Why People Change their Sex: An Empirical Study

It has been suggested that people ask for sex-change operations because society will not allow them to behave in a way which deviates from the rigidly prescribed roles of male and female. People who seek sex reassignment will in most cases be either individuals who wish to express behaviour which society has labelled as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’, and who are so taken in by societal strictures regarding sex roles that they change to the other sex physically in order to be legitimately, as they (and society) see it, a member of the now-appropriate sex; or homosexuals who have so strongly internalised societal attitudes that only heterosexual relationships are acceptable and natural, that in order to validate having a relationship with another person of the same sex, they must change their sex and thus make the relationship heterosexual. Such people are conservatives with regard to sex roles. Empirically, these propositions can be tested by looking at incidence and ratio of the transsexual phenomenon in a society with less rigid sex roles and less repressive attitudes towards homosexuality as compared with a more rigid and repressive one.

Comparisons were made between Sweden, a society approaching the former situation, and Australia, approaching the latter. National figures for the transsexual phenomenon for both countries were collected by circularising all psychiatrists in Australia and obtaining figures of number of individuals seriously requesting sex reassignment surgery, and comparing these with the total Swedish figures which are based on a similar official sample (see Ross, Walinder, Lundstrom and Thuwe, 1979, for an extended report of this study).

Results were in line with the hypothesis. The incidence in Sweden was .23 per 100,000 of population over 15 years of age: in Australia, .79 per 100,000 of population over 15 years of age, well over three times as high. This supports the argument that repressive attitudes towards homosexuality and more rigid sex roles are associated with a greater degree of transsexualism. In societies which are less conservative in these regards, people appear to be able to express themselves, as either homosexual or by exhibiting feminine or masculine behaviour regardless of their sex, without needing to alter their genitals in order to feel free to do this.

Results with regard to sex ratio support this interpretation. In Sweden, equal numbers of males and females present for sex reassignment (1:1 ratio). In Australia, one female to every seven males presents (1:7 ratio). This difference highlights the social and political aspects of the change. Where men and women are considered equal, equal numbers of each request reassignment. Where women are considered second-class citizens and denied equal rights in law and in remuneration, ‘misfits’ from their roles, or people wishing to change for other reasons, are allowed to if the change devalues them in status, as does the change from man to woman. If the change means an increase in status, from women to man, it is made much more difficult. People who fall outside the rigid roles prescribed for them by society may be degraded in status, but the reverse happens very infrequently.

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Reference