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How Transsexuals Cope with Discrimination: A Grounded Theory

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University

BRONWEN AVIS ROSKILLY
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ABSTRACT

The coping strategies of transsexuals who experience discrimination have previously received little research attention. The primary objective of the present study was to generate a grounded theory to explain how transsexuals cope with discrimination. Eight transsexual individuals were interviewed and each interview was audio taped and transcribed in verbatim. The data was qualitatively analysed utilising the grounded theory methodology. Participants collectively described experiencing numerous instances of discrimination and described using a variety of coping strategies to help alleviate anxiety caused by discrimination. The core category of 'understanding discrimination to be an anxiety-provoking phenomenon' emerged from the data. It was determined that the core category was established by three pre-existing conditions. The first of these was an awareness of the self to be vulnerable to discrimination. The second condition was an awareness of discrimination to impact negatively on the self, and the third entailed an understanding of why discrimination occurs. The coping strategies were broken into three selective codes. Participants adopted constructive strategies which were primarily rational and realistic. Cognitive coping strategies addressed anxiety caused by discrimination by changing the appraisal of cognitions pertaining to the discriminatory experience. Direct action strategies were behavioural approaches which entailed the altering of the situation. Implications of these findings are discussed in relation to clinicians working with transgendered people, with emphasis on the common occurrence of discrimination and its detrimental impact on the transsexual.
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"I told my staff...that something had happened to me. It was as if the male and female ego inside me had been fighting and suddenly it had stopped and the female had taken over and the male was taking a back seat. And I suddenly felt content with the world, or content with myself. At this point, I did not realise what the world was about to unleash on me in terms of discrimination." (excerpt from a participant's transcript)
PART ONE
Introduction
OVERVIEW OF INTRODUCTION

How transsexuals cope with, deal with and understand discrimination is largely an uninvestigated area and thus, there is an extreme dearth of literature pertaining to this precise topic. Literature concerning the phenomenon of transsexuality is reviewed and structured so as to enable the reader to conceptualise transsexualism. A firm understanding of the nature of transsexualism is necessary for the reader of this work, particularly since much discrimination arises through misinformation and ignorance surrounding transsexuals and transgendered people. A brief discussion of history, definitions, prevalence, etiology, the transitional process, and the psychological impact of transsexuality is presented in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 investigates the psychological conceptualisation of discrimination and prejudice. The concepts are defined and discussed in relation to transsexuality. Legal aspects pertaining to discrimination against transsexuals are also discussed.

The following chapter introduces cognitive dissonance and the related cognitive processes leading to the subsequent adoption of coping strategies.

Chapter 4 establishes an understanding of the analytical methodology of grounded theory. This is achieved by providing definitions and rationales firstly for utilising a qualitative approach and then for using a grounded theory approach. The coding and data analysis techniques are outlined, followed by discussion of criteria for assessing qualitative research.

The final chapter of the introduction outlines the method applied to conduct the present study. The objectives of the research are firstly listed, followed by a brief discussion pertaining to the participants and ethical considerations. The method of data collection (interviews) is discussed, accompanied by the rationale for using a semi-structured interview format. The precise process of data collection, entailing description of initial contact with participants, the interview process, the process of transcribing, and the follow-up is described.
The introduction provides insight into the background of the phenomenon under inquiry. It outlines the methodological procedure and provides clear rationale for utilising such methodology in relation to the present study.