

THE TRANSSEXUAL RIDDLE:

Naturalistic research and psychoanalysis offer clues to the family dynamics involved in transsexualism and gender identity

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

And please, God, let me be a girl. Amen.

I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, and it was the earliest memory of my life.

It was also worrying to me, for though my body often yearned to give, to yield, to open itself, the machine was wrong.

It was a marriage that had no right to work, yet it worked like a dream, living testimony, one might say, to the power of mind over matter—or of love in its purest sense over everything else. . . . We produce five children, three boys, two girls, but by the very nature of things sex was subsidiary in our marriage.

But it could not work forever. . . . My manhood was meaningless. With Elizabeth's loving help I abandoned the attempt to live as a male and took the first steps toward a physical change of sex. . . . a slow-motion Jekyll and Hyde.

But I do not for a moment regret the act of change. I could see no other way, and it has made me happy. . . . I would search the earth for surgeons; I would bribe barbers or abortionists; I would take a knife and do it myself, without qualms, without a second thought.

These are the words of Jan Morris, a well-known British journalist who was born a male but who remembers always wanting to be a female. In *Conundrum* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), Morris tells the story of her confusing life. As a young man James Morris served in the army and then began a successful career as a foreign correspondent. In 1953, at the age of 26, he achieved worldwide fame as a reporter on an expedition up Mt. Everest. James Morris married, fathered five children and lived as a male; throughout all of this he remained convinced that he should really be a female. Eventually he decided to do something about that conviction. In 1964 Morris began eight years of hormone treatments. During this time he took almost 12,000 pills that gradually changed his body chemistry and gave him the outward appearance of a woman. He began



dressing as a woman, and in 1972 went to Casablanca, Morocco, to have a sex-change operation. Since that time Jan Morris has been living as a woman in all ways.

What causes the transsexual urge? What forces are at work in the life of someone like Jan Morris? Fifteen years ago Freudian theory had all the answers. The central features in personality development were said to be castration anxiety in males and penis envy in females. Inability to overcome these primordial conflicts was thought to be the root of almost all psychopathology, sexual or otherwise. Psychoanalytic theory, however, has proved to be inadequate and has since had to be updated. During a session on the methodology of psychoanalytic research at the recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Denver, psychiatrist Robert J. Stoller of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine described his ongoing research on gender identity. The results help explain the transsexual phenomenon, suggest need for a modification of Freudian theory and shed light on the development of gender identity, normal as well as abnormal.

Stoller's interest in gender identity began 20 years ago when a colleague asked him to talk to a female transsexual (a woman who acted and dressed like a man). Expecting to meet a "very butch homosexual," he was astonished to meet a person who appeared to be very much a man, a quite ordinary man. This person eventually referred a friend, and within several years Stoller was seeing more and more people with confused- or cross-gender identity.

As a young analyst Stoller held firmly to the Freudian tradition. He believed that the evidence on gender identity was in, that the theory confirmed and that there was little in this area needing more study. "I had no plans," he says, "to do research on masculinity and femininity; if, over 20 years ago, I saw a person with a disturbance in masculinity or femininity, such as homosexual or transvestite, there was no challenge, no therapeutic impulse, no interest; because there were no questions." After being confronted with the natural maleness of the female transsex-

ual, Stoller's attitude changed: "Generalizations on oedipal conflict and metapsychological descriptions relying on 'ego,' 'superego,' 'id,' 'cathexis,' 'libido,' 'instincts' and the like, had, I felt, to give way to data—the realities of this patient's presence. (And some years later I came to think that our metapsychology worked no better to describe anyone else, not just someone as aberrant as a transsexual.)" After working with several more gender-confused individuals, he says, "I knew there was no shortage of questions; my patients were all confusing me."

Stoller set out to find some of the answers. With the entry into treatment of the family of a very feminine boy, he decided to focus on gender identity as a research topic. The child in question was an anatomically normal four-and-a-half year old boy who wanted to be a girl. Graceful, charming and feminine in appearance and carriage, he liked to dress all day in girls' clothes, to play exclusively with girls and wanted his body changed to female. The boy's parents said he had been this way since the beginning of any behavior one could judge as masculine or feminine, starting around a year of age. Having seen by then a number of adult males requesting sex change, and being unsure of how much of their histories could be believed, Stoller decided it would be interesting to study the child with his family in order to find clues to his behavior. Mother, father and son were scheduled for treatment, each with an analyst. The father, who was not interested, never got started. The boy was treated by Stoller's colleague, R.R. Greeson, and the mother by Stoller.

The analytic treatment was effective. The boy became masculine and has remained so to the present. The mother's analysis had equally important results. It gave Stoller an explanation for the boy's femininity and provided a base from which to develop an hypothesis concerning transsexualism. "I like to think it was analytic technique and an analytic perspective toward the data that made this possible," says Stoller. "I suppose it was; yet now I am sure anyone can find these factors without using analysis. More than that, although the full array of influences surfaced in this treatment, I did not know

AN HYPOTHESIS



Anne Lunsford

that for a few years. Although some factors struck me immediately, it was only after seeing three more families that I decided others were true findings and neither coincidental nor artifacts." The findings from the first family studied have since been confirmed in 15 additional families.

