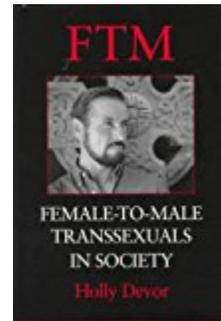


# H-Net Reviews

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Holly Devor. *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. xxviii + 609 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33631-6.

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## Girls Will Be Boys

According to Holly Devor, transsexualism is a topic which has received little attention. Existing research on the subject analyzes male-to-female transsexualism (MTF), but nothing has been written about women who have chosen to undergo a sex- and gender-identity shift. This void can be explained, in part, by issues of masculinity. For some, it is astounding that a man would abandon male privilege for the female world of subordination. Consequently, such transformations have garnered the lion's share of this topic. Another reason centers around the incompleteness of female-to-male changes. As Devor states, "the ultimate signifier of manhood is, of course, the penis," and since plastic surgeons cannot create a normal functioning penis, most FTM transsexuals have not completed the procedure (p. 405). Does lacking a penis mean sex reassignment has not occurred, or is changing one's sex dependent on more than an appendage? To answer these questions, Devor studies forty-five people who had been born women but who either considered themselves, or were in the process of becoming, men.

Devor posits that transsexualism, which gained notoriety following Christine Jorgensen's sex reassignment surgery in the 1950s, probably existed earlier. Although the surgical procedures that allow for sex change are relatively recent advances, Devor believes that women who view themselves as incomplete men have existed throughout history. While such evidence is difficult to locate, Devor presents examples of women who lived as men, fought in wars and even took wives. Their true sex became known only after hospitalization or death. On such example is the famous surgeon Dr. James Barry.

She/he gained prestige for her/his surgical skills (she/he performed the first successful Cesarean section). Barry was a ladies' man who was frequently in the company of gorgeous women. It was only upon her/his death that the genitalia revealed a different story.

But what causes transsexualism? Devor acknowledges that there may be a genetic factor or predisposition, but makes it clear that there is no scientific agreement. Yet through her interviews, it becomes evident that her subjects shared some common experiences. First, most of the participants viewed their mothers as weak and subservient. In contrast, they gravitated toward their fathers or male role models with whom they felt an affinity. Even in homes where fathers were abusive, these participants still saw masculine/male as dominant and powerful and they wanted those attributes. Second, as young girls, most were considered "tomboys" because of their masculine tendencies. Consequently, they spent more time with their fathers, brothers and other male children. "Thirty-eight participants (86 percent) indicated that they would have preferred to have spent most of their childhood time with boys rather than girls" (p. 176). As adolescence approached and their bodies began to change, the participants hoped they would change into men. For some, it never dawned on them that they were anything but male. The teen years, therefore, proved extremely difficult for these individuals. Fathers tended to limit their time with daughters who were adolescents, expecting that girls would learn best about being women from mothers and older sisters. This abandonment caused participants to feel isolated; they were never close to their

mothers and now psychologically and physically separated from their fathers. It is clear from Devor's interviews that sexual dysphoria (people whose own beliefs/feelings about their sexual nature differs from the physical manifestations) was already established or identifiable by adolescence.

Sexual intimacy during the teen years proved an additional problem for Devor's subjects. Most felt "disinterest and alienation from almost any form of heterosexual relations during adolescence" (p. 280). Since most of the participants entered puberty with an image of themselves as boys, their fantasies and desires were towards girls. This is not to imply that these subjects were lesbian. As Devor explains, lesbians, while attracted to other females, still see themselves as women and enjoy their sexual identity. Female-to-male transsexuals, on the other hand, view themselves as men. To them it is normal behavior to be attracted to women as other men are. Thus, in order to pursue their desires, many participants entered into lesbian relationships before identifying themselves as transsexuals. Within the lesbian community, they often found allies who understood their desires. Notwithstanding such acceptance, they at least had an avenue to explore their attraction to women. According to Devor, however, some participants did attempt to conform to societal norms by becoming involved with men. They often hoped that being with men would "change" their feelings and desires. A few married and even had children, but their self identification as male never faltered.

