

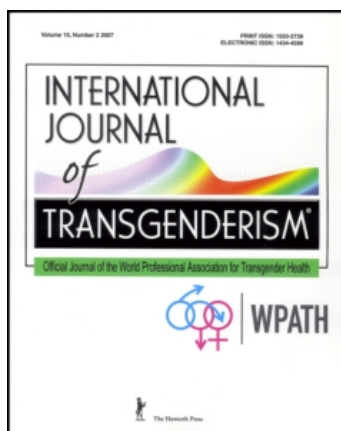
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The Case Against Autogynephilia

Julia M. Serano

ABSTRACT. Autogynephilia is a paraphilic model that states that all male-to-female (MtF) transsexuals who are not exclusively attracted toward men are instead sexually oriented toward the thought or image of themselves as a woman. The assertion that transsexual women are sexually motivated in their transitions challenges the standard model of transsexualism—that is, that transsexuals have a gender identity that is distinct from their sexual orientation and incongruent with their physical sex. This article provides a review of the evidence against autogynephilia and makes the case that the taxonomy and terminology associated with this theory are both misleading and unnecessarily stigmatizing.

KEYWORDS. Autogynephilia, paraphilia, erotic target location error, transsexualism, transvestic fetishism, transgender, gender identity, sexual orientation, cross-gender arousal, sexualization

There are few concepts within the fields of transgender studies and human sexuality that are more controversial than autogynephilia. The word was coined by psychologist Ray Blanchard in the late 1980s based on his research on transgender individuals on the male-to-female (MtF) spectrum, that is, those who are assigned a male sex at birth but who gravitate toward female gender identities and/or feminine gender expressions. Some MtF spectrum individuals live primarily as men but engage in cross-dressing on occasion (MtF cross-dressers); others identify and live as women, often taking steps to physically and legally transition to female (transsexual women); still others may adopt alternative transgender identities and/or find other outlets for their cross-gender feelings. Blanchard has (and subsequently others have) used the term *autogynephilia* to describe two significantly different phenomena. First, it is used *descriptively* to denote a type of erotic fantasy common to

many (but not all) MtF spectrum individuals in which they become aroused by the idea of being or becoming women. Second, the term has been used *theoretically* to describe a paraphilic model in which the aforementioned fantasies arise as a result of a misdirected heterosexual sex drive (i.e., instead of or in addition to being attracted to women, the individual becomes attracted to the idea of becoming a woman) and once established, such fantasies become the primary cause of any gender dysphoria and desire to physically transition to female that the individual might experience (Blanchard, 1989a; this model will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section).

As others have noted, conflation between the descriptive and theoretical definitions of autogynephilia has led to a great deal of confusion in the literature on the subject (Wyndzen, 2005). For example, when an author describes an individual as an autogynephilic transsexual,

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are they simply stating the fact that the individual has experienced “autogynephilic” fantasies in the past? Or are they suggesting that the individual suffers from a paraphilia and became gender dysphoric as a result of such fantasies? To avoid this problem, throughout this article, I will use the term *cross-gender arousal* to describe sexual arousal that occurs in response to cross-dressing or imagining oneself being or becoming a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, and I will use the term *autogynephilia* exclusively to denote the paraphilic model that Blanchard and others have forwarded.

While nobody seriously doubts the existence of cross-gender arousal, there has been considerable debate about autogynephilia. The aspects of the theory that have garnered the most contention are its claims that (a) transsexual women come in two (and only two) subtypes—androphilic and autogynephilic and (b) the assumption of causation—that a “misdirected heterosexual impulse” causes cross-gender arousal, which then subsequently causes gender dysphoria and a desire to transition. While numerous critiques of the theory exist, proponents of autogynephilia have attempted to play down the significance of these critiques on the basis that they were not published in the peer-reviewed literature (Bailey & Triea, 2007; Lawrence, 2007). Here, drawing on these previous critiques, I argue that autogynephilia theory is clearly incorrect. I also discuss how the typology and terminology associated with the theory needlessly sexualizes MtF spectrum people and exacerbates the societal discrimination this group already faces.

