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womens' clothes?**



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Transsexuals: victims? Dressing up

'Whereas all libertarians and socialists feel duty-bound to defend the gay liberation movement, how many would do the same for transvestism?' So wrote Dave Black of Lanarkshire in a letter to *The Leveller* last March. 'Consider the position of the transvestite,' he urged. Now we're doing just that. We also look at transsexualism — a different but related subject — which is controversial in the women's movement. Some say, once a man, always a man, and transsexuals should be excluded. Others, including a number of feminist transsexuals, disagree. *Imogen Bloor* reports on a meeting on the subject and outlines the arguments. *Brian Deer* looks at transsexuals and male transvestites, and asks whether transsexuals are living proof that masculinity and femininity are created by social circumstances.

'My friend Suzanna wasn't using her cock very much and vaguely meant to have the op. And one day she said: "Well I got up and looked in the mirror and it was there. So were my tits and my hips and I thought: Better off without it!"'

Ros [redacted] is an Oxford graduate now living in North London. She met Suzanna, an American transsexual, during a working holiday in the United States. Ros liked Suzanna's style: 'She didn't regard the op as a great choice, a great divide. She wasn't into any great metaphysical crap.'

In America, 'gender reassignment' or sex-change surgery is easy to obtain—if you've got the money. 'People at times have the opportunity to treat the medical profession as technicians, rather than tin gods,' says Ros. In Britain, with only a handful of hospitals doing the operation, it's much more difficult.

But why should anyone want to change their sex? Despite Suzanna's apparently casual attitude towards her body, gender reassignment involves major surgery—described by one doctor as 'butchery, really'. It needs a lifelong course of hormones and generates social problems which would be hard to overestimate. It's not something embarked upon lightly.

The simplest explanation is just to say that some people born with a male body strongly identify with, or may even believe they 'really are', women. Indeed transsexuals, and many transvestites, frequently complain that they are 'women trapped in men's bodies'.

But how does this happen? Why should there be such a split between a person's biological sex and their 'gender identity'? With a growing demand for gender reassignment surgery, a fair bit of research has been done on the matter, but without many particularly clear conclusions.

One approach is to assume that the 'patient' has some biological abnormality—a view most often put forward by those who try in similar terms to account for homosexuality. But the most convincing investigations into gender identity problems have been done by those who believe in psychological and social explanations.

Among the most influential is Robert Stoller, a psychoanalyst working at the University of California, who has published a great deal of research material on transsexualism and

transvestism. His most recent book, *Perversion—The Erotic Form of Hatred*, was published in Britain by Quartet in 1977.

Stoller's approach is deeply rooted in Freudian psychology, although he has differences with Freud's position on homosexuality and heterosexuality. He places the emphasis on the first years of a child's life and [redacted] the mother, out of hatred and envy of men, wants her particularly beautiful baby boy to be the perfect girl.

[redacted] makes a clear distinction between transsexualism and transvestism in his explanations.

In Stoller's view, every boy loves his mum, but before that there is a phase in which he is merged with her—before she exists for him as a separate entity. Masculinity is not a naturally occurring state, but is acquired by a boy only through separation from his mother's femininity.

In the transsexual male, this separation into masculinity never occurs. Stoller says that the essential feature of the transsexual is not that they seek gender reassignment, but that 'there

has been no significant phase in life that either this anatomically normal male or an observer could recognise as masculine'.

Right from the start, despite his male name and anatomy, the transsexual boy believed he was really a girl and was even accepted as such by girls. As a result, 'transsexuals have a conscious, open, undefended envy comparable to that of a person born without limbs towards those more fortunate.'

The responsibility for this state of affairs Stoller puts directly on the mother. The nub of this part of his explanation is that the mother, out of hatred and envy of men, wants her particularly beautiful baby boy to be the perfect girl. So she never pushes him out of the nest of her own femininity.

Meanwhile the boy's father, a distant, retiring man, keeps his nose out of it—leaving the task of encouraging masculinity entirely in the hands of the mother. Stoller claims that all the transsexuals he has come across have had this background behind them.

Stoller really feels quite sympathetic towards his transsexual patients. 'They

the ultimate Transvestites: for pleasure?

treat me as their mothers treated them: as things, as appendages, rather than as separate people, he says. But as for transvestites: these are a very different group of people, with different problems to face.

