

TRANSGENDER

The term *transgender* refers to a diverse group of individuals whose gender does not match their biological sex at birth. It is an umbrella term that describes a wide range of gender-variant groups and individuals, from those who engage in transgender behavior on occasion, such as cross-dressers, to those who do so at all times.

Transgender is a word whose meaning has shifted over time. A version of the term was first used in 1969 by Virginia Prince in *Transvestia*, a magazine for cross-dressers. At that time, Prince used the term *transgenderal* to refer to a person who lived full time in the gender opposite their sex but had no desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery. With the printing of Leslie Fienberg's pamphlet "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come," in 1992, the term took on a broader scope, as Feinberg used *transgender* to refer to all people who were gender variant. This is the meaning of the word as it is currently used. It refers to not just those who identify themselves as transgendered, but to many different groups, including cross-dressers, transsexuals, androgynes, and genderqueers.

As the definition of transgendered has changed and many different groups have claimed some kind of transgender (*sic*) identity, it can be confusing to determine who is being referenced by the term. The definition used here is very broad and inclusive, but some estimates use narrower definitions. Therefore, it can be difficult to determine the number of transgendered individuals. In the United States, the estimates vary from 1 percent of the population to as high as 2 percent to 3 percent.

The remainder of this entry examines transgender-ing in various ways. First, the differences between sex, gender, and sexual orientation are examined in order to provide a better understanding of transgendering. The second part of the entry describes three theories of gender that have been used to explain transgendering. The final section defines and describes several different groups that fall into the category of transgender: transsexuals, including male-to-female and female-to-male, transgenderists, genderqueers, androgynes, cross-dressers, and drag performers, including drag kings and drag queens.

Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

It is important to examine the concepts of sex, gender, and sexual orientation, as these ideas form the basis of transgendering. *Sex* is the biological reproductive category in which a person is placed when born, while *gender* refers to the social behaviors and traits that are considered normal for a particular sex. A person who is transgendered experiences and expresses a disjuncture between sex and gender. *Sexual orientation* is usually defined in terms of the gender that one is typically attracted to.

Sex, whether one is born male or female, is a biological determination made at birth. There are multiple ways to determine sex, including examining the genitals at birth for a penis or a vagina; measuring hormone levels of estrogen and testosterone; examining chromosomes for XX or XY patterns; and later in life using secondary sex characteristics, such as facial hair. Sex is thought to be a mutually exclusive and exhaustive binary in that there are two and only two sexes: male and female.

Though the male-female binary of sex is considered a biological fact, this is not necessarily the case. A child can be born with any number of characteristics that make it difficult to determine its sex, such as ambiguous genitals or chromosomes that vary from XX and XY, such as XXY. In these cases, sex determination cannot easily be made as male or female, and so the child is considered *intersexed*. An intersexed infant is typically surgically altered to fit into either the male or female sex category. In most cases, intersexed infants are turned into females. Because the definition of intersexed varies depending on the way in which sex is determined, estimates of intersexed births vary widely, though it is generally thought that in at least 1 in 2,000 births, a child is born intersexed. In addition to intersexed infants, transsexuals go

through medical procedures in order to change the sex they were born with. *Transsexuals* are usually individuals born in one sex category who wish to change their sex through sex reassignment surgery. The existence of both transsexuals and intersexed individuals challenges the notion that sex is entirely biological.

Gender is a social construction based on sex, which defines the normal behaviors and traits for each sex, such as the way people are expected to walk, talk, and dress. Just as there are generally thought to be two sexes, there are generally only two genders that are considered socially acceptable: masculine and feminine. A person who is male is expected to be masculine, while a person who is female is expected to be feminine. For example, a male is expected to have shorter hair, as that is considered to be masculine, and a female is expected to have longer hair, as that is considered to be feminine. These are categories that are thought to be mutually exclusive: A person can be masculine or feminine, but not both masculine and feminine at the same time. Since gender is a social construction, what is considered appropriate masculine or feminine behavior can change over time and can differ across cultures. For example, while at one point in the United States, it was considered inappropriate for women to work outside the home, now it is more acceptable.

Transgender individuals disrupt the sex/gender binary in multiple ways. As gender is based on behavior and traits, a person who is one sex, for example, male, could learn how to be feminine and adopt the gender of the female sex. In addition, a person could combine both masculine and feminine traits and/or behaviors at the same time. Finally, a person might learn both masculinity and femininity and be able to switch back and forth between the two genders with ease.

