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Cross-dressing as a meaningful occupation: A single case study

Morag Curtis and Karen Morris

Abstract

Introduction: The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experience of cross-dressing, to raise awareness of cross-dressing and investigate any possible implications for occupational therapy.

Method: A single design case study utilizing an unstructured interview was used with a male cross-dresser known to the first author. Following transcription, flexible and ongoing analysis was undertaken following an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach and emergent themes resulted in an ongoing literature review.

Findings: The themes that developed were 'identity', 'dressing' and 'conflict'. A complexity of meanings related to cross-dressing also emerged: uncontrollable urge; erotic expression; sexual orientation; and a sense of completeness.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that cross-dressing is a meaningful occupation and as such influences identity formation and occupational choices. Occupational therapists have a duty of care to this vulnerable and alienated group within society.

Keywords

Transvestite, cross-dressing, transgender, Trans, sexuality

Introduction

Cross-dressing describes the act of dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex for sexual enjoyment or personal comfort. It may be carried out to varying degrees, ranging from one item of clothing hidden from view to 'dressing' fully (AgeUK, 2011). For the purpose of this study the term 'cross-dresser' rather than 'transvestite' is adopted, in the main, as this is used by the participant and most available research. The male pronoun has been used consistently to avoid confusion and because Sammy spoke as his male self during the majority of the interview. Cross-dressing and 'dressing' are used interchangeably as the latter is used by the participant. Trans/transgender is an inclusive term describing all whose identity falls outside typical gender norms (Reed et al., 2009).

The dearth of occupational therapy literature investigating cross-dressing drove this study into cross-dressing as a meaningful occupation. Occupational therapists are ideally suited to provide support and enable participation in 'dressing' within a non-judgemental, client-centred practice.

Literature review

No specific literature relating to occupational therapy and cross-dressing was found. However, this is an area explored within social and medical sciences and this review outlines the key literature.

Cross-dressing, gender and sexuality

Gender is a fundamental part of personal identity (Hawley, 2011), providing a sense of self in terms of being a man or woman. Whilst there is adult tolerance for tomboy-girls, cross-gender behaviour in boys is actively discouraged for fear of the development of homosexuality, with boys facing greater peer pressure to conform to their gender role (Archer and Lloyd, 2002). To emphasize masculinity,

this is defined as the opposite of femininity (Connel, 2005), rejecting 'feminine' emotions and vulnerability, which are equated with an 'unspoken fear of gayness'.

A secure sense of self-identity requires that one's internal sense of self is mirrored and confirmed by others (Chapman, 2012). If this does not happen it can lead to a lack of authentication, resulting in the self becoming a shameful secret (Fraser, 2009).

Religions have historically played an important role in constructing gender and sexual identities along reproductive lines and within a binary system whereby, according to western belief, only two genders, corresponding to two biological sexes, exist (Cashore and Tuason, 2009). For those who do not 'fit', this can result in religious guilt creating feelings of worthlessness, combined with anger towards God, which in turn aggravates feelings of guilt (Vasegh, 2011).

Psychological and medical perspectives have traditionally viewed transvestism as a pathology and categorized it within ICD-10, as 'deviant', 'fetishistic' and a 'mental and behavioural disorder' (World Health Organization, 2011). This view of transvestism as a mental disorder and a vehicle for sexual arousal would have made coming out as a cross-dresser extremely difficult and may, in part, account for the discrimination facing them (Tirohl, 2007). According to the Scottish Transgender Alliance (2010), however, it is relatively rare for people to self-identify as a cross-dresser if their 'dressing' is purely erotic. Within the transgendered community, it is now generally agreed that self-definition is the most important determinant of sexuality and gender (Scottish Transgender Alliance, 2010), resulting in a movement towards a fluid gender identity lying along a continuum between male and female (Fraser, 2009).

Gender and sexuality are important elements of identity and self-esteem, influencing a variety of behaviours, attitudes and activities such as dressing, make-up, sexual acts and self-care (Kirsch et al., 2006). Client-centred practice is at the core of occupational therapy, especially with the marginalized or disempowered (Kronenberg and Pollard, 2005), and sexuality should be an important element of this.

The occupation of dressing as identity

Pierce (2003) describes an occupation as a 'subjective event which is meaningful to the individual, has a beginning and end and a shared or solitary aspect' (p. 4). Cross-dressing would appear to fit this definition, in the same way that dressing does for the rest of society. Both are subjective acts with personal and cultural meaning as a form of expression both to ourselves and others. However, meanings are influenced by our culture and only those conforming to social norms are deemed acceptable (Pollard et al., 2009).

