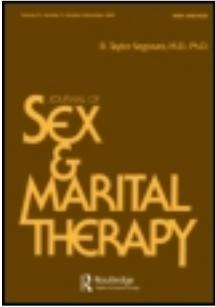


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## Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usmt20>

### The Female-to-Male Transsexual and His Female Partner Versus the Traditional Couple: A Comparison

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Available online: 03 Sep 2008

**To cite this article:** Evie Kins, Piet Hoebeke, Gunter Heylens, Robert Rubens & Griet De Cuypere (2008): The Female-to-Male Transsexual and His Female Partner Versus the Traditional Couple: A Comparison, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 34:5, 429-438

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00926230802156236>

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## **The Female-to-Male Transsexual and His Female Partner Versus the Traditional Couple: A Comparison**

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*In this explorative study, nine stable relationships between female-to-male transsexuals and their biologically female partners were compared to an equal number of “traditional” heterosexual couples. The aim was to investigate any differences between these two groups on three aspects: satisfaction about the partner relationship, sexual satisfaction, and partnership sex typing. Data do not show any significant differences in relational and sexual satisfaction between the transsexuals’ female partner and the women in the “traditional” couples. In contrast, the female-to-male transsexuals and their female partners were found to have adopted a more pronounced sex-typed partner relationship than the “traditional” couples.*

There is a general lack of information on the relationship between a transsexual person and his partner. The focus of the studies conducted until now, was mainly on the difference between the relationships of the female-to-male transsexuals and the male-to-female transsexuals. From the few studies it emerges that proportionally more stable relationships are found in the female-to-male group than in the male-to-female group (Steiner & Bernstein, 1981; Kockott & Fahrner, 1988; Barrett, 1998). This difference, however, was not born out by the follow-up study conducted by De Cuyper

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et al. (2005). On a qualitative level, the relationship of female-to-male transsexuals would be more comparable to a “traditional” heterosexual relationship (Fleming, MacGowan, & Costos, 1985).

Female-to-male transsexuals have a pronounced preference for a partner of the female sex (Benjamin, 1967; Pauly, 1974a, 1974b; McCauley & Ehrhardt, 1980; Steiner & Bernstein, 1981; Fleming et al., 1985; Blanchard, Clemmensen, & Steiner, 1987; Chivers & Bailey, 2000). They also consider this relationship with a female partner, in spite of the (initially) similar anatomical conditions, as heterosexual (Pauly, 1974a, 1974b; Steiner and Bernstein, 1981). The group of the male-to-female transsexuals is known to be more heterogeneous. Twenty-three to 58% of the male-to-females are also attracted to women and are consequently engaged in a lesbian relationship (Smith, 2002).

Female-to-male transsexuals prefer female partners with a heterosexual orientation (McCauley & Ehrhardt, 1980) who in addition show very female characteristics (Benjamin, 1967; Pauly, 1974a; Steiner & Bernstein, 1981; Chivers & Bailey, 2000). This finding was, however, contradicted by another study (Fleming, MacGowan, & Salt, 1984). Those researchers concluded that female-to-male transsexuals do not expect nor wish that their female partner behaves excessively feminine. Also the female-to-male transsexuals in this sample did not show a pronounced male sex type. Their conclusion was that female-to-male transsexuals reject their female aspects to a lesser degree than male-to-female transsexuals do with their male aspects (Fleming et al., 1984; Herman-Jeglinska, Gabrowska, & Dulko, 2002).

The contradiction of the results found in the literature and the lack of control groups in the different studies prompted us to reinvestigate this matter. In the present study, we want to compare a traditional heterosexual relationship with a relationship between a female-to-male transsexual and a biological woman, from the viewpoint of the partner (biological female), specifically on sexual and relational satisfaction. This gave us the opportunity to determine if a relationship with a biological male individual is as satisfying as a relationship with a female-to-male transsexual for a biological female.

We secondly want to investigate if the female partner of the female-to-male transsexual actually belongs to the more feminine type compared to the female partner of the “traditional” heterosexual relationship.

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedure

Participants in this study consisted on the one hand of females that had a stable relationship with a female-to-male transsexual ( $N = 9$ ). It was not required that these couples were cohabiting or married. Though we required

that all transsexual partners went through the full sex reassignment surgery (mastectomy and phalloplasty): besides living in the male gender role they all possess male anatomical features. Only two of the female-to-male transsexuals did not yet dispose of an erection prosthesis. These women were recruited by the urologist of the Gender Team of the Ghent University Hospital (PH). A lot of female-to-male transsexuals were accompanied by their female partner, when consulting the urologist with regard to the follow-up of the phalloplasty. This occasion offered a unique opportunity to recruit as many partners as possible for this study. Participants voluntarily cooperated after informed consent.

