

# Boy or Girl? When Doctors Choose a Child's Sex [video]

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Boy or Girl? When Doctors Choose a Child's Sex [video]. Produced by ABC News. 1999. Available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543, [www.films.com](http://www.films.com). VHS, \$89.95.

It seems that during the last several years there has been a burgeoning interest in transsexuality and transgenderism within certain academic circles. The issue of gender and its determination via biological versus cultural influences was recently brought to the forefront with the publication of a book on the famous John/Joan case (Colapinto, 2000). Accordingly, perhaps more than ever, transsexuality and transgenderism are pertinent topics within undergraduate courses in human sexuality. Books on gender issues can be used successfully in such courses (Nicolai, 2000) and, fortunately, there have been several videos produced in the last several years whose aim is education regarding transsexuality and transgenderism. Each of these videos will be reviewed separately below.

## Boy or Girl? When Doctors Choose a Child's Sex

This video is actually a segment from the ABC News program "Primetime Live" which apparently was televised during 1999. Accordingly, the production values are high and the brief video (approximately 15 minutes) is in a format viewers are used to seeing. The video focuses primarily on two particular cases: "Jade" a chromosomal male born without external genitalia and who is being raised as a girl, and David Reimer, the famous John/Joan case from the sexological literature (a chromosomal male who lost his penis during an accident and was subsequently raised as a girl; see Colapinto, 2000).

In the video, Jade is 4 years of age and had previously undergone surgery to fashion a vagina. Dr. John Gearhart, the Johns Hopkins pediatric endocrinologist treating Jade, is interviewed, and one of the most interesting and educationally beneficial portions of the video is a brief segment during which Dr. Gearhart shows the interviewer a series of slides of infant genitalia. Of course, in each case the genitalia do not match the chromosomal sex. I think it is often the case that students read or hear about ambiguous genitalia but do not fully appreciate how impossible it can be to determine an infant's sex by visual inspection.

Also of interest for members of a sexuality course is the implicit debate between those who believe individuals like Jade will grow up to be happy,

adjusted women and those who believe it is misguided to attempt to determine a child's sex. In this regard, Dr. Gearhart is portrayed as the proponent, and Dr. Milton Diamond the opponent, of infant sex re-assignment. In the video, Dr. William Reiner is also featured for his ongoing study of Jade and 15 other chromosomal males who are being raised as females. In this context, the viewer sees Jade during a play session in the laboratory. Although Jade looks like a little girl, her play is characteristically male.

After Jade's case, the video shifts to David Reimer. However, the video was produced prior to the public disclosure of John/Joan's identity. So, David Reimer is interviewed while sitting in the shadows, and his voice is distorted to maintain his anonymity. After publication of Colapinto's (2000) book, David Reimer appeared on several television shows, so there is video footage available elsewhere that shows the real person behind the famous John/Joan Case.

Despite a fairly balanced presentation of the issues, there are some subtle aspects of this video that transgender and transsexual advocates would find problematic. For example, in portraying intersex infants, reference is made to "birth defects," "grossly malformed" genitalia, and the ability to "fix" the problem.

### Hermaphrodites Speak

This video is offered through the Intersex Society of North American (ISNA) and runs about 30 minutes. The filming took place during what is billed as the "first retreat weekend" of the ISNA (which took place during 1996). The entire program revolves around a group of nine intersex individuals sitting outdoors, on the ground, in somewhat of a circle. The members of the group pass a microphone as each makes an introduction and describes some of the experiences that led to this point in their respective lives.

Cheryl Chase is identified as the organizer of the retreat, and she is seated among this group of individuals featured in the video (and acts somewhat as the host of this group discussion). The group, though small, represents a fair range of diversity with regard to ascribed gender at birth, degree of genital ambiguity, age, and so forth. However, there are some themes that are common to the members of the group. Primarily, what comes through clearly is the anger at the medical establishment for having taken away the individuals' rights to choose whether and how their bodies would be modified via surgery and hormones. The other primary theme is the sense of isolation and "differentness" each person felt while growing up, hence the relief and celebration at having found Cheryl Chase and the ISNA.

The video appears to have been shot using a standard camcorder, with

perhaps an untrained operator behind the viewfinder. Accordingly, the production values are very low. The video appears as it would if one's uncle Louie were taping a family gathering. In a sense this is a weakness of the video, as we are all used to professionally produced footage. On the other hand, the amateur nature of the video lends a sense of authenticity and conveys at a very basic level that this is a sort of "family gathering" for these folks. As a viewer, we have been allowed to peek in on a small part of the retreat. Despite the amateur nature of the video footage, the sound quality is fine, probably because the participants spoke directly into a microphone passed among them.

### Investigative Reports: Transgender Revolution

This video is an episode of "Investigative Reports," produced by the Arts and Entertainment (A&E) Network. Accordingly, the production values are high and the video easily holds the viewer's attention (despite a running time of 50 minutes). In addition to the high production values, one of the advantages of this video is that it is comprised of four more-or-less independent segments, each approximately ten minutes in length.

The first of these four segments features the story of a female-to-male transsexual who has served as an exemplary police officer for several years. Through this individual's experience, a few broader issues are addressed: persecution in the work place, phalloplasty, the relationship with one's primary partner, and use of the Internet to form a support network for transsexual individuals.

The second segment features a sort of "macho male" who eventually transitioned to living as a woman. Here the focus is on the personal pain before deciding to transition, and the proactive stance this individual has taken in the transgendered community. Interviews with family members and photos from childhood and early adulthood highlight the lifelong process involved in arriving at the current place in this individual's life, and the conclusion is that this is how the individual was "meant" to live.

