

TWU Counseling Center

Answers to Your Questions about Gender Identity, Transgender, Transsexuality, and Intersexuality

What is Gender Identity?

Gender identity is a complex concept to define. In our Western biomedical construction of the body, there are only two genders, masculine and feminine, just as there are only two genital/birth sexes, male and female. Many people confuse gender and sex. When we talk about sex, we are talking about birth sex. However gender is in the mind of a person and is more elusive. In many other cultures, and throughout history, there have been different constructions of gender in which there are three or more gender identities. For example, the Tewa Indians of New Mexico identify as women, men, and 'kwido', although their New Mexico birth records recognize only females and males. Contrast the 1984 definition of gender, which references two genders, with the current dictionary definition from Webster, which states that gender is "any of two or more categories into which words are divided." Many individuals believe that gender is a culturally defined concept. Others do not. Many people confuse gender identity, one's inner perception of one's gender, with gender self-expression (how one externally chooses to present one's inner identity to the world).

What Causes a Person to Have a Particular Gender Identity?

The fact of the matter is that nobody really knows. There are many different theories ranging from genetic (nobody has found a gene for gender identity, transgender or transsexuality) to changes in brain structure (although there is no evidence yet) to hormonal effects in the uterus while the baby is developing, and finally to social and even evolutionary factors. Like most things, gender identity is probably defined through a collection of complex interactions between many variables. In the end, no particular cause/factor has been found to fully support any of these theories.

Is Gender Identity a Choice?

The answer is that we just don't know, although all of the research and clinical evidence seems to be leaning to no.

What Is Transgender, Transsexual, and the Gender Community?

The "gender community" consists of transsexuals, transgenders, cross-dressers, and others with gender self-perceptions other than the traditional (Western) dichotomous gender world-view (i.e., including only male and female), such as persons with "non-Western" gender identities. Transsexuals experience variance between genital/birth sex and psychological gender, and often seek medical sex reassignment services, including hormonal therapy and genital surgery. Transsexuals are often referred to as post-op (have had the operation and are on hormones), pre-op (plan to have the operation and are on hormones), non-op (do not plan to have the operation and are on hormones). In all cases, the individuals live the lifestyle of the self-perceived gender. Transgenders usually identify strongly with the "other" sex and often adopt a life-style and appearance that is consistent with their psychological gender self-perception. This may or may not be supported by the use of hormonal medications, but genital sex reassignment surgery is usually not desired. Cross dressers "cultivate the appearance" of the other sex, particularly with regard to clothing. Cross-dressing may be undertaken on a part-time or recreational basis, such as at clubs and social events, and may or may not have erotic significance. Transvestites use the cross-dressing as a type of fetish (sexual arousal) but do not see themselves as the other gender or other sex.

Can Therapy Change Gender Identity?

Even though many people have tried, there are numerous research and clinical results showing that gender identity is fixed at a very young age. Some people claim that it could be as early as two years of age. Others state that it is closer to four years of age. Some transgendered individuals seek to change their gender identity through therapy. Frequently, family members or religious groups coerce these individuals to change or stay. The reality is that transgender is not an illness. It does not require treatment to change it. It is simply not changeable.

What About So-Called Conversion Therapies?

Just as has happened in the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual (GLB) communities, there are therapists catering to the transgender (T-community) who undertake so-called conversion therapies and report that they have been able to change their client's gender identity and remove the so-called disorder. Closer analysis of these therapists' methods shows several factors that cast doubt on their claims. For example, many of the claims come from organizations with an ideological perspective that is anti-GLBTI (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex). Furthermore, there is minimal to no documentation of their claims.

Is Gender Identity Dysphoria a Mental Illness or an Emotional Problem?

While Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) is listed in the diagnostic manual of mental health, there are a number of organizations that are lobbying for its removal in the same fashion that homosexuality was removed from the manual many years ago. Many psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, nurses, and social workers all agree that transgender is not an illness, a mental disorder, or an emotional problem. More and more international, objective, scientific research is showing that transgender and transsexuality are not, in and of themselves, associated with mental disorders or emotional problems. For more details see the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association web page at <http://www.hbgda.org>

What is Intersex?

Even the ancient Greeks recognized that there was a "third sex." They called it hermaphrodite, which is now considered a pejorative term for an individual who displays both sexual organs at birth (actually, the anatomical presentation can be quite varied and does not necessarily require both complete organs to be displayed, hence an abstract "continuum" of sex). The preferred current terminology is "intersexed." The prevalence of intersexuality is estimated at 1 in 2000 births. Additionally, it is estimated that there are nearly 65,000 intersex births worldwide per year. Intersex individuals may or may not be transgendered. For more information on intersex, visit the Intersex Society of North America's web page at <http://www.isna.org>

Why Don't Transgender and Intersex Individuals Tell People About Their Gender Identification?

Unfortunately, the social stigma associated with being transsexual, transgender, intersex, or any other type of member from this community is so great, and the potential loss so severe, that very few individuals will tell anyone about their gender identity. Transgender is not protected under the hate crimes law. It is not protected under EEOC anti-discrimination law, and it is not protected in any other way legally. Many transpersons are murdered for being transgendered and their murders are not seen as hate crimes. For more details, see the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force website documents at <http://www.nglftf.org>

Why is the Coming Out Process Difficult for Transgender and Intersex Individuals?

The fact of the matter is that violence, in all forms, is on the rise, and hate crimes are escalating as well. A recent World Health Organization report on violence worldwide placed the US in the top 10 most violent industrialized countries in the world. As with the GLB populations, transgender and intersex populations are at significant risk for violence and abuse. A recent study has shown that the violence and abuse experience of the gender community, as adults, appears to be similar to that of their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers. Hate crimes against the transgender population are often multifaceted, with features consistent with gender-based violence, homophobic attacks and hatred of "gender role transgression." Multiple victimization, including repeated incidents of violence or abuse in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, is common. Given the social stigma associated with transgender and intersex, along with the lack of legal protection, many transgender and intersex individuals choose to remain quiet about themselves.

What Can Be Done To Overcome the Prejudice and Discrimination That Transgendered and Intersex Individuals Experience?

This is not an easy question to answer. And there is no simple answer either. Television shows constantly portray the transgender community as crazy, insane, or stupid when, in fact, just like any other population segment, there are many transgender, transsexual, and intersex persons with advanced degrees in all fields, carrying on their lives, raising their families, and trying to go on living. As with the GLB community, it is thought that negative stereotypes and jokes, along with anti-GLBTI religious and hate groups, continue to propagate the negative attitudes towards the transgender and intersex population. Protection against violence, as well as employment protection and non-discrimination laws are critical steps. Inclusion of attacks based on gender or gender presentation in hate crime statistics and the training of law enforcement and medical personnel are strongly needed

Information provided by University Counseling Services at Virginia Commonwealth University

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