These female partners of female-to-male transsexuals were compared to a control group of biological women with a heterosexual relationship ( $N = 9$ ). We matched these subjects with the partners of the female-to-male transsexual according to age, level of education, and duration of the partner relation. All nine women of the control group were volunteers, recruited through the social network of the author.

The age of the participants ranged between 24 and 40 years (mean = 31,78 years;  $SD = 6.41$ ). Most of the women were highly educated ( $N = 10$ ). Our sample included mainly either women engaged in a rather short-term (0–1 years) ( $N = 6$ ) or rather long-term relationship ( $> 10$  years) ( $N = 6$ ). Five out of the nine relationships with a female-to-male transsexual started before the sex reassignment procedure, three women met their partner only after the sex reassignment surgery took place, and one female got to know her partner during the treatment procedure. No pronounced differences were found between the “traditional” heterosexual couples and the “transsexual” couples with regard to the number of couples that were cohabiting, married or having children. The number of couples that were raising children at the time was equal for the “traditional” heterosexual couples ( $N = 5$ ) and for the “transsexual” couples ( $N = 5$ ). Most of the female partners of the female-to-male transsexuals reported these children were born during their partnership with their current partner ( $N = 3$ ). In the other cases the children originated from a previous relation of the female partner and/or a previous relation of the female-to-male transsexual. With the exception of one couple, all heterosexual couples had their children with their current male partner. Of the remaining childless couples in both groups ( $N = 4$ ), 50% wanted children in the future and 50% were yet undecided about this topic.

## Material

All participants were asked to fill out, without previously consulting their male partner, three questionnaires being a self-constructed questionnaire, the Maudsley Marital Questionnaire and the Bem Sex Role Inventory.

## SELF-CONSTRUCTED QUESTIONNAIRE

The self-constructed questionnaire is a nonstandardized instrument that tends to assess demographical data, general data with regard to the partner relation, and data specifically concerning the sexual relationship. To create this questionnaire we based ourselves on a number of questions frequently used during the assessment of the persons with Gender Identity Disorder at the Centre of Sexology and Gender Problems of the Ghent University Hospital and during the follow-up after Sex Reassignment Surgery. We also drew inspiration to create items for this questionnaire from the small amount of literature indeed on this topic.

## MAUDSLEY MARITAL QUESTIONNAIRE (MMQ)

This 20-item questionnaire aims to measure the dissatisfaction one experiences in general and the amount of dissatisfaction that is particularly experienced in the partner relation. The MMQ mainly proves to be useful for a quick screening of any kind of relational disturbances (Hendriks, Sanderman, & Ormel, 1991).

The MMQ has three subscales: the Marital scale (M), the emotional connection one has with the partner or the relational satisfaction (10 items); the Sexual scale (S), the sexual satisfaction (5 items), and the General Life adjustment scale (GL), the general satisfaction with life (5 items). All items are scored on a nine-point Likert scale, with a high score indicating more dissatisfaction (Arrindell, Boelens, & Lambert, 1983a; Arrindell, Emmelkamp, & Bast, 1983b; Evers, van Vliermulder, & Groot, 2000).

All subscales have a sufficient amount of internal consistency and stability (measured over 20–93 days test-retest interval) (Arrindell et al., 1983a). Furthermore, all three MMQ scales show both divergent and convergent construct validity (Arrindell et al., 1983a, 1983b; Hendriks et al., 1991).

## BEM SEX ROLE INVENTORY (BSRI)

The Bem Sex Role Inventory claims to characterize the degree of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny of people, depending on how they respond to the items. The BSRI has three subscales which each consist of 20 items: the Masculinity scale, the Femininity scale, and the Social Desirability scale. Each item is scored on a seven-point Likert scale.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory does not consider masculinity and femininity as two extremes of a bipolar scale, but as two independent concepts. A person can therefore have typical male properties as well as typical female properties. Only in this basic assumption the androgynous type is really acknowledged. So after administering the BSRI, we can obtain a masculinity score, a femininity score, and a social desirability score, and most important, the androgyny score.

Psychometric properties of the BSRI reveal that the three subscales as well as the androgyny score reflect a high reliability. Reliability was examined by means of the coefficient alpha, measure of internal consistency, and by means of the test-retest method (interval of 4 weeks) (Bem, 1974).

## RESULTS

### Demographic Data

A paired samples *t*-test revealed that the mean age of the female-to-male transsexual and his female partner do not differ significantly from each other:  $t(8) = -.06$ ,  $p = .955$ . When comparing the mean ages of the males and females of the "traditional" heterosexual couples, a significant effect was found however:  $t(8) = -2.53$ ,  $p = .035$ . These results indicate that the female-to-male transsexual looks for a partner in his age range. This finding does not hold true for a "traditional" heterosexual couple, in which the difference is that men choose younger women.

