

# AN INTRODUCTION TO SEX UAL IDEN TITY

**A BEGINNER'S GUIDE** BY STEVEN ANDERSON

## INDEX:

1. Foreword
2. Understanding Identity
3. Sex as Identity
4. Gender Terminology in Brief
  - Cisgender
  - Transgender
  - Non-Binary
  - Intersex
5. Sexual Preference
  - Heterosexuality
  - Homosexuality
  - Bisexuality/ Pansexuality
6. The Importance of Sexual Identity
7. The Representation of Sexuality
8. End Notes and Citations

## FOREWORD

Your identity is both self-generated and socially constructed. How we identify and label ourselves helps humans to communicate and express essential concepts about their personhood.<sup>1</sup> Identities contain numerous intersecting facets that make up a person's individuality. The type of music a person likes, their cultural background, their health history, the language they speak and more all culminate into the rich fabric of personal identity. Some aspects of our identities are public, some are private. Some traits are given more weight than others when it comes to their levels of social importance. A person's sexuality sits on the borders of important / not important and public or private and is comprised of multiple aspects aside from a person's outright sexual behaviors.<sup>2</sup> As a major component of personal identity, sexuality is often at the forefront of the public eye. This pamphlet seeks to break down some aspects of identity including how identities are formed, the expression of gender, the expression of sexual orientation, and reconciling identity conflicts through community representation. By reading this work I hope that readers explore the definitions of multiple avenues for human sexual expression aside from those that are traditionally known and are empowered to take further steps toward understanding and embracing varying sexual identities, including their own.

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## UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY

Some aspects of our identities are given to us when we are born. In the United States, at birth, parents apply for a birth certificate and social security number. Doctors assign a person their given gender based on biological sex and parents give us our names. These factors all become the start for a person's fledgling identity. As people grow their contextual worldview informs their identity expression. Humans learn through categorization and comparison and come to understand the given meaning of labels.<sup>3</sup> Labels, or "identity markers," that a person acquires over time like; male, caucasian, student, American, cisgender, bisexual, dog-person, all shape and classify identity. Labels associate people with activities, preferences, places also associate us with other people.

Labels are not only given to a person through association, an identity is also a form of personal expression. A person can choose to align or disassociate themselves with given labels as a matter of expression. Some identity markers have neutral connotations and others can be positively or negatively charged depending on popular culture.<sup>4</sup> Labeling often leads to stereotyping but it can also be useful in daily life to differentiate groups and to express a person's individuality.<sup>5</sup>

## SEX AS IDENTITY

Sex has been and continues to be a major signifier of one's identity. Sexual identity has multiple facets. Kate M. Ott notes; Sexuality develops in relationships (personal and systemic) shaped by social, biological, physiological, cultural and spiritual forces".<sup>6</sup> Throughout time sex-as-gender has been represented with the binary gendered system of male and female and was supported by biology. Around the world, your sex (gender) has historically determined a person's role as property or proprietor and limited a person's vocational opportunities.<sup>7</sup> As such genders gained specific roles to play in daily life, and like many aspects humanity, are societal constructs subject to change between cultures and time periods. Examples of this can be found in the differences between the patriarchal power dynamics of Abrahamic religions as examples from India and Tanzania.<sup>8</sup>

## GENDER TERMINOLOGY IN BRIEF

Gender is the foremost public aspect of a person's sexual identity. Historically the binary system has dictated social boundaries for sexual identity, however, sociological and psychological research has broadened our understanding of gender into a spectrum of various representations and identities.<sup>9</sup> Gender expression is a personal choice on how a person expresses their gender through actions or outward appearance.

[The following is a short, non-comprehensive list of gender identities and examples of their expression]

### CISGENDER

Someone who aligns their gender expression along with the sex they were signed at birth would be considered cisgender.<sup>10</sup> This generally takes the form of conforming to social norms regarding gender. For instance, in the United States, a cisgender-man might choose to have short hair or grow a beard, and wear a suit and tie as an outward expression of his gender identity, or a cis-woman might wear their hair long, wear makeup or wear a skirt as an outward expression of her identity. Gender pronouns for cisgender people are; he/him/his for male, she/her/hers for female.<sup>11</sup>



## TRANSGENDER

Non-cisgender people generally do not fully align their personal identity towards the sex they were assigned at birth.<sup>12</sup> People who identify as transgender identify with a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth. This form of identity can be expressed through clothing, alterations to a person's voice and even legal and/or medical procedures to permanently alter one's identity. Gender pronouns for transgender people are also generally he/him/his for male, she/her/hers for female. As an example a person whose gender assigned at birth as male who identifies as a female would be represented with the pronouns; she/her/hers.<sup>13</sup>

## NON-BINARY

Non-cisgender people who do not identify as transgender may also express their gender identity through titles such as genderfluid, agender, genderqueer, or non-binary and may choose to express their gender through socially non-conforming acts.<sup>14</sup> In the United States, this may be seen as a man wearing feminine jewelry or makeup while still dressing in masculine clothing. It can also be seen as a woman donning traditionally male-oriented traits such as short hair or masculine clothing. These examples are by no means an authority on non-binary gender expression but serve as limited examples of outward expression. Gender pronouns can vary for non-cisgender people, ranging from the plural; they/them/theirs, to other gender-neutral pronouns such as xe/xem/xyrs as well as others.<sup>15</sup>

## INTERSEX

Non-cisgender people who's biology differs from traditional biological standards can be known as intersex. Intersex people are sometimes born with genital or chromosomal variations.<sup>16</sup> Intersex people are often assigned the gender (either male or female) that most closely matches their biology at birth and are often subject to corrective medical procedures.<sup>17</sup> Outwardly intersex people sometimes represent themselves as male or female according to their culture and generally use the pronouns; he/him/his, or she/her/hers, but may also identify as queer or non-binary and use non-binary, gender-neutral pronouns.

