BECOMING WHAT WE LOVE

autogynephilic transsexualism conceptualized as an expression of romantic love

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ABSTRACT The increasing prevalence of male-to-female (MtF) transsexualism in Western countries is largely due to the growing number of MtF transsexuals who have a history of sexual arousal with cross-dressing or cross-gender fantasy. Ray Blanchard proposed that these transsexuals have a paraphilia he called *autogynephilia*, which is the propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought or image of oneself as female. Autogynephilia defines a transsexual typology and provides a theory of transsexual motivation, in that Blanchard proposed that MtF transsexuals are either sexually attracted exclusively to men (homosexual) or are sexually attracted primarily to the thought or image of themselves as female (autogynephilic), and that autogynephilic transsexuals seek sex reassignment to actualize their autogynephilic desires. Despite growing professional acceptance, Blanchard's formulation is rejected by some MtF transsexuals as inconsistent with their experience. This rejection, I argue, results largely from the misconception that autogynephilia is a purely erotic phenomenon. Autogynephilia can more accurately be conceptualized as a type of sexual orientation and as a variety of romantic love, involving both erotic and affectional or attachment-based elements. This broader conception of autogynephilia addresses many of the objections to Blanchard's theory and is consistent with a variety of clinical observations concerning autogynephilic MtF transsexualism.

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Male-to-female (MtF) transsexualism has become increasingly common in Western countries. A few decades ago, the estimated prevalence of MtF transsexualism was about 1 in 37,000 in Sweden and 1 in 100,000 in the United States (Landén, Wålinder, and Lundström 1996). Recent prevalence estimates from Western countries are nearly an order of magnitude higher, with about 1 in 12,000 men having undergone sex reassignment surgery, and about 1 in 7,400 having sought treatment for transsexualism (Bakker et al. 1993; De Cuypere et al. 2007;Wilson, Sharp, and Carr 1999). Most of the increase in MtF transsexualism can be accounted for by men who would have been considered atypical—and probably inappropriate—candidates for sex reassignment only a few decades earlier. These men are usually unremarkably masculine in their appearance and behavior, and they typically seek sex reassignment after having lived outwardly successful lives as men, often in male-dominated professions such as engineering or computer science. Most have been married to women, and many have fathered children. They invariably have a history of sexual arousal with crossdressing or cross-gender fantasy (Lawrence 2003, 2004). Most MtF transsexuals who undergo sex reassignment in the United States and the United Kingdom now appear to fit this pattern (Green and Young 2001; Lawrence 2005).

The phenomenon of men wanting to become women appears even more prevalent if one considers heterosexual cross-dressers, also known as transvestites or men with transvestic fetishism. Erotic cross-dressing is surprisingly common in men: a recent population-based survey found that 2.8% of men reported having experienced sexual arousal in association with cross-dressing (Langstrom and Zucker 2005). This figure is consistent with data from several previous studies using convenience samples, which suggested that at least 2% or 3% of men often engage in cross-dressing or cross-gender fantasy as a sexual practice (Hsu et al. 1994; Person et al. 1989; Spira, Bajos, and the ACSF Group 1994). Many of these cross-dressing men not only wear women's clothing but also think seriously about undergoing sex reassignment. In a survey of 1,032 such men, most of whom identified as heterosexual and none of whom lived full-time as women, Docter and Prince (1997) found that 17% identified as "transsexual" and would seek sex reassignment if possible, 28% regarded their "feminine self " as their preferred gender identity, 4% were currently using feminizing hormones, and another 43% wanted to use hormones.

In 1989, psychologist Ray Blanchard made the controversial proposal that the "atypical" male-to-female transsexuals described above, and the heterosexual cross-dressers with whom they seemed to have so much in common, both experienced a powerful sexual attraction to the idea of being or becoming women. This unusual sexual interest, or paraphilia, he theorized, was the driving force behind their behavior. Blanchard called this paraphilia *autogynephilia*, meaning "love of oneself as a woman" (1989a). He formally defined *autogynephilia* as "a male's propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought of himself as a female" (1989b). According to Blanchard's formulation, heterosexual cross-dressers were

men who were sexually attracted to women and who had a paraphilic sexual interest that made them want to episodically impersonate the objects of their attraction. Autogynephilic transsexuals, he theorized, were men who were also sexually attracted to women, but whose paraphilic sexual interest made them want to go farther and permanently change their bodies to *become* the objects of their attraction, or the best possible facsimiles thereof.