More biological men were highly educated ( $N = 6$ ) compared to the group of female-to-male transsexuals ( $N = 3$ ). All members of the control group, the "traditional" heterosexual couples, were employed. Besides one transsexual and one female partner of a female-to-male transsexual who were looking for employment and one female-to-male transsexual who was still a student, all members of the "transsexual" group were employed as well.

### Relational Satisfaction

An independent samples *t*-test (equal variances assumed) was executed to test the hypothesis that women with a female-to-male transsexual partner experience the same amount of relational satisfaction, measured by the Marital scale of the MMQ, compared to women with a "traditional" heterosexual relationship. Results revealed no significant effect of type of relationship on the variable "relational satisfaction,"  $t(16) = -.23$ ,  $p = .821$ . This means that a relationship with a female-to-male transsexual can, for a female partner, be as satisfying as a relationship with a biological male. Besides, none of the female participants of both types of relationships reported a score that indicated some amount of relational disturbances.

A number of univariate ANOVA's were performed in addition to control if the following variables: duration of the partner relationship, cohabitation, marriage, and children had a possible main effect or interaction effect with the type of partner relation, on the amount of relational satisfaction experienced by the female. Nevertheless, none of these variables seemed to have an effect on the score on the Marital Scale of the MMQ.

Through the self-constructed questionnaire, we found that most of the women in both types of partner relationships felt sure about their relationship with their partner.

**TABLE 1.** Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of the Marital Scale and the Sexual Scale of the MMQ for Participants of the Experimental and the Control Group

MMQ Subscales		Female Participants	
		Experimental Group	Control Group
Marital Scale	<i>M</i>	10.67	11.67
	<i>SD</i>	9.19	9.21
Sexual Scale	<i>M</i>	10.00	4.78
	<i>SD</i>	8.79	2.82

### Sexual Satisfaction

Regardless of the type of partner relationship, all our female participants had an exclusive sexual preference for men. Still more women with a female-to-male transsexual partner had prior sexual experiences with both men and women compared to the women of the control group. Yet this difference in sexual experience did not yield a significant result between the two groups;  $\chi^2(1) = 2.250$ ,  $p(2\text{-tailed}) = .471$  and  $p(1\text{-tailed}) = .235$ .

By comparing the scores on the Sexual scale of the MMQ, we wanted to test if a woman finds the relationship with a female-to-male transsexual sexually as satisfying as a relationship with a biological male. An independent samples *t*-test (equal variances not assumed) demonstrated that there is no difference in the amount of sexual satisfaction a women experiences in a relationship with a female-to-male transsexual compared to women in a “traditional” heterosexual relationship;  $t(9.628) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .122$ . In addition none of the scores of all our female participants reached the range of the sexually distressed couples.

Although the “type of partner relation” did not have a significant effect on sexual satisfaction, we did observe a higher mean score for the women with a female-to-male transsexual partner (see Table 1). A high score indicates more sexual dissatisfaction. This elevated score is probably caused by the two female partners in our sample who report that coitus is not included in the sexual activity with their transsexual partner. For these two couples, coitus was at the time technically not possible, since the female-to-male transsexuals did not yet have an erection prosthesis.

However, when we measured satisfaction with sex life by a question of the self-constructed questionnaire, we again noticed that female partners of transsexuals seemed to be more dissatisfied than women of the “traditional” heterosexual couples. But even this result did not reach a significant effect as well:  $\chi^2(1) = 3.60$ ,  $p(2\text{-tailed}) = .060$  and  $p(1\text{-tailed}) = .030$ .

Again, a number of extra univariate ANOVA's were done to control for a possible main effect or interaction effect with “type of partner relation” of the variables: duration of the partner relationship, cohabitation, marriage,

and children. None of these variables, however, seemed to have an effect on the amount of sexual satisfaction the women in our sample experienced.

Surprisingly, only one female partner of a female-to-male transsexual revealed that she sometimes experienced problems to get excited during sexual intercourse, compared to one-third of the women of the control group. This result did, however, not seem to be significant:  $\chi^2(1) = 1.29$ ,  $p(2\text{-tailed}) = .576$  and  $p(1\text{-tailed}) = .288$ . Moreover, none of the women with the transsexual partner considered themselves as prudish or inhibited, while again two women of the “normal” heterosexual relationship did experience some amount of prudishness and inhibition during the sexual act. The reversed pattern was found for the male partner of both types of relationships: one-third of the female-to-male transsexuals was described by their partner as prudish and inhibited, while none of the biological males received this label. Finally, it is remarkable that in comparison with the control group the initiative for sexual intercourse came more frequently from the female-to-male transsexual than from the female partner. In “traditional” heterosexual couples the initiative is equally distributed across the male and the female partner.