Sexual orientation refers to the sex of the person an individual is attracted to. A person who is homosexual is attracted to those of the same sex as her or his own, while a person who is heterosexual is attracted to those of the opposite sex. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are also thought to be a binary; however, a person might be bisexual and be attracted to both sexes or might have a sexual orientation outside of these categories.

Though gender variance is frequently associated with sexual orientation, where it is thought that a person who is homosexual will identify with and express the gender opposite her or his sex, this is not always the case. Not all people who are homosexual will be transgendered, and not all transgendered people are homosexual. Transgendered individuals may be gay, straight, bisexual, or might not identify with a particular sexual orientation. Further, a person with a homosexual orientation might be gender variant, or they might engage in normative gender behavior

Types of Transgendering

There are many different narrower categories of trans-gendering. Gender variance is a very broad category that includes a variety of people, some of whom display cross-gender behavior occasionally and others who do so full-time. Several different types of trans-gender behavior are discussed in this section.

Transsexuals

Transsexuals are individuals who decide to undergo either partial or complete sex reassignment surgery. The process of changing from one sex to another is called *transitioning*. It is possible for a male to transition into a female (MTF) and for a female to transition into a male (FTM). To transition, transsexuals need to undergo a “real-life test” administered by medical professionals, in which they show that they are able to live full time in the opposite gender. This process takes years, and throughout, transsexuals undergo psychiatric and medical evaluation. For transsexuals, there are different medical procedures that can be done in the process of transitioning. These procedures differ for MTFs and for FTMs.

MTF transsexuals undergo hormone therapy, which can include multiple hormones, such as estrogen and anti-androgens. Estrogen is a hormone that helps MTFs to develop breasts. In addition, MTFs may have

their facial and body hair removed through processes such as electrolysis. Finally, multiple genital surgeries are done to construct a vagina.

FTM transsexuals also use hormone therapy, in this case, testosterone. They may undergo “top surgery,” which involves the removal of breast tissue and reconstruction of the chest. They may also undergo “bottom surgery,” in which a penis is constructed.

Both MTF transitioning and FTM transitioning may be done in whole or in part. For example, a person can undergo hormone therapy and not have any type of surgery done. There is a debate as to whether transsexuals are actually part of the transgender community or whether different needs exist in the transsexual community that do not need to be addressed in the transgender community at large. Because transsexuals change their sex to fit their gender identities, they are sometimes viewed as conforming to the sex/gender binary.

Transgenderists

Transgenderists are individuals who live full time as the gender opposite their biological sex but have no desire to change their bodies through sex reassignment surgery. A person is considered to be a transgenderist if he or she has been living full time as the opposite gender for over 2 years.

Genderqueers

Genderqueer is a more recent term that is used by people who engage in a variety of gender-variant behaviors but do not agree with the term *transgender*. Genderqueer individuals argue that because it has the root *trans*, transgender implies that a person is moving from one gender to another. Some do view themselves as part of a transgender community, while others do not. Genderqueers usually combine elements of both masculinity and femininity. In addition, genderqueer individuals might have either male or female bodies.

Androgynes

Androgynes are individuals who combine elements of masculinity and femininity. An androgyne can be either a male- or female-bodied individual who incorporates aspects of femininity and masculinity in her or his gender identity and presentation.

Cross-Dressers

Cross-dressers are those who occasionally dress as the opposite sex, though they show no desire to change their sex or to adopt cross-gendered behavior for extended periods of time. A person may cross-dress from either sex into the opposite gender, though generally cross-dressers are thought to be men who dress as women. This is because female-to-male cross-dressing is thought to be more common and socially acceptable.

Drag Performers

Drag performers can be either female- or male-bodied individuals or those in transition; they perform onstage the gender opposite the sex they were born, in an exaggerated or campy fashion. A *drag king* is a person who was born with a female body and performs onstage in a hypermasculine style, while a *drag queen* is a person born with a male body and performs onstage as a hyperfeminine woman.

Theoretical Background

There are three main theories of gender that can be used to explain transgenering: essentialism, social constructionism, and performativity. All three view sex and gender as having differing degrees of importance in the social world. In addition to sex and gender, the concepts of gender identity and gender

expression are particularly important for these theories. *Gender identity* refers to a person's self-identification as a man, a woman, or someone in between or outside of that binary. *Gender expression* refers to how a person expresses gender behavior, for example, through clothing or hairstyle. Gender identity is not something that others can view, while gender expression is visible to other people.

