

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Discussion on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

This essay is presented to advance the discussion about gender identity and sexual orientation and how the two are different concepts yet closely related and often intermingled incorrectly. I have written this essay for cisgender men and transgender men alike. My goal is to advance the discussion about gender identity and specifically how it relates to transgender people and cisgender people. Along the way, I will share my insights and knowledge that I have learned on my journey from a cisgender man totally unaware of transmen, or some use the term FTM, to a cisman who has lived with and loved transmen for nine years as of 2018.

To start with some definitions are in order. A transman (also known as a trans man, transgender man, or FTM) simply put is a man who was born in a female's body, hence the acronym FTM – female to male. Of course, life is never simple, and understanding gender identity may be one of the most complicated questions we endeavor to understand. For the interest of this essay, we are going to use the terms transman and FTM interchangeably to mean a person who identifies as a man but who was born in a female body (with female parts such as a vagina and breasts – this is also known as AFAB, assigned female at birth).

One of the challenges facing the transmale community is agreeing upon terminology. One of the first things I learned about transmen is that there is little agreement about what they want to call their sex organs and chest. For the sake of respect and the least amount of ambiguity I am going to refer to the female parts as a vagina and breasts, the clinical terms used. I beg the forgiveness of those of you who don't appreciate such terms. For further terminology discussions and definitions relating to transgender people please visit www.transmaleerotica.com/vocabulary.html

What is a cisman? (also known as a genetic man or bioman by some) Again, a basic definition would be a person who was born with male parts (a penis and testicles) and he identifies as male. Some people use the term cisman rather than bioman because they feel that all men, trans or cis, are born as men and to use the term bioman (its root is biological) or genetic man is an insult to transmen because they were born men also. The point is we are all men and some of us have penises and some of us don't. In mainstream orthodoxy, whether one has a penis or not is the general definition of maleness. Hopefully, you will discover while reading this essay that what we have between our legs or the size and shape of our chest has nothing to do with our maleness or being a man.

Society has long embraced a binary code of sorts (a closed set of two), even computers are based on a binary code of zeros and ones. Most humans embrace a binary world made up of two genders, male and female. Much like the computers, it makes it much simpler for us to categorize people as a male or female (a zero or a one, if you will). Of course, the problem is we are not a two-gender society. The false choice that people are either entirely male or entirely female has long been the fodder for much research and discussion. The focus of this essay is beyond the question of whether we are a binary society comprised of men and women; the assumption is we are not. We have long known as the Kinks perhaps so amply put it back in 1970 that “girls will be boys and boys will be girls, it's a mixed up muddled up shook up world...”

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I find it interesting that for many decades, since I can remember, we as a society have been aware of transwomen (people who were born male but who identify as females). Renee Richards, nee Richard Raskin, is a great example (if you're unfamiliar with Renee Richards she was born with male parts and underwent one of the first publicly acknowledged gender reassignment surgeries to give her a vagina and breasts – what made the case so noteworthy was she was a very good tennis player who wanted to compete in women's professional tennis tournaments, you can imagine the uproar this caused back in the mid-70s).

I don't believe there is a person of my generation (I graduated high school in 1976) that doesn't remember the great controversy and questions we all asked ourselves about transgenderism during that crucial struggle for transgender rights. Again, transgender rights are not the focus of this essay, but I mention it because transmen have not been in the national conscious, by and large, until very recently with the publicity surrounding Chas Bono. I don't really know the reason for this oversight or slight. I have some suspicions but have not researched it thoroughly enough to make a scientific analysis. I will explore some possible reasons later in the essay as to why it is only recently that so many of us have become aware of, and appreciate, transmen. Make no mistake about it there have been transmen all the way back in time, just like transwomen.

Back to the point, of course, there is a distinction to be made between crossdressers, transvestites and transwomen, much like we must make a distinction between so called "butch lesbians" and women who like to wear men's clothing and transmen. The key difference is gender identity. Most people confuse gender identity and sexual orientation as synonymous, meaning essentially the same thing. This could not be farther from the truth.

Sexual identity is our gender identity, male or female, that binary choice we are forced to make. Some of us see ourselves and feel like we are male. Some of us see ourselves and feel as if we are female. Unlike some in the United States, I strongly believe that we have the right to self-identify our gender regardless of our sex organs. If you're reading this essay, you probably agree.

Sexual orientation is generally more familiar and usually includes such labels as gay, bi, straight and more recently terms like pan or poly sexual. One's sexual orientation is based on one's choice for a sex partner, generally one with a penis and ass for sexual play, or one with a vagina, ass and breasts for sexual play. I say generally because like so many distinctions today there is a great deal of gray area and certainly a definition of one's sex organs can be much more inclusive than just a penis or vagina. The point I am making is that our sexual orientation has to do with our sexual preferences. Our gender or sexual identity does not.