According to Twigg (2009), identity and the way we dress are closely interlinked. Clothes are cultural items which can be put on or off, allowing us to outwardly express ourselves in whatever way we choose. Clothes have long been used to hide sexual difference whilst also highlighting assumptions concerning gender codes in clothing. Thus, clothing helps to reproduce gender as a form of body style, producing a complex interplay between sexed bodies and gendered identities. It is an area of pleasure and expressivity, whereby people send messages about themselves. In terms of cross-dressers as a sub group, style of clothing, for example suspenders and stockings, could be seen as a way of stabilizing identity and registering belonging within that group.

Reed et al. (2009) asserted that 1% of UK men (235,000) cross-dress; however, as many do so in secret, this may be a conservative figure. Therefore, it is probable that occupational therapists will have in their case load clients who cross-dress. The dearth of relevant research literature reflects a

lack of insight within occupational therapy into the lived experience of cross-dressing, representing a neglected area of emerging specialist practice. This study has been undertaken in light of this and aims to investigate one person's lived experience of cross-dressing and use this to explore potential occupational roles within this emerging area.

This study is an initial attempt to explore the lived experience of a cross-dressing male from an occupational perspective.

Method

Where there is a scarcity of information, an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach is a useful way of eliciting a detailed narrative, in the participant's own words, promoting their own understanding of their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Smith et al., 2010).

A single design case study was adopted as a result of limited access to this group and the availability of only one subject. The utilization of feminist principles ensured that the participant was actively involved throughout the research process and any understandings reached were accurately represented.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained and the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA 1998) was adhered to. The participant was a middle-aged cross-dresser, willing to commit to this study, and a convenience sample known through a network of contacts. The pseudonym 'Sammy' was chosen by the participant and every effort was made to protect him throughout the process as identification could have resulted in discrimination. Ongoing consent was sought throughout and this, along with member checking, would mitigate any issues concerning revelations that he may later regret. Prior to data collection, time was spent getting to know each other in order to develop a trusting relationship.

Data collection consisted of one in-depth unstructured interview within which the topic was allowed to emerge gradually. The content of the transcript was verified by Sammy. Some emerging themes were further developed through discussion via email. Extracts of verbatim quotations accurately reflected Sammy's voice and ensured transparency and authenticity. Ongoing reflections and supervision discussions were used to monitor researcher feelings and influences on the research process.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis: identity; dressing; and conflict.

Dressing as identity

Throughout his life Sammy experienced the desire to 'dress', bringing with it differing emotions and experiences at different stages of his life. As a young child, dressing 'as a fairy princess' was just part of fantasy play embedded in the context of female siblings and cousin playmates. His developmental environment was predominantly female, although he also had a father and male friends, and there would have been a predominance of 'girly' clothing around. His relationship with 'dressing' changed as he developed from pre-school, through puberty and into adulthood. Around the age of 14 the erotic side of 'dressing' became less important and the goal was to 'pass' as a girl. As Sammy has grown older he still experiences the compulsion to dress but has come to terms with it, no longer experiencing self-hatred or confusion.

Sammy's family was working class within a northern England industrial town, at a time when homosexuality was illegal. As his initial understanding of this compulsion to 'dress' was that he must be homosexual, secrecy was paramount. He compensated for his 'dressing' by creating a very 'heterosexual male' image, whereby he dated lots of girls. This was, in a sense, proof that he could not be homosexual. At this time and within his community, there was no access to relevant information, role models or support and this added to his confusion and guilt. Sammy idealised his female persona and this may have affected his relationships with women who could not live up to this image.

Sammy split his life into male and female parts, experiencing these in very different ways. When 'dressed', the clothing fulfilled his stereotypical image of femininity, helping to maintain his personas at opposite ends of the masculine/feminine dichotomy. Keeping them separate served to protect his male identity and assuage the guilt he felt.

I used to look in the mirror when I was dressed and see a different person, so it was easy to blame her for everything.

He developed different personality traits for his female persona, who was more extrovert and sociable than his male self.

I would look at her in the mirror and think from the guy side and go, you know, 'wow . . . well she looks absolutely stunning' but then the mind . . . the girl mind would click in and go 'wow you look stunning'.

The mention of two separate minds would seem to imply that these personas were separate personalities. As he matured these personas became less pronounced and the need for this separation abated.