## SEXUAL PREFERENCE

Sexual preferences are simultaneously a private and public mark of one's identity.<sup>18</sup> Sexual preference, or sexual orientation, refers to the gender one prefers in pursuit of a sexual relationship. Traditionally sexual orientation has been seen to mirror biological utility. Over time, however, the intense scrutiny and study on human sexuality has given rise to the demonstration of different purposes for intercourse aside from procreation and has shown the prevalence of natural sexual preferences aside from the standard of heterosexuality.<sup>19</sup> Sexual preference as identity is often expressed through the type of sexual relationships people pursue and advertise both for emotional and sexual fulfillment.

[The following is a short, non-comprehensive list of sexual orientations and preferences]

## HETEROSEXUALITY

Traditionally sexual preference has been seen to mirror biological utility and is identified as heterosexual; a person attracted to and wanting to pursue sexual intercourse with a person of their opposite-sex [or gender].<sup>20</sup> Most people are assumed to be heterosexual until identified otherwise. "Heterosexual" is also a label/identity marker for relationship type aside from a person's sexual preference. It is possible for people who do not identify as heterosexual to be in a heterosexual relationship or to engage in heterosexual intercourse. While the most common sexual identity, it is not any more or less natural than other sexual identities. Other identity terms for people who identify as heterosexual include; straight.



## HOMOSEXUALITY

Some people identify as being homosexual (gay); a person being attracted to and wanting to pursue sexual intercourse with a person of their same gender.<sup>21</sup> "Homosexual / gay" is also a label/identity marker for relationship type aside from a person's sexual preference. It is possible for people who do not identify as homosexual to be in a homosexual relationship or to engage in same-gender intercourse. Other identity terms for homosexuality include; gay, and lesbian (a woman who is predominantly attracted to other women).<sup>22</sup>

## BISEXUALITY / PANSEXUALITY

Other sexual preferences include the identity label bisexual; a person being attracted to and wanting to pursue sexual intercourse with a person of their same gender and/or their traditionally opposite gender or is attracted to more than one gender, and pansexual; a person being attracted to and wanting to pursue sexual intercourse with a person regardless of their biological sex or gender identity.<sup>23</sup> It is possible for people who identify as bisexual or pansexual to be in homosexual and/or heterosexual relationships. Terms related to bisexual and pansexual are sometimes shortened to; Bi, or Pan.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

Many argue that a person's sexuality is intrinsically tied to a person's self-worth or that sexuality is at the forefront of a person's identity, whether these observations hold true or not is one thing, however, it is important to recognize that humans are sexual beings and that sexuality cannot be stripped away from our personhood, after all our bodies have sexuality built-in, at the very least biologically and physiologically. Since sex cannot be removed from a person it is instead trivialized and regulated (along with many other aspects of life) for its utility as a form of control over the populace, through secular and religious law.<sup>24</sup> Sexuality has been studied at length in the scientific community by psychoanalysts and sociologists alike, and much data has been to light, yet in the broader spheres of society and religion, we have sent mixed signals about sexuality's importance.<sup>25</sup> That being said our sexual identities should not be taken lightly. As aspects of our personhood sexuality represented by gender identity / expression, through orientation / preference, biology and activity demand respect.

## THE REPRESENTATION OF SEXUALITY

There are many reasons a person may choose to be public or private about their sexual identity. Typically heterosexuality is seen as the default orientation and heterosexual-cisgender, people have low risks in truly representing their honest sexual identities. However, those who identify as LGBTQ+ face risks for representing themselves outside of cultural norms and standards. Being private about sexual identity or preference is sometimes called "being closeted" and being public about sexual identity is often referred to as being "out of the closet" or "out".<sup>26</sup> Cultural stigmas based on gender roles, religious taboos, and national laws have historically seen non-heterosexual identities as a threat to traditional values.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup> People who identify as transgender, gay, queer or people who identify outwardly as heterosexual and engage in homosexual sex, face internal repression and social oppression on a daily basis. LGBTQ+ people face worldwide systematic inequalities when it comes to legal rights and healthcare.<sup>30,31</sup> Sometimes sexual minorities even face violence by publicly proclaiming their honest sexual identities, or by living their private identities in secret.<sup>32, 33</sup> Even people who identify as gay or lesbian and choose to abstain from sexual relationships can be at risk for violence and social inequalities by speaking the truth.

While this oppression is unfortunately commonplace and risks to personal injury and opportunity can be high, having clear representation is critical to



ending social stigmas and bringing about social equality with regards to sexual identity. By accepting the risks of being publicly out as LGBTQ+, a person is just as likely to find a welcoming community or a compatible romantic partner. Likewise, by being out LGBTQ+ communities have a better chance at true representation, both through civil rights work, such as has been done by groups such as the Human Rights Campaign, as well as individual activists like the late Harvey Milk or statistical analysis such as the compilation of Duchamp and Singer's work in "LGBTQ Stats".<sup>34</sup> By allowing everyone to be open about sexual identity, we empower those who are confused or questioning to seek personal answers about their personal identities, especially in areas that may seem conflicting such as in matters of sexuality and religious tolerance.<sup>35</sup> By choosing to be open, and perhaps vulnerable, about one's identity a person can feel free.

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