

# Are transvestites necessarily heterosexual?

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## INTRODUCTION

Most documents written before the middle of the 20th century made no clear distinction between sexual orientation and gender; a man described as effeminate was often assumed to be homosexual (V. Bullough, 1976). Similarly a masculine woman was often thought of as lesbian. An example of this was the prototype lesbian woman pictured by Hall (1929) in *Well of Loneliness* (Devor, in press). Thus the historical record of cross-dressing sometimes included an assumption of homosexuality but other times it did not. This was particularly true of women, the most frequent cross-dressers before the 20th century whose motivation was often described as economic or a desire for freedom rather than a sexual urge (V. Bullough and Bullough, 1993).

Hirschfeld, the first serious student of cross-dressing, coined the term "transvestitism" and indicated that the group was primarily heterosexual and male. A German physician, he was himself an avowed homosexual, a reformer, and a specialist in the study of sexuality. In 1910 he published what may be the key work on cross-dressing, *The Transvestites: An Investigation of the Erotic Drive to Cross Dress* (1991). He reviewed the cases of 16 men and 1 woman, most of whom were patients. The others were located through newspaper stories, correspondence with people he heard about, and referrals from colleagues. He described cross-dressing as starting in early childhood, increasing during puberty, and remaining almost unchanged after that. Although most of the persons he studied were heterosexual, Hirschfeld noted there were a few homosexuals but argued that the dominant sexual urge among transvestites was focused on themselves dressed in women's finery rather than other persons of either sex. The one woman in the group indicated some attraction to females, but she eventually married and had children. In her history she focused on the freedom and life-style which a man's identity provided her more than she did on erotic pleasure (Hirschfeld, 1991).

Ellis, another early 20th century sex researcher essentially agreed with Hirschfeld's findings, although not his terminology since he felt the phenomenon went beyond simple cross-dressing (Ellis, 1913, 1936). Then for the next 50 years the research on transvestism was done by treatment-oriented psychiatrists who characterized transvestism as an illness and sought to treat it with psychotherapy. They searched for key elements in the childhood history of their clients that would help them understand and treat them. Castration anxiety and homosexual panic emerged as the major explanations (Gutheil, 1930; Fenichel, 1930; Hora, 1953; Peabody et al., 1953; Lukianowitz, 1959). More recently psychiatrists and psychologists have sought understanding using a broader range of variables but have continued to use an illness model to conceptualize all types of cross dressing (Person and Ovesey, 1978; Brierley, 1979; Beatrice, 1985; Fagan et al., 1988; Docter, 1988, 1993). Stoller (1971) who focused on the family constellation as a causal factor in both transsexualism and transvestism, argued that a strong mother figure was the major causal factor. His position has been supported in a recent study by Schott (1995).

Codification of the thinking of the psychiatric and psychological community on transvestism was reflected in the definition adopted in DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1987). Though homosexuality was omitted from the DSM list of mental illnesses in 1974 (Bayer, 1981), the continued listing of transvestism can be partly explained by the fact that transvestism had neither been studied as much as homosexuality nor were the transvestites as politically astute as the gay-power movement in demanding that their diagnosis be removed from the DSM. Only recently has such an effort begun to be mounted in the cross-dressing community.

The new DSM-IV (APA, 1994) definition of transvestism is similar to the earlier definition. Although the discussion section indicates that heterosexual men may occasionally have homosexual encounters, the definition is specifically focused on heterosexual men. The definition excludes transsexuals, people who cross-dress for relief of tension or gender discomfort, but who have sexual excitement, and men whose sexual orientation is homosexual. The diagnostic criteria for Transvestic Fetishism (disorder #302.30)

reads as follows:

A. Over a period of at least 6 months, in a heterosexual male, recurrent intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving cross-dressing.

B. The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. Specify if

With Gender Dysphoria if the person has persistent discomfort with gender role or identity. (APA, 1994)

At the same time that the psychiatric or illness approach to transvestism was in sway, another influence on the perception emerged - namely, the transvestite club movement. Virginia Prince, the founder of the movement was well educated, holding a doctorate in science, and she could and did read the literature in the field. Although she knew Stoller and talked to him at length she did not accept the illness model of transvestism but agreed with him that it was heterosexual. She found the work of Money more persuasive, partly because he was a dedicated writer of definitions, which was also one of Prince's great interests. She defined transvestism as strictly a heterosexual activity, and argued that it was therefore more respectable than homosexuality. She did not deny that there were homosexual cross-dressers but said they were drag queens who focused on seduction rather than the joy of dressing (V. Bullough and Bullough, 1993, p. 324). She also supported the definitions of Money and Ehrhardt (1972) who pointed out that sexual orientation and gender identity were totally different concepts.