There was nothing controversial about Blanchard's considering transvestism to be a paraphilia or cross-dressing by heterosexual men to be an expression of paraphilic sexuality: psychiatrists had recognized this for nearly a century. Nor was there anything remarkable about Blanchard's observation that some MtF transsexuals had a history of sexual arousal with cross-dressing or cross-gender fantasy: this phenomenon had been recognized at least since the 1970s. But Blanchard's theory that sex reassignment was sometimes an expression of paraphilic sexual desire was a radical departure from accepted explanations, which emphasized transsexuals' wish to enact the gender role of the opposite sex and ignored or deemphasized the role of sexual desire in general and paraphilic sexual desire in particular.

The reactions to Blanchard's autogynephilia theory recall Mahatma Gandhi's famous description of reactions to his nonviolence movement: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." For several years, Blanchard's ideas were ignored; and, after they became better known, they were at first not taken seriously. Now that his ideas are more widely known, they are being fought against, primarily on the Internet, by a cadre of MtF transsexuals who find them repugnant. While it may be premature to predict that Blanchard's ideas will become generally accepted, completing the parallel to Gandhi's description, his autogynephilia-based theory increasingly has been adopted by clinicians and researchers. It was, for example, implicitly endorsed in the most recent edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2000). Moreover, Blanchard's ideas have never been seriously challenged in any peer-reviewed academic publication. Some MtF transsexuals, however, remain bitterly opposed to Blanchard's theory, arguing that it is stigmatizing and inconsistent with their experiences. Their views cannot easily be dismissed, if only because many clinicians who provide care for MtF transsexuals will have difficulty accepting any theory that cannot account for their patients' subjective experiences or that appears to be disrespectful of them.

As a physician and researcher who cares for, studies, and advocates for MtF transsexuals, and as a MtF transsexual myself, I find Blanchard's theory of autogynephilic transsexualism to be both persuasive and valuable. I believe that Blanchard's theory has often been mischaracterized, both by its critics and by its advocates. I will propose an alternative way of thinking about autogynephilia and will attempt to demonstrate that Blanchard's ideas, when framed in this alternative way, are more consistent with and respectful of the experiences of MtF transsexuals than has been generally supposed. I will argue that this alternative

conceptualization not only addresses many of the objections that MtF transsexuals offer to Blanchard's theory, but also offers clinicians a more nuanced understanding of the feelings and experiences of many MtF transsexuals.

BLANCHARD'S CONCEPT OF AUTOGYNEPHILIC TRANSSEXUALISM

Like many other clinical researchers, Blanchard sought to make sense of the diversity he encountered in his MtF transsexual patients. Over the years, several different typologies of MtF transsexualism had been proposed, typically based on sexual orientation, the presence or absence of sexual arousal with cross-dressing, or some combination of these features (Blanchard 1989a; Lawrence 2003). A *homosexual* transsexual category, comprising MtF transsexuals who were exclusively attracted to men and who often had identified as homosexual in the past, was recognized in nearly all typologies. Other proposed categories of MtF transsexuals included persons who were sexually attracted to women (*heterosexual*), attracted to both women and men (*bisexual*), or not strongly attracted to other persons of either sex (*analloerotic*, "not sexually attracted to other people," although not necessarily devoid of all sexual interests). Still other typologies reflected the observation that MtF transsexuals usually reported only one of two unusual sexual interests: either sexual arousal with cross-dressing or cross-gender fantasy, or exclusive sexual attraction to men (Freund, Steiner, and Chan 1982).