What were the factors involved? Stoller explains that one must study three generations in order to understand the process. The mother's mother, the transsexual boy's grandmother, is a cold, harsh woman who has no love for her daughter. The girl is made to feel from birth that being female is worthless. She is treated with no affection or respect by her mother but serves simply as a slave to do the household tasks. On the other hand, her father loves her and they remain close for a few years. Unfortunately for her femininity, however, the attachment is one in which the father has his daughter join him in his masculine interests, encouraging her to be like him. Then sometime between the age of six and puberty he abandons her. (Death, separation, divorce and entering the service are among the reasons for abandonment.) In the first case studied, when the girl was six a new daughter was born and the father instantly turned his love and attention exclusively to the newborn.

With father's desertion, sometimes within days, the girl begins acting like a boy. She refuses to wear girls' clothes, insisting on dressing only in boys' clothes from underwear out. She cuts her hair short, refuses to play with girls and will only play with boys, in exclusively boys' games. She becomes a fine athlete, better than most of the boys. Even more, she wants to become a male, talks of sex change and prays to God for a penis. Up to this point, the story sounds like that found in females who grow up to be transsexuals, says Stoller. But, with the changes of puberty and evidence of oncoming adult femaleness, these girls stop waiting for maleness, become manifestly depressed and put on a feminine facade. In time, without romance, heterosexual fantasies or premarital sexual enthusiasms for men, they marry. They have pushed themselves into marriage, says Stoller, but their wish to be males, although con-

sciously renounced, and their hatred and envy because they are not, persist.

The men they marry are chosen by them to fulfill their own unhappy needs. These men are not effeminate, but they are distant and passive. They are not involved with their families, not respected by their wives and not physically present most of the time, leaving the young transsexual-to-be without much of a masculine model. One of these men, for instance, worked all weekend in a photographic darkroom; another drank beer and watched football all weekend, with the children instructed not to disturb him; another was a painter isolated in his studio. None could be induced to undergo therapy. They just weren't interested or involved with their sons.

Contrary to what one might expect before analysis revealed differently, the mothers were happy to give birth to a son. As had others, Stoller admits he thought very feminine boys were the result of a mother who was disappointed not to have had a girl. But these mothers were overjoyed, so overjoyed that they set up an excessively intimate symbiosis with their sons. "This intimacy," explains Stoller, "more complete than any I have seen under other circumstances or ever found reported, is set off by the infant's perceived beauty and gracefulness. If this mother finds the baby to be ideal—beautiful, cuddly, responsive to mother—he becomes the beautiful phallus for which she has yearned since her sad, hopeless girlhood. . . . Because her other sons are not considered beautiful and graceful, they are spared this intense symbiosis and are not feminized." (All the families studied had only one transsexual son, even when there were other sons in the family.)

When one hears of a mother and infant in a blissful relationship in the first months of life, one thinks only that this is normal, even ideal. One does not, however, expect it to go on day and night (up to 16 hours a day in some cases) with the mother trying to keep it from being interrupted, and especially, one does not expect it to persist for years. But Stoller has observed this type of intimacy to be still active when the children are brought to him around age four or five. By this age the boys act and look like beautiful girls, but

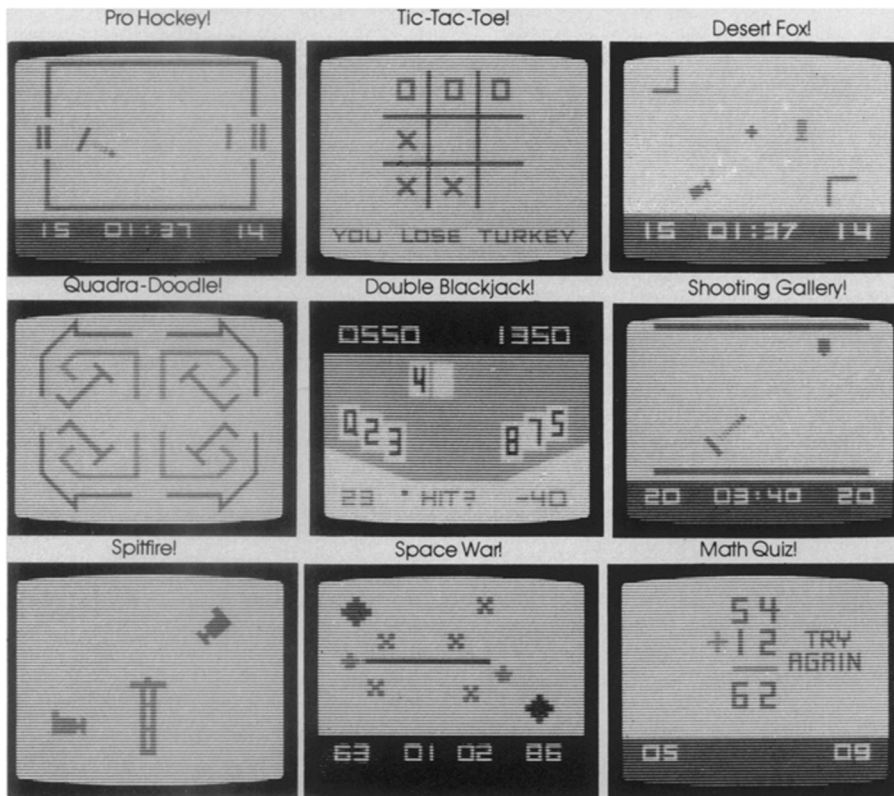
the mothers refuse to recognize this. They consciously cannot understand how anyone could mistake their child for a girl, so they do not spontaneously bring their boys for evaluation but are driven to, usually after their sons begin moving out into the world, especially to school. Then pressure builds up for the mother to consider her child abnormal and to get help.

