
ONE Telling Transgendering Tales

Beginnings

The story of our research begins in the mid-1970s in the United Kingdom at a time when there was little or no sociological interest in what was then conceptualized as 'transvestism' and 'transsexuality'. Today, by contrast, 'transgender' provides a focal point for cutting-edge theoretical work in cultural and gender studies and cutting-edge gender activism. In the same 30-year period, transgendering has moved from the peripheries of 'deviance' and 'perversion' in Euro-American societies to the centre of mainstream celebrity. As we write, the Portuguese transsexual Nadia Almada has recently won the UK reality TV show *Big Brother 5* and is among the hottest 'celebs' featured on the covers of the major celebrity magazine weeklies:

Now we've taken her to our hearts because she isn't afraid to show her insecurities. Despite her thick mascara and lip gloss, she's refreshingly real. AND she wears heels to do the housework. That makes her our kind of woman. (Johnson, 2004: 3)

Within a few weeks, the focus of attention has switched from 'Nadia: "Why I Had My Sex Change"' (*Closer*, 2004a) to more pressing concerns of celebrity womanhood: 'Nadia's Agony: "I've Lost My Virginity to a Love Cheat"' (*Closer*, 2004b); 'Nadia: My Agony Over Secret Boyfriend' (*Star: The World's Greatest Celeb Weekly*, 2004); 'Nadia Loses a Stone in 4 Weeks' (*Heat*, 2004).

In the same 30-year period since we began our research, our focus of interest has extended from the United Kingdom, to North America, Europe, South Africa and Australasia. In addition, we have observed in this time how Western discourses of transgenderism have been increasingly exported to many other parts of the world and are usurping or heavily influencing more traditional indigenous notions of gender and 'transgender' phenomena (Teh, 2001; 2002; Winter, 2002; Winter and Udomsak, 2002).

Dave's story

Although as an undergraduate I had read US sociologist Garfinkel's (1967) study of 'Agnes', it was the British sociologists Carol Riddell and Mike Brake who provided the inspiration for my interest in developing a sociology of transgender. Carol Riddell, then a lecturer at the University of Lancaster, England, presented an unpublished paper in 1972 to the National Deviancy Conference 10, entitled 'Transvestism and the Tyranny of Gender'. For Riddell (1972), transvestites and transsexuals, along with gay men and lesbians, were the casualties of a gender role system that performs important functions for capitalism. In particular, she argued that the medical profession was acting as an agent of 'capitalist family and gender relations': 'In no way is the T.V. [transvestite] encouraged to develop his/her inclinations, to express them publicly and to politicise them into a rejection of the system which produced the need for them' (ibid.: 10).

Riddell's recommendation was for transvestites and transsexuals to join 'with other sexually persecuted minorities, particularly, homosexuals, in confrontation with the police, the legal profession, the psychiatrists, the capitalist nuclear family, capitalist gender roles, capitalist attitudes, and fundamentally the capitalist system itself' (ibid.: 12). Mike Brake, then a lecturer at the University of Kent, England, had intentions of publishing Riddell's article in a book he was editing at the time but, unfortunately, his plan did not materialize and it remains unpublished.

Two years later, in 1974, Mike Brake presented his own more nuanced thoughts on the matter in a conference paper entitled 'I May Be Queer, but At Least I am a Man' (Brake, 1976). Brake made the point, as relevant today as it was then, that:

[MTF] Transvestites and transsexuals polarize the problems of gay activism. At one level they are accused of sexism because of their concern with traditional femininity, but it must be remembered that the masters are not supposed to dress as slaves, and men who dress as women are giving up their power as men. Their oppression is similar to that experienced by gay men and all women. (ibid.: 187)

These comments by Brake on the politics of transgender seem to be the first published thoughts by a British sociologist on transvestism and transsexualism. It was not a topic Brake returned to and when my research story began in the mid-1970s, I was determined to make a serious study of transgender phenomena.

