

The childhood and family dynamics of transvestites.

by Richard L. Schott

INTRODUCTION

Transvestism, like many of the paraphilias, is not well-understood. Its causes and progression are complex, and due partly to the fact that most transvestites dress largely in private, populations of cross-dressers other than those who present in clinical settings have, with some exceptions, only recently been studied. Articles on the etiology and course of transvestism appearing over the past decade or so, in addition to individual case studies and psychoanalytic interpretations, have clustered in several areas.

One area has been the relationship of transvestism to various personality characteristics and dispositions (e.g., Persinger and Stettner, 1991; Wise et al., 1991; Fagan et al., 1988). Another, including both clinical and nonclinical subjects, has been a focus on the spouses of men who cross-dress (e.g., Brown, 1994; Brown and Collier (1989); Bullough and Weinberg 1988; Weinberg and Bullough, 1988; Woodhouse, 1985). Others have explored the relationships among transvestism and gender dysphoria (e.g., Blanchard, 1988; Blanchard and Clemmensen, 1988; Blanchard et al., 1987) and the possible biological and sociological aspects of cross-dressing (e.g. Bullough, 1991; Pillard and Weinrich, 1987).

Nonclinical studies of the family and childhood dynamics of cross-dressers, though infrequent, have been growing in number. Among the earliest to pay some attention to family background issues was Virginia (Charles) Prince (Prince and Bentler, 1972), an early activist among the heterosexual cross-dressing community and former editor of *Transvestia* magazine. Prince and Bentler, who collected retrospective data from a sample of 504 readers of *Transvestia*, reported that 89% of the subjects described themselves as heterosexual (though 28% had at least one homosexual experience), 74% were fathers, and 64% were currently married. Of particular interest was the finding that over three quarters of the sample had never sought psychiatric consultation regarding their condition and thus were not represented in the professional clinical literature.

As regards family backgrounds, Prince and Bentler found that 50% were firstborns and 26% were second-born, though birth position was not significantly related to other variables in the study. Slightly over half (51%) selected the father as the dominant parent and 72% answered yes to the statement that the "father had provided a good masculine image for me," leading Prince to conclude that there was no strong support for the hypothesis that dominance by the mother was an etiological factor in transvestism (p. 911). However, the study included no controls or comparisons with family demographic statistics of the population at large; and as Prince noted, "the questions asked were rather general, and it is possible that the parental homes of transvestites differed from the general population in specific ways as yet not determined" (p. 911).

Buhrich and McConaghy (1977b) studied 35 members of an Australian club for heterosexual cross-dressers, comparing them with 29 male transsexual subjects who had approached the Prince Henry Clinic for reassignment surgery. Though little material on childhood experiences was collected, the authors concluded that the two groups represented discrete syndromes, with the transsexual subjects reporting significantly stronger female identity, desire for feminization, greater frequency of homosexual contact, and substantially lower fetishistic arousal from women's clothing than the transvestites.

In a parallel study of the same transvestite club members, Buhrich and McConaghy (1977a) found that they could be further differentiated into two groups. Members of the first group rated more heterosexual on the Kinsey Scale than the second and generally did not wish to alter their physical appearance by taking female hormones or having surgery. Most of the second group were either taking hormones or wanted to and also desired some kind of surgical intervention, from breast enlargement to

full sexual reassignment. Group 1 members were also more likely to have experienced a period of fetishism than those in Group 2 and were less likely to have ventured out dressed in public. Buhrich and McConaghy designated the Group 1 members "nuclear transvestites" and Group 2 members "marginal transvestites," the convention used in the current study. Buhrich and Beaumont (1981) found similar patterns among nuclear and marginal transvestites in a comparative analysis of 86 members of an Australian and 136 members of an American club for cross-dressers.

