



Review Article

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A Thought Experiment Using Social Exchange Theory to Interpret Possible Reasons Underlying Advantages for Transgenderism

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Abstract

Currently the most popular theory for explaining stress among LGBT persons is sexual minority theory. However, social exchange theory has also been useful for explaining human behavior and decisions that are focused on maximizing profit by increasing rewards and reducing costs. Social exchange theory is used to demonstrate how transgender transitions, both MtF and FtM, may reduce costs compared to one's former gender and with respect to one's new gender vs. cisgendered persons and may enhance rewards compared to one's former gender and also with respect to one's new gender vs. cisgendered persons. Rather than simply reflecting distressed feelings about a non-natal gender, transition decisions may reflect conscious or unconscious awareness or anticipation of greater personal profit after transition.

Keywords: Transgenderism, Social exchange theory, Rewards, Costs, Profit, Sexual Minority Theory

Introduction

Social exchange theory posits that personal decisions are largely made on the basis of perceived (correctly or not) rewards and costs/risks of those decisions, based on maximizing rewards and minimizing costs in both short- and long-runs. The higher the difference (profit) between rewards and costs over time, the better decisions would appear to be. Some decisions that may not make sense at first, will make sense when the precise issues are examined. Profit may be evaluated in both a short-term perspective and/or a long-term perspective. Decisions about relative profit from decisions may be conscious or unconscious. Social exchange theory has been a popular theory in general in family social science [5,6,9,10,11,12,15,16,17,18,20] and also with respect to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues [2,3,13,19]. In social exchange theory actors are motivated by self-interest [20] and are rational in terms of being

able to assess profit as a function of reward/cost ratios [20]. Rewards [9]: "love, companionship, emotional support") are things that are perceived as beneficial to an actor's interests while costs [9] "time, effort, and emotional distress") are things perceived as harmful to an actor's interests [20]. For example, Peplau, Fingerhut, and Beals [14] argued that lesbians and gay men may have greater profit with respect to sexual satisfaction because gay men have sex more often than heterosexual men while lesbians have higher quality sex than heterosexual women.

Here, I wish to present an argument contrary to the typical idea that transgender decisions are based on only feelings, things like "female mind in a male body" or "I never felt like a woman and I want to be a man". Instead, I propose that transgenderism is a rational decision from the point of view of that person, even though it may not be entirely correct (errors in estimating costs and re-

wards) in the long run and may lead to later regret, if costs greatly exceed rewards. Below is a chart (Table 1) that explains the rewards and costs balance in terms of possible advantages (higher rewards, lower costs/risks) a transwoman may have, on average, over cisgender men and/or cisgender women and the advantages (Table 2) that a transman (higher rewards, lower costs/risks) has, on average, over cisgender women and/or cisgender men. These rewards and costs were developed as a thought experiment by the author over several months of reflection. Between the comparative advantages it should be clear that a transgender person may indeed hope to gain many new rewards and reduce costs/risks relative to

the old gender and relative to natal genders as well. In other words, a transgender person is not simply exchanging an old gender for a new one but is achieving a new order of gender, leaving behind that which is negative about the natal gender and gaining what is positive about the non-natal gender, achieving what might be designated as a better, perhaps even superior, gender, one that may attain greater profit relative not only with respect to their former gender but also with respect to cisgender persons of either gender.

A plus sign in the R/C columns means the advantage is a greater reward or a lower cost per that column.

Table 1: Hypothetical advantages of transwomen relative to cisgender men and cisgender women.

