

Transvestic Fetishism in the General Population: Prevalence and Correlates

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We used a random sample of 2,450 18–60 year-olds in the general population of Sweden to study the prevalence as well as the social, sexual, and health correlates of transvestic fetishism (sexual arousal from cross-dressing). Almost three percent (2.8%) of men and 0.4% of women reported at least one episode of transvestic fetishism. Separation from parents, same-sex sexual experiences, being easily sexually aroused, pornography use, and higher masturbation frequency were significantly associated with transvestic fetishism. A positive attitude to this sexual practice and paraphilia indicators—sexual arousal from using pain, exposing genitals to a stranger, and spying on others having sex—were particularly strong correlates to the dependent variable.

According to the World Health Organization (1992), fetishistic transvestism is the wearing of clothes of the opposite sex principally to obtain sexual excitement. No limitations with respect to the gender or sexual orientation of the subject or any requirement of temporal stability are given. In contrast, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text revision* (DSM-IV-TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2000) defines transvestic fetishism or transvestism as sexual arousal related to dressing in clothes pertaining to the opposite sex (cross-dressing) among heterosexual males. The fantasies, urges, or behaviors should occur over a period of at least six months and cause clinically significant distress or impairment in

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social, occupational, or other areas of functioning (see Zucker & Blanchard, 1997, for an overview).

Many researchers have not used impairment criteria or excluded non-heterosexual males when investigating transvestic fetishism. For example, Buhrich and Beaumont (1981) studied transvestism in Australia and the U.S. with a questionnaire mailed to transvestite club members. A total of 222 male subjects reported any period of fetishism to women's clothes. Characteristics of transvestism were remarkably similar across countries. Almost half of the subjects first cross-dressed in prepuberty and a majority reported established cross-dressing by late adolescence. Docter and Prince (1997) conducted a survey in the U.S. of 1032 self-defined, periodic male cross-dressers recruited with announcements at transvestite club meetings, conventions, and magazines. No cross-dressing females were identified in either of the two studies, and 75% and 89% percent of the subjects, respectively, described themselves as heterosexual.

Two subgroups of cross-dressers have been identified based on differences in cross-gender identity (Blanchard, Racansky, & Steiner, 1986; Docter & Prince, 1997), usually defined as the tendency to view oneself as having core personality attributes and gender characteristics opposite to one's genetic sex. The first group, termed nuclear or periodic transvestites, are typically satisfied with cross-dressing only. The second group, called marginal (more transgendered or transsexually inclined) transvestites, often desire feminization by hormonal treatment or reconstructive genital surgery, report lower sexual arousal to cross-dressing, and a stronger interest in same-sex sex (Docker & Prince, 1997). For a genetic male, an intense and persistent sense of cross-gender identity could lead to complete gender role change, as in transsexualism.

Transvestic fetishism may be associated with increased risks for sexual acting out that could injure the individual and victimize others. Among subjects who accidentally died when engaged in autoerotic asphyxia, a high-risk paraphilic behavior based on self-induced cerebral anoxia by hanging or suffocation during masturbation, transvestic fetishism was common (Blanchard & Hucker, 1991). Co-occurrence of non-paraphilic hypersexuality, including extensive masturbation and promiscuity, and transvestic fetishism has been identified in clinical outpatient populations (Black, Kehrberg, Flumerfeldt, & Schlosser, 1997; Kafka & Hennen, 1999, 2002). Finally, a seminal investigation of 561 male subjects voluntarily seeking help for paraphilic behavior revealed that many had additional *DSM-II/III* paraphilias in addition to the presenting diagnosis (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittelman, & Rouleau, 1988). Up to 20% of individuals with transvestic fetishism also had been involved in the sexual molestation of children, and 36% had committed exhibitionistic acts (see also Langevin, Checkley, & Pugh, 1987).

Previous studies have focused either on referred cross-dressing individuals or those attending clubs or subscribing to newsletters addressing these

issues. No epidemiological study has been published so far (cf. Zucker, 1997). The aim of this study was to elucidate prevalence and correlates to transvestic fetishism in the general population.

METHOD

Sample

A total of 5,250 randomly selected 18–74 year-olds from the general population of Sweden ($N = 6,200,000$) were contacted by mail as part of a large interview study of sexual attitudes, behaviors, and health in Sweden. The study was sponsored by the Swedish Public Health Institute (Lewin, Fugl-Meyer, Helmius, Lalos, & Månsson, 1998) and approved by the research ethics committee of the Swedish Research Council for Humanistic and Social Sciences. After subjects with language problems, severe visual or hearing impairment, long-term illness, or who had emigrated had been excluded, the remaining 4,781 individuals were invited to participate. A total of 59% ($n = 2,810$) of these subjects chose to participate in the survey. After written informed consent, trained research assistants collected all data in the spring of 1996, almost exclusively in the homes of the subjects. Sociodemographic information was obtained through face-to-face interviews. All questions related to sexuality and health were administered in the form of questionnaires embedded in the interview and were completed by the subject without involvement from the research assistant. The subject was reminded that no name or details allowing personal identification were present on forms or questionnaires, and that nobody would be able to trace specific answers to him or her.

