Social Desirability Response Set and Systematic Distortion in the Self-Report of Adult Male Gender Patients

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This study showed that the "socially desirable" presentation for a heterosexual male gender dysphoric is one that emphasizes traits and behaviors characteristic of "classic" transsexualism. Fifty-one homosexual and 64 heterosexual adult male gender patients were administered the Crowne-Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale as well as eight questionnaire measures that tapped various features of the clinical history commonly given great weight in differential diagnosis. The tendency for a heterosexual subject to describe himself in terms of moral excellence or admirable personal qualities was significantly correlated with scores in the "transsexual" direction on all eight sexological measures; for the homosexual subjects, only one correlation was significant. It is argued that the patients most motivated to create a favorable impression on the examiner are likely to be those most anxious to obtain approval for sex reassignment surgery. Because, in this population, the socially desirable presentation is "feminine," it is possible that the differences in the histories produced by transvestites and heterosexual transsexuals are exaggerated to an unknown degree by the motivation of the latter to obtain approval for this operation. The findings do not diminish the important distinction between these groups, but they do suggest caution in interpreting the self-report data that have been used in comparing them.

KEY WORDS: gender identity; social desirability; transsexualism; transvestism.

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INTRODUCTION

The third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) distinguishes two syndromes of gender identity disturbance in adult heterosexual males. According to this source, the essential feature of *transvestism* is recurrent and persistent cross-dressing by a heterosexual male that, at least initially, is for the purpose of sexual excitement. Transvestites do not desire removal of their male genitals. *Heterosexual transsexualism* denotes the condition of those men who, though they are sexually attracted to women, nonetheless strongly desire to become women themselves—to be rid of their genitals and live permanently in society as females. The *Manual* remarks that some proportion of transvestites gradually develop the desire to dress and live permanently as women and recommends that, in such cases, the diagnosis should be changed to (heterosexual) transsexualism.

There is obviously some important difference between heterosexual transsexuals and transvestites that determines why the former ardently desire surgical sex reassignment and the latter do not. Can one find clues to the nature of this difference by comparing these groups with regard to self-reported erotic interests or childhood gender role preferences? Such comparisons have been carried out by Freund et al. (1982), who found that heterosexual transsexuals reported less erotic attraction to females, more feminine feelings and behavior in boyhood, and less fetishism than a combined group of transvestites and heterosexual "borderline transsexuals" (an intermediate category employed by these authors). The potential heuristic value of differences in such self-report data depends, however, on the extent to which they are affected by the desire to create a favorable impression on the examiner. If the "socially desirable" presentation for a heterosexual male gender patient is one that emphasizes childhood femininity and erotic interest in males and downplays fetishistic arousal and erotic interest in females, then the difference in the histories produced by transvestites and heterosexual transsexuals could be exaggerated to an unknown degree by the motivation of the latter to obtain approval for surgical sex reassignment.

The existence of distortion in the self-report of male gender dysphorics has long been suggested by clinical observers, who have commented on it in quite diverse contexts. In a discussion of transvestite publications (i.e., periodicals written by transvestites for transvestites), Benjamin (1966) remarked on the tendency of many transvestites to minimize the connection between cross-dressing and erotic arousal. Benjamin believed that the denial of sexual motives for transvestites, reflected in the editorial stance of such publications, was meant to make transvestism more respectable and therefore more acceptable to the public. He also wrote, however, that this "de-