

## Notes for Sexuality Task group – Defining Terminology. 10/02/17

Gender identity refers to our innate, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither. It can be different from the biological sex we are assigned at birth. Many people who are living this experience refer to themselves as ‘transgender.’ What most people find difficult is to differentiate between gender and gender identity.

Gender (masculine and feminine) is a social construct that socially defines roles for men and women. These may differ from culture to culture. Individual gender identity, however is set in the brain before a child is born and guides the child in how to behave and interact with others.

When the physical sex and gender identity do not match, it creates confusion, tension, and anxiety within and between the individuals and their surrounding culture. The means of resolving this tension varies. Some will be driven to seek relief through surgery, bringing body into harmony with the brain. Others will find that harmony through alternative means of gender expression. <sup>1</sup>

Nothing can be taken for granted in the theology of sex and gender. Take for example the truism (something that looks obvious) that we are either women or men. There are at least three reasons for doubting even this. First, if we are adults, we have *become* either men or women, because of a comprehensive process. It may take half a lifetime to discover the pervasive influences on us that helped to make us the men and women we now are. We are more than our biology.

Second, there are many adults who are unable to identify with either label. There are *intersex*, and *transsexual* or *transgender*, people who cannot easily say they identify with this *binary* (twofold) division of humanity into separate biological sexes.<sup>2</sup>

Third, for most of Christian history, people were inclined to believe that there was a single sex, “man,” which existed on a continuum between greater (male) and lesser (female) degrees of perfection. <sup>3</sup>

### Defining Terms.

**Sex:** Sex, is the division of a species into either male or female, especially in relation to reproductive functions.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the report *Moving Toward Full Inclusion Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The United church of Canada. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. The United Church of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Thatcher, Adrian. *God, Sex, and Gender An Introduction*. UK: Wiley – Blackwell, 2011, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

**Sexuality:** the term "sexuality" is very recent. It began to be used in the 1860's, as part of a "discourse" of sex which was invented by the medical profession.

### What's in a name?

1. Naming is a primary characteristic of language. Words name objects.
2. Naming is a form of "power – over". When Adam named the animals and the birds, "the LORD God ... brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name" (Gen.2:19). When the infant John the Baptist was circumcised on the eighth day, his father Zechariah "asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John' (Luke 1: 63-64). These examples of naming are examples of *performatives*. The people doing the naming have the power and authority to do so. They name the named by speaking their names.
3. Naming is part of a wider discourse. A "discourse" can just be a language people use, but in its more technical sense discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, *The archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Pantheon, New York). Sexuality and gender also form discourses. The names given to people to describe their sexual orientation, preferences, and activities, belong to a *medical discourse*. They *form the objects of which they speak*, in particular ways.

A good example of the power of medical discourse is the invention of the categories "heterosexual" and "homosexual." The term "homosexual" was coined only in 1869. "Heterosexual" is even later, occurring first in German in 1887, and in English in 1892.

A "heterosexual" was at first a term of *deviance*. It named people who had straight sex for pleasure, not just for procreation. Alongside "homosexual" it soon became a *norm*, in fact *the* norm against which most sexual deviance is measured.

About 140 years ago, homosexual people were given new labels. They were defined by a medical establishment, and like the animals named by Adam in the book of Genesis they were unable to refuse these names. A homosexual person came to be identified by his or her sexual orientation and pronounced abnormal.

Homosexual and bisexual people were marginalized and rendered both strange and immoral in a sexual system where only one type of desire was to be legitimately expressed.

4. Medics and moralists do not have a monopoly on discourse. All sexual groups have an "in" language which they use to speak about themselves and those outside their groups.
5. Name-calling can sometimes be accepted by minorities who are stigmatized by the names majorities give them and turned into means of resistance against them. The term "queer" was originally an abusive, derogatory term, aimed at almost any non-conforming, non-heterosexual person, "queer" became accepted, adopted, and reflected back on its users. To use the word in this sense became important in refusing contempt and building self-affirmation, much as "gay pride" marches still do today. <sup>4</sup>

**Bisexuality:** is a sexual orientation which emerged into public consciousness through the work of Dr Alfred Kinsey, whose seven-point scale measured sexual behaviour on a continuum, with exclusive heterosexuality (represented by 0) on one end, exclusive homosexuality (represented by 6) on the other end, and degrees of bisexuality at points 1 through 5.