Comparisons revealed no social, or geographic differences between participants and non-participants. In addition, cross-validation of interview data did not find general social desirability bias or untruthfulness in answer patterns, not even for sensitive sexuality-related data (Lewin et al., 1998). However, since elder individuals, particularly females, were underrepresented among responders, we included only subjects up to age 60. This yielded a final sample of 2,450 individuals (1,279 males and 1,171 females).

Measures

The questionnaire item “Have you ever dressed in clothes pertaining to the opposite sex and become sexually aroused by this?” tapped the dependent variable, sexual arousal from actual cross-dressing. Thirty potential correlates to the dependent variable were identified from a literature review and are displayed in Table 1. All listed items were translated into English closely following the intent of the original questions in Swedish.

TABLE 1. Correlates of Transvestic Fetishism among 1,279 18–60-year-old Men in a Representative General Population Sample

| Characteristic | Ever sexually aroused from cross-dressing | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| | Yes <i>n</i> = 36 (2.8%) | No <i>n</i> = 1,243 (97.2%) | Mann- Whitney U or χ^2 | Odds ratio | 95% CI |
| Sociodemographic characteristics | | | | | |
| Age (years) | 36.89 (11.35) | 37.02 (12.05) | -.02 | .99 | .97–1.03 |
| Immigrant status ^a (%) | 11.1 | 7.7 | .58 | 1.50 | .52–4.35 |
| No. of siblings | 2.25 (1.86) | 2.22 (1.89) | -.05 | 1.01 | .85–1.20 |
| Separation from parents during childhood (%) | 27.8 | 14.7 | 4.67* | 2.23 | 1.06–4.70 |
| Parental attitudes to sex ^b | 3.03 (.85) | 3.33 (.75) | -1.77 | .57 | .35–.95 |
| Current socio-economic position ^c | 1.68 (.73) | 1.69 (.72) | -.12 | .97 | .60–1.57 |
| Currently living in major city area ^d (%) | 38.9 | 24.5 | 3.88* | 1.96 | .99–3.88 |
| Own children (%) | 51.4 | 59.5 | .92 | .72 | .37–1.41 |
| Sexuality | | | | | |
| Ever sexually abused before age 18 (%) | 8.8 | 2.9 | 3.90* | 3.24 | .94–11.15 |
| Ever sexually abused (%) | 19.4 | 12.4 | 1.60 | 1.71 | .74–3.98 |
| Age 1st vaginal intercourse (years) | 17.06 (2.96) | 17.02 (3.15) | -.10 | 1.01 | .90–1.12 |
| Current stable sexual relationship (%) | 72.2 | 76.1 | .30 | .82 | .39–1.71 |
| Easily sexually aroused ^e (%) | 55.6 | 33.6 | 7.46** | 2.47 | 1.26–4.81 |
| Ever same-sex sexual partner (%) | 17.1 | 2.5 | 26.36*** | 8.21 | 3.17–21.26 |
| No. times vaginal/anal intercourse last month | 5.53 (10.80) | 5.52 (6.04) | -1.08 | 1.00 | .95–1.06 |
| No. times masturbation last month | 12.40 (11.37) | 4.68 (6.55) | -5.33*** | 1.09 | 1.06–1.13 |
| No. sexual partners per active year ^f | .79 (.82) | .93 (1.41) | -.05 | .91 | .67–1.24 |
| No. times used pornography last year ^g | 31.17 (49.51) | 13.56 (36.36) | -4.04*** | 1.01 | 1.01–1.01 |
| Sexual arousal to cross-dressing acceptable to self (%) | 47.2 | 2.9 | 171.24*** | 29.70 | 14.26–61.85 |
| Ever sexually aroused by actually | | | | | |
| ... exposing genitals to a stranger (%) | 16.7 | 3.7 | 14.84*** | 5.15 | 2.04–12.98 |
| ... spying on what others are doing sexually (%) | 33.3 | 10.9 | 17.29*** | 4.09 | 2.00–8.37 |
| ... using pain (%) | 13.9 | 2.2 | 19.43*** | 7.19 | 2.60–19.92 |
| Satisfaction with sexual life ^b | 4.06 (1.26) | 4.42 (1.33) | -2.11* | .83 | .66–1.04 |
| General health and substance use | | | | | |
| Satisfaction with life in general ^b | 4.61 (.77) | 4.79 (.95) | -1.66 | .84 | .60–1.15 |
| Psychological health ^b | 5.03 (.97) | 5.22 (.94) | -1.32 | .83 | .60–1.13 |
| Physical health ^b | 4.92 (.73) | 5.09 (.94) | -1.84 | .84 | .60–1.15 |
| Current tobacco smoking ⁱ (%) | 19.4 | 21.2 | .06 | .90 | .39–2.07 |

