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Thai Transgenders in Focus: Their Beliefs About Attitudes Towards and Origins of Transgender

Sam Winter, BSc, PGDE, MEd, PhD

ABSTRACT. One hundred and ninety-five transgendered females (i.e., male-to-female transgenders (or MtF TGs)), with a mean age of 25.4 years, completed a questionnaire examining, *inter alia*, their beliefs about (a) attitudes (of parents and society) towards them (and to MtF TGs in general); and (b) origins of their own MTF TG status.

According to our participants, 62.9% of mothers and 40.6% of fathers accepted or encouraged their child's transgender from its first expression. Many with misgivings became more positive as time went on. According to 40.7% of our participants, Thai people overall held similarly favourable attitudes towards MtF TGs.

Many of our participants cited multiple origins for their transgender. Nearly 84% believed inborn biology had played a role. Friends and karma were also commonly endorsed as explanatory factors (50% and 48.4% respectively). Parents, siblings, and other relatives were less commonly cited (30.3%, 24.1%, and 22.2%, respectively). Cluster analysis revealed that, based on their beliefs, 97.1% of the sample could be divided into three groups. Most (61.2%) fell into a 'biogenic' group, emphasising the role played by inborn biology, while 29.4% believed took a 'peer psychogenic' view, emphasising the role played by friends in the development of their transgender. A small 'eclectic' group (6.5%) believed that biology, karma, and parents combined to account for their transgender. doi:10.1300/J485v09n02_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Transgendered females (i.e., male-to-female transgenders (or MtF TGs)) are a well-known element in Thai society, garnering press and TV coverage domestically and overseas, as well as providing the theme for several full length movies. Thais refer to MtF TGs in different

ways, often using the word '*kathoe*' (formerly a very broad term including gays and effeminate males, but nowadays increasingly limited to transgendered females), '*sao praphet song*' and '*phuying praphet song*' (both literally 'second kind of woman'), '*phet tee sam*' (literally 'third sex/gender') or simply 'ladyboy' (a relatively recently import to the Thai vocabulary).

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In terms of whom they denote (MtF TGs), these various terms can be considered synonymous.

Jackson (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999a, b, 2003), Sinnott (2000, 2002, 2004), Matzner (no date: a-g, 2001, 2002), Beyrer (1998), Storer (1999), ten Brummelhuis (1999), Nanda (2000), Wong (2003), Winter (2002a,b,c,d, 2005, 2006) and Winter and Udomsak (2002a and b) have all written extensively on Thai MtF TGs. Totman (2003) recently published a book devoted to a treatment of the subject. A common theme running through these works is the reportedly high level of tolerance (even acceptance) which Thai transgenders, like homosexuals, enjoy (at least in comparison with their counterparts in the West). To date there has been no in-depth study of Thai attitudes towards transgender as viewed by MtF TGs themselves.

Estimates for the incidence for transgender in Thailand range from around 1:3000 (Ehrlich, 1996), through around 1:300 (Totman, 2003) to around 1:180 (Winter, 2002c). All these figures represent a higher incidence than is commonly supposed for their counterparts in the West. They beg questions about the factors possibly underlying transgender in Thai culture. To date there has been speculation (e.g. Totman, 2003, Matzner, no date: d) but little empirical work, least of all any drawing on what transgenders themselves believe.

This paper reports on these two matters (beliefs about social acceptance and about origins), both from the point of view of MtF TGs themselves. The data providing the basis for this report constitutes part of a broader study.

INSTRUMENT

The research instrument was a 77-item questionnaire, first developed in draft form in English, then refined and translated into Thai over a period of six months for eventual completion by participants. While many items were multiple-choice, 41 items also gave opportunities for (or encouraged) open-ended responses. As well as (a) *demographics*; (b) *transition histories*; and (c) *identities*; there were sections examining (d) *beliefs about attitudes of others towards transgender*: initial and current attitudes of father and mother towards the participants' transgender, and of Thai society generally to-

wards MtF TGs; (e) *beliefs about the origin of their transgender*: in terms of biology, karma, influence of parents, siblings and other relatives, influence of friends, and other factors; and (f) *beliefs about sexual relationships involving transgenders*: as indicated by labelling of own and others' sexual preferences. It is sections (d and e) that are the focus of this paper. Findings for Sections (a-c) form the basis of Winter (2006), while those for Section (f) are the basis for Winter (submitted for publication).

For beliefs about the attitudes of others towards transgender there were five items. Each participant indicated the attitude of her father (when first she had expressed her gender incongruity, as well as nowadays), of her mother (again, initially and nowadays), and of Thai society generally towards MtF TGs. For each item one of four response options were offered: 'encouraging' (conceptualised as an actively positive reaction), 'accepting' (passively positive), 'tolerating' (passively negative) and 'rejecting' (actively negative). A fifth response option ('other') was available if needed, with participants who chose this option invited to supply more information.

For beliefs about origins, we asked participants to try to account for why they were transgendered. We supplied seven possibilities ('inborn biology,' 'karma,' 'parents' influence,' 'siblings' influence,' 'other relatives' influence,' 'friends' influence,' and a miscellaneous 'other' category). For each one of these possibilities, participants indicated whether they agreed that it accounted for their transgender. A five-point scale was used ('strongly agree,' 'agree,' 'can't decide,' 'disagree,' 'strongly disagree'). Where they indicated an explanation in the 'other' category, they were asked to specify what it was.