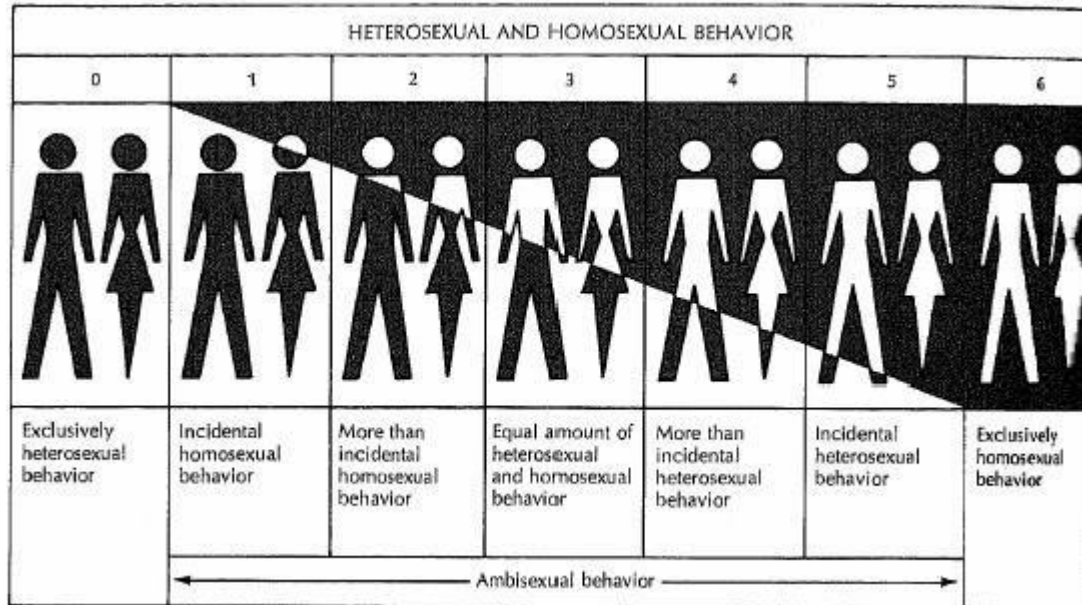
If we go back to our discussion about whether it is a binary choice, male or female, I want to take a moment to discuss perhaps a third or fourth option. There are a small number of people, not that the size of a population diminishes its importance or significance, which self-identify as gender neutral,

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or gender non-conformist. Since, I don't believe most of us are entirely female or entirely male, I understand or "get" this identity that some people proclaim.

I tend to look at gender much like Kinsey described heterosexual and homosexual behavior, along a continuum (you may have seen his famous diagram showing that some people are entirely heterosexual and then the next cohort is mostly heterosexual but has a small homosexual element to the other end of the spectrum where the person is entirely homosexual in his or her behavior).

Diagram One



Of course, there is great debate about what percentage of the population falls under each category, but we will leave that for others to conclude. My point is that gender identity is also not a binary choice of entirely male or entirely female. Many of us have elements of both genders within us. Quite often, those that self-identify as gender neutral or gender non-conformist feel they have characteristics and manifestations of both genders. I suppose a true gender-neutral individual might fall in the exact middle of a diagram that mirrors the Kinsey model but applying it to gender rather than sexual orientation.

So, how do sexual identity and sexual orientation relate to one another? Quite simply really, if a person identifies as male and has exclusive sexual interest in other males than he usually identified as gay. It doesn't matter whether he has a penis or a vagina, if that person identifies as a male and if he only finds sex with males as satisfying then we would probably "label" him as *gay*. If he finds sex with females his only fulfilling option we would identify him as *straight*, again regardless of his sex organs. Of course, those who enjoy sex with both genders would be *bisexual*.

This again is a simplified model that allows us to build some sort of construct of sexual preferences and behaviors. *Lesbians* are people who identify as female and are attracted to females only, as with gay men

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often there is a further delineation of top or bottom, butch or femme depending on who does what to whom and, of course, some are switch, meaning they do both.

Why label at all? I agree with so many people who claim to hate labels. Labels lead to stereotypes and stereotypes lead to straightjackets and conformity, or what I often call orthodoxy. I am all about unorthodoxy, no preconceived notions of gender, behavior, or sexual orientation. Let each person be who they are without labels both sexually and identity-wise. Sounds good and gender-neutralists have taken this idea a step further by even creating their own non-gender pronouns (zer, ze, hu, e...) or using the plural pronouns of they, themselves, their... as singular. There is no uniform set of pronouns even within the relatively small gender-neutral community. I am sure that could be worked out at some date in the future, if it is necessary.

