

# THE WORLD OF THE TRANSVESTITE

## METAMORPHOSIS

A transvestite is a person who, in some manner, for a period of relatively short duration, but with frequent recurrence, thinks and feels their gender identity (masculine/feminine) as the opposite of their genetic sex. The intensity, duration, and nature of cross-gender feelings and drives serve to delineate whether the person is 'normal' or experiences frustration, anxiety, and guilt in the expression of these feelings. The expression of cross-gender identity includes the wearing of clothing apparel defined by society as being proper only for a person of the opposite genetic sex. The transvestite may be heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual as regards sex object choice.

To the casual observer, a transvestite is seen primarily, and usually solely, from the perspective of one who has 'put on' a particular facade through clothing. Dressing, in the reality of the transvestite, takes on the nature of a ritual — a metamorphosis occurs. The metamorphosis consists of the stripping off of everyday feminine or masculine identity and the putting on of the gender identity of a projected ideal. This ideal for the male transvestite may be a sexy femme fatale, a suburban housewife, or perhaps a tender mother; for the female transvestite the ideal may be super macho, an executive, or perhaps joe college. This ideal is expressed, in part, through clothing. Also contained in the metamorphosis is the 'trying on' of behaviors and feelings which are socially forbidden in the primary role in which the person lives and functions. This behavior may be viewed

as an attempt at self-actualization which society does not, or which she/he feels society will not, allow as an open choice.

Virginia Prince, editor of a magazine for the male transvestite, states in one of 'her' articles: "...each of us man and woman is only half human being. Half because at birth and shortly thereafter each of us had half of himself or herself designated as a no-no area and in effect told that we couldn't live that part of ourselves ... Yet two kinds of people rise up to challenge it: 1) the femmiphiles (male transvestites) and 2) those women who understand and support women's liberation." — *Transvestia*, Vol. 13, No. 74, p. 83.

The act of 'putting on' may be conceptualized as an experimental process wherein the individual is testing whether or not it is 'alright' to behave and feel in particular and different ways. First, the individual must experience the behavior or feeling in some manner in order to form a reality based opinion as to whether or not it is pleasing and meaningful. Second, given the personal and private acceptance, the individual must determine if such expressions are socially acceptable, and if not, whether the behavior or feeling can be maintained in the face of social ostracism.

The identity chosen, and the clothing which reflects this identity, contains the 'gestalt' — what is personally perceived by each transvestite as most characteristic in the societal

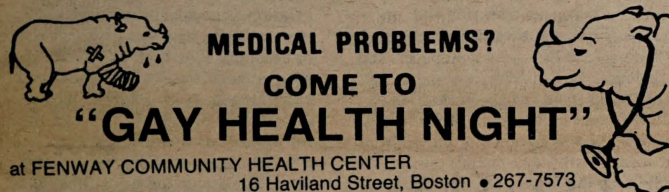
role imposed on, or chosen by, a person of the opposite sex. This can be observed in the behaviors of various transvestites, to which the broader community is exposed and may experience as either degrading mimicry or sincere emulation.

The transvestite is presenting an unsettled identity to the world. This, in turn, puts others who might attempt to relate and understand the transvestite in a most awkward position. It is quite natural to question who or what is this person really. How can I be expected to relate to someone who is presenting only some amorphous self to me? Such reactions, while understandable, not only isolate the transvestite and prevent growth of a more integrated identity, but also seriously divide the 'non-straight' community.

The transvestite too experiences a 'coming out' process which is parallel to that of the gay person. In that transvesticism may be solely private (invisible) a sense of being the 'only one' is typical in the experience of all. In that the practice is not socially acceptable or 'normal,' strong guilt feelings accompany the needs being felt. This involves the process, well-known to the gay community, of self-destruction through putting yourself 'down' because society tells you that you should. One major difference from the homosexual does exist — being gay and acting upon these feelings requires another person as contrasted to the transvestite who can act on these feelings in isolation. As

the isolated transvestite comes in contact with others, shares feelings and experiences, finds acceptance from others as a person and as a transvestite, the person then can enter a period of personal growth and stable identity formation. It might be noted that transvestites too have been subjected to the therapeutic community in the same manner and with the same results as the homosexual. Every device from talk to shock therapies have been employed with a 'cure' rate near zero. Like the experience of the gay community, the most successful therapy is acceptance of self and anger at society for its insistence that you call yourself 'sick.' A favorite joke among transvestites goes: "Are you a cross-dresser?" — "No, I'm a happy dresser."

It is necessary, when discussing sex and gender role conflict, to keep in mind that gender definitions were initially formed in a society which dictated very narrow and non-overlapping definitions of 'proper' masculine and feminine behaviors and feelings. As is amply evident if one reflects on the process of 'coming out,' society inflicts doubt, guilt, inferiority feelings, and ultimately some form of rejection on those who insist on violating its norms. The violation of a taboo by the wearing of the clothing of the opposite sex, the affirmation of the self in juxtaposition to society, is in itself a personal political act. Affirmation is given to being a 'whole' human being and thus this 'defiance' is, in essence, part of the 'liberation movement.'



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