



From Where I Sit: Repurposing Gender

Jessica Pettitt

Much like Facebook describes some relationship statuses, gender is... *complicated*. Gender is actually very simple, as in not complex, but not easy to always grasp. When people say their relationship is complicated they may mean that they have multiple partners or maybe the members of a particular relationship haven't picked words that represent their involvement with one another therefore resulting in something simple that is hard to articulate. The same is true when a member of the fraternal movement explains their on-going involvement with their affiliated organization long after college graduation. Living your values, even through retirement, is a simple concept that is dependent on others who "don't get it" somehow making sense of it all.

I have been stirring up conversations about gender in single sex organizations for about five years now. Researchers and educators like myself, looked at Olympic, NCAA, and Title IX, regulations as well as university non-discrimination policies for sexual orientation and/or gender expression inclusion. I looked to the fraternal movement as the frontier in which to do work in gender inclusion. I wanted to begin to ask the unconsidered questions: Who can be a brother? Who can be a sister? What about my life experience with gender supports my affiliation? In 2007, Sarah Fielding, as an

[www.iamsocialjustice.com](http://www.iamsocialjustice.com)

966 Lloyd Street, Eureka, California 95503 • (917) 543-0966 • [contactme@iamsocialjustice.com](mailto:contactme@iamsocialjustice.com)





undergraduate intern, and I started this area of research by gathering resources and conducting interviews with over 60 fraternity and sorority members that had transitioned, or changed, their gender identity from the one they were labeled at birth, before, during, or after becoming affiliated with a fraternity or sorority. As a result, a *Beginning the Conversation Guide* has been downloaded more than 5,700 times from [www.lambda10.org/transgender](http://www.lambda10.org/transgender) and I have noticed an increase in attendance at educational workshops at conferences. There were even over 400 participants in a free webinar that I facilitated in the Fall 2010 semester hosted at breakdrink.com (still available for viewing for free). It seems a complicated conversation is beginning in chapters, on campuses, and throughout some corners of the fraternal movement.

As this conversation gets started, I am frequently asked to list best practices and specific examples of exactly how to address gender expression as a fluid changing variable within the context of a single sex based organization. Again, the answer is both simple and complicated. There is not a perfect or even good standard of best practices to refer to nor is there a typical process of action steps to address the question of inclusion of members or potential members that identify differently than they were labeled at birth. Literally, this is why the conversation needs to be stirred and our definitions of single sex based organizations and the connections between brotherhood or sisterhood and the social construction of gender need to be repurposed. Here is a break down of sexual





identity, sex, and gender to help clarify the ungraspable complicated yet very simple differences that you can begin the conversation yourselves and/or help other's do the same.

Terms	Sexual Identity/Orientation	Sex	Gender
Definition	How a person defines an emotional, sexual, and/or romantic in nature relationship with another	Birth assigned label used on birth certificates and decided based on external genitalia either based on ultrasound images and/or upon birth.	The performance and perception of one's performance along a socially constructed continuum ranging from feminine to masculine with androgyny in the middle.
Brief definition	How I define who I am attracted to or want to be in a relationship with	What I assume is in your pants... It isn't socially acceptable to ask a person's	How I interpret the pants themselves (fabric, accessories, movement, sound)





		<p>internal or external genitalia, chromosomal, or hormonal status prior to interacting (or recruiting) them – so we guess or assume generally based on how we perceive a person – this is actually how sex and gender are functionally conflated together.</p>	<p>Literally, how I chose to dress, act, etc., and how I read another’s dress and actions along a spectrum of gender expressions.</p>
Common elements	<p>Generally assumed straight/heterosexual unless otherwise told. If assumed G/L it is because</p>	<p>Hormones Chromosomes Genitals</p>	<p>Roles Identity Expression  (perception from</p>



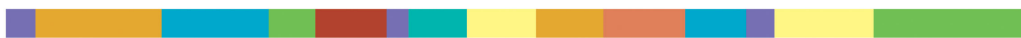


	<p>how we perceive their gender. (e.g. feminine man =gay man, masculine woman = lesbian woman) (there are also masculine gay men and feminine lesbians but that isn't the assumed norm)</p>	<p><u>Secondary Sex Characteristics</u></p> <p>Hair, voice, size, etc</p>	<p>others or of others)</p>
<p>Common defining labels</p>	<p>Heterosexual</p> <p>Gay</p> <p>Lesbian</p> <p>Bisexual</p> <p>Fluid</p> <p>Pan or Omnisexual</p> <p>Queer</p> <p>Asexual</p>	<p>Male</p> <p>Intersex (formerly called hermaphrodite)</p> <p>Female</p>	<p>Masculine/Man</p> <p>Female to Male</p> <p>Transman</p> <p>Androgynous</p> <p>Transwoman</p> <p>Male to Female</p> <p>Feminine/Woman</p>





			<p>The term transvestite describes what is now known as a cross dresser. This defines a person who wears the “other” gender’s clothing in private for personal reasons.</p> <p>The term drag king (female in male’s clothing) and drag queen (male in female’s clothing) describes someone that wear’s the “other’s” clothing in a public</p>
--	--	--	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------





			performative manner.
Areas of impact	Ubiquitous in our organizations and now federally protected against discrimination.  Common words to address power dynamics: Homophobia, Biphobia, Heterosexism, Heteronormativity	Title IX, Single-sex organizations, single sex bathrooms, locker rooms, etc., as well as sex assigned roommates, etc. Generally single or same sex assignments are based on official paperwork as hormones, chromosomes, and internal organs are not tested or examined unless	Perhaps this is where brotherhood and sisterhood really exists?  Fraternity and Sorority membership may be gendered





		<p>having a medical concern regarding puberty, fertility, or menopause.</p> <p>Because of the impact of hormone levels, single sex athletic teams and new NCAA and Olympic regulations are based on hormone levels of team members.</p>	
--	--	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--

Short of identifying best practices, great examples, and paved paths' to follow, I invited us all to participate in a self reflective conversation regarding gender. Together, let's face a complicated issue and repurpose the concept of gender to stay true to our affiliation's values and maintain the relevancy of the fraternal movement. Here are some starting places:





- What is your (individually and/or organizationally) definition of brotherhood/sisterhood?
- How much variety exists within your brothers/sisters life experiences as a man/woman?
- If you live your values can you develop the kind of men and woman you want in the world?
- How does a fellow member's chromosomal or hormonal make up ensure strong leadership within your organization?
- How does gender play a role in your organization's Ritual?

To repurpose gender we must first understand how gender actually impacts our single sex organizations. We must understand the actual implications of our assumptions and limiting definitions of gender and how this silences our brothers and sisters and closes doors to potential new members that could serve our organizations and live our collective values that can keep the fraternal movement relevant. Repurposing doesn't mean starting over, deleting history, or necessarily throwing open the doors in the face of tradition. What repurposing means is to use existing resources to address new needs and realities. It's time to begin this conversation.