For all items, there was space on the questionnaire for participants to clarify or enlarge upon their responses.

The phrase '*phuying praphet song*' was the Thai term used throughout most of the questionnaire to describe MtF TGs, though '*kathoe*' was sometimes used in addition, for example where it gave us an opportunity to study in finer detail the participants' own use of the term.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The sample was opportunistic, with participants located through contacts with members of the transgender community, as well as through a clinic providing services to transgendered people. One hundred and ninety eight persons presenting as MtF TGs were approached from June, 2001 to August, 2002 at their place of study or work ($n = 139$), or while waiting for treatment at the surgery ($n = 59$). We called these two groups the 'community' and 'clinic' sub-samples respectively.

For those approached at their work or place of study, initial approach was on the basis of apparent gender-presentation, confirmed by enquiry. The researcher explained the purpose of the research, introduced the questionnaire, answered questions and remained available to answer any questions that arose. All those approached agreed to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire itself included a check on transgender status. An item asked participants what they thought of themselves as. The response options were: 'male,' 'female,' 'kathoey,' 'phuying praphet song' and 'other.' A questionnaire was included for analysis only if the participant indicated a cross-gendered identity (i.e., anything other than male). Three participants were rejected on this basis, leaving a final data base of 195 clearly TG participants, mean age 25.4 years, with a range from 15.5 to 47.6 years.

Findings on participants' subjective identity are presented in some detail in Winter (2006). To summarise here, almost half (46.9%) thought of themselves as female, with 36.1% thinking of themselves as *phuying praphet song*. Relatively few (12.3%) used the connotatively more vulgar term *kathoey*. A small number (6.1%) checked the 'other' category, usually describing themselves as members of a 'third sex.' For many, the sense of being transgendered had developed early in life (mean reported age 11.9 years). All were cross-dressed.

The vast majority (70.4%) reported a feeling that they had a female mind, with others reporting the mind of a *phuying praphet song* (15.5%), *kathoey* (8.8%), or some other category (5.5%) such as *phet tee sam* ('a third sex'). For many, the perception of a non-male mind

had developed early in life (mean reported age 10.9 years).

Consistent with their identity, many had adopted cross-gendered behaviour patterns early in life. The mean course of transition involved (a) use of feminine word forms by early- to mid-teens; (b) long hair, female clothes, and hormones by mid- to late-teens; (c) surgery, for those that underwent any, in the twenties. There was variation around this mean course of development. Several participants had taken hormones from age 10. Several had undergone SRS in their teens, one as early as 15.5 years.

Though the information was not used to determine inclusion, it is noteworthy that 74.8% reported a preference to be *phuying jing* (a 'real, i.e., natal woman') in this life, with 71.1% reporting a desire to be *phuying jing* in their next life. For more information on participants' identity, demographics and transitions see Winter (2006).

All open-ended responses were translated into English and entered into an Excel file. All other responses were entered into SPSS PC plus (version 11.0). In terms of the beliefs reported in this paper, the clinic and community sub-samples did not appear to differ significantly. Statistical results reported in this paper are therefore for the whole sample.

RESULTS

Beliefs About Social Attitudes Towards Transgender (see Table 1)

Data confirmed the common observation that Thai culture is at least tolerant (Jackson, 1999a), and arguably somewhat accepting (Matzner, 2001) towards TGs. A minority of participants (17.1%) believed Thai people generally rejected people such as themselves. A rather greater number (29.1%) reported tolerance. A further 38.6% reported acceptance. Surprisingly, a small number (2.1%) went even further, describing Thai people as generally encouraging.

One might expect that participants' family members would not be so positive towards the presence of a TG individual in their own family. In fact, as reported by our participants, fathers overall displayed quite positive attitudes (with

TABLE 1. Beliefs About Attitudes of Others Towards Transgender

Percentage of participants endorsing different answers provided. Totals occasionally rise above 100% because of participants who check more than one possibility.

My father's attitude to me when I began showing I was <i>phuying</i> <i>praphet</i> song was	
encouraging	2.5%
accepting	38.1%
tolerating	33.0%
rejecting	21.0%
other	11.5%
Nowadays he is:	
encouraging	10.7%
accepting	54.6%
tolerating	19.8%
rejecting	5.8%
other	12.3%
My mother's attitude to me when I began showing I was <i>phuying</i> <i>praphet</i> song was	
encouraging	9.3%
accepting	53.6%
tolerating	19.8%
rejecting	5.8%
other	12.3%
Nowadays she is:	
encouraging	23.2%
accepting	64.2%
tolerating	9.5%
rejecting	1.6%
other	7.0%
Attitudes of Thai people generally towards <i>phuying</i> <i>praphet</i> song are:	
encouraging	2.1%
accepting	38.6%
tolerating	29.1%
rejecting	16.6%
other	17.1%

33.0% tolerating, 38.1% accepting, and 2.5% encouraging their child's incongruous gender identity when first expressed). As time progressed they apparently became more positive; 54.6% nowadays accepting, and 10.7% encouraging their offspring's transgender.

