What Else Is There to Read About This Topic?


Where Can I Find Further Information or Support?

World Professional Association for Transgender Health http://www.wpath.org

Gender Education and Advocacy http://www.gender.org

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—Transgender network http://www.pflag.org/TNET.tnet.0.html

Advocates for youth http://www.advocatesforyouth.org

References


Written by Walter O. Bockting, PhD, Associate Professor, Program in Human Sexuality, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, University of Minnesota Medical School, 1300 South Second Street, Suite 180, Minneapolis, MN 55454; President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, 2004-2005; President, World Association for Transgender Health, 2009-2011.

Series Editor: Sandra L. Davis; Associate Editors: Patricia Barthalow Koch, PhD, and Clive M. Davis, PhD. The editors would like to thank several anonymous reviewers who have also contributed their time and talents to this series.

The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality is an international organization dedicated to the advancement of knowledge about sexuality. The Society brings together an interdisciplinary group of professionals who believe in the importance of both the production of quality research and the clinical, educational, and social applications of the research related to all aspects of sexuality.

In 1957, The Society was founded to encourage rigorous systematic investigation of sexuality. The early 20th century had produced phenomenal growth in scientific understanding, but similar gains were not being made in understanding sexuality, with knowledge often mixed with misunderstanding and confusion. Through interdisciplinary cooperation, The Society continues to support the study of sexuality as a valid area for research by the scientific community.

Questions about sexuality extend beyond the scientific. A strength of The Society is the range of disciplines represented by its members, conference participants, and journal authors. A broad, interdisciplinary perspective is insured by dialogue and research contributions from biologists, physicians, nurses, therapists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, educators, theologians, and others.

This publication is produced by The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality (SSSS) as a means of informing professionals in health, education, and therapy, as well as the general public, about current research knowledge in important topical areas concerning human sexuality. Multiple copies of this publication and others in the series may be ordered at www.sexscience.org

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality
What is Transgender?

Transgender people are a diverse group of individuals who cross or transcend culturally defined categories of gender. Typically, sex is assigned at birth, most often based on genital appearance. Gender identity (one’s inner sense of being a boy/man or girl/woman) is usually congruent with one’s assigned sex. However, transgender people show us that this is not always the case: Their gender identity may vary significantly from their sex assigned at birth. Transgender people include transsexuals (those who desire or have had hormone therapy or surgery to feminize or masculinize their body); crossdressers (those who wear clothing associated with the other sex and/or spend part of the time in the other gender role); drag queens and kings (those who combine hyperfemininity with hypermasculinity, usually for entertainment); and other individuals who may describe themselves as bigender or two-spirit (both man and woman), gender questioning (especially common among youth), gender variant or gender queer (who are people challenging gender norms in various ways).

How Common is It?

The prevalence of transgenderism is largely unknown in part due to the associated stigma. Online studies indicate that the prevalence of transgenderism may be as high as 1 in every 50 people. More specifically, the prevalence of transsexualism (based on applicants for sex reassignment) has been estimated at 1 in every 11,900 for male-to-female reassignment and 1 in every 30,400 for female-to-male (Kesteren, Gooren, & Megens, 1996). It is unknown why male-to-female transsexuality is more common than female-to-male (Olsson & Moller, 2003).

What Causes Someone to Grow Up to Be Transgender or Transsexual?

The existence of transgender people has been documented throughout times and across cultures (Feinberg, 1996). For example, Chevalier D’Eon was a famous male-to-female transgender person in 18th century France, and Jack Bee Garland, a popular writer in San Francisco around the turn of the 20th century, was born female yet lived for most of his life as a man. Research on the etiology of transgenderism has crossed both biological and environmental determinants (Cohen-Kettenis & Gooren, 1999). Findings point toward the role of biology via sexual differentiation of the brain influenced by hormones and genes, but evidence to date indicates that biology cannot fully explain the development of gender variance (Segal, 2006). Social and cultural factors, such as early life experiences and rigid gender norms, may also play a role.

What Is Gender Dysphoria and How Is It Treated?

Transgender individuals may experience discomfort with their sex assigned at birth (male or female) and gender role (living as a man or woman). They may have a desire to feminize or masculinize their body and/or change their gender role. When this discomfort is strong, the individual might meet criteria for a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Treatment options include psychotherapy, changes in gender role, hormone therapy, and breast/chest and genital reconstructive surgery. For those who are seeking physical changes, treatment of this disorder is guided by Standards of Care set forth by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (Meyer et al., 2001).

How Effective is Sex Reassignment?

Sex reassignment involves a change in gender role from male to female or female to male, hormone therapy, surgery, and a change in sex on identification documents. Transgender individuals’ perceived satisfaction with sex reassignment ranges from 87% among male-to-females to 97% among female-to-males. Predictors of satisfaction include younger age at time of reassignment, participation in psychotherapy, and family support. Dissatisfaction has been associated with inadequate surgical results. Regrets and reversal to the original gender role are rare (less than 2%; Pfafflin & Junge, 1998).

What Does Research Tell Us About the Transgender Coming-Out Process?

Many transgender individuals experience intense stigma for their gender nonconformity and transgender expression. Verbal harassment, physical violence, employment and housing discrimination are not uncommon (Bockting & Avery, 2005). Nevertheless, transgender individuals are currently coming out earlier in life, developing pride in transgender identity, and more successfully changing gender roles in the community and on the job than in the past. Coming out desires have acknowledged gained in visibility; more and more schools and communities offer Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) support groups than in the past. Schools and communities should respect and accommodate the youth’s gender expression and offer protection against ridicule and violence. The Internet provides opportunities for transgender youth and their families to connect with others who are having similar experiences. The physical changes of puberty can be extra challenging for transgender youth. Those with persistent gender dysphoria are eligible for hormone therapy. In general, the younger generation appears to be less ashamed and freer to express their gender diversity than those who came before them.

What Should Be the Focus of Future Research?

Previous research has largely focused on clinical samples and demonstrated that sex reassignment is a viable and effective treatment for gender dysphoria. Research using community samples has revealed the great diversity in gender and sexuality among this population, and has begun to identify health disparities in the areas of HIV and mental health (Bockting & Avery, 2005). Future research is needed to strengthen the evidence base guiding the promotion of transgender health more broadly.