



Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: 1369-1058 (Print) 1464-5351 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tchs20>

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To cite this article: Elena Faccio, Elena Bordin & Sabrina Cipolletta (2013) Transsexual parenthood and new role assumptions, *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 15:9, 1055-1070, DOI: [10.1080/13691058.2013.806676](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2013.806676)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2013.806676>



Published online: 04 Jul 2013.



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Transsexual parenthood and new role assumptions

Elena Faccio^a, Elena Bordin^b and Sabrina Cipolletta^{c*}

^a*Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Padua, Italy;* ^b*Institute of Constructivist Psychology, Padua, Italy;* ^c*Department of General Psychology, University of Padua, Padua, Italy*

(Received 15 January 2013; final version received 14 May 2013)

This study explores the parental role of transsexuals and compares this to common assumptions about transsexuality and parentage. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 male-to-female transsexuals and 14 men, half parents and half non-parents, in order to explore four thematic areas: self-representation of the parental role, the description of the transsexual as a parent, the common representations of transsexuals as a parent, and male and female parental stereotypes. We conducted thematic and lexical analyses of the interviews using Taltac2 software. The results indicate that social representations of transsexuality and parenthood have a strong influence on processes of self-representation. Transsexual parents accurately understood conventional male and female parental prototypes and saw themselves as competent, responsible parents. They constructed their role based on affection toward the child rather than on the complementary role of their wives. In contrast, men's descriptions of transsexual parental roles were simpler and the descriptions of their parental role coincided with their personal experiences. These results suggest that the transsexual journey toward parenthood involves a high degree of re-adjustment, because their parental role does not coincide with a conventional one.

Keywords: gender identity; role-taking; transsexualism; transsexual parenthood; Italy

Introduction

The contemporary proliferation of new types of family units has significantly altered typical male and female parental roles (Klaslow 1996). In this context, the experience of transsexual parents, fathers and mothers who are undergoing sex reassignment surgery stands out. This new parental form requires both identity and relational readjustment. Because transsexuals undergo an important change in roles, they threaten the sexual dichotomy but cannot avoid comparing themselves with conventional social roles because they are judged through the lenses of others' understandings of these roles. Transsexual parents pose a threat to commonly held beliefs about sexual identity, parenthood and assigned and personified roles because transsexual parents challenge societies in which relations between the sexes have been determined by a rigid, closed framework that has long gone unmentioned (Bryant 2007; Gates 2010; Iantaffi and Bockting 2011; Salvini and Watts 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

Psychologists, sociologists and lawyers have focused not on the identity process and transsexuals' ability to assume a parental role, but on the child's wellbeing and on the social and family impact of sex change (Biblarz and Savci 2010; Pardo 2011; Wentling 2011). Our aim in this study, however, was to understand transsexuals' perception of the

*Corresponding author. Email: sabrina.cipolletta@unipd.it

construction of the parental role and negotiations with the social meaning of parenthood. We have chosen to use the term ‘transsexual’ here instead of ‘transgender’ because it more accurately describes our study participants, including those who have undergone surgical operations. In addition, those who had not undergone surgery did not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. In choosing the term transsexual, however, we do not want to lessen the importance of gender configuration. On the contrary, gender is one of the key topics of our study.

Transsexual identity

Social scientists have long pointed to the social construction of gender, especially regarding transsexualism: a human being is a man or woman not only due to his or her inner feelings but also to the feedback received from others (Benjamin 1966; Butler 1986; Denzin 1990, 1991; Faccio 2011; Faccio, Centomo, and Mininni 2011; Fenstermaker and West 2002; Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1991). From an interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1983; Mead 1934), identity is essentially a relational process. Constant interactions between human beings generate and preserve one’s concept of the self, which, in operational terms, translates into representations of self (Cipolletta 2011; Faccio et al. 2012; Romaioli and Faccio 2012; Salvini et al. 2012). Others act like mirrors, allowing the transsexual person to discover his or her own personal characteristics and, moreover, to evoke a specular point of view controlling the actions he or she may perform or testing the sexual role he or she wants to personify. In other words, a transsexual, like any other individual, knows him or herself by observing what other people express, think and feel about him or her. The main difference is that transsexuals seek confirmation of their behaviour in the social constructions of others who are sexually complementary rather than sexually similar (Salvini 2002). Therefore, they tend to reflect widespread feminine and masculine models (Buzzi, Cavalli, and De Lillo 1997) and stereotypical parental models.