Mothers were more positive than fathers, apparently displaying early in their child's transition the sorts of attitudes that would take fathers years to cultivate. As was the case for fathers, mothers' attitudes became more positive as time went on, so that at the time of the study an impressive 64.2% were accepting, and 23.2% were encouraging their offspring's transgender.

The overall figures discussed above might conceal substantial individual differences in terms of parent responses to their child's transgender. To investigate this possibility we

subjected the data on parents' attitudes to a cluster analysis. In fact, over 95% of our sample belonged to one group. This group was characterised by (a) mothers who, both formerly and currently, were more positive than fathers, with (b) both parties increasingly likely to become positive as time went on. This finding indicates high homogeneity in the family experiences of MtF TGs in Thailand.

Parental acceptance, even encouragement, was indicated in some of the open-ended statements participants provided for this item.

Community participant 132: *My father said that even though I am a ladyboy I can be his daughter. He doesn't mind whether I am male or female. He says that everyone should do their best in life, and that he cannot let his heart abandon anyone who does so. Everyone should be free to choose the best way for themselves to live. As for my mother, she told me she is very happy that I am following the way of life that is best for me and am succeeding at what I do. She does not mind that I am a lady boy. She knows that she has one more daughter now.*

Community participant 54: *My parents wanted a daughter.*

Community participant 30: *My mom liked me to dress as a girl.*

Occasionally, there were clear signs that one parent was rather more accepting than the other.

Community participant 20: *My father accepts me a little only. In his mind he doesn't want me to be like this. But my mother accepts me. She is my adviser. I am very lucky I have a mother like this.*

In conclusion, relatively few parents seemed at any time to react to their offspring's transgender with rejection. The rest responded with tolerance, acceptance or even encouragement, with positive reactions more common for mothers than fathers, and becoming more common for both parents as time passed. However, participants' comments revealed that these attitudes were often conditional.

Community participant 71: *My father can accept me if I don't cause a problem for society or the family.*

Clinic participant 42: *My mother can accept what I am but I must not make problems for any other person.*

Community participant 56: *My parents accepted it when I was able to support myself.*

Community participant 23: *(People) can accept ladyboys who are beautiful. They don't find it so easy to accept them when they hear them talking or acting in a bad way.*

Beliefs About the Origins of Transgender (see Table 2)

Very few participants (less than 20% across the six items in this section) chose the 'can't decide' option. Most held clear views on the origins of their transgender. They showed signs of having thought about the matter well before our questionnaire. Between 40% and 50% chose to expand on their likert-scale responses by providing open-ended statements (the precise figure depending on the factor about which they were being asked).

Inborn Biology

A large majority (83.9%) believed (strongly or otherwise) that their transgender had resulted from something inborn and biological.

Open-ended comments indicated the bases for their view. For some the role of biology was evident in the fundamental nature of this aspect of self.

Community participant 34: *To be kathoey is in my blood.*

Clinic participant 26: *I am simply a woman.*

Community participant 130: *Because my heart is that of a lady.*

Community participant 125: *This feeling came from within myself.*

For some it was evident in their early gender-incongruous experiences.

Community participant 42: *Even when I was a young boy I felt like a female.*

Community participant 108: *Since I can remember I wanted to be a girl.*

Clinic participant 41: *Early on I wanted to be a lady, wear make up, and wear skirts.*

Community participant 118: *Since I can remember, I was just another girl, always playing with my sister and female friends.*

An early interest in beauty, apparently seen as an indication of cross-gender leanings, provided further evidence for biological origins.

TABLE 2. Beliefs About the Origin of Transgender

Percentage of participants endorsing different answers provided, as well as mean response (with s.d.)

I believe I became a *phuying praphet song* because of:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Can't Decide	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mean/ (s.d.)
Something biological I was born with:	37.4%	46.5%	10.7%	4.3%	1.1%	1.85 (0.85)
Karma:	13.8%	34.6%	18.6%	21.3%	11.7%	2.82 (1.25)
The influence of my parents:	4.6%	25.5%	14.9%	43.1%	11.7%	3.31 (1.12)
The influence of my brothers and sisters:	1.5%	22.5%	13.7%	44.0%	18.1%	3.54 (1.08)
The influence of my other relatives:	3.1%	19.0%	10.9%	47.3%	19.6%	3.61 (1.10)
The influence of my friends:	10.7%	39.3%	11.2%	27.5%	11.2%	2.89 (1.24)

Other reasons given by 9.7% of participants

Clinic participant 49: *I have loved beauty since I was a child.*

Community participant 100: *Since I can remember I wanted to be pretty.*

The belief implied by all these comments was that early tendencies were more likely biological than learned.

Some participants appeared to resort to a biological explanation for want of any plausible alternative.

Community participant 19: *Nobody could teach me to be this way.*

Community participant 22: *People, society, or my situation can't influence my personality. All this happened in my mind.*

Community participant 55: *It's happened because of me. No one influenced me.*

Clinic participant 25: *I don't know why I felt compelled to become a lady boy. I wouldn't have wanted it.*

Those believing in a biological origin for transgender often expressed a sense of the inevitability of their condition.