Essentialist theory places emphasis on biological processes and argues that gender is a fixed trait, as opposed to a social construction. This means gender is something that will not vary much over time and space, either on an individual basis or in society in general. In essentialism, transgendered individuals might view themselves as always having felt that they were actually members of the sex category opposite their biological sex at birth. Some argue that they were born transgender; for example, they state that they were born male but have felt for as long as they can remember that they were supposed to be female. In this case, they view their sex as male, but their gender identity is actually female. This is an essentialist notion of transgenering, as it relies on the idea that a person has a gender identity that he or she is born with, as opposed to one that is constructed or developed throughout that person's life. An example of the essentialist theory is seen in the narrative given by some transsexuals. Transsexuals feel the need to change their sex to match their gender identities, seen as an inborn trait. Their narratives often involve the feeling that they were born into the wrong sex and therefore need to change their physiology to more closely approximate the sex that corresponds with their sense of gender identity.

Social constructionism refers to the notion that sex and gender are separate concepts and that both are socially constructed. Sex is thought to be socially constructed by the medical community, as doctors define who is male and who is female. Gender is also socially constructed, as gender changes over time and across cultures. Further, while gender is thought to be based on sex, there is always the possibility that individuals may break the social norms that are dictated. Transgender individuals in this case may view sex and gender as completely distinct and believe that there is no reason for their gender to be based on their sex. This leads some to break conventional gender norms and develop a gender distinct from their sex. Gender identity is still a key concept here, as it is used to describe why a person might change from one gender to another, though it is not necessarily seen as something one is born with. Rather, gender identity is viewed as something the individual develops over time and that has the potential to change in the future. A person who is a transgenderist—that is, someone who lives full time as the opposite sex but feels no need for sex reassignment surgery—falls into the category of social constructionism. Their sex and their gender do not match, but they do not see this as a biological issue as they have no desire to change their biological sex through surgery.

Performance is a third way to view transgenering. *Performance theory* is very different from essentialist notions, which rely on a gender identity, and social constructionist notions, which rely on a distinction between sex and gender. Attributed to theorists Candace West and Don Zimmerman, as well as Judith Butler, this outlook sees gender as a performance that must be done on a daily basis. This performance does not have to be based on sex or on gender identity. Frequently, it is so routine that one might not pay attention to it or think of it as a performance—rather, it is just seen as something “normal” that one does in daily life. A person's gender performance may change depending on who that person is interacting with. In this case, transgender people might view their gender as more of an expression or performance rather than as an aspect of identity or an expression of their sex. The example of a drag queen is a good way to think about gender as a performance. Drag queens are male-bodied individuals who perform onstage as females. Though this is a very literal example, if one considers everyday life and interactions to be a broader stage on which to perform, it is easier to picture gender as a performance.

Conclusion

Transgender is a complicated term that incorporates many different types of people. A transgender individual is someone whose sex assignment at birth does not match the gender they consider themselves to be. There are many different groups that fall into the transgender category, including those who cross-dress in their private lives, or onstage, such as drag kings, and those whose cross-gender identification is so strong that they undergo medical procedures to change their sex. A person may simply identify as transgendered without changing sex and choose to live somewhere in between the masculine/feminine binary of gender constructed by society.

As sex is often used as an organizing feature in society and gender is thought to follow from sex, transgender individuals frequently face sanctions for their behavior. Individuals may face problems related to official identification, such as a passport with a sex category indicated that does not match a person's sex; issues in employment, such as being fired after having made the decision to transition to the opposite sex; and violence at the hands of those who wish to maintain a strict gender binary. Nonetheless, the transgender social movement continues to fight for the freedom of gender identity and expression for all

—*Kimberly Tauches*

FURTHER READINGS

Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw: Men, women, and the rest of us*. New York: Routledge.

Namaste, V. (2000). *Invisible lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Entry Citation and other information:

Tauches, Kimberly. "Transgender." *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. 2008. SAGE Publications. 6 Mar. 2009. <http://sage-ereference.com/gender/Article_n423.html>.

<http://www.sagepub.com/home.nav>

<http://www.amazon.com/Encyclopedia-Gender-Society-Jodi-OBrien/dp/1412909163>

Order from a bookstore

[SAGE](#) - Publisher

[Amazon.com](#)

[Barnes&Noble.com](#) - \$315.00

[Books-A-Million](#)

[Borders](#) - \$315.00

For decades, scholars of gender have been documenting and analyzing the various ways in which gender shapes individual lives, cultural beliefs and practices, and social and economic organization. Including contributions by experts in the field, the *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* covers the major theories, research, people, and issues in contemporary gender studies. This comprehensive, two-volume encyclopedia is distinguished by a cross-national/cross-cultural perspective that provides comparative analyses of the life experiences of men and women around the world.

