

The image of female-to-male transsexuals in Polish society

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Summary

Aim: The aim of this study is to determine the image of female-to-male type (F/M) transsexuals, in the opinion of men and women with undisturbed gender identity.

Method: A questionnaire survey was carried out among 300 students. Respondents answered questions concerning their age, gender and place of origin as well as various aspects of life of F/M transsexuals (e.g. childhood, occupational preferences, social and sexual life, quality of life).

Results: The results showed that the image of F/M transsexuals differs between the group of men and women, mainly due to the lack of opinion expressed more frequently by men.

Conclusions: 1 Assessment of mental, social and sexual dimension of F/M transsexual life, presented by the surveyed students, reveals a lack of understanding of the problems of transsexual people. 2. Men's lack of opinion about these mentioned spheres of life of people with disturbed gender identity may indicate insufficient knowledge about the nature of transsexualism or little interest in the problem in the group of students.

Key words: transsexualism, questionnaires, students

Introduction

The term transsexual refers to a person whose gender identity is opposite to the genetic sex and its physical characteristics. Gooren defines transsexualism as „the development of gender identity, which is not consistent with the morphology of the genitals and secondary and tertiary sexual characteristics” [1].

In the majority of F/M transsexuals, gender identity disorders manifest themselves in early childhood, resulting in a feeling of discomfort due to emerging tertiary sexual characteristics [2]. In older children and youth a sense of gender incompatibility prevents the normal development of peer relationships, which often leads to their isolation, and even aggressive behaviors towards them [3, 4]. Transsexual adults are not always socially accepted, it may be reflected in both professional and personal life, which leads to low self-esteem and a sense of being harmed by nature [5, 6, 7]. However, in the available medical literature publications describing extensive social contacts and active erotic life of transsexuals can be found [8, 9]. Dulko and colleagues [8] claimed

that patterns of sexual activity of transsexuals in terms of their strengths and needs are similar to those in the „normal” population.

In Poland, the issue of transsexualism remains controversial and taboo topic. Many people associate it with homosexuality or transvestism, and for some the notion of transsexualism is completely alien and associated with sexual deviation. The expression of specificity of this problem in Poland is the lack of clear legal regulations concerning sex change, and the current law is based on the statutory activities in anticipation of the Act on transsexuals [10]. Antoszewski et al. [11], comparing the opinions of students about transsexuals, showed a greater understanding of the needs of transsexuals in female students than in male students. Women more frequently accepted the right of transsexuals to legal sex change, hormone therapy and sex-change operations. They also more often agreed to finance these procedures from a national health fund.

In view of these controversies regarding public perception and acceptance of transsexualism in Polish society, it seems reasonable to conduct researches on this topic and identifying the needs of the society sex education, which will allow to develop an open and aware social attitudes, and ,at the same time, can improve the acceptance of transsexual people.

The aim of this study is to present the image of F/M transsexuals in the eyes of women and men as well as examining the relationship between specific images in the analyzed groups.

Material

Participants

A questionnaire surveys were conducted among 300 students from higher education institutions in Łódź (Technical University of Łódź, University of Łódź and the Medical University) *Characteristics of the group of students*

All respondents assured of having heterosexual orientation and reported no sexual identity disorders. The study group consisted of 51% males, 49% females; mean age of respondents was 23.2 ± 1.1 years. The majority – 61% of the surveyed students - came from large cities (over 100 thousand inhabitants), 27.4% from smaller towns, and 11.6% from rural areas.

Method

For the needs of the study a questionnaire was developed, containing questions about age, sex and place of origin, as well as various aspects of F/M transsexuals' life.

Respondents were asked the following questions: *Do F/M transsexuals feel hurt by nature? Do F/M transsexuals feel „different”? Do F/M transsexuals envy people satisfied with their sex? Do F/M transsexuals encounter more failures in life than others? Do F/M transsexuals preferred to play with girls in childhood? Do F/M transsexuals have always liked typically female professions? Do F/M transsexuals have extensive social contacts? Do F/M transsexuals feel sexual drive for women? Do F/M transsexu-*

als imagine intimate contacts with women as pleasant? Do F/M transsexuals consider themselves to be attractive life partners? Based on the responses to the questions included in the questionnaire, the image of F/M transsexuals in the examined groups (women and men) was determined. In addition, the survey included question about the sources from which the students derive knowledge about transsexualism.

