

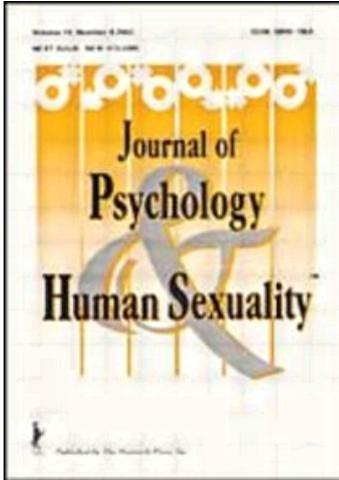
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Sexual Orientation Confusion Among Spouses of Transvestites and Transsexuals Following Disclosure of Spouse's Gender Dysphoria

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ABSTRACT. Wives of transsexuals and transvestites typically experience surprise, shock and confusion upon discovery of the husband's gender dysphoria. This phenomenological study of four women (two wives of transvestites and two wives of transsexuals) was developed to explore the extent, if any, of sexual orientation confusion experienced by the nontranssexual spouse. The hypothesis that sexual orientation confusion in the wives followed disclosure of the husband's crossgendered behavior was confirmed among wives of the transvestites. However, this was not true of the wives of the transsexuals. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworth.com]*

Discovering that one's husband is a transvestite or transsexual typically results in surprise, shock and confusion in the wife (Bullough and Weinberg, 1988). This is not surprising considering that most marriage relationships are built around explicitly or implicitly defined gender roles. Cross-dressing blurs those distinctions, causing confusion in many areas of life.

One type of confusion the authors have seen in clinical settings has been a confusion in the nontransgendered spouse concerning sexual orientation.

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If the husband is not playing the culturally defined masculine role in lovemaking, indeed if he is looking and acting like a woman, does that make the relationship a quasi-lesbian one? This presents a challenge to the wife's sense of identity since gender and sexuality are core components of identity. Confusion about either presents a person with a significant identity crisis.

Therefore, the authors set out to test the hypothesis that sexual orientation confusion, as indicated by the subjective report of the subjects, does occur in wives of heterosexual transvestites and transsexuals following discovery of the transvestism or transsexualism.

The existing literature on spouses of transvestites is limited and literature on spouses of transsexuals is virtually nonexistent. Two major studies by Bullough and Weinberg (1988a & 1988b) discussed stigma management (1988b), alienation and self-image (1988a). Factors related to wives remaining with their crossdressing husbands were discussed as well as frequency and nature of sexual intercourse. Feinbloom (1976) speculated that women who stay with crossdressing husbands may enjoy lesbian fantasies, but this was not developed, nor was specific evidence presented to confirm this speculation. Woodhouse (1985) emphasizes difficulties women face who decide to stay married to transvestites, but nothing is mentioned about sexual orientation. The same is true of Docter's (1988) study of women married to transsexuals. His study lists several concerns of wives and even discusses marital sex but nothing is said about sexual orientation confusion other than a quote by one of his subjects who said (p. 181) "... it makes me feel like I am having sex with a woman and that makes me sick." Stoller (1967) presents the theory that the wife contributes to the development and maintenance of the transvestism. He describes the wives as seeking power and control over men.

One should note that all the studies above only describe women married to transvestites. None discuss wives of transsexuals. In fact, a literature search found no current studies related to transsexualism and marriage other than marriages following gender reorientation. This may reflect the outdated assumption that transsexuals have no heterosexual experiences. It may also reflect the belief that all marriages to transsexuals will lead to the nontranssexual spouse abandoning the marriage. Nevertheless, the spouse's needs, whether he or she leaves the transsexual, have been largely ignored.

Other materials exist related to the area of gender dysphoric spouses published by organizations which promote tolerance of transvestism and transsexualism. However, these tend to be anecdotal in nature and written primarily to persuade spouses to be more accepting of transgendered be-

haviors. Therefore, because of their biased nature and unscientific approach, the authors did not include them in this review.

METHODOLOGY

The authors of this study chose a phenomenological approach to the subject. Rudestam and Newton (1992) define phenomenology like this: "phenomenological inquiry attempts to describe and elucidate the meanings of human experience. More than other forms of inquiry, phenomenology attempts to get beneath how people describe their experience to the structures that underlie consciousness."

