

Gender Bending Your Ear!
By Jessica Pettitt

Traditionally, society believes that gender is a fixed and immutable characteristic and that each person is either a man or a woman, male or female. Gender, as it turns out, is far more complex than that. Gender identity is determined by many characteristics. Some characteristics that are part of gender identity, that go beyond just the physical, are psychological, and even spiritual characteristics that help determine personal gender identity. Transgender or gender variant people may not fit into the rigid gender roles and identities that society is limited us to. Consequently, the general public, peers and professionals find themselves lacking even a basic understanding of gender identity, gender expression, and gender perception as it pertains to gender variant individuals.

Of course, not all people who transgress cultural norms in regards to gender are or should be considered gender variant. Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are three separate and unrelated identities and it is imperative that each of these concepts is understood. Take into consideration that a “feminine” person can be “genetically” male or female, have any body shape, any variation of genitals, and a combination of romantic and/or sexual attractions, as can a “masculine” person or even “androgynous” person.

Each of us must examine our own perceptions or misperceptions of people and recognize that most likely you have been socially trained to combine these three distinct identities based on socially constructed norms you grow up with and not what reflects reality.

For example, Sam just attended one of your meetings. Sam is 5’8” has short hair, wears sweatpants and an oversized sweater with work boots. There is no noticeable facial hair or jewelry. Sam works in Housing as a Hall Director. Sam wants kids, but currently has a dog and a cat. Sam’s partner lives in the Residence Hall as well and works at the Career Center on campus. Sam fills the weekends with painting, volunteering as a mentor, and playing soccer.

Based off of this description, how do you visualize Sam? Is Sam short for Samantha or Samuel? In this culture, names, appearance, clothes, jobs, dreams, aspirations, partner status, hobbies, etc., all have socially constructive meanings or attachments to sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Often times, sex and gender are even used as synonyms, but are Sam’s sex and gender the same? How would you refer to Sam if describing Sam to another person? Are you making assumptions, or do you know for sure?

The best way to get the answers would be to ask Sam.

It is extremely important to refer to a trans/gender variant person by the pronoun appropriate to their presented gender. If someone identifies as female, then refer to the person as she; if they identify as male, refer to the person as he. If you are not sure, ask. Once you know, be as consistent as possible. It’s okay if you forget or slip up once in a while. Nevertheless, it is very important to make the effort.

As an educator, inform others to:

- Never use the word "it" when referring to someone who is transgender; either in his/her presence or to others when they are not present. To do so is incredibly insulting and disrespectful.
- Trust that their decision to present themselves in a gender different from their birth gender is not one made lightly. Most likely they have spent many year's working through conflicts associated with gender identity issues before presenting their identity to others. Do not assume that it is a passing phase. Take is seriously.
- Do NOT assume that everyone knows or that it is okay to "out" someone. Some trans/gender variant people "pass" very well and the only way someone would know would be if they were told. The decision to tell someone about their gender issues should be left to the trans/gender variant person themselves.
- Do NOT assume a trans/gender variant person is straight. Do not assume they are gay, lesbian or bisexual, either.

As an ally:

- Take the initiative to review your campus policies (housing, non-discrimination, employment, etc.) for the inclusion of gender identity/expression.
- Work towards the inclusion of your student community before a student is forced to take the initiative for them. Introduce trainings, readings, and other resources to your colleagues to continue educational efforts to deconstruct social norms around gender, sex, and sexual orientation.
- Attend on of the many trans/gender variant related programs, roundtables, seminars, workshops, and social events.
- Talk to campus officials about the Gender Neutral Bathrooms and how that provides a safe place for individuals perceived to be in the wrong bathroom so they may avoid violence and discrimination.

The most important element to remember is that anything you do is more than what is probably being done. With your energy, action, and initiative, these changes can end the oppression and violent discrimination against trans/gender variant students, faculty, and staff members. Change begins with each of us.

Visit the Consortium of Higher Education Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Resource Professionals website at www.lgbtcampus.org.

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<http://www.jessicapettitt.com/images/GenderBending.pdf>