

## BEYOND MALE AND FEMALE: AN INTRODUCTION TO TRANS ISSUES

For many people, the world is made up of males and females who exhibit various physical and behavioural qualities defined as either masculine or feminine. However, for others this view does not reflect their reality. In terms of gender and sexual identity, a binary model that acknowledges only male and female leaves out those who embrace both male and female qualities, and those who don't feel comfortable with either of these labels. In this *Check the Research* we will explore some of the different ways that trans people experience and define their gender and sexual identities, and look at some recent research on this topic.

**"TRANS PEOPLE LIVE PARTLY OR ENTIRELY IN A SEX OR GENDER THAT WAS NOT ASSIGNED TO THEM AT BIRTH."**

(Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development. 2011. p.1.)

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The term transgender is commonly used to refer to those whose sexual identity cannot easily fit the stereotypical designation of male or female. This term is considered to be an umbrella term that covers people with a wide range of identities and beliefs. The use of the word trans is preferred by many since it does not include the socially constructed concept of gender. Gender refers to socially defined roles for males and females, which may include accepted ways of dress, behaviour, physical appearance and expression. In contrast, when the term sex is used to refer to males and females, the reference is to a person's biological status that is dictated by hormonal and chromosomal attributes, and internal and external anatomy.

**"TRANS (TRANSGENDER, TRANSSEXUAL OR TRANSITIONED) PEOPLE REPRESENT A BROAD RANGE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO... SHARE THE COMMON EXPERIENCE OF KNOWING THEMSELVES TO BE A GENDER THAT IS NOT CONGRUENT WITH THEIR BIRTH SEX."**

(Bauer, 2012)

A person's sex is usually assigned at birth. However for some, their assigned sex does not match their internal sense of gender. Some people choose surgical or other medical interventions, such as hormone therapy, to reconcile their physical appearance with their internal sense of gender. This process may be called sex or gender reassignment, or it may be known as gender affirmation. The term transsexual is often used to describe a person who has transitioned from being a male to a female, or from being a female to a male. This may or may not involve surgical and other medical interventions. For those who transition from male to female or female to male, their internal sense of gender identity does not match their biological sex assigned at birth, and from an early age, they may have a sense that they were born into the wrong body. In a recent survey of trans people in Ontario, 59% stated that they knew their internal gender identity before they reached puberty (Trans Pulse, 2011).

**"I REMEMBER SEEING A TRANS WOMAN ON TV WHEN I WAS 4-5 YEARS OLD, AND THINKING OH COOL JUST LIKE ME"**

(Transgender survey respondent cited in Riley, Clemson, Sitharthan, & Diamond, 2012).

Not all trans people will choose to alter their physical self, and many do not feel the need to relate to either a male or female identity. Some prefer a more fluid definition of gender or a genderless alternative. Gender diverse, genderqueer, two-spirited, gender nonconforming and third gender are some terms used by trans people to describe



themselves. There are many terms that are used to convey a trans identity, and this reflects the need to respect and include the perceptions of an individual when considering issues of gender and sexuality.

**“WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT AMONG TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSE CANADIANS IS THE ABILITY TO CHOOSE HOW THEIR LIVES AND IDENTITIES ARE REPRESENTED.”**

(Egale Canada. 2011., p.6)

## TRANS PEOPLE AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The concept of sexual orientation differs from that of gender identity. Whereas gender identity refers to a person's sense of being male or female, a combination of both, or something entirely different, sexual orientation considers multiple dimensions of attraction, behaviour and identity (Bauer, 2012). A trans person may have a sexual orientation described as lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual. For example, a female who has transitioned to male may be attracted to and form relationships with women. In this case, although he was born as a female, he is now male with a heterosexual orientation. A male who chooses to live as a woman without undergoing surgical sex reassignment, may be attracted to other women and thus have a lesbian orientation. A survey of trans people in Ontario revealed a range of reported sexual orientations, including bisexual (30%), gay (11%), lesbian (14%), queer (31%), straight (30%), and not sure or questioning (13%)(Trans Pulse E-Bulletin, 2010). The authors of this study note that these results are similar to results of research on the transgender population in the United States.

## RESEARCH ON TRANS PEOPLE

For the purposes of research, the concerns of trans people are often included with those of the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities. However, recent studies have underlined the need for research that does not focus exclusively on sexual orientation and concepts of male and female, and that addresses the issues unique to trans people. Research has shown that trans people experience discrimination and are at increased risk of violence because of their gender choices and identities (Norton & Herek, 2012). A survey of 1700 students from across Canada found that trans youth experienced higher rates of verbal and physical harassment than did lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) or straight students; 95% of trans youth felt unsafe at school compared to 75% of LGB students and 20% of straight students (Taylor et al., 2008).

In a study of over 2,000 heterosexual adults in the U.S., researchers sought to understand those who held negative attitudes towards trans people (Norton & Herek, 2012). They found that men were more likely than women to hold negative views, and that those who strongly supported the idea of gender conformity for men and women were less accepting of trans people. Negative attitudes were also correlated with a high regard for rules and authority, an hostility towards egalitarian attitudes in general, and political conservatism. The authors note that studies from other countries, including Canada, indicate similar findings regarding the attitudes of men and women (Norton & Herek, 2012).

A recent survey of 61 trans people from the U.S, Canada and U.K. posed the question: Overall, how positive do you feel about your current identification as a transgender individual? Over 70% of participants said they felt extremely or very positive, 25% said they felt somewhat positive, and only 3% reported that they felt not very positive (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011). It is interesting to consider that such a high percentage of the respondents were positive about their trans identities, given the results of other studies that point to an increased risk for violence and discrimination among the trans population. Participants mentioned various reasons for their positive feelings, and the authors noted some common themes that emerged from the survey. A trans identity gave many a feeling of congruence between their inner feelings and outer appearance. It also contributed to a sense of personal growth and self-knowledge, which led to more positive interpersonal relationships with family and friends. Trans people commented that their experiences led them to empathize with the struggles of other minorities and to appreciate the need the need to support the struggle for civil rights in general. They also mentioned



that their experiences gave them insight into male and female sexes and genders, and allowed them to challenge restrictive gender norms and stereotypes.

**"I DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT WHETHER MY BEHAVIOUR SUITS MY GENDER BECAUSE THERE ARE NO SET RULES FOR 'TRANSGENDER' THE WAY THERE ARE FOR MAN AND WOMAN."**

(No label, transgender; age 22, cited in Riggle et al., 2011, p. 152)

## WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Trans people represent a diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations. A trans view of the world forces us to reconsider gender stereotypes and rigid ways of thinking about male and female identities. The many terms that can be used to express a trans identity reflect this diversity. Statistics show that many trans people experience violence and discrimination because they do not fit into clearly defined categories of male and female. More research and education on trans issues is needed to encourage greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity.

**"BEING TRANSGENDER PRESENTS A CHALLENGE TO ACCEPTED THINKING AND STEREOTYPES AND ENCOURAGES US ALL TO EXAMINE OUR OWN PREJUDICES AND BLINKERED VIEWS."**

(Male to Female, butch dyke, lesbian; age 57 cited in Riggle et al., 2011, p.152.)

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