NOMENCLATURE

Most of the terms used in this article are consistent with those commonly found in the sexological literature with the following exceptions. Proponents of autogynephilia typically label transsexuals based upon their birth-assigned sex (e.g., calling MtF transsexuals “male transsexuals” and using male pronouns in reference to them). Because this language is misleading and considered “maligning” by many

transgender people (Winters, 2008), I will instead use language that affirms transsexuals’ self-identified/post-transition sex (e.g., referring to MtF transsexuals as *transsexual women* and female-to-male (FtM) transsexuals as *transsexual men*). Since the labels *homosexual* and *heterosexual* become confusing when the person in question changes his or her sex, I will use the term *androphilic* to describe people who are exclusively attracted to men, and *gynephilic* to describe people exclusively attracted to women. Also, I will be making a distinction between *gender identity* (i.e., whether one identifies as or feels that they are or should be a girl/woman or boy/man) and *gender expression* (i.e., whether one’s gender presentation, mannerisms, and interests are considered feminine or masculine).

AUTOGYNEPHILIA THEORY

The theory of autogynephilia was developed by Blanchard over a series of papers published between 1985 and 1993. The salient points of this work will be described here; for a more detailed account of the concept and its history, see Lawrence (2004) and Blanchard (2005). For years prior to Blanchard’s work, MtF transsexual candidates typically had to fit the “classic” transsexual archetype—which included being overtly feminine throughout their lives, not exhibiting any signs of fetishism or excessive sexual activity pre-transition, and being heterosexual (i.e., androphilic) post-transition—in order to qualify for sex reassignment (Meyerowitz, 2002). However, the psychologists and sexologists who serve as gatekeepers of sex reassignment increasingly recognized that many of those presenting as MtF transsexuals did not fit this archetype, either because they experienced attraction toward women, were not especially feminine as children or adults, and/or tended to seek out sex reassignment much later in life after having lived for many years as heterosexual men. There were also indications that many in this latter group had previously identified as cross-dressers and/or had a history of cross-gender arousal (reviewed in Blanchard, 1989a).

Blanchard set out to make sense of these previous findings by analyzing questionnaire data

from patients that had presented at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry (where he worked as a gatekeeper) over the course of many years. Based on their self-reports, Blanchard subdivided MtF transsexuals by sexual orientation into four groups—androphilic, gynephilic, bisexual, and asexual. He found that a majority of the gynephilic (87.5%, $n = 16$), asexual (75%, $n = 12$) and bisexual (65.7%, $n = 35$) groups reported having experienced cross-gender arousal in response to wearing women's clothing on at least one occasion in their lives, while only 15% ($n = 100$) of the androphilic group responded similarly (Blanchard, 1985). He also found that the gynephilic, bisexual, and asexual groups, on average, reported less recalled childhood feminine gender expression and presented for sex reassignment later in life than the androphilic group (Blanchard, 1988). Based on these results, Blanchard argued that there are two fundamentally different types of MtF transsexuals—androphilic and nonandrophilic (where nonandrophilic includes the gynephilic, bisexual, and asexual groups). Proponents of the theory have described androphilic MtF transsexuals as “extremely feminine gay men” and suggested that they transition to female primarily to attract heterosexual men (Bailey, 2003, p. 146). In contrast, based on its association with cross-gender arousal, Blanchard proposed that nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism had a distinct, paraphilic etiology. The fact that paraphilias are presumed to be male-specific (and that Blanchard conceptualizes MtF transsexuals as “male transsexuals”) seemed consistent with the fact that, according to the medical literature of the time, there appeared to be no FtM equivalent to nonandrophilic transsexualism (Blanchard, 1989a).

While other researchers had previously described MtF cross-gender arousal (calling it “transvesticism” or “cross-gender fetishism”), Blanchard reenvisioned these phenomena as all being manifestations of “autogynephilia” (literally, “love of oneself as a woman”). In order to explain its prevalence in nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals, Blanchard hypothesized that autogynephilia arose from a “misdirected type of heterosexual impulse, which arises in association with normal heterosexuality

but also competes with it.” (Blanchard, 1991, p. 241). He proposed that gynephilic MtF transsexuals experience both autogynephilia and “normal” attraction to women, whereas, asexual MtF transsexuals “represent those cases in which the autogynephilic disorder nullifies or overshadows any erotic attraction to women” (Blanchard, 1989a, p. 324). He also argued that bisexuality in MtF transsexuals is better described as “pseudobisexuality”: “The effective erotic stimulus in these interactions . . . is not the male physique of the partner, as it is in true homosexual attraction, but rather the thought of being a female, which is symbolized in the fantasy of being penetrated by a man. For these persons, the male sexual partner serves the same function as women's apparel or makeup, namely, to aid and intensify the fantasy of being a woman” (Blanchard, 1989a, pp. 323–324).

