

Understanding Transgenderism

BY VERONICA ZERRER

Beginning with the history of transgender experience, "Transgender Emergence" by Arlene Istar Lev summarizes the Native American two-spirit tradition, hijras of India and the female "husbands" in some African tribes as evidence of the existence of gender-variant behavior across cultures.

While this book is primarily a clinical reference that is designed to be used while working with a transgendered or intersexed person, it has reference value that will appeal to both the clinician and client. Lev's main theme is surrounded by the idea that transgenderism is a normal and potentially healthy variation of human expression. Organized in three parts, Lev examines the theoretical understanding of transgenderism, diagnoses and assessments, and ends with treatment options.

The first part discusses how two Greek heroes, Achilles and Hercules, both reportedly cross-dressed and how the god Dionysus could shape-shift from man to woman at will. The Roman emperor Elagabalus preferred to wear only silk clothing, and reportedly requested castration in order to become a true woman. Also, biblical prohibitions against cross-

dressing men and women had to be written for a reason, she claims, and that reason was because of gender-variant behavior.

Part two is devoted to diagnosing and assessing the transgendered client. Lev examines competing theories that argue whether transgenderism is caused by nature or nurture. There is great power in the diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Currently, diagnoses are based upon the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSMIV), which currently lists gender dysphoria as a disorder. Sensitive to the transgendered client who is struggling to obtain a diagnosis in order to obtain treatment (hormones and surgical alterations), Lev is aware that once diagnosed, the transgendered person is too often victimized by a society that perceives him or her as being disordered. One is left with the conclusion that the DSMIV is being exploited by some in order to discriminate.

The transgender group is one of the few groups not to be listed as a protected class in employment discrimination cases. Indeed, there has been little interest in adding "transgender" to the Employment Non-Discrimination Act's language. The

unfairness is obvious, but less clear is what to do about it. Some professionals who work with transgenders suggest depathologizing the language in the DSM in much the same way that being gay and lesbian has been removed from the list of "pathologies." They favor a classification that is used by the World Health Organization for transsexualism and listed in the International Classification of Diseases. These guidelines refrain

from the language of pathology, and instead use language that endorses a human's right to self-expression while providing careful medical and mental health protocols for medical supervision of one's gender transition, if such is indicated.

In the third and final part of the book, Lev lists the stages of transgender and family emergence, and lists treatment strategies that can be used at each stage for each client.

Particularly helpful are the chapters that deal with treatment strategies for young people and intersexed clients.

Part of the reason why Lev's book works so well is the thoroughness of her knowledge of transgendered persons. This book is comforting to the transsexual who reads it, wonderfully technical and professional for the clinician who refers to it, and informative for anyone else who will read it.

Buy this book if you want to understand transgendered people. In this heavy tome, Lev has created a work for everyone. She has set the bar high for excellence in documenting transgenders' needs and meeting them.

"Transgender Emergence" is available for \$29.96 (soft cover) and \$69.95 (hard cover) at local bookstores and through Haworth Press. For more information, visit www.haworthpress.com.