The transvestite's joy is to be so successful at learning what he thinks is a woman's role that he is able occasionally to 'pass' undetected as a woman. Almost always he will be heterosexual and will clearly separate his feminine persona from his everyday life as a masculine man.

But, unlike the transsexual, Stoller's transvestite is in no doubt at all about his gender. He acquired the expected masculine behaviour in childhood. The roots of his transvestism lie in a deeply felt childhood trauma for which he later seeks revenge in 'perversion'.

Also dividing the transvestite from the transsexual is the transvestite's hostility toward those he believes were responsible for the trauma, and his constant awareness of, and delight in, the cock he hides under the women's clothes.

Stoller is specific that the trauma was the humiliation and threatened loss of masculinity involved in being dressed, by mother or some other loved and powerful woman, in female clothes. But he does admit that not all boys would find this experience traumatic.

There follows a period of latency in which transvestism doesn't yet appear. But then, beginning in later childhood or adolescence, the painful experience of being 'cross-dressed' is re-enacted—this time, however, not as humiliation, but as 'triumph'.

Stoller writes: 'These garments, formerly the agent

of trauma, now delight him—strong, full of anticipation, powerfully potent, intact, penis and self gathered up in full strength competent for orgasm. How better to prove he is triumphant than to be potent in the presence of the original trauma?'

By making such a big difference between this—a

He sees transvestism as a special kind of fetishism and seeks to prevent all but the true transsexual from reaching surgery.

'perversion'—and transsexualism—merely an 'aberration'—Stoller's explanation has a certain elegance and at least gives a framework through which they might be better understood. But the test of any theory is whether it describes the real world.

Certainly, it doesn't describe the world as seen by Ros [redacted]. She thinks the division between transvestism and transsexualism is not at all clear and is really a matter of choosing your own label. 'I think to a very large extent you are transsexual if you think you are transsexual'.

Ros [redacted] thinks she is a pre-operative transsexual, but in Robert Stoller's book she's checked in as transvestite. 'I don't think of myself as a woman, in a lot of senses,' she says, 'but at the same time I like passing, I want to look as much like a woman as I can'.

She decided she was transvestite or transsexual at the age of 14 and since then has gone through a process only an Oxford graduate would call: 'Verisimilitude—looking better and better, convincing yourself more and more, moving from wearing a pair of black stockings to

using Immac on your legs . . .'

Ros says she's 'moderately' looking forward to surgery, but she's taking things a step at a time. Her vagueness about her genitals is stunning: 'I'm quite into my cock, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't be into a vagina if I had one'. But whether she'll ever get one is another matter entirely.

One reason why she might not is that the channels through which she would have to pass for gender reassignment are full of obstacles. As a counsellor with the Albany Trust put it: 'In no way are people like this transsexual. They believe that after the change things are suddenly going to be different—and many are disappointed'.

The Albany Trust, which devotes some 40% of its casework to gender identity problems, follows the popular professional line that 'the true transsexual is asexual'. But Ros [redacted] disagrees: 'By saying that they're saying "All these other people aren't transsexual so we needn't help them". I've had all that shit from the Albany Trust'.

Ros sees people as being much too various to be fitted into neat categories. Taking the crucially important attitude of transsexuals and transvestites towards their cocks, for example, she thinks no obvious pattern emerges. According to Stoller, transsexuals 'simply do not want, need, or cherish their male genitals'.

But Ros says one of her friends, who has now had surgery, never used to allow other people to touch her cock when she was having sex, 'but used to touch it herself when she masturbated'. Others evolve a method of 'sticking their cock between their legs and sort of squirming, rather than actually touch it'. And others



'masturbate in a fairly straightforward way'.

Ros's point is that in almost all matters, it varies from person to person. She is supported in this by many psychiatrists who believe there is some kind of spectrum, taking in people who consider themselves fetishists, transvestites and transsexuals, and by many individuals who have chosen to swap one label for another.

This view, however, isn't shared by John Randell, the consultant psychiatrist at the Charing Cross Hospital Gender

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Identity Unit—and the man who effectively decides in most cases who can have gender reassignment. He sees transvestism as a special kind of fetishism and seeks to prevent all but the true transsexual from reaching surgery.

He is an extremely unpopular man in transvestite circles and many people accuse him of making it unnecessarily difficult for the transsexual. His Unit is also criticised for providing little advice and support for transsexuals who must make major social readjustments in their life before and after surgery.