Due in large part to Kinsey's scale, bisexuality came to be viewed as a third sexual orientation, defined by 'attraction to both sexes,' and conceptualized as in-between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

The creation of bisexuality as a distinct orientation made identifying as a *bisexual* possible. Since the 1990s, definitions of bisexuality as 'attraction to both sexes' have been criticized for reinforcing a binary system of gender and sex that excludes those who do not fit easily into male or female categories. In response to such critiques, many now define bisexuality as the capacity for attraction to both same-sex and other-sex partners.<sup>5</sup>

### **Intersex and Transgender**

Christian theologians often assume everyone has a clear and stable physical sex, male or female. Some argue that gender identity must match this physical sex only in certain ways in physically, psychologically, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, Margaret. "Bisexual People." In *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*. (Ed: Adrian Thatcher). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015, 641.

spiritually healthy people. However, the existence of intersex conditions and of transgender identities makes clear, first, that not everyone does have a clear male or female physical sex, and second, that gender identity does not 'match' physical sex typically for everyone. <sup>6</sup>

**Intersex:** all human foetuses' genital regions initially appear identical, and typically, beginning around seven weeks' gestation, most develop along clear male or female lines: XY foetuses usually develop testes, a penis and scrotum, and are brought up as boys from birth; XX foetuses usually develop ovaries, a clitoris, and vulva, and are brought up as girls. However, people with intersex conditions – about one in every 2,500 people have bodies different from typical male or female ones.

Formerly, the term 'hermaphrodite' was used for people with intersex conditions, but this is misleading and is now considered archaic. 'Hermaphrodite' implies someone with a full set of both male and female genitalia. However, intersex conditions mostly fall into two categories:

- those where the external genitalia look 'in between' male and female genitalia (with, for example, a genital tubercle which looks bigger than a clitoris but smaller than a penis);
- those where the external genitalia look unremarkably male or female, but there are unusual combinations of internal and external characteristics (for example, testes and XY chromosomes, and a clitoris, vulva, and vaginal opening).<sup>7</sup>

The intersex condition has been known for an extensive period of time, but the term "intersexuality" was not introduced until 1920. Before then the classical hybrid word "hermaphroditism" was used to cover all intersex people and the use of that term still lingers.

**Hermaphrodite:** In Greek mythology, Hermaphroditus was the child of Aphrodite and Hermes. After being seduced by the nymph Salmacis, he was transformed into an androgynous being, that is, s/he had both masculine and feminine characteristics and so had an ambiguous sex. <sup>8</sup>

**Transgender:** People who identify as transgender or transsexual are usually born with typical male or female anatomies but feel as though they've been born into the "wrong body." For example, a person who identifies as

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<sup>6</sup> Cornwall, Susannah. "Intersex and Transgender People." In *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*. (Ed: Adrian Thatcher). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015, 657.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 658.

<sup>8</sup> Thatcher, Adrian. *God, Sex, and Gender*. 12-13.

transgender or transsexual may have typical female anatomy but feel like a male and seek to become male by taking hormones or electing to have sex reassignment surgeries. Some transgender people are cross-dressers. Others are not. They sometimes wear clothing associated with a sex their bodies are not.<sup>9</sup>

It is unclear what causes transgender. Unlike intersex, where there is a clear variation from typical male or female anatomy, there is not uncontested evidence of a physical difference in transgender people.<sup>10</sup>

Like intersex, transgender is under-acknowledged within Christian theology.