It should be noted that Blanchard conceptualizes autogynephilia as but one of several possible “erotic target location errors,” which hypothetically occur when men who have a particular sexual object choice develop a paraphilic desire to become that sexual object themselves (Freund & Blanchard, 1993). The evidence forwarded to support this theory is entirely anecdotal, consisting of case histories of certain individuals who both are pedophilic and engage in age regression play or of individuals who are both attracted to amputees and wish to become amputees themselves (Freund & Blanchard, 1993; Lawrence, 2006; for challenges to the theory as it has been applied to people who seek out amputations, see Brang, McGeoch, & Ramachandran, 2008; Sullivan, 2008). Autogynephilia is the one proposed “erotic target location error” for which the most empirical data has been generated and, as such, it will be the sole focus of this review.

While Blanchard authored numerous papers on autogynephilia between 1985 and 1993, the theory did not garner much attention until the early 2000s when Anne Lawrence and J. Michael Bailey began to publicly advocate his theories. Their writings—particularly Bailey's book, *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender Bending and Transsexualism*—have generated controversy both in the transgender community and within the field of sexology (for a variety of perspectives on this, see

Transgender Tapestry, 2000–2001, issues 92–94, and *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 2008, vol. 37, no. 3).

In recent papers, proponents of autogynephilia have argued that the theory should be accepted because it has more explanatory potential than what they call the “feminine essence narrative”—that is, the idea forwarded by some transsexuals that they are rather uncomplicatedly “women trapped in men’s bodies” (Bailey & Tria, 2007; Blanchard, 2008). According to this argument, while the feminine essence narrative may hold true for androphilic transsexual women (whose feminine gender expression and attraction to men allows them to come off as sufficiently “womanly”), nonandrophilic and/or nonfeminine transsexual women fail to achieve conventional ideals of womanhood and, therefore, must comprise a different category and arise from a distinct etiology. However, pitting autogynephilia against an overly simplistic “feminine essence narrative” ignores a more nuanced view that I will refer to here as the *gender variance model*, which holds that gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and physical sex are largely separable traits that may tend to correlate in the general population but do not all necessarily align in the same direction within any given individual (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Lev, 2004; Serano, 2007). According to this model, transsexuals share the experience of discordance between their gender identity and physical sex (which leads to gender dysphoria and a desire to physically transition) but are expected to differ with respect to their gender expression and sexual orientation (just as nontranssexuals vary in these aspects). This variation in gender expression and sexual orientation may lead individuals to follow different transgender trajectories and develop different sexual histories. If autogynephilia is to be taken seriously as a theory, it should explain the observed differences in MtF transsexuals at least as well as (if not better than) the gender variance model.

IS AUTOGYNEPHILIA’S TWO-SUBTYPE TAXONOMY VALID?

While Blanchard published numerous articles on autogynephilia, the bulk of the empir-

ical data supporting the model can be found in three papers. Two of these papers provide evidence that there are two classes of transsexuals—androphilic and nonandrophilic (Blanchard, 1985; Blanchard, 1988). In the third, he developed the Core Autogynephilia and Autogynephilic Interpersonal Fantasy scales (which measure various aspects of cross-gender arousal) and showed that the nonandrophilic group scored significantly higher on these tests than the androphilic group (Blanchard, 1989b). The experiments found in these three papers were conducted in the 1980s on the same, or largely overlapping, populations (i.e., clients at the Clarke Institute). Wyndzen (2003) has pointed out numerous shortcomings of this work; these, in part, include (a) that Blanchard’s subtypes were not empirically derived but rather stemmed from his initial grouping of individuals based on their sexual orientation, thus, “begging the question” that transsexuals fall into subtypes based on their sexual orientation; (b) that he did not include nontranssexual female control groups; (c) that Blanchard relied exclusively on clinical samples that may not accurately reflect the greater nonclinical transgender population (c.f., Hooker, 1957); and (d) that his results had not been replicated. Indeed, Blanchard himself described his results as “provisional” and stated that “the present findings, therefore, need replication” (Blanchard, 1989b, p. 620).

Since Wyndzen’s critique, three papers have been published that have partially replicated some of Blanchard’s findings while calling others into question. Smith, van Goozen, Kupier, and Cohen-Kettenis (2005) tested a number of psychological, sexual, and gender-related variables in both transsexual women and transsexual men. They found statistically significant differences between “homosexual” (i.e., attracted to one’s birth-assigned sex) and “nonhomosexual” transsexuals on both the MtF and FtM spectrums. For example, androphilic MtF and gynephilic FtM individuals were generally found to exhibit more cross-gender behavior as children and applied for sex reassignment earlier than their nonandrophilic MtF and nongynephilic FtM counterparts, respectively. Smith et al. (2005) also found that 53.8% of their nonandrophilic and 29.5% of their androphilic MtF subjects reported having experienced

cross-gender arousal (both these percentages are significantly higher than those reported by either FtM group). While this suggests that cross-gender arousal may be more common in the nonandrophilic MtF population, the difference between these groups is not nearly as pronounced as Blanchard claimed and does not support his contention that cross-gender arousal is strictly associated with nonandrophilic (but not androphilic) MtF transsexualism.

