

Lesson 7 – Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

KEY CONCEPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY, AND GENDER EXPRESSION¹

To talk about issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, it is useful to distinguish among the following four concepts: sex/gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation.

Many people assume that a person's sex, gender and sexual orientation are "either-or" categories that "naturally" match up in a certain way. For example, people who are born with a male body are expected to identify psychologically as male; to act in characteristically masculine ways; and to be attracted exclusively to women. These assumptions are harmful when they are used to negate the existence of LGBT lives and relationships. The most current thinking by reputable scientists, psychologists, sociologists and cultural experts is that a person's sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation do not automatically and permanently line up in just one way. Contemporary thinkers understand that cultures across history and around the world view gender roles and sexuality in many different ways, and that, within our own contemporary culture, these are more fluid and flexible categories than was once thought. Especially when dealing with young people who are coming to terms with their identities, it is important to avoid forcing youth into rigid labels or binary categories.

SEX/GENDER

<i>Refers to:</i>	characteristics of male or female, most often based on genital and reproductive anatomy and/or genetic makeup
<i>Typical binary:</i>	male OR female
<i>Beyond the binary:</i>	intersex, transsexual

GENDER IDENTITY

<i>Refers to:</i>	the innate and deeply felt sense of one's self as being male, female or something other or in-between
<i>Typical binary:</i>	male OR female
<i>Beyond the binary:</i>	transgender, genderqueer

¹ See NAT'L CTR. FOR LESBIAN RTS., BREAKING THE SILENCE: LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER FOSTER YOUTH TELL THEIR STORIES (2006), http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/lgbtq_terminology.pdf?docID=3443.

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GENDER EXPRESSION

Refers to: outward characteristics, social/cultural expectations and roles that have typically been associated with either male or female persons

Typical binary: masculine OR feminine

Beyond the binary: butch, femme; transgender, genderqueer or non-conforming; queer

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Refers to: primary romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to people of a particular sex

Typical binary: gay/lesbian OR heterosexual

Beyond the binary: bisexual, queer