In a follow-up study, Buhrich and McConaghy (1978) examined the reported parental relationships of their transvestic sample along with those of sample groups of homosexuals, transsexuals, and controls. Compared to the controls, both transvestite and transsexual subjects reported that their mothers had more frequently wished for a girl before their birth. They also found that, compared to the controls, the three sample groups reported higher maternal involvement in their childhood rearing. Further, the average paternal involvement among the three subject subgroups was less than that reported by the controls (p. 106). On the other hand, the authors found no evidence of an abnormal relationship with the mother among the subject groups as compared to the controls. They concluded that "the father is less involved with the subject who will show anomalous sexual behavior but shows average involvement with other family members" (p. 107).

Bullough et al. (1983), exploring the psychoanalytic thesis that an absent father may figure prominently in the development of transvestism and transsexualism, studied a nonclinical sample of 65 male transvestites and 33 transsexuals, comparing them to 57 homosexual males and a control group of 61 men. They found, however, no significant relationships between parenting figures (both parents, mother, or others) and representation in the four groups under study. Nor did birth order or number of siblings provide significant associations, leading the authors to conclude that "the psychoanalytic picture of the overwhelming mother and absent father was not supported by the data" (p. 249).

The authors did find that the transvestic group showed a stronger interest in sports than transsexuals or gays and that they began dressing earlier and more frequently than these two groups. However, the transvestites reported a less happy childhood than the homosexuals or controls, but a happier childhood (and better performance in school) than the transsexuals. The transvestites, by and large, held relatively high-status occupations, were generally successful, and seemed secure in their role as males.

Newcomb (1985), interested in the influence of nonnormative sex role behaviors of parents on the sexuality of their children, studied the perceived personality traits of parents of members of five sample groups - male and female heterosexuals, male and female homosexuals, and male transvestites. The parental characteristics explored by his Parents Characteristics Questionnaire measured relative parental strengths on five traits: intellectual orientation, endurance, dependence, aggression/dominance, and affiliation.

All five groups perceived their fathers as relatively more intellectual, aggressive, and enduring than their mothers and the latter as more dependent and affiliative than the fathers. Though the male heterosexuals and male homosexuals showed no significant differences on the five scales, Newcomb found significant differences between the heterosexual men and the transvestic sample, with the transvestites perceiving their fathers as more dependent and more affiliative than did the heterosexual men. He concluded that the findings support "a pattern of parent sex-role reversal in the parents of transvestites" (p. 160).

Docter (1988), who has provided a thoughtful developmental model of transvestism, studied a nonrandom sample of 110 cross-dressers contacted through responses to notifications in a magazine directed to transvestites and through referrals by participants. In addition to collecting demographic and experiential data, Docter explored briefly the family backgrounds of the subjects. Eighty percent came from intact families and indicated they were reared by both parents. On a 7-point scale measuring how close, supportive or warm these men perceived their relationship with their mother and father to be (with 1 being the highest and 7 the lowest), the mothers were seen as warmer, with a mean of 3.37 compared with a mean of 4.58 for the fathers. Fifty percent of mothers were found in the top three categories and roughly 50% of fathers in the bottom three categories - a general pattern confirmed in the current study.

Recently, Docter (1993) gathered data on a nonclinical sample of 692 subjects and identified, through factor analysis, four clusters of cross-gender behavior. The four are cross-gender identity, reflecting cross-gender self-percepts; cross-gender feminization, reflecting high motivation to feminize the male body and to live in a cross-gender mode; cross-gender sexual arousal; and cross-gender social/sexual role, involving social and sexual interactions with men while cross-dressed. The three subgroups of transvestites, marginal transvestites, and transsexuals he studied exhibited significantly different mean scores on these four dimensions. Arguing that the traditional concept of gender dysphoria is too broad and ill defined to permit acceptable operational definition, Docter urges that variables such as those he identifies be used in studying cross-gender behavior.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study of the family constellation and childhood experiences of cross-dressers is based on the results of a random sample of a group of self-identified cross-dressers with personal listings in a 1991 issue of *Tapestry* magazine, a nonsexual cross-dressing publication with a combined circulation of over 5,000. One hundred twenty-six questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of those with personal listings, and 85 usable questionnaires were eventually received, for a response rate of 71%. Additional material was gathered by personal correspondence with a number of the respondents. The comparison group was a sample of 44 male graduate students at a large public university with a mean age of 27. Data collected from them were limited to age, birth order, and the quality of their reported relationships with their mothers and fathers.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Populations of cross-dressers are notoriously difficult to identify, due partly to the largely clandestine nature of the activity itself. It is difficult if not impossible to determine the extent to which the cohort studied here reflects the population of transvestic males in the United States, estimated to be as many as 1 million (Arndt, 1991). While the majority of cross-dressers is likely still "in the closet," the men surveyed here appear comfortable enough with their cross-dressing to list their pseudonyms and post office box numbers in a major transvestite publication and to solicit responses from readers.

