CONTINUITY AND CHANGE – On Being a Sister of a Transsexual Person
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Introduction

Transsexualism is about gender and more precisely about body and gender-identity (Landén 1999, Wålinder 1967). The point of departure for the concept of transsexualism is the understanding of these phenomena. Moreover, culture and the social setting constitute frames for the thinkable. These frames may become more visible to persons who experience situations where the frame boundaries are crossed, which may occur when someone discovers that a close kin is transsexual.

Formulating the realm relatives of transsexuals presupposes a domain of persons with a certain experience, a new experience, which has to be merged with their preconceptions. This leads to a process where a new understanding develops. The focus on the relative of a transsexual person starts with an assumption about a situation that has to be managed in one way or another, and where the relative eventually attains such understanding. This is an assumption on the basis of our conventional discourses where gender-transformations are not in agreement with general ideas about gender.

This paper is about discovering that one’s sibling is a transsexual person (female to male, hereafter ftm; male to female is termed mtf). It is based on an interview with the sister, which I shall call Maria. The interview is part of a study in which twelve persons who were either the partners, siblings or grown-up children of six transsexual persons (both ftm and mtf) were interviewed. The aim of the study is to understand how close relatives of transsexual persons experience this turn of events in their lives. One of the questions in the study is How do ideas about normalcy come into expression in the relative’s narratives. This is also the subject of investigation in this paper.

What is said in an interview depends to some extent on the interview situation. The purpose of the interview shapes the structure for what is relevant to disclose in the interview. In the same way, a person is interviewed because he or she has had certain experiences; in this case the experience is of being closely related to a transsexual person. Such communicative conditions constitute a structure for the conversation and together with the interviewee’s and my own conceptions about how and what we are able to communicate to each other, the interview develops.

On the assumption that Maria has learned about certain circumstances that could be described as unusual, unexpected and difficult to understand, the interview situation gives her an opportunity to process her experiences. Through the interchange between language and thoughts, the interview situation, which contains formulations about the transsexual person’s and Maria’s own situation, can be considered as a forum both for conceptualising herself and for constructing an intelligible world. For the most part, conventional discourses and gender practices do not allow for the possibility of transsexualism as being a legitimate experience of the self. In light of this, the question is how do close relatives of transsexual persons create
meaning under such circumstances. One way of making sense of one’s experiences is to narrate them (Mishler 1996). Thus, in narrating her experiences in an interview situation, the interviewee tries to make sense of the situation and by so doing structures her life. Narration then entails selecting certain events as being worthy of reporting; thus, what Maria chooses to verbalize could throw light on the her own life. In this way, a main narrative emerges in the interview, i.e. a more official story is brought to the fore in a more or less active manner. In the interview, which lasts for more than an hour, the conversation develops in several directions, and the main narrative has to compete with other narratives or projects. On the basis of the more highly arranged story, other stories are told that do not always coincide with the main narrative. By identifying these different narratives, or projects, which interviewees try to evince in the interview, an image of how they re-construct their history into an understandable world becomes visible. The focus of the study is on how this particular interviewee, Maria, constructs an image of continuity in the interview and how this relates to gender.

The wish to shape one’s own life into a consistent whole is universal, although the meaning of continuity differs between cultures (Harris in Becker 1997). When our expectations regarding our life-courses are not fulfilled, we must deal with the situation in some way; a more or less chaotic situation has to be restored to order by reconstructing our understanding of the self and the surrounding world. This is one of the ways in which we create normalcy in relation to our conventional discourses and practices of being a person (normalcy is here understood in the sense of what is expected from a societal perspective, i.e. not a statistical or medical perspective).

We often describe who a person is in terms of inner/outer aspects – as two sides of identity. We expect the inner identity to be in accordance with the person’s outer appearance (Trilling 1972). The gender-identity follows the same logic (Orobio de Castro 1994). The main project in Maria’s narrative is to describe her sister/brother’s (here called Sara/Samuel) personal identity. This means focusing on what is lasting and permanent in the person despite the changed circumstances, both for the person concerned and for the people around her/him (Ricoeur 1992). Upon the question of who someone is, a narrative is constructed and the narrating creates possibilities for several interpretations of who that person is. However, the thoughts about who the person is are then interpreted and expressed through the cultural system of meaning that shapes the narrative. If gender-identity is a part of identity, the answer to the question about who someone is in relation to gender is woman or man.

