

Psychosexual Development of Male-to-Female Transgenders – An Exploratory Study

Aparna V V and Baby Shari. P. A.

University of Calicut, Calicut.

The present study was an exploration of sexual identity formation and related psychosocial conditions of male-to-female transgenders of Kerala using an in-depth interview. Participants were studied individually and the thematic analysis of the data indicates that their maturation was slow and late and childhood play mates were specifically of opposite sex. Father absence and child sexual abuse were pointed out by almost all participants, where their mother was found to be supportive. When identity development was expressed, rejection was the major response. Tendency for internalization of emotions were there, but even in the alienation they found a sexual partner. Details are explained in the article.

Keywords: Psychosexual development, Male-to-Female transgender

The term “sex” is generally used to categorize someone as biologically male, female or intersex. Gender, in contrast, is a term which includes all of the psychological, cultural, social characteristics of being male, female and other gender groups. Therefore, gender can be referred to as a set of expectations or perceptions about being masculine or feminine which further categorize people based on the roles and identity one carries. Gender roles are a collection of cultural norms or conventional rules that govern how people of a particular sex “should” act or behave. Gender roles establish a set of expectations for how people of a particular sex should behave within a specific culture. Gender identity is how comfortable one person is or the extent of congruency with the gender roles we follow. That is, an individual’s psychological perception of being male, female, neither, both or anything in between is referred to as gender identity. In spite of the fact that one’s gender identity is commonly congruent with their biological sex, there can be differences. For Instance, a person with a biological sex of male could identify himself as a female and

vice versa. This indicates that the perception of gender can vary from the conventional conceptions which results in a form of transgenderism (Lehmiller, 2018).

Transgender is a term used to describe individuals who exhibit gender-nonconforming identities and behaviors (Ryan & Futterman, 1997). This broad category of people includes transsexuals, cross-dressers, and gender benders/blenders (i.e., those who purposefully present an ambiguous gender expression). Although most transgender people are heterosexual, they may also be lesbian, gay, bisexual or asexual (Davenport, 1986; Ryan & Futterman, 1997). In India transgenders are excluded from the mainstream society, forced to live in cloistered groups, on the fringes of society and mostly in extreme poverty. They also go through several mental health issues such as depression, stress, and anxiety due to the marginalization they face from the family, peers as well as the society where they get merely no help from the professionals. As their identity formation is gradual, where they experience changes or differences in

their selves during the late childhood, then realize and accepts their identity around adolescence which is incongruent to the societal norms, many transgenders are excluded from the society resulting in lack of social support and dropping off from school.

It is necessary to study the development of a Transgender because there can be several factors that influence the development of a transgender identity. That can be biological (genetic or hormonal), psychological and social factors (father absence or increased involvement with opposite sex peers). Diamond (2006) explored a theory of gender development that incorporated early biological factors that organize pre-dispositions in temperament and attitudes. He found that with the activation of early biological factors, a person interacts in society and comes to identify as male or female. He concludes that one can say the person has a gendered brain since it is the brain that structures the individual's basic personality; first with inherent tendencies then with interactions coming from experience. The findings by Tsoi indicate a distinct sexual development pattern. This pattern included the prepubescent appearance of effeminate traits, the development of homosexual feelings during puberty, a cross-dressing phase during the mid-to-late teen years, and a transsexual phase characterized by surgery and the adoption of living life as a woman (Tsoi, 1990).

The society excludes the transgender people from the community due to their gender identity. The transgenders face rejection from every sphere of the community. In a research paper, Grossman and D'Augelli explored factors that affect the experience of youth (ages 15-20) who identify as transgender in three focus groups. In this research most youth reported feeling they were transgender at puberty, and they experienced negative reactions to their gender atypical negative behaviors, as well

as confusion between their gender (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). In another study conducted by Norton and Herek, they found that attitudes toward transgender people were more negative among heterosexual men than women; negative attitudes were associated with endorsement of a binary conception of gender; higher levels of psychological authoritarianism, political conservatism, and anti-egalitarianism, and (for women) religiosity; and lack of personal contact with sexual minorities (Norton & Herek, 2013). The study conducted by Kunalanka, Weiner and Mahan represent the parents' and other family members' feelings and reactions to the children's gender identities and expressions over time and the responses of others in the community (Kunalanka, Weiner & Mahan, 2014).

