

# Becoming What We Love: Autogynephilic Sexual Orientation

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Persons who feel intense discomfort with their biologic sex or associated gender role are said to experience *gender dysphoria*. Males with gender dysphoria who want to undergo sex reassignment or who have successfully done so are called *male-to-female (MtF) transsexuals*. Over the last few decades MtF transsexualism has become increasingly prevalent in Western countries. This is attributable to growing numbers of gender dysphoric males who now undergo sex reassignment but in the past would have been considered inappropriate candidates. These males had been unremarkably masculine in appearance and behavior and had lived outwardly successful lives as men, often in male-dominated professions like engineering or computer science. Many had been married to women and had fathered children. They almost always had a history of sexual arousal with crossdressing or fantasies of being female. A growing number of gender dysphoric adolescent males with similar histories now undergo sex reassignment as well. These young males also appear unremarkably masculine and experience sexual arousal with crossdressing or cross-gender fantasy. Usually their gender dysphoria becomes more intense at puberty.

In 1989 psychologist Ray Blanchard proposed that these MtF transsexuals feel a powerful sexual attraction to the idea of being female. He theorized that they have an unusual sexual orientation that motivates them to seek sex reassignment. Blanchard called this sexual orientation *autogynephilia*, which means “love of oneself as a woman.” He formally defined autogynephilia as “a male’s propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought or image of himself as a female.” According to his theory, autogynephilic transsexuals are males who are sexually oriented to females but are also sexually oriented to the idea of changing their bodies to resemble females.

Blanchard's proposal that the desire for sex reassignment could be an expression of an unusual sexual orientation was a departure from

earlier explanations. Previous theories had emphasized transsexuals’ desire to live in the gender role of the opposite sex and had deemphasized or ignored the role of sexual desire. Some clinicians and MtF transsexuals still adhere to these earlier explanations, but many others find Blanchard’s theory to be persuasive and valuable. Family members of gender dysphoric males often find value in this explanation as well.

## Blanchard's Theory of Autogynephilia

Blanchard's theory of autogynephilia arose from his attempt to make sense of the diverse clinical presentations of his MtF transsexual patients. Historically most clinicians had classified these transsexuals on the basis of sexual orientation. A *homosexual* category was comprised of males who were exclusively attracted to other males and who often self-identified as homosexual as well. Three other categories included males who were sexually attracted to females (heterosexual), attracted to both females and males (bisexual), or not strongly attracted to people of either sex (*analloerotic*, “not sexually attracted to other people”). Other clinicians, however, had proposed a different system of classification. They observed that almost all MtF transsexuals belonged to one of two distinct sexual minority categories: either exclusively sexually attracted to males or else sexually aroused by crossdressing or fantasies of being female.

Blanchard observed that the MtF transsexuals whose orientations were heterosexual, bisexual, or analloerotic were more similar to each other than to those with homosexual orientations. Homosexual MtF transsexuals were younger at clinical presentation, had been very feminine as boys, and were not sexually aroused by crossdressing or fantasies of being female. Transsexuals with the three other sexual orientations, collectively referred to as *non-homosexual*, were older at clinical presentation, had not been conspicuously feminine in childhood, and usually had experienced sexual arousal with crossdressing or fantasies of being

female. Based on these observations, Blanchard concluded that the underlying sexual orientation of these nonhomosexual MtF transsexuals was *autogynephilic*, sexually aroused by the idea of being female. He wrote: "All gender dysphoric males who are not sexually oriented toward men are instead sexually oriented toward the thought or image of themselves as women."

### **Autogynephilia Defines a Sexual Orientation**

Blanchard was careful to emphasize that autogynephilia is a genuine sexual orientation, involving both erotic and romantic elements. The romantic manifestations of a person's sexual orientation includes feelings of affection, idealization, appreciation of beauty, comfort, and desire for closeness -- all the things associated with the word love, broadly construed. Autogynephilic transsexuals want to change their bodies to resemble the females to whom they are sexually oriented. Their gender dysphoria reflects their inability to do so. This was clearly expressed by MtF transsexual Nancy Hunt in her autobiography:

I was feverishly interested in [girls]. I studied their hair, their clothes, their figures. And I brooded about the increasing differences between us. I seethed with envy while at the same time becoming sexually aroused—I wanted to possess them even as I wanted to become them.

