



Similarities and Differences between Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

✓ What is the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation?

Gender identity is a person's internal sense of being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. Sexual orientation is someone's sexual attraction to others who may be of the opposite sex, the same sex, or either sex. Like other people, transgender people can be straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual. Generally speaking, their gender identity – not their physical sex status – determines their sexual orientation.

✓ What is Gender Identity Disorder (GID)?

GID is a psychological classification found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association. Although GID is the only diagnosis under which trans people may receive treatment, and therefore necessary, it also is controversial. GID has been used inappropriately and harmfully by some psychotherapists to treat gender variant youth. Moreover, many if not most trans people also believe they do not have a mental disorder.

✓ Is Gender Identity Disorder related to sexual orientation?

Not necessarily. Many gender variant children and teens who exhibit gender non-conforming behaviors are diagnosed with GID, and later in life identify as gay, lesbian or straight. Other gay men and lesbians conform to most traditional gender behaviors, with the exception of their same gender sexual relationships.

Yet there does seem to be some overlap between gender expression and sexual orientation. For example, some lesbians express their gender in a masculine fashion, by wearing men's clothes and their hair short. This is the area where sexual orientation and gender identity issues overlap and become blurred.

✓ Do trans people exhibit gender variant behaviors in childhood?

Just as all children experience social pressures to conform, most youth who later become transgender adults learn to bury their true gender preferences about dress, play and names. Many families may never recognize that their child is having severe difficulties, while others report children as young as age 3 clearly preferring the other gender.

✓ Do gender variant children benefit from psychotherapy?

Gender variant children suffering from gender dysphoria may benefit from supportive therapy, by learning to accept themselves and to cope better with social pressures. However, since the GID diagnosis has been used to manipulate these children to become more gender conforming, in efforts to prevent the development of homosexuality or transsexualism, parents are urged to screen prospective psychotherapists carefully regarding their therapeutic goals and techniques. Major medical professional organizations have declared that homosexuality is not an illness, and that so-called conversion or reparative therapies generally do more harm than good. This same concern now applies to gender variant children, adolescents and adults.

✓ What common experiences do trans people share with other sexual minorities?

They are all subject to the same social pressures to conform, which can include harassment and even violence. Later in life, many transgender people, like openly gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, must also deal with discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Many trans people also often confuse their

internal feelings of being another gender with feelings of being gay or lesbian. It can take a long time for them to recognize and acknowledge their true identity. And, like gay men and lesbians who do not come out, many trans people must cope with a profound loneliness as members of a relatively small sexual minority.

✓ **What common experiences do the families of transgender people share with those of other sexual minorities?**

The parents, families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans persons all may experience the same stages of denial and grief, along with safety concerns and much confusion when a family member comes out. Since the transgender experience is less common and more complex, with more profound changes, these parents have an even more difficult time reaching the stages of acceptance and celebration that we have come to know in PFLAG. They, too, are in need of much support and understanding.

Issues of Transgender Youth

✓ **Psychological Issues**

The powerful emotions behind gender dysphoria cause many trans children to grow up emotionally constricted and deeply ashamed of their difference. Over time, the pervasive societal stigmatization of trans people allows the low self-esteem of these children to grow into the internalized self-hatred of many transgender adults. While gay and lesbian people, who are far more numerous, have made some tremendous strides in educating the public, trans people are still struggling to present society with more positive, accurate portrayals of who they really are.

✓ **Family Issues**

Coming out as transgender is usually difficult for everyone concerned. Consequently, many male teenagers who crossdress do so in secret, never telling their families and friends about it. As adults, most continue to keep their crossdressing private, sometimes seeking support through transgender support groups. Those who tell their families experience a variety of reactions, from loving acceptance to complete rejection.

If a male adolescent's crossdressing is discovered by his parents, it is likely to precipitate an emotional crisis for the entire family. A female-to-male's "crossdressing" may be disguised as a "tomboy" phase that a daughter stubbornly refuses to grow out of, only later causing friction within the family.

However, if a youth is intent on gender transition, major changes are in store for the entire family. Being out about one's sexual orientation is a choice for most gay sons and lesbian daughters, but rarely with those who enter gender transition, since gender is so visible.

Moreover, the changes arising from gender transition will be much more profound than just physical appearances. In a sense, when transsexual youth "come out" and tell their family, their parents are indeed "losing a daughter" and gaining a new son they never knew they had, or vice-versa. Yet the youth remains their child, usually much happier, but with a whole new set of challenges to surmount.

While an increasing number of parents are acknowledging their child's gender struggle, most trans children keep their gender issues secret until they cannot hold them back any longer. Thus their revelation takes most parents by surprise. Moms and dads of these kids then must deal not only with shock, denial, anger, grief, misplaced guilt, and shame, but also many real concerns about the safety, health, surgery, employment, and future love relationships of their child. In addition, they must learn to call their child a new name, and even more difficult,

use new pronouns. Thus trans parents need tremendous support. In wondering what changes to expect, one mother found it comforting to anticipate seeing her new son look like her former daughter's twin brother.

✓ **The Risks Faced by Trans Youth**

When a trans youth or adult comes out, the ability to pass in their new gender is usually limited. Hormonal therapy can take years to produce a passable appearance, especially with male-to-female trans people, and some may never pass completely. Thus those in gender transition are readily apparent to others, and they are vulnerable to intense harassment, discrimination, and even violence.

Trans youth often feel that their true gender identity is crucial to the survival of self. If their parents refuse to allow their gender transition, or if their families and friends withhold support, these youths incur the same risks faced by gay and lesbian youth with non-accepting families. Some may runaway from home and live on the streets, or they may seek to escape the pain of their lives through substance abuse. Like gay and lesbian youth, trans youth are also at higher risk for suicide.