Narratives about situations that disrupt the expected course of development are concerned with integrating the new situation and its consequences with the prevailing ideas in the society. From the point of departure that gender has a central meaning for categorizing other people, Maria’s narrative of her situation not only throws light on that specific situation but also enhances our knowledge about meanings in relation to gender and identity – supposedly central concepts for transsexual persons as well as and for people in general.

In the following, an audiotaped interview with the sister of a transsexual person will be discussed. Maria discovered that her sister, Sara, is transsexual about three years prior to the interview. Today Sara has changed her/his name to Samuel.

Maria’s narrative

To open the interview I asked Maria to tell me about when her sister became her brother. She begins her narrative by describing under what circumstances she first learned that Sara
sometimes wore male clothing and that she defined herself as a drag-king or transvestite. Maria also describes her reaction to this information. She says she was not surprised, even though she had not suspected it earlier. That it was not surprising, she says, has to do with how she customarily viewed Sara, i.e. in terms of “a person is a person” and “the gender thing wasn’t so strong”, neither in her own person nor in Sara. Maria continues by describing Sara as “quite peculiar as a person. And it, it still felt as if, well… so she’s still the same person, I think that’s what I felt. That this was probably just further confirmation that she is a very peculiar person…. (laugh)”.

M, in her description of her sister/brother, concludes that Sara/Samuel is the same person now as she/he was before and that gender is not one of her/his central attributes. Rather, she describes Sara/Samuel as a very special person, which can be understood to mean here that Sara/Samuel is beyond the ordinary categorization of woman and man. This may be seen as a way of denying any importance to gender, perhaps in order to maintain a coherent image of the other as normal.

After relating how she became aware of Sara’s transsexualism, Maria emphasises even more strongly the absence of gender, both in how she describes her own general attitude toward gender and how she talks about Sara/Samuel specifically.

Not that I think it’s very important to relate to someone as a man or a woman. Because it’s still the case that a transsexual… has no… very, I don’t know …you still have pretty special indicators of gender. I mean, I’m never going, I think now anyway, completely see Samuel as a man, I’m going see him as Samuel. I don’t think it will be in any other way. I don’t think I saw her so much as a woman before, rather that she’s my sister. But we haven’t been like sisters to each other, we haven’t had that kind of contact… .

Here Maria points out that she does not regard Sara/Samuel in terms of woman or man, rather as a person standing apart from gender categories. She says that to her Sara is simply her sister, but then she says immediately thereafter that they have not really been like sisters to each other. She describes their relationship as being different from how sisters usually are with each other. She also characterizes their relationship as very special. She says: “I’ve been thinking about that some times …that you can’t … I’ve never had that kind of sister, I’ve had a sibling and we’ve had …our relationship”. She also says: “We haven’t been like sisters to each other, we haven’t had that kind of contact, or that kind of communication or so”. When I persist in asking Maria why it is no longer like having a sister, she replies that she never had a sister in the first place and explains this by saying “she’s always been very peculiar”. She gives the example that she never met Sara during her pregnancies: “I don’t remember that we met, not even once, during her pregnancies… such things … and if you’re sisters that’s when you really meet and stuff like that”.

The sister stresses that her attitude towards people is seldom about their being male or female. She also describes her relationship to her sister as unique and different from the relationship women usually have with their sisters. In this an image of the absent gender is formulated. The absent gender is about Maria’s own way of behaving as well as Sara’s; neither of them is typically female and neither of them has ever been preoccupied with doing “girl-things”. She says that this is how she regards people in general and in her description of Sara she says that Sara “never defined herself very strictly in terms of gender-role”. The relationship between Maria and her sister can be discussed in terms of continuity. Maria says that they have not been like ordinary sisters and that their relationship has always been very peculiar. By
perceiving the situation in this way, her relationship with her sister does not risk being disrupted just because Sara has now become Samuel. Instead, the new circumstances are merely an extension of their “peculiar” relationship. Sara/Samuel hereby becomes relegated to a unique category. Generally we do not categorize people to whom we have a close relationship as explicitly male or female; it is more common to categorize in this way people we do not know very well. What is worth noting here, however, is that Maria talks about this aspect explicitly, which gives us reason to regard this view as her main narrative.