The phenomenological approach is especially useful in studying an emerging research field. Lack of previous research, as we find in studies of spouses of transsexuals, or limited previous research as in the case of spouses of transvestites, creates a situation which makes traditional quantitative methods of research difficult. In such cases the researcher is not so much looking for answers, as she or he is looking for information on which to base the questions for future research. As Polinkinghorne (1991, p. 112) observed, qualitative methods, such as phenomenological inquiry, are particularly useful in the "generation of categories for understanding human phenomena and the investigation of the interpretation and meaning that people give to events they experience."

The design of this study is one which the authors hope will produce those "categories for understanding" the life experience of the wives of transsexuals and transvestites as regards their clarification of their own sexual orientation when faced with the transgendered behavior of their husbands.

For this study, the authors chose four subjects known to the authors through previous therapy or peer counseling experience. The subjects were interviewed by the authors using a questionnaire containing 40 open-ended questions. The interviewer followed the questionnaire but also asked clarifying questions when unsure of the meaning of the answer or when the answer needed expansion for understanding.

The data was analyzed in the following manner. Each author read all four interviews independently. She then marked sections which seemed relevant to the research questions. The authors then considered as significant material which met one of the following criteria:

1. Material marked by both readers.
2. Material which was substantially similar to material found in at least three interviews.

3. Material which was substantially similar only within one of the research subgroups (i.e., material only found in wives of transvestites but not in wives of transsexuals or vice versa).

Sexual orientation confusion was operationally defined as the subject questioning her heterosexuality and evidenced by statements found within the text of the interview and identified as such by both readers through an independent reading of the text. Such statements concerning sexual orientation confusion were only considered significant if they related to feelings and questions the subject experienced following disclosure by the transgendered spouse.

SUBJECTS

Subject 1: Judy is 35 years old. She is Caucasian and has completed two years of college. She is an artist and is currently working as a framer for a large store. She has no children and was married only once. She has been separated from her husband for a year and a half. The divorce is not final at this time. She was married to her transvestite husband for four years. In addition she was dating and living with him for five years previous to getting married. She is currently dating heterosexually although she says she would be open to a lesbian relationship with the right woman.

Subject 2: Gail is 48 years old. She is Caucasian and has two years of college. She is a store manager and has been such for several years. She had one child, a boy 18 years old. She was married only once. She has been separated for approximately two years. She was married to her transvestite spouse for 20 years. She is currently living and dating as a lesbian. She expects future relationships to be with a woman.

Subject 3: Carol is 36 years old. She is Caucasian. She has a Bachelor's degree and is completing work on her MBA. She works in computer graphics and computer networking. She has no children. She has no previous marriages. She has been married to her transsexual spouse for ten years. She expects to remain married to him.

Subject 4: Debra is 38 years old. She is Caucasian. She has a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education. She is currently a full time mother to her two children, Mark, 8, and Jennifer, 10. Another child, Shannon, is deceased. She has been married 15 years. She is uncertain as to whether she will stay with her transsexual husband. She hopes to be able to; however, several issues in the marriage would have to be resolved for her to do so. She was interviewed on the same day as her husband underwent sex reassignment surgery.

(Note: In the interests of confidentiality the names of spouses and children have been changed.)

RESULTS

The most striking result of this study is the fact that the hypothesis was confirmed as regards the wives of the transvestites. Each wife reported some sexual orientation confusion following disclosure of the spouse's transvestism. However, the authors found no sexual orientation confusion among the spouses of transsexuals, using this phenomenological method. Neither reported significant confusion regarding sexual orientation.

Another distinction between the transsexual and transvestite spouses relates to the presence of sexual trauma in their personal histories. Sexual trauma was present in both spouses of transvestites. It was not present in spouses of transsexuals.

The transvestites were described in terms of being "macho" and overtly masculine. The transsexuals were not described in this manner. Indeed, the transsexuals were presented as being androgynous.

All four subjects reported unpleasant memories of menarche and puberty. Three of the four were not prepared at all for the event and experienced some trauma as a result.

Three out of four subjects reported a distant or absent father. The two spouses of transvestites reported serious dislike of the father figures in their lives. One of the spouses of transsexuals reported that her father was absent a lot on business. However, her memories of him when he was around are positive.