Given the high response rate, the results likely accurately reflect the characteristics and family dynamics of the population of *Tapestry* subscribers with personal listings. Whether the patterns they report differ significantly from other populations of cross-dressers, however, remains a matter of conjecture. We note, on the other hand, that the patterns of their responses to those items which have been measured in other studies - such as birth order and parental relationships - are rather similar. Finally, the data reported are based on the recollections of the participants and thus carry the usual caveats of any retrospective study.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS

The survey respondents are predominantly middle-age men with a mean age of 47 years, the oldest born in 1925 and the youngest in 1968. The majority, 65%, classified themselves as transvestites and form the nuclear transvestite group; 19% considered themselves to be borderline transvestites or transgendered and form the marginal transvestite group; and the remaining 16% identified themselves as transsexuals, either pre- or postoperative.

The majority of the respondents, 64%, reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual. An additional 32% identified themselves as bisexual (though narrative evidence suggests that most of these are likely heterosexuals who have had one or several experimental sexual encounters with other men), and the remaining 4% identified as homosexual.

Sibling Position and Family Characteristics

One is struck by the large proportion of respondents, 74%, who were the eldest male child in their family of origin. Forty percent were eldest children with one or more younger siblings, 19% were only children, and 15% had one elder sister. Eldest children and only children appear much more frequently

in the group under study than in two large national samples: the Occupational Changes in a Generation (OCG) studies of the American population conducted in 1962 and again in 1973 (Blake, 1989, pp. 18-20). The 1973 OCG study found that male only children constituted 6% and eldest male children with one or more younger siblings constituted 25% of the national population (OCG, 1973). As Table I demonstrates, these differences are both substantial and significant.

Also striking is the contrast between the reported quality of the relationship of these boys to their mother as compared to their father. On a 5-point scale of a very weak or negative relationship to a very strong or positive relationship, the mothers, with a mean of 4.02, ranked much higher than the fathers, with a mean of 2.88. Table II contrasts the respondents' assessment of these childhood parental relationships. Fully 86% of the sample reported a neutral to very positive childhood association with their mothers, while 68% reported a neutral to very negative relationship with their fathers.

[TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE I OMITTED]

Table II. Respondents' Perceptions of Parental Relationships During Childhood

% Sample % Comparison group
(n = 85) (n = 44)

Quality of reported relationship with mother(a)

Very positive	45	71
Fairly positive	31	25
Neutral	10	2
Fairly negative	10	0
Very negative	4	2

Quality of reported relationship with father(b)

Very positive	12	32
Fairly positive	20	27
Neutral	31	18
Fairly negative	20	18
Very negative	17	5

a t = 3.507, p = 0.0003.

b t = 3.257, p = 0.0007.

The quality of the relationship with their mothers reported by the comparison group by contrast is a mean of 4.6, higher than the sample, and that with the fathers a mean of 3.6, substantially higher than that reported by the sample members. Early Cross-Dressing Experiences

Respondents were asked to describe the first encounter with cross-dressing they could recall and their age at the time. Nearly all the sample members (97%) reported that their first experience took place before the age of 13 (i.e., puberty), and one half reported an initial exposure to some form of cross-dressing by the age of 7. The age of the initial experience ranged from the first year of life (several respondents were dressed as girls by their mothers from infancy on) to age 25.