The beginning of my research story coincided with Britain hosting 'The First National TV.TS [Transvestite.Transsexual] Conference' (1974) in Leeds, although I was unaware of it at the time. The conference was designed as a

forum for those people self-identifying as transvestite or transsexual and for professionals working in the field. It included presentations from community activists who were the leading figures in both transvestite and transsexual organizations, personal stories from those who identified as transvestite or transsexual, and talks from social workers and psychologists. This meeting of minds of 'experts' and 'members' (transvestites and transsexuals) set the initial parameters for the growing stream of such conferences that took place during the 1970s and 1980s. A press report of the conference by Parkin informed general readers thus:

The First National conference of transvestites, including radical drag queens and transsexuals is to be held at Leeds in March [1974]. Social workers, doctors and clergy have been invited to join them in discussing their problems of which the public largely knows nothing.

Briefly, a transvestite is a person who gains psychological release through dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex. He (it is not often a she) is usually heterosexual. A radical drag queen is a transvestite who wears women's clothing in public, but does not try to hide the fact that he is a man.

Mr. Martine O'Leary, a radical drag queen at Leeds, says that he buys old dresses from Oxfam shops, wears neither make-up nor substitute breasts, and tries to shake people out of their preconception of what a man is, a woman is, or more important, what he is.

The other group, transsexuals, consider themselves to be women who have been trapped inside a man's body. They make their break for sexual freedom by proclaiming themselves to be women and living as women. Many seek the so-called 'sex change' operation and hormone treatment. (1974: 36)

In addition, the Conference Report (*The First National TV.TS Conference*, 1974) told tales of distinctions between 'radical' and 'conservative' wings in the debate on the future of transvestism. Radical feminist transvestites were said to identify with women's liberation; conservative transvestites were said to treat their wives 'like slaves' when dressed as men at home. There was talk that would take some 20 years to become widespread: of transsexuals seeking 'gender alignment'; of 'trans-gender' and 'trans.people' [sic] used as umbrella terms to include both TVs and TSs. On the other hand, there was much more talk of TV and TS being 'conditions', of being 'compulsive behaviour patterns', and of 'militant action' by TVs and TSs being inappropriate.

Della Aleksander, something of a celebrity at the time as a male to female (MTF) transsexual, had recently co-produced the BBC2 *Open Door* programme about 'transsexualism', which featured Member of Parliament Leo Abse, a well-known 'champion of minority causes' (*The First National TV.TS Conference*, 1974: 11). Aleksander had undergone 'sex change' surgery in 1970 in Casablanca, and the following year established GRAIL (Gender Research Association International Liaison), a group formed to campaign for equal rights for transsexuals. In her conference talk, she made the point that the conference unites all those 'crossing the sex border' and 'rejects petty differences between them as misplaced' before adding:

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Being a transvestite or a transsexual cannot, by its nature, be a social protest phenomenon, for it seeks to conform to accepted norms of the sexual division and the manner in which the sexes are distinguished by dress. In this it is very conformist and not to be confused with unisex of the David Bowie genre with which it is frequently confused. Unisex mirrors Man's sexual ambiguity. Transvestism and transsexualism does something about this ambiguity. (Aleksander, 1974: 11)

The organizers of the 1974 conference had sought to include main presentations on the law and psychiatry relating to TV and TS. However, the Chief Constable, Leeds City Police and Dr John Randell, Gender Identity Clinic, London were among those who sent their apologies for their non-attendance. This matter was rectified in the follow-up conference held at the University of Leicester in 1975 that did include legal and psychiatric contributions in the main presentations. It also included a contribution from the celebrated columnist Anna Raeburn, who gave a presentation entitled 'Male and Female Roles in Society with Reference to Transvestites and Transsexuals' (Beaumont Society, 1975). I was alerted to this conference by an advertisement in *New Society* and fortunately was able to attend.

These two conferences set the tone for my research. From the sociological point of view, what marked the two conferences were three major and related features. In the first place, it was evident that cross-dressing and sex-changing were non-normative (deviant) phenomena. In the second place, it was striking how knowledge in the area had been subjected to a pervasive medicalization. In the third place, it was notable how the conferences sought to garner what were thought to be the most favourable media representations.

