acceptance, rejection, and hostility felt about this theory by MTF transsexuals. Future research could explore MTF transsexuals' experiences of their sexual attraction to themselves as women (autogynephilia) and examine the similarities and differences between these and nontranssexual women's experiences of sexual attractions to themselves as women (Lawrence, 2009). Similar research could also be conducted on sexual attraction to oneself as a man (autoandrophilia) among female-to-male transsexuals and nontranssexual males. Also, discursive analysis of the relationship between transsexuals' accounts of their gender identity formation, rejection of Blanchard's typology, and discourses of femininity could be examined (T. Thompson, personal communication, February 12, 2012; see Aizura, 2010 for further discussion).

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APPENDIX

Summary of Blanchard's theory that was given to participants:

For those who are unfamiliar with the theory of autogynephilia, a brief summary of it is given below. This summary is taken from the web site of Anne Lawrence (www.annelawrence.com):

“Male-to-female transsexuals are popularly characterized as "women trapped in men's bodies," i.e., male bodied persons who are very feminine, overtly or otherwise. And clearly there are some transsexuals for whom this is an accurate description. But there are also some of us male-to-female transsexuals to whom this popular description does not so obviously apply. Many of us transitioned in our 30s, 40s, or even later, after having lived outwardly successful lives as men. Often we were not especially feminine as children, and some of us are not especially feminine after transition, either. Many of us were, or occasionally still are, married to women; often we have fathered children. A sizable number of us identify as lesbian or bisexual after reassignment. Many of us have a past or current history of sexual arousal in association with cross-dressing or cross-gender fantasy. Yet there is no doubt that we experience gender dysphoria—a term that denotes dissatisfaction with the sexed body—as intensely as our more outwardly feminine transsexual sisters. And we pursue sex reassignment surgery every bit as avidly, too.

The term autogynephilia was coined in 1989 by Ray Blanchard. He defined autogynephilia as “the propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought or image of oneself as a woman”.

Clinicians had observed for years that males who sought sex reassignment were not a homogeneous group. Several different categories of male-to-female transsexualism had been proposed, invariably based on sexual orientation, history of sexual arousal to crossdressing, or a combination of these. Many observers had noted that gender dysphoric males nearly always displayed at least one of two statistically uncommon erotic preferences: either sexual attraction to males, or a history of sexual arousal to crossdressing or cross-gender fantasy.

Based on his research, Blanchard concluded that there were really only two distinct categories of gender dysphoric males: an androphilic group, those who were sexually aroused primarily by males; and a nonandrophilic group, those who were sexually aroused primarily by the idea of being women, either currently or in the past. Blanchard called this latter group autogynephilic—“sexually aroused by the thought or image of oneself as a woman”.