All four subjects reported a late onset of sexual activity. The spouses of transsexuals were in their twenties while the transvestite spouses had first sexual encounters in late adolescence. In addition, all four subjects reported a lack of excitement over their first sexual experiences.

The wives of the transsexuals were told of their husbands' transsexualism before they discovered it. The wives of the transvestites discovered their spouses' crossdressing first and disclosure only came with confrontation.

Three out of four subjects reported being tomboys or being interested in "masculine" activities during childhood. However, none of the subjects reported any gender identity confusion or desire to be male.

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study relates to the differing experiences between spouses of transsexuals and transvestites. The hy-

pothesis that sexual orientation confusion resulted from the disclosure of crossdressing was confirmed for wives of transvestites. However, it was not in the case of transsexuals' wives. If anything, the husbands' transsexualism clarified the heterosexuality of the wife. For instance, when Carol was asked if she experienced any sexual orientation confusion during her marriage she said:

There was this one time. She . . . he . . . I was taking sort of a male role and he the female role. And at the time . . . it was . . . well it was exciting for him and at the time it was exciting for me too. And that made me wonder if I might be Bisexual. But later on it didn't do anything for me. Shaved legs and French perfume are not a turn on for me. My husband IS a turn on. Sometimes we'll watch a movie or TV show where there's some real macho guy and then I go to bed and . . . shaved legs and French perfume don't do anything for me.

Compare this with Judy's response to the same question:

Yes, especially toward the last, the latter portion of . . . I believe it was because he at that point wanted to assume more of the woman's role and just, as a mental balance, for me, I, probably started taking on the male role, because that's how we're brought up. . . . And he had us going out to lesbian bars quite a bit and when you're out there, in the middle of it, it doesn't seem so foreign . . . the marriage was failing, uh, and I had been engaged three times before . . . Uh I began to think that maybe men were not what I was supposed to be with.

There is also some evidence that both wives of transvestites may have had latent lesbian tendencies as far back as high school. Judy remembers a girl in high school who was "very very attractive." She had feelings toward the girl which were "different than I had for most everyone else." Judy dismissed the attraction as being her reaction as an artist to the girl's physical beauty. Gail reported no specific attraction to any particular girl; however, her early memories of dating and heterosexual activities were unenthusiastic. When asked about pleasurable memories of dating she said, "I don't really know if I had any pleasurable dating things." So, both women had at least ambiguous feelings about heterosexual dating. Perhaps the discovery of the spouse's crossdressing triggered these latent feelings. It may be that the crossdressing didn't result in sexual orientation confusion as much as it resulted in clarification.

Another possible explanation, which begins with the assumption that the wives carried some sexual orientation confusion into the marriage, stems

from Stoller's (1967) theory that wives use the husband's transsexualism as a means of obtaining power and control. If the woman feels the stirring of uncomfortable feelings, she may seek to mask those feelings by exercising power through controlling the husband's crossdressing through demands for its discontinuance or by setting limits on its expression. When such attempts fail, the woman is then forced to face her own repressed homosexuality.

A third possible explanation is that women who are confused about their sexual orientations are attracted to gender-confused men. The main flaw in this theory lies in the fact that the wives of transsexuals did not experience sexual orientation confusion. Certainly, transsexuals must be viewed as being more gender-conflicted than transvestites since transvestites usually have gender identities congruent with their physical sex whereas transsexuals do not.

One reason that transvestism is more likely to stimulate confusion in the spouse than transsexualism may lie in the fact that transvestism involves greater ambiguity than transsexualism. There is more ambiguity for several reasons. The transvestite self-identifies as male even while crossdressed, the transvestic experience is varied from fetishistic attachment to a single item of clothing to complete crossdressing, and there is little structure to the transvestite's development of self whereas the transsexual's transition is fairly predictable. The transsexual experience is simply that of a male becoming female. Transsexualism recognizes two rather distinct genders. Transvestism does not. One can speculate that this ambiguity in the transvestite can stimulate a similar sense of ambiguity in the spouse.

