

# **Witnessing and Mirroring: A Fourteen Stage Model of Transsexual Identity Formation**

By  
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**KEYWORDS:** Transsexual, Transgender, Female-to-male, Male-to-female, FTM, MTF, Identity formation.

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## **Abstract**

Coming to recognize oneself as transsexual involves a number of stages of exploration and analysis on both an interpersonal and intrapersonal level over the course of many years. A model encompassing fourteen possible stages is proposed: (1) Abiding Anxiety, (2) Identity Confusion About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex, (3) Identity Comparisons About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex, (4) Discovery of Transsexualism, (5) Identity Confusion about Transsexualism, (6) Identity Comparisons about Transsexualism, (7) Tolerance of Transsexual Identity, (8) Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual Identity, (9) Acceptance of Transsexualism Identity, (10) Delay Before Transition, (11) Transition, (12) Acceptance of Post-transition Gender and Sex Identities, (13) Integration, and (14) Pride.

## **Introduction**

Most transsexed people and most of the professionals who work with them believe that ultimately a biological basis for transsexualism will be found. Nevertheless, no matter how much of our lives may be ruled by biological considerations, all people live within social environments which give meanings to the realities of their bodies and of their psyches. Over the course of our lifetimes, each of us biological organisms must learn how to understand ourselves as we grow and adapt to a shifting and changing world.

I propose here a fourteen-stage model of transsexual identity formation (see figure 1: next page). This model is built upon a model of homosexual identity formation developed by Cass (1979, 1984, 1990) and upon the Ebaugh's (1988) work about role exit. Although my focus here will be transsexed people, I will also attempt to explain some of the ways in which the model might apply for other transgendered people.

This model is based on fifteen years of sociological field research and social and professional interactions with a wide range of transgendered persons, the majority of whom have self-identified as female-to-male transsexed or transgendered (Devor, 1987, 1989, 1993, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Kendal, Devor and Strapko, 1997; Meyer et al., 2001). The data base for my propositions includes contacts with hundreds of transsexed and transgendered people in settings such as face-to-face in-depth structured interviews each lasting several hours, extended private consultations, innumerable heart-to-heart conversations in private settings, extended visits in one another's homes, private house parties, meetings at community and professional conferences, dinners, lunches, walks on the beach, and hard-working task-oriented committees of professional organizations; in other words, a wide variety of non-clinical settings.

In reviewing this model it is important to bear in mind that it cannot possibly apply all individuals in the same way. Each person is unique. Each person experiences their world in their own idiosyncratic ways. Some people may never experience some of these stages. Some people may pass through some stages more quickly and others more slowly. Whereas some people may move through these stages in their own particular order, some people may repeat some stages several times, while the model may be totally inapplicable to others.

It is also important to remember that any person may enter into a process which resembles the one outlined here but may conclude that the best way for them to live their lives is to go no further than any particular stage. Just because an individual may seem to be following the trajectory described herein does not mean that they will end up making any particular choice for any particular outcome. This model is only intended to provide some insights into a commonly followed path. It is by no means the only path, nor will all who appear to be following it come to the same conclusions.

**Figure 1. Stages of Transsexual Identity Formation**

<b>Stages of Transsexual Identity Formation</b>			
<b>#</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Some Characteristics</b>	<b>Some Actions</b>
1	<b>Abiding Anxiety</b>	Unfocussed gender and sex discomfort.	Preference for other gender activities and companionship.
2	<b>Identity Confusion About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex</b>	First doubts about suitability of originally assigned gender and sex.	Reactive gender and sex conforming activities.
3	<b>Identity Comparisons About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex</b>	Seeking and weighing alternative gender identities.	Experimenting with alternative gender consistent identities.
4	<b>Discovery of Transsexualism or Transgenderism</b>	Learning that transsexualism exists.	Accidental contact with information about transsexualism.
5	<b>Identity Confusion About Transsexualism or Transgenderism</b>	First doubts about the authenticity of own transsexualism.	Seeking more information about transsexualism.
6	<b>Identity Comparisons About Transsexualism or Transgenderism</b>	Testing transsexual identity using transsexual reference group.	Start to disidentify with women & females. Start to identify as transsexed.
7	<b>Identity Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity</b>	Identify as probably transsexual.	Increasingly disidentify as originally assigned gender and sex.
8	<b>Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity</b>	Waiting for changed circumstances. Looking for confirmation of transsexual identity.	Seeking more information about transsexualism. Reality testing in intimate relationships and against further information about transsexualism.
9	<b>Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity</b>	Transsexual identity established.	Tell others about transsexual identity.
10	<b>Delay Before Transition</b>	Transsexual identity deepens. Final disidentity as original gender and sex. Anticipatory socialization.	Learning how to do transition. Saving money. Organizing support systems.
11	<b>Transition</b>	Changing genders and sexes.	Gender and sex reassignments.
12	<b>Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender and Sex Identities</b>	Post-transition identity established.	Successful post-transition living.
13	<b>Integration</b>	Transsexuality mostly invisible.	Stigma management. Identity integration.
14	<b>Pride</b>	Openly transsexed.	Transsexual advocacy.

## **A Social Context**

In a social psychological sense, the phenomena which we recognize as transsexualism only make sense within a social context which is predicated upon a number of primary assumptions about the nature of sex and gender. What I outline here pertains to contemporary mainstream Euro-American values. Social groups who do not share these assumptions make sense of gender variations in their own culturally specific ways.

In order for transsexualism to be a meaningful concept, widely accepted social values must dictate that clearly distinct categories of gender and sex exist independently of social will. Furthermore, it must be accepted that genders and sexes are ultimately verifiable only on the basis of specific physical attributes. These societal beliefs, however, are themselves social products of particular cultures under particular historical conditions (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Laqueur, 1990). Thus, transsexualism only makes sense within the context of a society in which there exists a nearly universally accepted way of understanding gender which teaches people to function as if certain ideological presumptions were elemental truths rather than the products of particular social arrangements.

