

Book Review

NOT KNOWING

Exploring Transsexualism. By Colette Chiland. Translated from the French by David Alcorn. London: Karnac, 2005; 100pp, £9.99.

In the author's own words, this book is intended to be 'a contribution to the quest for information and effort to reflect' (p. 6). This is difficult to achieve in this subject, which is fraught with prejudice, whether from the lobbying of protectors of civil rights, or from the judgements of people who do not want to reflect or who feel horror or revulsion towards those who are prepared to undergo genital surgery to follow an inner compulsion of 'being the other sex'.

Considering how new the term 'transsexualism' is (little more than 60 years old), the burgeoning medical interest in treatment interventions and the fast changing legal and civil rights legislation in relation to transsexuals, it is surprising how little is known with certainty about transsexualism. Any new book on the subject is welcome, especially one written with such expert clinical knowledge and academic experience.

Colette Chiland, is Professor Emeritus at Rene Descartes University of Paris, Psychiatrist-in-chief at the Alfred Binet Centre, a Training Analyst of the Paris Psychoanalytical Society, and Honorary President of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions (IACAPAP). The style of her writing in this slim book, *Exploring Transsexualism*, with its wide-ranging account of gender dysphoria, goes a long way in stimulating thoughtful questioning.

Some questions she answers. What is the background to this condition? What is society's response? How does transsexualism relate to 'normal' development? More questions remain unanswered. Is this an illness with biological causes? Is it a 'normal variation' like homosexuality, or is it psychologically and socially caused and therefore potentially understandable? The frustration of not knowing in itself will provoke further questions in those who know either only very little or a good deal about the subject. Psychotherapists, surgeons, psychiatrists and endocrinologists who contribute to 'the treatment' of transsexuals will be given food for thought. But so will those who are interested politically, culturally and philosophically in the significance of the categories 'sex' and 'gender' (how are they the same and different?) – familiar terms that easily become oversimplified.

The book begins by describing the conditions of intersex – where individuals have a biological mismatch between hormone-determined sexual characteristics, chromosomes and gender role – and of transsexualism, where what is at odds is the psychological experience of sexual identity and bodily sex. While intersex can be medically understood, in transsexualism the explanations still remain almost entirely hypothetical, despite research efforts to unravel biological, hormonal, psychological and social aetiologies. The book goes on to describe different cultural attitudes towards intersex and transsexual states (the East

is more accepting than the West) and the mythologies of our cultural history that support symbolic concepts of transsexualism and hermaphrodite and the value of crossing sexes as part of initiation into aspects of the adult world.

When she comes to talking about treatment and the therapeutic encounter, Chiland writes with a mix of deep compassion, frustration and even incomprehension about the psychoanalyst's role in these conditions. But she gives some hope to those who attempt to work with transsexuals. Even though they may appear as though they have no wish to reflect upon themselves and their condition, transsexuals have a wish to talk and Chiland says, 'I would never reject a patient who decides obstinately to follow the transsexual path ... I want to explore with the patient who or what he or she is and leave as many doors open as possible' (p. 22).

But there are few clear diagnostic or aetiological signposts to help a psychotherapist. Despite similarity with other psychopathologies – narcissism, borderline, and psychosomatic for instance – transsexualism is not an exact fit with any of these in the conviction transsexuals hold of a mismatch between body and soul. And despite some overlaps, homosexuals and transvestites have attitudes to sexual identity and sexuality that can be distinguished from those of transsexuals.

Chiland faces the fact that many transsexuals feel better after surgical transformation to the opposite sex. This is complicated by the considerable market for genital operations and by different national human rights legislation, which varies as to whether or not surgery is considered an essential part of society's acceptance of someone becoming a member of the opposite sex to their birth sex. It is also complicated by uncertainty of outcome. Sometimes genital surgery leads to further misery, physical or mental, and sometimes the success of surgery can be accompanied by a wish for psychotherapy after surgery and a genuine attempt either to mourn what has been lost or to gain understanding.