The type and extent of these initial experiences varied considerably. Some were fleeting and partial, such as having one's nails polished or hair tied in ribbons, or trying on a mother's or sister's shoes, slip, or panties in secret. Others involved being completely cross-dressed by a mother, sister, or other female family member, often accompanied by wearing long hair styled as a girl's. Several of the sample reported being dressed more frequently as a girl than as boy until beginning school.

The frequency of cross-dressing after the initial experience varied as well. Of those boys who were cross-dressed (either by family members or on their own initiative) before beginning school, 45% of the sample, the majority reported that it took place only infrequently. However, 13% of this group reported being cross-dressed regularly or even daily.

Overt and Covert Groups

For most of the sample, 78%, cross-dressing was furtive and carried out in secret. Although some of these boys were "initiated" into cross-dressing by the painting of nails, having one's hair done up by a mother, or playing "dress-up" with a sister or girl playmates, their family members remained unaware of the respondents' transvestic activities. These individuals make up the covert group of cross-dressers.

Twenty-two percent of the sample members, those who constitute the overt group, reported that their cross-dressing was initiated and openly encouraged - up to school age and sometimes beyond - by a mother, sister, or other female extended family member. Sixty-one percent of this overt group were frequently or regularly dressed as girls at home during the day (when the father was not present) and sometimes taken out dressed in public for shopping, social visits, or even brief vacations. Nearly half, 44%, of the members of the overt group had been encouraged to grow long hair as young boys. In fact, 21% of all respondents reported having had long hair as children - quite unusual for young boys in the 1940s and 1950s when most of the sample were growing up. Most of them had their long hair cut, frequently at the father's initiative, before beginning school.

The Attraction of Feminine Apparel

The majority of the respondents, 78%, reported that certain items of feminine clothing had a sexual-arousing attraction to them as children. In general, this attraction seems to be directed toward those items associated with their first remembered cross-dressing experience. For example, those who recall their hair being put up became particularly attracted to long hair; those who first tried on slips or panties retained a special affinity for these items; and those who first experimented with lipstick or rouge later found makeup particularly appealing. As might be expected, various items of underwear (perhaps the quintessential feminine garb) led the list of attractive items. Forty-one percent of those respondents who reported being especially attracted to certain feminine items chose underwear. An additional 13% chose nylon stockings and 12% feminine hair styles.

Reactions to Childhood Cross-Dressing

The sample members were asked to describe their recollection of their feelings about being cross-dressed as children. The majority, 55%, reported positive emotions associated with their cross-dressing: It brought enjoyment and happiness. A much smaller group, 14%, reported negative feelings: They felt basically guilty, ashamed, even "crazy." Some 19% expressed ambivalence: They enjoyed it but also felt strange or guilty. And 12% (most of whom identified as transsexuals) reported no particular feelings associated with cross-dressing: It was neutral (or normal) for them.

Reasons Given for Cross-Dressing

Members of the sample were asked, in an open-ended question, what they believed to be the main factor that influenced their cross-dressing. As Table III indicates, most members of the sample attributed their cross-dressing to the family environment - the dominant role of the mother, the remoteness of the father, being surrounded by female extended family members, or a special attraction to women ("gender envy"). A smaller number cited the sensuality or eroticism produced by wearing female clothing or the attention and euphoria they experienced while being cross-dressed. Relatively few attributed their cross-dressing to internal or genetic factors such as: "I am really a woman." "I was born with it." "It is the result of an inner drive." Table III displays the responses of the sample group.

Patterns and Trends

In addition to describing the frequency distributions of participants' responses to the survey items, it is instructive to examine the relationships among these items. Cross-tabulation and chi-square analysis reveals a number of trends and relationships significant at the p [less than] 0.01 level or better. The first concerns the relationship between the respondents' sexual preference and their self-identification. As shown in Table IV, the majority of both heterosexuals and bisexuals identify themselves as transvestites, whereas the homosexuals identify themselves as transsexuals (TS). Further, a greater percentage of heterosexuals than bisexuals identify as transvestites.