The comparison of oneself to others, internalised or performed socially, positions a person with the opportunity to carve out his or her own personal and parental identity. Consequently, if a transsexual elicits social interactions in which he or she receives positive acknowledgments, even to his or her own diversity, this enables the construction of his or her new identity. Recognition as sexually normal and as a good parent may help transsexuals become ‘normal’ because the social context facilitates the elaboration of an identity they revindicate (Goffman 1983). Experimenting in the social context, transsexuals can internalise parental prototypes and culturally produced stereotypes and learn more about the peculiarities of the gender identity to which they feel they intimately belong and the most suitable parental behaviour they think they ought to exhibit.

Transsexual parenthood

Historically, most couple relationships that transsexuals have do not survive the transition (Lev 2004), and stable partnerships are more commonly formed after transition (Lewins 2002). Many studies of families in which a parent comes out as transsexual (mostly male-to-female) confirm the potential strain of the transition on partnerships (Buxton 2006; Freedman, Tasker, and Di Ceglie 2002), but the affects of transsexual transition on a continuing partnership are less known (Brown 2009). In a recent study, Lenning and Buist (2013) emphasise the impact of social stigma on the transgender experience and that of their partners.

Difficulties related to the presence of a transitioning father/mother can emerge, especially during close contact with parents experiencing emotional frustration linked to the difficulties of transition. The effect on a child depends on such variables as developmental stage, the gender of the child and the affected parent, and how the other parent copes with the situation (Sales 1995). Young people often have a difficult time coping with the disclosure and transition of a transsexual parent because they are developing sexually themselves. In contrast, pre-adolescents and young adult sons may have an easier time adjusting to their parent's transition (White and Ettner 2004). Brown and Rounsley (1996) suggested that, among other reasons, younger children may tend to be more accepting because of their familiarity with cartoons and fairy tales in which transformations are frequent and common. However, young people who often have a difficult time coping with parental transition and disclosure, worry about potential peer stigmatisation and fear they might inherit transsexualism, which can make this issue even more difficult for them.

Some researchers have pointed out that trauma is not directly caused by a parent being transsexual. The first clinical studies on this topic found a lack of evidence showing that having a transsexual parent impairs a child's wellbeing. Interviewed children typically behaved similarly to their same-sex peers and had interests and imaginations like their same-sex peers (Green 1978). They had a reasonable understanding of their parent's gender dysphoria and empathised with their parent's situation (Green 1998a).

Freedman, Tasker, and Di Ceglie (2002) confirmed these outcomes through a comparison of the children of transsexuals and of parents with a gender identity disorder diagnosis who had not transitioned. The researchers found that none of the interviewed children exhibited symptoms of gender identity disorder (Freedman, Tasker, and Di Ceglie 2002). Lev's (2004) review of the transgender literature supported Green's (1998b) earlier qualitative research, indicating an absence of evidence that children raised by transgendered parents have a greater chance of experiencing gender identity or development issues than children raised by non-transgender parents.

Clinical evidence suggests that children of gender-variant parents do not develop gender dysphoria or mental diseases due to gender identity disorder. Nevertheless, such children can experience difficulties in family relationships, chiefly because of the high level of conflict between their parents (Dèttore 2005). The few studies that have analysed the nature of family relationships have suggested that the more stable the relationship between parents, and between parents and children, before the transition, the more stable it will be after gender transition (Green 1998a; White and Ettner 2007).

Based on clinical experience, Brown and Rounsley (1996) proposed that children's reactions to fathers' disclosure and transition depend heavily on the family environment. For example, if the parents were bitter and angry at one another because of the transsexualism, the children often felt the same. Conversely, if parents were communicative and supportive, children were more likely to experience the parent's transsexualism positively. In addition, White and Ettner (2004) proposed that a high level of family cohesiveness prior to and following the transition served as a protective factor for children. Other protective factors include the maintenance of contact with the transitioning and non-transitioning parents, cooperation among parents and an active role by the extended family in the children's lives. In addition, an open dialogue within the family unit can contribute to the development of an atmosphere of mutual emotional support between the transsexual parent and the child (Hines 2006).

It is important to consider the significance of the re-definition of the transsexual mother/father's parental role process even through changes in the language the child uses

to identify it. Children who can vary the words they use to identify the transitioned parent tend to better manage emotional reactions (White and Ettner 2007). By changing the term used, children modify the symbolic construction of the father or mother figure, thereby gaining a better understanding of his/her parent's chosen pathway and story (Hines 2006).

Study aims

The present study aimed to explore how transsexual people construct and assume a parental role as part of their identity. In particular, we wanted to understand if and in which ways commonly held beliefs about transsexualism and parenthood influenced participants' narrations. We explored to what extent men (fathers and non-fathers) and male-to-female transsexuals (again fathers and non-fathers) shared common beliefs. We chose these two groups because they have both performed, even if for different lengths of time, a sexual role in agreement with their biological sex, assuming the same expectations, socially shared representations and male sexual role as part of their identity and, in the case of half of them, the father's role.