This study is also one of several that indirectly bring into question the necessity for evoking paraphilia as a separate cause of gender dysphoria in nonandrophilic transsexual women. One of Blanchard's main arguments for proposing that nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism must have a unique (and likely paraphilic) etiology was his belief that a reciprocal FtM group (i.e., nongynephilic transsexual men) did not exist or were merely anomalous (Blanchard, 1988, 1989a). It turns out, however, that nongynephilic FtM transsexuals are not nearly as rare as previously claimed (Bockting et al., 2009). The simplest explanation for this is that neither nongynephilic FtM nor nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism are paraphilic but, rather, both occur because gender identity and sexual orientation are separable traits. Additionally, while Smith et al. (2005) found that their "homosexual" and "nonhomosexual" groups differed on several traits, these groups did not vary with regards to the intensity of their gender dysphoria and body dissatisfaction (a similar result was recently obtained by Deogracias et al., 2007). Together, these findings are far more consistent with a gender variance model of transsexualism than with autogynephilia theory.

A more recent attempt to test some of Blanchard's findings can be found in Veale, Clarke, and Lomax (2008), which examined several aspects of MtF sexuality. This study is notable in that it avoids several of the previously mentioned methodological shortcomings of Blanchard's work. First, a nonclinical MtF population (recruited primarily via the Internet) was studied—such a group would be expected to give a more accurate account than Blanchard's research subjects, as their answers were anonymous and could not be used to deny them the means to transition. Second,

they used a control group of nontranssexual women. Third, instead of dividing MtF transsexuals into groups based on their sexual orientation (as previous studies have done), they categorized individuals as either autogynephilic or nonautogynephilic based on their responses to four surveys, including Blanchard's Core Autogynephilia and Autogynephilic Interpersonal Fantasy scales. The authors explain that this categorization scheme was empirically derived based on their own taxometric analysis (Veale et al., 2008).

The results of Veale et al. (2008) supports some of Blanchard's claims. For example, transsexuals in the autogynephilic group first experienced a desire to change their sex significantly later than those in the nonautogynephilic group. The authors also found that recalled childhood femininity correlated with attraction to males. However, what is most striking about their results is that their autogynephilic and nonautogynephilic groups did not segregate along lines of sexual orientation. For example, both autogynephilic and nonautogynephilic groups scored roughly equal on attraction to the male physique, and 68% of the nonautogynephilic group scored the highest possible gynephilic score. Asexual individuals in their study fell mostly in the nonautogynephilic group. They also found that attraction to the male physique highly correlated with sexual attraction to males in MtF bisexuals—this contradicts Blanchard's claim that individuals in this group are "pseudobisexuals" who do not experience genuine attraction to men. Together, these results strongly challenge autogynephilia theory's claim that nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism arises from a misdirected heterosexual impulse and is necessarily associated with cross-gender arousal.

Another recent study conducted by Nuttbrock et al. (2009) examined the frequency of cross-gender arousal in a nonclinical sample of 571 MtF transgender individuals living in the New York City metropolitan area (nontranssexual female controls were not used). The sample in the study by Nuttbrock et al. (2009) was significantly more diverse with regard to age and ethnicity than the population Blanchard studied back in the 1980s. Their results, like those of Smith et al. (2005), revealed a correlation

between cross-gender arousal and sexual orientation but one that was not deterministic, as 23% of the androphilic subjects experienced cross-gender arousal, while 27% of the nonandrophilic group did not. Furthermore, within a given sexual orientation, the incidence of cross-gender arousal was significantly higher in Whites compared with non-Whites, and in older subjects compared with younger subjects. The reduced levels of cross-gender arousal in younger subjects led the authors to suggest that cross-gender arousal “may be a historically fading phenomenon.” Finally, the authors also found that cross-gender arousal correlated with gynephilia in a linear (rather than nonmonotonic) fashion. This finding challenges Blanchard’s assertion that, in nonandrophilic MtF individuals, cross-gender arousal competes with “normal” attraction to women (Blanchard, 1991, 1992).