But some counsellors privately express relief that

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the difficulty of obtaining surgery may at least deter those who are not completely sure that gender reassignment would help them. The operation, which involves the removal of male organs and the creation of a vagina, is irreversible—and some have regretted it afterwards.

How many people have gone through the operation and later realised their mistake is unknown. But there is no doubt that the vagueness which for Ros [redacted] is merely happy confusion is for others a source of terrifying uncertainty about themselves and their future.

What is more, there seems to be a tendency among some transvestites to see transsexualism to be their occasional predilection for feminine behaviour taken to its logical conclusion. Thus, as one counsellor with London Friend pointed out, 'a kind of hierarchy develops with transsexuals at the top'.

Fortunately, however, most transvestites don't have the slightest wish to undergo gender reassignment surgery. For them, cross-dressing would lose its point if they didn't retain their feeling of heterosexual masculinity. And, after all, many transvestites get a lot of pleasure simply by dressing.

Early cross-dressing experiences are usually very sexual for transvestites—focussing perhaps on one or two female garments and differing not at all from what most people would call fetishism. For some this is enough, but others go on to develop a full-blown feminine persona, with her own name, wardrobe and interests.

Wendy, a member of the Beaumont Society transvestite organisation, is characteristically a married man with children and a career to worry about. But when his wife's away and the kids are in bed, he gets his secret collection of women's clothes down from the attic and enjoys himself:

'A long, hot, perfumed bath, a slow deliberate dressing and making up, the gorgeous feeling of a brassiere weighted with my boobs, the lovely feel of a skirt swishing against my tights, and my face as feminine as I am able to make it. Finally, I brush out my wig and complete the image'.

This evidently relaxing activity may be harmless enough, but Annabel [redacted] at Essex University, who has done considerable research into transvestism, is critical of the transvestite's 'dual personality'. The man tends to be anti-gay, and the feminine persona 'doesn't seem very far removed from a

form of objectifying women through their clothing'.

She says, although people can't change their ideas of gender and roles overnight, transvestites reinforce gender stereotypes in a way which she, as a feminist, found disturbing. 'I became increasingly uneasy about working in this area of research,' she says. 'Sometimes I felt like shaking them and saying: "You don't need to think in these terms"'

Gill [redacted], a transsexual who has been through surgery, says it's in these terms that another important difference between transvestites and transsexuals can be found. 'A transvestite imitates women,' she says, 'but when you are 100% committed to a woman's position, as I am, you have a very different view of things.'

She says that while maintaining a dual personality is central to a transvestite's satisfaction, this is not so for the transsexual. Long before gender reassignment, changing back into a male role is the source of great difficulty and frustration for the transsexual. The transsexual strives not to split, but to integrate their body with their identity.

While the transvestite never has any serious intention of giving up make status and privilege, the transsexual wants nothing more desperately than to dump her male 'disguise'. If this means dressing in a way which is considered female, taking a course of female hormones and going through surgery, this is the price she will pay.

In Gill [redacted]'s view, transsexuals and transvestites have nothing much in common except that 'some degree' of cross-dressing is involved in both. But cross-dressing is hardly a small matter—since, in order to do it, a person must give a lot of thought to what men and women are supposed to wear.

For most people this is just taken for granted. For example, women can wear skirts, while men—apart from some Scotsmen—can't. But the transvestite, and often the transsexual as well, will consciously seek out the clothing of the opposite sex. And the transvestite will often present an image of women which is merely a caricature.

