

Richard Ekins *and* Dave King

e transgender
phenomenon



The Transgender Phenomenon

Richard Ekins and Dave King



Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

© Richard Ekins and Dave King 2006

First published 2006

Reprinted 2008

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-7619-7163-4
ISBN 978-0-7619-7164-1

Library of Congress control number: 2006920988

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed on paper from sustainable resources
Printed and bound in Great Britain Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

The Transgender Phenomenon

For Wendy, Denise and James
In memory of Nicholas Dodge (1943-2004)

I am accustoming myself to regarding every sexual act
as a process in which four individuals are involved.

We have a lot to discuss on this topic.

From a letter on 1 August 1899 by
Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess

Preface

The newspaper headline, 'What is a man? Parliament may have to decide', appeared in the UK *Manchester Guardian* on 19 March 1954, amidst the massive press coverage of the story of Roberta (formerly Robert) Cowell. In 2004, the UK Parliament finally decided and passed the Gender Recognition Act which according to Lord Filkin, Minister at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, 'allows transsexual people who have taken decisive steps to live fully and permanently in the acquired gender to gain legal recognition in that gender' (Filkin, 1993).

Even as the story of Roberta Cowell was breaking in England, Dr Harry Benjamin, with the help of American 'sex change' ex-GI Christine Jorgensen, was fashioning a story of the 'transsexual' that was to become the dominant medical story for the half century that followed. Jorgensen had travelled to Denmark to have her male genitalia removed by a medical team who, in 1951, told a story of relieving the distress of a troubled homosexual (Hamburger and Sprechler, 1951; Hertoft and Sørensen, 1979). In 1953, following the fusion of Jorgensen's personal story with Benjamin's developing medical story, the seeds were sown for the modern tale of the transsexual conceptualized as a problem of gender identity quite separate from that of sexual orientation.

At around the same time in Los Angeles, a man named Arnold Lowman was giving a lot of thought to why he liked to dress in women's clothes and was adopting the name of Virginia Prince. Prince's story of the male heterosexual transvestite, as adopted in the Euro-American world, spawned a host of supportive and commercial ventures so that today male cross-dressers can find welcoming venues across the globe, on any night of the week (Lee, 2005).

These fragments are illustrative of the two stories that became dominant in the realm of human experience that is today considered under the heading of 'transgender'. More recently, however, a new story has emerged. It is

a story that has emerged within a transgender community built upon the foundations provided by the stories of Harry Benjamin and Virginia Prince. It is a story of diversity, of 'blending genders', of 'gender outlaws': a 'beyond the binary' view of transgender. As US transgender activist Dallas Denny put it in 1996 (Denny, 1996: 4): 'the ways of thinking given us by Harry Benjamin and Virginia Prince no longer provide a good "fit" for all of us . . . It's no secret that we are in the midst of turmoil and change. A "beyond the binary" view of transgender is emerging.'

Implicit within all these stories are tales of the interrelations between personal transgender narratives and medical, legal, media, and transgender community stories; variously dominant, contested, and socially distributed in time and place. We prefer the gerund 'transgendering' to the noun and adjective 'transgender' because of its focus not on *types* of people, but on behaviour and social *process*. Transgendering, for us, refers to the idea of moving across (transferring) from one pre-existing gender category to another (either temporarily or permanently); to the idea of living in between genders; and to the idea of living 'beyond gender' altogether. It also refers to the social process within which competing transgendering stories and attendant identities and ideologies emerge, develop, and wax and wane in influence, in time and place.

Tales of transgendering take many forms. This book sets forth a sociological framework within which it is possible to map the emergence of the maximum diversity of such tales and to consider the diverse interrelations between their origins, developments and consequences. In particular, it examines the emergence of diverse conceptualizations of transgender phenomena in terms of their relationship with the binary gender divide in contemporary Euro-American societies, with reference to problems of conceptualization, theorization, identity and social worlds.

Acknowledgements

This book draws upon the personal and professional life experiences of untold individuals who variously identify with the term transgender, and of untold individuals, who, for whatever reasons, find themselves working within the transgender community whether as academics, independent scholars, professionals or activists. We thank them all.

Our theory and research methodology entail maintaining contact with many of our informants over the entire period of our research – a period that now extends over 30 years.

It is quite impossible to pay the proper respect to our informants in an acknowledgements entry in a single book. For this book, however, we have drawn especially on the time, experience and expertise of selected informants. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Holly Boswell, Sissy Diana, Christie Elan-Cane, Anne Lawrence, Millie, Debra Rose, Del LaGrace Volcano, Rachael Webb, and Stephen Whittle.

