

Introduction

I am a *trans-woman*. I use the term broadly to mean someone born male who feels that they are in some sense female. *Trans-woman* implies a greater commitment to one's female identity than the offensive and more generic term *transgendered male*. *Trans-women* see themselves as women spiritually and many *trans-women* live at least part of their lives as women. Some *trans-women* are on a path to transition or have done so. I use the term *transsexual* more narrowly to mean a *trans-woman* who has transitioned.

This article is about the narratives that trans-women use to describe themselves to others and eventually to integrate into their own emotional sense of identity. It is especially about the bitter conflict that arose over the use of the two specific narrative terms: *female-essence transsexual* and *autogynephilic transsexual*. The former describes the more typical narrative of trans-women in our culture today. It came into prominence in the decades after Christine Jorgensen so notoriously changed her sex in the early fifties. Prior to this, men who wore women's clothes were simply seen as homosexuals. This was the predominant narrative accepted by society at that time and I suspect by most trans-women as well. A *female-essence transsexual* believes that she is in some sense female but born into the wrong body.

The category *autogynephilic transsexual* describes the narrative adopted by a smaller group of trans-women only in the last few years. *Autogynephilic transsexuals* believe that they have a sexual disorder that compels them to surgically change their bodies and live as women. Research psychologist Ray Blanchard originally proposed the Autogynephilia Theory of MtF Transsexualism¹ in 1989.

Much of the anger over the use of these terms is caused by the failure of some professionals and members of these two respective groups to acknowledge the scientific legitimacy of the other. Psychologist Madelyn H. Windzen believes that a problem contributing to this is the casual way that Ray Blanchard first defined autogynephilia and how others now use it. She describes this problem as follows:

Defining "autogynephilia" is more than giving a definition. It's giving the word a place in your perspective on transsexuality. It's how you use a word that counts. There are two broad ways I find researchers and transsexuals use the word "autogynephilia": as a "phenomenon" and as a "theoretical construct." Both Bailey and Blanchard equivocate between these two definitions. I feel this is why transsexuals are so divided over this issue. We each see only the definition that we feel more strongly about and we have plenty of evidence from experts to support our views.²

Ray Blanchard's theory did not receive much notice until the conflict over these terms and their meanings erupted in the spring of 2003. At that time noted sexologist J. Michael Bailey,³ then head of the Psychology Department at Northwestern University, published his book, *The Man*

Who Would Be Queen. In this book he gave official support to Ray Blanchard's theory and discredited the *female-essence* view that was previously accepted by most professionals. He stated that self-described *female-essence transsexuals* were actually *autogynephilic transsexuals* who were misleading researchers about their motivations.⁴ A firestorm immediately broke out in the trans community as well as among research and clinical professionals.

This article is my attempt to gather in one place some of the fascinating things that I've learned about our use of narratives to define ourselves. It is also to state my opinion regarding the conflict over Michael Bailey's now infamous book from my position as a minor participant in this conflict and as a lay person in the science of psychology.

The Trans-woman Who Is Me

One day in March of 2003 I received a gracious e-mail from psychologist Michael Bailey with a link to the online text of his new book, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*. I had sent him a complimentary message regarding a paper he had published online and apparently he put me on his e-mail list. I spent the next few days devouring his new book. I had no sense of the raging controversy that was already forming over that small type on my screen. I felt elated that I had found an expert, the head of the Psychology Department at Northwestern University no less, revealing to me what I assumed to be the latest scientific thinking on transsexualism. The subtitle, after all, was *The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism*.

Like many other trans-women I wanted more up-to-date information about my persistent belief that despite my male body I had always felt female in my mind. The book started with some interesting chapters about homosexual males and the childhood experiences of boys who would later become either homosexual or transsexual. But as I read through the later chapters I found myself feeling sad, depressed even. As a sixty year-old trans-woman, Bailey described me as a late-onset MtF transsexual. He claimed that I had a condition called autogynephilia, which was sexual arousal at the fantasy of myself as a woman. I had no real problem with that as I had experienced arousal associated with such thoughts, especially in my late teens. The part that bothered me was his claim that this arousal was the cause of my desire to live my life as a woman.

I had never considered that possibility. My sense of some inherent femaleness had started with my first memories, at least by three or four years of age. They could have started even earlier but certainly before I was aware of such a thing as sexual arousal.