The third segment features a genetic female who has been living as a male with the help of androgen therapy. This individual works in a male-dominated field and is known to everyone (except family members) as a typical male. So, throughout the segment the individual's identity is hidden by not showing his or his female partner's face. However, it is clear from this individual's body and movements that he has no difficulty "passing" as a male. The segment focuses on this person's decision to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, the legal and social advantages and disadvantages of doing so, and the medical process involved.

The last segment focuses more broadly on persecution and hate crimes

against transsexual and transgendered people, and includes a brief description of the Teena Brandon case. The video ends by briefly addressing the socially constructed nature of gender.

### Multiple Genders: Mind and Body in Conflict

This video is an episode of the British television program "Heart of the Matter," and runs approximately 40 minutes. The program opens with an obligatory introduction to the topic of this episode, then quickly launches into an overview segment that is similar to those one would see in an American news magazine program. This "news" segment (approximately 10 minutes in length) is hosted by Dr. Stephen Whittle and features a description of intersex, a case of an American photographer living as an intersex individual, and a case of a married, chromosomally male individual who wants to maintain aspects of both a male and female identity (e.g., maintaining both developed breasts and a penis, dressing as a male one day and as a female the next).

The program shifts to a panel discussion that is maintained for approximately 10 minutes. The panel is comprised of five individuals, including Dr. Stephen Whittle, the American photographer portrayed in the previous segment, and a vicar who maintains the traditional Christian view. The ensuing debate focuses around the issue of whether there are two genders or more, and whether genital surgery should be performed on infants.

From the panel discussion, the video segways to a brief (about 3 minutes) interview with a couple who adopted a child under a storm of controversy. One member of the couple is a gay male and the other individual has Klinefelter's syndrome. From this point, the video returns to the panel who spend about 10 minutes debating such issues as how one would raise children in a family headed by a transgendered individual. As the video revolves around talking, some viewers may have difficulty understanding some of the British and Scottish accents.

### XXXY

This brief video only runs approximately 10 minutes, but is a well-done presentation of two intersex individuals. Each person describes their respective experience: one individual is a chromosomal male born with hypospadias and raised as a male, the other an individual with XXXY chromosomes (hence the title of the video) who was raised as a girl and is currently attracted to women. Each of these individuals share the emotional and social problems they faced, and both wish that they had had a choice as to the surgeries each underwent (rather than having surgeries imposed upon them as infants and young children). The video is an effective, well-done (albeit brief) presentation of two compelling individuals whose chromosomal

and genital circumstances differed, but who shared some overlapping experiences as a result of their atypical development.

### You Don't Know Dick: Courageous Hearts of Transsexual Men

This award-winning documentary features six individuals who were all born and raised as females, but who currently live as men. Running approximately 50 minutes, the video revolves around first-person accounts from these six individuals. This "talking head" approach to any topic can be deadly boring, so it is a credit to the makers of this video that such is not the case here. To achieve this effect, the comments from the six individuals are clustered according to topic, rather than focusing on each of the six individuals sequentially. Also, there are points where video of these individuals from childhood is interspersed, and popular music is sometimes used as a backdrop for providing some commentary on such footage. Even when the viewer is presented with a "talking head," the camera frequently shifts angles or zooms in or out to provide a sense of movement and life.

The first third of the video addresses the realization each individual had regarding their gender identity, their decisions to "change" gender, and the immediate repercussions for doing so. From there a variety of issues are tackled as the video progresses. Such issues include reactions from friends and family, life in the workplace, effects of testosterone, surgery, intimate relationships, sexual activity, and children's reactions to having "lost" their mother to sex change.

One of the most powerful aspects of this video is the visual portrayal of the degree to which testosterone alters appearance. In most of these six cases, there would be no doubt that all who meet these people would label them male. One of the individuals is a bodybuilder and has developed musculature that most men would envy. So, when the viewer is confronted with a photograph of this individual posing nude, the stark contrast between the clearly masculine body and the lack of penis is quite powerful. With regard to the link between body and gender, one of the six individuals makes the point that there have always been transgendered individuals, and in those cultures that lacked the technology to change the body via hormones and surgery, members of those cultures agreed that certain individuals were the other gender because they asserted themselves to be. However, in contemporary Western culture our social agreements as to one's gender has to do with appearance of the body, particularly of the genitals.

The video closes with brief updates as to what each of the six individuals has done more recently. At least two of the individuals have published books relating to their experiences as transgendered, and all continue to be successful in various ways.

## CONCLUSION

Which video is best? Of course the answer depends on the intended use, the issues one wants to address, and the messages one wants to send. Each of the videos described here has something to offer, but for use in an undergraduate sexuality course I have some opinions as to the top choices. If cost were not an issue (when is this ever the case?), then my recommendations would include Boy or Girl? When Doctors Choose a Child's Sex, Transgender Revolution, XXXY, and You Don't Know Dick. Of course, any one instructor is liable not to have the funds to purchase these four videos, nor the class time to show even selected clips from all of them.

For the price and the quality, it is difficult to justify not owning Transgender Revolution. However, depending on the aims of the instructor, some of the other videos may be more valuable. In the end, it is refreshing to be considering which videos to select from among a group of high-quality, educationally relevant productions rather than scouring to find some video resource on a topic that is at least somewhat relevant for education.

## REFERENCES

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