Even though it is difficult to change the body it is more difficult to 'change what people have in their minds' (p. 36). All the psychotherapist can aim to do is help by struggling to understand. However, it is worth noting that children who present with transsexualism often do change on reaching adulthood, either to nontranssexual heterosexuality or to homosexuality. But those who present as adults are less likely to do so.

In the chapter 'How the transsexual mind works' Chiland makes it clear how difficult it is to understand what lies beneath the transsexual attitude. She explores the extreme lengths to which transsexuals will go in order to get what they feel belongs to them. Perhaps, she hypothesizes, they also aim to avoid thinking about their sexual desires, which cause unbearable turmoil. The transsexual often seems to have an empty mind and is therefore difficult to know. Put another way transsexuals find it difficult to find words to communicate their experience and psychotherapy does not provide the guiding theories to make the deeper contact, which might provide more helpful psychological treatment.

Transsexualism invites us to think about how society defines men and women. One can only be male or female, not neuter and not 'more' or 'less' male or female. The obvious way to define male and female is by the presence of the genital organs. But intersex people make us see that things are not so simple and that difference might be best described through our chromosomes, or by general appearance, or by role and not by genitalia. To date when research has tried looking at the psychological differences between men and women they amount to little more than mathematical and communication abilities and levels

of aggression. Transsexualism strangely caricatures society's distinctions between men and women and overlooks similarities.

With regard to normal gender or psychosexual development, the process of bodily identification with the same-sex parent, siblings or peers, rather than with the opposite sex remains mysterious. In transsexualism there is an active choice towards transsexualism or an active refusal of conventional sexual identity and it must begin very early in life when babies are not obviously able to distinguish that they belong to one bodily sex or another. Which aspects of the contact between parents and their infant might prevent the transsexual child from breaking free and achieving an integrated mind and body identity as man or woman? Does a mental sexual identity develop before bodily sexual identity? How does this affect transsexuals' own parenting, and their sexual relationships with their partners?

Chiland says, 'A baby is never neuter as far as the parents are concerned' (p. 65), although it may erroneously be considered male or female for a range of biological, social or psychological reasons. So in the mind of the other one must be male or female. But during childhood there is a possibility for an individual child to remain neuter or neutral about gender towards and within himself or herself, through detachment or disavowal, which is challenged at adolescence. So the child transsexual can say, 'I want to grow up a member of the opposite sex' whereas the adult transsexual must say 'I am a member of the opposite sex.'

In her final chapters, Chiland explores the fact that 'transsexuals put us to the test' in the robustness of our attitude to what she calls the 'sex compass' (p. 73). Understanding and making personal sense of sexual difference is one of the central guides in life and intimacy suffers when it is not resolved. This is the basis of the intense and confusing countertransferences experienced in working with transsexuals who have lost their sexual compass and who challenge the constancy of our own. Remaining consistently 'male' or 'female' may be impossible if gender and sexual identity are as polymorphous as sexuality itself.

Society's response to transsexualism has thrown up as many problems for individuals as it has solved, by allowing legal recognition of transsexualism and gender change operations. Moreover the fluidity in male and female social roles of today has created boundary crossing that seems to cause as many problems as does rigidly held sexual difference.

Chiland's own response is cryptic. She talks about society's 'mad response to a mad request' (p. 79). Can any of us be as neutral as the analyst attempts to be, accepting and observing reality (transsexualism is a reality), or can one only be for or against? It would have been helpful to have heard more of Chiland's ideas about why society is driven to such 'madness' and about how the difficulties of handling countertransference in this area of work might be tackled.

This book is not for a person who wants clarity on a complex subject or theoretical understanding, Stoller or Di Ceglie are more likely to provide this – but it is an excellent account of a condition that causes much unhappiness and of the many questions that the condition raises with regards to society's attitudes to sex and gender.

Di Ceglie D. *A Stranger in My Own Body: Atypical Gender Identity Development and Mental Health*. London: Karnac Books, 1998.

Stoller R.J. 'The Transsexual Experiment', from *Sex and Gender* Vol. 2. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1975.

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