Those feelings of femaleness in me have never gone away. They were present and strong throughout my early childhood. I played dress-up in my mother's clothes or with neighboring girlfriends but I never experienced arousal as far as I recall. My parents encouraged me to play with boys. Wanting to please them I did that too. Some boy stuff can be more fun than girl stuff anyway. I was not good at ball sports. I was physically capable but disliked the rough

competition. I enjoyed making forts out of the stalks from the cornfield at the end of our street. I always felt different when I was playing with boys. I wasn't like them. I always felt very much at home playing with girls. Since then I have always greatly enjoyed the company of women more than men.

I can vividly remember watching some older girls walking to school in the morning past my house when I was four. I wanted to be just like them when I was ready for school—down to their knee socks, their plaid skirts and the barrettes in their hair. I had no hatred of being a boy. I just believed that someone had made a big mistake and had put me in a boy's body and that eventually these things would sort themselves out. I remember thinking that I'd wake up one morning and everything would be OK, my parents would see that I was really a girl. They would take me to the big department store downtown to buy some proper clothes and toys and I would assume my proper role in life.

My feelings of some inherent femaleness have remained fairly constant in my life even though at times I have been more or less successful at disregarding them. However, those feelings always seemed to be the cause for my wish to someday live my life as a woman.

Gender Is Identity

Ray Blanchard defines autogynephilia as "a man's paraphilic tendency to be sexually aroused by the thought or image of himself as a woman".⁵ One of the key concepts in this model is his premise that all gender variant males must be categorized based on one of two "male" sexual interests: homosexuality or paraphilia.

Thus, an effeminate homosexual man who wants to appear sexy and attractive to heterosexual men will want to assume a female persona. Even so, it's hard to believe they could do that for any extended period without having some strong sense of a female identity as well. I can also believe that there may be a very small population of males who have a paraphilic desire to surgically change their genitals. Beyond this I really do not understand their choice. Why on earth would such a person want to take on a completely different persona and live the rest of their life as a woman? How is it possible to want to be female without also having some strong sense of female identity? To me, the only comprehensible reason for removing male genitals is to achieve harmony with the feeling that one is female.

The persona we inhabit is our visible and felt identity. It is not easily exchanged for a new one. Actors study for years just to be able to do that convincingly for a little while. Attending a thirty-year reunion can really make that case. All those crazy people you knew in high school are remarkably the same after you get past the hair loss and the bulging waistlines. It seems to me that if our personas were so easily discarded that many of those people would be unrecognizable strangers. When someone permanently commits to a persona other than their own they are committing to live every moment for the rest of their lives as a charade. How can anyone do that

without condemning themselves to a life of pain and unhappiness? I have friends who can become depressed just from getting a haircut if they think it doesn't look like them.

Gender is probably the most crucial element of our identity. There are heart-wrenching stories of young lives destroyed when parents and doctors guess wrong for their intersexed children. Anyone forced to assume a permanent gender persona different from whom they really believed themselves to be must suffer tremendously. The majority of young trans-women who must hide their gender from society live unhappy lives. However, that situation is improving. In urban areas young people are becoming more openly tolerant of all forms of diversity. But generally, and especially in rural communities, their suicide rate is above average.⁶ Many older trans-women turn to drug abuse and suffer from depression.⁷ Yet, the majority of post-op transsexuals report significantly improved happiness after SRS (sexual reassignment surgery).⁸ The only reasonable conclusion is that their surgery ended the charade. I find Ray Blanchard's theory a poor explanation for what is going on in my mind and the minds of most trans-women.

The Shame of Disloyalty

Not long after reading Michael Bailey's book I discovered Willow Arune's AG-support (autogynephilia support) forum on the Internet and joined it. Here was a chance to discuss this troubling idea with others. I wanted to hear in their own words how they could believe such a thing about themselves—or about me.

The next several months were a learning experience. My background is in engineering but psychology and human nature have always fascinated me. As the members of the AG-support forum and I challenged each other almost daily I spent a lot of time offline reading and exploring. Despite that, we eventually exhausted all the obvious arguments and both sides reached a stalemate.

At about that time I started looking deeper into the arguments they were making in support of Blanchard's theory. Several forum members had stated in their posts that hearing Blanchard's theory was a *coming home* for them, that they had finally heard the words that resonated with them emotionally.