Table III. Respondents' Assessment of the Major Influence on Their Cross-Dressing (N = 85)

Category %

Parental roles, feminine environment, "gender envy" 27
 Sensuality or erotic appeal of feminine items 22
 Genetic or internal factors 21
 Affective factors (happiness, attention, excitement) 6
 Other 7
 Don't know 17

Table IV. Sexual Preference of Respondents (N = 80)(a)

Self-identification (%)
 Sexual preference n Nuclear Marginal TS

Heterosexual	52	75	17	8
Bisexual	25	56	24	20
Homosexual	3	0	0	100

a $[\chi^2]$ (4) = 20.69, p [less than] 0.001.

Considerable support for the assumption that gender dysphoria increases along a possible continuum from

transvestism to transsexualism is found in the data. Table V displays the major reason given for their cross-dressing by members of the three groups. Of the nuclear transvestites, only 5% stated that their behavior was the result of an inner drive or that "I am/should be a woman," whereas 50% of the marginal transvestite (TV) group and 80% of the transsexual group made this attribution. By contrast, more than two thirds of the transvestites selected either the erotic appeal of feminine garb (37%) or family/environmental factors (34%) as the primary reason for their cross-dressing.

Table V. Major Factor Influencing Cross-Dressing (N = 65)(a)

Major factor cited (%) (b)
Self-identification n 1 2 3 4 5

Nuclear TV	41	37	34	5	12	12
Marginal TV	14	14	36	50	0	0
Transsexual	10	10	0	80	0	10

a $[\chi^2(8) = 32.52, p < 0.001]$.

b 1 = sensuality/eroticism of female clothes; 2 = family/environmental factors/gender envy; 3 = genetic/internal drive/am or should be a woman; 4 = affective factors (attention, approval); 5 = other.

Explanations offered by the sample as to why they became cross-dressers also display significant relationships. The large majority, 83%, of those who attribute their cross-dressing behavior to the sensuality or eroticism of female apparel (i.e., its fetishistic attraction), identify as nuclear transvestites. Of those who attribute their behavior to familial or environmental influences, 74% so identify. But of those who attribute their behavior to genetic or internal factors, only 12% identify as nuclear transvestites; the remainder, 88%, identify as marginal transvestites or as transsexual. There are also significant relationships between one's self-identification and his perception of the quality of his childhood relationships with his mother. The more positive the reported childhood relationship with the mother, the greater the tendency for the respondent to identify as a nuclear transvestite; the weaker or more negative the relationship with the mother, the greater the tendency to identify as a marginal transvestite or as transsexual. The relationship between membership in one of these three groups and the quality of the relationship with the father, on the other hand, showed no distinctive patterns nor did it achieve the required significance level. The data are displayed in Table VI.

Several other factors are significantly associated with one's self-identification along the nuclear-marginal-TS spectrum. Whereas only 12% of the nuclear transvestites in the sample had been taken out cross-dressed (i.e., presented as girls) in public as a child, 31% of the transsexuals had been taken out dressed. Having long hair as a child was strongly and significantly associated with differentiating the nuclear from the marginal group ($p < 0.001$). Only 16% of the nuclear transvestites reported having had long hair as children, whereas 40% of the marginal group reported having had long hair. (Encouraging a young boy to wear long locks may well have "marked" him visibly as being different from his male peers.)