Through these questions, we investigated how social validations and invalidations can influence parenthood, parenting and the parental role-taking of people committed to embarking on a journey across genders, namely, that of 'women fathers'. We wanted to assess the possibility that enacting both gender roles could facilitate, at least theoretically, the development of a neutral, gender-independent parental role or if, in becoming a mother or a father, people are bound by common representations of a binary, sex-specific construction of the mother/father parental role.

Methods

Participants

The study involved 14 male-to-female transsexuals and 14 men from different parts of Italy. In both groups, seven parents and seven non-parents were identified. The subjects were between 39 and 58 years old and had a wide range of socio-cultural backgrounds and educational levels (Table 1). Within both groups of transsexuals, parents and non-parents, five had undergone surgery, two had not and none of them identified with the gender they were assigned at birth. Five transsexual parents had one child, and two had two children. The children's age ranged from 15 to 20 years, and they all were older than 10 when

Table 1. Summary demographic characteristics of study participants.

	Male-to-female transsexuals	men
Education (highest)		
College graduate	3	4
High school graduate	7	7
Middle school graduate	4	3
Occupation		
Worker	2	2
Clerk	3	7
Highly specialised worker	2	2
Prostitute	3	0
Other	4	3

their parents underwent surgery. All the surgically operated transsexuals became divorced after their transition, and only one of the two other transsexual parents was still with his wife.

To overcome the difficulty in directly contacting transsexuals and potentially evoking a sense of awkwardness and discomfort by approaching this topic, we recruited a snowball sample (Hudelson 1994) through support centres for transsexual people, first selecting a few main subjects who suggested other potential participants from within their own social network. Thanks to this gradual introduction, participants had more faith and confidence in the interviewer, who is biologically a woman. This strategy also helped find men who exhibited greater openness during the interviews, especially if introduced by an acquaintance.

Data collection

Participants attended a semi-structured interview that lasted about one-and-a-half hours. Although flexible, the interviews followed a common script focusing on themes we wanted to explore. After a brief general introduction, the interview began with a broad question about the person's story, allowing him or her to introduce himself or herself in the way he or she wanted. The following questions aimed to explore four thematic areas: (1) self-representation of the parental role, (2) personal image of the transsexual as a parent, (3) common representations of transsexuals as parents and (4) male and female parental prototypes and stereotypes, specifically socially produced beliefs about parental roles.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' home or in gay-lesbian-bisexual-transsexual associations, as freely selected by the interviewees. All interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed. We adhered to ethical principles throughout the study. We shared each step of the interview with the participants, informed them of their right to withdraw whenever they wanted and obtained their informed consent to participate in the research. We presented the material anonymously and obtained approval from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Padua.

Data analysis

Thematic and lexical analyses of the interviews were conducted using Taltac2, a software application that automatically analyses texts according to the logics of text analysis and text mining (Bolasco 2002). This analysis generated a quantitative representation of the phenomenon under study, both at the level of text-units (words) and context-units (segments), allowing the examination of both the language and the contents of the text (Romaioli 2012; Romaioli and Contarello 2012). To identify differences among the participants, three categorical variables and the following operational modalities were specified: (1) gender identity (operational modes: transsexual, man), (2) parenthood (operational modes: parent, non-parent) and (3) gender identity/parenthood (four operational modes: transsexual parent, transsexual non-parent, man parent, man non-parent).

In the first phase of the analysis, the text was divided according to the different questions and the frequency of the words used in the text was calculated. The next phase involved the analysis of specificities and concordances (Bolasco 2002). The analysis of specificities is a lexical analysis that identifies the specific language used by each modality for the variable under analysis. This procedure produces four typologies of the words used, as follows:

1. original specificities, which are specific words used only by a sub-group of participants (e.g. transsexuals),

2. positive specifics, which are overused words characterising a sub-group of participants,
3. negative specifics, which are infrequent terms characterising a sub-group of participants,
4. trivial words, which are well distributed among all sub-groups and thereby avoid discrimination between the two sub-groups of men and transsexuals.

The analysis of concordances enables us to infer the context in which the specific words are used by calculating the probability that certain words are combined with each other in the same text.