Such a way of understanding gender presumes that there are two and only two biological sexes, male and female, and that under "normal" circumstances persons' sexes are unchanging and can be definitively determined from a visual inspection of their genitalia. Similar underlying assumptions about gender must also be accepted for transsexualism to make sense. That is to say that we must believe that there are only two social genders, men/boys and women/girls, and that under "normal" circumstances persons' gender classifications are unchanging and can be determined by casual visual inspection of persons in everyday social situations. Furthermore, it must be assumed that sex and gender are inextricably linked in a fixed and biologically natural way: all males are men/boys and all females are women/girls. In this schema there are no socially-acceptable intermediate sexes, no socially-acceptable intermediate genders. Within this world view, such gender or sex indeterminacy will only make social sense within a context of it being an illness which must be corrected as soon as possible.

Although primary sex characteristics have the role of being the only legitimate markers of sex status in everyday life, genitalia are rarely directly displayed or discussed. Rather, gender styles of femininity and masculinity are the media of most social exchange. As such, gender styles indicate genders and genders act as markers of sexes. Persons who seamlessly perform particular gender styles are attributed by others with being the corresponding gender and sex. Thus, although the common assumption is that genders are the result of people being particular sexes, people functionally read gender styles, genders, and sexes in the reverse order. That is to say that in everyday life, we actually read gender on the basis of gender styles, not on the basis of sexes. In other words, under most circumstances, people are assumed to be either male or female, men or women, on the basis of social characteristics, mannerisms, and personality traits. Such attributions are usually made automatically and with little or no conscious thought and are accompanied by the assumption that genders and sexes are permanent and unchangeable.

Therefore, persons who wish to be taken as a particular gender and sex have few options open to them. They may successfully perform as the gender of their choice and rely on people's assumptions to attribute them with the desired sex as well. However, the success of such performances can be entirely unseated by the disclosure of sex characteristics which do not match the gender being presented. Therefore, no matter how effective persons' performances of their genders may be, the most reliable option open to them is to unequivocally substantiate their claim to being a particular gender by also possessing the sex characteristics socially

designated as appropriate. In order for persons to socially legitimate their gender identity claims, they must ultimately have bodies which match their gender claims in socially expected ways.

The model presented here traces one of the most common pathways used by people in the process of coming to understand that they are transsexed. It outlines how they first come to feel that they do not belong as members of their originally assigned sex and gender and later to understand themselves as members of another gender and sex. It also describes how they learn to think of themselves as transsexed in order to make sense of the apparent contradiction of being born to one sex and gender while knowing themselves to belong as another (Tully, 1992).

### **Witnessing and Mirroring**

There are two overarching themes which run throughout the entire process of transsexual identity formation which, indeed, run through the lives of many people as they search for self-understanding. Each of us are social beings and as such we live in a sea of other humans with whom we interact during most of the waking hours of our lives. Even when we are not in contact with others, we devote a tremendous amount of our psychic energies to being psychologically engaged with others. It would therefore be difficult to underestimate the powerful effects that the opinions of others have on each of us.

Each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by others for whom we are. Each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others' eyes as we see ourselves. These interactive processes, witnessing and mirroring, are part of everyone's lives. When they work well, we feel validated and confirmed—our sense of self is reinforced (Poland, 2000). When the messages which one receives back from others do not match how one feels inside, various kinds of psychological distress and maladaptive behaviours can result. When the situation is especially severe it can lead to psychotic and/or suicidal behaviours.

Although they are closely related in that they both serve a purpose of validation of self, witnessing and mirroring involve somewhat different processes, different personnel, and different kinds of feedback. Each of us is defined both by who we are and by who we are not. The effectiveness of witnesses, in part, derives from the fact that they are not like oneself and can look at us from outside of our categories of self-definition. Witnesses can be presumed to have some distance and therefore to have some perspective and objectivity about their observations. When dispassionate witnesses provide appraisals which conforms to one's own sense of self, it leaves one with a feeling of having been accurately seen by others who can be assumed to be impartial. Thus validations offered by non-transgendered friends, loved ones, co-workers, and interested professionals of the gender and sex identities of transgendered people can serve as a powerful reinforcer of transgendered identities. Conversely, when what a whole society witnesses clashes with persons' self-images, a profound alteration or destruction of that self may appear to be the only options. Transsexualism can allow people who feel overwhelmingly unwitnessed to make sense of why others cannot see them as they see themselves. Transition allows them to make changes that enable others to witness them as they see themselves. Transsexualism thus can allow severely and chronically unwitnessed people to survive and to thrive. However, if one is only witnessed and never mirrored one can end up feeling profoundly alone in the world. One can feel like they are the only one of their kind.

Mirroring, as I use it here differs from Kohut's self-psychology (1984). Mirroring, in the sense that I use it here is also about seeing oneself in the eyes of others like oneself. As well as needing to be witnessed by people who are different from ourselves, each of us also needs to be seen and validated by people who are like ourselves. We need to be seen by people who

have insider knowledge of what it means to be a member of the social groups within which we identify ourselves. Each of us needs to know that people who we think are like us also see us as like them. We need to know that we are recognized and accepted by our peers. We need to know that we are not alone. For these reasons it is vitally important that transsexed and transgendered people be able to see their own feelings and experiences reflected back to them in the lives of other transsexed and transgendered people. Furthermore, the gender and sex identities of transsexed people benefit greatly from seeing that their perspectives on the world match, in key ways, with those of people who were originally assigned to the gender and sex with which they identify.

### **1. Abiding Anxiety**

The first stage of this fourteen-step model of transsexual identity formation involves a sense of abiding anxiety about one's gender and sex. This sense of not feeling right in one's social role and/or body may be traced back to one's earliest memories, or it may develop slowly over time at a later stage of life. Most commonly, transsexed people report that this sense of gender anxiety has always been with them even before they were able to say what it was that was making them uncomfortable. Eventually, it becomes clear to such individuals that the source of their anxiety lies in gender relations. It will often begin simply as a feeling of generalized discomfort around people, a sense of not fitting in or of being socially awkward. However, over time, the sense of unease becomes more clearly focused, probably because such individuals come to recognize that their preferences are for companionship and/or activities socially expected from people of another gender than the one to which they have been assigned at birth. Females prefer the activities and/or companionship of males; males prefer to be with females doing the things that females usually prefer to do. For example a 47-year-old white transman home healthcare worker remembered it like this:

*I didn't have friends. I just wasn't comfortable with people. Casual acquaintances, but I did not have friends....I'd see them at school and yes we would speak if we saw each other but that was it. It was just too uncomfortable. With the girls, it was simply I was not interested in the same things. I don't think I gave people a chance. I know that all through my life...people have had a problem relating to me. There was a discomfort and I think it went both ways. I think it was my identity. There was always something, people weren't comfortable with me.*

In a highly gender dichotomized world, this is enough to make a person have trouble living comfortably as their assigned gender because others will rarely either witness or mirror them accurately. The more pronounced the mismatch between their gender preferences and society's expectations, the more pervasive will be their feelings of abiding anxiety and the greater their psychological and social difficulties will become. Over the course of many years this kind of abiding anxiety can accrete until it becomes unbearably difficult to function in society. Many people struggling with these issues turn to drugs or alcohol to relieve some of the unremitting anxiety. For some people, the distress can become so acute that suicide seems to be the only option.