I approached the area as a symbolic interactionist sociologist committed to labelling theory. In 1975, Ken Plummer had published his important text *Sexual Stigma*, which set forth a symbolic interactionist sociology of sexuality, with particular reference to male homosexuality. This book drew extensively upon labelling theory which studies how categories arise, and how they are disseminated and applied to self and others. I was fortunate enough to meet Plummer at a conference and in due course he became my PhD supervisor. As my research progressed, I began to separate out the main areas of focus, in particular those of identity, subculture, medicalization, and media representation. The empirical work was based on studies of the medical literature; a large number of media reports; fieldwork with transsexuals and transvestites; and, most importantly, interviews with surgeons, psychiatrists and psychologists and others working in this field. Eventually, I produced a number of articles and my PhD thesis on this research (King, 1981; 1984; 1986; 1987).

Richard's story

As we have seen, Dave's transgender research story began, in a sense, with the work of British sociologist Carol Riddell on transvestism. Rather extraordinarily, my work as a serious student of sociology also began with the work of Carol Riddell. However, in my case, it was not Carol Riddell's work on transgender that influenced me. It was the work of Carol Riddell, in a different guise.

By 1971, I had become disillusioned at the prospect of continuing a career in law, and enrolled as a graduate student in the sociology of education at the University of London. In my first lecture, I was told that the best introduction to sociology was that by Margaret Coulson and David Riddell (1970) entitled *Approaching Sociology: A Critical Introduction*.

My principal teacher was Michael F.D. Young who at the London Institute of Education was spearheading, at the time, what became known as the 'new' sociology of education. It was a sociology of education that had, in the space of a few short years, jettisoned the 'old' sociology of education which was rooted in sociological positivism and structural functionalism.

In place of the 'old' sociology of education, Young and his colleagues were developing an entirely new approach to the area. They were re-formulating the discipline in terms of a sociology of knowledge which took its inspiration from humanist Marxisms and the 'new' interpretive sociologies of symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology (Young, 1971; Gorbitt, 1972).

At the time, there were no introductory books to sociology that combined all these theoretical approaches in one introductory text, but the great merit of Coulson and Riddell's (1970) introductory text, I was told, was that it did set forth the parameters for such an approach from a 'critical' Marxist standpoint. For this reason, it was the only recently written introduction to sociology that my teachers 'allowed' me to read.

I still have my original copy of this book sitting on my bookshelves. The book's publication date is marked as 1970 with a copyright © Margaret A. Coulson and David S. Riddell. Next to it is a 1972 reprint of the book but the authors are Margaret A. Coulson and Carol S. Riddell! Yes, Riddell had transitioned from MTF (male to female) in the period between the two print runs of her book. Unbeknown to Dave and myself, at the time, Dave's sociological transgender predecessor was my guide to introductory sociology: the former British MTF academic Carol Riddell.

While a schoolboy, one of my 'A' Level English teachers once remarked that I had a talent for writing about the relations between the individual and

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society, and not much else. The teacher in question held a double first from Cambridge; he was eccentric to the point of craziness; and he seemed to hold in utter disdain the proprieties held so dear by his fellow teachers. I was fascinated by him and by everything he did and said. A man with such credentials must surely be right about me. In my sociology courses at the University of London, Institute of Education, I was introduced to the writings of philosopher-social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). I soon learned that Mead had spent a lifetime developing and refining a brilliant and highly influential social theory of mind – a social theory of the emergence and development of self, with a corresponding pragmatist social ontology and social epistemology and a scientific social psychology. Inevitably, perhaps, I was hooked. Making sense of Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), and then exploring its ramifications, became my academic and professional anchor and my inspiration. It has remained so ever since.

After the completion of my initial courses in sociology, philosophy, and education, I registered at the University of London for a doctorate entitled 'G.H. Mead: On the Contribution of George Herbert Mead to a Philosophy of Sociological Knowledge'. Following an extended period of study in the Department of Philosophy, University of Texas at Austin, with foremost Mead disciple David L. Miller and a period studying the 'G. H. Mead Archive' at the University of Chicago, I returned to England and submitted my doctorate in 1978. After these years of 'theorizing about theory', I decided to gain expertise in empirical sociology and turned my attention to an area that had intrigued me for many years: that of transgender.