Based on his research, Blanchard concluded that MtF transsexuals who belonged to the heterosexual, bisexual, and analloerotic categories were more similar to each other—and to heterosexual cross-dressers—than they were to MtF transsexuals who belonged to the homosexual category. Those in the homosexual category were younger at the time of clinical presentation, had been more feminine as boys, were unlikely to give a history of sexual arousal with crossdressing, and were rarely sexually aroused by fantasies of being female (Blanchard 1985, 1988, 1989b; Blanchard, Clemmensen, and Steiner 1987). The MtF transsexuals in the other three groups, collectively referred to as *nonhomosexual* transsexuals, tended to be older at the time of clinical presentation, had been less feminine as boys, were more likely to give a history of sexual arousal with crossdressing, and usually admitted to being sexually aroused by fantasies of being female. Physiological studies suggested that sexual arousal to cross-gender fantasies probably was almost universal in, although not universally acknowledged by, nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals (Blanchard, Racansky, and Steiner 1986). Based on this evidence, Blanchard (1989a) concluded that autogynephilia was the underlying sexual orientation of all nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals, proposing that, "All gender dysphoric males who are not sexually oriented toward men are instead sexually oriented toward the thought or image of themselves as women" (pp. 322–23).

Blanchard (1992) further hypothesized that autogynephilia was a variant form

of heterosexuality that could coexist with and simultaneously compete with sexual attraction toward women. He also demonstrated that autogynephilia is merely the most common example of a broader category of paraphilic sexual interests that he called "erotic target location errors" (Freund and Blanchard 1993). Men with erotic target locations errors want to impersonate, or change their bodies to resemble, the persons or things ("erotic targets") that they love: whatever their preferred erotic targets, these men, including autogynephilic transsexuals, erroneously locate those erotic targets wholly or partially *inside* themselves, in contrast to the usual pattern of locating erotic targets exclusively outside oneself. This phenomenon is illustrated by an excerpt from the autobiography of a nonhomosexual MtF transsexual, describing her simultaneous desire to have what she loves and to become what she loves:

> I was feverishly interested in [girls]. I studied their hair, their clothes, their figures. And I brooded about the increasing differences between us. I seethed with envy while at the same time becoming sexually aroused—I wanted to possess them even as I wanted to become them. In my nighttime fantasies, as I masturbated or floated towards sleep, I combined the two compulsions, dreaming of sex but with myself as the girl. (Hunt 1978, p. 60)

It is important to distinguish between autogynephilia as an erotic orientation and Blanchard's autogynephilia-based model, in which autogynephilia both defines a transsexual typology and is believed to constitute the reason that nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals pursue sex reassignment. No one denies that some MtF transsexuals experience autogynephilia, but not everyone agrees with Blanchard's premises that all MtF transsexuals are either autogynephilic or homosexual, and that autogynephilic transsexuals seek sex reassignment primarily to turn their autogynephilic sexual desires into reality.

OBJECTIONS TO BLANCHARD'S AUTOGYNEPHILIA-BASED MODEL

Some MtF transsexuals object vehemently to Blanchard's autogynephilia-based typology and theory of transsexual motivation. Not surprisingly, most of these objectors are persons who fit the demographic pattern of autogynephilic transsexualism. To catalog and explain all their objections would require an entire article, but at the heart of most objections is the belief that Blanchard's model ignores crucial aspects of the transsexual experience or that it oversimplifies a more complicated reality. While a few objectors who fit the demographic pattern of autogynephilic transsexualism deny ever having experienced autogynephilic arousal, objectors more often acknowledge having experienced such arousal but contend that Blanchard's theory exaggerates its importance or ignores other more significant aspects of their desire to feminize their bodies and live as women. They typically say things like, "I no longer find the idea of having a woman's body

sexually exciting; it just feels more comfortable living my life as a woman," or "Sometimes I find the idea of being a woman sexually exciting, but I was never like other boys and I never fit in as a man, so it just feels more natural for me to live as a woman," or "This isn't primarily a sexual thing for me; it's about my identity as a woman," or "I've felt this way since I was six, long before I had any sexual feelings." Often these MtF transsexuals are particularly offended by the implication that they are trying to deceive themselves or others about their experience of autogynephilia or about its role in their life histories (Lawrence 2004).