Advantages Over Natal Women	R	C	Advantages Over Natal Men	R	C
Reduced risk of cervical, uterine, or breast cancers (including reduced fears)		+	Reduced risk of penile, prostate, testicular cancers (including reduced fears)		+
If you like sports, you may gain notice from others in a good way, compared to cis-gender women	+		Gain minority, legally protected status as a woman, even as a sexual gender minority	+	
Retain born-with male height advantage	+		Gain hiring preferences not held before transition if successfully pass as a woman	+	
Retain post-puberty muscular strength	+		Less risk of pain, damage to testicles		+
If a mugger attacks you, expecting an easy prey/woman, you have an element of surprise for your own self-defense	+		Multiple orgasms more possible, reduced refractory period	+	
You can run faster, hit harder	+		No need to buy/use jockstraps		+
Never have to consider risk of needing an abortion		+	No need to worry about future child support (can't have more children)		+
Never need worry about menstruation, feminine hygiene items (except pessary)		+	Less responsibility for children, future		+
You are free to engage in sex any day of the month (no menstruation or optimal day of fertility restrictions), more even libido	+		Greater variety in clothing acceptable, in styles and colors, including dresses, hats, handbags, and items usually reserved for women	+	
You already know much about how men think, what they desire from women	+		Can wear female clothing without shame		+
Never a need for emergency surgery to remove ovaries or uterus		+	Can gain some weight/fat without looking too unusual or shameful		+
Never a need to carry a fetus for nine months		+	Less notice/shame if you don't like sports		+
No menopause, retain better bladder control with prostate, longer route from bladder out, so less risk of UTIs	+	+	Cannot be accused of being gay if you are attracted to men sexually (escape from gay shame)		+
You can adjust size of bras to fit your desired breast size	+		Can sidestep stereotypical masculine expectations to lead, rescue, etc.		+
Can still ejaculate semen (surgery does not remove the seminal vesicles or the prostate gland), less risk of swollen prostate due to female hormones	+		Never have to worry about making a woman pregnant against her will or even pregnant at all		+
Gain male courtesies often extended to women (opening doors, etc.)	+		Never have to pay for an abortion caused by your semen		+
No need for breast reduction surgery		+	No need to use birth control		+
No need for birth control		+	Less shame if you don't throw yourself under a bus to save a child's life or similar emergency situations		+
Neovagina may be deeper than natal women					
	+				

No risk of an unwanted pregnancy		+	Less pressure, as a man, to figure out women and how to woo them		+
Can engage with multiple sexual partners with fewer risks	+		Less fear of being called a “sissy” by other men (unless you are outed as trans)		+
Can pick a new first name	+		Less worry of trying to play contact sports in middle age and winding up hurting yourself (bruised ribs, etc.)		+
Can demand that men treat you nicely	+		Less risk of rejection by women in a sexual sense		+
Can work at some jobs more suited for men better than might be for some women	+		Lower cost of dates where man is expected to pay all costs		+
Ready excuse why you can't sew, cook, clean as might be expected	+		No more disrespect by women for standing up to urinate		+
If you learned how to sew, cook, clean as a man, you may have an advantage over some women who didn't so learn	+		Less worry about being “trapped” if you accidentally got someone pregnant		+
No worries about problems associated with breast feeding		+	More free to marry on the basis of love rather than gender per se	+	
No worry about unexpectedly early start of menstruation, staining underwear, even outer clothing with public shame		+	Market effects (person's physical appearance may seem to reflect a more desirable look as a female, hence a better chance at romance)		+
Market effects (person's physical appearance may seem to reflect a more desirable look as a female, hence a better chance at romance)	+		Less pressure to “take charge” of difficult situations that require leadership or physical strength		+
If, Lower height (more attractive to men)	+		If, lower height (less attractive to women)		+
Retention of pleasure from anal sex, more pleasure than for women (retained prostate)	+		A “cure” for unwanted sexual attractions to men, a cover for homosexual feelings		+
Possibly increased longevity, lower cancer risks for gender-related cancers, etc.	+		Greater acceptable variation in hair length, styles, and coloring	+	
More acceptable to not know “male” things like how to fix cars, understand football, etc. and possibly a plus if you do	+		Gain the ease of attracting males simply by wearing female clothes or less of same vs. having to have the “right stuff” to attract a woman (confidence, money, job, bantering ability, good communication skills, etc.)		

Table 2: Hypothetical advantages of transmen relative to cisgender men and cisgender women.

Advantages Over Natal Women	R	C	Advantages Over Natal Men	R	C
Avoids risk of becoming barefoot and pregnant		+	No worry over male reproductive cancers, increased life span		+
Easier hairstyles and less makeup needed		+	No worry over getting a woman pregnant		+
No menstruation, cramping		+	Can come across as a more sensitive male without being seen as gay	+	
Larger clitoris w/hormone treatment	+		You know a lot more about how women think, what they want from men	+	
No more unwanted pregnancies/abortions		+	No need for a pessary for your vagina if you keep it		
Lower risk of reproductive cancers, increased life span		+	Retaining your clitoris, greater chance for multiple orgasms	+	
Easier to act assertive normally	+		No need to buy jockstraps as any testicles used are nerve/pain free		+
Easier to urinate standing up	+		No need to worry about paying future child support		+
Fewer feminine hygiene products needed		+	No need for birth control		+
More in control in dating others	+		Know more how to treat women nicely	+	
Easier to defend yourself physically	+		Can pick a new first name	+	
Less likely to be bullied as a weaker woman		+	Can probably relate to female staff or co-workers with more sensitivity	+	