Prince started publication of the magazine *Transvestia* in 1960 and it was for almost a decade the only periodical in the field. She was also the founder of the many cross-dressing clubs, starting in the 1960s in the United States and extending throughout Europe, Canada, and Australia by the 1970s. The club movement provided a social support system and a sexual script for cross-dressing that made cross-dressing at home or at club meetings a pleasant and respectable activity, enabling the members to temporarily forget the hostility of society and family (V. Bullough and Bullough, 1993). The historical record is not clear on whether Prince influenced the DSM definition on the issue of heterosexuality or the DSM definition influenced Prince.

The behavioral science approach to studying and classifying cross-dressers developed after the emergence of the transvestite clubs in the 1960s since the club movement provided for the first time a ready population for the study of cross-dressing people who were not necessarily patients. For a time Prince refused to make her lists available unless she was involved in the study. She and Bentler did a survey of 502 readers of *Transvestia*, the club publication which circulated to cross-dressers throughout the country, and also had a small international following. Although data were gathered from 1964-1966 the findings of this survey were not published until 1972 (Prince and Bentler, 1972).

Other studies followed with the Australian team, Buhrich and McConaghy (1977a, 1977b, 1978, 1979) using 83 club members as their sample. Buhrich and Beaumont (1981) did a comparison of 86 Australians and 126 Americans. V. Bullough et al., (1983a, 1983b; B. Bullough et al., 1985) comparing the life histories of 65 transvestites with transsexuals and gay men. Docter (1988) studied 110 cross-dressers who were located through clubs. There were still other studies (Randall, 1959; Buhrich and McConaghy, 1985; Stoller, 1985).

In spite of the fact that this first generation of survey researchers used nonpatients as their study samples, they did not move very far away from either the psychiatric model or the ideology of the club members. The Australians, Buhrich, McConaghy, and Beaumont followed the DSM definition on the issue of fetishism and excluded people who had no sexual arousal related to cross-dressing. Similarly Docter excluded people who did not fit the definition in two areas; if they had never experienced excitement in association with cross-dressing or if they were homosexual (Docter, 1988 p. 135). Although V. Bullough et al., avoided the flaws of exclusion of homosexual men and people who did not report excitement with cross-dressing, their sample was undoubtedly biased by the fact that it used Los Angeles clubs as a sample source. Los Angeles was Prince's home ground and those clubs, even those who had broken with her, still felt her powerful influence.

The Prince and Bentler (1972) sample was the most representative since it covered a national

readership of Transvestia and in spite of the ideology espoused by Prince they reported that 9% of their sample of 504 men indicated that they were homosexual in orientation, with 29% reporting some homosexual experience. Buhrich and McConaghy (1977) reported 3% homosexual in their sample with 17% having some homosexual experience. V. Bullough et al. (1983) found no one who was exclusively homosexual, although 18% indicated they had some homosexual experience.

In their cross-cultural study, Buhrich and Beaumont (1981) asked subjects to indicate their sexual orientation when they were dressed as males and when they were dressed as females: 87% of an American sample said they were exclusively heterosexual when they were dressed as men but only 52% were exclusively heterosexual when cross dressed. Similarly, an Australian sample went from a 72% heterosexual orientation in men's clothing to a 56% heterosexual orientation in women's clothing. Homosexual fantasies or actual homoerotic activities are clearly a part of the cross-dressing scene.

We therefore decided to survey a larger more geographically dispersed sample of cross-dressers to again look at the definition that specified that transvestites must be heterosexual, as well as to study selected variables related to the childhood and present patterns of cross-dressing with an emphasis on those variables that might help us understand the phenomenon.

#### METHOD

Questionnaires were sent to 1200 members of Tri Ess, a national cross-dressing organization, by enclosing questionnaires with the association's magazine, *Femme Mirror*. In addition the American Educational Gender Information Service (AEGIS) sent out a notice of the study to its mailing list of 500 which includes persons who identify as transgendered or transsexual, members of the helping professions, and related support groups. News of the study also spread through other newsletters and friendship which prompted people to write to the researchers to secure questionnaires. These sources brought in approximately 40 individual requests for the questionnaires. An ad in *The Advocate*, a gay newspaper published in Los Angeles, yielded no responses.