Community participant 77: *We can't choose how we are born. We have to accept it.*

Community participant 110: *I was born with it, I couldn't refuse myself.*

Clinic participant 42: *I couldn't choose what I was when I was born, and could not make myself become a man.*

Finally, the sceptics (the 5.4% of participants who doubted the role played by biology) also offered, in their open-ended responses, insights into their thinking. Some believed that biology could not be responsible for something that develops as one grows older.

Community participant 5: *It didn't happen at birth, it happened after I was born.*

Others felt it could not explain feelings.

Clinic participant 15: *I just didn't like my penis.*

Community participant 12: *I feel this way. I don't think I am like this because of biology. No man is 100% male, no lady is 100% female.*

In summary, the majoritarian belief in a biological role in transgender arose from a sense of how fundamental identity is, and from memories of cross-gender tendencies early in life. The minority scepticism arose out of feelings that, early though these tendencies were, they were not experienced at birth. Nor, some argued, could biology account for feelings.

Friends

Fifty per cent of participants believed that their friends had played a role in the development of their transgender. Open-ended comments suggested why they expressed this belief. Many cited friendship groups that were primarily female (including MtF TG).

Community participant 118: *In my school, I had only female friends.*

Community participant 121: *(I have been) close to female friends since I was young.*

Clinic participant 1: *Because I have a lot of kathoey friends.*

Clinic participant 24: *I had female friends from primary school to university.*

Clinic participant 31: *When you're an adult if you associate with kathoey then you will find it easy to become a kathoey.*

Clinic participant 33: *Maybe school was important, because my school was a males-only school. There were many kathoey there.*

Behind these comments lay an implied belief that their relationships with females (natal and transgendered) could have underpinned the development of transgender. In practice, these relationships might have arisen out of the transgender rather than caused it.

Many participants reported that friends inspired the confidence to live a transgendered life:

Community participant 18: *My friends did not really influence me. But when I stayed with friends who have confidence they made me have more confidence.*

Community participant 20: *They helped me have more confidence.*

Community participant 91: *They made me brave enough to be kathoey.*

Community participant 123: *I dared to express myself when I had kathoey friends.*

Community participant 19: *Yes, friends influenced me in terms of what I would like to be. On the other hand, if I were not a kathoey, they would not have been able to influence me. My friends helped me have the confidence to live as a kathoey.*

or had prompted them to examine their identity more closely:

Community participant 77: *I'd never known what I was until I met my kathoey friends.*

or had offered support, even instruction, during transition.

Community participant 75: *My friends told me what to do in order to be kathoey.*

Community participant 78: *I have friends who have the same kind of feeling. So we support each other.*

Community participant 89: *Because I am close to my friends, when we have problems we talk together.*

Community participant 138: *My straight friends didn't accept me, but my lady friends did.*

Clinic participant 28: *Because ladyboys can understand what I am thinking and what I talk about.*

In a few cases, friendship groups had apparently instilled a spirit of friendly competition.

Community participant 40: *I wanted to be more beautiful than my friends.*

Community participant 84: *There is more competition when having kathoey friends.*

There were even a couple of cases in which friends, through teasing, had prompted a greater determination by participants to live a transgendered life.

Community participant 4: *They teased me and/or stayed away from me (narrow attitude).*

Community participant 22: *It is because my friends teased me that I am living as a kathoey.*

Finally, 38.7% of participants denied a role for friends.

Community participant 30: *I became kathoey by myself, ever since I was aged 11.*

Community participant 90: *I am what I am. That is not because of them!*

Community participant 77: *My friends didn't behave like kathoey.*

Community participant 97: *No kathoey was in my village.*

Community participant 25: *My friends are normal.*

In summary then, while a large minority denied a role for friends, many participants believed that female (including MtF) friendship groups provided a safe zone for examining one's identity, learning self-presentation, and developing confidence and determination to lead a transgender life. Paradoxically, unsupportive friendship groups sometimes prompted similar determination.

Karma

The Thai belief in karma is a very deep-rooted one. Karma (more precisely, the karmic consequence of actions taken in previous lives) is used to explain many aspects of life. This includes transgender, which is often seen as a consequence for sexual misdemeanours in a previous life (Jackson, 1998).

Community participant 19: *Every person in this world is born because of karma. Not only ladyboys but also men and women.*

Predictably then, almost half (48.4%) of our participants believed (strongly or otherwise)

that transgender was a karmic consequence. Open-ended comments illuminated these beliefs. For some participants, karmic action was evident in the difficulties that accompanied being transgendered:

Community participant 102: *People look down on kathoey.*

Community participant 120: *I'll have to be alone when I get older. I will never be successful in love.*

Community participant 137: *The Buddhists believe that if we aren't happy in our lives that comes from bad karma. For myself, I am always unhappy.*

Community participant 117: *Because I'll have problems until I die.*

Some noted that one should not fight against karma:

Clinic participant 57: *I must accept what I am.*

For the many who were content being transgendered, even wanting to be born transgendered in their next life, a clear dilemma arose. How could such happiness arise out of karma? A few managed to reconcile their beliefs, viewing their transgender as a sign of good karma; a reward for something good they had done in a past life rather than a penalty for something bad. For most though, the dilemma prompted doubts about karma as an explanation for transgender, or indeed for any other aspect of life:

Community participant 32: *I don't think it is karma if we're happy.*

Community participant 49: *(It's not karma) . . . I wanted to be a kathoey.*

Community participant 109: *(It's not karma) . . . I'm already very lucky.*

Community participant 125: *(It's not karma) . . . I'm happy with my body and my mind.*

Clinic participant 25: *Maybe God has given a new sex to this world.*

Community participant 88: *We can't decide to become kathoey but that is not because of any (bad) karma.*

Community participant 126: *Karma? And what about real men and women?*

Community participant 100: *Karma doesn't affect the way someone lives.*

Community participant 124: *Karma? No. It's just that my mind and my body are different.*

Community participant 90: *I don't believe in karma.*

Clinic participant 42: *Karma? I don't think like that. Every person has many ways to go.*

In summary, the sample was split in terms of the place karma had in their theory of transgender. Those believing it played a role often cited unhappy, even painful, experiences of transgender. Those believing it did not often cited happy experiences. Few were willing to think 'outside the box' of Buddhist orthodoxy and see their happiness as evidence of good karma.

Parents

Around a third of participants (30.3%) believed parents had played a role in the development of their transgender. As indicated by their open-ended comments, some participants ascribed their influence to accommodating and gentle child-rearing practices:

Community participant 23: *They took care of me so kindly, so then I did not become strong.*

Clinic participant 21: *It's because my parents spoiled me.*

Community participant 15: *My parents took care of me gently. They were very gentle with me indeed.*

Clinic participant 8: *Maybe they made me submissive like a girl and then I grew to like it.*

Community participant 17: *They took care of me like a daughter.*

Community participant 42: *My parents took care of me like I was a female.*

The implication was that these patterns of child-rearing would encourage (at least provide

space for) the development of female qualities in a boy.

Some participants suggested their parents had intentionally raised their sons as daughters.

Community participant 41: *My mum raised me as a girl.*

Clinic participant 2: *They wanted a daughter, because in the family they did not have a daughter.*

Clinic participant 24: *My mother wanted me to be lady. She did not like me to play with boys when I was a young boy.*

Some ascribed parental influence to an especially close bond with their mother:

Community participant 12: *Because I stayed with my mum.*

Community participant 127: *I lived with my mum since I was young.*

Community participant 85: *I'm very close to my mom.*

Clinic participant 33: *Maybe because my mother liked to make me beautiful and I liked to stay with my mother.*

sometimes contrasting with a more distant, even antagonistic, relationship with their father.

Community participant 78: *I was closer to my mum than to my dad.*

Community participant 80: *Lack of love from my dad.*

Community participant 138: *My father didn't show me how good a man could be.*

Community participant 4: *I was closer to mother than to my father.*

The implied belief here was that their close relationships with mothers, and distant ones with fathers, could have underpinned the development of transgender. Both types of relationship might have resulted from a child's gender issues rather than the other way round.

The majority of participants (54.8%) denied that parents had played a role in their gender identity development. Some pointed out that their parents had raised them just like any other boy:

Community participant 88: *They've never raised me as a girl.*

Community participant 82: *They raised me well. But I just wanted to be a woman.*

and/or had found it difficult to accept their son's gender identity.

Community participant 29: *My parents wanted me to be a man.*

Community participant 75: *My parents never accepted me as a girl.*

Some claimed their parents would not have been able to influence such a core aspect of self.

Community participant 55: *They took care of my body only. They couldn't influence what I was inside.*

Clinic participant 41: *They only took care of my body. But my heart belongs to me.*

In summary, a minority incorporated parents into their theory of transgender. They found evidence for the role of parents in child-rearing that promoted femininity, close relationships with mothers, more problematic ones with fathers.

Over half of our participants' denied any role for parents, pointing out that their parents had done nothing, or indeed could *not* have done anything, that would have led to their becoming transgendered. Some pointed out that their parents tried to oppose their son's transgender, obviously without success.

Siblings

Around one quarter of participants (24.1%) believed that siblings had played any role in the development of transgender. Open-ended comments cited close relationships with sisters:

Community participant 118: (three brothers, two sisters) *I was close to my two sisters.*

Clinic participant 17: (one sister only) *Because I liked to be like my older sister.*

Clinic participant 31: (one brother, three sisters) *Because I played with my younger sisters all the time.*

sometimes coupled with distant, even antagonistic, relationships with brothers:

Community participant 19: *Because I was closer to my two sisters than to my brother.*

Community participant 78: *I'm closer to my three sisters than to my two brothers.*

Community participant 137: *I had no sisters but had one brother. I didn't get along well with him. As a result, I feel negative about males.*

Yet again, their warm relationships with sisters (and the distant ones with brothers) might have been more the result of the gender issues than the other way round.

A few participants specifically commented on a transgendered (MtF) sibling's influence.

Community participant 91: (has a younger biological brother who is transgendered) *Because of my kathoey brother, I could come out more easily.*

Community participant 103: (has two older biological brothers, both transgendered) *They wanted to have a sister.*

Again, the implied belief was that relationships with females (biological or transgendered) could influence this aspect of development.