Maria’s main narrative is about Sara as a person who has not in fact changed. In relation to who her sister is, Maria asserts that Sara’s coherence is intact, which is what the concept of continuity is all about. Maria’s description of their relationship follows the same pattern. A possible interpretation is that Maria, in her ambition to enforce continuity, tries to negate the existence and meaning of gender.

From the point of departure that gender is of central importance in categorizing other people and that Maria now has to accustom herself to Sara/Samuel’s ambivalence about her/his former gender and her/his later repudiation of it, it is understandable that Maria tries to construct a coherent image of Sara/Samuel where gender is absent. To maintain coherence, order and continuity, Maria has to manage the fact that Samuel was once Sara. In the interview Maria re-constructs the two sisters’ shared history in a meaningful way, stressing that the person, Sara, is the same person over time, thereby enabling her to make sense of Sara’s transsexualism. She creates an image of Sara as a non-female person by focusing on Sara’s personality and on their relationship as being other than a normal one, i.e., how female siblings are supposed to be towards each other.

Maria’s narrative can be seen as questioning the assumption that for most people gender follows the idea of an inner identity that corresponds to the individual’s outer identity or appearance, and also that gender categorization is essential if we are to understand other people. In describing Sara as an own category unto herself, thereby placing personal identity above gender and in a sense denying gender, Maria chooses to relate to Sara’s supposed inner identity and thereby creates a semblance of continuity.

Continuity does not necessarily contradict change, yet Maria’s main project is modified through the image of change, about which she also talks in the interview. In the next section of this report, Maria presents when she finds out about Sara’s transsexualism, describing this change in relation to continuity.

**Feeling that something is wrong**

In describing her sister, Maria stresses that Sara/Samuel is the same person as before and that her relationship with her sister has not changed. If we view the narrative from the perspective of time, with a *then* (before she finds out about Sara/Samuel’s transsexualism) and a *now* (afterwards, when she knows), a turning point emerges (Charmaz 1997) in connection with in Maria’s understanding of Sara/Samuel.

Many aspects of Maria’s narrative concerns how Sara was as a woman. Her way of talking about this is to describe Sara’s physical appearance. She puts this description in relation both to her own general idea that gender is of little importance and to her own physical appearance. Thus, she describes both her own and Sara’s way of behaving as more or less deviant in relation to gender.
Often, Maria’s point of departure is that she and Sara differ from one another. In addition to their different lifestyles, different interests and different personalities, Maria describes how Sara looks, what kinds of clothes she wears and so on. The general image is that although Sara seldom used make-up or wore typically female clothes, she could on occasion do so, which Maria finds to be rather inexplicable. In the following excerpt she talks about Sara’s way of dressing up for a family dinner:

At the more traditional family gathering, it could be a dinner or something like that… then she would suddenly use make-up and she would wear skirts and things like that. And it looked totally crazy. We’ve never had the same preferences about clothes and so, I mean I thought okay ….we have never preferred the same clothes, but still I thought it looked really weird /…/ because, I mean, even at a traditional dinner, it’s not so that, we don’t come from a bourgeois family background where you have to…well, wear a dress for certain occasions; rather just the opposite.

Sara’s suddenly using make-up and putting on a skirt Maria finds to be “weird” because their family lifestyle does not require that kind of dress. What is essential here is that Sara “suddenly” puts on make-up and wears that kind of clothing, behaviour that conflicts with Maria’s view of the kind of person Sara is. Sara’s behaviour departs from her customary way of behaving. The point is not that Maria regards wearing a feminine style of dress as strange in itself, rather that Sara should choose to do so. It does not suit the image Maria has of Sara. Here she has constructed a general image of normalcy that does not correspond with Sara’s changed way of dressing; therefore it becomes a problem for Maria.

Maria describes this style of dress as a problem for Sara as well, i.e. an expression of Sara’s uncertainty of who she is. Maria discusses this unexpected and, in her eyes, unnecessary style of dress as “an expression of uncertainty…to overstate instead”. Maria’s way of describing how Sara was earlier may be understood as a narrative about Sara’s never having been a woman and therefore as always having been uncertain about her behaviour as well. Also, Maria’s narrative can be understood as an expression of what in the situation is problematic and for whom. From the excerpts above, we can see that the problems concern Sara, which Maria relates in explicit terms, but also Maria herself, i.e. Maria’s difficulty in understanding who Sara really is.

