

Sexual Identity of 37 Children Raised by Homosexual or Transsexual Parents

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The author reports on 37 children who are being raised by female homosexuals or by parents who have changed sex (transsexuals): 21 by female homosexuals, 7 by male-to-female transsexuals, and 9 by female-to-male transsexuals. The children range in age from 3 to 20 years (mean=9.3) and have lived in the sexually atypical households for 1-16 years (mean=4.9). Thirty-six of the children report or recall childhood toy, game, clothing, and peer group preferences that are typical for their sex. The 13 older children who report erotic fantasies or overt sexual behaviors are all heterosexually oriented.

THERE ARE provocative questions regarding the sexual identity development of children whose parents are sexually atypical. Two relatively recent sociomedical phenomena have provided an opportunity to examine these influences: the increasing numbers of persons undergoing sex-reassignment surgery (transsexuals) and heterosexually married parents who divorce and then live as homosexual parents.

Sexual identity is here defined as encompassing three components: 1) core morphologic identity, the early emerging self-concept of being male or female; 2) gender-role behavior, those subsequently emerging dimorphic behaviors considered masculine or feminine; and 3) sexual partner orientation, the later emerging erotic preference for males, females, or both.

Transsexuals are atypical in terms of all three components. The transsexual has a core identity contradictory to that designated by genital anatomy, behaves in a manner typically manifested by persons of the other sex, and has a sexual partner preference for persons of the same sex. The homosexual is atypical in one of these areas, having a core identity consistent with anatomy, usually behaving in a gender-role fashion typical for his or her sex but manifesting an erotic preference for same-sex partners.

METHOD

During the past 2 years, I have examined 37 children (18 males and 19 females) who are being raised by at

least one parent who is either transsexual or homosexual. Sixteen were being raised by transsexual parents and 21 by homosexual parents. The transsexual parents were evaluated at varying stages of sex-reassignment. The children in these families were either born to the transsexual during the life phase in which he or she was living in the sex role designated at birth, or were children of women who divorced and then married a female-to-male transsexual (who thus became stepfather and husband). The children of the homosexual parents had mothers who were involved in child custody litigation with their ex-husbands.

The age range of the children raised by transsexuals was 3-20 years, with a mean of 11.3. The number of years they had lived in the transsexual household ranged from 1 to 16 (mean=6.75). The children raised by homosexual mothers ranged in age from 5 to 14 years, with a mean of 8. They had lived in the homosexual household for 2-6 years (mean=3.5). All of the latter children had lived in a household in which there were two adult homosexual females and all but two sets continue to do so. In most cases the children knew of their parent's atypical sexual identity (transsexual or homosexual).

An attempt was made to understand features of the transsexual or homosexual home environment and to ascertain what information (if any) had been transmitted to the child regarding parental sexual lifestyle, the age at which such information was given, and the amount of time that had elapsed since the child was informed.

Sexual identity of the younger children was assessed on gross measures found in previous research to best reflect emerging sexual identity (1). These include toy and game preference, peer group composition (which is typically same-sex in grade-school-age children), clothing preference, roles played in fantasy games (which are typically of the same sex as the player), vocational aspiration, and the Draw-A-Person test (sex of the first person drawn is considered reflective of sexual identity; males typically draw males first, and females draw females first) (2). For adolescents, information was obtained regarding romantic crushes, erotic fantasies, and interpersonal sexual behavior.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the data on the 9 children raised by 4 female-to-male transsexuals. Four of these chil-

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TABLE 1
Children Raised by Female-to-Male Transsexuals

Family Code	Sex	Age (years)	Years in Household	Age at Awareness	"Sissy" or "Tomboy"	Vocational Aspiration	Sexual Orientation
A	F	17	10	7	No	Waitress	Heterosexual
A	F	15	10	5	No	Nurse	Heterosexual
A	F	13	9	4	Yes	Veterinarian	Heterosexual
A	F*	18	8	10	No	Housewife	Heterosexual
B	M	17	14	Never	No	Engineer	Heterosexual
B	M	15	14	Never	No	Doctor	Heterosexual
C	F	20	16	15	No	Stewardess	Heterosexual
D	M	8	5	Never	No	Fireman	—
D	F	7	5	Never	No	Waitress	—