Many more participants (62.1%) believed siblings had played no role at all. Some, implying that sisters or MtF siblings might exert such influence, pointed out that they had none:

Community participant 108: *(Among my natural siblings) I have only brothers.*

Community participant 126: *I have only brothers but I still became kathoey.*

Some remarked that siblings had discouraged their transgender:

Community participant 29: (two brothers, two sisters) *My brother doesn't support me.*

Community participant 76: (one brother only) *My brother teaches me to be a man.*

Community participant 88: (one sister only) *My sister doesn't like kathoey.*

Others claimed that siblings could not exert influence over such an important aspect of their lives.

Community participant 127: *They never get involved with my life.*

Community participant 75: *They never realised I was kathoey.*

Community participant 84: *They don't have enough influence on me.*

In summary, a minority believed that siblings had had an influence on development of transgender. The evidence cited was (a) close relationships with sisters, (b) more distant relationships with brothers, and (c) the presence of MtF transgender siblings. The majority denied any place for siblings in their theory of transgender. They cited (a) the absence of sisters (natal or MtF), (b) sibling discouragement of transgender tendencies, or (c) the inability of siblings to influence this aspect of their lives. These last two lines of thought echoed comments made about parental influence.

Other Relatives

Just over one in five of our sample (22.2%) believed that other relatives (i.e., beyond parents and siblings) had influenced the development of their transgender. In open-ended comments some explained that relationships with extended family were predominantly with females:

Community participant 23: *I was taken care by female relatives.*

Community participant 76: *I have only female cousins.*

Community participant 114: *My relatives are mostly female.*

or that relationships with female relatives were warmer than those with immediate family members.

Community participant 137: *I love and am closer to my female relatives. I have always been afraid of aggression from my father and brother.*

The implied belief was again that their relationships with females could have influenced this aspect of development. As for parents, friends and siblings, these relationships might have resulted from transgender rather than promoting it.

Some relatives apparently encouraged the participants' transgender.

Clinic participant 13: *My grandma liked to have a girl.*

Clinic participant 24: *Everybody in my family wanted me to be female.*

Others seemingly accepted it, providing a space in which the youngster could explore her identity.

Community participant 108: *They let me play like a girl.*

Community participant 91: *They made it so that I could come out more easily.*

In contrast, 66.9% denied that extended family had played a role in this aspect of their development. They claimed that there were no MtF TG models among extended family:

Community participant 118: *None of my relatives are kathoey.*

Community participant 12: *Nobody in my family is ladyboy.*

that relationships with extended family were not close enough:

Community participant 123: *I'm not close to my relatives.*

Community participant 100: *I'm not close to them at all.*

that extended family had not accepted their transgender:

Community participant 112: *Everyone wanted me to be male.*

Community participant 89: *They don't accept kathoey.*

or that extended family members lacked the power to influence such a fundamental aspect of self.

Community participant 84: *They don't have enough influence on me.*

In summary, a minority believed that extended family had influenced the development of their transgender. They cited contact or warm relationships with female members, some of whom had accepted (indeed encouraged) their transgender. The majority who denied a role for extended family claimed there were no TG models, or any close or accepting relationships that might have made such influence possible.

A Cluster Analysis of Participants' Beliefs About Origins of Transgender

Given these diverse (and often strongly held) beliefs about the origins of transgender, we attempted to identify whether participants fell into discernible groups. We conducted a cluster analysis (hierarchical, between-groups linkage, squared euclidean distance). A seven-cluster solution revealed three substantial groups (at least 10 members), accounting for 97.1% of our sample (see Table 3). The remaining 2.9% of participants consisted of individuals or pairs.

The largest group (61.2% of the sample) subscribed to a strongly *biogenic* theory of their transgender, believing it inborn and biological. While often undecided about karma or friends, members of this cluster were inclined to reject any suggestion of parental, sibling or other relatives' influence. Some of their open-ended comments were scathing in regard to any social influence:

Community participant 55: *I became a ladyboy not because of any outside influence, but because of me.*

Community participant 91: *To be kathoey is not because someone or something forces us to be like that. It's our mind which make us become kathoey.*

Clinic participant 25: *When you are born a ladyboy you must be a ladyboy. The only thing you can choose is whether you become an open one or closed one.*

Community participant 27: *Nobody can force us to be kathoey.*

TABLE 3. Cluster Solution for Beliefs About Origins of Transgender

	Something biologically inborn	Karma	Parents' influence	Sibling influence	Other relatives' influence	Friends' influence
Peer psychogenic N = 50	2.24	2.96	2.76	2.62	2.58	1.96
Eclectic N = 11	1.27	1.27	1.82	2.91	3.55	3.91
Biogenic N = 104	1.65	2.88	3.79	4.12	4.18	3.27

Mean ratings given to the importance of six possible factors underlying transgender. 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree.

The second group (29.4% of the sample) subscribed to a *peer psychogenic* theory, believing that friends were the main factor underlying their transgender. They conceded a subsidiary role for biology, but were rather undecided about anything else.

The smallest group (6.5%) was somewhat *eclectic*. They felt that biology, karma and parents were all important factors, but remained undecided or sceptical about everything else.

Notice that biology was, to a greater or lesser extent, important for all three groups. To that extent then, our sample overall backed nature more than nurture.