Of our academic and professional mentors who do not identify as transgendered, we are especially grateful to Ken Plummer and Friedemann Pfäfflin, whose particular combinations of humanity, integrity, and commitment to rigorous science have long been an inspiration to us.

We are also very grateful to Peter Farrer, Alice Purnell and Barbara Ross for the help and support they have given us over many years.

Finally, we particularly thank Wendy Saunderson for providing vital intellectual and emotional support, thereby enabling the completion of this book.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
1 Telling transgendering tales	1
Beginnings	1
What is transgender?	13
Modes and processes of transgendering	28
2 Migrating stories	43
A conceptual introduction to migrating	43
Telling migrating stories	56
Male-to-female migrating and 'love of oneself as a woman'	90
3 Oscillating stories	97
A conceptual introduction to oscillating	97
Telling oscillating stories	109
Barry's story: a tale of interrelations	137
4 Negating stories	143
A conceptual introduction to negating	143
Telling negating stories	152
Ungendering processes as components of transgender masturbatory scripts	173
5 Transcending stories	181
A conceptual introduction to transcending	181
Telling transcending stories	184

A return to 'lived experience': the case of Del LaGrace Volcano	213
Methods, methodology and a tale of caution	218
6 Conclusion	221
<i>Notes</i>	233
<i>Bibliography</i>	238
<i>Index</i>	254

List of Figures

1.1	Gendering and transgendering	34
2.1	Christine Jorgensen at a book signing, 1967	66
2.2	Anne Lawrence and Ray Blanchard, at the 31st Annual Meeting of the International Academy of Sex Research, Ottawa, 2005	87
3.1	Virginia Prince at a Seminar at Fantasia Fair, Provincetown, 1992	121
4.1	A 'Debra Rose' Male Sissy Maid, 1993	153
4.2	Christie Elan-Cane with per partner, David, at the 3rd International Transgender Film and Video Festival, London, 1998	158
5.1	Holly Boswell, the creator of 'Kindred Spirits', at the Southern Comfort Convention, Atlanta, 1999	196
5.2	'Lesbian Cock', London, 1992	214
5.3	Del and 'Harry', San Francisco, 1996	217

ONE Telling Transgendering Tales

Beginnings

The story of our research begins in the mid-1970s in the United Kingdom at a time when there was little or no sociological interest in what was then conceptualized as 'transvestism' and 'transsexuality'. Today, by contrast, 'transgender' provides a focal point for cutting-edge theoretical work in cultural and gender studies and cutting-edge gender activism. In the same 30-year period, transgendering has moved from the peripheries of 'deviance' and 'perversion' in Euro-American societies to the centre of mainstream celebrity. As we write, the Portuguese transsexual Nadia Almada has recently won the UK reality TV show *Big Brother 5* and is among the hottest 'celebs' featured on the covers of the major celebrity magazine weeklies:

Now we've taken her to our hearts because she isn't afraid to show her insecurities. Despite her thick mascara and lip gloss, she's refreshingly real. AND she wears heels to do the housework. That makes her our kind of woman. (Johnson, 2004: 3)

Within a few weeks, the focus of attention has switched from 'Nadia: "Why I Had My Sex Change"' (*Closer*, 2004a) to more pressing concerns of celebrity womanhood: 'Nadia's Agony: "I've Lost My Virginity to a Love Cheat"' (*Closer*, 2004b); 'Nadia: My Agony Over Secret Boyfriend' (*Star: The World's Greatest Celeb Weekly*, 2004); 'Nadia Loses a Stone in 4 Weeks' (*Heat*, 2004).

In the same 30-year period since we began our research, our focus of interest has extended from the United Kingdom, to North America, Europe, South Africa and Australasia. In addition, we have observed in this time how Western discourses of transgenderism have been increasingly exported to many other parts of the world and are usurping or heavily influencing more traditional indigenous notions of gender and 'transgender' phenomena (Teh, 2001; 2002; Winter, 2002; Winter and Udomsak, 2002).