*Not interviewed

TABLE 2
Children Raised by Male-to-Female Transsexuals

Family Code	Sex	Age (years)	Years in Household	Age at Awareness	"Sissy" or "Tomboy"	Vocational Aspiration	Erotic Fantasies
E	M	13	3	10	No	Film director	Heterosexual
E	F	9	3	6	No	Artist	—
E	F	6	3	3	No	Teacher	—
E	M	6	3	3	No	Policeman	—
F	M	11	4	7	No	Doctor	Heterosexual
G	M	4	4	3	No	Daddy	—
G	F	3	3	2	Yes	Mommy	—

TABLE 3
Children Raised by Female Homosexuals

Family Code	Sex	Age (years)	Years in Household	Draw-A-Person	Peer Group	Favorite Toy	Vocational Aspiration	Erotic Fantasies
H	M	11	3	M	M	Cars	Pilot	Heterosexual
H	F	8	3	F	F	Autoharp	Popsicle lady	—
H	M	5	3	F	M	Hot cycle	Football player	—
H	F	5	3	F	F	Doll	Nurse	—
H	M	9	3	M	M	Truck	Artist	—
H	M	7	3	M	M	Gun	Artist	—
I	F	14	5	F	F	Monopoly	Doctor	Heterosexual
I	M	13	5	F	M	Cars	Fireman	Heterosexual
I	M	12	5	F	M	Racing set	Policeman	Heterosexual
I	M	9	5	M	M	Model shark	Scientist	—
I	F	8	5	F	F	Doll	Doctor	—
I	F	6	5	F	F	Doll	Nurse	—
J	M	5	2	M	M	Board game	Fireman	—
J	M	10	2	F	M	Kite	Lawyer	—
J	F	7	2	M	M	Board game	Nurse	—
K	M	8	6	M	F	Plastic animal	Scientist	—
L	F	7	4	F	F	Doll	Nurse or teacher	—
M	F	6	3	F	F	Doll	Nurse	—
M	M	7	3	—	M	Cars	Storekeeper	—
N	F	7	2	F	F	Doll	Nurse	—
N	F	5	2	F	F	Doll	Nurse	—

dren were unaware that their "stepfather" or "father" was transsexual, whereas the others knew of their parent's transsexuality. Four girls recall seeing their biological mother emerge through androgen treatment and sex-reassignment surgery to become their "legal father" and then marry their "stepmother." All of these girls are feminine and heterosexually oriented. One girl lived with her mother until age 16 while the mother engaged in a lesbian lifestyle and planned for sex-reassignment surgery. The girl is feminine and heterosexual.

Two boys had been unaware of the continuing female anatomic morphology of their "stepfather" for 14 years. These boys are masculine and heterosexually oriented. Two children were 3 and 2 years old when their mother became their "father," and they have no conscious memory of the transformation. All of these children who have reached adolescence are heterosexually oriented.

Table 2 summarizes the data on 7 children who are being raised by 3 male-to-female transsexuals. In one family (family E) 4 children watched their father

change through hormones and surgery to become their "mother." The youngest children were 3 years old when the process began 3 years ago. Contact with their biological mother ceased. Three show typically masculine or feminine preteenage behavior, and the 13-year-old boy is heterosexually oriented.

In family G the father continues to live with his wife. He dresses regularly in women's clothing and has been receiving estrogen treatment for 2 years. The boy and girl are 3 and 2 years old, respectively. The girl is considered a "tomboy"; the boy is not considered a "sis-sy."

In family F the boy, now 11, has watched his biological father become a woman over the past 3 years. He lives most of the time with "Martha" (his biological father) and the remainder of time with his biological mother. The boy is unremarkably masculine and heterosexually oriented.

Table 3 summarizes the data on 21 children being raised in 7 female homosexual households. Fifteen of these children drew a person of their own anatomical sex on the Draw-A-Person test, 1 did not draw a person, and 5 drew a person of the other sex. The peer group of 19 of these children is same-sex. The favorite toy of 20 of the children is consistent with conventional sex-typed toy preferences, and the vocational choices for all 21 are within the typical range of sex-typing in our culture. The four oldest children reported erotic fantasies that were exclusively heterosexually oriented.