Easier to be bisexual	+		You can brush off sexual advances by women	+	
Fewer decisions to make over clothing		+	You may appear to be a weaker less strong man	-	
Takes less time to get ready for a date		+	Without voice therapy, you may sound too high pitched	-	
Less risk of menopause		+	You can combine your advantages as a man with your womanly wiles to gain power over male staff, co-workers, bosses	+	
Hormone therapy may strengthen muscles	+		If you are "outed" you may pass muster as just a "tomboy", no big deal		+
You can avoid men who just want to have sex with anyone with a "front hole"		+	If you desire sex with other women, you know more about how to please them in bed	+	
Being overweight does not reduce your mating market value as much		+	If you are tall, can fit in better with men as a man	+	
Any personal interest in things vs. people makes more sense	+		You may be able to select men's clothes and styles better than most men	+	
If lesbian, may align your attractions better	+				
No need to nurse, risk nipples being bitten		+			
Stronger sex drive with hormone therapy	+				
Sexual harassment less likely		+			
May be easier to enjoy male type sports	+				
More free to engage in sex any day of month	+				
Give up minority status as a woman	-				
If you are tall, can fit in better with men as a man					
Less responsibility as a mother for future children since you cannot have any more		+			
No need for birth control		+			
If you are tall, you can fit in better among men as a tall man					
You can brush off sexual advances by men	+				
If you are in an environment where prejudice puts men ahead of women, you may escape some of that discrimination or make it work for you		+			
Assume the benefits of what is called "male privilege"	+				

Future Methods

These proposals could be tested empirically and could be falsified. Transpersons could be asked if they had aspired to the improvements before transitioning and if they felt they had attained them even if they had not anticipated them. Medical treatments could be evaluated from a social exchange perspective (puberty blockers, hormone therapies, and surgeries). It might be possible that some of the proposed rewards and costs might be rejected as incorrect, illogical, or irrelevant. Some aspects (e.g., loss of fertility) might be seen as a cost by some and a reward by others, although here loss of fertility is discussed as a benefit. The theory of planned action might be used in addition to social exchange theory in evaluating assignment of costs and rewards [1,2,4]. These ideas might be subject to challenge by those few persons who detransition; how would they evaluate the positives and negatives of transitioning differently compared to the positives and negatives of detransi-

tioning? If detransitioning is rare, that might be explained in social exchange theory terms by potential loss of the advantages obtained from transition but possibly regaining disadvantages perceived for the natal gender.

Discussion

This may not sit well with natal men or women as they may feel they are being cheated by contrast, unable to gain the same combination of higher rewards and lower costs without changing their gender identity. They might wonder why anyone would have the right to attain a new order of gender, just because they want to do that, regardless of how their advantage in profit might seem unfair to cisgender persons. That inequity, rather than prejudice, might be a source of apparent disapproval or prejudice directed towards transgender persons. Sexual minority theory would argue, in contrast, that disapproval of transgender persons would be rooted in irrational bias and undeserved prejudice as well as a cause of

distress among transgender persons [7,8]. For sexual and gender minority persons, distress can be proximal (internalized costs) or distal (externally imposed costs). Sexual minority theory and social exchange theory are not necessarily incompatible as their costs may overlap.

These contrasts in theory might be used in research or in a courtroom to ask a participant or testifier about these pros and cons and where they fit and how each, if either, model (sexual minority theory) or (social exchange theory) fits their situation. Another way of putting this situation is one of cherry-picking the best of each gender worlds and giving up the worst aspects of both gender worlds. The risk is that despite the potential of such cherry-picking for short-term advantages in a gender transition, there may be long-term disadvantages that may lead to disappointment, including adverse side effects of medical treatments, rejection by male or female cisgender persons and/or lesbians/gay men/bisexuals, rejection by society, boundary ambiguities, fetishization, nutritional issues associated with hormone therapies, and unanticipated complications of various surgical attempts to create a non-natal sexual appearance. Transgender persons may also encounter prejudice from both cisgender heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals.

Limitations and Objections

Readers are reminded that this is a thought experiment without any empirical validation. It represents an alternative to sexual minority theory, a theory that at present remains very popular. It is entirely hypothetical. At the same time, social exchange theory has been found to be very useful in the social sciences in a wide array of studies and may hold promise in this narrow area as well. However, reviewers and readers are welcome to disagree with specifics in each Figure as well as the use of social exchange theory in general and as used with respect to transgenderism here. Suggestions for additional possible rewards and costs, overlooked in this report, would be welcome as well.

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