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**Social constructionism and medical knowledge:
the case of transsexualism**

Abstract Bury (1986) and Nicolson and McLaughlin (1987) have respectively attacked and defended social constructionism in relation to medical sociology. In this article I try to further the debate by considering how a form of constructionism has been used to study a small area of medical knowledge – that relating to transsexualism. The literature on this topic reveals two stories; one claims that transsexualism has been discovered, the other that it has been invented. In the main part of this article I examine the invention story alongside evidence drawn from a study of the medical treatment of transsexualism in Britain. I argue that the invention story exaggerates the legitimacy of transsexualism and sex-change surgery in this country; that what it depicts as peculiar to transsexualism is also common to other areas of medical knowledge and practice; and that its explanation of the invention of transsexualism is implausible in the light of the data presented. Finally I consider the implications of this case study for the wider issues. I conclude that, whilst some of Bury's criticisms of constructionism apply to the invention story of transsexualism, some of the latter's weaknesses are shared with the discovery story and with Bury's own position.

Introduction

Transsexualism and its management by hormonal and surgical 'sex change' are topics on which there is now a substantial medical literature.¹ Is this area of medical knowledge a product or reflection, not of the 'reality' of transsexualism itself, but of social processes and relations which shape the nature of medical thought and practice? In this article, I examine the claims of those who would answer this question affirmatively. I do so in the light of two recent articles by Bury (1986) and Nicolson and McLaughlin (1987)