The three studies I have just described provide evidence that there are some significant differences in gender expression (and perhaps other traits) between MtF transsexuals of differing sexual orientations; similar differences have been reported between heterosexual and homosexual subjects who are not transsexual (reviewed in Lippa, 2005). Thus, these differences are most likely related to the subjects’ differing sexual orientations rather than reflecting underlying transsexual subtypes. Furthermore, none of these studies supports Blanchard’s contention of a strict association between cross-gender arousal and nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism. These results are corroborated by the opinions of numerous psychologists and sexologists who work with trans-clients who have gone on record to say that they do not believe that MtF transsexuals neatly fall into two discrete classes (Bockting, 2005; Gooren, 2006; Lane, 2008; Moser, 2008), and by other research studies (including Blanchard’s own work) that consistently demonstrate that a significant number of androphilic MtF transsexuals experience cross-gender arousal, while many nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals do not (reviewed in Lawrence, 2005).

One of the most troubling aspects regarding autogynephilia is that proponents of the theory have consistently tried to dismiss the aforementioned exceptions as being the result of misreporting on the part of research subjects.

Notably, it is always those transsexuals who are constructed as “autogynephiles” that are accused of either lying about their sexual orientation, or of supposedly denying their experiences with cross-gender arousal; in contrast, the reports of those who neatly fit the “androphile” archetype are never questioned (Bailey, 2003; Bailey & Triea, 2007; Blanchard, 1985; Blanchard, Clemmensen, & Steiner, 1987; Lawrence, 2004; Lawrence, 2008). This double standard is not only illogical (as someone who wished to appear like the “classic” transsexual stereotype would likely deny both attraction to women *and* cross-gender arousal), but it is tantamount to hand-picking which evidence counts and which does not based upon how well it conforms to the model. Furthermore, the evidence cited to support these accusations of misreporting is far from definitive and open to alternative interpretations (Wyndzen, 2005). If proponents of autogynephilia insist that every exception to the model is due to misreporting, then autogynephilia theory must be rejected on the grounds that it is unfalsifiable and therefore unscientific. If, on the other hand, we accept that these exceptions are legitimate, then it is clear that autogynephilia theory’s two-subtype taxonomy does not hold true.

CORRELATION DOES NOT IMPLY CAUSATION

Blanchard’s model makes two etiological claims. The first is that cross-gender arousal arises from a “misdirected heterosexual impulse”; this claim was shown to be highly suspect in the previous section. The second claim—that cross-gender arousal causes gender dysphoria and a desire to transition to female in nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals—is based solely on Blanchard’s correlations and his anecdotal theory of “erotic target location errors.” No hard evidence has been forwarded to establish or support this proposed causal relationship. In fact, in the original papers in which Blanchard first developed and tested his theory of autogynephilia (Blanchard, 1989a, 1989b, 1991, 1992), there is no exploration or even discussion of the possibility that cross-gender arousal may

be an *effect of* gender dysphoria (rather than its cause) or that both traits might simply correlate in nonandrophilic MtF individuals for some other reason. This oversight is surprising, given that Blanchard's own research provides several lines of evidence to indicate that the causal relationship he proposes does not hold true.

First, there are the previously discussed exceptions to the two-subtype taxonomy. Anywhere from 10% to 36% of androphilic MtF transsexuals experience cross-gender arousal (reviewed in Lawrence, 2005). If one discounts accusations that all of these individuals are misreporting their experiences, then there appear to be only two other potential explanations. The first is that cross-gender arousal *does* cause transsexualism in this group—this would undermine Blanchard's contention that androphilic and nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism necessarily have distinct etiologies. The second, and more parsimonious, explanation is that cross-gender arousal *does not* cause transsexualism in these individuals—this would suggest that cross-gender arousal might not cause transsexualism in the nonandrophilic MtF group either. The causal relationship forwarded by Blanchard is also brought into question by the fact that many nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals never experience cross-gender arousal. This demonstrates that the assumption of causation is false in, at a bare minimum, these individuals. This fact appears incompatible with autogynephilia theory, as it seemingly creates a third subtype of MtF transsexual that now requires explanation: nonautogynephilic, nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals.