Results

Self-representation as a parent

All the respondents, except the male parents, employed self-attributions relating to the disciplinary approach they would assume as parents (e.g. severe to a greater or lesser degree), qualifications of their emotive tone and descriptions of their personal experiences:

I would be a lousy mother. (Barbara, 41, transsexual non-parent)

I would be a kind mother but strict at the same time. Because I know how the world works I would be a very careful mother. (Ilaria, 39, transsexual non-parent)

I would have been a very affectionate mother. You have to be, say, firm in your decisions as well. (Dalia, 50, transsexual non-parent)

I would be conflicted over whether to be a permissive parent . . . but at the same time, I would always be worried and possessive. I think I'd be a caring parent, certainly caring. (Luca, 39, male non-parent)

I think I'd be a normal father, maybe a little strict. . . . I would have raised my son carefully, maybe even been a little jealous over certain of his choices. (Ivan, 54, male non-parent)

I'd be a fairly tranquil, well-balanced parent. I'd certainly make my child respect me. (Paolo, 39, male non-parent)

I generally try to help her out. If she needs me to do something, I do it. I talk to her, tell her. (Clara, 50, transsexual parent)

Maybe I'm not always present, though I hear them nearly every day. Even though I don't see them, there is fairly important contact with them, showing I'm there. (Giorgia, 50, transsexual parent)

I'm a little too affectionate, maybe a little too apprehensive, a person who's always put my daughter before anything else. I've done everything I think a parent should do, the very utmost. (Serena, 46, transsexual parent)

Non-parents, whether transsexuals or men, frequently referenced their personal experience to confer credibility on it and to validate a role undertaken only hypothetically. They linked analogous biographical events to the hypothetical parental role under investigation, almost creating an illusory correlation between adequately faced life events and self-attributions about themselves as parents:

I experienced a sort of parenthood in relation to my brother, who is . . . years younger than me, and I don't know whether to call this a female instinct, that is, something inside my psyche. I experienced this as a maternal parenthood. I was a bit demanding, a bit too apprehensive. I like the idea of being a sort of guide for him. (Barbara, 41, transsexual non-parent)

For three years, I have been an adoptive parent from afar of a little girl from Mozambique through the association. . . . She was seven; now she'd be ten. Every month, they draw . . . euros from my account, which maintains an entire family there in Mozambique. (Piera, 50, transsexual non-parent)

Let's say that, if I refer to my behaviour toward my youngest brother . . . that is, I'd be an apprehensive person. I'd watch over him. I'd be for the family. In fact, I helped my brother buy his apartment. I'm still helping my ex-wife. Obviously, that is my family . . . and if I had children, it would be the same. (Davide, 55, male non-parent)

When asked to think about themselves as potential parents, male-to-female transsexuals who were not parents almost invariably referred to themselves as mothers rather than as fathers ('I would be a lousy mother', 'I would be a kind mother'). Male-to-female transsexuals who were parents gave a detailed description of themselves as fathers in their daily lives, listing what they already do for and with their children, almost to the point of excess, thereby providing proof of their adequacy as fathers. They did not perceive the diversity they bore as interfering with their parental role:

I generally try to help her out. If she needs me to do something, I do it. I talk to her, tell her. (Clara, 50, transsexual parent)

Maybe I'm not always present, though I hear them nearly every day. Even though I don't see them, there is fairly important contact with them, showing I'm there. (Giorgia, 50, transsexual parent)

I'm a little too affectionate, maybe a little too apprehensive, a person who's always put my daughter before anything else. I've done everything I think a parent should do, the very utmost. (Serena, 46, transsexual parent)

In particular, transsexual parents used the figure of the child and his/her healthy growth to testify to their competence as parents and their success as fathers. This finding emerged from the analysis of specifics and concordances – the terms 'child' and 'raised' appeared, in fact, only in their texts:

The boy has turned out very well. I know that's something parents say – that a child has turned out very well – but he really has turned out well. He studies. He does what a boy his age needs to do. He's very intelligent and well-trained. He's extremely affectionate with both his parents . . . I don't know. I like being with him, and he likes being with me because if I don't seek him out, he seeks me out. So from that point of view, I'd say I've functioned, because the results are there. (Erika, 58, transsexual parent)

Male parents, unlike all the other interviewees, did not describe themselves in terms of their abilities, attitudes, thoughts or emotions but, rather, judged themselves based on their behaviour. For example, they judged themselves negatively because they considered themselves to be absent from their children. They did not feel a need to express their adequacy or their success as parents, they evaluated their competency rather than describing themselves as fathers:

I might be better, in the sense that, especially when they were little, probably because of work but mostly because of my character, I didn't spend much time with them. There are a few things I'd do differently. I might have dedicated a little more time to them. Surely a lot more could have been done. (Rudy, 46, male parent)

I don't feel I was totally successful. . . . I don't think I succeeded in showing them what things are important. (Sandro, 57, male parent)