Key Features:

- Provides users with a “gender lens” on society by focusing on significant gender scholarship within commonly recognized areas of social research

- Offers “framing” essays that summarize commonly used concepts and directions of research and provide an overview of each area (e.g., Media and Gender Socialization; Religion, Gender Roles in; Sexuality and Reproduction; Women’s Social Movements, History of)
- Examines basic aspects of social life from the most individual (self and identity) to the most global (transnational economics and politics).
- Contains new information on well-known subjects, including surprising facts that may counter common assumptions and research in areas of study where the impact of gender has been traditionally overlooked
- Reflects cutting-edge discussion and scholarship on current issues and debates regarding gender and society

More details

Encyclopedia of Gender and Society

By Jodi O'Brien, Sage Publications, inc, Sage eReference (Online service)

Published by SAGE, 2008

ISBN 1412909163, 9781412909167

1032 pages

WHY WE NEED THE TRANSGENDER DAY OF VISIBILITY

By John Corvino, columnist, 365gay.com 03.27.2009

March 31 is Transgender Day of Visibility. I’m supposed to participate in a panel that day. I’m a bit apprehensive.

Like many gay people, I tend to tiptoe around transgender issues. This surprises some straight people I know. They say, “But as a GLBT person yourself...”

But I’m not a GLBT person. I’m a G person. (Nobody is a GLBT person. You get two letters at most, and that’s only if one of them is T.)

One of my earliest experiences with the transgender community involved an angry trans woman standing up after one of my lectures in the mid-90’s.

“You’ve talked for an hour about gay and lesbian issues,” she griped, “but you’ve said nothing about ME. An hour-long lecture and not a word about me.”

I remember at the time not knowing quite how to respond. I figured she was referring to transgender issues, because I was pretty sure she was trans. She was about 6’2”, and to put it bluntly, she had man-hands.

But I didn’t want to say, “Oh, you’re transgender.” Because if I said, “Oh, you’re transgender,” I might come across as saying, “Oh, you’re transgender...”

“...and not very convincing at it.”

Isn’t it rude to guess? To me, it’s like trying to figure out if someone you know is pregnant, or just getting fat. Better to wait until she brings it up.

Of course, sometimes waiting is not an option, such as when a person’s gender presentation is ambiguous and you need to refer to “him” or “her.” You can only switch to the plural “they” for so long before it

becomes obvious that you're avoiding gendered pronouns. I actually had this problem once with a student, whose name was as gender-ambiguous as [his? her? their?] clothing. Turns out she was a MTF who deliberately skated the line as "genderqueer"—something I discovered only when other students filled me in. But absent such informants, how does one politely ask?

Regarding my angry questioner, though, I had no such doubts—just doubts about how to respond to her "nothing about me" complaint.

At the time, I think I said something like "I don't know you, so how can I talk about you?" That was a reasonable answer then. But what about now?

The truth is I still hardly ever talk or write about transgender issues. That's partly because I'm no expert on them. There are only so many minutes in an hour (or lines in a column), and you can't cover everything.

But to be frank, it's also partly because I'm nervous about offending people whom society has already hurt enough. It's a touchy subject, and like many touchy subjects, it's often easier for those of us without a direct stake in it simply to avoid it.

And that's probably as good a reason for Transgender Day of Visibility as any. Our discomfort around the issue—I know I'm not alone in this—means that we've got some learning to do. Bravo to those trans people willing to come out and teach us.

Some gay people wonder why we get lumped with the transgender community at all. Sexual orientation is one thing, they say, and gender identity is another.

That's true as far as it goes, and perhaps it's better to talk about our overlapping communities than about a single GLBT community.

Still, the alliance makes sense insofar as both (overlapping) groups suffer from rigid social expectations about sex and gender. Compare "If you're born biologically male, you should grow up to be a man" with "If you're born biologically male, you should grow up to love a woman." The similarities between the two inferences seem to outweigh the differences.

Then there are those who question whether linking GLB to T might slow down GLB political progress, insofar as society has a harder time with trans issues than sexual-orientation issues.

Even if you find those who raise such questions insensitive, it's hard to argue that they're being irrational. In general, society does have a harder time with trans people than gay, lesbian, or bisexual people, which is one reason why the trans community needs and deserves our support.

The bottom line is that there are a lot of us who could benefit from frank and open dialogue about all of these issues. Transgender Day of Visibility is an important step in that direction, and gays—and everyone else—should support it.

John Corvino, Ph.D. is an author, speaker, and philosophy professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. His column "The Gay Moralist" appears Fridays on 365gay.com.

For more about John Corvino, or to see clips from his "What's Morally Wrong with Homosexuality?" DVD, visit www.johncorvino.com.