

## Alex Byrne Writes about Anne Lawrence

From: *Trouble with Gender: Sex Facts, Gender Fictions* (2024). Polity Press.

Anne Lawrence is a psychologist and former anaesthesiologist who transitioned in the 1990s and is a self-identified autogynephilic transsexual. She is the author of numerous papers in sexology and of the classic *Men Trapped in Men's Bodies: Narratives of Autogynephilic Transsexualism*. The book contains excerpts from hundreds of narratives from people who had experienced autogynephilia." (p. 138)

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"[Julia] Serano argues that [the theory that autogynephilia accounts for gender dysphoria] is wrong, because autogynephilia develops in puberty and cross-gender wishes in non-androphilic males appear earlier. . . . Proponents of the 'presumption of causality' [linking autogynephilia and gender dysphoria] can hardly have overlooked this phenomenon and indeed they haven't. Anne Lawrence has discussed it in an illuminating article descriptively titled 'Becoming what we love: Autogynephilic transsexualism conceptualized as an expression of romantic love,' so let's turn to that next.

"It is a mistake, Lawrence wrote, to think of autogynephilia "as a purely erotic or lusty phenomenon, devoid of any of the other elements, such as admiration, affection, beneficence and desire for closeness, that are usually associated with the word love, broadly construed, and are considered to be expressive of a person's sexual orientation." The romantic-attachment component of sexual orientation, she suggested, may explain why some MtF transsexuals report that erotic feelings played only a minor role in their transitions, and why autogynephilic sexual arousal after transition frequently lessens or even vanishes.

With respect to childhood, Lawrence noted that sexual orientation in general manifests earlier than puberty, as non-erotic childhood crushes and the like. . . . Lawrence is not conflating love—parental or otherwise—with sexual attraction. Rather, she is making the general observation that a person's sexual orientation can surface as non-sexual attachment before puberty. The hypothesis that autogynephilia is an unusual kind of sexual orientation fits nicely with [this] (pp. 141-2)

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[Julia Serano's 2020 article criticizing auto-gynephilia] has a glaring omission. Normally, in arguing against a scientific theory one cites the latest publications on the topic, particularly if they contain a new data or arguments supporting the theory one opposes. Anne Lawrence's book—the one with numerous narratives of autogynephilia, as well as a huge amount of other relevant material—came out in 2013. In 2017 her review article "Autogynephilia and typology of male-to female transsexualism: Concepts and controversies" appeared in the journal *European Psychologist*. All the main criticisms are discussed and all the main critics are cited, including Serano. Lawrence also mentions the issue of autogynephilia in women, a literature to which she contributed herself. No scholarly discussion of autogynephilia is complete without engaging these two works. In Serano's earlier 2010 article, Lawrence is cited. Yet, in [Serano's] subsequent 2020 article, Lawrence is not cited at all. This is representative of the intellectual quality of the [special issue to which Serano contributed]. (p. 144)

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As the psychologist, Anne Lawrence puts it at the end of *Men Trapped in Men's Bodies*:

"We create our feminine persona by trying to express and embody the feminine virtues whatever, we think these are. For me, they include gentleness, nurturance, empathy, agreeableness, cooperation, friendliness, and grace. These qualities do not describe how I am naturally, but they describe the way I want to be and try to be. . . . The transsexual journey is, in this case less about finding our "true selves" than our best selves."

Lawrence is describing one specific kind of transsexual transition, but the point isn't confined

to transsexuality and is quite general. Sometimes we aren't naturally the way we should be; complete transformation is not possible, but that doesn't mean we can't be better. Be your authentic true self is one of the worst pieces of advice. Lawrence is not suggesting that life is solely a quest for self-improvement, a voyage that begins and ends at home. It's not all about me. There are friends, lovers, family, and others in the expanding circle of moral concern, including non-human animals. Ruminating about myself takes attention away from what really matters. One of the many troubles with gender in the Age Identity is this impulse toward narcissism. [Chapter ends] (pp. 193-4)