Many people studied transgender development but discuss only about the physical aspects, HIV transmission and the sexual health of transgenders. Sexual orientation, sexual development and identity formation of transgender people are not properly addressed. Psychological studies in Kerala context are also limited. The present study aims to understand the psychological as well as sexual development of transgender people. Special care is given to the identity development. Since most of the studies in this particular area were conducted in Western culture and the availability of Indian studies are limited, the generalizability of the findings of these studies into the present study may be difficult. This study is conducted especially in Kerala; therefore, the cultural difference might be huge. And studies addressing discrimination, perception of society and childhood experiences are rare. Thus, childhood retrospective experiences are also explored. Additionally, social responses were tried to look into from the perception of transgenders.

Objectives:

- To explore psychosexual development of transgenders with special focus to childhood and adolescence.
- To study /examine the social responses in connection with the expression of feminine nature of the participants.

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were Male-to-Female transgenders from Kerala who understands and speak the regional language fluently. All of the participants were born as biological males. The age range of the participants was 28-35 years old.

Measures

The investigator used a semi-structured interview schedule to collect information from the participants. The content of the interview was related to their childhood experiences, identity development, social responses and interpersonal conflicts (both family and intimate partner). The items in the interview were open-ended questions which further allow for an efficient probing when found necessary.

Mode of Data Collection

Since the population belonged to a marginalized community with a smaller number of identified and registered transgenders, the investigator used Snowball sampling to collect data. In Kerala, there are Non-Government Organizations (NGO) who are working in close association with transgenders in order to provide social support, create awareness on sexually transmitted diseases and providing necessary health care services to the target participants. The investigator directly met the transgender participants with the support of an NGO named "Suraksha". The NGO officer

introduced the investigator to the peer educators who are from the transgender community. These peer educators then helped the investigator to connect with other people of the transgender community.

During the first meeting the investigator disclosed the purpose of the research and fixed the appointment according to the participants' convenience. Before starting the interview, the investigator briefed about the purpose of the study and research questions to each participant, proceeding with seeking informed consent maintaining the ethical considerations. Later, the investigator established rapport in order to collect information from the participants and also sought permission to audio record the interview. After getting the permission, the interview began and each interview took 45 minutes to One hour. Each interview concluded with offering psychological help when in need and expressing gratitude for cooperating throughout the interview. All the information were given by the participants themselves. No informant was present during the interview. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, P. A. B. S, upon reasonable request.

Discussion

The present study proceeds under the umbrella of psychosexual development of transgender. In this particular study, the investigator collected data from male-to-female transgenders from Kerala, India. The NGO and interview confirmed that they were not people having an intersex condition, bisexual or hermaphrodites but are males who have female characteristics and behavior. The investigator employed a semi-structured interview schedule for the research purpose. The descriptive data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

Developing and integrating a positive identity is a developmental task for all

adolescents. For transgender youth, however, there is the additional challenge of integrating a complex gender identity with their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, personal characteristics, and family circumstances. They are faced not only with the task of developing a sexual identity, but also with reconciling their gender identity with the traditional gender expectations associated with their biological sex (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006). As gender-atypical behavior is much less accepted in boys than girls, biological males who are transgender are most often the targets of verbal and physical abuse. Without resources and support, these youth often drop out of school, run away, and end up on the streets, where they may engage in survival sex and become at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Klein, 1999).

Despite increasing social scientific acknowledgment and investigation of transgender experience, most contemporary perspectives presume that the primary identity dilemma for transgender individuals is a conflict between one's psychological gender and one's biological sex, such that the normative and healthy endpoint of transgender identity development is the achievement of a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female, often achieved via some form of physical transformation aimed at bringing one's psychological gender and one's physical gender presentation into alignment. Yet there is increasing evidence that such dichotomous models of gender fail to accommodate the true complexity and diversity of transgender experience (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011).