NONEROTIC ELEMENTS OF AUTOGYNEPHILIA AND OTHER PARAPHILIAS

I believe that many of the objections to Blanchard's autogynephilia-based model arise from an overly narrow conceptualization of autogynephilia, both by its foes and by some of its supporters. Like many other paraphilias, autogynephilia can easily be misunderstood as a purely erotic or lusty phenomenon, devoid of any of the other elements, such as admiration, affection, beneficence, and desire for closeness, that are usually associated with the word *love*, broadly construed, and that are considered to be expressive of a person's sexual orientation. Imagine how heterosexual men would respond to the assertion that their attraction to their lovers, fiancées, or partners was based solely on erotic desire or lust and nothing more: I suspect that most would not only regard such a description as woefully incomplete, but would consider it insensitive at best and deeply offensive at worst. The MtF transsexuals who object to Blanchard's ideas, whether they acknowledge autogynephilic arousal or not, seem to be saying something very similar: "Our desire to change our bodies and live as women involves much more than just erotic desire or lust; to claim otherwise is both wrongheaded and deeply offensive to us."

When Blanchard (1989a) first described autogynephilia, he referred to it as an "erotic (or amatory) propensity" and a "sexual orientation" and explained that it meant "love of oneself as a woman" (p. 323). For some reason, however, the purely erotic aspects of autogynephilia have received the greatest emphasis, while the aspects related to "amatory propensity," "sexual orientation," and "love" have received comparatively little. Love has been conspicuously absent in most discussions of autogynephilia, whether by its advocates or by its critics.

Why this has been so, I'm not entirely sure. Clinicians and researchers may have emphasized the erotic elements of autogynephilia, and of most paraphilias, because: (1) sexual arousal is fairly easy to measure, at least in men; (2) sexual arousal provides a sufficient basis for categorizing individuals by sexual orientation, at least in men; and (3) the nonerotic elements of sexual orientation, including "love," may seem too metaphysical to be within their purview. Clinicians and researchers are, moreover, not immune to the societal bias against

paraphilic sexuality: historically, the paraphilias often have been regarded as exclusively erotic phenomena, and those who experience them have been assumed not to be fully capable of love. For their part, many MtF transsexuals seem to have been preoccupied with the erotic aspects of autogynephilia, albeit in a dismissing way, because they regard these aspects as especially stigmatizing. Wanting to change one's sex for any reason is stigmatizing, but wanting to do so for erotic reasons is especially so: to employ the distinction proposed by Margolies, Becker, and Jackson-Brewer (1987), an erotic model of transsexual motivation exposes transsexuals not only to society's xenophobia (fear of that which is different), but also to its erotophobia (fear of that which is sexual)—and to the internalized versions of these feelings, too.

I believe it is useful to return to Blanchard's original definition and to think about autogynephilia as an "amatory propensity"—that is, as a variety of "romantic love," involving more than just sexual arousal—and also as a special type of sexual orientation. Doing so allows us to see Blanchard's autogynephilia-based model in a different light, one that I believe is more consistent with the life experiences of MtF transsexuals. Before exploring these issues, however, I need to clarify a point of terminology. Because the term *sexual orientation* historically has been used to denote only the tendency to choose sexual and romantic partners of the opposite sex, the same sex, or both sexes, I have elsewhere suggested that it may preferable to refer to autogynephilia and other paraphilias as *erotic-romantic orientations*, a term that denotes the tendency to be erotically attracted to, and to fall in love with, any of a broader range of erotic targets (Lawrence 2006).This is the term I will use throughout the remainder of this essay.

EROTIC AND NONEROTIC ELEMENTS OF EROTIC-ROMANTIC ORIENTATIONS

To understand why putatively autogynephilic MtF transsexuals often report that their desire to be female does not feel like a sexual phenomenon, it is useful to consider the elements that contribute to the expression of erotic-romantic orientations, some of which may not feel very "sexual." One prominent model addressing these issues has been developed by Fisher (Fisher 2000; Fisher, Aron, and Brown 2006; Fisher et al. 2002). Fisher proposed that mammalian sexuality generally, and human sexuality specifically, is served by three related but potentially independent emotional/motivational systems: a libidinal system (erotic desire or "lust"), designed to facilitate sexual interaction with any appropriate partner; an attraction system ("romantic love" in Fisher's parlance), designed to concentrate attention on one preferred partner; and an attachment system ("companionate love"), designed to facilitate pair-bonding and partnering (e.g., for mutual caregiving and cooperation in parental tasks). Other theorists have proposed slightly different multicomponent models to explain the manifestations

of erotic-romantic orientations. Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw (1988), for example, theorized that "adult romantic love" involved the integration of three independent but related components: sexuality (i.e., eroticism), attachment, and caregiving. Diamond (2003), in contrast, posited only two components of human love, sexual desire and affectional bonding or attachment; she proposed that "passionate" attraction (what Fisher called "romantic love") was simply an early developing component of affectional bonding. Common to all of these models is the idea that erotic desire (or lust) and affectional bonding (or attachment) are two distinguishable components of the complex human passion that I will call "romantic love" and of erotic-romantic orientations generally. Also common to all of these models is the observation that the erotic and affectional components of romantic love, while often occurring together, are potentially independent of each other.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE POTENTIAL INDEPENDENCE OF EROTIC DESIRE AND ATTACHMENT