How, apart from in terms of their beliefs about the origins of transgender, did these groups differ? We ran ANOVA tests to compare the biogenic and peer-psychogenic groups (leaving out the eclectic group because it was judged too small for this sort of statistical analysis). We compared the two groups in terms of over 100 variables (their responses to the 77 items in the questionnaire overall, plus a few variables derived from those responses).

We found that among those who had undergone either breast or sex reassignment surgery, members of the 'biogenics' group had done so on nearly four years earlier on average than members of the 'peer-psychogenics' group. Perhaps those who believed their transgender originated in inborn biology were ready to transition earlier than the others. Consistent with this interpretation, the biogenics group transitioned earliest (albeit nonsignificantly) on every other milestone studied (thirteen of them, covering female speech patterns, dressing habits, hair styling, hormone use and various surgeries) except one (surgery to the nose).

No other notable differences were found between the two groups.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarise the main findings of this study, many participants reported that their parents (particularly mothers) had accepted or even encouraged their child's transgender from its first expression onwards. Almost invariably those mothers and fathers who initially had misgivings became more positive as time went on. Positive parental attitudes apparently echoed those expressed in Thai society generally.

Overall, participants most commonly explained their own transgender in terms of (a) inborn biology (often citing recollections of early transgender tendencies, as well as a belief that gender identity was a fundamental aspect of self); (b) friends (because they provided a safe space for examining identity, and developing the confidence, drive and presentation skills to live transgendered lives); and (c) karma (a belief confirmed by unhappy experiences as a transgender person).

Most believed that family (parents, siblings or other relatives) played little or no part in this aspect of their development. Even if family members had the ability to influence the development of transgender (something commonly doubted), their aim was often to oppose it.

Participants fell into three sub-groups based on their theories of the origins of transgender. Most (61.2%) fell into a 'biogenic' group (explanation primarily in terms of biology), another 29.4% formed a 'peer-psychogenic' group (explanation primarily in terms of friends' in-

fluence), and a small ‘eclectic’ group accounted for most of the rest (6.5%).

There follows a discussion of some of these findings.

Participants’ Beliefs About Social Attitudes Towards Transgender

At first glance our findings suggest positive attitudes towards MtF TGs, both within Thai society overall and within participants’ own families.

How do these findings compare with those in other Asian societies? Our own recent research in the Philippines (Winter, Sasot and King, in preparation) reveals more negative attitudes there. Only 22.6% of transgendered females there judged their society encouraging or accepting towards transgender, as against 40.7% in the Thai study reported here.

Participants were perhaps viewing Thai society through rose-coloured glasses, or else presenting a over-rosy picture for us. Positive attitudes reported might have little basis in reality. But a recent study (in which university students from Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, the UK and US reported their attitudes towards transgendered people) confirms that Thai attitudes are indeed quite accepting, at least compared with some other societies (Winter, Chalungsooth, Teh, Rojanalert, Maneerat, Wong, Beaumont and Ho, submitted for publication).

A few comparisons with the USA make the point. Thai students more commonly believe MtF transgenders are ‘normal, but just different from most of the rest of us’ (53% versus 38%), and less commonly believe they ‘are mentally disordered’ (13% versus 49%), or that they ‘need psychological help’ (28% versus 66%). More believe that ‘they deserve society’s support’ (37% versus 22%), to the extent of being ‘allowed to work with children’ (57% versus 21%).

Positive though Thai attitudes appear to be in comparison with some other cultures, comments by TG participants in the current study suggest they are conditional upon beauty, restrained dress-code and demeanour, meritorious behaviour and ability to support oneself. To this extent, perceptions of unrestrained behaviour and dress among the TG sex-worker community arguably hinder more general social ac-

ceptance. In a similar vein, Matzner (2001) argues that people’s willingness to accept kathoey depends on the appearance and demeanour of the *kathoey*. He adds one more factor: the nature of a person’s relationship with a *kathoey*.

We found that, within families, mothers find it easier than fathers to accept a son’s gender transition. Given the investment that fathers make in the gender development of their sons (Clarke-Stewart, 1980), this finding is not surprising. Our Philippines findings on mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes towards transgender reveal a similar pattern.

Participants’ Beliefs About the Origins of Transgender

The great majority of our participants (83.9%) believed, to a greater or lesser extent, that their transgender resulted from an inborn biological factor. For the 61.2% in our biogenic group, this seemed to be their main way of accounting for their transgender status. Even the peer-psychogenic and eclectic groups conceded an influential role for biology.

Though most participants were likely unaware of the research literature, these beliefs in the role of biology are very much in line with recent findings. As Cohen-Kettenis and Pfäfflin remark in a recent (2003) review of research: “There is increasing, but still largely indirect, evidence that the brains of certain types of cross-gendered individuals (MtFs who are sexually attracted to men in particular) have been prenatally exposed to atypical levels of sex hormones” (p. 83).

In an examination of possible biological origins of transgender, we are currently engaged in a study of digit ratios among MtF TGs, males and natal females. The ratio of the lengths of the second and fourth digits is considered a marker for prenatal androgen exposure (Manning, 2002). We hope to report results shortly.

The biogenic view, though prevalent, fell short of monopoly status. For 50% of our participants, friendships—usually with females, either natal or transgendered—were an important factor underlying this aspect of their development. For the 29.4% in our ‘peer-psychogenic’ group, it was the main factor explaining their transgender.

