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Cross-dressing in Men with Learning Disabilities

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Four men with learning disabilities were considered to show transvestic fetishism, and a fifth to show transvestism. However, developmental retardation and personality problems may modify the concepts behind such categorisation.

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Fetishism occurs when inanimate objects, often items of female clothing, are the preferred, or only, means of achieving sexual excitement. Transvestism is the use of full female apparel for this purpose (Bancroft, 1983; Money, 1984). Cross-dressing is initially sexualised, although with repeated indulgence the level of arousal diminishes, and the cross-dressing is rewarding in its own right.

DSM–III–R includes transvestic fetishism and transvestism as two categories of paraphilia (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Transsexualism is considered a gender identity disorder. Transvestic fetishism occurs exclusively in the heterosexual male. A six-month history is diagnostically essential.

Five cases of cross-dressing in men with learning disabilities are described.

Case reports

Case 1

B is a 36-year-old man with learning disabilities of unknown aetiology. Secondary handicaps include refractive temporal lobe epilepsy with secondary generalisation. He resides with his elderly retired parents, who, although caring, tend to be oppressive, exercising restrictive control over his activities. He is not permitted to leave the home independently and has no social contact outside the family. He has no daytime occupational activity.

B is somewhat dogmatic and stubborn. There is no history of psychiatric illness. Approximately ten years ago he had a series of convictions for arson, being fascinated by fires, fire engines and watching firemen extinguish the flames.

His cross-dressing became apparent at the age of 16 years and lasted several weeks. It re-emerged between the ages of 31 and 34 years, when he would attire himself with his mother's and older sister's pants and dresses. This was usually secret; however, on occasions he paraded himself wearing female clothes in front of other family members. At the age of 34 years, while being changed by his mother following ictal incontinence, he was observed to have a piece of string tied around the base of his penis. He did this on several occasions. He once painted the glans of his penis with his mother's nail polish, for enjoyment. This bizarre sexual behaviour appears to have replaced the cross-dressing, which has been absent for two years.

Examination using the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (Sparrow *et al*, 1984) showed B to have a developmental age of 4 years, 2 months. There were no significant findings in the Reiss Screen Test (Reiss, 1988) or the Psychopathology Inventory for Mentally Retarded Adults (PIMRA; Matson, 1988).

Case 2

C is a 41-year-old man with learning disabilities of unknown aetiology. One sister and a brother have a history of learning disabilities. He was brought up in a disadvantaged family where relationships with and between his parents were frayed. Social services were involved with the family who were known for emotional and educational difficulties.

C has the typical features of Asperger's syndrome, including impairments of two-way social interaction, non-verbal communication, and the content and delivery of speech (Cooper *et al*, 1993). After leaving the family home he lived alone in a council flat, managing at a rudimentary level, but unemployed, until he received convictions for

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repeated indecent assault. These consisted of publicly touching previously unknown young women. C has never had sexual relations, which he desires, probably as a consequence of his poor social skills and consequent impairment of personal relationships.

Since his mid-teens he has bought black and red frilly knickers from second-hand stalls, which he wears while masturbating over soft pornographic magazines. His cross-dressing only occurs within the privacy of his room.

The Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (Sparrow *et al*, 1984) showed C to have a developmental age of 4 years, 6 months. On the Reiss Screen Test (Reiss, 1988), he scored high on the Depression (P) Scale and on the Avoidance Disorder Scale. Using the PIMRA (Matson, 1988), high scores were achieved in areas of psychosexual disorder and inappropriate adjustment.

Case 3

D is a 17-year-old man with learning disabilities associated with the Coffin–Lowry syndrome. He is the last of six children, the three youngest of whom are mentally handicapped. He lives at home with his warm, although rather chaotic, family.

From a young age he observed his older brother's indiscreet masturbation. His brother, who has moderate learning difficulties and is markedly deaf, would dress up specifically in overcoats or even bin-liners to obtain arousal. At the age of 15 years D first took his sister's underwear and was found wearing a brassière and pants in his bedroom. His cross-dressing, both in under and outer garments, has been persistent and regular over the past two years. He attempts to use discretion in his cross-dressing and, if interrupted, tries to hide. He has been observed to be sexually aroused and masturbating while cross-dressing. Often he will go out wearing female pants and tights under his trousers, or stand admiring himself in the mirror while 'dressed up'. The patient has never expressed or shown an interest in the opposite sex or acted inappropriately with women.