### **2. Identity Confusion about Originally Assigned Gender and Sex**

One response to the realization that one does not fit in well with others of their gender, when one cannot find others like themselves to mirror them, is to question whether one really is supposed to be their assigned gender or sex at all. Children may become quite completely convinced that they are in the wrong gender and the wrong sex and may proclaim loudly to others that they are actually members of the preferred gender and sex. However, parents,

teachers, and peers will routinely do everything in their power to disabuse them of such ideas because they witness them as belonging in their originally assigned gender and sex. This kind of social and psychological pressure to conformity is usually enough to cause children to either temporarily abandon or hide these kinds of gender thoughts from others and/or from themselves (Zucker and Bradley, 1995). Although they may still believe that they really are or should be another sex and gender, many children simply stop talking about it, fantasize a different future for themselves and wait for puberty to bring about the changes that they believe are their due. When puberty arrives and their bodies do not turn into the ones they had imagined for themselves, many transgendered people fall into severe depression, substance abuse, and suicidality. A 36-year-old white transit manager recalled these experiences:

*Ever since I've been twelve I've felt like I was in the wrong body....It was like "Oh, this isn't going to happen." So and I think from [puberty] on I was pretty unhappy about my gender, I felt restricted in my activities....it just didn't feel comfortable for me at all....So it was like to me it didn't make any sense at all that I was the way I was physically. It didn't click....Well, basically from twelve to eighteen I was basically drinking all during that period. In fact, I remember going to school, most of the time I'd drink a couple of shots of vodka and smoked a little bit of pot before I even walked across the street. So basically I was just taking drugs.*

Adolescents and adults may also respond to abiding gender anxieties by feeling confusion about the appropriateness of their originally assigned gender/sex. Because they will have learned and internalized more completely the social rules of gender, they are even less likely to speak of their gender confusion publicly. Teens and adults will understand that there will most probably be a great deal of stigma attached to any proclamations about doubts that they may be having about the correctness of their originally assigned gender or their originally assigned sex. They will know the social rules which insist that one's sex unequivocally determines one's gender. They will understand that to claim otherwise is to invite others to think of them as crazy.

At any age, the social and psychological realities will at first push most individuals into hiding. Children, adolescents, adults will often react to these feelings of identity confusion by trying harder to make themselves conform more exactly to social expectations about appropriately gendered behaviors. Most commonly they will react to their gender identity confusion with an honest attempt to look and act like persons assigned to their sex are supposed to look and act even if on the inside that is not how they feel. One 41-year-old white unemployed transman recalled:

*As I did reach adolescence where certain things were kind of required of you--the dating, the things you're supposed to do as a female--I tried to do. Not because I wanted to, but because I didn't want them to know that I was different. And maybe in a sense I didn't want to accept that I was different at that stage. I really wanted to be what other people wanted me to be. And I really tried to be that.*

Thus it may be that even people who seem to be perfectly well adjusted to their gender roles may be harbouring repressed or hidden feelings of abiding gender anxiety. This stage may be quite brief or may persist for the better part of a lifetime.

### **3. Identity Comparisons about Originally Assigned Gender and Sex**

Identity confusion will commonly persist and coexist with the next stage, identity comparisons. At this stage, individuals are generally accepting of the fact that the physical sex of their body has mandated their gender status and they attempt to find ways to successfully navigate

between social expectations and their own needs for self-expression. During this period, individuals will try to find more comfortable ways to live as their originally-assigned gender while also expressing some of their feelings of belonging to another gender. They know what sex and gender they are and will try on alternative forms of gender expression which will allow them to better fit within the social expectations of their originally assigned gender and sex statuses.

This stage involves comparison in the sense that individuals compare their inner feelings to various types of alternative behaviours and identities that they have known others of their gender and sex to exhibit (e.g., “sensitive artiste” or “butch dyke”). If the comparisons wear well, they may adopt those ways of being and stay with them for a short while, or for the remainder of their lives. When successful, this strategy can result in individuals feeling both more witnessed and better mirrored because they can be recognized as a known type of man or woman. They can exhibit more of their inner selves for others to witness and they can find ways to share more common ground with others of their assigned gender and sex thus seeing more of themselves mirrored back. If comparisons fail, individuals will keep searching for an answer to the question, “Who am I?”

Such attempts at accommodation can take many forms. For girls, the tomboy role is readily available and carries with it few disincentives. Until puberty, most girls are allowed to experiment with masculinity within the relatively comfortable confines of this socially acknowledged and accepted variant form of gender role expression. Although the tomboy role is not universally accepted, and although there are limitations on how much masculinity a girl may incorporate before arousing social ire, most of those girls who adopt the tomboy role navigate through childhood relatively psychically unscathed because such girls are able to be socially recognized and accepted *as girls* at the same time as they are able to express some of their masculinity. At puberty, however, tomboyism rapidly becomes unacceptable and those girls who do not abandon it begin to suffer from the effects of escalating social disapproval.

However, the emotional stability of girls who are too masculine for the social environments in which they live can become undermined as a result of rejections from peers and adults from a very early age. Their mental health often becomes even more precarious when they reach puberty and have to face unwelcomed changes in their bodies and increased social demands for femininity.