Second, the presumption of causality is challenged by the fact that many MtF spectrum people who experience cross-gender arousal find that it is merely a passing phase rather than central to their transgender experience. For instance, transsexual women typically experience a sharp decrease in cross-gender arousal after transition (Lawrence, 2005). While one could argue that this reduction might simply be a by-product of having lower androgen levels, some transsexuals experience this reduction in cross-gender arousal prior to hormone therapy and orchiectomy (Serano, 2007). Further, many MtF cross-dressers who have not taken steps toward

physical transition also experience a decrease in cross-gender arousal over time (Buhrich & Beaumont, 1981; Buhrich & McConaghy, 1977a, 1977b; Doorn, Poortinga, & Verschoor, 1994; Ovesey & Person, 1976). While early explorations of feminine clothing and thoughts of female embodiment may be highly arousing (perhaps related to the sexual symbolism associated with femaleness and femininity in our culture), this sexual charge wanes for many MtF cross-dressers and pretransition transsexuals as they begin to interact socially in the feminine role, to develop a conscious female identity, and/or to view their transgender inclinations as authentic and nothing to be ashamed of (Doorn et al., 1994; Serano, 2007). There is agreement in the medical literature that paraphilias tend to be "chronic and lifelong," and persist until one's sex drive diminishes with advancing age (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 568). The fact that many pre- and nontransition MtF spectrum people who are not especially old, and who continue to be sexually active, nevertheless, experience a large decrease in cross-gender arousal over time, strongly suggests that cross-gender arousal is not the driving force behind their transgenderism.

It should be noted that Blanchard and others have tried to explain away this flaw in the theory by arguing that autogynephilia is both a paraphilia *and* a sexual orientation (Blanchard, 1991; Lawrence, 2007). According to this idea, "autogynephiles" who come to identify as female have developed a "pair-bond" with their female selves, and the reduction in cross-gender arousal they experience is akin to how long-term couples tend to become less sexually active with one another over time. This explanation is quite a stretch, as there is no biological evidence to suggest that humans or other animals are capable of pair-bonding with themselves and/or their own physically-sexed bodies. Furthermore, the term *pair-bonding* has traditionally been used to describe monogamous pairings. The fact that many MtF cross-dressers and nonandrophilic transsexual women continue to engage in relationships with other people after experiencing this sharp decrease in cross-gender arousal strongly suggests that they are not pair-bonded to their female selves. It is far more parsimonious to suggest that

cross-gender arousal is an effect of, or merely correlates with, MtF transgenderism (especially in its earliest stages) rather than being its cause.

The third and perhaps most damaging finding for the presumption of causality is that many nonandrophilic MtF individuals report that they experienced an awareness of wanting to be female long before they ever experienced cross-gender arousal. For example, in Bailey's book, the three individuals whom he offers as typical examples of autogynephiles all recalled experiencing cross-gender feelings as young children prior to ever experiencing cross-gender arousal (Bailey, 2003, pp. 151–152, 160, 167). Similarly, Blanchard has repeatedly forwarded his case study of Philip as a quintessential example of autogynephilia (Blanchard, 1991). Yet according to his own reports, Philip describes having experienced cross-gender feelings at the age of 6, well before he first experienced cross-gender arousal during puberty at the age of 12 or 13. There is a general consensus that cross-gender arousal typically first occurs during or after the onset of puberty; this is consistent with the fact that people, in general, typically experience their first sexual fantasies between the ages of 11 to 13 (reviewed in Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Since Blanchard et al. (1987) reported that the average age that their nonandrophilic MtF research subjects first recognized their desire to be female was 9.82 years, this suggests that the majority of these individuals exhibited signs of cross-gender identity prior to experiencing cross-gender arousal. Similarly, Buhrich and Beaumont (1981) reported that nearly 50% of the 212 MtF cross-dressers they studied began cross-dressing prior to ever having experienced cross-gender arousal. Together, these findings indicate that cross-gender arousal does not cause transsexualism or cross-gender expression in the majority of nonandrophilic MtF individuals.

Aside from accusations of misreporting, three responses have been offered by proponents of autogynephilia to counter the evidence that cross-gender arousal is not a cause of MtF transsexualism. First, Lawrence (2007) cites two rare cases of male children who precociously experienced erections in response to cross-dressing as young children in order to suggest that cross-gender arousal may be the cause

of nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism even when the individual in question experienced an early awareness of wanting to be female. To evoke these highly atypical cases to account for the rather high percentage of nonandrophilic transsexual women who experience a desire to be female prior to puberty seems unreasonable. Second, Lawrence has broadened Blanchard's "erotic target location error" theory to include romantic love (Lawrence, 2007). Having done this, she then argues that those nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals who have not experienced cross-gender arousal, or who experienced such arousal only after becoming aware of their desire to be female, may nevertheless be motivated by a romantic-love version of autogynephilia. The notion that individuals who do not experience erotic arousal to some stimulus might nevertheless be described as having a paraphilic relationship with that same stimulus has extraordinary ramifications. By the same reasoning, men who love their own children, but who are not sexually aroused by them, could nevertheless be said to experience pedophilia. Given the lack of empirical evidence to support this autogynephilia-as-romantic-love hypothesis, Lawrence's argument is not very persuasive.