Data gathering started in the Summer of 1994, and analysis was carried out in 1995. There were 372 respondents, including men from every state in the union, 8 from Canada, and 7 from other countries. Structured questions were answered carefully and answers to open-ended questions were often answered at length. Some subjects indicated they had never told anyone all of their background before. Many people sent their names so we could contact them for additional data. A six-item homosexual attitudes scale was constructed and included in the questionnaire. It could be called a homophobia scale although it is important to remember that attitudes towards homosexuality tap more than fear (Plasek and Allard, 1984) so we call it a homosexual attitudes scale. The scale had an alpha score of .75.

Table I. Current Sexual Orientation (N = 368)

Orientation N %

Heterosexual	248	67.4
Bisexual	39	10.6
Homosexual	9	2.4
Sex not a part of my life now	72	19.6

Table II. Present Sexual Orientation and Fantasy While Cross-Dressed

Fantasies	Hetero	Bi/homo	Asexual
Man	9.6%	30.2	29.0
Woman	52.8	23.3	32.3
Self	27.0	9.4	24.2
Both men and women	10.5	37.2	11.3

**RESULTS** The 372 people in this sample all started life as men and all cross-dressed at some time in their lives. Their median age when they filled out the questionnaire was 48; 64% are presently married or living with a woman, 1.4% live with a man, and 35% live alone. They were an affluent group with 66% holding

professional, business, or clerical jobs with an additional substantial group of retired professionals. The subjects' father's jobs had a much more normal distribution so the sample represents an upwardly mobile successful group of men.

Table I shows the current self-reported sexual orientation of the sample. The homosexual group was small, only 9 persons, but the bisexual group was larger, 39 persons. Some comments suggested that bisexuality was a less stigmatized identity so even some people who seemed to be clearly oriented totally towards a same-sex partner chose the bisexual option to identify themselves. Note the finding in this table of the sizable group who report no sexual activity at present (other than cross-dressing), a finding consistent with comments made by Hirschfeld, and by Docter (1993; Docter and Fleming, 1992).

Fantasy life can also be an expression of sexual orientation. Although the influence of orientation can be seen with the heterosexual group most likely to focus on a fantasy woman, and bisexual/homosexual persons focused on a fantasy man, fantasies focused on the subject are also common. Fantasy orientation seems to vary significantly.

Table III. What Did You Fear Would Happen if You Were Caught Cross-Dressing? (N = 312)

Fears N %

Rejection	148	47.4
Sissy label	78	25.0
Crazy, mentally ill label	71	22.8
Sinful label	15	4.8

Childhood Experiences The median age at which this group started to cross-dress was 8.5 and 32% of the sample cross-dressed before they were 6. This is slightly younger (about 1 year) than the median age reported in other studies. Most of the subjects in this research were clandestine cross-dressers as children, and 56% (by their accounts) were never caught; although 93% of the sample indicated that they were afraid of being caught. An open-ended question solicited the reasons they feared being caught. Their answers could be coded into four groups shown (Table III).

The most common fear was a fear of rejection which was emphasized by 47% of respondents: 25% feared a "sissy" label; 23% were afraid of a "crazy" label, and 5% figured cross-dressing was a sin. The sissy category also included those who feared being called a "faggot" or a "queer" as well as those that used the term "sissy." From the context of the answers it seemed that sissy sometimes meant girlish and weak and sometimes it meant a homosexual orientation. This confusion is a part of the childhood culture because labels are often applied before the participants know what the words mean. Even queer can mean "strange," "girlish," or "silly" rather than denoting a sexual orientation. In addition some of the answers which were primarily focused on parental or peer rejection included a secondary fear that they would be rejected because they were sissies or crazy. Nevertheless, the fact that these labels were used in variable ways did not lessen their stigma. Fear of a label was a powerful deterrent to open expression of feminine traits including an interest in women's clothing. It may have influenced the child to stick with a clandestine activity to express his gender feelings rather than seeking out a same-sex partner which would have been less secret.

Childhood and adolescent sexual experiences may also touch on the variable of sexual orientation. Ninety-seven persons or 26% of the group reported some homosexual experiences as a child or adolescent and 135 persons or 41% indicated they had some heterosexual experience as children or adolescents. For most of the respondents this was a positive experience, but a small number reported negative feelings. Table IV shows these data.