CLINICAL VIGNETTES

I will present fuller descriptions of the circumstances of each family to sketch the milieu in which these children are developing.

Female-to-Male Transsexual Families

Family A. The biological mother of 4 girls underwent sex-reassignment via androgen treatment and extensive reconstructive surgery. Until the 4 daughters were aged 4-9, the mother appeared normal and seemed to have a conventional marriage with the children's biological father. At that time her desire to become a man became increasingly strong and she left her husband. She continued to live with the children. Shortly after leaving her husband she met a woman with whom she fell in love. Within a year she began dressing as a man all of the time and receiving androgen injections. She told the children that she felt more like a man than a woman and that over time she was to undergo medical treatments that would enable her to become a man. She achieved a legal sex status change and remarried as a man. Litigation ensued, and the court ruled that the former mother was the legal father of the 4 children.

The daughters ranged in age from 13 to 18 at the time of the study. The 18-year-old is a mother and lives away from home. She was not interviewed but is de-

scribed by parents and/or siblings as being feminine and exclusively heterosexual and as never having been a "tomboy" during her preteen years. Two of the 3 daughters who were interviewed have a basic female identity, lack a "tomboy" history, are typically feminine teenagers, and are heterosexually oriented. The fourth and youngest sibling, age 13, is evolving out of a "tomboy" phase and is beginning to develop romantic crushes on boys. None reported any desire to become a male or any homosexual fantasies.

Family B. The "stepfather" of two boys, 15 and 17 years old, had been "married" to the boys' biological mother since they were about 1 and 2 years old, respectively. The transsexual had always dressed as a man but did not begin androgen injection treatments until 10 years after the relationship commenced. During this time "he" bound "his" breasts and was identified to the children as their stepfather. Surgical sex-reassignment procedures were not undertaken until 2 years ago. The adolescent sons have not been told that their stepfather is transsexual. They have had no contact with their biological father. The children never see other family members nude, which prevented them from discovering that their "stepfather" had female breasts and still has female genitalia. The boys have male self-concepts and are conventionally masculine, heterosexually oriented teenagers.

Family C. A 20-year-old woman lived with her mother, who had engaged in a series of lesbian relationships until the daughter was 16. When the daughter was 18, her mother underwent sex-reassignment surgery and remarried in the role of husband and stepfather in a new family. The daughter is feminine and heterosexual and reports that her two older married sisters (who were not interviewed) are similarly oriented.

Family D. The biological mother of a 2-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son began to receive androgen injections, to live as a man, and to represent herself to the children as "father." The biological mother then married a woman who was represented to the children as their mother. The children have no conscious recall of their "father" in the mother role. They are now 7 and 8 years old and are content being female and male, respectively. Her favorite toy is a set of dishes, his is a walkie-talkie. She prefers girls as playmates, he prefers boys.

Male-to-Female Transsexual Families

Family E. Four children in this family have watched their biological father emerge as their "mother" over a 3-year period, during which the biological mother permanently severed contact with the family. The biological father has had sex-reassignment surgery and lives as a woman with male dating partners. The oldest son, now entering adolescence, has a male identity, is behaviorally masculine, and has begun to develop an interest in dating girls. A 9-year-old daughter and a 6-year-old daughter have female identities and behavior. Neither is a tomboy. A 6-year-old son has a male iden-

tity and is conventionally masculine. The two 6-year-olds are twins: the boy says it is better to be a boy, and the girl that it is better to be a girl.

Family F. The biological father of a 7-year-old boy announced to his son that he felt like a woman and was going to dress as one, to date men, and to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. The parents separated and shared equally in parenting contact with the son. The boy witnessed the complete metamorphosis of his father to "Martha," whom he sometimes refers to as "Mom." He is now 11 years old. He has no desire to be a woman, cross-dress, or have an erotic relationship with a man. His masturbatory and nocturnal dream fantasies are heterosexual. His major disappointment is having "lost a father."

Family G. A young boy and girl, aged 4 and 3, respectively, are watching their father undergo sexual reassignment. They have been told that "Daddy and Mommy will continue to live together so that you will have two mommies." The children have remarked that "Daddy is growing titties." The boy has a male peer group; the girl has not yet formed a peer group. The boy's favorite toy is a truck. Their identity is reflected in the fact that the boy wants to be a daddy when he grows up and the girl wants to be a mommy.