Dave's story

Although as an undergraduate I had read US sociologist Garfinkel's (1967) study of 'Agnes', it was the British sociologists Carol Riddell and Mike Brake who provided the inspiration for my interest in developing a sociology of transgender. Carol Riddell, then a lecturer at the University of Lancaster, England, presented an unpublished paper in 1972 to the National Deviancy Conference 10, entitled 'Transvestism and the Tyranny of Gender'. For Riddell (1972), transvestites and transsexuals, along with gay men and lesbians, were the casualties of a gender role system that performs important functions for capitalism. In particular, she argued that the medical profession was acting as an agent of 'capitalist family and gender relations': 'In no way is the T.V. [transvestite] encouraged to develop his/her inclinations, to express them publicly and to politicise them into a rejection of the system which produced the need for them' (ibid.: 10).

Riddell's recommendation was for transvestites and transsexuals to join 'with other sexually persecuted minorities, particularly homosexuals, in confrontation with the police, the legal profession, the psychiatrists, the capitalist nuclear family, capitalist gender roles, capitalist attitudes, and fundamentally the capitalist system itself' (ibid.: 12). Mike Brake, then a lecturer at the University of Kent, England, had intentions of publishing Riddell's article in a book he was editing at the time but, unfortunately, his plan did not materialize and it remains unpublished.

Two years later, in 1974, Mike Brake presented his own more nuanced thoughts on the matter in a conference paper entitled 'I May Be Queer, but At Least I am a Man' (Brake, 1976). Brake made the point, as relevant today as it was then, that:

[MTF] Transvestites and transsexuals polarize the problems of gay activism. At one level they are accused of sexism because of their concern with traditional femininity, but it must be remembered that the masters are not supposed to dress as slaves, and men who dress as women are giving up their power as men. Their oppression is similar to that experienced by gay men and all women. (ibid.: 187)

These comments by Brake on the politics of transgender seem to be the first published thoughts by a British sociologist on transvestism and transsexualism. It was not a topic Brake returned to and when my research story began in the mid-1970s, I was determined to make a serious study of transgender phenomena.

The beginning of my research story coincided with Britain hosting 'The First National TV.TS [Transvestite.Transsexual] Conference' (1974) in Leeds, although I was unaware of it at the time. The conference was designed as a

forum for those people self-identifying as transvestite or transsexual and for professionals working in the field. It included presentations from community activists who were the leading figures in both transvestite and transsexual organizations, personal stories from those who identified as transvestite or transsexual, and talks from social workers and psychologists. This meeting of minds of 'experts' and 'members' (transvestites and transsexuals) set the initial parameters for the growing stream of such conferences that took place during the 1970s and 1980s. A press report of the conference by Parkin informed general readers thus:

The First National conference of transvestites, including radical drag queens and transsexuals is to be held at Leeds in March [1974]. Social workers, doctors and clergy have been invited to join them in discussing their problems of which the public largely knows nothing.

Briefly, a transvestite is a person who gains psychological release through dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex. He (it is not often a she) is usually heterosexual. A radical drag queen is a transvestite who wears women's clothing in public, but does not try to hide the fact that he is a man.

Mr. Martine O'Leary, a radical drag queen at Leeds, says that he buys old dresses from Oxfam shops, wears neither make-up nor substitute breasts, and tries to shake people out of their preconception of what a man is, a woman is, or more important, what he is.

The other group, transsexuals, consider themselves to be women who have been trapped inside a man's body. They make their break for sexual freedom by proclaiming themselves to be women and living as women. Many seek the so-called 'sex change' operation and hormone treatment. (1974: 36)

In addition, the Conference Report (*The First National TV.TS Conference*, 1974) told tales of distinctions between 'radical' and 'conservative' wings in the debate on the future of transvestism. Radical feminist transvestites were said to identify with women's liberation; conservative transvestites were said to treat their wives 'like slaves' when dressed as men at home. There was talk that would take some 20 years to become widespread: of transsexuals seeking 'gender alignment'; of 'trans-gender' and 'trans.people' [sic] used as umbrella terms to include both TVs and TSs. On the other hand, there was much more talk of TV and TS being 'conditions', of being 'compulsive behaviour patterns', and of 'militant action' by TVs and TSs being inappropriate.