Final acceptance of their transsexualism came slowly. Press reports surrounding the Christine Jorgensen case alerted people to the possibility that sex reassignment was indeed possible. As most participants became aware that such surgery was available, they conducted additional research to discover that surgery could also be performed for female-to-male patients. Often they were helped in this endeavor by loved ones or partners. But knowing about the surgery and taking the next step toward scheduling one took time. The participants carefully weighed all their options. The notion that their sexual dysphoria affected more than just themselves (they were not alone) and that new procedures were available to alter sexual identities was earth shattering. "Typically," Devor writes, "by the time that participants decided that they were transsexual and that they had to take action of their transsexualism, they saw such moves as last options. They felt that they had exhausted all known ways to live in the world as women" (p. 375).

The process of sexual reassignment is extensive.

Many participants utilized specialized clinics dealing with transsexualism. Each patient underwent three months of psychotherapy before they could begin hormone therapy. They then continued therapy for another three months and had to be evaluated by another professional therapist before the procedure would continue. Lastly, following therapy, they were required to live as men for one year before any surgery would be performed. What participants found through their use of hormones is that they provided "more extensive, long-lasting, and seemingly internally produced physical manifestations of maleness" (p. 418). Thus, they could make "use of gender markers, such as clothing and mannerisms, backed up by secondary sex characteristics, such as beards and deep voices, to convey the message to others" that they were now men (p. 419).

Support during this transition is crucial to a patient's overall well-being. For Devor's participants, "coming out" to their family, friends and co-workers was therefore an important part of the process. As expected, people's opinions varied. Some were supportive of participant's transsexualism, while others were not. While there is no standard response, Devor concludes that participants who had intimate and long-standing relationships with friends and family received support. Those who were more distanced from the participants often had trouble accepting the change.

Devor also examines how life and relationships changed for these FTM transsexuals. Many began relationships with women as men. And while only a few had undergone surgery to construct a penis, that did not seem to thwart the others from establishing relationships. A common desire to gain eventually a penis, however, was expressed. Yet since the surgery is still ineffectual at approximating a "normal-looking" penis and the cost is so high, most participants decided to wait. A few argued that they had completed the transformation, even without a penis; they contended that being a man was more than a physical part.

Devor concludes that what marks these participants today is their ability to look beyond gender and sexual identities. They have seen life from both the male and female perspective, and that, in turn, has made them more tolerant of others. Since they have "learned to see each gender with greater empathy and clarity than do most people, many participants were able to choose more selectively from among admirable gender traits and to reject those which were not to their liking" (p. 571). In sum, Devor argues that transsexuals experience a devel-

opmental process where they recognize a sense of dissatisfaction with their sex. They then have to believe that this dissatisfaction would disappear with changes to their gender and sex. Finally, they identify themselves as transsexuals and undergo reassignment techniques (p. 586).

As a sociologist, Devor constructs this book based upon her survey responses. Each participant either filled out an exhaustive questionnaire which they mailed to Devor, or a face-to-face interview was scheduled. The book is thus arranged with introductory sections (First Questions, Childhood Years, Adolescence, Pre-Transition Years, Changing Over and Life After Transition) in which Devor explores the topic, followed by segments of interviews which confirm those findings, and a summation section. Arranged chronologically, the reader traces the journey these transsexuals traveled toward sex reassignment. While the substance of the book comes largely from these interviews, Devor also consulted numerous secondary sources on developmental theory and sexual variance, thus offering a blending of primary and secondary resources.

While the book is insightful, Devor's response group was limited. Devor acknowledges the difficulty she had in locating female-to-male transsexuals who were willing to discuss their lives. However, basing such conclu-

sions on only forty-five respondents seems scant to this historian. Devor states that face-to-face interviews were the most productive because she could have participants clarify responses which was not possible for those who only filled out the questionnaire. Yet a large number only responded in written form. In addition, of those who had face-to-face interviews, one-third did not complete a second interview. Perhaps a larger sampler group would not alter Devor's conclusions, but one wonders. Also, when discussing influences on these transsexuals, Devor needed to explore the role of the media. Studies indicate that it profoundly affects or influences notions of masculinity and femininity, male and female.

Devor has shed light on a topic largely ignored in academia. Hopefully this work will inspire others to pursue research in this area. Understanding how humans identify and, at times, alter their gender and sex will allow those of us involved in gender studies to construct a more complex picture of men and women; one that recognizes the diversity of experiences.

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