Autogynephilic transsexuals love females and want to become what they love. That is their sexual orientation.

### **Can Autogynephilic Orientation Account for Lived Experience?**

Gender-dysphoric males who seek sex reassignment and seem to fit the autogynephilic pattern sometimes doubt whether the concept is consistent with their lived experience. Autogynephilia is defined as an erotic propensity, but many gender-dysphoric males report that their wish to undergo gender transition has little or nothing to do with sexual desire. They explain their motivations in other terms: They identify with women, or feel themselves to be female mentally or spiritually, or believe they simply would feel more

comfortable and authentic living as women. Sex reassignment would allow them to express and actualize these powerful feelings. Their explanations are not unexpected if one remembers that autogynephilia is a sexual orientation.

When males with heterosexual orientations fall in love with females and form romantic relationships with them, their initial intense erotic attraction usually diminishes over time, while feelings of love, affection, and desire for closeness continue. The same is true of males with autogynephilic sexual orientations: Sexual arousal associated with the thought or image of being female eventually becomes less compelling, but other feelings about one's female-identified self, such as admiration, comfort, and attachment, remain strong. Eventually the desire for sex reassignment can feel as though it no longer has any erotic motivation. Blanchard explained:

In later years, however, autogynephilic sexual arousal may diminish or disappear, while the transsexual wish remains or grows even stronger. . . . It is therefore feasible that the continuing desire to have a female body, after the disappearance of sexual [i.e., erotic] response to that thought, has some analog in the permanent love-bond that may remain between two people after their initial strong sexual attraction has largely disappeared.

### **Autogynephilic Orientation and Identity**

Sexual orientation is an essential contributor to personal identity in contemporary Western societies: We define ourselves by whom we love. Psychologist Ethel Person, who wrote extensively about gender identity issues, observed that an individual's unique sexual orientation pattern ("sex print") can be an especially significant source of identity for persons whose sexual preferences or orientations are atypical:

Because it is revealed rather than chosen, sexual preference is felt as deeply rooted and deriving from one's nature. To the degree that . . . sexuality is valued, one's sexual "nature" will be experienced as more or less central to personality. To the extent

that an individual's sex print "deviates" from the culture's prescription for sexuality, it may be experienced as even more central to identity.

For MtF transsexuals who want to become what they love, autogynephilic sexual orientation provides a powerful source of personal identity, because it defines one's ideal self, the person one wants to become. This explains why becoming what one loves often feels like an identity-driven process for persons with autogynephilic sexual orientations.

### **Autogynephilic Orientation in Childhood**

Gender-dysphoric males who seem to fit the autogynephilic pattern often report that their desire to be female began in early childhood, long before the onset of puberty. They may doubt whether autogynephilic sexual orientation can account for cross-sex wishes that occur so early in life. Developmental psychologists have observed, however, that sexual orientation often becomes evident in early childhood and sometimes is expressed in ways that are clearly erotic. For example, there are two published case reports of boys younger than age three who expressed a desire to wear girls' clothing and displayed penile erections when they did so. This provides convincing evidence for childhood expression of autogynephilic sexual arousal in some cases. Other manifestations of sexual orientation can also become evident in

early childhood. Children as young as age four or five can clearly describe feelings of "longing for union" with opposite sex age-mates, with an intensity comparable to that experienced by adolescents. Evidence of sexual orientations, including the desire to become what we love, can appear long before puberty.

### **Autogynephilic Orientation and a Meaningful Life**

Psychologist Ethel Person also observed that romantic love provides a solution to the "problem of meaning" in societies where other sources of meaning, such as religion or allegiance to family or clan, have lost much of their power. Many individuals of diverse sexual orientations now structure their lives around their relationships with the people they love. For those with an autogynephilic sexual orientation, becoming what one loves can similarly address the problem of creating a meaningful life. Changing one's body and living as a woman offers an identity, a program of action, and a sense of purpose. Being able to fully express one's sexual orientation, without apology or shame, gives one's life greater meaning and authenticity, perhaps especially when that sexual orientation is atypical. For persons with an autogynephilic sexual orientation, becoming what one loves can help create a life that feels vital and authentic, a life truly worth living.

(October 2023)