Table VI. Association Between Self-Identification and Quality of Relationship With the Parents (N = 81)

Quality of relationship (%) (a)
 Self-identification n 1 2 3 4 5

With mother (b)

Nuclear 53 4 6 8 28 54
 Marginal 15 0 7 13 40 40
 TS 13 8 38 15 31 8

With father (c)

Nuclear 53 11 15 38 23 13
 Marginal 15 13 33 33 7 13
 TS 13 38 23 8 23 8

a 1 = very negative, 2 = fairly negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = fairly positive, 5 = very positive.

b $[[\text{Chi}].\text{sup}].2] (8) = 18.22, p [\text{less than}] 0.02.$

c $[[\text{Chi}].\text{sup}].2] (8) = 11.75, \text{ns}.$

The distinction between the overt and covert cross-dressing groups is also salient. Of those who identified as nuclear transvestites, 83% cross-dressed covertly. Among the marginal transvestite group, however, this percentage declined to 71%, and to 69% among the transsexuals. Members of the overt group were much more likely to have worn long hair as children and to have been taken out in public dressed than members of the covert group ($p [\text{less than}] 0.001$). The overt transvestites were also more likely to select their mother as influential in their cross-dressing. Fifty-eight percent of the overt group chose their mother as the primary influence, whereas only 4% of the covert group did so. The overt group were also more likely to identify themselves as transsexuals; 36% of them identified as transsexual whereas only 12% of the covert group so identified.

DISCUSSION

In interpreting these relationships among the variables under study, it is helpful to refer to the work by Docter (1988). Docter's developmental model suggests two basic types of transsexualism: primary and secondary. Primary transsexualism has its roots in homosexual preference, whereas secondary

transsexualism is seen as a developmental stage among those with a primarily heterosexual (or possibly bisexual) orientation.

Docter's model, briefly, suggests that a large number of young boys are exposed to factors that lead to fetishistic attraction to women's clothing, but most of them do not become cross-dressers. However, those who do begin cross-dressing encounter a unique set of social learning experiences and reinforcements, accompanied by the development of a sexual "script," and develop fetishistic, partial cross-dressing between ages 8 to 18 or so. Many of these partial, fetishistic dressers go on later to cross-dress completely and to develop a "feminine self" (i.e., a cross-gender identity). Most cross-dressers eventually integrate their feminine self into their self system and become nuclear transvestites. Some, however, have greater difficulty accommodating the feminine self and become "marginal" transvestites or transgendered individuals. These men may live occasionally (or for extended periods of time) as females, experiment with female hormones, and frequently experience some degree of gender dysphoria. Some among this second group eventually become secondary transsexuals and may later seek sexual reassignment surgery.

Though Docter's developmental model is not universally accepted, it does provide a context within which to interpret the data from the sample group. We note, for example, that those who express a homosexual preference in Table V identify as transsexuals; they likely are among the primary transsexual group. Those who identify as heterosexual or bisexual and also as transsexual likely form the secondary transsexual group. As the identity of the sample group moves from nuclear transvestite to marginal transvestite to transsexual, there is an increasing tendency to identify as bisexual or homosexual and a decreasing tendency to identify as heterosexual.

The Importance of Birth Position

As noted above, 19% of the study subjects were only children - three times higher than the estimated percentage of male only-children in the U.S. population at large. Moreover, 40% were eldest children, compared to an estimated 25% in the general population. As we have seen, an additional 15% of the subjects reported having one elder sister; thus a total of 74% of the sample were the eldest or only male child in their family. These boys thus experienced, by virtue of their sibling position, a direct exposure to maternal and feminine influences in their family systems without the intervening influence of an older male sibling. (These sample data, we note, are similar to the birth order statistics reported by Prince and Bentler, 1972.)

Parental Relationships

The maternal influences to which these men were exposed were closer and more immediate than the paternal, for as indicated in Table II they report a substantially closer and more positive relationship with their mothers than with their fathers. It appears that rather than the absence of the father from the family constellation as a factor in transvestism as Bullough et al. (1983) hypothesized, it is the quality of the paternal relationship that counts. Most in the sample reported their fathers were to varying degrees remote, unaffectionate, preoccupied with work, emotionally absent from their lives, or even abusive. And as Newcomb (1985) reported, the fathers of transvestites he studied were more dependent and more affiliative (both feminine traits) than those of the heterosexual controls.

