

SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

By this time, most people in the mental health field are familiar with the distinction drawn between gender identity and sexual orientation. When I do presentations, I usually begin by giving the following explanation, as a “jumping off” point for further discussion: Gender identity is about a person’s internal sense of being male or female or some combination of the two. Sexual orientation is about a person’s attractions – who do you fall in love with, who are you attracted to, who do you feel comfortable forming relationships with?

However, I then expand on these two definitions, as I don’t think they reflect the whole picture. My training is in holistic therapy, and this perspective on people makes it impossible for me to pigeonhole portions of core identity, as if one aspect of identity does not influence another.

Do sexual orientation and gender identity influence each other? Are there points of intersection, or overlap? From my own experience, conversations I’ve had with other trans people, and observations of clients, I would answer both these questions, “Yes.”

It’s easy to conceptualize the two aspects of identity as completely separate, but only if one imagines a person existing in isolation from others, in a social vacuum. As soon as one begins to consider people in relation to others, it becomes more clear why one can’t completely separate sexuality and gender identity.

Consider for a moment a woman involved in a life-partner relationship with another woman. She may call herself a lesbian, a dyke, a gay woman, bisexual, or some term I’ve never heard before. In a cultural context, however, she is seen as being in a lesbian relationship, with all the difficulties that entails. She and her partner may choose to interact socially with other lesbians as much as possible, in order to escape for a time the hostility the larger culture generally exhibits toward same-sex couples.

But what if half this couple never really felt comfortable living female and decides eventually to transition to male? Perhaps he and his partner decide to stay together. What happens to both their sexual orientations? He will probably no longer accept the label “lesbian” as being a good fit for himself. Post-transition, he and his partner will be seen as heterosexual, particularly by those who never knew them as a lesbian couple. But is this comfortable to them both? Social gender role comes into play when one transitions. I have met a number of couples who were formerly seen as heterosexual and are now perceived as same-sex couples because one of them has transitioned. One biomale, still involved with the person who used to be his wife but is now his FTM partner, quips that he considers himself “queer but not gay.” He has never been involved with a gay biomale, and does not consider himself part of the gay male community. Yet his partner is now male, so he is part of a same-sex couple. To further complicate matters, they are legally married and have two children together.

I have met FTMs who found their sexuality morphed post-transition. Many identified as lesbians pre-transition and were not attracted to men at all – until after their transition. Consider, however, the difference: pre-transition, any relationship they would have had with a man would have been seen as heterosexual, and the man in question would (probably) have been straight, or bisexual. It’s a different story, post-transition – the

relationship then would be a gay relationship, an FTM involved either with a bioman or another FTM. The dynamics of a woman involved with a man are quite different from the dynamics of a man involved with another man. The politics of gender come into play in numerous ways, far too complex for this brief article.

I met one FTM who had given up trying to pigeonhole his sexuality. He used to be a lesbian separatist (to hold at bay the man inside, he told me) and assumed he'd be a straight man post-transition as he'd only ever been attracted to women. But after he started taking testosterone, he gradually realized he was more attracted to men (either biomen or other FTMs) than to women. He finally decided what attracted him was the dynamic of a same-sex relationship. When he was a woman, that meant being involved with women. After transition, that meant being involved with men. He has since evolved to embrace the term "pansexual," which he defines to mean "anything that moves." I don't want to imply that this man is polyamorous. Rather, he has given up on defining gender in a dualistic fashion, and thus does not use language that perpetuates a dualistic view of gender. This man's process is a striking example of what can happen when one allows the emergence of a core aspect of identity – other aspects of core identity can then emerge in their fullness as well. Denial can't be applied selectively to one emotion or aspect of identity. In repressing gender identity, sexuality will also be stunted or at the least, misinterpreted.

If you feel more confused after reading this article than when you began, I can't really apologize for that. I don't make the social rules, I just point 'em out to the best of my ability.

I do invite you to consider sexual orientation as it applies in your own life. If you identify as heterosexual, how does it feel when you find yourself attracted to someone of your same sex/gender? Comfortable? Uncomfortable? Do you hide it, and if so, are you aware of all the reasons why you do so? If you identify as gay or lesbian, how comfortable are you if you find yourself attracted to someone of the "opposite" sex? Regardless of what your sexual orientation is, how would you feel if you learned someone you found attractive had transitioned at some point in the past?

While they are not the same aspect of identity, I don't think it's possible to consider sexual orientation separate from gender identity; I believe they are inextricably tied together because our society persists in linking them. As a society, we draw harsh distinctions between a woman-to-woman or man-to-man relationship and a man-to-woman relationship. (I realize I'm leaving out polyamorous relationships here, but that's a whole other topic far beyond the scope of this article) As a society, we have created a link between the gender of two partners and the degree to which a relationship between them is socially sanctioned. While neither the fact of having gender or sexuality is socially constructed, the pigeonholes known as sexual orientation *are* a matter of social construction. The gender identity of the two partners determines the sexual orientation of each, by our culture's standards, and this is the intersection of gender identity and sexuality.

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