Della Aleksander, something of a celebrity at the time as a male to female (MTF) transsexual, had recently co-produced the BBC2 *Open Door* programme about 'transsexualism', which featured Member of Parliament Leo Abse, a well-known 'champion of minority causes' (*The First National TV.TS Conference*, 1974: 11). Aleksander had undergone 'sex change' surgery in 1970 in Casablanca, and the following year established GRAIL (Gender Research Association International Liaison), a group formed to campaign for equal rights for transsexuals. In her conference talk, she made the point that the conference unites all those 'crossing the sex border' and 'rejects petty differences between them as misplaced' before adding:

Being a transvestite or a transsexual cannot, by its nature, be a social protest phenomenon, for it seeks to conform to accepted norms of the sexual division and the manner in which the sexes are distinguished by dress. In this it is very conformist and not to be confused with unisex of the David Bowie genre with which it is frequently confused. Unisex mirrors Man's sexual ambiguity. Transvestism and transsexualism does something about this ambiguity. (Aleksander, 1974: 11)

The organizers of the 1974 conference had sought to include main presentations on the law and psychiatry relating to TV and TS. However, the Chief Constable, Leeds City Police and Dr John Randell, Gender Identity Clinic, London were among those who sent their apologies for their non-attendance. This matter was rectified in the follow-up conference held at the University of Leicester in 1975 that did include legal and psychiatric contributions in the main presentations. It also included a contribution from the celebrated columnist Anna Raeburn, who gave a presentation entitled 'Male and Female Roles in Society with Reference to Transvestites and Transsexuals' (Beaumont Society, 1975). I was alerted to this conference by an advertisement in *New Society* and fortunately was able to attend.

These two conferences set the tone for my research. From the sociological point of view, what marked the two conferences were three major and related features. In the first place, it was evident that cross-dressing and sex-changing were non-normative (deviant) phenomena. In the second place, it was striking how knowledge in the area had been subjected to a pervasive medicalization. In the third place, it was notable how the conferences sought to garner what were thought to be the most favourable media representations.

I approached the area as a symbolic interactionist sociologist committed to labelling theory. In 1975, Ken Plummer had published his important text *Sexual Stigma*, which set forth a symbolic interactionist sociology of sexuality, with particular reference to male homosexuality. This book drew extensively upon labelling theory which studies how categories arise, and how they are disseminated and applied to self and others. I was fortunate enough to meet Plummer at a conference and in due course he became my PhD supervisor. As my research progressed, I began to separate out the main areas of focus, in particular those of identity, subculture, medicalization, and media representation. The empirical work was based on studies of the medical literature; a large number of media reports; fieldwork with transsexuals and transvestites; and, most importantly, interviews with surgeons, psychiatrists and psychologists, and others working in this field. Eventually, I produced a number of articles and my PhD thesis on this research (King, 1981; 1984; 1986; 1987).

Richard's story

As we have seen, Dave's transgender research story began, in a sense, with the work of British sociologist Carol Riddell on transvestism. Rather extraordinarily, my work as a serious student of sociology also began with the work of Carol Riddell. However, in my case, it was not Carol Riddell's work on transgender that influenced me. It was the work of Carol Riddell, in a different guise.

By 1971, I had become disillusioned at the prospect of continuing a career in law, and enrolled as a graduate student in the sociology of education at the University of London. In my first lecture, I was told that the best introduction to sociology was that by Margaret Coulson and David Riddell (1970) entitled *Approaching Sociology: A Critical Introduction*.

My principal teacher was Michael F.D. Young who at the London Institute of Education was spearheading, at the time, what became known as the 'new' sociology of education. It was a sociology of education that had, in the space of a few short years, jettisoned the 'old' sociology of education which was rooted in sociological positivism and structural functionalism.

In place of the 'old' sociology of education, Young and his colleagues were developing an entirely new approach to the area. They were re-formulating the discipline in terms of a sociology of knowledge which took its inspiration from humanist Marxisms and the 'new' interpretive sociologies of symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology (Young, 1971; Gorbitt, 1972).

At the time, there were no introductory books to sociology that combined all these theoretical approaches in one introductory text, but the great merit of Coulson and Riddell's (1970) introductory text, I was told, was that it did set forth the parameters for such an approach from a 'critical' Marxist standpoint. For this reason, it was the only recently written introduction to sociology that my teachers 'allowed' me to read.

I still have my original copy of this book sitting on my bookshelves. The book's publication date is marked as 1970 with a copyright © Margaret A. Coulson and David S. Riddell. Next to it is a 1972 reprint of the book but the authors are Margaret A. Coulson and Carol S. Riddell! Yes, Riddell had transitioned from MTF (male to female) in the period between the two print runs of her book. Unbeknown to Dave and myself, at the time, Dave's sociological transgender predecessor was my guide to introductory sociology: the former British MTF academic Carol Riddell.

While a schoolboy, one of my 'A' Level English teachers once remarked that I had a talent for writing about the relations between the individual and