Really bad, because I don't have time to . . . with the excuse that I go to work early. . . . It's not that I have this great relationship. Sometimes we quarrel, but you know, it's not easy. (Andrea, 47, male parent)

Descriptions of the transsexual as a parent

In the second thematic area – the description of the transsexual person as a parent – an analysis of specifics to the answers given by men shows that this group exclusively used the following linguistic forms as: ‘probably’, ‘a good parent’ and ‘in my opinion’. A comparative analysis reveals that such terms expressed the personal opinion of the speakers, who might have some reservations and uncertainties about the parental capacities of transsexual persons. Men used value judgments, such as ‘If I saw she was a good parent, I’d say she’s a good parent’, ‘Maybe she’s a marvellous person, as a parent’, or ‘Maybe she’ll improve as a person’.

Male-to-female transsexuals responded, instead, with simple and direct expressions, primarily using the verb ‘to be’ in the third-person, singular, present tense when referring exclusively to the transsexual parent: ‘Come what may, you always remain a parent’, ‘You’re not a transsexual parent; you’re a parent’ and ‘A transsexual who has had a child before the transition still remains a father, just the same’.

Analysing the specificity used to refer to the variable ‘gender identity/parenting’, the following words emerged as typical sub-texts of transsexual parents: ‘parents’, ‘transsexual’, ‘social’, ‘role’ and ‘affection’. The overuse of these terms and the concordance analysis suggest that transsexual parents prefer to use words that emphasise the parenting, rather than the gender, role. They used the word ‘affect’ to indicate their relationship with their sons, which was also closely associated with a parental and asexual ‘role’.

When describing the parental role with respect to the couple, men, unlike transsexuals, expressed some doubts about the difficulty that ‘transgender couples’ experience while behaving like normal couples. Men were somewhat sceptical about the transsexuals’ display of affection in parenthood roles and about the transsexual parental couple’s relational system. These findings emerge from the concordance analysis: for men, positive specific words are ‘normal’ and the segments ‘I do not know’, ‘my opinion’ and ‘could be transsexual parents’.

In contrast, transsexuals attributed the differences experienced by normal parenting couples and transsexual parenting couples to individual differences, rather than to being transsexual. In short, while men thought that the parental role is closely tied to the functioning of the couple, transsexuals said that it is more closely tied to the parents’ love and their offer of love.

Analysing the responses of men and transsexuals, another difference emerges in views of what transsexuals couples can do or be and their feelings associated with parenting: men do not doubt the transsexuals people’s affection for their children but have concerns about the transsexual couple’s functioning system. Conversely, transsexuals attribute the differences between normal and transsexual parent couples to individual differences, rather than transsexualism. In short, while the parental role and the functioning of the couple are closely connected in men’s responses, for transsexuals, the parental role is more tied to the parent’s love and offering of love. In fact, the word ‘love’ was used exclusively by transsexuals.

Commonly held beliefs about transsexuals as parents

We explored perceptions of commonly held beliefs about transsexuals who are parents by asking what the main commonly held ideas about the transsexual person as a parent are. Heterosexual men’s responses indicated a belief that transsexual parents are incompetent, thus affirming a difference between tradition and ‘transformation’. They viewed transsexuality as an event contrary to nature and as socially marginalised (‘It’s a little

abnormal. It's plainly abnormal', 'You're going against nature', 'It's not normal ... because what God has given must be and remain'). They believed that people disapprove of and reject trans-parenthood ('for many, it shouldn't exist. It's against nature', 'The majority are absolutely against it').

A textual analysis of the responses reveals a shift from the question 'What do people think?' to the expression of one's own personal opinion when declaring that 'normal' couples are better qualified for parenthood:

I don't think they're able to look after a child. They just think in a different way, I believe. (Andrea, male parent, 47)

I can't see them as parents. ... I am against these liberalisations because they would harm these children ... surely in their social relationships with the rest of society. (Giovanni, male parent, 55)

The idea of a transsexual parent makes me sick. I may be a special case. I hope not, well. ... Anyway, it makes me sick. (Franco, male non-parent, 54)

The responses given by male parents in particular, reveal concern about the healthy growth of children and centre on the assumed psychological harm. This finding emerges from an analysis of specifics, which also reveals a predominance of the word 'children' in the texts. A comparative analysis shows that this term is used in association with the words 'problems', 'psychological' and 'grow'.