One serendipitous finding of our study found that wives of transvestites typically had a much more traumatic life prior to marriage than did the wives of transsexuals. This raises the possibility of developmental issues which are different between the subgroups. The childhoods of the spouses of transsexuals in our study were found to be relatively uneventful. The spouses of the transvestites saw their fathers as mentally or physically abusive. Both of the wives of transvestites had been sexually assaulted, one as a child and the other as a young adult. Further research on developmental factors in the spouse's lives might lead to a better understanding of differences between the two subgroups.

One clinical implication of all this is that wives of transsexuals must be treated differently than those of transvestites. Some wives of transsexuals have been advised to join support groups for transvestites. This is rarely helpful since the issues are significantly different. Likewise, models of therapy or even stages of adaptation such as are found in Burlough and Weinberg (1988b), designed around spouses of transvestites, are probably inappropriate for use with wives of transsexuals.

Another serendipitous finding which is common to both groups having been found in three out of four of the interviews relates to a perceived self-centeredness seen in the transgendered person by the partner. The wives described themselves as feeling abandoned, left out, not needed or simply being used. Again though, there has to be a distinction drawn between the transsexual and transvestite experience. The self-centeredness in transsexualism can be seen as proceeding from the pain of being transsexual and from the complexity of the process of gender reorientation. That self-centeredness tends to diminish as the transsexual develops his or her new identity. The emergence of the transsexual's identity makes him or her better able to reach out to others including the spouse. Carol credits counseling with helping her husband and her become more concerned about each other's needs.

It was essentially laid on the line like 'What are you going to do just keep Carol with you until everything works out say thank you very much and ditch her?' So that made her realize that you have a choice in life and that you're not out of control.

Carol describes how with her husband's emergence of self, which includes his feminine identity, that self-centeredness has diminished.

In contrast, transvestite spouses often relate a growing absorption in the crossdressing to the point that the wife becomes secondary to the dressing itself. Often, the transvestite is seeking narcissistic mirroring of his crossdressing abilities. The wife becomes that mirror. The demands can escalate as in the case of Lisa where by the end of the marriage the husband was demanding that when initiating lovemaking Lisa wear an apparatus holding a rubber form of the male genitalia and mount him while he was dressed.

A clinical implication of this difference might lie in the concept of emergence of self. The transsexual is on a journey of self-actualization. She literally brings a hidden self into existence. If the transvestite were also to view the transvestism as a process of self-discovery and self-actualization there would be less need of mirroring from the spouse and therefore some of the self-centeredness could diminish.

LIMITATIONS

Obviously, this is a very limited study. As a preliminary study of the field, it was intended to provide direction for future research rather than to find definitive answers to the question posed. Thus, the study was limited in several ways. These limitations must be addressed in future studies.

First, the study was limited by its small sample size. Secondly, the study was limited by the homogeneity of the sample. All four women were of about the same age, ethnic background, and educational level. Future studies should include a more diverse sample. Thirdly, this study is limited by the fact that it included only wives of crossdressers and transsexuals. Future studies might also include live-in sexual partners who are not legally married as well as husbands of female crossdressers and transsexuals. Fourth, the study was limited by the qualitative nature of the research design. This design allowed maximum flexibility to explore many diverse issues with the subjects. However, it also elicits data which is difficult to analyse in a manner which addresses issues of reliability and validity. Fifth, the study was limited by the fact that the subjects were all personally known to the authors. Familiarity with the personal history of the subjects made objective questioning difficult. Finally, the study did not include a control group of women not married to gender-conflicted men. Future studies should include such a control group to help validate the findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As stated earlier, this study was done more to generate questions than to provide definitive answers. Several avenues of future research suggest themselves based on the findings of this study. First would be to replicate the study with more subjects and a greater diversity of subjects. How do younger women respond compared to older women? Do subjects taken from clinical samples differ from others such as samples drawn from TV social groups? Are there cultural differences? Do better educated women fare better than less well educated women? Is counseling a factor in reducing confusion? What about husbands of female crossdressers and transsexuals? What special issues do men have to face which are different than women? What role does homophobia play in a husband's reaction to the wife's crossgendered behavior?

A second consideration for future research would be to refine the methodology. While the authors believe that open-ended questions provide for the best understanding of subjective experience on the part of the spouse, better coding and analysis methods could be devised. In addition, some aspects of the study could be conducted in a more quantitative manner using close-ended questions. Semantic differential scales for brief notation of subjective experience could be used in conjunction with open-ended questions for clarification of the rating the subject gave on the scale.

