

Settling into gender

Francine Béar and Jennifer Wild on *My Transsexual Summer*

For most of us, waking up in the morning is linked to thoughts about what to eat for breakfast or how to postpone getting up. Few of us open our eyes then question how to dramatically change our body so it more closely reflects our sense of gender.

Throughout November, Channel 4 brought us a fascinating five-part documentary series about transgender identity: that sense of being more similar than different to the opposite sex. The documentary features seven people whose gender identity is a mismatch to their biological sex. Every few weeks, they spend a weekend together to share their experiences of living life as their preferred gender.

My Transsexual Summer gives an in-depth and excellent perspective on the difficulties and rewards that arise when

people who struggle with their biological gender transform it through surgery, hormones, clothing style or a combination of all three. But questions still remain. Whilst the viewer learns about the psychological struggles

transgender people face, the programme presents only medical procedures as a means of intervention. We have yet to hear about the psychological support that's available and how it may work to help people accept their biological gender or their decision to change it.

Thousands of people in the UK experience transgenderism, and

Charing Cross Hospital performs four gender reassignment surgeries per week. But is surgery the solution for people who struggle with their gender identity?

Donna and Drew, two male-to-female transsexuals featured in the programme, are content with looking and dressing like women, taking hormones to support their looks, but wish to keep the parts of their bodies that make them male. Donna says about being transgender, 'It's more about a journey to find yourself than it is to find a good surgeon.'

The programme reveals the extent to which our psychological well-being is linked to accepting our gender identity, and how for most people, the match between our biological sex and our psychological gender is a good fit. We accept our gender identity without awareness or question: we take it for granted.

Sarah, one of the male-to-female

transsexuals in the documentary, reveals the psychological problems that can occur when psychological gender does not match a person's biological sex. She has recently begun her transition to living as a woman, and talks about her episodes of depression and how she has self-harmed to deal with painful emotions linked to rejection. We learn of the terror all seven individuals felt when they disclosed true identity to family and friends and how rejection, isolation, and depression are common consequences.

The programme gives space for the featured individuals to express their thoughts about gender identity, and in so doing, gives space for the viewer to challenge convention that it's about being biologically male or female. We learn that gender identity, like many psychological constructs, exists on a continuum. Male and female sit at either end with variations of the two existing in-between.

By getting up close and personal, the programme encourages us to let go of our attachment to separating gender into two constructs and to consider transgender as an identity that sits on the gender identity continuum. Perhaps psychological support could start with helping individuals to accept where they are on the continuum and supporting any choice for surgery.

In terms of surgery, the series does an excellent job of covering what's involved and its controversial components. Gender reassignment surgery costs the NHS approximately £40,000. With cutbacks to health care, even more people are criticising the decision to fund these so-called 'cosmetic' procedures out of a grant that must also pay for other life-saving procedures. But the surgeon interviewed in the documentary makes it clear: not only are there significant improvements to psychological well-being after reassignment surgery, but the improvements in quality of life can last for 40 years or more, much longer than what we would see following surgery for cancer or other illnesses, he says.

Finding foot on the gender identity continuum is certainly a long journey when there's a mismatch between biological and psychological sex. Channel 4 has done an excellent job in revealing the struggles that dominate when there's a poor fit, what's involved medically on the journey to make a better fit, and importantly, the need to see gender as spanning a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Only in seeing this, will we have a chance to transform the stigma, misunderstanding, and mockery that transgender individuals face when they take steps to be who they really are.



Gender – spanning a continuum rather than a dichotomy

MEDIA PRIME CUTS

The nocebo effect: Wellcome Trust science writing prize essay <http://t.co/HcKceYKq>
 Letter from Scott Lilienfeld on the trend for renaming psychology departments as 'Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences' <http://t.co/2n0c2AWD>
 What makes musical memories special? <http://t.co/T9RSyZa3>
 The Science of Sarcasm? Yeah, Right <http://t.co/UbGpADOk>
 Cognitive enhancers, with Barbara Sahakian comment <http://t.co/qmHRv8UN>

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Lazy pursuit of the sexy?

Has psychology become 'addicted to surprising, counterintuitive findings that catch the news media's eye'? That's the charge levelled by Eric-Jan Wagenmakers, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Amsterdam, who claims that the trend is warping the field. Wagenmakers was quoted in a piece by Christopher Shea, writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://t.co/10CNgtPh>) on the fraud case surrounding Dutch researcher Diederik A. Stapel.

'The field of social psychology has become very competitive,' Wagenmakers said, 'and high-impact publications are only possible for results that are really surprising. Unfortunately, most surprising hypotheses are wrong.' Shea asks the question, 'Is a desire to get picked up by the Freakonomics blog, or the dozens of similar outlets for funky findings, really driving work in psychology labs?'

