

## **Robert Stoller**

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Robert Stoller was an American psychiatrist who studied gender identity and sexuality. Stoller was born in 1924 and died in 1991 (Green, 1992). He died in a car accident near his home, at the age of 66 (Cook, 1992). Stoller received his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and received his medical degree in 1948 from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) (Goleman, 1991). Stoller also completed psychoanalytic training at the Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, where he worked under psychoanalyst Hanna Fenichel.

Stoller became a member of UCLA's department of psychiatry in 1954 and was a faculty member there until his death in 1991 (Goleman, 1991). At UCLA, Stoller was a professor of psychiatry, and a researcher and clinician at the UCLA Gender Identity Clinic. During his time at UCLA, Stoller wrote and co-authored 12 books, and published over 100 articles. Some of his most well-known books include *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (1975), *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968), and *Presentations of Gender* (1985; Goleman, 1991). His work focused primarily on gender identity, transsexualism, and sexual identity, deviations and perversions. (Goleman, 1991; Cook 1992).

Stoller became interested in working with the transgender population after several patients, particularly child patients, with gender disorders were referred to him for therapy. He was intrigued by these patients, and wanted to find an explanation for their gender and sexual identities. After hearing of Dr. John Money's sex reassignment case study, Stoller hypothesized

that individuals develop a core gender identity during infancy, and that disruptions or threats to this identity may result in sexual deviations and/or transsexualism (Green, 2010).

Stoller's work stems from psychoanalytic theory, however he challenged many of Freud's theories of gender identity and sexuality (Goleman, 1991). While Freud believed in innate bisexuality and masculinity, Stoller believed in primary femininity or proto-femininity (Isakidou, 2016). Primary femininity is the idea that humans are biologically and psychologically initially oriented towards female development (Isakidou, 2016). During the first three months of prenatal development, all fetuses are oriented towards female development. It is not until the end of the first trimester that sex organs develop. Similarly, Stoller believed that all children are born with an initial female gender identity, and that the identity remains until a masculine presence disrupts this female identity development.

Stoller outlined three main factors that contribute to the development of gender identity: biological and hormonal influences, sex assignment at birth, and environmental and psychological influences (Isakidou, 2016). These factors form the permanent sense of maleness or femaleness that a person has and is usually established by age two. Stoller believed that threats to the core gender identity pose as threats to the sense of self (Isakidou, 2016). This results in sexual perversions, which serves as a form of revenge against the individual who initially threatened the gender identity (Goleman, 1991).

Stoller expanded on the theory of primary femininity to study homosexuality and transgenderism. Individuals may exhibit sexual deviations or deviations from their gender assignment at birth as a way of expressing their true selves, especially if they were unable to do so as a child (Isakidou, 2016). Transgenderism could also result from pathological parents, specifically for male children. Stoller gave the example of a pathological mother, who had

extreme penis envy and masculine qualities, keeping her son too close and too involved in her femininity. This, in combination with a pathologically distant and uninterested father, may result in the son developing a feminine identity and therefore identifying as transgender (Isakidou, 2016).

Because he believed that sexual and/or gender deviations are a way of expressing the true self, Stoller worked to normalize sexual perversions and eliminate the stigma associated with them. He argued that perversions were only pathological if they harmed others or violated on their rights (Goleman, 1991). He did this through his clinical work and research, as well as his publications and presentations. Stoller also worked to legitimize psychoanalysis as an empirically valid practice. Stoller kept notes and transcripts of his interviews and therapy sessions with patients, and used them to produce data of his work. Many of Stoller's publications focus on this data and implementing them into his theories.

#### **Further Readings:**

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