It has been widely observed that affectional bonding or attachment can occur independently of erotic desire and can also persist after erotic desire has diminished or disappeared (Diamond 2003; Fisher 2000; Fisher et al. 2002).This suggests the possibility of sustained affectional attachment to paraphilic objects or situations that may have lost much of their purely erotic power. Blanchard (1991) described this phenomenon in nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals: "In later years, however, autogynephilic sexual arousal may diminish or disappear, while the transsexual wish remains or grows even stronger. . . . It is therefore feasible that the continuing desire to have a female body, after the disappearance of sexual [i.e., erotic] response to that thought, has some analog in the permanent love-bond that may remain between two people after their initial strong sexual attraction has largely disappeared" (p. 248). This insight plausibly explains the reports by some nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals that they no longer experience sexual arousal to the idea or reality of being female but still feel a comforting "nonsexual" (i.e., nonerotic) affectional bond to the idea or reality of being female and living as women. If these transsexuals were to misunderstand autogynephilia as a purely erotic phenomenon, they might erroneously conclude that their continuing attraction to being female had nothing to do with autogynephilia. If clinicians and researchers were to make the same misinterpretation, they might erroneously conclude that these transsexuals were deceiving themselves or trying to deceive others about their autogynephilic feelings.

EXPRESSION OF EROTIC-ROMANTIC ORIENTATION IN PERSONS WHO EXPERIENCE LITTLE EROTIC DESIRE

Another implication of the potential independence of erotic desire and attachment as components of erotic-romantic orientations is that these two components may differ significantly in relative strength. It seems plausible that some nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals may experience relatively little erotic desire but may nevertheless experience substantial feelings of attachment to and affection for their idealized images of themselves as female. This would be consistent with the reports by some putatively autogynephilic MtF transsexuals that erotic desire was only a minor aspect of their wish to be female. It is not uncommon for nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals to report having a low sex drive, losing their virginity late in life, having been sought out by female partners rather than seeking them out, and experiencing little sexual excitement with cross-dressing after a few years' time. Nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals with histories like these appear to resemble the "asexual" MtF transsexuals who were extensively studied by some early theorists (Bentler 1974; Person and Ovesey 1974) but who have received less attention recently. Reports by these transsexuals that their desire to be female lacks a strong erotic component do not necessarily indicate that they do not have an underlying autogynephilic erotic-romantic orientation, nor do they indicate that they are deceiving themselves or trying to deceive others.

I further hypothesize that, when nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals describe themselves as having been unmasculine or "not like other boys," they often may be referring to an unwillingness or inability to seek out female sexual partners with an avidity comparable to their peers, rather than to the presence of female-typical interests or behaviors. The nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals I have interviewed rarely describe themselves as having had female-typical interests and behaviors in childhood, but many describe themselves as having been "unmasculine," in ways that go beyond their commonly reported disinterest in team sports. Many recall having had little erotic interest generally or little interest in interpersonal sexuality specifically, in comparison to their male peers. Many never dated during adolescence unless invited by girls. Clearly these boys had not been unattracted to girls, but their attraction was often more idealizing and affectionate than overtly erotic and was not expressed with typical masculine confidence. Admittedly, this is a complicated issue: a significant number of nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals appear to have comparatively little interest in other people generally, but substantial interest in "things," especially computers and other machines (Laub and Fisk 1974). In my experience, the tendency of some MtF transsexuals to prefer things over people sometimes involves deficits in empathy and interpersonal skills similar to those seen in Asperger's disorder; this may partly explain the limited interpersonal sexual expression or interest of some nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals (Galluci, Hackerman, and Schmidt 2005). Nevertheless, its seems plausible that some nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals who report that they were

unmasculine in childhood and adolescence can accurately be thought of as persons who want to become what they love, but whose love for women is more affectionate than erotic.