Dressing as an occupation

Sammy's 'dressing' and behaviour combined to enhance his occupational performance and he was able to 'pass' as a girl. No-one noticed, and this was the 'ultimate accolade'. When he 'dresses', he follows particular steps towards the goal of 'passing' as a woman and making her 'the best she could be'. Sammy never wears just a couple of items of female clothing because 'it was either all or nothing' and he describes a 'completeness of dressing' which implies more than sexual gratification. The process of 'dressing' is an important ritual, imbued with transformative power. He does not just 'dress' as a woman, he 'becomes' a woman, and as such has different occupations to those engaged in as a man.

When I dress I tend to be much more a social animal . . . more of an extrovert than my male self. . . . I smoke cigarettes, something I never do as a man.

When younger, Sammy used to engage in a range of occupations as a girl. Some of these involved finding ways of 'dressing' without arousing suspicion or being recognized, and shoplifting items of clothing and make up. The clothes, make-up, wig etc. are a very important part of 'dressing', as are self-care activities such as shaving the body. However, not all female attire is deemed feminine unless it is clothing that men would not wear, for example dresses, bras, stockings and suspenders.

He seemed to need occupational balance in his life to counter the conflict experienced in relation to 'dressing'. This balance was ostensibly between his masculine and feminine occupations and neither was allowed to dominate the other. The masculine ones were very physical and involved strength

and machinery, for example motorbikes, whereas the female occupations involved clothes, make-up and shopping.

If I'd had an ultra feminine sort of episode I would almost sort of counteract that by having an ultra masculine sort of session or the reverse.

In order to dress completely Sammy required time and a safe place, taking measures to avoid discovery, such as travelling to different towns and hiding his 'girl' clothes. This was too important to compromise on and, if unable to perform this occupation to his satisfaction, he preferred not to 'dress' at all rather than partly 'dress'. Sammy describes periods when he was unable to 'dress' in terms of there being something important missing from his life.

Dressing as a source of conflict

A strong theme running through the data is the conflict and dilemma which drove this occupation. As a child, he would dress in his mother's and sister's clothes when alone in the house. As a result of being 'found out' by his father, who came home early one day and found him wearing his sister's clothing, Sammy developed a sense of his 'dressing' as somehow wrong and of being different to his peers. During puberty, 'cross-dressing' became sexually gratifying, involving items of underwear and secrecy. There was an addictive element to Sammy's dressing. He initially experienced sexual gratification as the overwhelming driving force but 'post ejaculation regret, remorse, hatred' led to the conviction that he would never do 'it' again. However, he experienced an 'overwhelming compulsion' and was unable to stop.

After a while the erotic element diminished, with Sammy experiencing contentment and happiness when dressing completely and feelings of loss when he returned to being a boy. During adolescence Sammy was dressing completely as a girl and going out in public, but at the same time afraid that by doing so he was 'queer', as other forms of gender variance were invisible at this time. Dressing was an important part of his life but the fear of being caught doing something 'wrong' meant that he experienced both pleasure and pain when he 'dressed'.

'Dressing' has not been an entirely comfortable part of Sammy's life and he maintains that he would not have chosen to 'dress', especially in the earlier part of his life. Over the years, however, he has come to terms with and accepted his 'dressing' as an important part of who he is.

Religion formed a major part of his spirituality and therefore allows some insight into his behaviour. As a consequence of being told by a respected church member that his 'dressing' was sinful, he experienced intense guilt and self-hatred, consequently giving up practising any religion. He discussed purging his female side and burning clothing and make up:

As the fire burned down and I watched the fire die away to a few cinders and ashes, I tried to imagine being in hell and burning forever, and all because I wanted to dress as a girl.

In medieval Italy, 'Bonfires of the Vanities' were episodes when objects that may lead to sin were destroyed. Purging could have been an act of cleansing for Sammy whereby he was attempting to rid himself of his 'sinful' persona.

Discussion

Many factors affected Sammy's development, as his crossdressing experience was not mirrored back by his social environment and therefore not authenticated (Fraser, 2009). 'Dressing' became secret and something to be ashamed of, resulting in fear, confusion and the lack of a stable identity.

