

# Gender Identity

A significant issue of our times is *gender identity* (or at least it should be). When the tabloids make transsexualism public, we simultaneously enjoy its sensationalism and are appalled by it. But what does it really mean?

Do we dare open that box labelled transsexualism and look at what's inside? If the answer turns out to be more than just a headline, will we get scared? And of course the worst would be: what if we ourselves turn out to be in question?

## Transsexual People: Who Are They?

Transsexualism is about *gender identity*—transsexuals are people who have an identity that doesn't match their anatomy, and that's that. Transsexual people are just normal women and men like anybody else, simply trapped in the wrong kind of body.

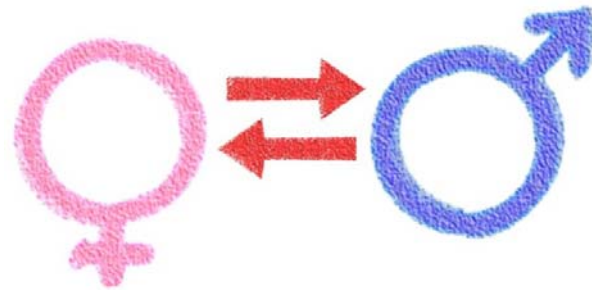
Most people, if not all of us, have some part of our bodies we don't like: a big nose, short legs, scarred skin, fat tummies or whatever. That's not the real us, or we don't want it to be anyway. Others of us are born with some kind of handicap or become handicapped later in life due to sickness or accidents; these people's identities—how they perceive themselves as persons—most certainly are not made up entirely of their handicaps.

Do you believe that if we change our anatomy we will be another person? Well, yes, most of us will answer, and in one way that is so very true. We each play a role in our society, and by changing our looks, we change that role. That's why so many people turn to plastic surgery to improve their looks.

But what about our souls, the very persons we really are? We can become happier by changing our looks for the better and thus enter a new role, but inside we are still the same persons as before. So what is happening then?



A question of identity



A change in anatomy affects the way we are able to express ourselves emotionally, and if the change turns out right, we will get happier. If not, we can get seriously depressed. Transsexual people are the proof that changes to our looks do affect our emotions, and this proof also shows that transsexual people are no different than anybody else.

If you change a person's body to look female instead of male (or the other way around), and that person gets happy, then you have a transsexual person: that person finally has a body that reflects who he or she really is. These people have a *gender identity*—their true selves—that was opposite their bodies, and they too wanted to change their looks as anybody else to become happy. So in this sense transsexual people are quite normal, and there is actually nothing more to it than that.

## Homosexuals vs. Transsexuals

People in general (and especially people from various countries) experience a lot of confusion regarding homosexuality and transsexualism, and if that weren't enough, we have the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Queer) community that really messes things up for us. Who is who, and what is what? Even as a transsexual myself, this can be confusing.

To straighten things out we first need to understand (or accept) that we are all different as persons (thank God for that, I guess many of us will say) and we have different ways of understanding things. Don't most conflicts occur because of differences in understanding? To be able to take part in a discussion we need to have some common views, and in this case it's like trying to see the forest before the trees.

To begin to understand we need to skip all those man-made labels and concentrate on the larger issue of the difference between "sexual orientation" and "gender identity".

Sexual orientation is about attraction—people who attract us sexually. Attraction we all can feel, but orientation is like a wheel of fortune that can point anywhere and even sometimes gets stuck in the middle.

Gender identity however is about you, the gender of your soul, and it has nothing to do with attraction at all.

### **What Determines Gender?**

We currently determine gender by anatomy, but a person's true gender identity, the soul, doesn't show on the surface. If a person's soul were determined by anatomy (penis or vagina) then transsexualism wouldn't exist and all of us would be happy regardless of handicap or looks.

Doctors and families have experimented with assigning gender to newborns without any sexual anatomy (or with parts of both) by changing children's gender through surgery and through cultural upbringing. Neither always works. It's enough that just one case fails to tell us that there is more to gender than looks and culture.

Now science says that gender identity has been located in one section within the human brain, because female and male brains differ in that section. So back to square one again: it's just that one brain thing that matters and penis/vagina is not that one thing anymore.

With this line of thinking it follows that in the future we won't decide a newborn child's gender by external anatomy; we will x-ray the brain instead, and if brain gender and penis/vagina mismatch, this child will get surgery and hormone treatments, without any further questions asked. If the brain theory were correct, this would be the consensus, or wouldn't it?

Somehow common sense indicates that gender is so much more than a switch in the brain. If it were that simple, what's the fuss? The logical, scientific explanation would then be: *Everything about us as persons adjusts according to our brains' gender switch position.*

But why must we behave the way we do, and why do we experience all those emotions, and what about love and happiness? That scientific explanation doesn't make sense to me. The rule of cause and resulting effects tells me that it should be the other way around: *Because everything about us as people differs, female and male brains differ.*

### **Sensational Transsexual Discovery?**

Scientific studies should consider the sensationalism caused by news about gender changes as well as the reactions of fear that people have to transsexualism. These reactions reveal that the roots of transsexualism may be present in all of us, which may be the scary part. If we look at how and where transsexualism occurs, we are forced to realize that it can happen to any of us; we are randomly affected.

So are we ready for the truth? What if it turns out that each one of us is a mixture along a continuum of male and female, and the bodies we are born with are randomly picked out of a closet like clothes we wear? It's just that some of us can't live with the coat we have been given; the weave of the fibers makes us allergic and we get ill. If this were the truth, would we accept it?

The "truth" is what we believe is politically and morally appropriate, and science often adjusts to that, just as once the Earth was flat as a pancake and your intelligence was measured by the shape of your skull.

Regarding transsexualism, the truth lies within us, as well as the courage to search for truth. Do we dare reveal that courage today? If we do, that would be a sensational discovery we all could benefit from.

Article by Li Sam, September 2006.