



TRANSGENDER EMERGENCE. Lev, A. I. New York: Haworth Clinical Practice Press, 2004.

Ari Lev's book *Transgender Emergence* primarily addresses psychotherapists working with transgender clients and their families. Yet, she writes with care to make *Transgender Emergence* accessible and potentially valuable to transgender people and their families, and people interested in learning about the range of transgender identities. Lev, a licensed clinical social worker, family therapist, and alcohol and substance abuse counselor, has worked with members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities for twenty years. As stated in the book, Lev approaches working with transgender people from the standpoint that "transgenderism is a normal and potentially healthy variation of human expression" (p. xix).

The book is comprehensive; it addresses the varying needs of the full range of transgender people and their families including bi-gendered, non-gendered, and other alternatively gendered people, transsexual people, and intersex people. The discussion of gender variance in childhood is thorough including a good overview of the controversial topic—whether this is a disorder and how to treat such children and their families. While she favors of a non-pathologizing approach, she is fair and respectful in her presentation of other theoretical approaches. A real strength of Lev's book is the discussion extends beyond only clients seeking medical intervention or the process of evaluating and recommending clients for hormone therapy or sex

reassignment surgeries. She discusses a range of clients, client concerns, and ways therapy can be helpful to transgender clients and their families.

Using an empowering affirmative approach, the book encompasses the extensive literature on the history of transgender people, etiological theories, and the experiences and challenges that transgender people and their families face. Lev is informed by various theoretical models: an ecological social-work model, a feminist family systems perspective, and a post-modern and social constructionist view. Accordingly, she carefully examines power issues in the therapeutic relationship which are important with this population as therapists often serve as gatekeepers for access to medical interventions. Lev gives an excellent historical perspective on the development of transgender identities and deconstructs sex and gender in general. This is valuable because it creates an empowering perspective on the roles gender variant people have played in society across history and cultures. Lev's deconstruction of sex and gender more generally exposes assumptions of essentialist thought which may be limiting to transgender clients. For example, transgender clients who cling to essentialist notions of what it means to be male or female may foreclose their identity development process. Lev's theoretical approach also connects the current transgender rights movement to other social justice movements, including the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement.

Lev introduces her book with an examination of the language of gender, etiological theories of gender dysphoria, the families of transgender

people, and the need for clinician training in this area. She never assumes that gender variance and family stability are mutually exclusive. In the first section, she focuses on theoretical understandings of transgenderism including clinical guidelines for treatment of transsexual clients, the gatekeeping role that clinicians often play in the process of accessing medical interventions, and the associated controversies. This section also reviews the history of transgender people and the evolution of current understanding and medical treatment of transgender people, and different components of sexual identity. The next section focuses on diagnosis and treatment specifically reviewing and critiquing etiological theories of gender and categorical classifications, the social implications of diagnosis, and challenges the current diagnostic categories of Gender Identity Disorder and Transvestic Fetishism. The final section and the bulk of the book's focus is on treatment issues. This section contains the most useful material: helping clients construct gender narratives; the developmental process of coming out and consolidating a transgender identity; the parallel process family members experience; and issues specific to gender variant children, youth, and people with intersex conditions.

Lev's post-modern approach to narrative, her use of an identity development model, and her attention to families make her book an eminently practical one both for transgender people and for clinicians looking for guidance on how best to assist transgender clients. She does not downplay the variety of challenges such people face in the process of becoming more fully themselves nor the impact on their family systems. Rather she provides useful guidance on how transgender clients and their therapists can face such challenges in a non-pathologizing, growth-promoting way which provides support for a variety of individual client choices and outcomes. Lev's guidance is important as therapy has received a bad reputation among some transgender people. They see mental health professionals as simply requiring that they jump through hoops rather than being helpful. Lev's advocacy approach directly addresses these concerns. Additionally, Lev tackles the controversial issue of the current diagnostic categories of Gender Identity Disorder

(GID) and Transvestic Fetishism. Lev clearly favors reform and eventual elimination of these diagnoses while maintaining access to appropriate care. She reviews a variety of suggested approaches such as considering GID a medical, not mental health concern. She perceives mental health diagnostic categories as hampering the transgender rights movement. Lev does a good job addressing the phenomenology of cross-dressers for whom this is an expression of a core cross gender identity; she does not do as good a job describing men whose cross dressing is more erotically motivated. She describes erotic cross-dressing as a non-problematic sexual variant, and minimizes concerns about compulsive behavior, which she describes as being a normal part of the transgender identity development process for some clients. Lev also reviews a wide range of etiological theories of gender variance, and deconstructs them from feminist and post-modern perspectives. It is useful to have this type of theoretical analysis, as all too often theorists and activists seem to talk past one another in this area.

Given the overall high quality of Lev's *Transgender Emergence*, her discussion on the treatment of intersex children was disappointing. She accurately described the position of intersex activists who have challenged the treatment model used for much of the past thirty years; but she does not do as good of a job describing developments within the field or the range of opinions among medical and mental health care providers. This area of treatment struggles with a variety of ethical challenges, and currently there is little consensus on how to best address these challenges. The following intersex children's issues are currently contested: whether and when surgery should be performed on intersex infants, who should decide this (see for example Berenbaum, 2003; Daaboul & Frader, 2001; and Diamond & Sigmundson, 1997), and to what degree parents should have input into their child's gender assignment (Daaboul & Frader, 2001; and Diamond & Sigmundson, 1997). It is unfortunate that such a complex area should be presented in such a one sided way, as Lev does a better job of portraying both sides of other controversial issues in the book, like the diagnostic category of Gender Identity Disorder. The treatment of

intersex clients is an area of specialization, although it overlaps with the concerns of transgender clients. Lev's decision to include this chapter in a book addressing transgender clients reflects her overall approach of casting a broad net by addressing the wide variety of issues associated with the term transgender and her sympathy with movements for increased rights and affirmative care within transgender and intersex communities.

That Lev's book emerges from a transgender and intersex rights advocacy movement which includes valuing and encouraging positive self-definition as transgender is one of the book's great strengths. At the same time, it is exactly this approach which may discourage some readers. Currently, this movement is strongest in the United States and North America. Providers in other parts of the world may question the applicability of these approaches to their clients. However, transgender rights movements are growing more international in character. Transgender affirmative therapy approaches are helpful to clients from a many backgrounds to feel positive in who they are rather than deficient. Another concern among potential readers is that the advocacy approach sometimes results in her downplaying some of the significant clinical issues transgender clients face. However, Lev's careful political analysis of this field is quite useful as the treatment of transgender clients is not only a clinical concern but does have political implications. Ari Lev's *Transgender Emergence* combines a broad topical approach with an advocacy approach for transgender people, challenges cur-

rent treatment paradigms, and offers a clinically practical treatment framework—making this book a welcome addition to the field.

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AUTHOR NOTE

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