

All dressed up and somewhere to go

RHONA (James) wrote me a couple of letters, taking me up on a point I made about the way that sex stereotyping damages men almost as much as it damages women. Jenny (Paul) phoned to invite me to a big party in a wine bar, so that she (he) and others could talk to me about their views of gender. The point about transvestism is that it has little overtly to do with sex.

The Beaumont Society has about 1,000 members. It has increased in numbers steadily since it was founded over 12 years ago. Beaumont was a French eighteenth century diplomat and soldier who dressed sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man. The Society is strictly not for homosexuals. None of its members are gay. They are not remotely interested, and never have been, in men. Most of them are married or have girl friends, whom they often bring along to meetings. They are still interested in dressing as women and then for only part of the time. As a group the transvestites I met were intelligent, articulate and self aware, all of them good at describing themselves in rather distant, detached terms. Jenny (Paul), London and South East organiser, explained in a matter-of-fact way.

"It's an obsession. No-one really knows how we came by it. No-one has found any kind of cure. It has nothing to do with homosexuality and has none of the same causes. We just feel obliged to dress as women part of the time. Most of us don't actually want to be women. We want to be men, but to pass as women some of the time."

"Jenny" is a managing director of a medium sized company, married with two children, living in a three bedroomed house by the

river in Walton-on-Thames. "My wife discovered by accident about two years after we married. She loathes it." But they are still together after 18 years. "Jenny" is tall. She wears a short brown wig that looks so natural I thought it was her own hair, and rather respectable, middle-aged clothes — nothing brassy or vulgar about her. Her foundation make-up is light, and her mascara discreet. Can Paul find any explanation for his desire to dress up as Jenny?

"Not really," he says. "I remember when I was about five clothes seemed especially significant. At seven I was in the cubs and I desperately wanted to be a chorus girl in the gang show, but I was put with the chorus boys. I envied the boys in frilly knickers."

After that he remembers nothing of significance until he was about 15, and started secretly trying on his older sister's and mother's clothes. Since the formation of the Beaumont Society he has had a weekly time and place to "come out" — though at the end of a long evening he disappeared like Cinderella and returned, balding, in a grey suit. I didn't immediately recognise him.

There is a special transvestite vocabulary. "Suit-cases" are those who never dare come out but take their women's clothes furtively to hotels. They refer to their habit as "dressing." I took my husband along to the party, and he was promptly asked "Do you dress?" as if visiting a nudist colony. A shop in the Barbican advertises clothes for "TV Personalities." TV meaning transvestite.

Members of the society are anxious to stress that transvestites are not transsexual. Most TVs have no wish to become women, but there are



Polly Toynbee

'When I was seven I wanted to be a chorus girl in the cubs' gang show. I envied the boys in frilly knickers'

a few transsexuals in the society. They don't want to be men dressing as women from time to time: they actually want to be women, and think they really always were.

"Pam" is 60, tall and upright, and in the last few weeks has decided to live as a woman the whole time. After 35 years of marriage, she has just separated from her wife and their five children. She works as a sales rep for a textile company, and after deciding to live as a woman, sent a letter round to all her clients to tell them of her decision, and to ask if she would still be welcome to visit their companies. She showed me a pile of replies, none of them rejecting her: "We are in receipt of your letter of the 21st instant. You are welcome to visit us in your usual business arrangements as before," was a typical one.

In her case, friends and acquaintances must have been particularly surprised. Pam was at Sandhurst, spent many years in the army, and

was shot in the knee in Burma.

"I commanded 135 men, and I was a jolly good commander. Never in their wildest dreams would they imagine that I really wanted to be a woman." And she does still seem a very male character. She is a Roman Catholic, but when she once confessed to a priest, he said he couldn't see that dressing as a woman was actually a sin of any kind.

Pam is now on hormone pills. "I've put 5½ inches on my bust in six months, 3in off my waist and 4in on my hips." Her voice still sounds deeply male, but she is having speech therapy to feminise it.