Most men in the present study perceived their mothers as more supportive, accessible, and emotionally affirming than their fathers. Thus their attraction to the feminine may have been accentuated by a push or repulsion from the masculine - a situation that seems, from the perspective of object relations, to facilitate the development of an enhanced feminine self-object (cf. Kohut, 1971). As noted, the parental perceptions of the sample differ significantly from the comparison group.

One is struck by the proportion of the respondents in the overt group (nearly a quarter of the sample), who were cross-dressed as children by their mothers or other female family members and presented to the world as young girls. What might have been the mothers' motives for exposing their young sons to such experiences? During the time these boys were growing up, mainly during the 1940s and 1950s, the classic nuclear family model reigned - a working father and a mother/housewife at home with the children. Divorce was rare. One can speculate that some of these mothers may have been compensating for their disappointment at having had a boy rather than a girl, an observation made by several of the overt group

and consistent with Buhrich and McConaghy's (1978) finding that their transvestic and transsexual sample reported more frequently than controls that their mothers had wished for a girl. Perhaps the mothers' "solution" was simply to turn the male child occasionally (or frequently) into a girl during childhood.

For other mothers, disappointment in their relationship with their spouse might have led them to compensate via their relationship with their first sons - finding in them a vehicle for the expression of their unsatisfied needs for intimacy and affection. Or they may have exercised a subtle revenge by transforming their boys, temporarily, into pseudogirls. (As one respondent wrote, "My mother hated men, but loved me as a girl.") From the perspective of family systems theory (e.g., Kerr and Bowen, 1988), the anxiety produced by an unsatisfactory marriage may have been assuaged or "bound" by bringing the son into a mother/father/son triangular relationship. In this view, transvestism may be associated with a pathology inherent in the family system.

Overt and Covert Patterns

One is struck by the proportion of boys in the sample, over 20%, who were openly cross-dressed in their families. Members of this overt group, as we have seen, were more likely than others to have had long hair and to have been taken out dressed in public; many were exposed to relatively frequent and sometimes even daily cross-dressing. (One subject reported that his mother carried around photos of him dressed as a girl, anxious to show them at any opportunity.) Although such cross-gender exposure may be more common than generally assumed, one should recall that during the 1940s and 1950s when most of the sample were growing up, gender lines were closely drawn and gender expectations perhaps even more stereotypical than they are today. As indicated above, there is a significant relationship between such overt behavior and the respondents' self-identifications: Overt cross-dressing becomes more frequent as one moves from the nuclear transvestite through the marginal transvestite to the transsexual group.

Gender Dysphoria

If we examine one category of the reasons offered by the sample respondents to explain their transvestic or transsexual behavior - that it is the result of an inner drive or that "I am/should be a woman" - we find a significant difference in the frequency of use of this explanation by the three groups. This attribution is rarely used by members of the nuclear group, becomes more prevalent among the marginal transvestites, and is almost without exception typical of the transsexuals. Members of the transsexual group reported substantial dissatisfaction with their gender, sometimes including hatred of their male sex organs. One had occasionally shocked his penis with a train transformer as a child; another wrote in detail of his efforts at auto-castration. Several transsexuals also reported frequent encounters with the criminal justice system and episodes of sociopathic behavior. By and large the transsexuals reported that both their social relationships with their parents and peers and their emotional lives have been quite troubled.

Coping with Transvestism

Sifting through the anecdotal details and narratives offered by the respondents, one is struck by the variety of patterns, influences, and attributions regarding cross-dressing these men relate. For many, their transvestic behavior has been a lifelong concern, a mystery, a consternation. They often felt confused and isolated as children, so different from other boys, frequently burdened with guilt and self-doubt.

Other members of the sample, more frequently those who identify as nuclear transvestites, were originally bothered and confused by their compulsion to cross-dress, but seem to have taken their cross-dressing more in stride and have integrated it (with varying degrees of success) into their adult lives. For them, the extent of disclosure to family members and the degree of acceptance by the spouse seem to be the major remaining issues. Some of this group have gone beyond integrating their feminine persona and have taken initiative in forming self-help and outreach groups or become involved in public awareness programs.