Sammy's experience appears compatible with Fraser's (2009) view of the development of self, whereby the self splits as a defence mechanism in response to confusion and the lack of a coherent self. Thus, there is one self, mirrored by society, and another developing secretly. Where there is difficulty locating a core self, an individual may try to be someone else. In Sammy's case this is a hyper-masculine male, developed out of his fear of discovery and his fear of homosexuality. To further underline his masculinity (which he equates with heterosexuality) he had many short-term girlfriends, describing himself affectionately as a bit of a 'rogue'. This may have helped him cope with the guilt he felt following 'dressing' episodes, whilst his hyperfeminine persona safely allowed him to express his feminine side. His constant need to look at himself in the mirror whilst 'dressed' and his conceptualization of the person in the mirror as 'the perfect girl but she was me, but she wasn't, she was different' may indicate a self-mirroring process. Developing a relationship with the mirror and the 'girl' reflected back at him may have enabled the development of an authentic sense of self (Fraser, 2009). However, his feelings of guilt and self-hatred following episodes of 'dressing' indicate that self-acceptance was a process which took years to achieve, during which contact with other transgendered individuals and social activism may have been more influential in this process.

Sammy is sexually attracted to both women and other cross-dressers (but only when both he and they are 'dressed' as women). This may be a further indicator of mirroring and validation of his authentic self. According to Monro (2000), 'eroticization of the transvestite as a gender ambiguous she-male' enables heterosexual males to express same-sex attraction without disruption of self-identity. Sammy repeatedly and emphatically denied any homo-erotic attraction and underlined his exclusive attraction to women, which could, according to Monro, be self-protection. Conversely, it also highlights a fluidity of gender and sexuality whereby if everyone is a mix of masculine and feminine then erotic desire does not automatically fit gender or sexual dichotomies (Hines and Sanger, 2010).

Whilst still experiencing erotic feelings when 'dressing' to go out socially, Sammy no longer 'dresses' when at home on his own. This would seem to indicate a need for external validation rather than an insular relationship with his female persona. He described a maturation process whereby these personas merged, resulting in him being the same person regardless of whether he is 'dressed'. This may be the result of both accepting and appreciating his own femininity as a form of mirroring.

Sammy experienced issues surrounding his sense of identity along with isolation and disconnectedness due to a lack of information and fear of homosexuality. His religious beliefs were compromised and he felt self-hatred and guilt due to societal attitudes and norms surrounding his 'dressing' (Tirohl, 2007). Whilst he did not stop 'dressing', his engagement and participation were compromised by the need for secrecy and the restriction of his environment.

If traditional communities are not open to Trans people, it may be that membership of Trans communities can serve the same purpose and have similar positive benefits. Over the years Sammy has been actively involved with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) groups, demonstrating a sense of solidarity with Trans people as a vulnerable group and expressing a sense of pride in his activism, which has been a positive experience for him.

Reed et al. (2011) suggest three interconnected themes which can uncover the meaning of occupations: 'the call', 'being-with' and 'possibilities'.

'The call' relates to what we are called to do, what excites and engages us. Cross-dressing has both compulsive and de-stressing elements for Sammy. He also describes it as 'transformative', implying a spiritual element going beyond everyday dressing, creating another 'self'. It involves rituals and

becomes part of social activities such as sexual expression and dancing. Throughout his lifespan various occupations have grown up around his 'dressing', including shopping for clothes, smoking and dancing. He has developed skills such as applying makeup, putting on stockings and suspenders and walking in high heels. The process of cross-dressing is completely different to everyday male dressing, with more time and effort taken in preparation and execution. Dressing thus has different meanings and requires different performance components depending on its context.

'Being-with' is the special bond with others and growing intimacy gained through sharing interests. Sammy does not dress and stay in his house alone, as one of the reasons for dressing is to 'be appreciated and desired'. Thus, part of its meaning is social, whereby his selfimage is reflected back by other cross-dressers, contributing to his sense of identity. Sammy is sexually attracted to other cross-dressers and this is also meaningful, depending on the context of his dressing. If he was involved in activism he would dress and interact differently.

Occupations come to have meaning in their connection with the present, the past and future possibilities. Sammy spent a lot of time analysing why he 'dresses' but has been unable to find a definitive meaning. He is comfortable and happy now and has situations and times when he 'dresses' and times when he chooses not to. The process has to be complete rather than partial and this takes time. Sammy's 'dressing' has been a large part of his life from the age of four and his relationship with it has changed as it has evolved. Thus, the meaning of an occupation can change over time.

Sammy continues to face discrimination and marginalization when 'dressed'. According to Whittle et al. (2007), 73% of Trans people experience comments, threatening behaviour or abuse in public spaces. Stigmatization and violence can result in 'minority stress' (Meyer, 2003) or excess levels of stress: unique, socially based and chronic. This can lead to long-term mental health consequences, such as suicide, self-harm, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. This is particularly acute among the young and the elderly. There is thus a great deal of pressure to keep cross-dressing secret for fear of discrimination.