Others listening to Pam's story wanted to stress that they had no wish to be women all the time. Jenny said "I'm a man in man's body, as most of us are. But a few, like Pam, feel they are really a woman trapped in a man's body." They said that they probably had a lower sexual drive than other people, but that their desires all focused on women, never on men. Pam described visiting a brothel with friends in the army. He ended up undressing his prostitute and putting on her clothes. They sat and discussed make-up and dresses, and that was all.

Dr Anthony Storr, author of *Sexual Deviation*, says, "It is an extraordinarily deep-rooted compulsion, almost impossible to get rid of. If they come to a psychiatrist the most we can do is to reconcile them, and their wives to this compulsion." Behaviourists claim some success with electric shock treatment, but he doubts if this works permanently.

"It starts very early," he

says, "and is probably associated with the wish to be as close as possible to their usually dominant mothers. They have never found an exhibitionistic role as a man. They seek admiration and see women as getting it."

Of the transvestites I spoke to, a large number had older sisters, and may have felt their sisters got more admiration than they did. Dr Storr suggests they may dislike female genitals and displace their desire into a desire for female clothing. Transsexuals, like Pam, are quite different. Several wives and girl friends turn up to Beaumont Society gatherings. Polly is a small, blond woman, married to Jenny/Ronald who is a plumber. Jenny looked one of the most convincingly female TVs there, except for her large, battered hands.

"I knew what he was about two weeks after I met him," Polly says. "I guessed before he even really knew himself." She says she accepts it totally, and it causes her no problems. They have told all their family and friends.

"My boss doesn't really know though," Jenny says. "Sometimes I tell him I've bought a new dress but he thinks I do a drag act, which is acceptable."

Polly says she doesn't think their relationship is much different to any other husband and wife most of the time. "He's quite domineering," she says. "But he's probably a bit more understanding." Other people there said Polly was not typical, and most wives hated it, even if they accepted it.

In the Beaumont Society's latest newsletter, one wife complains that dressing up as a woman has nothing whatever to do with women's real

lives. She describes a typical day of scrubbing floors, washing nappies, cooking and shopping, with no time to think about make-up or smart clothes. She addresses the transvestites, "Now you girls, think about it. Oh to be you! Hardly any household chores to ruin those lovely nails. We have to make do with short hair — no time for hairdressers and manicurists. So for God's sake take over for a day or so, and let us have a chance to go out in our finery and splendour for an enjoyable evening."

A fetishist fascination with female trappings doesn't make these men any more female; indeed most are far less effeminate in their view of the world than many homosexuals. Curiously many of them are particularly masculine in outlook.

Several described how they felt in terms of wanting to escape from being men into being women for a part of the time. One or two, as in Rhona's original letter, complained of the rigidity of sex-stereotyping in society, and said this restricted men as much as women. But when we talked more, it was clear that the only aspect of being a woman that interested them was the clothes. If men were allowed to dress in whatever they liked, there wasn't much else in the stereotyping that worried them. They had no burning desire to take on childcare or motherhood. In fact they seemed less interested in children than many other men. It wasn't the loving, caring, more openly emotional side of the traditional female role that they wanted. Nor were they interested in attracting men.

They are not campaigning for anything in particular. Like gays and others, they are asking for understanding and acceptance in the outside world. But what many most want is to pass as women, when they are "dressed." The brave ones who step out of doors get a thrill from going to the supermarket or a dress shop without anyone ever suspecting that they are men. Some of them do pass muster on a dark night, but many of them couldn't possibly. They do, though, run risks. The police sometimes pick up transvestites on the wildly wrong assumption that they are gay prostitutes likely to be soliciting men. But mostly they suffer from teasing. One of them not long ago had his wig stolen in the street, and committed suicide from the shame of discovery.

Party dress—in the transvestites' bar