The information collected is discussed on the basis of the theory of Psychosexual Development explained by Sigmund Freud. As per the theory, in a normal psychosexual development an individual go through

different stages. In each stage the sexual pleasure is gained from different erotogenic zones. The first three stages are auto-erotic because the individual gains pleasure from its own body. These are the oral stage, anal stage and phallic stage (Freud, 1953).

During the latency period, the child does not involve in any of the sexually stimulating activities. Instead, they develop mental dams like disgust, shame and morality against sexual instincts. And in the last stage of genital stage, again the erotogenic zone becomes the genitalia. At this stage, the individual finds a sexual object. The sexual instinct is now directed towards the reproductive function. An individual forms his/her sexual and gender identity at this last stage of the development. He/she also confirms his sexual orientation. But all these are different when it comes to the case of transgender people (Freud, 1953). The reports were collected from the participants directly. The first objective of the study was to explore the childhood and psychosexual development. From the participants itself the investigator came to know that the birth, babyhood and childhood were quite similar to others of the age. The investigator also could not find any significant changes in development during the same period.

Childhood Play

Exploration of childhood experiences generated certain attributions made by the participants. While considering the contribution of social factors such as interaction with peers from neighborhood and schools, the participants reported that they had an increased preference for playmates from the opposite sex and preferred opposite sex companionship rather than same sex companionship. The welcoming, non-judgmental and accepting nature of the opposite sex peers were found to be a contributing factor for this preference. They greatly enjoyed the conventional

games played by girls in the neighborhood and utilized every chance to get along with the other girls. Likewise, in schools they preferred to sit with their opposite sex peers in contrast to the followed system in educational institutions in Kerala. Negative emotions or experiences such as fear and frustration were reported when force was imposed on them to behave otherwise. These experiences with the opposite sex peers might have produced a chance for imitation, like a female, for the transgender person. Social learning theory indicates that our environment plays a crucial role in learning gender roles through rewards and punishments (Carroll, 2007).

The theory proposed by Bem, 'Exotic Becomes the Erotic', claims to specify the causal antecedents of an individual's erotic or romantic attractions to opposite-sex and same-sex persons. According to this theory, the events that lead to sexual orientation for most men and women in a gender-polarizing culture proceed in a temporal sequence. In this theory, Bem points out that one individual's biological variables such as genes or prenatal hormones do not code for sexual orientation but for childhood temperaments, such as aggression or activity level. It is these temperaments that predispose him/ her to enjoy some activities more than others. One child will enjoy rough-and-tumble play and competitive team sports; another will prefer to socialize quietly or conventional female-typical activities. Children usually has a tendency to prefer to play with peers who share their activity preferences; for example, a child who enjoys cricket or football will selectively seek out boys as playmates. Gender conforming children are those who prefer sex-typical activities and same-sex playmates; children who prefer sex-atypical activities and opposite- sex playmates are referred to as gender nonconforming (Bem, 1996).

Gender-conforming children will feel different from opposite-sex peers, perceiving them as dissimilar, unfamiliar, and exotic. Similarly, gender-nonconforming children will feel different—even alienated—from same-sex peers, perceiving them as dissimilar, unfamiliar, and exotic. These feelings of dissimilarity and unfamiliarity produce heightened autonomic arousal. For the male-typical child, it may be felt as antipathy or contempt in the presence of girls ("girls are yucky"); for the female-typical child, it may be felt as timidity or apprehension in the presence of boys. The theory claims, however, that every child, conforming or nonconforming, experiences heightened, nonspecific autonomic arousal in the presence of peers from whom he or she feels different. In this modal case, the arousal will not necessarily be affectively toned or consciously felt. Regardless of the specific source or affective tone of the childhood autonomic arousal, it is transformed in later years into erotic/romantic attraction. Thus, these sequences encompass specific psychological mechanisms that transform exotic into erotic (Bem, 1996).