Boys who wish to find a way to incorporate some femininity into their gendered performances have no socially acceptable format in which to present themselves. The sissy role is generally demeaned by children and adults alike. Those boys who adopt it are most often subjected to sorely psychologically and socially damaging ridicule and rejection and to abuse of all forms. Thus feminine boys are even less likely than masculine girls to reach adolescence relatively unscathed. Sissies are extremely likely to be badly taunted and physically abused by especially by male peers and adults, leaving them feeling especially terrorized around other males and even more alienated from maleness and men.

During their adult years, people who will later come to identify themselves as transsexed or transgendered may likewise avail themselves of any of a number of techniques of identity comparison to try to determine if there is an identity within which they can comfortably live their lives in their originally assigned gender and sex.

Females may attempt to carry on as some kind of grown-up tomboy. In many cases this translates into an identity as a butch lesbian by way of the popular perception that lesbians are women who want to be men (Devor, 1997b). Feeling like men and believing that lesbians are women who want to be men, many transgendered females experiment extensively with

lesbianism or bisexuality. Those females who take this course of action will often find that there are many women, and more than a few men, who witness, mirror, appreciate, and encourage their masculinity. However, at the same time masculine lesbians will, in large measure, bear the brunt of still wide-spread social condemnation of homosexuality. Although they find reinforcement for their masculinity in their love lives, the more masculine they are the less support and the more abuse they will suffer socially. Some heterosexually or bisexually-inclined females may also carry over their butch personas into their adult lives. Regardless of their sexual orientation, butch females will suffer from social disapproval and bear psychic scars as a result. One 33-year-old white transman artist put it this way:

*I...changed my name, cut my hair short, began buying more male clothes....I lived as a male in my own eyes more, but to other people I was still a female, and I was becoming what they considered a very bizarre female....Nobody really understood it. I didn't clearly understand it myself. It was more of a subconscious manifestation of my true personality.*

Similarly, males may become drawn to lifestyles which allow them a community in which to express their inherent femininity. Similarly having absorbed societal beliefs that all gay men are effeminate, some males may try on lives as gay or bisexual men as extensions of their sissy-boy childhoods. Some of them may be drawn to the drag scene where they will be given room to call themselves by female names, dress in women's clothing, and be appreciated for their femininity. Others may simply enact femininity in smaller more subtle ways in their everyday lives. Sadly, despite the benefits of a certain amount of witnessing and mirroring from lovers and within the restricted social environments of gay life and the drag scene, intense social disapproval of femininity in men will inevitably deeply colour their experiences and leave them damaged by the painful scorn and discrimination to which visibly feminine men are routinely subjected.

Heterosexual males may also explore crossdressing, first in private and later more publicly, in an attempt to give expression to their inner feelings of womanliness. Usually, in the early years of the practice, such crossdressing is solitary and accompanied by sexual arousal and orgasm. Erections and ejaculations while crossdressed are often felt as concurrently satisfying, confusing, and shameful. Despite such conflicting feelings, the erections and ejaculations which accompany this kind of crossdressing can provide a concrete confirmation of maleness which can fortify one's originally assigned gender and sex identities for many years. Thus, the sexual aspect of crossdressing may allow a man to continue to feel that he is really a man while also allowing him to feel himself to be a woman. Nonetheless, crossdressing is highly stigmatized and therefore those who make use of this avenue will usually suffer significant challenges to their psychological health because of the anxieties connected with fear of exposure and the consequences of the disapproval of others.

Some people adopt a feminist critique of gender as a social construction. From this perspective, they are able to make comparisons between their own desired gender expressions and the deficiencies of standard gender roles. They may be able to find comfort in believing that the failure is not their own but rather that of a system which makes unhealthy and unobtainable gender demands on its citizens. A feminist stance may therefore allow some people to find relief in the validation of their gender non-conformity as political correctness (Devor, 1997c).

Each of these techniques may be employed so as to allow individuals to continue to have others see them and to continue to see themselves as perhaps a bit odd but still as members of their originally assigned gender and sex. To the degree that they are successful, they may remain at

this stage for lengthy periods of time. Those people who define themselves as transgendered may find that they are able to make use of these options indefinitely.

#### **4. Discovery of Transsexualism or Transgenderism**

There comes a time in the life of every person who will one day identify themselves as transsexed or transgendered when they first learn that transsexualism or transgenderism exists. Some people learn of transsexualism or transgenderism at an early age. For most people this event takes place later in their lives after many years of living with feelings of abiding anxiety, identity confusions and identity comparisons. For some people, the knowledge that transsexualism or transgenderism exists comes as a godsend which immediately crystallizes the feelings with which they have been living for many years. For many it is an "Aha!" kind of moment where everything that they have been feeling finally falls into place. Finally, they have found a mirror in which they can see themselves. Who they feel themselves to be makes sense to them for the first time. They have a name for what they feel and a possible course of action. For most people, this realization constitutes the beginning of another cycle of identity confusion and comparisons. This is illustrated in the words of a 37-year-old Indo-European Canadian:

*I think I was about sixteen and a half or seventeen in grade twelve. We had these three day work things, where you sort of apprentice....I was interested in journalism, so I went to a radio station...and you spend three days there learning about it. So, this wire came out...and it mentioned the word transsexuals. It was the first time I had ever heard that word, and I guess it explained it, so I figured out "I'm not the only one in the world like this." Up to that time, I thought I was the only living person on the planet.*

Some people will immediately accept that they are transsexed or transgendered and run through the next four steps in a matter of seconds. They will more or less immediately, and with great relief, accept that they are transsexed or transgendered. Others may take many years to come to terms with their feelings.

#### **5. Identity Confusion about Transsexualism or Transgenderism**

Most people who will one day identify as transsexed or transgendered recall their discovery of transsexualism or transgenderism as a significant event in their lives. Such people may not immediately begin to actively engage with the idea as an option for themselves. They may retain the idea as a precious touchstone to which they return from time to time until they are prepared to begin to consider its relevance to their own lives. Over time, the idea of transsexualism or transgenderism takes on more and more significances and they begin to wonder if they might be transsexed or transgendered themselves, thus entering a stage of identity confusion.

In order to help with the identity confusion that such questions engender, people will begin to seek out further information about exactly what it might mean to be transsexed or transgendered. Thus they will begin to engage in a deeper level of both external and internal inquiry as a response to their initial discoveries.