A third area of research suggested by the study is the differences between the experiences of the wives of transvestites versus those of wives

of transsexuals. Do different developmental issues prevail among one subgroup? Is the finding of sexual orientation clarification in the case of the wives of transsexuals as opposed to sexual orientation confusion among wives of transvestites consistent? If so, what factors account for this difference? What other differences exist between the subgroups which may be important clinically? What can be done to create a model of treatment for spouses of transsexuals which does not draw on that existent for transvestite spouses?

A fourth consideration is the significance of androgyny in the marital roles and in each partner as a predictor of success in adapting to a spouse's transgendered status. Our research suggested that the transvestites tended to be more locked into rigid sexual stereotypes while the transsexuals were more androgynous. If this is borne out by future research it may provide an explanation why spouses of transsexuals experience less confusion about their sexual orientation than those of crossdressers.

The wives of transsexuals in this study seemed to demonstrate more integration of self prior to the marriage. Would this be a consistent finding? Is it this basic self awareness that helped these women avoid confusion over their sexual orientation? Burlough and Weinberg (1988) found that women with high measures of self-esteem were better able to accept their husbands' transvestism. Would this also be true of transsexuals?

Finally, a family systems approach to this field seems to provide some exciting possibilities. How does the declaration of one's transgendered status change the system? When the homeostasis is threatened, does the system break down or does another person in the system assume the role previously played by the transgendered member of the family? Is individual therapy sufficient or is a family therapy approach more effective?

Certainly this field offers many research possibilities. Such research is needed, not simply to satisfy scientific curiosity, but also to aid the clinician. When a transvestite or transsexual comes for therapy there is a body of literature from which to formulate treatment approaches. Such is not the case for the clinician treating a spouse or providing family therapy. Research in the areas mentioned above would provide some of the foundation for effective clinical treatment.

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APPENDIX A

Spouse Questionnaire

Demographics

1. Age_____
2. Ethnicity_____
3. Occupation_____

Education

4. High School_____
5. College (Number of years)_____ Degree(s)_____

Children

6. Boys_____
7. Girls_____
8. Number of Marriages_____
9. Length of time married to the transvestite/transsexual spouse_____

Childhood and Adolescence

10. What are your earliest memories of childhood?
11. What are your memories of your mother?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories

APPENDIX A (continued)

12. What are your memories of your father?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
13. What are your memories of school experiences?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
14. What are your memories of your peers?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
15. What are your memories of childhood and adolescent activities?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
16. What are your memories of Menarche and Puberty?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
17. What are your memories of relationships with female friends?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
18. What are your memories of relationships with male friends?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories
19. What are your memories of dating rituals?
 - A. Favorite memories
 - B. Distressful memories

Adolescent Sexual Experience

20. Did you masturbate?
21. What were your feelings about any masturbation experiences?
22. What were your memories of your first sexual experience?
 - A. Pleasurable memories
 - B. Distressful memories

Spousal Attraction

23. Tell me about how you met your spouse. (Where, when, under what circumstances, etc.)
24. What character traits attracted you to him?
25. What were the elements of distress in your relationship, other than gender issues?
26. Tell me about how you discovered your spouse's crossdressing/transsexualism?
27. What was your first emotional response?
28. How did your emotional response evolve over time?
29. (If crossdressing was discovered before transsexualism was disclosed) When did you discover this crossdressing reflected transsexualism? How did this change your emotional response?
30. Where are you now in your relationship?
31. Do you believe this relationship might break up? (If still married)
32. What might cause you to break up?

Sexual Orientation and Gender Confusion

33. Have you ever experienced confusion about your sexual orientation—such as in childhood or adolescence?
34. Have you ever experienced any confusion over your gender identity—such as in childhood or adolescence?
35. Did you experience any sexual orientation confusion during your marriage?
36. Did you experience any sexual orientation confusion at the time of separation?

Where are you now?

37. Are you comfortable with your sexuality?
38. Are you uncomfortable with your sexual orientation?
39. What do you expect from future relationships? Will you be involved with another crossdresser? Why? Why not?
40. One final question: Is there anything you would like to tell me about your relationship with your spouse which you believe is important which we haven't covered in this survey?