TABLE 1. Correlates of Transvestic Fetishism among 1,279 18–60-year-old Men in a Representative General Population Sample (*Continued*)

| Characteristic | Ever sexually aroused from cross-dressing | | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|-----------|
| | Yes <i>n</i> = 36 (2.8%) | No <i>n</i> = 1,243 (97.2%) | Mann- Whitney U or χ^2 | Odds ratio | 95% CI |
| Ever substantially drunk last month (%) | 38.9 | 32.2 | .70 | 1.34 | .68–2.64 |
| Ever illegal drug use ^j (%) | 22.9 | 11.8 | 3.90* | 2.21 | .98–4.96 |
| Current psychiatric disorder ^k (%) | 2.8 | 1.0 | 1.12 | 2.90 | .37–22.94 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: ^aBorn and raised abroad; ^bSelf-reported on a five-point Likert-type scale from very negative (1) to very positive (5); ^cRated on a three-step ordinal scale based on current or latest occupation; the higher socioeconomic position the higher score; ^dLarger Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö areas; ^eRated in comparison to others; ^fTotal number of partners divided by years since first (vaginal) sexual intercourse until interview; ^gTimes used pornographic magazine or watched pornographic movie; ^hSelf-reported satisfaction on a six-point Likert-type scale from very unsatisfying (1) to very satisfying (6); ⁱSmoked 5 or more cigarettes per day last year; ^jUse of narcotics not prescribed to subject by physician; ^kDiagnosed by a physician with a psychiatric disorder during the last year.

Sexual victimization history was addressed with the question “Were you ever involved in a sexual activity without wanting it yourself?” A separate variable was constructed for those reporting their first victimization experience before age 18. Endorsement of the statement “I can consider myself becoming sexually aroused by dressing like the opposite sex” was used to tap tolerability of sexual thoughts and fantasies regarding sexual arousal to cross-dressing. The *ICD-10* (World Health Organization, 1992) and *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) list diagnostic criteria for paraphilias defined according to their distinctive paraphilic focus. The questions “Have you ever exposed your genitals to a stranger and become sexually aroused by this?” and “Have you ever spied on what other people are doing sexually and become sexually aroused by this?” were used as proxy measures for exhibitionism and voyeurism, respectively, the two most common paraphilias in clinical samples (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Sexual masochism (arousal from receiving suffering or humiliation) and sexual sadism (arousal from inflicting pain or humiliation) are two paraphilias that are more rare. “Have you ever deliberately used physical pain and become sexually aroused by this?” was used as proxy measure for sexual masochism and/or sadism.

Statistical Analysis

We used the Mann-Whitney U-test (continuous measures) and the χ^2 -test (dichotomous variables) to examine possible differences between those reporting sexual arousal from cross-dressing and those who did not. The

strength of the association of each correlate with transvestic fetishism was expressed as an odds ratio (OR) with 95% confidence interval (95% CI) derived with bivariate logistic regression.

RESULTS

A total of 36 (2.8%) men and 5 (0.4%) women reported ever having experienced sexual arousal from actual cross-dressing behavior. Since the females were so few, we excluded them from further analysis. However, when the females were tentatively pooled with the men, associations with correlates were principally of the same strength (data not shown). Thirty of these men (85.7%) reported that they had only been sexually attracted by women, and the remaining five (one man did not respond) that they had mostly been sexually attracted by women and only sometimes by men. Among the six subjects with same-sex sexual experiences (Table 1), four endorsed having been together sexually mainly with women and only two having approximately equal experience with same-sex and opposite-sex sexual activities. No man with transvestic fetishism reported a main or exclusive focus on men with respect to sexual attraction or sexual intercourse.

Thirty potential correlates to transvestic fetishism were tested and are displayed in Table 1. Sixteen of these variables were unrelated to transvestic fetishism in men: age, immigrant status, family size, socioeconomic position, being a parent, and any history of sexual victimization. Equally uncorrelated to the dependent measure were age of sexual debut, current stable sexual relationship, frequency of vaginal or anal intercourse during the last month, and extended promiscuity. Finally, satisfaction with life in general, psychological and physical health, tobacco smoking, having been substantially drunk last month, and current psychiatric morbidity were not significantly associated with transvestic fetishism.