Puberty

The period of puberty was reported as challenging for the participants as they experience confusions on their gender identity which was prominent during this period. However, some experienced these shifts from the late childhood also. The primary and notable transformation they experienced is an alteration in their gait, that is, the slow imitation or adaptation of a conventional female gait, for which they were treated with contempt by the society. A high preference for female outfits and heightened desire to dress and groom like opposite sex peers were another remarkable change experienced during this period. Moreover, these episodes of crossdressing, somehow led them to believe that engaging in such kind of activities can make or help to identify

themselves as a female. Similarly, every possible chance to become a girl were made use by the participants, such as, engaging in different female artistic expressions, for example, dance, where interaction with the opposite sex peers were possible in circumstances such as practice hours, the possibility to wear make-up and ornaments and finally being able to dance like a girl which enhanced their sense of being a female. Rewards and appraisals from others for recognizing their skills furthermore enhanced their self-esteem and self-worth as a female.

A significant challenge experienced by the participants during this period was the identity crisis where they had to choose from either of the gender binary but yet unclear. In addition, this hampered the decision-making process of the transgenders regarding the gender identity. This stage is further marked by several severe internal conflicts such as, fear of rejection from family and friends, loneliness and heightened stress related to identity crisis. Initially, they believed that they are the only ones who goes through these experiences. But interaction with other transgenders they encountered at different situations and at different places facilitated the identification and acceptance of their gender identity and this happened to be at the age of adolescence or pre-adolescence. "Transgender people can easily identify another one who is a transgender", says one transgender. In addition, these encounters helped in understanding other particulars about their gender identity and gender role. Similar encounters and acceptance they received from other transgenders reduced the stress experienced due to the identity crisis. The perception that they are loved and accepted as they are, at least by a group of minority community helped in improving their self-esteem and confidence as well.

When it comes to the aspect of sexual attraction, attraction towards same sex peers were seen, as explained by Bem (1996), which

makes their sexual orientation heterosexual. This clarifies the presence of gender incongruity at an earlier age, of which only the acceptance was delayed. When the physical changes were examined, it was found to be occurred slow and late for the transgender people. For instance, the facial hair appeared late and there was only minor variation in the sound, which indicate a slow and late maturation. Some biological factors like hormones maught have played a role in this gender incongruence, which have to be explored further.

Parental Influence

Children have a tendency to observe same-sex and other-sex adults behaving in ways that generally confirm with traditional gender role expectations. These observations exert a powerful influence on children to exhibit expected gender confirming behavior. That is, this process of observational learning plays a significant role learning gender role expectation (Bandura, 1965). Developing children are given consistent models of male and female behavior by watching adult men and women and the results of their actions. A crucial component of the psychosocial approach to gender identity development is this social learning process. Based on extensive observations made over years in a variety of social contexts, according to Bandura, a large portion of gender role learning take place in an implicit manner (Westheimer & Lopater, 2002).

While looking into the reports of the participants, the absence of father figure, in their childhood, due to death, divorce or separation was found to be a significant correlated factor, but may not a causal factor, in the development of a trans identity. That is, the absence of a same sex parent during this developmental period as an identification object might have hindered the process of identification and practice of conventional

gender roles that goes congruent with their sexual identity. Therefore, this might have led them, during the phallic stage, to identify with the mother as she is the only dominant parent figure present for observation. Katz (1987) found that children reared by single female parents are less influenced by conventional gender roles than children reared by both parents. Observation and modeling of this maternal behavior lead children less likely to associate tasks, achievements or emotional expressions with either male or female.

Mothers of participants were reported as supportive and overprotective than any others in the family. This can be seen correlated with the help mothers received from the participants, when they were children, in terms of household works and emotional support. For instance, in a cultural context like Kerala, where single mothers come home tired after tedious daily wage work due to their low socio-economic status, they still have to do the household works. But in this particular context, the children usually did the household works such as, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, doing the dishes etc before the arrival of their female parents which was a relief, and in turn the children were rewarded with love and acceptance for which they continued doing these household activities. For these kind of expressions during adolescence, the mothers were supportive and non-reactive to the transgender identity.