Anne Lawrence is a Seattle doctor, a transsexual and a well-known advocate of Ray Blanchard's theory of autogynephilia. As a member of the AG-support forum she once described her strong emotional reaction when she first read Ray Blanchard's words. His theory of an autogynephilic basis for late-onset MtF transsexuality was one of the most profound statements she had ever encountered on the subject.

Aside from the deep gratification they expressed with Blanchard's theory I noticed another common thread in their arguments. Many of Bailey's online supporters stated intense feelings of discomfort at what they characterized as *disloyalty to their maleness*. They expressed

passionately, that even though they had undergone SRS and were now living full-time as women, they didn't believe that they were actually female in any sense. This was incomprehensible to me. Even hearing their own words I couldn't imagine how anyone could spend thousands of dollars, undergo radical surgery, assume lifelong hormone treatments, take on a female name and identity for the rest of their lives, and not have *some* inner sense of being female. They spoke as if the admission of any inherent femaleness was the ultimate degradation. That line they could not and would not cross.

Those same sentiments also seemed to underlie their strong hostility toward those of us who felt in ourselves some inherent femaleness. Their anger seemed focused on that most fundamental and personal part of our experience. The emotional strength of their belief was evident in the derogatory terms they occasionally used to describe us—such as deluded, mentally ill and psychotic.

I proposed this *shame of disloyalty to their maleness* idea to Anne Lawrence in a particularly memorable forum exchange. I suggested that they were unable to accept the idea of their own femaleness for that reason. I suggested that they had embraced the idea of autogynephilia as an officially sanctioned cause for their transsexuality because that excused them from having to disavow their maleness. For them, it seemed it was better to have a mental illness than to be disloyal to their birth gender. I suggested that those feelings might be connected to early childhood shame associated with their fathers' or older brothers' expectations.

Anne countered that to her, people like me, born male but believing that we were somehow female, were ashamed of the idea that we could be sexually motivated to live our lives as women. Anne suggested that we had embraced the post-modern fiction that we were women trapped in men's bodies, because that allowed us to avoid the truth. We did not have to admit to some strange sexual obsession as the cause for our condition. She explained that she and others like her were the realists, willing honestly to accept their lives as males with a sex-fueled disorder. We both thought the other was in denial.

But as I considered that exchange later, I was struck by the symmetry of her position vis-à-vis my own. I had to admit that I might have been attached to my *female-essence* narrative just as emotionally as Anne was to her *autogynephilia* narrative. It was this realization that caused me to start seeing this more as a dispute over ideologies and narratives than as a scientific controversy.

The Power of Beliefs

The high level beliefs that we hold about the world and our place in it define our cognitive identity. I believe that the powerful emotions attached to our higher-level identity beliefs often overcome our intellect as guides to our behavior. For trans-women there is no more important identity belief than our narratives about our gender.

Just to pick one example of how strong beliefs that exist in our minds can have such enormous effects, consider the nine justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, the preeminent legal minds of our nation. They have spent much of their lives perfecting their ability to keep ideology out of their decisions and have pledged to do so. Yet, time after time they can look at the same document, the US Constitution, and see almost opposite meanings in it. It seems to me that if they only used their passionless intellect they would very likely come to the same conclusions most of the time. But they not only come to different conclusions, their conclusions almost always align along consistent ideological (belief system) boundaries.

I now believe that the conflict over Michael Bailey's book *The Man Who Would Be Queen* is more easily understood as a dispute over competing narratives and the higher-level ideological beliefs they are part of, than in the hopeful speculations on transsexual etiology that either side has proposed.

Narratives Can Heal

At some time before four years of age some of us become aware of the confusing but persistent feeling that we are girls although the world says we are boys. For this to happen in our male-centric society at a time when we are forming our personality almost ensures that we are going to have some serious issues in life. We will need to find some potent means for dealing with this. I suggest that we do so by searching for an explanation for our feelings about ourselves that makes sense to us and that also makes sense to others. Thus we find our narratives that become our gender beliefs.

Different societies offer different transsexual narratives and these change over the years in response to cultural swings and evolving dominant memes. Since we trans-women are seeking acceptance from society we are compelled to choose from what is offered if we want even that meager level of recognition and protection. I propose that we will choose the narrative from our culture that fits best with our own emotional experience and that makes us feel best about ourselves. We also want a narrative that will encourage others to see us in the terms that we find the most acceptable.