Female-Homosexual-Parent Families

Family H. Six children, 4 boys and 2 girls ranging in age from 5 to 11, have been raised in a common household with two lesbian mothers for 3 years. The children are from the two women's previous marriages. They understand that homosexual people love persons of the same sex and have been involved in public civil rights demonstrations for homophile groups. All the children have a basic identity consistent with their anatomy and show gender-role behavior typical for children of their age and sex. The boys have a male peer group and the girls have a female peer group. There is a set of opposite-sex twins, age 5: the boy likes to play cowboy and the girl plays with dolls and paints her toenails. The 11-year-old boy gets erections when thinking of nude females. One child stated the two mothers live together because "God put them together." The older boy was teased once by a boy who said, "Your mother is a lezzie." His reply was, "So what!"

Family I. There are 6 children, ranging in age from 6 to 14 years, from the mother's two marriages. The mother has been exclusively homosexual for the past 5 years. For about 3 years she lived with another woman. She explained to the children as a group, 4½ years ago, that she was in love with a woman who was going to be living with her. Subsequent discussion included information about homosexual love-making.

The three oldest children (ages 12-14) have exclusively heterosexual erotic fantasies and behaviors. These include crushes, petting experiences, and masturbation to visual erotic stimuli. They understand that there are male and female homosexuals and state, "That is their business and it's OK." The 12-year-old

boy recalled one time when a schoolmate called his mother a "butch" because of her masculine style of dress. He did not respond verbally or physically. There has been no subsequent teasing. He states, "She can be anything she wants as long as she's still my mother." The other children did not recall any teasing.

The younger children seemed to be typical for their age and sex. Their peer groups, toy and game preferences, and vocational aspirations are sex- and age-appropriate with respect to cultural stereotypes. Neither of the two younger girls is a tomboy.

Family J. These 3 children have been living with their mother and her female lover for 2 years. The older boy, 10, is sports-oriented, role-plays as a father in house games (which he plays infrequently) and has a male peer group. He knows his mother is a "lesbian, which is a female homosexual. It's just a woman and woman loving each other." He does not want to be a homosexual when he grows up because "I have a girlfriend." He was teased one time by a schoolmate who said, "Your mother is a queer," and he "ignored it." The sister, age 7, loves to play with dolls, does not like sports, but prefers boys as playmates because they get to play "army." She knows her mother and the other woman "love each other" and has experienced some teasing from cousins. She has a "boyfriend." Her 5-year-old brother enjoys sports, idolizes Batman, plays with airplanes, and ignores dolls. He thinks his mother and the other woman living in the house should be together because "they are very nice."

Family K. The mother has been exclusively homosexual for the past 6 years, beginning when her son was 2 years old. For about 2 of those 6 years she cohabited with a woman with whom she had a sexual relationship for 5 years. The boy was told by his mother at the time the cohabitation began that the woman was "a person I am very happy with and care a great deal for." The relationship was described as a "love relationship," but there was no discussion of sexuality. The two women shared the same bed. The relationship terminated nearly a year ago.

The boy, now 8, is sensitive and esthetic and disinclined to rough-and-tumble play and sports. He related better to girls than boys of his age. He enjoys playing with plastic animals and dolls of the Superman and Wonderwoman type. He has no history of cross-dressing. Because he prefers the activities of girls, he often feels he would like to be a girl. However, he has a "girlfriend" whom he plans to marry. In house games he role-plays as the father or big brother. He has experienced no teasing in consequence of his mother's previous homosexual cohabitation or her current homosexual lifestyle.

Family L. The mother divorced her husband to move in with a female lover 4 years ago, when her daughter was 3. Before this time, she had not acted on homosexual interests. The child states that the reason her mother and the other woman live together is "because my mommy is divorced and they like each other

a lot." The child's favorite activity is playing with her "Barbie" dolls. She role-plays as the mother in house games, prefers dresses to jeans, and gets along better with female than male age-mates. She has experienced no teasing.