Social Support

The second objective was to examine the social responses in connection with the expression of feminine features in Male-to-Female Transgenders and in turn the reactions from the side of the participants against the society's responses. Support and acceptance of Male-to Female transgenders from family, friends, and even from the society were found to be minimal in this particular study. In addition to the insufficient

social support, they also undergone physical and verbal abuse from the family, friends, teachers and neighborhood, most of it being compulsions for being masculine. Yet in few cases, the mothers strongly supported the participants, but in another cases the pressure from relatives and other family members forced the mothers, who are single and non-assertive, not to approve of their children even if they desired so. Apart from the parents and other family member siblings also engaged in verbal abuse regardless of the birth order. However, a gradual acceptance can be seen from the side of the family but only for the money they earned and ignored again if the demanded amount of money was not provided, added the participants. This indicates the depth of exclusion and rejection faced by the Male-to-Female Transgenders from family.

Besides all the negligence, the support received from the female neighbors were commendable. The participants reported that amongst this trouble there were some female neighbors who provided some basic amenities and acceptance. The participants were made fun by the schoolmates and ridiculed by the teachers which further resulted in drop out from the educational institution. One participant reported that: "My classmates would be waiting outside the toilets when I was going to pee and when I started urinating, that is, when I took out my genital, they came fast and attempted to grab it where I was unable to resist. Thus, I stopped using public toilets." Negative events like these have the ability to trigger the tendency to affiliate with likeminded people, that is, homophelic tendency. Similarly, in this context also the Male-to-Female transgenders made a community of themselves where they are accepted and not judged due to their identity. This community usually gathered together on special occasions or at specific time in specific places where they are usually seen in a particular locality. At other times they hid

their identity and engaged in the usual work for living.

Travelling at night was frightening for the participants as they were mostly accused of immoral traffic and verbally abused even by the law-abiding officers itself. Apart from the verbal abuse, sometimes, they were also dragged to have sex along with coercion by some antisocial men, even when they clearly indicated their refusal. This shows the stigma towards Male-to-Female Transgenders even from the authorities along with the general public and they are treated only as sex workers. When extreme exclusion and rejection is experienced, sex work is the only option to earn a living, the participants added. Moreover, they are reported to have less capacity to resist during a sexual compulsion from males.

All the above-mentioned matters and incidents are found to be expressions of the marginalization of Male-to-Female Transgenders in our society.

Mental health & coping style

Lack of personal space, privacy and inability to experience and express their emotions along with the tormentation from the society was frightening for each participant. Compulsions to be masculine from the family as well as the society resulted in exhibiting a totally different persona by the participants and also retreat from the outside world to the comfort of their room, where no one is watching or teasing them and can be themselves. This in turn led to several mental health issues including heightened anxiety and rejection sensitivity. In addition, internalization of such negative experiences and the resulting emotions further increased the emotional vulnerability. The rejection faced by the transgender people from family, friends and society gradually led to a feeling of alienation. They experienced lack of close emotional ties with family and friends which further complicated their current situation. As

mentioned earlier, withdrawal is the most common coping style adopted by the transgender people. They tend to withdraw from any situation that they find difficult to handle. For instance, dropping out from the school as a result of the harassment from teachers and friends, crying and running away from the people who mocked at them, and inability to express frustration etc. They didn't mention anything additional that is suggestive of other psycho-somatic issues.

Sexual Partner

The participants talked about an intimate partner. So that, they expressed sexual needs. The presence of an intimate partner, who is a biological male and with whom they share emotional and sexual bond, can be seen in the case of every participant. This indicates that the participants' sexual orientation was heterosexual. From the analysis of their experiences the investigators found that transgender individuals are highly sensitive people who get easily attached to anyone who seems accepting. Since the transgender individuals are attracted to males, if they find that someone belongs to the opposite gender expresses love, the chances of getting intimate in that relationship is very high.