Statistical analysis

*Correlations between the statistical parameters in the analyzed groups were assessed with the use of the Chi2 test (the level of significance was $p < 0.05$). In the survey one of the possible answers should have been chosen: *definitely yes, rather yes, I have no opinion, rather not, and definitely not. Due to the small number of answers rather yes and rather not they were combined in the statistical analysis with definitely yes and definitely not, eventually considering three options: yes, no and I have no opinion.**

Results

The results of the survey, presented in the form absolute values and percentages as well as statistical relationships are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of male and female students' answer to the questions included in the questionnaire

Question	Females n = 147			Males = 153			df = 2	
	yes	no	I have no opinion	yes	no	I have no opinion	Chi ²	p
Do F/M transsexuals feel hurt by nature?	113 76.9%	14 9.5%	20 13.6%	92 60.1%	6 3.9%	55 35.9%	21.57	< 0.0001
Do F/M transsexuals feel "different"?	100 68.0%	21 14.3%	26 17.7%	95 62.1%	14 9.2%	44 28.8%	6.04	0.049
Do F/M transsexuals envy people satisfied with their sex?	95 64.6%	23 15.6%	29 19.7%	90 58.8%	10 6.5%	53 34.6%	12.16	0.002
Do F/M transsexuals encounter more failures in life than others?	74 50.3%	29 19.7%	44 29.9%	60 39.2%	33 21.6%	60 39.2%	4.06	0.13
Do F/M transsexuals preferred to play with girls in childhood?	16 10.9%	72 49.0%	59 40.1%	15 9.8%	37 24.2%	101 66.0%	22.18	< 0.0001
Do F/M transsexuals always liked typically female profession?	35 23.8%	58 39.5%	54 36.7%	31 20.3%	33 21.6%	89 58.2%	15.56	0.0004

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Do F/M transseksuals have extensive social contacts?	37	49	61	36	31	86	8.20	0.0166
	25.2%	33.3%	41.5%	23.5%	20.3%	56.2%		
Do F/M transseksuals feel sexual drive for women?	99	20	28	62	18	73	28.55	< 0.0001
	67.3%	13.6%	19.0%	40.5%	11.8%	47.7%		
Do F/M transseksuals image intimate contacts with women as pleasant?	83	12	52	44	9	96	25.47	< 0.0001
	56.5%	8.2%	35.4%	29.5%	6.0%	64.4%		
Do F/M transseksuals consider themselves to be attractive life partners?	52	26	69	39	19	95	6.95	0.031
	35.4%	17.7%	46.9%	25.5%	12.4%	62.1%		

Comparison of the data obtained in the group of women with the data obtained in the group of men shows statistically significant differences in almost all of the questions contained in the questionnaire (Table 1).

Responses of male and female students to questions about the basic psychological problems of F/M transsexuals (*Do F/M transsexuals feel hurt by nature? Do F/M transsexuals feel „different“? Do F/M transsexuals envy people satisfied with their sex?*) differed significantly ($p < 0.05$). In all these questions, both women and men most frequently gave positive response, while men more often chose the answer *I have no opinion*. In the question *Do F/M transsexuals encounter more failures in life than others?* more than half of the female students answered positively, and 29.9% had no opinion on the subject. Male students responses were similar.

For questions regarding social relations of transsexuals (*Do F/M transsexuals preferred to play with girls in childhood? Do F/M transsexuals have always liked typically female professions? Do F/M transsexuals have extensive social contacts?*) men and women responded significantly differently ($p < 0.05$). Almost half (49%) of the surveyed women did not agree with the belief that in childhood transsexuals F/M preferred the company of girls, while as many as 66% of men had no opinion on the subject. Similarly, to questions concerning transsexuals' occupational preferences and their social contacts, more than half of men (58.2% and 56.2%) answered *I have no opinion*. Only 25.2% of women and 23.5% of men believe that transsexuals have extensive social contacts.