Most people will turn to the internet for further information where they will find a plethora of resources available to them: everything from reading lists and on-line bookstores to chat rooms to graphic photos and descriptions of medical procedures. When the information garnered seems that it might apply, individuals may begin to more seriously entertain the idea that they might be transsexed or transgendered. The opening of this possibility leads to the next stage, identity comparisons.

## **6. Identity Comparisons about Transsexualism or Transgenderism**

Once individuals have begun to entertain the possibility that they might be transsexed or transgendered the next step is to try to come to a more definitive conclusion. At this stage the focus is on comparisons between oneself and transsexed and transgendered people, between oneself and people from one's originally assigned gender and sex, and between oneself and people of the gender and sex to which one might be moving. The point of these comparisons is to determine which comparisons provide better likenesses.

During this stage people who will one day identify as female-to-male transsexed or transgendered will increasingly find that they have more in common with men and female-to-male transsexed and transgendered people than with women. By the time persons reach this stage it is highly likely that they have already largely abandoned any attempt to identify with feminine women. Thus their starting point will most likely be in their identities as masculine women, often as butch lesbians. When they make such comparisons they increasingly focus their attention on the ways that they feel alienated and different from those who once were their reference group. More and more they find that the concerns of women do not mirror their own whereas those of men increasingly do. When they weigh the results of these comparisons against what they know of female-to-male transsexed and transgendered people, they find that those comparisons progressively reveal more and more congruencies. As they start to recognize that they may be transsexed or transgendered, they will simultaneously start to disengage from their identities as women and as females. This process is illustrated in the words of a 34-year-old white telemarketer who said:

*I latched on to the lesbian community. So...I had to de-emphasize certain aspects of myself...I felt that I was male but, because I had decided that really the lesbian community was the only place that I could ever begin to fit in in a sexual context, I really felt that I was being dishonest...because I was pretending to be female identified, but I really wasn't. And they usually picked up on it. Ever since I discovered lesbianism the standard line has been "But you're different. You're not a dyke. You don't seem like a lesbian."*

Male-to-female persons tend to go through very similar processes at this stage. There are however some important differences. Those who will come to identify as transsexed or transgendered may come to their identity comparisons about transsexualism or transgenderism from two somewhat different directions. In one way, many male-to-female people are similar to their female-to-male counterparts in that, by the time they reach this stage, they will have been living as feminine men for some time. They will have largely given up attempting to perform stereotypical masculinity and will have been living as openly very feminine men. When they make comparisons between themselves and women and between themselves and transsexed and transgendered people they find themselves better reflected than when they compare themselves to stereotypical men.

Another group of males who come to this stage come to it through a different route. A sizeable minority of males come to this stage after many years of living a unremarkably masculine public life while maintaining a private feminine persona complete with name, clothing, make-up, hairstyles, accessories, and possibly a social circle as well. Those males who privately crossdress and who have had some contact with others of similar predilections are likely to have felt mirrored by them and to have already adopted a transgendered identity. Thus their identity comparisons are between their own experiences "*en femme*" and those of women, and male-to-female transsexed and transgendered people. Some may feel satisfied with transgendered as an apt description

of who they are. Others may feel that to be insufficient and may move into the next stage of exploration.

### **7. Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgendered Identity**

For some people the stages of identity comparison and identity tolerance are very brief and overlapping. For them, the relief offered by the possibility of a transsexual or transgendered identity is so great that they are able to come to a rapid tolerance or even acceptance of that identity almost as soon as they become aware of it. For most people, however, taking on such an identity is more gradual process. After learning of transsexualism or transgenderism and going through stages of confusion and comparison, most individuals who come to identify themselves as transsexed or transgendered will come to a stage of identity tolerance wherein they begin to accept that the label of transsexual or transgendered probably is a fitting description of who they are. This in-between stage of "I am probably transsexual" or "I am probably transgendered" is used by many people as an avenue to allow them to come to terms with the enormity of what it means to identify oneself as transsexed or transgendered. During this and the next stage people more thoroughly disengage from the gender and sex to which they were assigned at birth. Those who are coming to identify as transsexed start to be able to say to themselves and to others that they are probably headed toward a change of gender and of sex. It is during this stage that the identity of transsexual or transgendered starts to take prominence over any other. One 49-year-old white transgendered musician spoke of the process this way:

*I already felt I was weird enough....This sounds cruel. I don't mean it to, but you gotta admit there's something side show freakish about it. You know, all these men--big guys with beards wearing lipstick and the long hair...I saw a lot of sadness and damage and things I'd never seen before, and I felt like: "Am I just going to be a freak all my life, and live in this underworld of freakishness all the time? They're nice people, but is this going to be my whole life? Am I just going to lose all my friends and all the other life I had that I treasured and valued, and just forever be some kind of a weirdo?"*

*That was just an initial thing. I got to know these people, and I saw them as real human beings, and I knew that I just didn't want to be that way myself, and I felt like that was going to be the rest of my life, and it was a very dismal, bleak outlook for me. 'Cause I saw how damaged they were, and how inconclusive everything was, how long it took, and maybe a lot of times people wouldn't make it. And even if they did, it would never be complete. I saw all the negative side of it first, and then after that, I got more and more self-determination or something, more in control of my mind and my outlook and felt more at home with it, and began to balance out again. I went through a lot of different funny, bumpy stages with it.*

### **8. Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgendered Identity**

Many people who are on their way to accepting themselves as transsexed or transgendered enter into a period of delay until they have enough information about themselves and about transsexualism or transgenderism that they can be sure that it offers them the correct solution to their gender discomfort. During this stage of delay, individuals engage in various techniques of reality testing to see if they can fully embrace an identity which until this time they were merely tolerating as a possibility (Diamond, 1997).

Individuals searching for an identity which can bring them to peace within themselves need to feel that they are seen for who they are. At this stage, they especially need others who are

sufficiently different from themselves that they can act as impartial expert witnesses who can validate that what they feel like on the inside is real enough to be perceptible by others. They also particularly need others who are similar enough to themselves that they can mirror back to them a confirmatory likeness which says, "You are one of us."

Intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships is one major arena of such reality testing. When loved ones and/or sexual partners are able to witness the validity of both the rejection of the old identity and the adoption of the new identity, individuals are more able to move into a full-scale adoption of a transsexed or transgendered identity. Female-bodied individuals who are doing this kind of reality testing often find valued witnessing of their incipient transsexual or transgendered identities when their sexual/romantic partners have a history of attractions to men or otherwise find the questioning individual to be more like a man than not. Male-bodied people may follow a similar kind of exploration but are less commonly able to receive witnessing of their gender identity within already established relationships with either women or men and are more likely to have to rely on more fleeting or superficial kinds of relations such as flirtations or anonymous sexual encounters for their confirmations.

When intimates are unable to provide that kind of witnessing, people may tarry longer in the stage of delay, perhaps temporarily choosing some other descriptive label for themselves, such as queer. Conversely, when a relationship predicated on one's originally assigned sex and gender does not work out individuals may also see the reason for the failure as being grounded in inappropriateness of their originally assigned sex and gender. They may then take their inability to make the relationship work as a confirmation of their transsexualism or transgenderism, jettison the relationship, and move more determinedly into a transsexed or transgendered identity. In the words of a 31-year-old white transman construction worker:

*Being with women, the feedback I got, the love I got was towards the physical woman. And for me, that was a conflict sexually, 'cause I felt different sexually....Making love from my heart I was not making love as a woman with a woman. From my heart it was that I was a male. It's a completely different dynamic. Also it depends on whether you make love with a lesbian or a heterosexual woman. Most of my lovers in my relationships were heterosexual women, and the difference--it's hard to explain cause it's just a different dynamic entirely on a feeling level--there is a different approach from a woman to her man than the approach from one woman to another woman who are lovers....It comes out in power differences.*

People at this stage also turn to transsexed and transgendered people for a mirroring confirmation of their transsexualism or transgenderism. Those individuals who are fortunate enough to make contact with transsexed and transgendered people through support groups, the internet, social contacts, or conferences have an invaluable resource available to them. Through various kinds of self-revealing discussions, they can avail themselves of the opportunity to compare their own feelings and experiences with those of people who have already adopted a transsexed or transgendered identity. When they find themselves mirrored in these comparisons, they can begin to reach more definitive conclusions about their own identities. Although not everyone struggling with this kind of identity issue will personally know transsexed or transgendered people at this stage of their lives, they may find ways to gain access to audio, video, print, or electronic biographical, autobiographical, and professional depictions of the lives of transsexed and transgendered people. These kinds of sources are also effectively used by many people to help them to decide whether or not they really are transsexed or transgendered and what they want to do about themselves. For example a 45-year-old white electrologist went through this kind of thinking process:

*I was about twelve [when I saw a story about a transsexual] in the headlines....and I read it...word for word and studied every picture and realized that she and I had an immense amount in common. The lights went off like a penny arcade....Obviously there was help for her so hopefully I would be able to do something about my problem at some point. So that was the first inkling I had that there was anyone like me and that there was some sort of resource that at some age in my life I could pursue.*

*I was 18 or 19 when...I started looking into what I could do for myself....and I finally took books out of the library and could do some reading and that type of thing. Put me in touch more with my problem....The photographs were close-ups...very grisly...and limited in what they could accomplish. So it was sort of another monstrous choice. Do I stay the strange that I am with these feelings and try to muddle through for a while longer or do I do something about it now.*

The stage of delay has another function for many male-to-female people. Many males who crossdress also come to question whether they might be transsexed and also go through stages of identity confusion, identity comparisons, and identity tolerance. At any of these stages some males become overwhelmed with shame and fear about the social and psychological implications of their expressions of their femininity. Periodically those feelings become expressed in episodes of radical retreat from any expression of femininity during which time all clothing and accoutrements of femininity are purged from their lives. Many males who crossdress and never will become transsexed follow this pattern as do many who do ultimately become transsexed. It is not unusual for an individual to repeat this pattern of purging and re-approach several times over a lifetime.

### **9. Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgendered Identity**

The full acceptance of oneself as transsexed or transgendered marks still another beginning. By the time people have reached this point they have gathered enough information and have worked through enough of their emotional anxieties about the subject that they are able to say to themselves and to others, "I am transsexual" or "I am transgendered." For some people this stage comes very quickly—almost simultaneously with the discovery of transsexualism or transgenderism. For others, the path to this point can be much more difficult and lengthy. For all, the implications of the acceptance of such an identity are enormous.

For some people, there is nothing but tremendous relief at finally knowing who one is and what one needs to do about it. For most people, however, the acceptance of such an identity is a much more mixed blessing. Generally, by the time people reach this stage they have complicated lives involving multiple commitments predicated on their being a particular gender and sex. The prospect of reconstituting those family, business, love, friendship, and casual relationships through a gender and sex change will be daunting to say the least. Whatever the implications may be for particular individuals, all who reach this stage are confronted with the task of whether to begin the process of transforming themselves, and if so, when and how to go about it.

### **10. Delay before Transition**

Having come to the decision to call oneself transsexual or transgendered is only a first step. Not everyone who comes to this realization will immediately, or ever, decide to take action on it. Not all transsexed or transgendered people undergo physical or social transitions. For a variety of reasons, such as health, family, or financial considerations, some people decide that their

circumstances do not warrant changing their gender or sex or that they will only take advantage of some of the possible transformative options. For those who do decide to proceed, commonly, they experience another period of delay during which there are many practical steps which must still be accomplished.

Few people at this stage know exactly what is involved or how to go about it. They may have general information about how others have accomplished their transitions but they must take some time to find out the minutiae of exactly what needs to be done in their own case and how to do it. Most people must make an enormous number of personal and practical arrangements. Family, friends, employers, co-workers, business associates and bureaucrats may need to be informed of the impending changes. Money will need to be saved. Arrangements will need to be made with various counselors and medical personnel. Psychic readiness must be achieved. Those individuals who have access to strong support systems during this stage may be able to move through this stage quickly. Those who have children or other work or family commitments may feel obliged to delay for years. This is illustrated in the following quote from a 44-year-old unemployed white tradesperson:

*I'm unemployed. And I'm getting scared. I still got a mortgage, etc. to meet. How am I going to do this? The other thing is, I'm not going to be working through the union. I'm not going to stay in that union and work and do this. 'Cause I could never handle the flack. I know it. So, I'm not even going to try. So, I mean, I just got really scared. So, I said, "No. I can't do this....Just forget it." But I never really did forget it, I guess....I started taking shots [again]....I'm unemployed again, but my mortgage is lower and...life is short....I've already taken shots, so I've made the decision.... There's nothing in the future for me as I am. I'm just going to grow older, and be more of a freak.... You don't want to be a freak, but...there's no sense worrying yourself about something [surgery] you can't get done anyways, for monetary reasons, or whatever.*

During this period of delay, transsexed and transgendered people will move further in the process of disidentification with their originally assigned gender and sex. This can be an especially trying time in its own way. At this point, individuals have come to accept themselves as transsexed or transgendered yet the people around them may witness no outward differences. However, individuals at this stage will identify more strongly with members of the gender and sex into which they are moving and they will begin to actively engage in anticipatory socialization. By so doing they begin to learn new ways of being in the world and to picture themselves experiencing what it might be like to live their new lives. They may be able to incorporate some of these new skills into their pre-transition lives but in many cases this will be impractical. The disjuncture between what individuals can foresee for themselves and what they can enact may be difficult to bear.

Female-to-male individuals have a distinct advantage over male-to-female individuals at this stage. Over the past 100 years the efforts of feminists have created far more room for variability in female gender presentations than in male gender presentations. As a result, the socially tolerated range of gendered clothing and mannerisms available to females is much greater than that available to males. Many female-bodied persons are therefore able to become relatively adept at masculinity prior to formally embarking on a gender or sex change. Male-bodied persons do not have as large a social space open to them in which to practice their femininity and therefore, while still living as men, cannot do as extensive preparation in this regard. This can make the social aspects of transition more challenging for many male-to-female persons.

## **11. Transition**

Having decided to make a transition, having learned what needs to be done, having told everyone who needs to be told in advance, having established or relinquished commitments as appropriate, having gotten the necessary resources lined up, transition may begin. This stage may encompass changes in social presentation of self, psychotherapy, hormonal treatments, and a variety of surgeries which together accomplish gender and sex reassignment. Some people will feel that they have begun transition as soon as they make the mental decision to do so. Others will feel that transition begins only when they start psychotherapy or when they start to make observable changes to their presentation.

Different individuals engage in different strategies for transition. Some will opt for the minimum which will effect a change in how they are perceived by others. Others will require every kind of transformation possible before they will feel completely transitioned. Some people will feel that they have completed transition as soon as they find themselves consistently witnessed and mirrored as the gender and sex with which they identify. Others will feel that they are still in transition until they have completed all desired hormonal and surgical transformations. This can mean that the transition stage can be very short for those who can make a satisfactory transition entirely through changes to their social presentation, or it can last many years for individuals who require complete hormonal and surgical transitions.

Transition can be both an exhilarating and a trying stage. During this stage individuals can spend long stretches of time during which their gender and sex are not easily recognizable to themselves or to others. On the one hand, to not know who one is, to not be known as who one is, can be extremely unsettling and difficult. On the other hand, to daily watch oneself moving out of a life which has been an enduring source of anxiety and into a life which promises to be more authentic and fulfilling can be a source of great wonder and joy.

Transition also means the leaving behind of a way of life. This departure from the total experience that comprises living as a woman or a man can be felt as a kind of death of a huge part of oneself. Thus transition also frequently brings with it a kind of grieving for the person that one once was but no longer will be. The melancholy which accompanies this farewell can be difficult to recognize or acknowledged because individuals may feel that to do so would be to cast doubts upon the authenticity of their commitment to transitioning.

During the transition stage all kinds of normally routine activities such as shopping, eating in a restaurant, or using public lavatories can become a source of anxiety. Every interaction with persons who are unaware of or unsympathetic to an individual's transition process can be fraught with uncertainty and potential upset. Members of the general public are unaccustomed to dealing with transgendered people and may become hostile to those whom they may perceive as fraudulent or mentally ill. Although few people will react in ways which are directly dangerous to people in transition, that ever-present potential and the fact that some people do, often leaves people in transition feeling fearful, withdrawn, and defensive during parts of this stage.

However, during transition people can also become dramatically invigorated by the magnitude of the transformational changes they are undergoing. After living a lifetime being unable to fully express themselves, they feel themselves to be finally righting what has been so wrong in their lives. As other people start to see them as they see themselves, the confirmation of having their self-image witnessed and mirrored back to them can feel like a beacon in a darkness which has too often dominated their lives to that point.

During this stage the effects of testosterone are particularly salient. People transitioning from female to male benefit in their everyday lives from the relatively rapid and dramatic effects of testosterone treatments which lower their voices, increase muscle mass, and change hair growth patterns on their faces, bodies, and heads. These effects mean that female-to-male individuals are able to become socially recognized as male relatively quickly and often without the necessity of surgical procedures. This can mean that those people who take full advantage of opportunities for extensive anticipatory socialization and who respond well to testosterone treatments can have a fairly smooth and rapid social transition from everyday lives as women to everyday lives as men.

The same can less often be said of those transitioning from male to female. Most often they do so after their bodies have spent decades under the influence of testosterone, the physical effects of which are not undone by estrogen treatments. Their difficult-to-disguise masculinized secondary sex characteristics combined with less extensive opportunities for anticipatory socialization often translates into more initial difficulties in accomplishing a credible transition into unremarkable women. However, many male-to-female persons are able, with the assistance of hormonal treatments, to live quite successfully as women while awaiting other surgeries.

When it comes to surgical transitioning procedures, generally a satisfactory basic surgical transformation from male to female can be accomplished in a single surgical session, whereas the same cannot be said of female-to-male conversion. Female-to-male transformations are accomplished through a series of surgical sessions which frequently span years and rarely provide a satisfactory genital result. Furthermore, due to the scarcity of satisfactory genital surgery, many female-to-male transsexed people do not opt to undergo genital surgery. Therefore, lacking credibly male genitalia, it can be difficult for some female-to-male transsexed people to ever feel that they have satisfactorily completed their physical transitions.