At some point, one would expect the father to interrupt the process, but he was already chosen as a person who is not there, and he is not. With the fathers absent or uninterested, the mother is free to continue the symbiosis uninterrupted; no one moves in as a shield between mother and son. The father's second main function, to serve as a model for his son's masculinity, is also not possible. He simply is not present, and additionally, masculinity is so constantly disparaged in the family by the mother's remarks about his weak and absent father, that the boy is never encouraged to look on masculinity as a state he would admire and wish to identify with. Once the femininity begins to appear, somewhere around one or two years, the mother is thrilled to see it, all the while denying that it is strange behavior for her unquestionably male son. Instead, she defines it as lovely, fine, adorable and creative, and so encourages him to continue.

The story so far comes from the mothers, fathers, grandparents and neighbors, and is confirmed, says Stoller, by observations of the family when the boys are four or five. "These are not my fantasies of what is going on," he emphasizes. In addition to collecting data during treatment, he consults with the families of patients. Snapshots, movies, diaries, drawings, written stories and letters are studied, and Stoller tape-records every encounter, consultation or treatment, unless there is some reason not to do so. Even with all of this data, crucial information is still missing: Never observed by an outsider and not articulated by mothers or their transsexual sons is the process by which, within the first year or so of life, the little boy draws forth his femininity. So far, Stoller has only a clue. All the mothers mention that these sons' eyes are large and beautiful, which draws the mothers to look constantly into the babies' eyes. This is a powerful process, suggests Stoller, so intense that few individuals persist in it for more than moments. Yet these mothers keep it up as long as possible. Perhaps in this way, especially, the boys "drink in," merge with and sense they are part of their mothers' femaleness. Although this suggestion has not been confirmed, Stoller's data have been useful in the formulation of a workable hypothesis (of which there are very few in psychoanalysis).

Hypothesis: If a woman like this marries a man like this and has a beautiful, graceful son, she will create the above-

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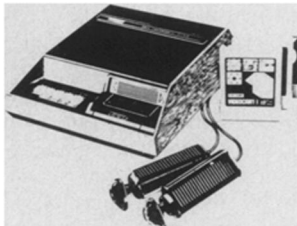
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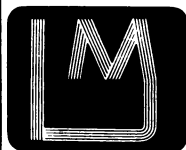
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. . . Transsexual

described symbiosis, making her son feminine by a year or so of age. She will then encourage the femininity, and the father will fail to intervene, so that the boy (in the absence of treatment or other circumstances that disrupt these family dynamics) will continue to develop in a feminine way. He will be feminine throughout his life, never having episodes of natural-appearing masculinity; he will not dress, walk or talk like a man, want sexual relations with women, desire to be a father, seek out a masculine profession or otherwise live in roles his society defines as masculine. No exigencies of life will get him to turn from his femininity. In time he will try to change his sex.

Corollary: To the extent that any element in this constellation is less strong or absent, the femininity will be lessened.

Corollary: The less these family dynamics are at work, the more likely masculinity will occur.

So far, says Stoller, "keeping in mind that the number of cases seen are too few [his emphasis]—the hypothesis and its corollaries have been confirmed." This may do more than help explain transsexualism. A study of extreme cases can teach one about mechanisms of similar nature but lesser degree. In other words, one begins to make sense of ordinary behavior. Freud, in his theory of normal masculine and feminine development, stated that maleness and masculinity were superior to femaleness and femininity. In addition to their inferior position, Freud suggested that women get off to a bad start because their first love relationship—with the mother—is homosexual. Males, from the very first, are heterosexual and have only to preserve this in order to become masculine. Females must make a great shift and somehow find a way to commit their affection and eroticism to a profoundly different sort of object—their father. Femininity, then, is a secondary, defensive state, acquired rather late in development. Stoller's data suggest that Freud's ideas should be modified. First, he says, it seems sure that maleness is not the primary or superior state, femaleness is. More to the point for the present-day analyst, says Stoller, "we are no longer sure that masculinity is the superior and more stable state. The evidence from feminine males suggests that we look, in all boys, to see if the earliest stage of gender development is the heterosexual one Freud postulated; rather, I think, there is an earlier stage wherein the boy is merged with his mother. Only gradually, and with his parents' help, will he separate from her, in time to know her as a separate, desired, opposite-sexed person. But in the earliest stage, he is in danger of femininity. The same merging with the mother will make the first stage of gender development a protofeminine one in girls as well; a powerful start if one is to grow up feminine." □