Like Dave, I had been introduced in my early days as a student of sociology to Garfinkel's (1967) study of the MTF transsexual Agnes (originally, thought to be intersex). I had also read Michael Kosok's (1971) article 'The Phenomenology of Fucking' which had emboldened my desires to branch out as an 'outlaw' researcher. Later, I studied the developing work of Ken Plummer on the sociology of sexuality (Plummer, 1975). However, I was drawn principally to the research methodology of sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969), particularly when I learned that he had been a devoted student of Mead's at the University of Chicago. I also knew that it was Blumer who had developed Mead's philosophy and theoretical social psychology into the sociological and social psychological perspective he termed symbolic interactionism, to which my lecturers at the London Institute of Education had introduced me.

Last but not least, I should mention, perhaps, an extraordinary 'interview' I had with the great American interactionist sociologist Anselm Strauss. Shortly after finishing my PhD thesis, I received a postcard from Strauss asking me to meet him while he was on a visit to London. I went to the

meeting feeling extremely flattered but with a degree of trepidation. In the course of a couple of hours, he seemed to 'milk' me dry of everything he was interested in, and, somehow, I never seemed to get the opportunity to put any of my questions to him. Strauss provided me with an object lesson in unstructured interviewing which I have never forgotten. I did determine, though, that I would attempt to be more 'reciprocal' in my own qualitative research, not wishing to leave my informants with the vaguely exploited feeling I experienced following my meeting with Strauss.

With this background, it was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that as I turned my attention to the study of an empirical domain, I did so from a symbolic interactionist perspective. My reading of Mead emphasized that he was a philosopher of process (Ekins, 1978) – specifically of social process – who saw all 'social objects' (minds, selves, meanings) as emergents within social process. The sociological corollary of Mead's philosophical position was that the principal task of the empirical social scientist wedded to his view was to plot the emergence and history of social objects in any given research arena, with reference to their origins, development and consequences. As a student of the sociology of knowledge, I approached the area in terms of the interrelations between the various 'knowledges' in the area, conceptualized in terms of three principal 'knowledges': those of 'science', those of 'members' (of transgendered people), and those of 'everyday life'.

As with Dave's work, this drew me to the detailed investigation of the interrelations between medical knowledge, subcultural knowledge, and the knowledge held by those people identifying as transvestite and transsexual, in terms of their origins, development and consequences.

As the only two UK sociologists working in the area at the time, it was only a matter of time before our paths crossed. I first met Dave at the 1982 British Sociological Conference on Gender in Manchester, UK, where I presented one of my first papers on transgender entitled 'Science, Sociological Analysis and the Problem of Transvestism and Transsexuality' (Ekins, 1982). This paper drew upon Dave's pioneering sociological article on transsexuality and transvestism (King, 1981), included in Ken Plummer's *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* in 1981 (Plummer, 1981). Plummer's book was ground-breaking, establishing as it did a sociological reader for sexuality studies rooted in the social constructionism of symbolic interactionism and the 'archaeology of knowledge' approach of Michel Foucault (1970; 1972). Moreover, it was a reader that placed emphasis on both theoretical sophistication and empirical work so guided.

By 1982, I was making sense of my empirical work in terms of a 'basic social process' (Glaser, 1978) of 'femaling'. I had yet to write my paper 'On Femaling: Some Relations Between Sex, Sexuality and Gender', which I first

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presented in 1984 (Ekins, 1984), although it was not published for some ten years after that date (Ekins, 1993). My work was based upon observations of what later became several thousands of transgendered people, extended interviews with several hundred informants; and detailed life-long life history work with several dozen informants from a number of different continents. From the outset I took care to follow selected informants in the full range of their social settings. This often entailed detailed observational and interview work with medical and related professionals, with the families of my transgendered informants, and with the various service providers to trans people, such as beauticians and hair care specialists. At the same time, I immersed myself into the full range of transgender 'community' events such as private meetings, drag balls, erotic networks, and so on (Ekins, 1997).

