

2005 Discussion Group on Sexual Object Choices: Transgender Issues

by Molly L. Grimes

Panelists: Deborah Luepnitz, Ph.D., Scott D. Pytluk, Ph.D., Bethany Riddle, M.Ed., and Debra Roth, LCSW

Chair: Dennis Debiak, PsyD

This year's panel presentation, sponsored by the committee on Sexualities and Gender Identities, began with opening remarks by chairperson Dennis Debiak, Psy. D, who explained that this panel marked the 4th annual meeting of the Ongoing Discussion Group on Sexual Object Choices. The goal of the discussion series, he noted has been to "open up a space to discuss the ways in which we conceptualize sexual object choice within a psychoanalytic framework."

Dennis then introduced the documentary, *No Dumb Questions*, directed by Melissa Regan. The film explores the experiences of young siblings and their reaction to their aunt's transsexualism. After viewing this film, our panel of presenters offered observations, reflections, and critiques of the film.

The first panelist, Scott Pytluk, Ph.D., spoke directly to the experience of Olivia, the middle sister in the movie. He observed Olivia's confusion and ambivalent reaction to her Aunt Barbara and noted the poignancy of her many questions. In particular, Scott highlighted Olivia's comment, "I don't see straight...I see a little color"; words she uttered while peering through a prism in her Aunt Barbara's kitchen. He noted the metaphoric power behind this comment, suggesting that her words "condense so many of the richly textured and interweaving layers of psychic and social meaning" involved in understanding the identity of a transsexual individual. Scott then discussed Olivia's confusion about whether or not her aunt would change on both the "inside" and the "outside" during her transition from male to female. He wondered, "How much do inside and outside reflect each other?"

Additionally, Scott addressed issues of loss associated with gender identity transition and noted the rarity of such a loss, asking, "How often are we faced with loss that makes us weep and our loved one rejoice -- all at once?"

Debra Roth, LCSW, commented that *No Dumb Questions* strived to reflect "the processes of loss, bewilderment, and anxious embarrassment" that are often associated with the gender transition of one's family member. She critiqued the film, noting that it "inadvertently functions as a graphic cultural representation of the disaffection and estrangement" so frequently experienced by transgendered folk during transition. Tellingly, Debra noted that Aunt Barbara's experience was virtually absent from the documentary, relegating her to "outsider" status within the family and objectifying her in

the context of the film. Debra then concluded that the only dumb question is the unasked question. In great ironic style, she asserted, *No Dumb Questions* enacts the single dumb question of the entire film by failing to ask Aunt Barbara: “What’s going on for you?”

Deborah Luepnitz, Ph.D., remarked that, despite its flaws, the film presented a “good-enough” model of parents and children speaking openly and intelligently about sexualities. She asked how many of us could have had a similar conversation at age six with our parents? The girls’ excellent questions -- “Which bathroom will she use?” “What if she doesn’t like being a woman, either?” and “Will she be changed on the inside as well?” -- illustrated the wide berth given to their curiosity in contrast to the narrow range of emotional they were allowed. She pointed to a scene in the film in which the children asked their father to turn off the camera because they were upset and he neglected to do so. According to the mother in the film, their daughter Abby asked if Uncle Bill “would amputate his penis” simply because she [Abby] “likes to use the word penis.” Neither parent considered that a discussion about their Aunt’s transsexual identity would compel the girls to think about topics such as mutilation, castration, and the vulnerability of the body, including their own. Deborah also concurred that the film’s neglect of interviewing Aunt Barbara was its major flaw.

The final speaker, Bethany Riddle, M.Ed., specifically addressed the experience of Abby, the youngest sister in the film. According to Bethany, Abby had clearly internalized a binary model of gender by the time of her Aunt Barbara’s transition. But Bethany noted that Abby’s understanding of the situation was very even-tempered relative to her sisters’ experiences. Bethany explained: “For Abby, the emphasis of Aunt Barbara’s transition was located in the number of possibilities that will open up for the two of them once they were both female.” For example, Abby was excited about the opportunity to “play Barbie’s” with her aunt, a desire that Bethany commented “both exposes and further produces a binary framework in which women, femininity, and heterosexuality imply one another and are implied by one another.” Bethany noted that despite an underlying binary model of gender, Abby was able to “love and accept and be excited about” her aunt’s transition.

Following these papers, the audience engaged in a lively discussion about the film, focusing most specifically on the absence of Aunt Barbara point of view in the documentary. Audience members also shared varying viewpoints on the nature of gender and transgenderism, a discussion sparked by one audience member’s controversial belief that transgendered identities are pathological. Additionally, audience and panel members shared information about resources available to the transgendered community.

The discussion ended with a sense that both the panel and the audience yearned for further debate and conversation.