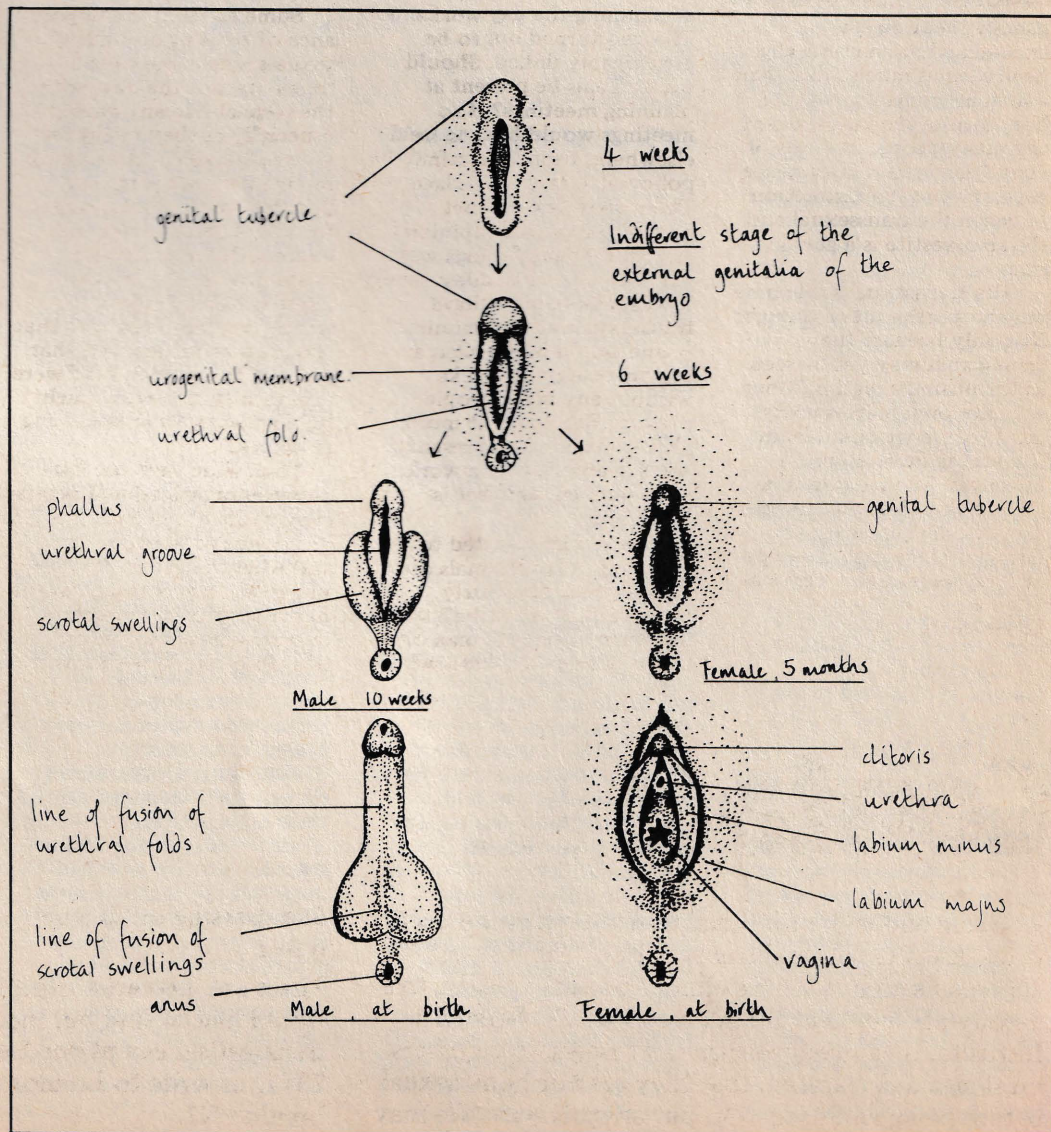
Many say they must do this in order to 'pass' as

women and, in any case, it isn't them who keep the fashion and cosmetic industries booming. Yet it's hardly surprising that as more and more women reject the oppressive stereotypes of femininity, it becomes increasingly hard for transvestites to justify them.

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But the world is full of crazy people. By any acid-test of normality, most of us would fail. And those who don't must either have devised the criteria or be of such mind-bending weirdness that they are driven to choose between a nervous breakdown, or a lifetime of moral crusading.

Of course, the magic word 'perversion' is so easy to apply. Certainly, it's much more comforting to point the accusing, critical finger at someone else, than to consider who is responsible for the casualties of our society. For,



Are they not men ?

as Robert Stoller observes, 'perversion is a *necessity* created by society and the family so as not themselves to become worse casualties'.

The man in women's clothing is an ultimate figure of fun and fear. On the stage, he can make us laugh with his oppressive images of women; in the street, he can make us throw bricks and bottles simply by walking out alone. Bestowed with such a magic power, should we be surprised that he may sometimes be triumphant in his mockery?

As for the transsexual, she brings us bigger problems. By her mere existence, she sweeps away one of the biggest of all assumptions we have about ourselves. For, despite all the pleas to God and biology to say it isn't true, the transsexual may be the most convincing proof of the social construction of masculinity and femininity.

But, perhaps because of the cross-dressing that is

The transsexual may be the most convincing proof of the social construction of masculinity and femininity

usually involved, the transsexual has never really been seen as much more than a man in woman's clothing. Yet, despite the vagueness of the many people like Ros St. John, the weight of evidence suggests that the distinction between the transsexual and the transvestite is a genuine one.