Third, Lawrence has suggested that the aforementioned exceptions do not seriously challenge autogynephilia because it is just a model: "Blanchard proposed that transsexuals with a history of autogynephilic eroticism *behave as though* they were motivated by the desire to actualize their paraphilic fantasy of feminizing their bodies" (Lawrence, 2004, p. 73). This is not quite true, however, as Blanchard clearly and repeatedly claimed that "autogynephilia" was both a paraphilia and the cause of nonandrophilic MtF transsexualism (Blanchard, 1989a, 1989b, 1991). As Wyndzen (2003) points out, "His causal claims are what allows him to form categories of transsexuals based on sexual orientation." Even Bailey, a proponent of Blanchard's model, has argued that "distinguishing 'homosexual,' 'heterosexual,' 'bisexual,' and 'asexual' transsexuals diagnostically makes sense only if the different types have fundamentally different causes. Otherwise, why not distinguish 'tall,' 'medium-sized,' and 'short' transsexuals, or 'blonde' and 'brunette' subtypes?" (Bailey,

2003, p. 162). As the results summarized in this section show, cross-gender arousal cannot be the cause of transsexualism in the majority of nonandrophilic transsexual women. Furthermore, the existing evidence is far more consistent with the notion that cross-gender arousal is an effect of, or merely correlates with, MtF transsexualism, rather than being its cause.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE “AUTOGYNEPHILIC” FANTASIES?

While autogynephilia clearly does not have sufficient explanatory power as a theory of transsexual etiology and taxonomy, one might ask whether the alternate meaning of the term (i.e., to denote fantasies or arousal centered on the idea of being or becoming female) has any merit. It should be noted that Blanchard conceptualized autogynephilia very broadly to describe a wide range of sexual fantasies and behaviors (e.g., arousal in response to cross-dressing, fantasies of having a female body, fantasies of being sexually appreciated as a woman by a man, and imagining oneself as a woman while engaging in sex with a partner; Blanchard, 1989a, 1991). While relatively few transsexual men report arousal in response to wearing male-typical clothing (Smith et al., 2005), many have pretransition fantasies where they imagine themselves as physically male while engaging in sex with a partner or become aroused by the prospect of being sexually appreciated as a man by others (Green, 2001). It makes sense that pretransition transsexuals (whose gender identity is discordant with their physical sex) might imagine themselves inhabiting the “right” body in their sexual fantasies and during their sexual experiences with other people. Indeed, critics of autogynephilia theory have argued that such sex embodiment fantasies appear to be an obvious coping mechanism for pretransition transsexuals (e.g., Barnes, 2001; Gooren, 2006; Serano, 2007). This coping mechanism explanation would also help to account for the sharp decrease in such fantasies that occurs in transsexual women after transition (Lawrence, 2005).

We also live in a heterosexual-male-centric culture, where female bodies and feminine

gender expression and presentation are routinely objectified and sexualized to a far greater extent than their male/masculine counterparts (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2007). This might account for why both androphilic and nonandrophilic MtF transsexuals experience far higher levels of arousal in response to cross-dressing than their FtM counterparts (Smith et al., 2005). This would also explain why a significant percentage of nontranssexual women who have been administered questionnaires similar, or virtually identical, to Blanchard’s Core Autogynephilia and Autogynephilic Interpersonal Fantasy surveys display autogynephilia (Moser, 2009a; Veale et al., 2008). The fact that nontranssexual women exhibit patterns of arousal similar to those seen in transsexual women indicate that autogynephilic fantasies are neither transsexual-specific nor paraphilic (as paraphilias are purportedly extremely rare or nonexistent in natal women; American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 568). Given this, there is no valid reason why Blanchard’s term *autogynephilia* should be used to single out MtF transsexual’s fantasies and desires. In fact, because autogynephilia has repeatedly been described as a paraphilia and a cause of transsexualism in the sexological literature, its usage from this point forward would be both misleading and maligning to the majority of transsexual women who find the term to be unnecessarily stigmatizing. The use of more neutral language to describe these phenomena (e.g., cross-gender arousal, female/feminine embodiment fantasies) would be more respectful and accurate.