EROTIC-ROMANTIC ORIENTATIONS AND IDENTITY

If we think of autogynephilia as an erotic-romantic orientation, rather than merely an erotic interest, it become easier to understand why some putatively autogynephilic MtF transsexuals say that issues of identity are a more important element of their motivation than issues of sexuality. In most contemporary Western cultures, one's erotic-romantic orientation contributes significantly to the creation of personal identity in persons with ordinary sexual orientations (Katz 1995; Levine, Risen, and Althof 1990; Person 1980). Probably this is also true for persons with atypical erotic-romantic orientations, including autogynephilic transsexualism.

As Katz (1995) observed, "We are all now socially pressured to privately believe in and publicly proclaim our 'sexual identities' as the defining truth of who we are" (p. 171). In the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann et al. 1994), 99.7% of American men and 99.9% of American women could report an identity that was heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual, which suggests that the idea of one's identity being defined at least partly by one's sexual orientation is a meaningful concept to almost all contemporary Americans.

Erotic and romantic preferences appear to serve as important elements of identity in paraphilic erotic-romantic orientations as well (Levine, Risen, and Althof 1990). Person (1980) proposed that an individual's unique personal erotic-romantic orientation or "sex print" can be a particularly significant element of identity in the case of "deviant" sexual preferences or paraphilic erotic-romantic orientations:

> Because it is revealed rather than chosen, sexual preference is felt as deeply rooted and deriving from one's nature. To the degree that one utilizes sexuality (for pleasure, for adaptation, as the resolution of unconscious conflict) and to the degree that sexuality is valued, one's sexual "nature" will be experienced as more or less central to personality. To the extent that an individual's sex print "deviates" from the culture's prescription for sexuality, it may be experienced as even more central to identity (at least in this culture). So, for example, many transsexuals and transvestites report both relief and a sense of personality consolidation when "I found out what I am," when "I found out there were others like me." (p. 51)

Moreover, it seems obvious that erotic-romantic orientations involving erotic target location errors would contribute especially strongly to personal identity, because they define one's ideal self: the person whom one wants to become or wants to change one's body to resemble. It is easy, then, to understand why

becoming what one loves would feel like an identity-driven process. It is also easy to understand how the erotic feelings that putatively contribute to the creation of identity in nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals could seem relatively unimportant, especially if they had diminished with time or were never strong to begin with.

CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT OF EROTIC-ROMANTIC ORIENTATIONS

Nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals often report that their desire to be female began early in childhood, well before the onset of puberty (Lawrence 2003, 2006). They frequently interpret this to mean that their desire therefore cannot be sexual. There is evidence, however, that both erotic desire and affectional bonding can develop in early childhood. It seems plausible that children in whom these erotic-romantic feelings were directed partly or wholly toward the self would experience the desire to become what they loved during childhood. There are two case reports of boys younger than age three who expressed a desire to wear cross-sex clothing and who experienced penile erections when they did so (Stoller 1985; Zucker and Blanchard 1997).These boys plausibly displayed an early form of autogynephilic arousal. Affectionate feelings that are not explicitly erotic also develop in early childhood. Hatfield et al. (1988) demonstrated that many children as young as age four or five can clearly describe feelings of "longing for union" directed toward opposite-sex age-mates and that the intensity of their feelings is comparable to that reported by adolescents. These observations suggest that erotic-romantic orientations can develop well before puberty and that they could plausibly manifest as cross-gender wishes and behaviors in children predisposed to want to become what they love.

PARALLELS BETWEEN INTERPERSONAL ROMANTIC LOVE AND AUTOGYNEPHILIA

If autogynephilia is an erotic-romantic orientation and if nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals are men who love women and who want to become what they love, we would expect that many of the distinctive characteristics of interpersonal romantic love would have parallels in nonhomosexual MtF transsexualism. Several such parallels exist and are worth noting, not because they provide a rigorous demonstration that autogynephilia is isomorphic to other forms of romantic love, but because they illustrate how thinking about autogynephilic transsexualism as an expression of romantic love can help clinicians achieve a more empathetic understanding of how their nonhomosexual MtF transsexual patients feel and behave.