Nine variables were significantly related to transvestic fetishism. The first five were: separation from parents during childhood, being more easily sexually aroused than others, same-sex sexual experiences, pornography use, and masturbation frequency. For example, the OR of 1.09 per unit increase in masturbation frequency can be interpreted to mean that the odds of transvestic fetishism was 2.3 times higher for males who masturbated ten more times per month than other men ($OR = 1.09^{10} = 2.37$). Transvestic fetishism also was strongly related to experiences of sexual arousal from using pain, spying on others having sex, and exposing one's genitals to a stranger. Sexual arousal from cross-dressing being acceptable to oneself was the strongest correlate to an actual experience of this practice.

One limitation with the present study was the low power to statistically secure other than strong relationships with transvestic fetishism. For the variables living in a major city, ever sexually abused before age 18 of lower

satisfaction with sexual life, and illegal drug use, the Mann-Whitney U-test or the χ^2 -test revealed significant associations with the dependent variable ($p = .035-.048$). In contrast, the corresponding odds ratios for these relationships had 95% confidence intervals including 1, just falling short of statistical significance. For parental attitudes to sex, the opposite was true in that the odds ratio was significant but the Mann-Whitney U-test was not. Because of this statistical lability, we interpreted these five associations as non-significant trends.

DISCUSSION

This is the first population-based study addressing transvestic fetishism. Almost 3% of males reported any sexual arousal from cross-dressing. This lifetime incidence agrees with data presented by Fedora et al. (1992), who found penile circumference responses consistent with transvestic fetishism in 3% of 60 non-paraphilic males. Previous studies have never identified females reporting sexual arousal from cross-dressing and women cannot be diagnosed with *DSM-IV-TR* transvestic fetishism. Interestingly, we found five women who did report sexual arousal from dressing in clothes pertaining to the opposite sex. Since they were so few, however, we excluded them from further analysis. It may be that these females understood the screening question in some other way than the men did, and more research is needed to determine whether transvestic fetishism in the same sense as for men really exists in women.

We found a non-significant trend suggesting that childhood sexual victimization was related to transvestic fetishism. Controlled studies of transvestic fetishism and other paraphilias are needed to delineate the relative importance of sexual and other forms of child abuse for their development. Two prior studies (Docter & Prince, 1997; Schott, 1995) indicated that cross-dressers do not come from highly distressed families. Males reporting transvestic fetishism in this study were not statistically different from those who did not report this fetishism in terms of immigrant status, family size, and parental attitudes to sex. However, they had less often grown up with both parents, which suggests that parental separation or some associated factor(s) could influence the development of transvestism (cf. Zucker & Blanchard, 1997).

Transvestic fetishism was further associated with being more easily sexually aroused in general. This may suggest that higher overall arousability or lower control over sexual impulses could influence also the likelihood for sexual arousal to cross-dressing. Previous same-sex sexual experience has been found in up to 30% of cross-dressers (Docter & Prince, 1997). These authors also found that 87% of subjects defined themselves as heterosexual, and the remaining 13% as bisexual, homosexual, asexual, or unsure of how

to describe their sexual orientation. No man with transvestic fetishism in our sample of non-referred subjects reported that other men had been a main focus for his sexual attraction or partnered sexual behaviour. This lends support to the notion, currently reflected in *DSM-IV-TR* diagnostic criteria, that it is almost exclusively heterosexually oriented men who experience sexual arousal from cross-dressing. Nevertheless, any experience of sexual activity with a partner of the same sex was a strong correlate of transvestic fetishism. Possible underpinnings to this co-occurrence could be more liberal attitudes to sexuality in general or a tendency to follow sexual impulses of any type among subjects with transvestic fetishism.

The strongest correlate of transvestic fetishism was the endorsement of this behavior being acceptable to oneself. However, more than 50% of those who reported sexual arousal from cross-dressing did not see it as acceptable to self. In other words, this sexual practice was currently ego-dystonic for a majority of those who had experienced it. Transvestic fetishism was strongly associated with ever having been sexually aroused from using pain when having sex, having exposed one's genitals to a stranger, and spying on what others are doing sexually. It is worrying that even though these proxy measures of paraphilias masochism/sadism, exhibitionism, and voyeurism, respectively, lack the persistence criteria included in *DSM-IV-TR* definitions, at least the latter two likely reflect sexually abusive behavior.

This study has limitations. Our definition of transvestic fetishism was based on one single questionnaire item and did not include the 6-month persistence threshold and subjective clinical impairment criteria required for a *DSM-IV-TR* diagnosis of transvestic fetishism. As in any cross-sectional study, causality cannot be inferred from associations between transvestic fetishism and correlates. With respect to generalizability of the results, recent immigrants, in particular, may have been underrepresented in our sample because language problems constituted an exclusion criterion.

The present results suggest that sexual arousal to cross-dressing is rare, but could be associated with potentially criminal paraphilic sexual behavior such as voyeuristic and exhibitionistic acts. Such negative correlates may need more attention by those providing services to individuals with transvestic fetishism.

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