AUTOGYNEPHILIA THEORY AND TERMINOLOGY ARE NEEDLESSLY STIGMATIZING

Many transgender activists and advocates feel that autogynephilia theory (and the terminology associated with it) is not merely incorrect, but unnecessarily stigmatizing. To understand why this is, it must first be acknowledged that transsexuals’ gender identities and gendered experiences are deemed to be less socially and legally valid than those of nontranssexuals, and that

much of the societal discrimination that transsexuals face is predicated on this double standard (Currah, Juang, & Minter, 2006; Serano, 2007). Furthermore, those who wish to invalidate transsexual perspectives typically do so by claiming that transsexuals are mentally ill, incompetent, or delusional and, therefore, need not be taken seriously (Winters, 2008; Serano, 2009). Autogynephilia theory exacerbates these problems in several ways. First, the theory conceptualizes and describes transsexual women as either homosexual or autogynephilic *men*, thus undermining their female gender identities and lived experiences as women. Second, the theory is extremely pathologizing, especially for those transsexual women who are classified as autogynephiles and, thus, lumped into a psychiatric category (paraphilia) that includes several criminal sexual offenses (e.g., pedophilia, frotteurism, and exhibitionism) as well as other generally consensual but unnecessarily stigmatized sexual behaviors. Pathologizing consensual, noncriminal behaviors as “paraphilic” can lead to considerable discrimination against individuals who express them (see Moser, 2008, 2009b). Third, the sexological literature about autogynephilia is riddled with claims that nonandrophilic transsexual women routinely misrepresent themselves and are inherently unreliable in their self-reports. Such claims give scientific credence to the stereotype that transsexuals are purposefully deceptive, which is often used to justify violence against transgender people. For instance, the men who murdered transgender woman Gwen Araujo tried to justify that act by claiming that they were victims of Araujo’s “sexual deception”; similar claims have been made by other perpetrators of transphobic violence (Bettcher, 2007). The stereotype that transsexuals purposefully misrepresent themselves also feeds into the common presumption that what transsexuals say about their own gender identities and experiences need not be taken seriously.

MtF spectrum people are also highly sexualized in our culture (i.e., others tend to focus solely on their sexual bodies or behaviors, to the exclusion of other characteristics). For many decades, the media has tended to depict transsexual women’s bodies and experiences in a titillating, even lurid, fashion, and fictional MtF

characters are routinely portrayed as being sexually deceptive, sexually promiscuous, sexually deviant, and sexually motivated in their transitions (Meyerowitz, 2002; Serano, 2007, 2009). Autogynephilia theory reduces MtF spectrum people to sexual motivation—in other words, it seems to both draw from, and to reinforce, these disparaging media stereotypes. Studies have shown that individuals who are sexualized are seen as less than human, are not treated with empathy, are not taken as seriously, and are seen as less competent and intelligent than individuals who are not sexualized (reviewed in American Psychological Association Task Force, 2007). Given this, it is no surprise that those who wish to demean, sensationalize, or discriminate against MtF transsexuals often cite autogynephilia theory in their attempts to invalidate transsexual women’s identities (e.g., Jeffreys, 2005; O’Leary, 2009; Wilkinson, 2006).

To put this sexualization in perspective, consider the following analogy: Many natal women have sexual fantasies about being raped (reviewed in Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). It is one thing to respectfully attempt to explore and understand such rape fantasies. It would be an entirely different thing to insist that there are two subtypes of women—those who have rape fantasies and those who do not; to use the label “autoraptophiles” when describing women who have such fantasies and to insist that they are primarily motivated by their desire to be raped; to include “autoraptophilia” as a modifier in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*; and to encourage the lay public to actively distinguish between those women who are “autoraptophiles” and those who are not. Such actions would undoubtedly have a severe, negative impact on women (who are already routinely sexualized and marginalized in our culture). Yet, proponents of autogynephilia have argued that transsexual women should be viewed and treated in an analogous manner. Such a view would surely add to the sexualization and discrimination that MtF spectrum people already face and would potentially jeopardize lesbian-, bisexual-, and asexual-identified transsexual women’s access to medical and legal sex reassignment.

In summary, as a theory of transsexual etiology and taxonomy, autogynephilia seems to

have little merit. For this reason, and because its terminology is especially maligning to MtF spectrum people, it is recommended that autogynephilia theory (and the language associated with it) should be avoided in favor of more accurate (and less stigmatizing) terminology. Like all human beings, MtF spectrum people have rich and diverse fantasy lives. Future studies that seek to understand the phenomena of cross-gender arousal, or female/feminine embodiment fantasies, should be conducted in a manner that is respectful of this diversity, deferential to what MtF spectrum individuals say about their own experiences, and careful not to needlessly exacerbate the nonconsensual sexualization that this population already faces in society.

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