### Sex Typing

We assumed that the female partners of female-to-male transsexuals would show a more feminine sex type than women involved in a “traditional” heterosexual relationship. Based on the scores of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), we could determine if the sex type of our female participants was feminine, almost feminine, androgynous, almost masculine, or masculine. These multiple categories were reduced to a dichotomous categorical variable: feminine sex type and non-feminine sex type (see Table 2). Consequently, a binary logistic regression could be performed to test our hypothesis. Though female partners of female-to-male transsexuals had a higher female score on the BSRI than the women in the control group, the difference was not significant;  $\chi^2(1) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .314$ .

**TABLE 2.** Feminine Sex Type (Based on the Scores of the BSRI)  $\times$  Type of Partner Relation Cross-Tabulation

		Female Participants		
		Experimental Group	Control Group	Total
Count	Feminine	4	2	6
	Non-Feminine	5	7	12
	Total	9	9	18

BSRI = Bem Sex Role Inventory.

When we specifically asked for partnership sex typing, we found by contrast that women with a transsexual partner do report to take on a more stereotype female role than women in a “traditional” heterosexual relation;  $\chi^2(1) = 9.00$ ,  $p(2\text{-tailed}) = .009$  and  $p(1\text{-tailed}) = .005$ . In addition, the female-to-male transsexual also seems to fulfill a more stereotypical male role in his partner relationship than a biological male does;  $\chi^2(1) = 5.844$ ,  $p(2\text{-tailed}) = .050$  and  $p(1\text{-tailed}) = .025$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates that a partner relationship of a woman with a female-to-male transsexual does not differ substantially from a “traditional” heterosexual relationship regarding the amount of relational and sexual satisfaction for the female partner. Most of the women in our sample engaged in a stable relationship with the female-to-male transsexual, before the onset of the sex reassignment surgery (Steiner & Bernstein, 1981; Kockott & Fahrner, 1988).

The female partners of the transsexuals turned out to be as satisfied with their partner relation as female partners with a “traditional” heterosexual relationship. Surprisingly, variables like duration of the relationship, cohabitation, marriage, and having children did not have any influence on the amount of relational satisfaction in both groups. We have to emphasize that the small sample size can explain why we systematically obtained nonsignificant results during these analyses.

Female partners of female-to-male transsexuals explain the success of their relationship in terms of respect, honesty, trust, love, understanding, and open communication. These women consider the fact that their partner does know and does understand women better than a biological male as the major advantage of having a female-to-male transsexual partner. Being unable to have children with her partner was reported as the main drawback of being involved in a relationship with a female-to-male transsexual.

A relationship with a female-to-male transsexual seemed to be sexually as satisfying for a female as a relationship with a biological male. Despite this, we observed that scores on the Sexual scale of the MMQ were higher for women in the transsexual relationship, which means more sexual dissatisfaction. This elevated score can be due to the fact that two couples were at that time technically not capable of having penetrative (peno-vaginal intercourse) sex with their female-to-male transsexual partner. Through questioning the sex life in the self-constructed questionnaire, we also noticed that more women with a transsexual reported to be somewhat more dissatisfied than women in a “traditional” heterosexual, relationship. Nevertheless, we could not conclude that the women of our control group were more sexually satisfied than women with a female-to-male transsexual partner. The fact

that all female-to-male transsexual partners in our study completed the full sex reassignment surgery could explain the equal amount of sexual satisfaction in both groups of females. A replication of this study with a larger sample size is needed to confirm these results. Additional variables like duration of the partner relation, cohabitation, marriage, and having children had again surprisingly no effect on the amount of sexual satisfaction.

On the whole we can conclude that a partner relation with a female-to-male transsexual for a biological woman is indeed satisfying, also sexually.

Just like Steiner and Bernstein (1981), we found that a relationship between a woman and a female-to-male transsexual is characterized as a stereotypical sex type partnership. By contrast "traditional" heterosexual couples do not show this explicit female and male sex type. Surprisingly, women of female-to-male transsexuals consider themselves in general not as very feminine types of females. Through these results we can conclude that although a female partner of a female-to-male transsexual attributes a stereotype female gender role in her partner relation, this does not necessarily mean that she also belongs to the very feminine type of women in general.

These results about the marital satisfaction of couples in which one partner is a female-to-male transsexual are in total agreement with our clinical findings. The female partners are mostly attractive, very feminine women for whom sexuality is not a big issue and who previously had rather negative experiences with "real men" in terms of relational (sexual) aggression.

The fact that we had to work with a very small sample is by far the biggest limitation of this study. Although this is a logical consequence of the target population we aimed to study, it is important to take into account the restrictions that small samples bring along. This study is rather indicative and should provoke further research in larger samples.

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