In informal conversations, Thai *kathoeys* often mention the influence of (usually older) MtF TG friends on the development of their own transgender. They tell of an older *kathoeys* living in their street, attending their school or using the same temple. They commonly tell of one in their family. Totman (2003) offers biographies of three young *kathoeys* participants in his research, all of whom benefited from the influence of an older *kathoeys* 'sister.'

Such accounts are unremarkable in a society where the MtF TG incidence may be as high as 1:180 (Winter, 2002c), and in which, among siblings of MtF TGs, the incidence of brothers who themselves are MtF may lie around 20% (Winter, 2006). As Matzner (2001) points out in his report of research on university students' attitudes towards *kathoeys*; 'almost every student I met either (a) had a *kathoeys* in their immediate family; (b) knew a *kathoeys* who was either a distant relative or somehow acquainted with their family; or (c) was friendly with or personally acquainted with one or more *kathoeys*' (p. 77).

In a culture espousing karma's role in life, it is not surprising that almost half our participants believed their transgender to be karmic consequence for previous misdemeanours. Indeed, this belief is common in Thailand (Taywaditep, Coleman and Dumronggittigule, 1997). Jackson (1998) goes into more detail, noting the teachings of a senior Buddhist scholar, Bunmi Methangkun, that (a) such karma arises out of sexual misconduct such as adultery, prostitution and not caring for a woman one has made pregnant; (b) it cannot be counteracted and must be accepted; (c) everyone has at some time been guilty of sexual misconduct and so has been born *kathoeys* in one or more of their lives; and (d) we should therefore not laugh at *kathoeys*, instead treating them with tolerance and compassion.

For some in the biogenic group, belief in the role of karma was apparently consistent with belief in the role of biology. Karmic consequence might, one supposes, express itself in biology. Biology might be an expression of karma.

Participants commonly denied that parents had influenced the development of their transgender. This was surprising. As we have seen, family attitudes towards transgender appeared

quite positive, with around two out of five fathers and three out of five mothers (according to our participants) accepting or even encouraging their child's transgender, even its early stages. One wonders whether our participants, accustomed to favourable parental attitudes, possibly ignorant of reactions transgenders encounter elsewhere in the world, were overlooking the role that their parents had played in this aspect of their development.

The apparent dismissal of any role for siblings was also surprising. We have reported elsewhere a possible sibling role in the development of transgender (Winter, 2006). We found that siblings of *kathoeys* are significantly weighted towards elders (62% of all siblings; $p < 0.001$). The older-younger sibling imbalance is evident for both sibling sexes, but is most significant for sisters (64% older versus 38% younger; $p < 0.001$). If one were to re-classify the MtF TG 'brothers' (apparently around 20% of the total) as sisters then the number of older sisters in the families of MtF transgenders would rise still further. The upshot is that many Thai MtF TGs grow up enjoying the care of older (especially female) siblings, rather than themselves being required to care for younger siblings. Possibly aware only of their experiences in their own family, ignorant of what other families might be like, it is possible that participants overlooked a sibling role in the origins of their transgender.

How do our participants' explanations for their transgender compare with those of TGs from other societies? The only other apparent study is our own Philippines research (Winter, Sasot and King, op.cit.). The findings echo those of Thailand somewhat. The great majority (73.5%) endorsed inborn biology as a factor underlying their transgender (83.9% for our Thai sample). Largely Christian, Filipino culture has no real equivalent of *karma*. The closest equivalent is probably God's will, and 41.9% cited it as a factor underlying their transgender (48.4% of Thai TGs citing *karma*).

On every other factor there were big differences between our Thai and Filipina samples. Filipina participants appeared far more sceptical about interpersonal influence; the role played by friends, parents, siblings, and extended family (24.4%, 3.5%, 6.9%, and 7.7%, respectively, as compared with corresponding figures of

50.0%, 30.3%, 24.1%, and 22.2% for Thailand). Seen in this light, our Thai participants, though heavily biogenic, appear to have a reasonably broad explanatory framework for the origins of their transgender, at least compared to one of their near neighbours.

Are Thai TGs' theories about the origins of transgender shared by their (non-transgendered) countrymen and women? This is not a trivial question; research indicates that people taking a biogenic view of transgender often view transgendered people more positively (Landen and Innala, 2000). A biogenic view may underpin the relatively favourable attitudes so often observed in Thailand (and even, to a lesser extent, in the Philippines). Neither our Thai or Filipino research projects have so far addressed this question.

Concluding Comments

Caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from this study. The study suffers from reliance on an opportunistic sample, prompting concerns in regard to the Thai MtF TG population. It also relies on self-report, often retrospective, raising fears about selective recall, socially desirable responding, and unrealistic self-presentation. The reports of favourable family attitudes to transgender may reflect an unwillingness to criticise one's family in front of a stranger. Strong biogenic beliefs may reflect a desire to appear as having no choice in the life one leads (and thereby avoid accusations of improper choice).

The question on origins of transgender failed to allow distinction between factors underlying feelings of gender incongruity and factors influencing their expression. The response categories failed to allow distinction between roles played by mothers versus fathers, brothers versus sisters, and TG friends versus non-TG friends.

There is clearly room for further research in the areas reported.

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