

Ask Matt: What Am I? Labels and Identities

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Abstract

Today we have two letters about identity that I thought went together quite well. So here goes: A reader writes: "I consider myself transgender - I was born female, but feel very much that the concept of 'womanhood' does not apply to me in the slightest. I've always pursued more male interests and likings - [...]"

Article

Today we have two letters about identity that I thought went together quite well. So here goes:

A reader writes:

"I consider myself transgender - I was born female, but feel very much that the concept of 'womanhood' does not apply to me in the slightest. I've always pursued more male interests and likings - everything from activities to clothes - even when I was too young to realize what I was doing. 'Man' best describes what I am when think of myself.

"In looking through different websites, there is no end of material about how to medically transition, and some information about how to 'pass' and live life as the opposite gender without having surgery.

"Though I wish that I had been born a male, I'm not too jazzed about having my fairly-well-working body operated on, or, for that matter, transitioning to living as a guy at all. I express myself with my choice of attire (think butch lesbian or gay guy). Are there other trans people who don't medically and socially transition, and are there any resources that I'm missing? What's the likelihood that other trans people will decide that I'm not really transgender, and are they correct?"

There are always some trans people who will decide that you are not trans. Whether they are correct or not depends on what definition they are using for "trans" or "transgender" - there are still quite a few out there. But the term "transgender" has morphed in meaning since I transitioned fifteen years ago.

I also know quite a few people who identify as trans*, which also seems to have different definitions, depending on who you talk to. But some of the people I know who identify as trans asterisk, which is how they verbalize the term, also see themselves as genderqueer or as simply not fitting into the mainstream gender binary. Others simply use it to express the fact that there are many different types of trans people.

I have one friend (who uses the plural pronoun "they") who primarily identifies as genderqueer, but they also identify as trans*, and they say that this is their way of connecting with and being a part of the larger trans community, but separating themselves in the sense that they have no plans to

transition, either medically or socially. They feel like they are on the fringe of what they consider to be the more “mainstream” transgender and transsexual community.

So everyone’s got his/her/hir/their own way of identifying, and I think that there are many people who identify as trans, trans*, or transgender who have no intention of transitioning in any way. Your identity is your own.

It’s possible that you will be challenged by some trans people who will say you aren’t trans because you don’t intend to transition. It’s possible that you will be turned away from some social or support groups because of this, but if that’s the case, those groups were not for you anyway. You have no choice but to live your own identity, whatever that is to you, and try not to worry about what other people think you are or think you should be.

I’m sure there are resources out there for those people who are not transitioning in any way, but who still identify as trans. Readers have probably brought them to my attention before, but it’s hard to keep track, so hopefully they will offer them up again. I would also advise that you look for resources for genderqueer people. You might be missing out on a whole community of like-minded people simply due to terminology.

Just keep in mind that there are textbook definitions and there are “real people” definitions. And while you might not fit the textbook definitions, in the end, it’s your personal definitions that matter when you are determining your own identity and the labels for that identity.

Readers?

A reader writes:

“I am a cisgender pansexual female who is very tomboy and always has been. Is it possible to be ‘half male’ gender but be totally happy to be female on the outside? I used to wonder when I was younger if I were transgender, but I don’t think I am. I have always gotten along better with men, though, and I have always felt like an outsider among really girly women. If I feel like I am half guy and prefer to dress and look more gender neutral but don’t want surgery, does this make me genderqueer? “Also, please forgive me if this is a stupid question, but I read Chaz Bono’s bio on his Facebook page, and he said he came out as lesbian in the mid-90s. He is still with a woman. However, if he is a guy and always has been on the inside, doesn’t that make him straight? He did mention in other interviews that it took him many years to realize his gender and decide to actively pursue a physical transition. Maybe at the time he came out, he thought he might be a lesbian? You mentioned that sexual orientation can change with a physical transition, but I thought that sexual orientation was something someone was born with, like gender? Can you please explain?”

With regard to the first part of your letter, you might be genderqueer, but only if that’s the label that you want to put on yourself. I know people who identify as genderqueer who have similar feelings to what you describe. There are other genderqueer-identified people who would describe themselves differently.

While many of us say that labels aren’t important (including me) and that we don’t need labels to describe who we are, the fact is that they really are important to many people. We are a categorizing

species. Our brain wants to put things in orderly little file cabinets with labels on each file. We want to be able to say, “I’m this” or “I’m that.” I think that it helps us to have labels, particularly when we are trying to establish or get a handle on our identity. It also helps us figure out what communities we belong to or where we might find like-minded people. (Even “gender fluid” is a label.)

Even though I preach about the problems inherent in labeling, I have a label. I identify as a transsexual man. That label means something to me as far as who I am in the world and how I move through and interact with the world. It was very important for me in the early stages of my transition to come up with this label and use it to help formulate my identity.

So while I would tell you to just be yourself and not stress out about a label for that self, I also understand the need to find one. You are what you consider yourself to be, and whether or not you are genderqueer is a decision for you to make. Do you want that label? Does it seem to best describe how you feel or how you identify? Are there other genderqueer people who seem to reflect your own or a similar experience?

If you’re comfortable with the label, then adopt it for yourself. If you’re not, keep searching and exploring - or come up with a label for your own self-identity. Maybe it’s not even out there yet. Maybe it’s a label that means something to you. You might always have to explain it to people, but you will probably have to explain genderqueer or trans* or any other label to people as well. So don’t sweat it - just find something that works. Find a label that fits you - don’t try to fit yourself into a label.

As for the sexual orientation thing - I can’t speak for Chaz Bono, but what I can say is that there are many trans men who come out of the lesbian community. Some of these men identified as lesbians prior to coming out as trans or even realizing that they were trans. They entered that community and took on the label of lesbian because it was the closest they could come to what they were feeling.

There are other men who were in the lesbian community who never identified as lesbians, even though they might have used that label socially or otherwise. They always saw themselves as straight men and they saw their relationships as straight relationships. They might not have realized that they could transition, or they might not have had any resources to do so.

And, of course, there are others who never put a label on their sexual orientation or their relationships. They were in the lesbian community but did not see themselves as lesbians. They did not see their relationships as lesbian relationships or straight relationships. They just saw them as relationships.

So there are many different experiences. The important thing here is not to confuse a label with a sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, straight - those are just labels. They are not sexual orientations. They are labels for sexual orientations. So if Chaz Bono, for instance, was attracted to women before his transition and is still attracted to women after his transition, his sexual orientation hasn’t changed. Just his label has changed - and it may have only changed in the eyes of the culture, not in his own mind.

When I was attracted to men before transition, the world saw me as a straight woman (and I saw myself that way, as well). When I remained attracted to men after transition, the world saw/sees me as a gay man. But my attraction - my sexual orientation - is the same. Just my label has changed.

It's also true that attractions can change, for a variety of reasons. A person who transitions from male to female might have dated women prior to transition and now dates men. Maybe she was unable to relate romantically or sexually to men as a male, but is able to do so as a woman. Maybe her orientation is not to a particular sex but to the opposite sex.

There are all kinds of reasons why her attractions might change. But the important thing to remember is that while attractions can change, they can't be changed - and that's what the argument around sexual orientation is really about. You can't force a person to be sexually or romantically attracted to anyone.

You can't "pray away the gay" or "medicate away the gay" or "therapize away the gay," just like you can't change a person's innate gender identity. While these things might change, or might appear to change, for some people, they can't be changed by social pressure or any outside influences.

And changing labels is just that - changing labels, not changing innate identity.

Readers, what do you think?

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