As the population ages there will potentially be large numbers of ageing Trans individuals with unique needs requiring care (Witten, 2003). Currently, Sammy does not envisage the need to 'dress' fading as he ages and this indicates a need for awareness and inclusivity within care homes and the community. Older Trans people grew up at a time when homosexuality was criminalized and their historic concealment of their identity may have affected their health and led to the assumption that there are no Trans older people using such services. This can hinder the delivery of an inclusive service which takes account of their needs (Health Service Executive, 2009). It will potentially become increasingly common for health workers to know that they are working with Trans clients who may have complex social and bodily needs. There is consequently a need for awareness raising and training amongst carers in the community and in care/nursing homes.

Potential implications for occupational therapy

Individual meaning is important and the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all those who 'dress'. Getting dressed may have alternative meanings other than as an activity of daily living (ADL) task. For Sammy, there are two types of dressing and he would not feel comfortable unless 'dressing' completely as a male or female. Occupational therapists' personal beliefs and values surrounding gender and sexuality may have implications for their therapeutic relationship with a cross-dressing or Trans person. It may prove challenging to acknowledge and set aside uncomfortable feelings in terms of one's own gender identity in order to approach each client in an

accepting and non-judgemental way. Occupational therapists need to be open to alternative personal meanings of everyday occupations to fully understand the occupational life stories of the people they work with (Twinley and Morris, 2014).

If, as Reed et al. (2009) suggest, at least 1% of UK men cross-dress, it is essential that no assumptions are made concerning clients' gender, sexuality or life story. Instead, the occupational therapist needs to express acceptance, listen carefully and be open to the client's needs as perceived by the client.

Occupational therapists are in an ideal position to support this group to enable participation through providing access to support groups, supporting the 'coming out' process, working with client and family/partner, building confidence and skill development, developing a positive self-concept and identity, creating a safe and accepting environment, providing information and advocacy and working towards social change and social justice.

As power is embedded in language, both written and oral (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2009), inclusive non-heteronormative language should be used by therapists in conversations, forms and reports, reflecting acceptance of the validity of a person's self-definition. Personal pronouns should be linked to gender presentation rather than biological make-up. It is also important not to assume that gender presentation and sexual orientation are necessarily related. Although cross-dressing may dominate an individual's life, it is only one aspect of their identity.

Limitations

The strength of this single case study is its narrative approach to eliciting a lived experience of cross-dressing. It was, however, carried out within a particular culture and time and therefore is not generalizable. Sammy's early development occurred in the 1950s and 60s in an industrialized area and as such was open to particular social and environmental influences. The narrative was retrospective and Sammy's memory may be fallible or exclude uncomfortable events or feelings. The feminist approach used means that the analysis presented is only one interpretation. Reflection and supervision were used to enhance awareness of researcher influence on the process and ensure a credible analysis.

Further research into the meaning that cross-dressing holds for, and the unique occupational needs of, Trans individuals, including older adults, is essential in order to develop this area of practice.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that cross-dressing may be a meaningful occupation that influences identity formation and occupational choices. Engaging in an occupation can be a source of meaning to an individual as well as connecting them to others. For Sammy, dressing held a complexity of meanings which changed over time. He identified the importance of contact with other cross-dressers in terms of support, building resilience and strengthening self-identity through positive role modelling.

Understanding the meaning embodied in an occupation relies on disclosure by the individual of their lived experience. It is thus important not to make assumptions about clients' gender and/or sexuality, but rather be open to their individual life stories and occupational narratives.

Occupational therapists are likely to have cross-dressing individuals on their case load within most specialist areas. It is essential that they reflect on their values, beliefs and use of language when working with clients to ensure cultural competence and sensitivity within their practice.

Understanding the issues faced by those who cross-dress and an awareness of the meanings embodied in this occupation are essential to authentic practice.

Key findings

- Engagement in cross-dressing may be a meaningful occupation.
- Cross-dressing can be a source of meaning, as discussed in relation to Reed's analysis of occupation.
- Understanding the issues faced by those who cross dress and an awareness of the meanings embodied in it are essential to authentic client-centred practice.

What the study has added

This study has raised awareness of transvestism/crossdressing as an emerging area for occupational therapy and the potential roles within this.

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