

A Bio-Experiential Model of Transsexuality

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This is the abstract to a paper that I plan to present at the *Transsomatechnics: Theories and Practices of Transgender Embodiment* conference in May, 2008. More info about the conference can be found here: http://www.sfu.ca/womens-studies/rwwp_conference/index.html

Discourses on transsexuality are often dominated by questions of etiology. Inquiries and hypotheses regarding the potential cause(s) of transsexuality can pose political challenges for trans people, as they typically define trans identities and experiences according to non-trans presumptions about gender, and they can negatively impact our ability to access the means to transition and to legally/socially live as members of our identified sex. Psychological accounts have traditionally portrayed transsexuality as a “pathological compromise formation” that arises from problematic parental-child interactions during infancy and childhood or misdirected/sublimated sexual drives during puberty and adulthood. Sociologists and feminist theorists on the other hand have historically viewed the phenomenon as a form of “false consciousness” that drives trans people to take drastic measures in order to conform to societal gender norms. From a trans perspective, such sociological and psychological models are flawed because they fail to account for the fact that most trans people experience our crossgender-identifications as inexplicable, profound and deeply-felt, rather than a mere reaction to our environments. They also tend to confuse or conflate gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and sex embodiment in a way that contradicts our life experiences and is inconsistent with the vast diversity of trans people that exists. In this paper, I will present an alternative, bio-experiential model of transsexuality. This interdisciplinary approach—a synthesis of biological, psychological and sociological perspectives—takes into account the unconscious and intrinsic manner in which trans people experience crossgender-identification, while also exploring how the manner in which one is situated within society can shape the way in which one self-conceptualizes their own transness. I will argue that this bio-experiential model of transsexuality is not only consistent with trans people’s experiences, but can account for the variation that exists in trans trajectories, identities and experiences, and can better explain observed differences between transgender “subtypes” (e.g., MTF/FTM, transsexual/transvestite, primary/secondary, “homosexuals”/“nonhomosexual”) than existing psychological taxonomies.