The transsexual's dilemma may be worth a lot of thought. Not only because the transsexual may yet be seen as the ultimate victim of our sexually oppressive society, but because we could learn something more about ourselves. The trouble is, as Gill [redacted] points out, 'most transsexuals just want to disappear into the landscape and get on with their lives as women'.

Brian Deer

On July 2nd 25 women attended the first planning meeting for a proposed day Workshop for the Women's Movement on transsexuals. The meeting, held at London's A Woman's Place — 'no men, no transsexuals' — was called as result of a rumble at a previous Monthly Event Collective social where a transsexual had been present (as a member of the group putting on the show there). Some women felt that at a gathering of several hundred women, her presence was an issue which needed a lot of discussion.

Transsexualism has not been a major topic of deliberation in the movement, though specific women's groups, (primarily it seems, in London) have discussed it.

The starting point of the planning meeting was whether to discuss the issue itself, of whether to exclude transsexuals from the women's movement, or the practicalities of planning the day workshop. The two turned out to be inextricably linked. Should transsexuals be present at planning meetings? If so meetings would have to be held elsewhere, bearing in mind the policy of A Woman's Place. There were two distinct opposing groups of opinions, and very strong feelings were expressed on both sides: surely it was reasonable to have transsexuals at the planning — one would hardly plan a day workshop on blacks without any black people present. But wasn't it more akin to having men present, when planning such a workshop on men, and *that* is ludicrous!

Those who objected to the presence of transsexuals (or men, as they constantly referred to them as 'he') at any time during the planning or the actual day, felt a whole

section of like-minded women would be excluded — feeling they could not attend in the presence of men. The other view was that only informed discussion was constructive, and as a great many of us are very ignorant about transsexuals and their feelings, why they identify with women, how they view their relationships with other women and the women's movement, only by talking to them and asking questions could rational decisions (if any) be made.

A compromise solution was proposed, that transsexuals be invited to some specified part of the day workshop, but that planning meetings should go ahead without transsexuals present. This was broadly agreed on, though very reluctantly by some on both sides. As one lesbian feminist said: 'if there was a transsexual present on the day she would not waste her time talking to it'.

Some stressed the importance of treating any transsexuals who came to the 'open' part of the day, with the respect due any guest, especially as they might feel very vulnerable and exposed, setting themselves up as a possible (or probable) target for attack. Many women, expressed sympathy and protective feelings towards any transsexual who was willing to place herself in that situation and it was felt that some of the women who were vehemently anti-men, might have no scruples in launching an attack.

Discussion then oscillated between organisational details (how to split up the day, when and where to hold the event) and what the aim of the day was to be. Was it to be limited to the subject of whether transsexuals were women, and therefore should we allow them

them to 'infiltrate' the women's movement or not? Other than those who had already decided that transsexuals were and always would be men, the women present seemed to generally agree that it is very arrogant of us to feel that we could conclusively decide whether a transsexual is a woman or not and so establish a policy for the women's liberation movement. How can we as one oppressed group oppress another?

A more broad-based approach would have much greater validity: what makes us women? How much is it determined by our biology, by our genitals, and how much is due to socialisation? Has a transsexual who has identified with women from a very young age, been truly socialised as a man anyway, even if biologically she started out as a man? Discussion on transsexualism could be very fruitful with regard to all women and questions of sexual identity in general. This was agreed on as a constructive approach to the day workshop.

Presumably problems which were only touched on at this first meeting such as whether to only invite post operative feminist transsexuals along, or whether pre-operative transsexuals who've never had any inclination to get involved in women's politics might have something to offer, as well as further organisation details, will be sorted out as planning proceeds. There will be several meetings over the ensuing months, aiming for what could be a very interesting day (or day and a half), probably in October. Details of meetings can be obtained from A Woman's Place.

Contact . . .

Isolation and lack of information are big problems for many transsexuals and transvestites. The biggest TV/TS organisation is the Beaumont Society. Sadly, this parody of that great British creation, the Women's Institute, is viciously anti-gay. Prospective members must sign a declaration that they are not homosexual before being admitted. Or, put another way: We may

like dressing up as women, but at least we're not queer.

There are, however, other possibilities. Anyone who would like to find out more about transsexualism and transvestism can phone London Friend on 01-359 7371, or write to London Friend, 274 Upper St, London N1.