Conflicting Selves and the Role of Possessions: Exploring Transgenders' Self-Identity Conflict

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What can transgenders tell us about the role possessions play in the formation, development, and resolution of the conflict between different selves? Using this extreme example of identity conflict, we identified five stages of conflict resolution, each of which involved possessions in varied and sometimes contradictory ways. This research contributes to the overarching theory of the extended self and the study of identity-conflict.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While the notion of possessions as an extension of the self has received extensive research attention (e.g., Belk 1988; Hirschman and Labarbera 1990), most of the literature has focused on possessions as reflecting a holistic self or specific aspects of the self (e.g., uniqueness). However, according to Erikson (1956), conflicts between different aspects of their self-identity are experienced by all individuals throughout their lifetime. Though some argue that possessions play an important role in cases of self-conflict (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), there have been very few studies on this subject. Taking a qualitative approach, this study seeks to understand the role possessions play in the formation, development, coping and resolution of the conflict between different selves using an extreme example of gender identity conflict—transgenderism.

Since gender is one of the most defining characteristics of the self (Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey 1997; Rudacille 2006), incongruence between gender identity and one’s genital configuration leads to a gender identity conflict. The establishment of gender identity occurs during early childhood, becomes an internalized aspect of one’s self and is virtually immutable. Transgender people experience a gender identity conflict which compels them to develop an alternative gender identity and enact a gender presentation that does not coincide with their sex (Gagne et al. 1997). In this study, using grounded theory analysis and interpretation of five in-depth, unstructured interviews with male-to-female transgenders, we explore the way transgenders utilize material possessions in negotiating their gender conflict. We assert that insights gathered from these extreme cases of self-conflict can educate us about more common or usual behaviors (Katz 1998).

The formation of an alternative gender identity requires transgenders to cross over either temporarily or permanently from one sex/gender category to another (Gagne et al. 1997; Lev 2004). In Western society, dominated by the binary perceptions of gender, the act of crossing over challenges the cultural and structural social order, exposing the person to social sanctions. Several multiple stage developmental models have been used to describe this process, building on Erikson’s (1956) social development theory.

Our findings are consistent with Gagne et al.’s (1997) integrative model. In its first stage, conflict emergence, our informants experienced transgendered feelings, but have not labeled them as such. This stage occurs during childhood, and our informants reported feeling that something was wrong with them (Bockting and Coleman 2007; Katz 1998). The gendered meaning of possessions (such as clothing and toys) raised their feelings to the level of conscious awareness. Possessions also defined the boundaries of socially accepted behaviors. While using possessions the “wrong way” (e.g., a boy wearing a skirt) resulted in acts of correction or punishment from others in an attempt to address the “problem”, at the same time they allowed the informants to engage in initial cross-gender socialization.

Identity exploration, the second stage, involved an extensive information search in an effort to label the source of the conflict as well as reach out to similar others. Our informants reported building a parallel world that enabled them to practice the performance of their new identity. Possessions (e.g., a secret cosmetics box) helped them segregate their conflicting identities, and thus, minimize and control their conflict.

In the third stage, coming out to one’s self, our informants coped with and internalized the meaning of their new transgender identity (“this is who I am”). Possessions played different roles in the variety of coping strategies utilized (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) such as denial (dressing like their original sex), acceptance (dressing according to their alternative gender identity), and self-control (keeping their alternative gendered possessions private). However, in order to resolve the conflict, transgenders had to accept and build their alternative gender identity and develop its public presentation (“to pass”).

In the fourth stage, coming out to others, the participants disclosed their transgender identity to significant others (spouses, family, friends), and often experienced rejection as a result (Lev 2004). Passing in this stage was not enough for them as they felt the need to present a convincing public image of cross-gender identity. As part of the new self, possessions were presented as embedded in the new gender identity.

Striving to find their “true” identity, most of our informants reached the final stage of conflict resolution. They explored various identities in an attempt to achieve a coherent identity in which transgenderism was only a part. Decisions regarding to what extent to cross over (e.g., have full surgery, just take hormones, etc.) were made in order to finalize their private and public identity. Possessions were no longer perceived as a means to project gender identity but as a means to express a new congruent self-identity.

Our study can be viewed in the context of the over arching theory of the extended self. The findings indicate that a person’s process of dealing with self-conflict is reflected in the use of possessions. As the conflict evolves, the role of possessions changes. They surface the conflict to the level of consciousness, are part of the coping process, and reflect the conflict’s resolution and the eventual formation of a new self-identity. We posit that our findings can be generalized to many other self-conflicts such as those involving athleticism, overt sexiness, and class affiliation, thereby contributing to the literatures on transgenders and the extended self.

REFERENCES