Person (1992) proposed that the single most important characteristic of romantic love was idealization of the beloved, along with intense yearning to be

united with him or her. In nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals, this idealization often is directed toward particular features of the female body, particularly the genitals, and is accompanied by an intense desire to acquire these highly valued features. The nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals I have seen in my practice typically want to undergo sex reassignment surgery as quickly as possible and want their new genitals to resemble as closely as possible the female genitals they love and idealize. After surgery, these transsexuals are not only relieved to be rid of their male genitals but are delighted with their female-appearing genitals and are often eager to display them to other people (e.g., at transgender support group meetings).They are proud to more closely resemble what they love. Their attitude is in marked contrast to that of the homosexual MtF transsexuals I have seen, who do not experience romantic love for women, do not idealize women's genital anatomy, and often seem indifferent or ambivalent about undergoing sex reassignment surgery. One of my homosexual MtF transsexual patients who had undergone sex reassignment surgery was, for example, unwilling to perform vaginal dilation to prevent postoperative vaginal stenosis, because she regarded her new female genitals as "too ugly" to look at or touch.

Viederman (1988) observed that romantic love often "becomes an essential and unifying theme for the person's life" and "the grand organizer of the individual's life. Everything else takes a secondary role." (pp. 3, 7). This is an apt description of the central role that the sex reassignment process assumes in the life of most nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals, once they decide to pursue it. Becoming what one loves usually becomes their first priority, while other elements of life—family, friends, employment—typically assume secondary importance, at least temporarily. The sex reassignment process is often given first claim on the transsexual's time, energy, and resources.

Viederman (1988) also noted that romantic love can "act as a powerful antidote to frustration, disappointment, and repetition" (p. 12). Consequently, he proposed, individuals are often especially inclined to seek out passionate love experiences, or to allow themselves the possibility of entering into them, in middle age and in times of crisis. This is consistent with the life histories of many, if not most, nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals, who tend to seek sex reassignment in their 40s or later, sometimes in association with a midlife crisis (Roback, Felleman, and Abramowitz 1984).Their decision to undergo sex reassignment is not uncommonly preceded by some significant loss or reversal, such as unemployment, physical disability, or the end of an important relationship (Lothstein 1979). For individuals who experience autogynephilia, deciding to become what one loves can represent an attempt to cope with adverse life circumstances, just as deciding to pursue a love affair with another person can for individuals with more conventional sexual orientations.

In a similar vein, Person (1992) suggested that interpersonal romantic love provides a solution to the "problem of meaning" in societies in which other sources of meaning, such as religion or allegiance to family or clan, have lost much of their

power. Accordingly, many individuals with conventional sexual orientations structure their lives around their relationship with the person they love. For nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals, the decision to structure one's life around becoming what one loves by undertaking sex reassignment similarly addresses the problem of meaning. The process of changing one's body and living as a woman offers an identity, a program of action, and a purpose in life.

Finally, Person (1992) observed that interpersonal romantic love carries the potential for deep personal transformation: "Love has the power to break old ties to family and friends, alter religious and ethnic affiliations, change social class and political preference, and in the case of those lovers who discover by way of their beloved their life's work or mission bring new purpose and meaning to life" (p. 401). This also seems true of nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals who decide to become what they love. Taking on the appearance and social role of the other sex constitutes a profound personal transformation in and of itself, of course, but these transsexuals often undergo important transformations in other domains of life as well. Nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals commonly report reconsidering their occupational choices, changing their political affiliations, undergoing spiritual conversions, and reevaluating their core beliefs and values in connection with sex reassignment. Not surprisingly, the changes they experience often move them toward more female-typical attitudes, values, and choices.

CONCLUSION

The concept of autogynephilia is essential to understanding the increasing prevalence of atypical MtF transsexualism in Western countries. Autogynephilic transsexualism is a manifestation of paraphilic sexuality, but thinking about autogynephilia as a purely erotic phenomenon is not the most helpful approach for clinicians who want to achieve a sophisticated understanding of their nonhomosexual MtF transsexual patients. Thinking about nonhomosexual or autogynephilic MtF transsexuals as men who "love women and want to become what they love" offers a more accurate and more richly informative model for clinicians.

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