Family M. In this situation, two women, each with a child, have been living in a sexual relationship for the past 3 years. The girl is 6 and the boy 7. The mother of the girl has had a less extensive homosexual history than the boy's mother and is 15 years younger. The boy's mother has had 18 years of a homosexual lifestyle, punctuated by a heterosexual relationship that resulted in the conception of her son. The two children play house: the girl is the mother and the boy is the father. The girl has a child's wedding gown and role-plays as a bride. She has a "boyfriend." The children have been told that the two women live together because they "like each other." There has been no teasing.

Family N. The mother, who had experienced homosexual fantasies in childhood, adolescence, and throughout her marriage, remained in a heterosexual marriage until 2 years ago, when her 2 female children were ages 3 and 5. She then began living with a female sexual partner. The children know the two women "love each other in a caring way" but have received no explanation about their sexual relationship. The girls prefer dresses to pants and role-play as women in house games. The younger girl has a boyfriend and wants to marry and have 2 girls when she is adult. The older girl vacillates about whether she wants to marry. Neither has been the object of teasing.

DISCUSSION

This is clearly a preliminary report. The data collection was not systematic, there is no control group, and the period of follow-up was generally brief. I have chosen to present the material at this time because of the absence of similar published data, the controversial nature of the subject matter, and its theoretical importance in understanding the development of sexual identity.

Both psychoanalytic and social-reinforcement or role-modeling views would predict that having a transsexual or homosexual parent should have a striking effect on a child's sexual identity development. Both transsexuals and homosexuals have a sexual partner preference for persons of their own sex at birth. Penis envy, castration fear, and resolution of the family romance (oedipal conflict) are pivotal for normal psychosexual maturation of the child, according to psychoanalytic theory (3). Thus, a father without a penis or a mother or father with a same-sex partner preference serving as the identification object during the resolution phase of the oedipal period should profoundly influence psychosexual development. Social learning theorists also point to identification with and role-modeling of a parent. In the cases I have described, the

parent has "changed sex" and/or has a same-sex partner preference.

Several factors must be considered when one looks at the potential influence on a child of having a transsexual or homosexual parent: the age and sex of the child, the sex of the transsexual or homosexual parent, the age at which the child becomes aware of the atypical nature of the family, explanations given to the child, the extent to which the parent attempts to convince the child of the benefits of an atypical sexual lifestyle, the credibility in appearance and personality of the converted transsexual, and the availability of surrogate typical parents and alternative role-modeling figures outside the immediate family.

For the younger children it is too early to know the long-term effects of being raised in transsexual or homosexual households. What one can say is that at this time, based on the best indicators of emerging sexual identity, psychosexual development appears to be typical in at least 36 of the 37 children described in this paper. These early life indicators appear to be good predictors of later sexual identity (1, 4-6). Children who are teenagers or young adults and have had a longer experience with transsexual or homosexual parents give more evidence that sexual identity has not been dramatically affected: all have developed a typical sexual identity, including heterosexual orientation.

What factors might account for the apparently conventional psychosexual development in these children who live in unconventional families? One explanation may be that children do not live in a universe composed entirely of their home environment. Children spend many hours watching television and reading and are exposed through mass media to conventional family styles and conventional patterns of psychosexual development. Much of the child's experience is at school and in nonschool recreation with the peer group. The peer group members and their families also present conventional family patterns. We do not know how much parental style contributes to a child's style of psychosexual development, but clearly it is not the only contributing factor. The children I interviewed were able to comprehend and verbalize the atypical nature of their parents' lifestyles and to view that atypicality in the broader perspective of the cultural norm.

In increasing numbers of cases, courts are being forced to deal with this issue, and public awareness is also increasing. Uncontrolled clinical reports such as this are no substitute for controlled longitudinal studies, but at this stage in the history of research in this area, I hope that this report may be of value. Currently, there are several projects under way to study matched groups of heterosexual and homosexual divorced mothers and their children, including one study in which I am involved (Mandel, Hotvedt, and Green, work in progress).

Greater detail will emerge from continuing studies; at this stage I tentatively suggest that children being raised by transsexual or homosexual parents do not differ appreciably from children raised in more con-

ventional family settings on macroscopic measures of sexual identity.

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