## **12. Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender/Sex Identity**

Transition need not be completely accomplished for a person to start to accept themselves as the gender and sex into which they are transitioning. For many people, the acceptance of a transsexed identity is identical with the acceptance of themselves as actually being a member of another gender and sex even if their bodies and lives do not yet display that truth to others. Many people, however, do require more concrete evidence before they are able to accept that they have arrived on the other side of the great gender divide. At first, their sense of themselves as their reassigned gender may seem somewhat fraudulent or artificial even to themselves. They may feel that their claim to membership is unsteady and easily challengeable due to the recentness of their transition, because of the approximate nature of their physical transitions, and because of the fact that they required transitional procedures to gain them their claim in the first place.

Over a period of months and years, individuals living as their new gender and sex learn to more deeply and profoundly understand what it means to be a person of that gender. As they accumulate a greater storehouse of experiences their sense of themselves as truly and authentically a member of their reassigned gender becomes deeper and more stable. Furthermore, as time passes and they find that they are readily and routinely witnessed and mirrored as who they feel themselves to be, many of the old anxieties and fears finally slip away to be replaced by a more serene self-acceptance than had ever before been possible. Many people find that their feelings of gender *dysphoria* are supplanted by feelings of gender *euphoria*.

### **13. Integration**

Most people who have undergone gender and sex transitions become seamlessly integrated into society at large. This is usually a gradual process, although it is generally more readily accomplished by female-to-male than male-to-female individuals. As transsexed people become more able and more comfortable functioning as unremarkable men and women in their every day lives, the facts of their transitions and of their transsexuality become less salient. As time passes and as transsexed people become more firmly embedded in their post-transition lives, they and most of the people around them will tend to allow the past to recede until it only rarely intrudes upon life in the here and now. The following story from a white 37-year-old student illustrates this process of coming to greater comfort in the new life:

*I always feel male....though I'm not often certain as to what that actually means...The first feeling that comes to mind is fear, fear that I don't live up to being male, don't satisfactorily meet the requirements of the role....The second feeling that comes to mind is confusion or ambivalence....I'm not often sure as to what I'm supposed to do/feel as a male....I feel I must be competent in all areas....In other words, my maleness all too often has been represented by the workaholic, Type A personality....These days I believe I am a bit more integrated....it simply ceases to be the main focus of my life....I no longer have to prove to society that I am male in order to obtain a validating mirror.*

However no one can erase or escape their past. Our histories are always with us. Once one has become transsexed, once one has undergone a gender and sex transition, that is an indelible fact which will have to be managed forever. Even after full integration back into society in a transformed gender and sex status, transsexed persons will always have to pay attention to how information about their transsexuality becomes available to others. No matter how well integrated they may become, there remain many levels of disadvantages and dangers attendant upon being transsexed. Thus, for the foreseeable future, all transsexed individuals will have to face the challenge of stigma management. One 41-year-old writer described it this way:

*There are times when I choose not to talk about it because there is no point. Like I'm not going to tell the gas station attendant you know....But if it comes up then I do talk about it freely and I'm perfectly willing to answer questions, any questions. It was a scary thing to do and its still a scary thing, like I still don't know how the future is going to be....When I'm wondering should I come out, I worry that people are going to stop taking me seriously, that they're going to think that I'm crazy, that they're going to think I'm disgusting, they're not going to accept me... those kinds of things. Those are really fleeting fears and so far I've been able to just press through.*

Integration also takes place on another level. As the post-transition years elapse, many transsexed individuals come to better appreciate that they have found great benefits in the lessons of the first parts of their lives. Many people find that although a gender and sex transition was the right choice for them, they do not wish to abandon all of their connections to their previous lives.

At first, while identity acceptance is still becoming firmly established, any hint of one's previous way of life may seem as a threat to the establishment of a credible post-transition identity. Fears of undermining the effectiveness of one's self-presentation may prevent newly transitioning individuals from integrating aspects of their previous gender into their post-transition lives. However it is not uncommon for those who have sufficiently consolidated their post-transition identities to re-introduce or give greater exposure to those aspects of their pre-transition lives which they still hold dear. Thus, many post-transition individuals find their way to a more

comfortable type of androgyny than they could have ever entertained in their originally assigned gender and sex. In other words, once they find themselves firmly established in the right gender and sex they also find themselves able to create a life for themselves which allows them to integrate their pasts with their post-transition lives.

#### **14. Pride**

Pride, as it is used here, implies both a personal sense of pride in oneself and a political stance. Persons who exhibit trans identity pride are open about their transsexualism or Transgenderism in situations where it is relevant and speak up on behalf of transsexed and transgendered people when an occasion lends itself to such advocacy. Some people who demonstrate trans identity pride make working for transgender political rights the focus of their life whereas many others more quietly and privately work toward greater social understanding and acceptance.

Those transsexed and transgendered people who achieve a sense of pride in themselves do so against a backdrop of widespread fear, intolerance, and hostility toward transpeople. The pride of transsexed and transgendered people thus has to be seen as a ongoing accomplishment in the face of the relentless shaming that society most frequently inflicts upon transgendered people. Until such time as society at large achieves greater gender integration, the achievement and maintenance of identity pride of transpeople as a whole and as individuals will require continual effort and vigilance.

As with many of the other stages in this model, the pride stage can co-exist with ostensibly earlier stages. Individuals may feel and enact pride in their originally assigned gender and sex or in their post-transition gender and sex, they may feel pride during stages of confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, delay, transition or integration. At any of these stages transgendered people may take pride in themselves for having the courage and integrity to pursue their own very special journey. One 34-year-old white collar worker summed these feelings up nicely:

*I am proud I had the courage to do it....It's always hard to first explain it to someone because there are so many misconceptions to try to dispel. I basically feel good I had the guts to make my dream come true and to overcome the huge obstacles one overcomes when you embark on the journey of gender change. I'm proud I confronted a problem that seemed insurmountable.*

#### **Conclusions**

The stages of self-discovery and self-actualization through which transsexed and transgendered people go are not unique to them alone. Many people in many walks of life go through profound transitions through which they remake themselves into someone apparently different from who they once were. Some of these transitions follow well-worn paths, others are more exceptional and therefore more challenging to those who undergo them and to those who witness them. Those who come to know themselves as transsexed and transgendered must confront some of society's most deeply entrenched belief systems and fears in order to become themselves. In so doing they must also face their own internalizations of those values and anxieties. To come to know oneself as transsexed or transgendered requires self-examination, bravery, and naked honesty. Being / becoming transsexed or transgendered is never an easy process.

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