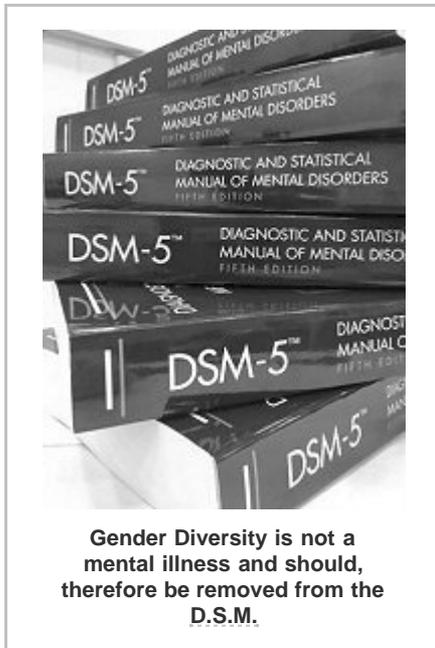


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## Pathologising Gender Non-Conformity

by Anthony Carlino

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**A** recent article in *Australian Popular Science* ('Why do we pathologise gender non-conformity?' August, 2013) questioned the merit of retaining the term 'Gender Dysphoria' in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, and for good reason.

***... there is no shortage of gender-variant individuals who have never experienced dysphoria and never had to seek support.***

The psychiatrists themselves involved with the working group on gender diversity in the D.S.M. have acknowledged that changes to the diagnosis seeks to downplay the implication that being transgender or gender-variant makes someone mentally unstable.

Once an individual has immersed him or herself in the world of gender diversity, spoken to enough individuals about their experiences or, in my case, sought to support those seeking to express their unique gender, it does not take long for the following to become obvious: Gender Diversity is not a mental illness and should, therefore be removed from the D.S.M.

The reasons for this are already well known. The inclusion of a person being gender variant in the D.S.M. (no matter the gentrified and softened name you now give it) supports the fallacy that those who do not fit neatly within the gender binary have a mental illness. So a group of people in our society then, who are already stigmatised, already at far greater risk

of actual mental health issues attributable to their inherently discriminatory treatment by society on a systemic level, are now even further stigmatised.

Further to this, there is no shortage of gender-variant individuals who have never experienced dysphoria and never had to seek support. The situation as it stands creates fertile ground where mental health professionals and wider society can make the mistake of disproportionately attributing distress to gender non-conformity itself, rather than the systemic and individual discrimination experienced by many transgender people. It is within this context that the negative stereotype of a mentally unwell gender variant person depicted in mainstream media has, all too often, come to be.

The current changes to the D.S.M. are a half-measure that do not go far enough in encouraging professionals and society at large to stop pathologising gender variance. At this point some may ask what better alternative there is? It is well documented that part of the reason for the continued inclusion of gender variance in the D.S.M. is access to care and insurance, which is of course very important for those who seek support and medical transition. Would it be fair to continue down the path of de-pathologising if, as a consequence, people were denied access to care?

My suggestion? Treat it as a medical condition. Negative stereotypes towards having a medical condition are far less common than those associated with mental illness. Further to this, we also know that medical conditions affect different people in different ways — sometimes people require nothing more than counselling, while others may require surgery (just like some gender-variant individuals as they seek to understand and express their true identity).

As a mental health professional, it is my opinion we can and must do better by the gender variant community to provide them with the support and care some people need. Being part of the problem by pathologising gender identity is the antithesis of this objective.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We

specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.