

The Psychiatric Sexualization of Male-to-Female Transgenderism

Julia Serano

This paper was presented at The Association For Women in Psychology Conference (Pacific Division) in San Francisco on March 10, 2007. Abstracts and learning goals are below.

An audio reading of the paper can be found at:
<http://www.juliaserano.com/av/Serano-PsychSexMTF.wav>

A more complete version of the paper has since been published as chapter 14, *Trans-sexualization*, in Julia's 2007 book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*.

50 word catalog abstract

This paper explores the sexualization of male-to-female spectrum transgender people in both mainstream and psychological/psychiatric discourses. An analysis of the diagnostic categories, criteria and etiology developed specifically for male-to-female transgenderism will be placed in the context of our societal-wide tendency to sexually objectify femaleness and femininity.

300-500 word proposal

This paper takes issue with the sexualization of male-to-female (MTF) spectrum transgender people (including transsexual women, crossdressers, and other models of “male” femininity) in both mainstream and psychological/psychiatric discourses. The fact that MTF spectrum transgender people bear the brunt of our culture’s fascination with, and demonization of, transgenderism, indicates that they are culturally marked, not for failing to conform to gender norms per se, but because they “choose” to be female and/or feminine. The notion that MTF transgender people are conceptualized within a traditionally sexist framework (i.e., one where femaleness/femininity are viewed as subordinate to maleness/masculinity) is perhaps most evident in the way that transsexual women (but not transsexual men) are hyper-sexualized in pornography and the media, wherein they are typically depicted as sex workers or as “sexual deceivers” who supposedly lure innocent straight men into sexual encounters. Implicit in all of these representations is a rigid, dualistic, heterosexual male-centered dichotomy in which only men can be viewed as legitimate sexual initiators and where women are invariably viewed as sexual objects. In the context of this “predator/prey” dichotomy, transsexual women are consistently viewed as inviting their own sexualization by virtue of their feminine expressions and their physical transitions to female.

Understanding this predator/prey dichotomy allows us to make sense of psychological/psychiatric discourses of transgenderism, which have historically focused almost exclusively on MTF transgender individuals, while largely discounting female-to-male (FTM) transgenderism. For many decades, the diagnostic criteria devised for MTF transsexuals required them not only to be heterosexual and gender-conforming in the female role, but also to be sexually desirable in the eyes of heterosexual men. Those MTF spectrum transgender individuals who were unable or unwilling to meet all of the prerequisites for sexual object have typically been cast as sexual initiators and relegated to a distinct “paraphilic” category—e.g., transvestic fetishism or autogynophilia. The positioning of this latter group (who are conceptualized as “men” who inappropriately fetishize female/feminine expressions in themselves) in opposition to “true” or “primary” MTF transsexuals (who are cast as willing objects of heterosexual male desire) reiterates the predator/prey dichotomy, thus preserving both the male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries. In this context, the invisibility and under-theorization of FTM transgenderism within psychology and psychiatry can be viewed as a direct result of the predator/prey dichotomy, which assumes that FTM spectrum

individuals cannot be legitimate sexual initiators in their assigned sex (female), nor can their identified/preferred sex (male) be legitimately objectified.

To move beyond these highly sexualizing and dichotomizing theories of transgenderism that have proliferated in the past, a new model of transgenderism will be proposed, one which recognizes that an individual's subconscious sex, gender expression and sexual orientation all arise largely independent of one another, and which takes into account the fact that both traditional sexism and oppositional sexism (i.e., the assumption that female and male represent distinct, mutually-exclusive "opposite" sexes) together shape the way that trans people are perceived by society and the way they come to understand themselves.

Learning goals:

- 1) The fascination with, and sexualization of, male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals in mainstream and psychological/psychiatric discourses on transgenderism is a direct result of traditional sexism (i.e., the assumption that femaleness/femininity are subordinate to maleness/masculinity).
- 2) Heterosexual male-centric models of sexual desire, which presume that only men can be legitimate sexual initiators and in which women are invariably viewed as sexual objects, results in both the hyper-sexualization of MTF spectrum transgender people, and the invisibilization of female-to-male (FTM) spectrum transgender people in psychological/psychiatric discourses.