The journal editors Shea spoke to are sceptical. 'Eliot R. Smith, new editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, says the talk about psychologists pursuing "sexy" findings is way overblown. "Go through five issues of mainstream psychological journals," says Mr Smith, a social psychologist at Indiana University at Bloomington. "You'll see maybe five articles out of 50 that are big counterintuitive findings that your grandmother would be interested in."

Robert V. Kail, editor of *Psychological Science*, told Shea he's never heard of the likelihood of press attention being used as a reason to publish a researcher's work. Rather, he says, he asks his reviewers: 'If you are a psychologist in a specialty area, is this the kind of result that is so stimulating or controversial or thought-provoking that you'd want to run down the hall and tell your colleagues in another subfield, "This is what people in my field are doing, and it's really cool"? To me that's not "sexy". It's the most interesting science that we're doing.'

Psychology got a rough time of it elsewhere on the web in November. Leeds-based psychologists Andrew Wilson and

Sabrina Golonka, tweeting and blogging as @psychscientists (see <http://t.co/iNwVC1k9>), argued that 'psychology has gotten lazy; when you can't come up with a simple solution to your complex problem, you suggest a complex solution that fills all those pesky gaps, and never notice the gaps were a bit weird to begin with'. Psychologists' aversion to ruling things out means



Professor Eliot R. Smith

'psychology becomes a mere collection of empirical results, with nothing tying them together'. According to Wilson and Golonka, 'This fragmentation means psychology is doing nothing but running in empirical circles: there's nothing resembling progress. All you get are individuals with their own collection of hunches running their own experiments on their own little experimental phenomena. Psychology needs to pick a side, suck it up and get on with some normal science for a change.'

Other media (e.g. *The National Post*: see <http://t.co/QsnuMrli>) picked up on an article on 'false positive psychology' in *Psychological Science* by Joseph P. Simmons and colleagues (see p.10), to argue that 'modern academic psychologists have so much flexibility

MEDIA CURIOSITY

From the *Sacramento Bee* (<http://t.co/d0rnvhGG>)

'Sacramento State professor George Parrott walked out of his Psychology 101 lab class Thursday morning because his students didn't bring any snacks... The professor said students are told of the requirement to bring snacks on the first day of class... The handout offers suggestions and pictures of which snacks are preferred.

The professor said the snack obligation is his way of encouraging students to work collectively. Parrott doesn't regret his decision to walk out. "I can understand the immediate frustration," he said. "I'm sympathetic, but I'm absolutely comfortable with the conclusion. The ethos I'm trying to promote is incredibly important. It may not be appreciated, and that's even more unfortunate. It speaks to their lack of understanding of higher education." For the outcome, see tinyurl.com/cwueeqg JS

with numbers that they can literally prove anything'. Turning the weapons of statistical analysis against their own side, Simmons' team managed to prove something demonstrably false. 'Our goal as scientists is not to publish as many articles as we can, but to discover and disseminate truth,' they write. 'We should embrace these [proposed rules about disclosing research methods] as if the credibility of our profession depended on them. Because it does.' JS

WORLD'S GREATEST LIVING PSYCHOLOGIST?

Daniel Kahneman's promotion of his new book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, led to a rash of effusive coverage in November. It is well worth checking out *The Guardian* interview with him (<http://t.co/WRjWqp1t>), particularly for his recollection of collaborating with Tversky. 'Psychologists really aim to be scientists, white-coat stuff, with elaborate statistics, running experiments,' Kahneman says. 'The idea that you can ask one question and it makes the point... well, that wasn't how psychology was done at the time.'

The Guardian also hosted a video (<http://t.co/NTJM4UEC>) and an editorial 'in praise of' Kahneman. 'Appealingly,' the editorial concluded, 'the pair tended to base their exploration of human foibles on their own errors: their faulty memories and dodgy mental shortcuts. Fallibility often begins at home – a lesson more economists might learn.'

There's also a Google talk at <http://ow.ly/7I9DL>. It was all a bit much for some, with the *Huffington Post* (see <http://t.co/qVK6piBj>) asking 'Is Daniel Kahneman really the

world's greatest living psychologist?' 'No psychologist or neuroscientist alive today would argue that Kahneman's work isn't elegant, fascinating and important,' wrote Margaret Heffernan, 'But the truth is that we have the good fortune to live at a time when many of the giants of psychology (of which Kahneman certainly is one) are alive and productive, doing elegant and thoughtful work with immediate and lasting relevance to how we live our lives. That body of thought goes well beyond marveling at our own stupidity.' JS