



Cross-Dressing

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Cross-dressers, commonly defined as individuals who wear clothing and take on an appearance and behavior considered by a given culture to be appropriate for another gender but not one's own, have often been misunderstood and maligned, especially in societies with strict, dichotomous gender roles.

As a result, many cross-dressers choose to hide this part of themselves and sometimes internalize a sense of shame and guilt. The individuals who were tormented by their cross-dressing were more likely than others to seek the assistance of doctors, leading many medical authorities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to view cross-dressing as a mental illness. Not until the 1960s, when generally well-adjusted cross-dressers formed support groups and became more visible to researchers, did cross-dressing start to become less stigmatized and more accepted.

Many psychiatrists, however, still consider cross-dressing to be pathological, and cross-dressers frequently continue to be stereotyped as having a perverse fetish.

Cross-Dressing in History

Accounts of women and men who cross-dressed have appeared in newspapers, legal records, and medical journals in the United States since the sixteenth century. For example, white explorers and missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found that many Native American tribal cultures recognized multiple genders, including "women-men" and "men-women" who took on cross-gender roles, often involving cross-dressing.

In the nineteenth century, European and American sexologists discussed cases of individuals who cross-dressed, typically categorizing them as "homosexuals" or as having a "contrary sexual feeling."

Like sex researchers, many contemporary historians have contended that men and especially women who cross-dressed in the past did so as a cover to pursue same-sex relationships or, in the case of women, to take advantage of male privilege, such as being able to escape narrow gender roles or enter traditionally male occupations. These women are said to have "posed" or "passed" as men and to have been in a lesbian relationship if they lived with another woman. There is no consideration given to the possibility that they identified as men or felt more comfortable dressed in traditionally male clothing.

Toward a Definition and a Diagnosis

In order to distinguish gender expression from sexual behavior, German physician Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term "transvestism" (Latin for "cross-dressing") in 1910. Hirschfeld, a cross-dresser himself, argued that transvestites were not fetishists, but were overcome with a "feeling of peace, security and exaltation, happiness and well-being . . . when in the clothing of the other sex."



This photograph of a cross-dresser appeared in 1902 in the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* published by Magnus Hirschfeld. Archiv für Sexualwissenschaft, Berlin.

Challenging the claim by other sexologists that cross-dressers were homosexuals and almost entirely men, Hirschfeld demonstrated that transvestites could be male or female and of any sexual orientation. In fact, most of the individuals he studied were heterosexual.

After Hirschfeld, most of the work published on cross-dressing through the 1960s was by psychiatrists, who, based on the distressed patients in their care, considered cross-dressing to be a perversion treatable through psychotherapy. Ignoring Hirschfeld's groundbreaking research, they argued that transvestism was a male phenomenon often associated with fetishism. Psychoanalytic literature tended to explain cross-dressing as either a form of homosexuality or an escape from homosexuality resulting from castration anxiety.

Cross-Dressing Clubs

Prior to the 1960s, there was little organizing among cross-dressers; many doctors even urged the cross-dressers who came to them to hide their transvestism and avoid contact with other cross-dressers. A new era began in 1960, when Virginia Prince began publishing *Transvestia* magazine and helped found the first national organization for cross-dressers. Known today as Tri-Ess (the Society for the Second Self), the group has more than 30 chapters in the United States.

Prince publicized the idea that most transvestites were "normal" heterosexual men who needed to express the "woman within." She did not acknowledge female or gay male cross-dressers and excluded them from the society. The cross-dressing clubs that formed in subsequent years often followed suit, so that the burgeoning cross-dressing movement consisted primarily of married, heterosexual men and their wives and children.

Research on Cross-Dressers

As the number of clubs grew in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers were able to conduct surveys of cross-dressers who were not patients and thus were more comfortable with their cross-dressing. The fact that most club members were white, middle-class, heterosexual men meant that the resulting samples were still not representative of cross-dressers as a whole. Nevertheless, these studies provided the first scientific look at the experiences of a significant segment of cross-dressers.

Research on heterosexual male cross-dressers finds that most began cross-dressing clandestinely before puberty, with some starting as early as their preschool years. Contrary to the popular belief that their cross-dressing was first initiated or encouraged by a parent, the studies show that the youths decided to do so themselves and never told anyone else about their behavior. Rarely did cross-dressing begin in adulthood, but as they grew older and had greater autonomy, they were able to cross-dress more completely and more frequently.

As to why these men cross-dress, the literature has historically cited sexual excitement as their primary motivation. But more recent studies conclude that cross-dressing also enables individuals to express another aspect of themselves and to develop a cross-gender identity. While cross-dressing may begin as a source of arousal, many of the men state that other factors become more important over time, such as achieving a feminine sense of self and temporarily escaping from masculine gender norms.

The little research that has been conducted on female cross-dressers concludes that most feel more comfortable in traditionally male clothing, but are not aroused by the practice. In a study of fifteen women who typically dressed in male-identified clothing and were often mistaken for men, Holly Devor found that the women chose to cross-dress because it gave them a sense of freedom and fit with their way of life. Most identified as lesbians and found acceptance in the lesbian community, where gender expectations are generally less rigid than in the dominant society.

Perhaps because of this acceptance, female cross-dressers have felt less of a need to organize support groups than some male cross-dressers and, as a result, often continue to be ignored by researchers and the general public. In the last decade, though, female cross-dressers have become more visible with the rise of a drag king culture.

Contemporary Psychiatric Views

The survey research involving members of cross-dressing clubs helped change the medical community's image of transvestites from homosexual to heterosexual men. However, many psychiatrists continue to view cross-dressing as a compulsive fetish.

Since 1987, the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, the profession's guide to mental disorders, has included the diagnosis "Transvestic Fetishism," which it defines as a heterosexual male who has "recurrent intense sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies involving cross-dressing" and "has acted on these urges or is markedly distressed by them."

The most recent edition of the *DSM* (1994) acknowledges that some transvestites are attracted to others of the same sex and that the fetishistic aspect may diminish over time, but the clinical definition of transvestism remains a heterosexual male who has a perverse, compelling desire to dress in women's clothing because of the erotic pleasure he derives from doing so.

Because "transvestite" connotes a perversion and excludes female, gay, and bisexual male cross-dressers, as well as heterosexual men who cross-dress for non-sexual reasons, the term is rejected today by many transpeople in favor of "cross-dresser."

Representations of Cross-Dressing in Popular Culture

Cross-dressing by heterosexual men is also often stigmatized in popular culture, as something either to laugh at or to fear. In movies such as Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Sydney Pollack's *Tootsie* (1982), Chris Columbus's *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), and Wallace Wolodarsky's *Sorority Boys* (2002), men who are not cross-dressers are compelled by circumstances to temporarily masquerade as women to great comic effect (*Some Like It Hot* and *Tootsie* have been considered the funniest American films of all time).

Actual cross-dressers are rarely represented on the screen, and when they are, as in such films as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), they are often portrayed as psychopathic serial killers.

Conclusion

Cross-dressing is a common practice with a long history, yet a lack of knowledge and understanding persists, both among doctors and the general public. Until cross-dressers began to organize in the 1960s and 1970s, little accurate research had been conducted on their lives since the groundbreaking work of Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910.

Scientific studies are now beginning to provide more insight into the experiences of cross-dressers, but a sickness model continues to hold sway in the medical profession and is reinforced by stereotypical images in the mainstream media. Clearly, cross-dressers and their allies will need to do much more educating and agitating in order to change the negative image of cross-dressing.

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Tri-Ess, The Society for the Second Self: www.tri-ess.org.

About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.