

Gender Case Study- Imperato McGinley et al (1974) The Batista family

Imperato-McGinley and her colleagues (1974) studied some unusual families including the Batista family from three villages in the Dominican Republic. Thirty seven children studied by the researchers had inherited a **mutant recessive gene** from an eighteenth century ancestor. They were born with apparently female genitals and were brought up as girls even though they all had XY chromosomes. When they reached puberty, the surge in testosterone levels, led to the production of a male hormone (dihydrotestosterone) which they had lacked before birth. This hormone led to their rather belated masculinisation and the sudden development of male genitals. They were born with normal female genitalia and body shape, but when they were twelve, their vaginas healed over, two testicles descended and they grew full penises. So the little 'girls' grew up to be muscular men. Curiously these people reported no difficulty in adopting the male gender despite being reared as girls.

So the role of socialisation in the development of sex roles appeared to be overridden by biological factors and the researchers concluded that biology was all important. Their ability to adopt a male gender identity and gender role suggests that their testosterone had pre-programmed masculinity into their brains.

However, one problem with this study was that the genitalia of these 'female' children were not entirely normal and others knew this from communal river bathing. It may be that the rearing of these children was not the same as that of normal females, especially as villagers would have known of other children with this disorder. It is also possible that the young men had no difficulty in adjusting to their new gender because they had always been uncomfortable with the female role. Certainly they were given support by their community to make the transition. This clearly suggests environmental influences on the children's gender identity.