Physical differences such as those caused by intersex have sometimes been understood as pathological. Cultural representations of 'hermaphrodites' sometimes figure them as monsters, freaks, or degenerates. In some contemporary Christian theology, intersex people are more likely to be treated compassionately, but their bodies may nonetheless be understood as problematic, not innocuous variations but pathological deviations from legitimate maleness or femaleness.<sup>11</sup>

**Transvestite:** a person who sometimes wears clothes traditionally worn by and associated with the opposite sex; typically, a male who cross - dresses occasionally by habit or compulsion. *Transvestite* should not be confused with *transgender* or *transsexual*; transvestites are often happy with their gender and have no desire to change their sex, but simply enjoy being able to cross-dress from time to time.

The word "transvestite" is increasingly rejected because of its association with fetishism, as in the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (DSM) – the same reference that, years ago, concluded that homosexuality was a mental illness. The term "transvestite" is synonymous with "crossdresser."

**Cross dresser:** Simplistically speaking, a crossdresser is a person whose gender identification is with one sex but who wears the clothing of the opposite sex because the clothing is the clothing of the opposite sex. For a crossdresser, dressing is not about comfort or convenience, but about the gender role that these garments are associated with. With many

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>10</sup> Cornwall, Susannah. "Intersex and Transgender People." In *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*. (Ed: Adrian Thatcher). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015, 660.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 665.

crossdressers, it is not just the clothes but also the mannerisms and the being in the role of the opposite sex. <sup>12</sup>

**Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD):** is a type of anxiety disorder, where a part of a person's physical features or attributes provoke intense anxiety and negative distorted beliefs about a part of their appearance. When others tell them they look fine or that the flaw isn't noticeable, people with BDD don't hear or believe it due to their preoccupation with their perceived flaw. They stay focused on their negative thoughts, and think that even small or invisible body imperfection is a cause for great concern. These thoughts cause severe emotional distress and interfere with daily functioning.

BDD most often develops in adolescents and teens, and research shows that it affects men and women almost equally. This disorder is thought to be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, which may be genetically based. A person with a family history of anxiety disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder is more prone to develop this type of problem. <sup>13</sup>

**Gender Dysphoria (GD):** discomfort with one's birth/assigned gender.<sup>14</sup>

**Two – spirit people:** anthropologists sometimes speak of a 'third sex.' <sup>15</sup> Some Native American tribes contained *berdaches*, men and women, now called "two-spirit" people, who adopted the gender roles associated with the biological sex that they were not.

There are *leiti* in Tonga, and *fa'afafine* in Samoa. These are "men who identify themselves as women." <sup>16</sup>

The *kathoeyes* of Thailand, the "ladyboys" of Brazil, and many other groups of people throughout the world, are regarded by some anthropologists as a third sex.

It is noted that some Native (North) American cultures understand a multi-gendered system valuing gender diversity – male, female, male females, female males, and non-specific genders and a balance of male and female known to some as "Two Spirit." Being "Two-Spirit" helps "straight" people to

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<sup>12</sup> [http://iamtransgendered.com/TRansexuals\\_Transvestites\\_TRAnsgendered.aspx](http://iamtransgendered.com/TRansexuals_Transvestites_TRAnsgendered.aspx) Accessed 10/02/17.

<sup>13</sup> Anxiety New Zealand Trust. Information Sheet on Body Dysmorphic Disorder. Also, <http://www.dermnetnz.org/topics/dysmorphobia/>

<sup>14</sup> Beardsley, Christina and Michelle O'Brien (Eds). *This is my body. Hearing the theology of transgender Christians*. London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2016, 194.

<sup>15</sup> Farley, Margaret. *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, New York/London: Continuum, 2006, 152-153.

<sup>16</sup> Halapua, Winston. *Moana waves: Oceania and homosexuality*, in *Other Voices, Other Worlds – The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality* (ed. T. Brown), London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006, 26-39.

gain a glimpse of what it is like to live in a world where the binary-sexed world is not the only real world. <sup>17</sup>

**To be continued: Last revision 6/08/19**

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<sup>17</sup> Thatcher, 13-14.