In view of Maria’s describing both herself and her sister as not being stereotypically female, it is understandable that she finds Sara’s behaviour provocative. Sara, Maria says, nevertheless used some typically female attributes; for example: “She always had to wear her hair very long … I’ve worn my hair short in periods from time to time… but she’s always kept hers very long”. These frequently recurring comparisons can be interpreted as an expression of Maria’s feeling of being confronted with something she could not understand and which lacked coherence. On the one hand, Maria has described Sara as being very special and not very female; on the other hand she describes her as sometimes being stereotypically female, but somehow as lacking in authenticity.

Transsexualism as a solution

Maria then describes how she felt more comfortable when Sara told her about her transsexualism; “In some way I think I felt a little more at ease to know for sure “. The uncertain thing she refers to is that Sara was not convincing in her earlier descriptions of her role as drag-king. She describes it as an “uncertain stage”. Maria’s understanding was that Sara’s narratives about sometimes dressing up in male clothing was a way of trying to adapt
to her condition – born female with the possibility to dress like a man in certain situations. Maria says also that the words Sara used were that she felt “uncomfortable as a woman”, which Maria describes as having been a problem for people in their surroundings:

… and then it felt like a pretty uncertain situation… she chooses to… to go for the drag-king role for adapting … but actually she doesn’t want that… And then it becomes uncertain for others too, how one should relate … In that way I think it became clearer.

Because the situation became more understandable when Sara/Samuel told Maria about her/his transsexualism, this revelation constituted a solution for Maria herself and for other people with whom Sara had a relationship. Sara/Samuel’s transsexualism also confirms the earlier signs Maria thought she had noticed that Sara was not the woman she sometimes seemed to be.

So it’s been … so in that way it felt more as, well better to know if she doesn’t feel at all comfortable as that, and it has been pretty obvious that she didn’t feel comfortable… as… a stereotypical woman, because when one already has had, when there were family dinners and she wore a skirt and so it was so totally wrong or it was, it was fairly obvious that she didn’t feel comfortable in it. And I didn’t understand why then she insisted on acting under false pretences. I think that the female gender role is more open … you don’t have to like, you don’t have to like short skirts and make-up to be a girl. It’s, no you don’t. But it was still pretty obvious that it wasn’t enough for her that you don’t have to, it was still a problem.

Through the transsexualism, Maria has an answer to something she could not understand earlier, i.e. Sara’s sometimes behaving in a very feminine manner. This can be understood in light of Maria’s attitude to the female role, that it is relatively open and broad and women do not need to be extremely female to be women. But it was rather obvious that this space was not broad enough for Sara, it was still a problem for her.

Maria’s narrative concerns there having been something unintelligible in Sara’s way of behaving and which Maria felt sometimes caused some inconvenience, an element of inconsistency. For example, Maria talks about moments when she felt that Sara entered into a female role that was at odds with the person Maria thought Sara was otherwise. This can be understood to mean that Maria experiences Sara/Samuel has not being genuine, that Sara/Samuel was not expressing her inner self. The inconsistency concerns Sara’s mode of expression and the lack of agreement between Sara/Samuel the person and her/her gender-categorized body, which generates the feeling that the person is not genuine. By describing the situation as now having been resolved, Maria has also constructed an image of the situation as being normal.

The sister’s description of her feeling of uncertainty about Sara’s way of being and the disturbing inconsistencies she experienced earlier receive an explanation and a solution through the transsexualism. She says that today everything is much more intelligible and that nowadays she is more relaxed because she feels that it is more certain and clear who Sara/Samuel is and what she/he wants.

But perhaps it results in your exaggerating in that direction, finding something safe because you feel that it isn’t this, then it’s easier. So, in that way it probably felt better when she had decided … well that she would change sex. It felt more like that this, this
at least she believes in totally. It’s important in relation to others to feel that there is no uncertainty…but this, this is her thing.

Maria describes learning about Sara’s transsexualism in positive terms. It is something she is able to believe in because Sara seems to believe in it. Nevertheless, she expresses a reservation and a remaining sense of insecurity: “Now I just hope that she doesn’t change her mind/.../but I don’t think so, it’s not…it feels that this is important and it will probably remain so”.