For some it is that we are women trapped in a man's body. For others it is that we have a sex-fueled paraphilic disorder. For some it is that we have two spirits, a most friendly term used in some Native American cultures. For some it is that we love men and being a woman makes that easier. For some it is that we're really boys who like to play dress-up. And some say that they only do it for theatrical reasons.

No matter how we come to our narrative though, I am certain that over the years most *trans-women* eventually integrate their narrative completely with the emotions that made that narrative necessary. Our personal narrative becomes the cognitive dimension of our gender identity. It can become as real to us as any other experience *of knowing* in our lives.

The same is true for non-TS men and women. Their own, more typical gender identity narratives were also offered to them by society and those are somewhat different in every culture. Theirs are just as strongly assumed to be the same as the feelings they represent. For all of us they are our attempt to slide in between the hard edges of the social fabric where we can be an appreciated part of the world around us, at least as much as anyone else achieves that position in life.

Our Gender Narratives Become Our Controlling Beliefs

Trans or straight, adult or child, scientist or subject, we all choose the gender narrative that makes the most sense to us and that makes us feel best about ourselves. These become a set of gender beliefs with their own strong emotions that will have an important effect on our behavior and personality throughout our lives.

Many in our society see us and our narratives as repugnant and abnormal. They no doubt hold the socially conservative belief instilled in them in childhood that only very disgusting boys act like girls and that such boys should be humiliated and punished. But many others, the growing majority, hopefully, are willing to live and let live. They hold the more socially liberal belief that no one should be punished and humiliated for being different.

Trans-women on the *female-essence* side of this dispute generally hold the strong belief that they are in some sense female. I find myself in this group. We believe that in a better world we would have been born with the bodies of women and would have had lives to match our gender identity. That belief feels so right to us because it closely matches our emotional experience. Many of us also hold a high level belief that self-realization, as long as it doesn't hurt others, is every person's right. We demand that right for ourselves.

It seems to me that many trans-women on the *autogynephilia* side of this dispute hold the belief that only very disgusting boys undeserving of their father's love would ever be disloyal to their birth sex. That belief feels so right to them because it closely matches their emotional experience. I also suspect that it conforms to the high level belief of some in this group that self-realization that violates social norms and humiliates their family is a shameful act. Yet, they have this irresistible desire to surgically change their sex and take on a permanent outward female identity. Ray Blanchard's theory of autogynephilia offers them a powerful narrative. Michael Bailey's book *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, gives that narrative the social visibility necessary for it to effectively serve that purpose. They can now claim illness, rather than betray their birth gender.

I believe that high level beliefs can blind even the best of scientists. I suspect that Ray Blanchard and Michael Bailey hold some version of a strong belief that is very prevalent in our culture, especially among those born before the sixties. That is, a man who wants to live his life as a

woman must be mentally ill. From some of their other writing, I suspect they may also be committed to seeing gender classifications as dichotomies and not as variations along a normal curve. It is reasonable to expect that whatever scientific theories they would propose or support about trans-women would confirm and justify those higher level beliefs. Narratives such as the female-essence version of transsexualism would likely feel incongruent with their most fundamental beliefs about human nature, beliefs they held long before they became psychologists. I believe that Michael Bailey expresses this outlook throughout his book.

For all of us, the narratives regarding gender identity that we choose to accept or advocate can only be those that support and confirm our higher-level identity beliefs because that's the way we are wired. If you think that that doesn't apply to highly trained professionals remember the Supreme Court.

Conclusions

My own understanding of transsexualism and the conflict between the autogynephilia and female-essence sides of this dispute as I have observed it, participated in it and as I've described it here is a lay undertaking. For an opposite perspective, here is Michael Bailey's defense⁹ of his actions surrounding the publication of his book. Andrea James offers an excellent summary of the opposition to Bailey in her paper, *A Defining Moment in our History*.¹⁰

In my opinion, the desire of some males to become women is strong, real and persistent. How we come to explain that desire to ourselves and to society is possibly a more important but separate topic. Science might offer some intriguing hints but neuroscience is just now starting to uncover the first secrets of our central nervous systems at this very basic level. Whatever science eventually reveals about our desire, it will no doubt be seen as the result of some combination of interrelated causes spread out through time in each person's environment, genetics and neural development. I doubt this puzzle will ever be completely unraveled.