Table IV. Sexual Experience as a Child or Adolescent

Experience N %

Homosexual

Yes, a positive experience 42 12.5  
 Yes, ambivalent about it 31 8.4  
 Yes, negative 20 5.4  
 No homosexual experience 271 73.6

#### Heterosexual

Yes, a positive experience 104 28.4  
 Yes, ambivalent about it 31 8.4  
 Yes, negative 20 5.4  
 No heterosexual 217 59.3

Ten percent of the sample reported they were raped or sexually assaulted as children and although there is some overlap between this group and the people who reported that they had a negative sexual experience, there were also those who reported both a rape and pleasant sexual experiences. Crossing Over: The Transgenderists

Twenty-five percent of the study group took hormones at some time. Most of the time hormone use was under 2 years, which is long enough to stimulate breast development but avoid some of the other side effects of estrogen. This can be thought of as a step towards a change of gender identity. There is a growing trend in both the male and female cross-dressing community to move into the opposite-sex role without benefit of surgery. Eleven percent of this study sample members are now living full time as women; 2% had sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and there were a few people who indicated that they are preoperative transsexuals. However most of the remaining 9% who are living full time as a woman are what are now called "transgenderists." Most (85%) of these people had taken or were now taking hormones.

This population of transgenderists is a growing phenomenon in the cross-gender community. Although in the historical past many people crossed over without surgery, most of them were women who changed their identity to become men, with only a few men cross-dressing and changing their identity to women. (V. Bullough and Bullough, 1993). When SRS developed after 1950 it became the rite of passage to a different sex role, and it was primarily a male to female journey. People, mostly men, believed that the surgery could give them permission to change their sexual identity by changing their sex organs (Bolin, 1988). Since SRS was not as well developed for women, many of them who wanted to change sex simply had a mastectomy and left their sex organs intact. In effect they too can be called transgenderists instead of sexually reassigned transsexuals.

Table V. Sexual Orientation of Transgenderists and Persons Living as Men

Orientation(a)

Heterosexual Bi-homosexual Asexual

Transgenderists 10 8 9  
 Living as a man 233 36 58

a Pearson: 26.51: sig .0000.

In this sample there were 40 persons living as women; only 11 of whom had experienced SRS. The remaining 29 were living full time as women. Seven of these indicated they planned to have surgery, but for some it seemed remote because they did not have the money or there were other significant barriers. They were analyzed with the other transgenderists even though they may not remain in this status. Some transgenderists reported other types of surgery, including facial surgery or mammoplasty, but did not plan to have genital surgery. The sexual orientation of this group of men who are living as women without SRS is variable: Table II shows the 27 transgenderists who indicated a sexual orientation, 10 called themselves heterosexual, 8 indicated they were bisexual or homosexual, and 9 asexual: one third of the transgenderists indicated that they were not much interested in sexual activities. This area of their life seemed to be centered around their gender orientation rather than their sex life. Table V summarizes these figures in comparison with remaining component of the sample who are living as men. The attitude

of the transgenderists and transsexuals is less prejudiced against homosexuals than other components of the sample. The mean score of the total sample on the homosexual attitudes scale was 12.5, while the mean score of the transgenderists was 13.23. The nontransgenderists had a mean score of 12.00. These differences are statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

These data clearly indicate that while a majority of transvestites are heterosexual, a significant portion are bisexual, homosexual, or not sexually active with another person. Although the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) definition of transvestism is better than the older definition, it seems to be in error on this issue.

There is support for this broader definition in the cross-cultural literature. Whitman studied cross-dressing communities in Java, Thailand, Guatemala, Peru, Brazil, and the Philippines and has found that the men who cross-dress are often homosexual. Some of them consider themselves preoperative transsexuals but few actually have sexual reassignment surgery. They have a distinctive name in each of the cultures. In Java for example, they are known as waria, and in Brazil they are known as travesties (Whitam and Mathy, 1986; Whitam, in press). Favorite occupations are hairdressing, prostitution, and entertainment including dancing, theater, and other art forms. Whatever the local culture, Whitam (in press) reports that the cross-dressing men outside of United States, Canada, and Western Europe have close ties to the gay community and in many countries are primarily homosexual.

The transvestite prostitutes of Costa Rica serve a clientele of heterosexual men who do not consider themselves homosexual because the client is the high-status person and the prostitute is a subordinate. This Latin American definition of the situation has more to do with power in the encounter than with sexuality (Schifter and Madrigal, in press).

The transgenderists who live in the opposite sex, both men and women, are a growing phenomenon (Devor, 1989, Boswell, 1991; Bornstein, 1994, Bolin, 1994). In this sample, the transgenderists were quite variable in their sexual orientation, with orientations towards the same sex, the opposite sex, or no sex at all.

The DSM model of obligatory heterosexual orientation for transvestites needs reconsideration since there is significant variation in sexual orientation among people who cross-dress.

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