We can interpret this to mean that Maria now regards the situation as being trustworthier in that Sara/Samuel actually reveals who she/he really is. Maria formulates an image of Sara/Samuel as a much more consistent person than she/he was before. For Maria this is a positive image and a solution, both for herself and for Sara. Furthermore, we can interpret Maria’s hope that Sara/Samuel will not change her/his mind as a reservation; Sara/Samuel still poses something of a problem for Maria.

Concluding remarks

If we regard the interview as a process Maria undergoes in which she re-conceptualising herself and her surrounding world, then we can see a main narrative emerge. This way of generating data is one way for Maria to conceptualise her experience. The question remains of what the main narrative contains and what other projects Maria is engaged in, in the interview, projects that are not in full agreement with the main narrative. This is of interest for understanding where some problems arise or what kinds of strategies or solutions Maria is using to manage the question of changed sex. This may also give an indication of domains where gender is evident and where our conventional discourses are insufficient for describing transsexual persons.

The demand to be treated as the other sex and to have one’s body altered to fit that sex is not generally thought to correspond with the expected life-course and Maria must find a frame for these new circumstances that will diminish its deviant meaning. One assumption is that Maria needs to find a way to conceptualise Sara’s gender-identity development that will make the situation more intelligible. Maria does this by talking about Sara as being the same person now as she was before, as someone beyond gender; Maria describes their relationship in the same way. She accomplishes this by showing the logical outcome of how Sara has been in the past, how she has anticipated the development and also how her expectations of Sara as a female were already disturbed. By discussing the past as a process that has led to transsexualism, Maria constructs a more intelligible image for herself.

In the interview Maria constructs an image of Sara as being the same person over time. We can interpret this to mean that, in seeking continuity, Maria denies gender as having meaning; the absent change is underscored and Maria’s situation and experiences become more normalised. In our society, the unique individual is in focus, there is an “ideal of authenticity” (Trilling 1972). Our thinking and the experience of transsexualism operate at the limits of language and conventional discourses; practices of gender do not allow the possibility of transsexualism as a legitimate experience of the self. Obviously, this is not an explicit problem for Maria. Instead, put in relation to the “ideal of authenticity”, the problem arises in her description of Sara/Samuel as having been less authentic became more or less solved with Sara/Samuel’s transsexualism.
Maria formulates the problem by her way of talking about Sara/Samuel and herself and their respective ways of being a female. She points out that she is not especially female herself but that the female role normally makes this possible. By doing so, she confirms herself as a person who is able to manage her own gender, and also that her own gender-expression is authentic. Against it, Sara has not been visible as an authentic female. Maria manages this in her narrative by placing a personality without gender above a personality where gender forms a part. This is not an easy project to accomplish, however, because gender-categorization is very obvious in our culture. We have an ideal of authenticity and gender is closely connected to this ideal as providing a true inner identity, a gender-core. A person’s failure to express this authenticity becomes a problem.

A possible interpretation of Maria’s narrative in which change and transsexualism become a solution is that she experiences Sara/Samuel as being a more genuine person now than she was before. She describes herself as experiencing greater consistency with respect to Sara/Samuel than she did before. The problem and later the solution is located both in Sara as a person and in Maria herself, and as both primary and a secondary problem for Maria. She describes it as:

- Sara was unsure of herself in relation to gender, which was reflected in her behaviour. Thus, the problem is formulated with a focus on Sara/Samuel’s health. Sara was unable to answer the question of who she is because she could not answer it in terms of the gender-categorization. In this respect we can assume that Sara’s body has limited her own self-understanding. This is a secondary problem for Maria.

- Maria did not know what was Sara’s gender. Through Maria’s experience of inconsistency and change in Sara’s behaviour, she has had difficulty relating to Sara. This is the primary problem for both sisters.

If the starting point for transsexualism is that gender-identity is not coherent with the physical body, i.e. that there is an inconsistency between inner and outer, part of the solution for a transsexual is to make the body to fit the inner. It is uncertain, however, that the transsexual person’s close relatives experience this coherence in the same way. Rather, the relative’s view may be one of discontinuity. But continuity can be re-constructed if an image of consistency can be re-constructed, as Maria does in the interview.

The main narrative in which Sara/Samuel is the same person over time is modified through her/his changed circumstances in relation to gender. For narrating about a “whole” person, the gender demands. In the attempt to be authentic, the paradox is visible; the person is the same and the gender is absent. But the search for authenticity requires gender in order to conceptualise who the person is.

References


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