Which leaves us trans-women with our narratives. Whatever the scientific causes, I personally believe that our desire to be women is a normal expression of human nature, not a mental disorder. However, neither my ideological belief, nor others' that it is a disorder could or should undermine the basic contract of civilized society that people should be free to do as they wish with their own lives and bodies as long as they don't directly hurt others by their actions. I suspect that this is the higher level philosophical belief that is really at stake here, and not so much any particular view of transsexualism.

After listening to the members of the AG-support group over several months, I'm sure that they were chronically unhappy being classified as *women trapped in men's bodies*. For these troubled souls Bailey's book offered them an escape from the worst of their unhappiness. He not only offered an official explanation that was emotionally satisfying for them; he denied the female-essence narrative. That must have been truly emancipating. I suspect they felt much as Anne

Lawrence described when she first read Ray Blanchard's theory. Even though their narrative remains incomprehensible to me, it is the explanation that makes them feel best about themselves. We are all entitled to our narratives, but not to anyone else's narratives.

Beyond that, I have read as many of Ray Blanchard's papers that I can find online. I find most of his ideas difficult to reconcile with my own experience. And, I don't think a clear case for his theory. However, I'll leave it to the real scientists to work those things out.

Despite that, I still find his theory important in other ways. For one, it marks the emergence of a new transsexual narrative in our culture, one that his theory inadvertently created and legitimized. Social scientists should be pleased with the opportunity to study this event in real time.

Blanchard's theory of autogynephilic transsexualism also has a political dimension and this could ultimately have the greatest impact on our lives. In the last few years many trans-women have appeared in public, in movies and on popular television programs. Rather than being vilified they are being understood and accepted. Many social conservatives find this outrageous and threatening. No matter its scientific validity, Blanchard's theory pathologizes all trans-women's desire to be women.

Autogynephilic transsexualism is therefore not just a scientific theory or a transsexual narrative. It is also a pathological political category that some, like Michael Bailey, would like to see applied to all trans-women by including it in diagnostic manuals. Already, politicians are open to attack for supporting legal protections for persons that have now been characterized by some prominent scientists as having a sex-fueled disorder.

How much damage this will actually cause probably depends on the extent of the control of our government by social conservatives in the future. With the recent shift in the Supreme Court ideological makeup, a bevy of new cases challenging past progressive legislation such as *Roe v Wade* are now working their way up the system. A worst case scenario could see laws that make it illegal for anyone born male to appear in public as a female. State or national laws could make it illegal for transsexuals to change their gender designation on legal documents such as driver's licenses. Restroom access could be restricted to birth gender. Aside from the complicated questions of insurance coverage, SRS could become illegal or severely restricted.

If Ray Blanchard and Michael Bailey had been more interested in the compelling psychosocial questions surrounding crossed-gender identity instead of the psychosexual, we all might have learned something useful from their research. Instead, trans-women now find our most personal desires and our legitimacy in question.

¹ Blanchard, R. (1989). The Concept of Autogynephilia and the Typology of Male Gender Dysphoria. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. v177:pp 616-623

² Madelyn H. Wyndzen's Website – The Psychology of Gender Identity and Transgenderism
http://www.genderpsychology.org/autogynephilia/j_michael_bailey/autogynephilia.html

³ J. Michael Bailey's Professional Website
<http://www.psych.northwestern.edu/psych/people/faculty/bailey/>

⁴ In *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, "Most gender patients lie - - -" p. 172. "The most common way that autogynephiles mislead others is by denying the erotic component of their gender bending." p. 173

⁵ Article - Varieties of Autogynephilia and their Relationship to Gender Dysphoria by Ray Blanchard, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol 22-3, June 1993, Pages: 241 – 251

⁶ Paper - GLBT Youth Suicide by Warren J. Blumenfeld & Laurie Lindop
<http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/orgs/glstn/youth.suicide.overview>

⁷ Paper - Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Health - Transgender health
<http://www.metrokc.gov/health/glb/ transgender.htm>

⁸ Transsexual Women's Successes: Links and Photos by Lynn Conway
<http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TSSuccesses/TSSuccesses.html>

⁹ Michael Bailey's Statement of Defense
<http://trans-academics.org/forum/index.php?s=cde2eff26febc746e30860c648a61f30&showtopic=674>

¹⁰ Andrea James – Paper - A Defining Moment in our History
<http://www.tsroadmap.com/info/gender-identity.pdf>