

Transgender 101

Adapted from "TRANSGENDERISM: Transgressing Gender Norms" by Nancy R. Nangeroni, International Foundation for Gender Education, 1996 (Ninja Design).

Sex, Gender, & Bipolarity

In order to understand the difference between someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and someone who is transgender, you need to know the difference between sex and gender. Simply put, sex is polarity of anatomy, gender is polarity of appearance and behavior. As one gains familiarity with transgenderism, these definitions quickly break down, but they serve as a good starting point.

Most people think there are just two sexes, male and female. Such is not the case. People who are intersexed and people who are transsexual constitute sexes which are neither exactly male nor exactly female. Likewise, gender is not a simple case of "either/or." Gender is exhibited by countless signals, from articles of clothing to cosmetics, hairstyles, conversational styles, body language and much more. Notice, however, that our gender "norms" are not symmetric. Women have won for themselves the right to a wide range of gender expression. Men have not made a corresponding effort. Most men live within a much narrower range of "acceptable" gender. Though our culture tends to group characteristics into "masculine" and "feminine," many people find some amount of gender transgression exciting, so there is some crossover between the two categories. Ultimately, gender is a "mix and match" mode of self-expression, and people within our culture are ever finding new ways to express their gender, with exciting subtleties and intriguing implications.

In general, it works best to think of all effects - sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual identity, and any others - as varying along a continuous spectrum of self-expression, rather than in just one of two or three ways.

Sexual Orientation vs. Gender Identity vs. Sexual Identity

Sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual identity are independent of each other. A person may express any variation of each of these in any combination. To discourage the free expression of identity and orientation by an individual is to impose a damaging burden of conformity.

Sexual Orientation is which sex you find romantically/erotically attractive: opposite (hetero), same (homo), or both (bi).

Gender Identity is how you see yourself socially: man, woman, or a combination of both. One may have a penis but prefer to relate socially as a woman, or one may have a vagina but prefer to relate as a man. One might prefer to be fluid, relating sometimes as a man and sometimes as a woman. Or one might not identify as either one, relating androgynously.

Sexual Identity is how you see yourself physically: male, female, or in between. If someone is born female, but wishes to see their body as male in all respects, their sexual identity is male. It is generally rude to speak of such a person as female, since it denies their right to inhabit the social and physical role of their choosing. We call such a person a transsexual, whether or not they have had any surgery.

Many **FTM** transsexuals do not undergo genital surgery, often because of disappointing results or extreme cost. As surgical technique improves, this may change. Since it is healthier for these people to live in accord with their wishes and heartfelt need, we call them men, though they may have a vagina where one would expect to find a penis.

The situation for **MTF** transsexuals is equivalent, except that the surgery produces a much more satisfying result, both cosmetically and functionally. Nonetheless, many MTF transsexuals elect to not have the surgery, most often because of risk, pain, or cost. Those who retain male sexual functioning may refer to themselves as transgenderists, since it is only their gender which is changed. Those that disown all male sexual function (surgery or no) tend to identify as transsexuals, since they change their sexual function, and therefore their sexual identity.

Definitions/Terms

People tend to categorize themselves. This identification can be helpful in finding like-minded others with whom to make friends, but it can be hurtful if imposed on an individual by others, well-intentioned or not. In relating to transgender folk, it is best to avoid pushing an individual to choose a category for themselves. Some folks prefer to explore the fringes of category, and such push for identification works against personal exploration and fulfillment.

Transgender folk have self-identified as:

Drag Queen: Female-emulating male, usually campy, often (not always) gay. **Butch:** Masculine-appearing person.

Femme: Feminine-appearing person.

Drag King: Male-emulating woman.

Intersex: Person born with mixed sexual physiology. Often ‘assigned’ at birth, such practice is coming under well-founded attack as a hurtful violation of a person’s well-being.

Transvestite: Person who enjoys wearing clothes identified with the opposite gender, often but not always straight. (**Crossdresser:** Polite term for transvestite.)

Transgenderist: Person who lives as gender opposite to anatomical sex, i.e. person with penis living as woman. Sexual orientation varies.

Androgyne: Person appearing and identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

Transsexual: Person whose sexual identity is opposite to their assignment at birth. Not all TS folk undergo 'sex reassignment surgery' (SRS), for various reasons, including personal preference. Sexual orientation varies.

FTM (female to male): born female but see themselves as partly to fully masculine.

MTF (male to female): born male but see themselves as partly to fully feminine.

Transgender Community: A loose association of people who transgress gender norms in a wide variety of ways. Celebrating a recently born self-awareness, this community is growing fast across all lines, including social, economic, political, and philosophical divisions. The central ethic of this community is unconditional acceptance of individual exercise of freedoms including gender and sexual, identity and orientation.