To the questions concerning sex life of F/M transsexuals (*Do F/M transsexuals feel sexual drive for women? Do F/M transsexuals imagine intimate contacts with women as pleasant? Do F/M transsexuals consider themselves to be attractive life partners?*) both women and men responded significantly differently. Most of the women correctly stated that F/M transsexuals have sexual desire to women, and intimate relationship with them they consider to be pleasurable (respectively 67.3% and 56.5%). However, the most common males response to these questions was *I have no opinion* (respectively 47.7% and 64.4%). Most of the female and male students to the question *Do F/M transsexuals consider themselves to be attractive life partners?* said *I have no opinion* (46.9% and 62.1%).

The image of transsexuals among students is shaped primarily on the basis of the media (76%), oral (57.7%) and Internet information (48.3%), fewer students acquire

this knowledge through self-study, from textbooks or scientific publications (37%), or through a personal relationship with a transsexual (3%). Most often students derive such information from three (35.3%) or two (34%) sources.

Discussion

The first symptoms of gender identity disorder, developing into the direction of F/M transsexualism, usually appear in childhood, manifesting, inter alia, in willingness to participate in games typical for the opposite sex and the lack of acceptance of the possessed sexual characteristics [2, 12]. The study showed lack of knowledge in this respect of a large population of men.

Bower [2] has proved that personality disorders associated with the lack of acceptance of one's own sex are more common among transsexuals (male-to-female) M/F than (female-to-male) F/M. At the same time, he points out that some people might not agree with the term „personality disorder” and would rather call it a „personality change”. Zucker et al. [13] explain that comorbid disorders are more common among transsexuals M/F than F/M, which may result from the fact that „tomboys” are more tolerated by peers and parents than „effeminate boys.” In literature it is often indicated that in adulthood transsexuals have difficulty in developing normal interpersonal relationships, there may be signs of depression, thoughts and even suicide attempts or self-harm tendency [2, 14, 15, 16]. About half of the students had no opinion on transsexuals' social contacts and a sense of their attractiveness as a partner for life, which is probably due to the fact that they do not have such a person in their environment.

Some authors reported that the majority of K/M transsexuals feel sexual desire for women, and they treat the relationship as heterosexual [2, 8]. However, Chivers and Bailey [17] found in their studies that F/M transsexuals, depending on the orientation of libido, are not a homogeneous group in many respects. In the opinion of most of the surveyed women F/M transsexuals have sexual desire for the female sex, which may indicate that the female respondents see them as heterosexual in terms of psychical gender identity. The males' information in this area are not satisfactory and indicate a lack of basic knowledge about transsexualism.

Antoszewski et al. in previous studies found that female students have greater understanding of the needs of transsexuals than male students - women are more likely to recognize the right of transsexuals to change the name, to undergo hormone therapy and surgical sex change, they also more frequently tended to grant them the right to state-funded treatment [11]. Researchers also concluded that among higher education students F/M transsexual is not stereotypically perceived, and men create a more negative picture of F/M transsexual than women [18].

In interpreting the results of the study, attention should be paid to the specificity of the group of respondents, and in particular to the fact that out of 300 students, none declared homosexual orientation, which seems unlikely. Although the respondents were randomly selected, this may indicate their specific attitude to sexuality issues.

In this study, which aimed to determine the F/M transsexual image, the influence of sex of respondents on its shape had also been observed. This was due to the fact

that men were less decided and more often than expected gave the response *I have no opinion*. This indicates lower interest in transsexualism or even ignorance of this problem by men, which may result from fear of the group of abnormality and otherness in the issues related to sexuality.

Conclusions

1. The assessment of mental, social and sexual life dimensions of F/M transsexuals, made by the students, indicates a lack of understanding of transsexual persons and of the essence of transsexualism, especially in regard to disclosure of a different identity in childhood, sexual preference and social functioning of transsexuals.
2. Untutored view of healthy males on the mentioned spheres of life of people with disturbed sexual identity may indicate a lack of knowledge about the nature of transsexualism or small interest in the problem among students.

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