It's not a good thing, because it surely creates problems for the child on a psychological level. (Rudy, 46, male parent)

The child might have problems. (Nicola, 48, male parent)

In my opinion, if the child doesn't grow up right, he'll have problems of a psychological nature. (Giovanni, 55, male parent)

In contrast, the transsexuals complained that there was little knowledge of transsexual parenthood at a social level and they declared that extremely negative judgments were directed towards the figure of the trans-parent, even in the world of transsexuals:

Transsexuality is hardly known about. (Clara, 50, transsexual parent)

It is spoken of so seldom, how would you speak of it? (Lisa, 57, transsexual parent)

In my opinion, they have no idea at all about it. ... The 'sterility' of transsexuals is a prejudice accepted all too often, even by the transsexual world. (Erika, 58, transsexual parent)

Even in the transsexual environment, it's really hard to understand these things. ... I speak about these things with my transsexual friends, both the ones who've had the operation and those who have not. When I start to talk about parenthood, their hair stands on end too. (Frida, 53, transsexual parent)

Transsexuals who were parents gave highly detailed descriptions of other people's opinions, thus proving that they could grasp the viewpoints of others about them. In fact, they use terms such as 'deprivation' (the specifics analysis shows that only this group uses the term), 'perversion' and 'paedophilia' to describe other people's opinions about transsexuality. Moreover, they were aware that they were considered 'sick', 'crazy', 'confused' and 'incapable of raising a child' by others. They felt that people tend to associate transsexuality with sterility (the words 'sterile' and 'sterility' are specific to their response group and the term 'transsexuality' dominates in their responses). In addition, they stated that this association prompts the common opinion that links transsexuality to prostitution, precisely because the transsexual condition is often closely tied to social marginalisation:

The implied concept of transsexuality is sterility: That is, you have a right to gender change if you have your gonads taken out. That's the idea ... the basic reason giving you the right to change your documents is sterility. (Erika, 58, transsexual parent)

People can't see any possibility of a transsexual person being a parent, since she's made a life choice in which, come what may, reproduction is cancelled out. (Giorgia, 50, transsexual parent)

Compared to male parents, transsexuals who were parents have internalised and elaborated upon socially construed meanings, making these interviewees more competent than others at describing the social representation of transsexual parenthood.

Male and female parental prototypes

Participants approached the fourth thematic area, the description of sex-specific parental prototypes, in different ways. Transsexual parents did not use the word 'mum' to describing the mother figure, but overused the word 'feminine' and described parental role stereotypes, bringing up the connection with the female figure and certain specific attitudes and feelings, such as confidence, affection and the ability to console ('She's more confident', 'Affection is typically female', 'Mums are generally the consoling figure in a couple'). They described the father as able to manage situations and identified him with strength and severity ('The one who's more practical in situations', 'If you go on a mountain trip, you prefer going with your dad', 'The father is the figure who has to grumble and scold', 'The dad is the stronger one. He's the strongest man in the world').

Transsexual parents revealed a detailed knowledge and specificity when defining parenting roles, especially in sexually dimorphic terms. This result stands out compared to definitions of self-representation in a parenting role. The answers referring to the prototype (the mother, the father) have a sexual connotation that disappears when applied to individuals' own lives, as we have seen from the analysis of responses to the first question.

Men's answers were different. In describing the father/dad prototype, they used their personal experiences, particularly methods used in their education and the division of labour with their wives:

I can say that my way of thinking is identical to my wife's. (Cosimo, 55, male parent)

My wife and I are in 100% harmony regarding our daughter. She changed her, and I changed her. She coddled her, and I coddled her ... (Giovanni, 55, male parent)

Normally, you consider the dad to be a little bit more severe, more rigid, more demanding, but then that depends on hormones. (Mattia, 58, male parent)

My wife immediately understands if one of the children has a problem. I don't. ... It's probably because I'm not home much. (Sandro, 57, male parent)

Fathers leave the children more free. At least, that's how I'd be ... (Rudy, 46, male parent)

In describing the typical mother figure, male parents also often referred to their wives, with the specific terms 'my wife' and 'mother':

A mum will always say her child is right. Mums always love their child. My wife immediately understands if one of my children has a problem, while I don't. ... The woman is different ... the mum. (Sandro, 57, male parent)

A mum lets them get away with nearly everything. ... My wife manages to communicate with our daughter better than I do. (Andrea, 47, male parent)

A mum is more attached to the children. She has to care. She has to give the most. The mother gives more. She raises children better. (Mattia, 58, male parent)

A mum is more tenacious, more stubborn. She always manages to be obeyed. . . . A mum can be more affectionate given her female nature. (Nicolas, 48, male parent)

A mum has more opportunities or more inclination to look after the child. For example, I'm thinking of my wife. (Rudy, 46, male parent)

Discussion

At the cutting edge of trans-parental research, this study is a new effort to understand the narrative processes transsexual fathers use to describe their own parental reality. The results of our study reveal that transsexual parents are highly competent at perceiving the opinions of others about them. They are familiar with sex-specific parental prototypes and role prejudices about the transsexual parent. At the same time, they tend to seek evidence that disproves these assumptions, thus affirming the parental competency of the transsexual using simple, direct expressions and declaring their success as fathers by referring to positive examples of parental aptitude drawn from their own daily life experiences.

