

## Sexual Identity and Orientation

Gender identity is a complex concept to define. In our Western biomedical construction of the body, we have assigned only two genders, masculine and feminine, just as we recognize only two genital/birth sexes, male and female. In actuality some infants are born with both genitalia or an anatomical variation of one or both sexes. Many people also confuse gender and sex. When we talk about sex, we are talking about the assigned 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. 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).

Sexual identity is the degree to which we identify with the social and biological aspects of being a man or a woman. Many men and women identify primarily with their biological sex but transgendered people identify more with the biological and social characteristics of the other gender. An integral part of sexual identity is sexual orientation, which essentially is defined by who we are emotionally and/or physically attracted to.

A person's sexual orientation can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or questioning. All of these sexual orientations are considered to be normal by all prominent mental health organizations, such as the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. Conservatively, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people represent at least 10% of the total population.

Gender identity is defined through a collection of complex interactions between many variables. 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. The fact is that nobody really knows.

### Helpful Definitions:

**L** stands for Lesbians--women whose primary emotional and physical attractions and attachments are to other women.

**G** stands for Gay Men--men whose primary emotional and physical attractions and attachments are to other men.

**B** stands for Bisexuals--men or women whose primary emotional and physical attractions and attachments are to both women and men.

**T** stands for Transgendered--a broad term that encompasses cross-dressers, intersexed people, transsexuals, and people who live substantial portions of their lives as other than their birth gender. A transgendered person manifests a sense of self, the physical characteristics and/or personal expression commonly associated with a sex other than the one he or she was assigned at birth. A transitioning transgender person is one who is modifying her or his physical characteristics and manner of expression to more wholly encompass another gender.

**Q** stands for Questioning--someone who is questioning their sexual or gender orientation.

**Intersex** Biologically labeled as an hermaphrodite, a 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." For many years anatomical variances were "corrected" so that sex could be assigned before the infant left the hospital. 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.

**Homophobia** refers to the irrational fear of homosexuals or of being homosexual.

**Heterosexism** is the assumption of the inherent superiority of heterosexuality and the presumption that all people are, or should be, heterosexual. A systematic set of institutional and cultural arrangements which reward and privilege people for being or appearing to be heterosexual while establishing potential punishments or lack of privilege for being or appearing to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. (Evans, N. J., & Rankin, S., 1997)