



## **Understanding Sex and Gender**

Sex and gender are terms that are often used interchangeably and frequently seen as synonymous. For purposes of a discussion that leads to greater understanding of human sexuality, let's consider sex and gender as separate concepts.

Additionally, let's examine variations and aspects of sex and gender. And let's further consider the notion that one's sex and gender may not be defined in the extremes but instead along a continuum.

Sex and gender can be discussed and understood in terms of physical, psychological, social, and emotional perspectives. What do the various labels mean? What is meant by sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation? This is an attempt to delineate the differences and clarify the terminology.

### **Sex (Physical): Male or Female**

Sex is described with regard to physical elements and in terms of one's biology and anatomy. A person's sex is defined as his or her medical assignment as manifest through organs, genitals, hormones, and chromosomes.

A person might be male or female. Or a person might be somewhere in between... intersexual, transsexual or hermaphroditic.

Biological sex includes external genitalia, internal reproductive structures, chromosomes, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics such as breasts, facial and body hair, and fat distribution. These characteristics are objective in that they can be seen and measured (with appropriate technology). The scale consists not just of two categories (male and female) but is actually a continuum, with most people existing somewhere near one end or the other. The space more in the middle is occupied by intersex people (formerly, hermaphrodites), who have combinations of characteristics typical of males and those typical of females, such as both a testis and an ovary, or XY chromosomes (the usual male pattern) and a vagina, or they may have features that are not completely male or completely female, such as an organ that could be thought of as a small penis or a large clitoris, or an XXY chromosomal pattern.

## **Gender Identity (Psychological): Man or Woman**

Gender identity is one's psychological understanding of self. It is defined in terms of roles, perceptions, and self concept. A person's gender identity can be described as the way in which he or she views him or herself.

A person might be a man (boy) or a woman (girl). Or a person might be somewhere in between... two-spirited or third-gendered.

Gender identity is how people think of themselves and identify in terms of sex (man, woman, boy, girl). Gender identity is a psychological quality; unlike biological sex, it can't be observed or measured (at least by current means), only reported by the individual. Like biological sex, it consists of more than two categories, and there's space in the middle for those who identify as a third gender, both (two-spirit), or neither. We lack language for this intermediate position because everyone in our culture is supposed to identify unequivocally with one of the two extreme categories. In fact, many people feel that they have masculine and feminine aspects of their psyches, and some people, fearing that they do, seek to purge themselves of one or the other by acting in exaggerated sex-stereotyped ways.

## **Gender Expression (Social): Masculine or Feminine**

Gender expression is a social construct. It can be defined with regard to societal expectations and interpretations. A person's gender expression can be described as the way in which he or she communicates his or her gender to others. It is manifest through outward appearance, mannerisms, clothing, hair style, and speech pattern.

A person might be masculine (butch, top) or feminine (femme, bottom). Or a person might be somewhere in between... androgynous (transvestite).

Gender expression is everything we do that communicates our sex/gender to others: clothing, hair styles, mannerisms, way of speaking, roles we take in interactions, etc. This communication may be purposeful or accidental. It could also be called social gender because it relates to interactions between people. Trappings of one gender or the other may be forced on us as children or by dress codes at school or work. Gender expression is a continuum, with feminine at one end and masculine at the other. In between are gender expressions that are androgynous (neither masculine nor feminine) and those that combine elements of the two (sometimes called gender bending). Gender expression can vary for an individual from day to day or in different situations, but most people can identify a range on the scale where they feel the most comfortable. Some people are comfortable with a wider range of gender expression than others.

## **Sexual Orientation (Emotional): Homosexual or Heterosexual**

Sexual orientation is described as one's emotional identity. It can be defined in terms of one's romantic or erotic response. A person's sexual orientation is described with regard to sexual behavior and is manifest through attraction, affection, relationships, and love.

A person who is attracted to persons of the same sex are homosexual (gay, lesbian) and a person who is attracted to persons of the opposite sex are heterosexual (straight).

A person might also be bisexual (both sexes), asexual (neither sex), pansexual (all variations), or omnisexual (all variations).

Sexual orientation indicates who we are erotically attracted to. The ends of this scale are labeled "attracted to women" and "attracted to men," rather than "homosexual" and "heterosexual," to avoid confusion as we discuss the concepts of sex and gender. In the mid-range is bisexuality; there are also people who are asexual (attracted to neither men nor women). We tend to think of most people as falling into one of the two extreme categories (attracted to women or attracted to men), whether they are straight or gay, with only a small minority clustering around the bisexual middle. However, Kinsey's studies showed that most people are in fact not at one extreme of this continuum or the other, but occupy some position between.

## **Sex and Gender Terminology**

**Gay** - A man who is romantically/sexually attracted to or involved with other men; also used as an umbrella term for everyone who has same-sex romantic/sexual attractions or relations.

**Lesbian** - A woman who is romantically/sexually attracted to or involved with other women.

**Bisexual** - A person who is romantically/sexually attracted to or involved with both men and women.

**Transgender** - An umbrella term that includes people who do not fit traditional male or female roles and expectations, and/or who identify with a gender other than the one assigned at birth (e.g., women who feel like men, or men who feel like women). Transgender does not imply any specific form of sexual orientation. Individuals in the transgender community express themselves in different ways. This can include adopting the clothing and/or behaviors of the opposite or both genders, use of hormones and/or gender reassignment surgery.

**Transsexual** - Individuals whose gender identity is not in keeping with their physical bodies. They may desire to, or have modified their body through hormones and/or

surgical procedures in order to bring their body closer to their gender identity.

**Two-Spirited** - A term for individuals who are considered to be neither women nor men among many Native American groups. It often implies a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit living in the same body. It is also used by some contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex Native American people to describe themselves.

**Intersex** - A person whose sex chromosomes, genitalia and/or secondary sex characteristics (e.g. facial hair, breasts) are determined to be neither exclusively male nor female. An intersex person may have biological characteristics of both the male and female sexes. The intersex community has generally rejected the term 'hermaphrodite' as outdated. Intersex people may or may not identify as part of the transgender community.

**Queer** - Some people prefer to be called queer rather than gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans. For some people the term queer is positive and empowering.

**Questioning** - People who are either experimenting with or exploring their sexuality, or who refuse to label their sexual orientation.