
Reviewed by Holly Devor, Ph.D.

This volume is about making the realities of transmen and female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) more visible. Cromwell uses the terms transmen and FTMs interchangeably to mean female-to-male transsexuals and female-bodied transgendered people who live as men. The main theme of the book is that a group of people whom Cromwell calls “medico-psychological practitioners” have controlled public discourse on female-bodied gender variance and that they have misunderstood, misrepresented, and distorted the reality of FTMs and transmen. Cromwell’s mission is to set the record straight by first exposing the problem and then providing a dose of reality from the perspectives of transmen and FTMs themselves.

The book, a reworking of Cromwell’s doctoral dissertation in anthropology, is divided into 14 short chapters and an appendix, which are further subdivided into sections of a page or two, each beginning with short epigraphs. If this kind of format is to be successful, it requires of the author an extra effort at providing sufficient continuity to make it work. I found each section clear enough, but the mortar was not always strong enough to hold the bits together very well.

In the opening two-page prologue and in “Excerpts from [Cromwell’s] Journey,” Cromwell establishes his credentials as a transman. Over the next several short chapters, Cromwell introduces some of the problems with the ways that “medico-psychological practitioners” fail to recognize that the physical state of a person’s body need not be the final arbiter of their gender. At the end of the third chapter, Cromwell sets out what struck me as his main message:

Transpeople not only shake the foundations of the biological foundationalist and essentialist theories but also undermine them completely. They are social disruptions and as such are a threat to the social body. They are not like other people. Rather than allowing society to dictate who and what they are, they define themselves. (p. 43)

In other words, Cromwell sees transmen as serving a revolutionary function in society. By their very existence, they challenge fundamental social beliefs about
the immutable connections among bodies and genders and identities. Furthermore, according to Cromwell, FTMs are unique in their ability to step beyond the confines of social structures and definitions to create their identities and social statuses at will.

Cromwell puts the central part of the book to two concurrent tasks. Firstly, he lambasts a wide range of anthropological and historical researchers for not properly understanding the transgendered nature and importance of female-bodied people of other times and places. Secondly, he reviews a range of historical and anthropological literature about gender variant female-bodied people with a goal to providing a more accurate and complete interpretation of the existing information. Although interesting and useful, he covers little new ground (see, e.g., Devor, 1997; Feinberg, 1996).

In the next three chapters, Cromwell takes on the medico-psychological practitioners more directly. In these chapters, Cromwell points out how medico-psychological descriptions of FTMs leave no room for FTMs to be healthy and well-adjusted, but only failed women, maladjusted lesbians, or incomplete men. Cromwell explains this apparently willful blindness on the part of medico-psychological practitioners by making the broad assertion that the unorthodox genders of transmen “arouses something dreadful in male researchers’ psyches” (p. 116). Cromwell then illustrates by describing some of the ways that FTMs and transmen enjoy a sexuality that does not fit within the usual binary sexual orientation categories.

Cromwell ends the main section of the book with a short critique of the process of the revisions which resulted in Version Five of the Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (1998). He uses this account as an opportunity to once again highlight how wrong-headed the medico-psychological practitioners can be when it comes to FTMs and transmen, and how revolutionary and visionary transpeople can be by comparison. The book finishes with “Further Excerpts from [Cromwell’s] Journey,” an “Epilogue,” and an appendix about how he obtained the sample of individuals who participated in his research.

The transmen and FTMs who provided the data on which Cromwell builds his arguments were drawn from Cromwell’s own social and personal connections. Four support groups were his main avenue of contact, two of which he co-facilitated and two of which were sponsored by a group which he cofounded. In addition to his participant observation at these groups, Cromwell reports that he conducted formal and informal interviews, administered a formal questionnaire, and spoke with more than 200 individuals. However, “only those individuals active in support groups, those who attended conferences, or those active on the Internet” (p. 12) were among the population from which Cromwell drew his sample and “no FTMs/transmen who were several years postphalloplasty agreed to talk [with him]” (p. 114). As a result, the book “does not include the voices of those who mainstream into society. Instead, it is about transmen and FTMs who, in varying