In this study, all the participants were reported as having an intimate partner with whom they live. In 100% of cases during the young adulthood they find someone who is attracted to them and start living with that person. Participants stated that when they believe their love is truthful and trustworthy, they are willing to do anything for their intimate partners. They reported that they assist them even with the money they obtained from begging and sex work. Furthermore, transgender persons tend to play gender stereotypes and obey their partners' demands, much like an obedient wife does. In most situations, once these partners get enough money, they end their

relationship with the transgender persons. This rejection results in a big emotional trauma for them. One participant reported that 'she' still suffers from depression after break up. In these cases, as well, transgender people found themselves lonely because their sole source of understanding and expressing their issues was their romantic partner. This indicates that most of their intimate relationships end up in conflicts and led to emotional problems.

In their sex life also, the satisfaction is reported as minimum. During sex, the transgender participants perceive themselves as a passive female who expect a dominant sexual male partner. But the partner might be having another expectation and sexual satisfaction level and that would be, in most cases, organ related.

Sexual Abuse

The participants reported that they had a very early/ childhood compulsive sexual contact where the perpetrator happens to be a male older adult and the event happened to be coercive. The role of the participant during the abuse in that young age specifically in childhood happened to be similar to that of female, partner in a heterosexual relationship, that is, a compulsive obedient, silent, passive role. In most situations the act was dominant and continued for a longer duration. They reported it as one of the primary causal factors of being gender incongruent. A passive feminine role was continuously given to them during the sexual activity. The dominant partner is always found to be a male, a teacher or one of the immediate family members, because the children are easily available to them. The participants have also reported that most of them loved to remain in the passive role during sex which was compulsorily assigned and they sustained in that passive role. These experiences made them more confused

about their identity. The participants were attributing these factors as the causal factors for the development of their gender identity. The reports from the participants show that even after being identified as transgender, they were abused in different situations. Whenever they go out antisocial people compulsorily drag them for sex even when they deny. They lack the assertiveness to say "No" to the offenders. The participants are of the view that people treat them as a material for sexual pleasure and they always received a passive partner role.

Miscellaneous

The investigator further enquired about their current life and needs. The participants reported that they struggle to find a dignified job in the society. Their gender peculiarity and lack of education keep them always discriminated from the job opportunities. Therefore, most of them find jobs like beautician, make-up artist, dance teacher etc., which is not possible for everyone. They are helpless to live in this world full of rejection and harassment. Participants reported that government should make policies to enhance their educational qualifications and help them with reservations in job categories, which is already implemented in the state of Kerala. The participants also reported that whenever they engage in a conversation with someone else, all of the other people would like to know only about their sexuality and sexual orientation. No one is trying to understand about their other basic necessities or what they actually need from the public. The participants are of the view that they do not need generosity but their rights. They are also about the view that the transgender policy hasn't reached them even if it is implemented. They also demand that in government projects all the officials including the counselor must be from transgender community people, so that they can ensure that the project is extending to the transgender community.

Limitations

- The study was conducted in a small group of transgender people.
- The participants include only male-to-female transgender individuals.
- The only method for collecting information was direct interview.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to explore the psychosexual development of male-to-female transgender people, with special reference to socio-familial responses. Through this study the investigator has tried to find out the gender identity development of male-to-female transgender people and the social and familial responses in connection with their identity development. The study was conducted in a small group. Playmates of the participants during childhood were from the opposite sex (females) whereas they had only very limited friends from the same sex. Father of the participants (100% of the cases) was found to be away from the child, due to death, divorce or separation. All the participants in the study (Male-to-Female transgender) had encountered sexual abuse in their childhood, which was coercive, continuous, dominant and sudden. In much of the cases the abuser was a person known to them and from immediate family or neighborhood. The compulsive role by the child was that of (similar to) a female. The causal effect of child sexual abuse reported for becoming a transgender was not verified as causal but found as correlated. The participants were found to be rejection sensitive which led to internal conflicts and high frustration to the society as such. Social responses (from strangers and police men) were also found to be negative. They live away from their family. They are not getting any white-collar job, due to lack of academic qualification. Confidence level of the participants was found to be low.

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Aparna, V. V., Research scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Calicut, Kerala, mail id: aparnavv466@gmail.com

Baby Shari. P. A., PhD., Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Calicut, Kerala, mail id: sharipadiyath@gmail.com