It may be hard for present-day students to grasp the difficulties attached to developing a sociology of sex, sexuality and gender in the early and mid-1980s, let alone a sociology of cross-dressing and sex-changing which included sexuality in its remit. In the USA, Gagnon and Simon had paved the way for a sociology of sexuality, as they branched out from the US versions of positivist sexology (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). *Contra* their mentor and colleague Alfred Kinsey, they began to focus on the social meanings of sexuality, developing, in particular, their conceptualizations of sexual scripts. In the UK there was (and is) no university tradition of sexology, despite the significance of the Englishman Havelock Ellis in the history of sexology. Moreover, in both the UK and the USA, the influence of women's studies and the nascent sociology of gender led to a situation where almost all social scientists drew a sharp distinction between sex as biology and gender as social construction. They tended to leave 'sex' in the hands of biologists (Oakley, 1972). Sexual perversion or variation was left to psychiatrists and psychologists, apart from sporadic studies in the sociology of deviance (Sagarin, 1969). The few studies on the sociology of sexuality (Gagnon and Simon, 1970; Henslin and Sagarin, 1978) were swamped by the burgeoning literature in women's studies that focused on sociological constructions of gender, seen as largely separate from sex and sexuality. Such was the climate of the times, that at the very conference where I first met Dave we had been barred from attending a presentation on pornography. All men had been told to leave the room after a majority vote had declared the seminar room a 'women only' space.

In the early 1980s, I had all manner of obstacles placed in my way when I tried to develop a third year course in the sociology of sex, sexuality and gender as part of undergraduate BSc programmes in sociology and in social science at the University of Ulster, UK. My Faculty Dean by-passed the usual informal Course committee meetings and took the unprecedented step of setting up a Faculty committee to probe the sociological viability and validity of

a course centred around an exploration of the interrelations between sex (the body), sexuality (eroticism) and gender. My Dean insisted upon external and internal letters of support from a number of sociologists and social scientists, before granting approval after a series of lengthy meetings. Likewise, the external examiner for sociology, a considerable name in social theory at the time, needed reassurance from me that it was possible for sociology undergraduates to consider sociologically what appeared to him, *prima facie*, to be matters of biology and psychology.

The exploration of the interrelations between sex, sexuality and gender came to form a major theme of my studies of cross-dressing and sex-changing. Unlike Dave, who situated his work primarily within the sociology of deviance, I, as a sociological theorist, was drawn to the research methodology known as 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) to conceptualize cross-dressing and sex-changing phenomena. This eventually led me to consider male cross-dressing and sex-changing in terms of the basic social process of 'male femaling'. I saw male femaling as taking place within diverse interrelations of body femaling, erotic femaling and gender femaling. I then identified an ideal-typical career path of male femaling developing within the interrelations of these modes over time through a phased career path considered in terms of beginning, fantasizing, doing, constituting and consolidating male femaling (Ekins, 1984).

Particularly in evidence was the way those males who 'femaled' felt the need to 'explain' their untoward thoughts, feelings and behaviours; and in doing so - in interrelating with available conceptualizations of their thoughts, feelings and behaviours - constructed for themselves identities and courses of action.

Working together

On a number of occasions in the 1980s, Dave had tried to form a study group in Britain for those interested in transvestism and transsexualism from a sociological point of view. His attempts had always failed through lack of interest in the area. Instead, Dave and I maintained occasional contact, but for the most part worked independently and in relative isolation.

Nor were publishers very interested in what we were doing. Dave had written his PhD thesis in 1986 (King, 1986) but it was not to be published as a book until 1993 (King, 1993). Richard's paper 'On Femaling: Some Relations between Sex, Sexuality and Gender', that was eventually published as 'On Male Femaling: A Grounded Theory Approach to Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing' (Ekins, 1993) had been rejected by the journal *Symbolic Interaction* on the grounds