Case 4

E is a 22-year-old man with learning disabilities of unknown aetiology, who lives with his parents. He was first discovered wearing his sister's underwear during his late teens, and has continued unabated over the past four years. He attempts to be discreet, dressing up in the privacy of his bedroom at night. His cross-dressing causes him great embarrassment if the subject is broached. There is evidence that he masturbates either in the presence of his mother's leotard, or actually wearing it under his male clothing during the day. He was apprehended recently by the police for making obscene telephone calls to the operator asking the colour of her pants. He has a healthy interest in the opposite sex.

E's developmental age is estimated at 5 years, 6 months on the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (Sparrow *et al*, 1984). On the Reiss Screen Test (Reiss, 1988) he had a high score for aggressive behaviour. No abnormality was recorded on the PIMRA (Matson, 1988).

Case 5

F is a 29-year-old man with learning disabilities of unknown aetiology. In his mid-teens, he surreptitiously took his mother's underwear from her bedroom which led to confrontation with his mother, and which he denied. Subsequently, he would dress up in full female attire from selected female relatives. Outdoors he would often wear female underwear underneath his masculine clothes. This behaviour persisted into his late teens, and caused conflict when he irrevocably damaged his mother's best clothes due to his large size. He was subsequently encouraged by his mother to buy his own female clothes.

He became aggressive in his late teens, which led to admission. In hospital, he stole fellow patients' underwear, being particularly partial to black tights. Over the past year, he has established a sexual relationship with a young woman, who is also mentally handicapped. Since then, the cross-dressing has been denied. However, flamboyant female dress with make-up is still the preferred attire at fancy dress parties.

F's developmental age was estimated at 10 years, 9 months on the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (Sparrow *et al*, 1984). No significant abnormalities were found on the Reiss Screen Test (Reiss, 1988) or the PIMRA (Matson, 1988).

Discussion

All five men had at least a six-month history of cross-dressing. Each recognised his male gender and lacked other evidence of effeminism or homosexuality. Cases 1, 2, 3 and 4 are considered to represent transvestic fetishism. Case 5 is consistent with transvestism.

Cross-dressing by people with learning disabilities has commanded little attention in the literature. It must be questioned whether it should be conceptualised in the same light as in those of average intelligence. It seems likely that developmental retardation, including social, interpersonal and cognitive impairments, and the effects of growing up in an environment with limited opportunities for sexual expression, may modify such concepts (Craft *et al*, 1985). In the four cases considered to represent instances of transvestic fetishism, the developmental age (as measured on the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales) lay between 3 years and 5 years, 6 months. Dressing up is an integral part of exploration and role play in normal middle childhood. At this age, such cross-dressing is of little predictive value regarding later sexual orientation. However, in each of these four individuals, cross-dressing was associated with masturbation. The fifth individual had a somewhat older developmental age (10 years, 9 months), the cross-dressing was not clearly associated with masturbation, was frequently more extensive, and in public. This individual is considered to show

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transvestism rather than transvestic fetishism (Buhrich, 1978).

The absence of fulfilling sexual relations is considered important in the development of cross-dressing. Individuals with learning disabilities are at a special disadvantage in finding appropriate partners, while their need for sexual relations is often denied by society. Additionally, personality characteristics severely impair relationship formation, Platonic or sexual. However, once a normal sexual relationship is established, the behaviour may diminish. Cross-dressing could be more common than expected among individuals with learning disabilities, owing to limited opportunity for sexual partners. In addition, such behaviour may be less discreetly conducted, leading to more ready discovery. Although the promotion of heterosexual relationships is important if the behaviour is to abate, greater acceptance of such behaviour by society is required.

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Erotic Target Location Errors in Male Gender Dysphorics, Paedophiles, and Fetishists

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A clinical series of male paedophiles who dressed or fantasised themselves as children suggests that certain paraphilias represent developmental errors in locating erotic targets in the environment and that proneness to such errors is a paraphilic dimension in its own right, apart from the specific nature of the erotic target.
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Blanchard (1991) has theorised that one class of paraphilias in heterosexual men, including fetishism, transvestism, and related cross-gender phenomena, results from developmental errors in locating heterosexual targets in the environment. The present study shows that analogues of these paraphilias occur in men whose preferred erotic target is something other than women. This is in order to argue that proneness to developmental error in locating erotic targets is a basic dimension of paraphilia which is independent of the nature of the targets themselves.

The phenomena described below have been observed only in men. Future research will have to determine whether, in this instance as in others, women are more resistant to the development of paraphilic preferences, or whether clinical sexologists have simply not learned to recognise the expression of certain paraphilias in women.

The term 'gynaephilia' refers to males whose preferred erotic targets are women. It is thus more specific than the familiar term heterosexuality, which can refer to an erotic preference for females of any age.

In gynaephilic men, developmental errors in locating the erotic target in the environment take three main forms: fetishism, transvestism, and autogynaephilia. In some fetishism, the individual

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