Due to severe employment discrimination, male-to-female transgender youth who are homeless, runaways or throwaways often work in the sex industry to survive and to pay for their hormones, electrolysis, cosmetic surgery and genital sex reassignment surgery. These youth are therefore at high risk for HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and they should be referred to understanding health care providers for testing and/or treatment. Female-to-male youth may resort to con games or other marginal means to support themselves.

Taking street hormones or high dose hormones without medical supervision is also commonplace, and may result in lethal complications. Hormonal sex reassignment can only be safely done under the supervision of an experienced endocrinologist following the Standards of Care. Some MTF trans persons who are impatient with the slow pace of hormonal sex reassignment may seek silicone injections to immediately improve their body shape, but these have proven to be a health risk later in life.

✓ **Referral for Hormonal and Surgical Sex Reassignment**

Transsexual people go to extraordinary lengths to obtain relief from their gender dysphoria. The desire to modify the body to conform to one's gender identity cannot be adequately explained by someone who is transsexual, nor can it be fully understood by someone who is not. This self-perceived need becomes a determined drive, a desperate search for relief and release from that ultimate of all oppressors – one's own body. Nor can the urgency itself be easily understood. It is a need to match one's exterior with one's interior, to achieve harmony of spirit and shape, of body and soul. It is a cry to be granted what is a given for all others: a gender identity not to be doubted nor ridiculed, but merely accepted.

Although parents may be alarmed by their teen's desire for physical transformation, they need to recognize the intensity behind it. Referral to a psychotherapist experienced in trans issues who can make a proper diagnosis is the key first step. If a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder is made, the doctor and parents should respect and support the child's feelings of who they really are.

Trans People and the Law

✓ **Discrimination**

Denial of an opportunity to make a living is the single most damaging and pervasive form of discrimination against trans people. Since changing gender is so readily apparent, trans people often lose their jobs, are denied

employment, or become under-employed regardless of their experience or education. Trans people are frequently denied housing or even evicted from their rented homes, and many more have been denied service at restaurants, stores or other public facilities. In schools, trans youth often must deal with harassment from other students with little protection from transphobic teachers and school administrators, who often react with dismay, disrespect, or disbelief.

Many health care providers refuse to treat trans people who seek modification of their bodies through endocrinology or cosmetic surgeries, and there are only a small number of surgeons in North America who perform sex reassignment surgeries. Moreover, most medical procedures related to sex reassignment are routinely excluded from nearly all health insurance plans, and thus the costs must be borne directly by the patient, with the surgeries ranging from \$5,000 to \$150,000.

Sadly, many AIDS service organizations have not regarded trans people as part of their service community, even though transgendered sex workers are at very great risk for HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs). Many trans persons will not seek health care due to the ridicule they must face when dealing with insensitive health care providers. There also have been cases where even emergency medical care has been withheld from transgendered persons.

✓ **Legal Protection for Trans People**

In existing case law, the courts have found that transgendered people are not covered under anti-discrimination laws protecting persons on the basis of sexual orientation or sex. Trans people were specifically excluded in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991, and they also are not covered under the disability laws of nearly all the states that have them. Both state and federal courts have almost uniformly held that transgendered people are outside the legal definitions and protections of existing anti-discrimination laws.

Only a few jurisdictions, including the states of Minnesota (by statute), Oregon (by administrative decision) and a small but growing list of cities and counties, offer trans people protection from discrimination. Thus most transgendered activists have viewed inclusion of protection based on gender identity in the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) as absolutely critical.

✓ **Hate Crimes**

Trans people are frequently subjected to verbal taunts and threats, hate mail, harassing telephone calls, vandalism, and acts of physical and sexual violence committed by the same persons who target lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Transgendered people are frequently perceived to be homosexual simply because of their appearance, which is often that of a masculine woman or a feminine man. Because this perception is so pervasive, trans people are particularly subject to targeting by people who are homophobic. But due to police refusal to investigate, the victim's shame, and the lack of any legal requirement to report such attacks as hate crimes, acts of violence against trans people often go unreported.

✓ **Re-Documentation**

Obtaining legal identification for their new names and genders is often difficult for trans people. While legal name changes may be obtained in almost all states either through the courts or by common law, the rules for changing gender on identity documents vary greatly from state to state. Most states do not officially permit pre-operative or non-operative transsexuals to obtain change of sex designations on their new driver's licenses. While most states will recognize a new sex status and correct birth certificates after sex reassignment surgery, a few states refuse to amend birth certificates for any reason.

School transcripts, employment records and credit histories also can be difficult to change. Instead of statutes, often there are only unwritten "policies", which are followed inconsistently, and thus trans people are sometimes left to the mercy of transphobic administrators.

A New Day is Dawning

In spite of all these complex difficulties, many more trans people are coming out, transitioning or finding new ways to live meaningful lives. More parents are learning to accept and embrace them for who they are, and to be justly proud of their exceptional honesty and courage. While many couples part when one spouse comes out, an increasing number are staying married – resulting in legal same sex marriages! Some trans parents are raising their children, continuing their careers or finding new ones, and organizing to build a safer, saner society. The medical and counseling professions are slowly becoming more informed, more flexible and more willing to provide the necessary, specialized services. Support groups for trans persons and their families are forming in increasing numbers, and even the media is carrying many positive stories.

You – the reader – are invited to help educate those who don't understand and to join those who are working towards the solution.

*** Taken from PFLAG.org (<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=383>)