It is precisely the narrative modes used by the transsexual parents to describe themselves – the trans-parent in general, sex-specific parental prototypes and everyday opinion about themselves – that lead us to hypothesise an internalisation of these everyday beliefs. Transsexual parents manifest a more intense need to demonstrate their parental competence and adequacy than the other groups interviewed, perhaps because they struggle against others' negative, pathologising and devaluing opinions. Moreover, because the 'inside/out gender binary naturalises non-transgender identity as that which does not have to be articulated, while trans identity as the outsider to the silent norm is forced to speak its name' it is easy to see why transsexual parents feel the need to declare their competency at parenting so strongly, precisely because they are 'excluded' from the 'parental binary' (Fuss 1991, 123). In contrast, 'heterosexual parents do not need to make "proud" declarations of their heterosexuality. The image of such parents routinely "coming out" to their children as heterosexual is almost beyond our imaginations' (Gabb 2001, 347). This observation may aid in understanding the responses given by the male parents: even when evaluating their performance negatively, they had no doubt about their role, nor did they feel a need to describe or justify it, because it was an essential part of their personal identity, coherent with their sense of gender.

Social stereotypes also influence transsexuals who are not parents. More so than all the other groups, they tend to refer to a sex-specific parental figure to describe themselves. They prefer to represent themselves as 'the mother they might become' rather than as 'the father that they might have become'. Therefore, we conclude that transsexuals who are not parents actively assume a sexually connoted role, even though they cannot do so except hypothetically. Transsexual parents, on the other hand, seem to share the same sexual stereotypical images of mother and father as those who are feminine and masculine, but they assert a concrete self-representation of themselves as the father in their relationship with their children closely associated with the 'role' in an affective and asexual sense. Perhaps underestimating the importance of the co-construction of their roles by the complementary parental role (the wife-mother and her point of view), they do not recall the beliefs of the other parent about dealing with children, relying almost exclusively on their pure, intense affection (the feeling of parenthood).

The men affirm the need to recognise a difference between what they see as normal and as abnormal. To this group, acceptance and appreciation of the transsexual parent might mean the loss of certainty about the natural family. More influentially though, the sexual

and paternal roles they have assumed and performed would be thrown into jeopardy, and so, too, would their self-representations as fathers and men. To describe the parenting prototypes, men used general definitions, their personal experiences and their wives' discourses and suggestions. Male parents' strong identification with personal experience and parental prototypes led us to consider their experience as prototypical. Transsexuals, in contrast, were cognisant of sexually different, parental prototypes in society and could give pointed, abstract descriptions of these prototypes without referring to another's point of view. Therefore, we can infer that, through social interaction and by listening to their wives' discourses on a father's role, male fathers learn what it means to be a parent. They conform to the current prototypes so closely that they regard their own experience and life events as representative. However, transsexual parents used more general descriptions of male and female parental prototypes, thus drawing on more stereotyped, culturally-oriented meanings and beliefs.

Conclusion

The results of this study have implications for practice. The discrepancy between the parental stereotypes and the parental experience of the transsexual women may affect the construction of their role and their relationships with their children. In the context of a clinical intervention with transsexual parents, it is important to recognise this influence and to encourage awareness of it, in order to value transsexuals' parental diversity. This might allow the person to attribute a new connotation to her paternal/maternal role, thereby unhinging the sexual dichotomy on the parental level (Nentwich 2008). Such a process might find expression and confirmation in a linguistic (re-)connotation of the experience (Seavey, Katz, and Zalk 1975). We found one example of the success and originality of this change in a narration by a transsexual parent when she spoke of her 'transformed' parental role, describing herself as '*la sua papà*' [the child's 'she-dad'].

The binary condition of the parental role reflected in the polarity mother-female *versus* father-male certainly does not facilitate the emergence of any new form of recognition for the role. The transsexual parent cannot naively think that the surgical transformation cancels out the need to revisit relationships of the past. The new forms of interaction with the children must, in fact, include everything connected to both the complicity and the separateness between the public and private codes, which are fundamental for communicating outside the family. A new way of interacting must be invented. Furthermore, it is not sufficient to know what a good mother would do in order to imitate her. The parental function of protecting and stimulating must also extend to the construction of something new. For instance, the varieties of communication regarding sex and sentiment that may arise in the father-son relationship and in the mother-daughter relationship will not be resolved or transformed by the surgical operation.