I believe there is a much more fundamental and difficult problem with dropping labels entirely and that is without labels we can't make proper choices because we lack adequate information. For as much bad as stereotypes do, and I haven't even delved into the discrimination possibilities created by labeling, we must have labels so we can identify potential partners and hold intelligent conversations. I respect those that disagree with me and I am sure part of my perspective is driven by my training as a social scientist where we have to have labels or stereotypes or we can't build models of behavior, whether political, social or what have you.

I believe it goes beyond building models of behavior and the academic aspect however, we need to communicate to each other in a relatively short way what are preferences are. If I say I am gay to a potential female suitor that short sentence establishes a very real set of expectations and boundaries which are necessary for two people to carry on a relationship (interaction) and explore mutual interests.

Another example might be, you're interested in a potential sexual or romantic partner and ask your friend about her. Your friend says she is a lesbian, well that quickly and succinctly settles whether you're a possible partner or not, of course, assuming she is not interested in men as a sexual or romantic partner.

Let me explain further, most of us since we were little, have known of males that crossdress or like to dress like females. They get tremendous media attention; in fact, some have argued that flamboyant crossdressers (CDs) have held the gay movement back for years because 'Main Street America' was exposed to the most unorthodox element of the Pride parades conducted every year and incorrectly assumed all gays were men who like to dress like women and act like women. (Not to be examined in this essay but mentioned as a point of reference for those who would like to consider this dilemma further.) It is of utmost importance that the reader understand that I do not write the paragraph above as some sort of pejorative conclusion about crossdressers hurting the "gay movement."

Some of these crossdressing men simply enjoy the feel that women's clothing gives them, some feel that they are flaunting society and love the attention they receive. Where it gets a bit confusing is do these "men" really identify as women? In many cases the answer is no, they simply enjoy dressing in women's clothing and see themselves entirely as male. While other "crossdressers" are indeed women who have been born in a male body. These individuals are transgender females or women and dress in women's clothing because that is who they are, women. The distinction is what gender do they see themselves as, not the clothing they wear or who they prefer to have sex with. I have known CDs that totally identify as

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male and only exclusively have sex with females, there is no gender identity issues with them at all. Transgender individuals have been born in the wrong body, in the case of a transwoman, she is a woman in a man's body.

For many people gender identity never crosses their mind and understanding this distinction is a bit challenging. The important thing to learn is that if you believe that you are male, then indeed you are male regardless of your genitalia. It goes beyond a "choice," although we know that much evidence and argument has been put forth supporting the notion that sexual orientation isn't a choice either, gender identity is who you are. You don't choose it, it is innate, born in you. The vast majority of people feel a gender, it is the very core of their existence.

Transmen are men, period. Their internal identity is male. Being born with female parts creates a very difficult burden and path to finding and accepting their true nature. Earlier we discussed that perhaps we are not entirely male or female, this makes transgenderism much more difficult for some because they feel a bit of both. Generally, my experience has been that most transmen feel very strongly that they are male and know this from a very early age. I am not discounting transmen who have come to the decision later in life.

Finally, as a primer to prepare the reader I want to discuss briefly the idea of testosterone, surgery and implements that help transmen reach their ultimate goal – to be seen and accepted by the general public for who they are – men. I am not going to delve into these possible enhancements in much detail but for now it is important for me to make a distinction. There are those that believe a transman is not officially a transman unless he starts testosterone (nicknamed "T" by transmen), a male hormone that grows hair, deepens the voice, adds muscle mass, reconfigures the body (although it does not significantly reduce the size of the breasts or hips), grows the clitoris incredibly large for most transmen, and makes other physiological changes in the transman to help him present as male. Further, while it is true gender reassignment surgery is crucial for many transmen, it is not required to be a man. It may give an external presentation that helps support the internal being, but it is not what makes a man.

I tend to disagree with those individuals who believe you must be on T to be considered a transman, or have at least had top surgery. As I wrote, I disagree with that notion because outward appearance does not make me a man or one person manlier than another. I have known transmen who did not take T, and it is true they do not "pass" as a man by our traditional binary standards, but they are every bit a man inside as the ones I have known who have been on T for 40 years, and that is where it counts, inside. What makes a transman is not the fact he presents as a man, or has a deep voice, or a big beard. . . , it is that he is a man at his very core. My thesis throughout this essay was not hidden or saved for the end, it is clear: what makes a man a man is what he is inside not his genitalia, masculinity, hairiness, depth of his voice or any other outward characteristic, it is his inner identity and being.