Conclusion

Beginning with birth order, one can speculate that those boys who are the first male child may be more at risk for the development of transvestic behavior than those lower down in the sibling hierarchy. Another contributing factor is likely a much closer relationship with the mother than with the father, a phenomenon

identified in this and most other nonclinical studies where the quality of parental relationships has been measured. Yet another may be the existence of a parental pattern where the father is perceived as ranking higher than normal on the "feminine" characteristics of dependency and affiliation, as Newcomb (1985) found.

To this constellation may be added a strong, perhaps overwhelming attachment to a first son by certain mothers. Here the psychodynamic work of Stoller (1968, 1975, 1985) on transsexualism and gender disorders is especially relevant. Young boys, in contrast to young girls, must struggle to separate from the early symbiosis with the mother to establish their gender identity. Identification as a male, as being of the opposite sex from the mother, requires individuation and separation from her. "Depending on how and at what pace a mother allows her son to separate, this phase of merging with her will leave residual effects that may be expressed as disturbances in masculinity" (1986, p. 16).

Stoller (1968) found that mothers of transsexuals fit a pattern in which the mothers were rejected by their own mothers and were initially close to their own fathers, but had that closeness interrupted sometime before puberty. They had a period of tomboy behavior, married somewhat distant and uninvolved men, and became passionately involved with their sons, merging with them intensively - too intensively to allow for normal individuation. The core gender identity of the transsexual, developed in the first year of so of life, remained female. An "excessively close and gratifying mother-infant symbiosis, undisturbed by father's presence, prevents a boy from adequately separating himself psychically from his mother's female body and feminine behavior. The hypothesis predicts that the more intense these family dynamics, the more feminine the boy will be" (1986, p. 25).

Though Stoller's analysis is not without its critics, it suggests that transsexuals may represent the far end of a continuum of disturbances in the process of a boy's normal gender development. Granted that a number of other factors, such as those outlined by Docter, likely guide the later stages of this development, perhaps nuclear transvestites, marginal transvestites, and transsexuals are not so much discrete syndromes but rather occupy clusters of behavior on a differentiated continuum from "normal" gender identity development at the one pole to transsexualism at the other.

Support for this notion is suggested by the data. Note that the comparison group reported a more positive relationship with their mothers than any subgroup of the sample. Among the sample subjects, one observes that the relative strength of the (already rather remote) paternal role is not significantly associated with the subjects' self-identification, but that the relative strength of the relationship with the mother is quite significant. As one moves from nuclear through marginal transvestites to the transsexuals, the mean rating of the relationships with the mother decreases.

One interpretation of this trend is that the subjects' evaluations reflect increasing degrees of difficulty in their individuation from the mother. Such individuation is easiest for the comparison group, whose strong paternal relationships facilitate a less troubled transition away from maternal influences. Among the sample group, separation from the maternal image evidently becomes increasingly difficult for the nuclear and marginal transvestites and most problematic of all for the transsexuals.

Finally, it is possible that there may be a greater-than-average frequency of narcissistic personality disorder among these mothers, who drew their first sons into its vortex and made it difficult for them to individuate normally - especially when paternal influence was weak and remote. Where this pattern was coupled with a perturbed spousal relationship, the son may have been "triangled" into it in an attempt to assuage the resultant anxiety. This interpretation at least often the prospect of integrating the findings of this study (and several of the other nonclinical studies reviewed above) with the insights of a psychodynamic and family systems approach.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks George R. Brown and Richard F. Docter for their assistance in providing critiques of earlier versions of this article.

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Publication Information: Article Title: The Childhood and Family Dynamics of Transvestites. Contributors: Richard L. Schott - author. Journal Title: Archives of Sexual Behavior. Volume: 24. Issue: 3. Publication Year: 1995. Page Number: 309+. COPYRIGHT 1995 Plenum Publishing Corporation; COPYRIGHT 2002 Gale Group