Another unexplored area, with no prior reference in the literature, lies in managing the network of relationships held by the family in social circles, such as those represented by school and leisure associations. The trans parent must be committed to accompanying her children toward a better understanding of her experiences, but she must also create points of reference so that the child can, with increasing autonomy, deal not only with challenges emerging from outer contacts, but also with any feelings of inadequacy that might undermine his or her own experience as a child who is considered to be 'different'. In fact, gender change creates problems not only for the transsexual but also for his or her so-called *significant* others, members of the social group and the family to which the

transsexual belongs. The transitional journey that the person undertakes forces the family as a whole to undertake a form of re-socialisation.

The main limitation of our study was that it focused exclusively on male and transsexual parents' experiences, thus excluding the other participants of the interaction (i.e., the child and also the mothers). It would be interesting to compare the child's experience with his or her transsexual parent's experience. Also, the mother's point of view might be considered. In fact, taking into account the whole network of relationships within a family system would lead to a richer and more complex representation of each of the roles played within that system. In order to offer a more differentiated picture of transgender families, it would be desirable to involve also more intact couples with children under the age of 10.

Another limitation of our study lay in excluding women and female-to-male transsexuals' experiences. It would be interesting to compare their experiences to those of men and male-to-female transsexuals in order to verify if there were differences in the process of sexual and parental role taking. The impact of social construction of femininity and maternity (Cipolletta and Sperotto 2012) on these persons could have been considered. This might be the starting question for future research. Our research highlighted how the prototypes of the male and female parental roles forge the parental role of both male and transsexuals parents, and also how the latter may articulate a more flexible and complex parental role because it needs a re-adjustment of the conventional one.

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Résumé

Cette étude explore le rôle parental des transsexuels et le confronte aux hypothèses sur la transsexualité et la filiation. Nous avons conduit des entretiens semi-structurés avec 14 transsexuels (de l'homme vers la femme) et avec 14 hommes (dont une moitié de parents, l'autre de non parents) pour explorer quatre champs thématiques : l'autoreprésentation du rôle parental, la description du transsexuel en tant que parent, les représentations courantes des transsexuels en tant que parents et les stéréotypes parentaux masculins et féminins. Nous avons procédé à des analyses thématiques et lexicales en employant le logiciel Taltac2. Les résultats indiquent que les représentations sociales de la transsexualité et de la parentalité influencent fortement le processus d'autoreprésentation. Les parents transsexuels comprenaient de manière précise les prototypes parentaux masculins et féminins conventionnels et se considéraient comme des parents compétents et responsables. Ils construisaient leur rôle à partir de leur affection pour leurs enfants plutôt que du rôle complémentaire joué par leurs épouses. À l'inverse, les hommes décrivaient les rôles parentaux chez les transsexuels plus simplement, et leurs descriptions des rôles parentaux correspondaient à leur propre expérience. Ces résultats suggèrent que le parcours des transsexuels vers la parentalité a pour implication un niveau élevé de réajustement, parce que leur rôle parental ne correspond pas à un rôle parental traditionnel.

Resumen

El presente estudio analiza el rol parental de los transexuales, comparándolo con las suposiciones comunes en relación a la transexualidad y a la paternidad. En este sentido, las autoras realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 14 transexuales hombres-a-mujeres y con 14 hombres, la mitad de los cuales tiene hijos y la otra mitad no. El fin de dichas entrevistas fue examinar cuatro áreas temáticas: la autorepresentación del rol parental; la descripción del transexual como padre; las representaciones comunes acerca de los transexuales como padres; y los estereotipos parentales masculinos y femeninos. Asimismo, las autoras realizaron análisis temáticos y léxicos de las entrevistas, usando para tal efecto la paquetería Taltac2. Los resultados demuestran que las representaciones sociales con respecto a la transexualidad y a la paternidad/maternidad tienen una

fuerte influencia en el proceso de autorepresentación. Los padres transexuales comprenden con precisión cuáles son los prototipos parentales convencionales para los hombres y para las mujeres, viéndose a sí mismos como padres competentes y responsables. En este sentido, construyen su rol con base en el afecto que tienen por su hijo/hija más que por el rol complementario de sus esposas. Por el contrario, las descripciones realizadas por los hombres en torno a los roles parentales de los transexuales eran más simples, mientras que la descripción de sus propios roles parentales coincidieron con sus experiencias personales. Estos resultados indican que el proceso hacia la paternidad/maternidad recorrido por los transexuales requiere de muchos reajustes, lo cual es consecuencia del hecho de que su rol parental no coincide con el rol convencional.