
Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to Charles Mate-Kole's (1992) review of Anne Bolin's work, *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* (1988). Mate-Kole's closing remark, that Bolin's book "may offer greater assistance to the student or avid reader in sociology/anthropology than to the clinician or psychology/psychiatry student," is extremely unfortunate, for it is precisely backwards: It is the clinician who has the most to gain by reading *In Search of Eve*.

The clinical treatment of transsexualism is a relatively new phenomenon, and it is not surprising and even to be expected that despite the best efforts of everyone involved, mistakes in treatment would occur. To perpetuate these mistakes would be a tragedy.

Archimedes once said that if he had a place to stand and a lever, he could move the Earth. Like Goffman (1961), in his insightful analysis of the workings of a mental hospital, Bolin provides a perspective outside the ordinary, and if one bothers to stand there and look, it is easy to see major problems with the literature of transsexualism and the treatment of transsexual people which continue to the present day. Ignoring these problems by continuing to look at them through clinical blinders will not make them go away.

Dr. William Verplanck, one of my graduate professors, was fond of saying that unlike biology, a science carefully built upon observation and classification, psychology began in a wild spate of theorizing which ultimately suffered (and still suffers) because of the lack of an empirical base. So too will the science of gender disorders—and transsexual people themselves—continue to suffer because of a clinical literature which is not rooted in the reality of the everyday lives of transsexual people but in the treatment setting. What will result will not be so much a literature of a science as a collection of papers by clinicians explaining to other clinicians how to deal with such troublesome people.

Clinicians see transsexual people almost exclusively in a highly structured and artificial setting which is very little like real life. Both the clinician and the client have a very decided agenda, and the clinician holds all the cards. Bolin is not opposed to the HBGDA Standards of Care, as Mate-

Kole claims; she merely points out in Chapter 5 that the imbalance of power created by the Standards causes serious problems with the patient-caregiver relationship.

Stephen Jay Gould shows us in *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981) how the unconscious bias of even the best scientists permeates everything they do, from determining which research questions they ask to which findings they consider socially significant. It would be foolish to suppose that so controversial and emotional a subject as transsexualism is exempt from this bias. Unfortunately, because Bolin is not writing 50 to 100 years after the fact, as Gould did, it is more difficult to wrench oneself from the immediacy of one's work and see today's biases than it is to see the problems with Goddard's classification of mass numbers of immigrants as "feeble-minded" (1917) and his treatment of the Kallikak family as genetically impure and debased (1912).

To those who are able to look at the phenomenon of transsexualism from a broad perspective, it becomes apparent that although we have come a long way, something is terribly amiss. The literature is full of counter-transference, which surfaces as name-calling, inaccuracy, misperceptions, opinion posing as fact, humor at the expense of transsexual people, and perhaps even some lies—and this literature influences treatment. The literature is further compromised by the fact that typically only those people let into the transsexual "club" by clinicians tend to show up in research papers—which may explain the belief of many clinicians that all male-to-female transsexual people have effeminate childhoods (i.e., you must have this characteristic to be treated for transsexualism; therefore transsexual people have this characteristic). When an empirical study like Bolin's tells us that our sampling methods are faulty, it's time for a reality check.

We must face the fact that our biases remain, blinding us, just as they once blinded us to the facts that there are large numbers of female-to-male transsexual persons, that there are females who obtain erotic satisfaction from cross-dressing, that many transsexual people show prior heterosexual orientation, and that there are many transgendered people who wish to cross-live, but who have no desire for genital surgery.

Sadly, we cannot even see where our biases lie unless we take advantage of the perspectives and insights offered by the Stephen Jay Goulds, the Irving Goffmans, and the Anne Bolins of this world. Although Mate-Kole's review is fair and unbiased, he unfortunately seems to have missed the true significance of *In Search of Eve*.

Dallas Denny, M.A.
Executive Director

American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc.

REFERENCES

- Bolin, A. (1988). *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage*, Bergin & Garvey, Boston.
- Goddard, H. H. (1912). *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, MacMillan, New York.
- Goddard, H. H. (1917). Mental tests and the immigrant. *J. Delinquency*, 2: 243-277.
- Goffman, I. (1961). *Asylums*, Doubleday & Co., New York.
- Gould, S. J. (1981). *The Mismeasure of Man*. W. W. Norton, New York.
- Mate-Kole, C. (1992). Book review of *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage*. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 21: 207-210.