

Gender Orientation, Identity, and Expression

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Published January 16, 2013 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-orientation_n_8267.htm

Abstract

I've witnessed many arguments and misunderstandings explode over the conflation of these THREE dimensions of what we in trans discourse collectively refer to as gender: Gender Orientation: One's subjective experience of one's body, including its sexed attributes. Gender Identity: Identity labels used when socially constructing sexed personas within the context of social groupings. Gender Expression: One's situational expression of cultural cues which [...]

Article

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1. Gender Orientation: One's subjective experience of one's body, including its sexed attributes.
2. Gender Identity: Identity labels used when socially constructing sexed personas within the context of social groupings.
3. Gender Expression: One's situational expression of cultural cues which communicate gender identity.

Note that gender identity and expression are absolutely culturally influenced. However, even if you stick me on a deserted island, I am still going to have a subjective experience of the material reality of my body's sexed attributes. It's through culture that I label my gender orientation and situationally express/repress it. Just because someone's gender orientation is female does not automatically mean that the person's gender identity and expression will also be female. So-called reparative/ curative therapies focus on controlling one's gender identity and expression in an attempt to change one's gender orientation. Ironically, this approach reveals the reality of a fixed gender orientation:

I had become addicted to certain forms of behavior in order to nurture that fantasy. I had chosen to abandon my manhood, one of God's good gifts to me... Eventually, I could see that abandoning that behavior was best for my life. Daily I continued to yield my life's choices to Christ in the pursuit of personal wholeness... My own reflection in the window pane is different now. It's no longer a stylish woman, waiting for the receptionist's announcement. Now I see the man God created me to be. No longer must I be seen as Jennifer. My real identity is contained in the name I proudly answer to: Jerry. - Reality Resources, Jennifer or Jerry?, p.23

The individual in the above narrative is attempting to change their gender orientation through a perpetual practice of ritualized rejection which involves demeaning their orientation while taking on male identity and expression. The foundational falsehood of this strategy is immediately apparent to

those who understand that gender is more than cultural modalities for if there is no innate subjective experience of one's own phenotype, the "ex-transsexual" would not require a daily ritualized practice of denial and repression.

This strategy is again employed in the following religious "healing" narrative:

He could see that I was processed of this thing, which only now, I realize was demonic. I knelt on the study floor, in tears, I was choking, forces were telling me not to do it, to walk out; freedom as a woman awaited me, after all, I had made such progress. I fought back, I cried aloud, I repented, I rebuked what had gone on in my life... All this happened 18 months ago... I gave them my suitcases of dresses, clothes, make up etc. It made me feel sick, and it was a major thing for me to do. I had to get rid of all that had held me before. They disposed of the stuff. I stopped having manicures, and cut my nails short, I grew a small beard. I threw all the [hormone] tablets away, and turned away from anything that had to do with my desires. I asked my Pastor for a verse that I could look at every day and enjoy my new freedom as a man, a father and a husband. I put a piece of paper next to my bed, with encouraging verses, which I read every morning when I got out of bed. I knew that the woman inside was dead. The power of Christ had destroyed her, and all she stood for. Eighteen months on, the devil still tries to persuade me, but he knows that I will not go down that path, as the consequences for my family would be immense. I am accountable to several people, and I am enjoying my manhood. - Sam's Story

Again, the strategy is to change one's orientation by assuming an identity and expression in opposition to their orientation. The failure of this approach is apparent in their need to engage in a daily ritualized practice of denial and repression. TERFs make the same mistake that anti-trans religious apologists make when they conflate gender identity and expression with gender orientation:

My main conclusion is that transsexualism is basically a social problem whose cause cannot be explained except in relation to the sex role and identities that a patriarchal society generates. Through hormonal and surgical means, transsexuals reject their "native" bodies, especially their sexual organs, in favor of the body and the sexual organs of the opposite sex. They do this mainly because the body and the genitalia, especially, come to incarnate the essence of their rejected masculinity and desired femininity. Thus transsexualism is the result of socially prescribed definitions of masculinity and femininity, one of which the transsexual rejects in order to gravitate towards the other.

Thus I will argue, in Chapter III, that the First Cause of transsexualism is a gender-defined society whose norms of masculinity and femininity generate the desire to be transsexed.... I believe that the primary cause of transsexualism cannot be derived from intrapsychic attitudes and/or behaviors, or even from family conditioning processes. One must begin with the roles of a gender-defined society, as the First Cause of transsexualism (that which, in the Aristotelian sense, sets all other causes in motion.) - Janice Raymond (1979), *The Transsexual Empire*, page 16

There you have it: framing the transsexual experience in terms of gender identity and expression. Raymond asserts a belief that the transsexual's subjective experience of their own phenotype is caused (and can therefore be cured by) modifying the cultural gender modalities available within the context of a patriarchal society. After asserting her views of transsexualism with all the hubris of the religious fanatic, a year later Raymond wrote the brief that the Reagan Administration used to justify excluding trans health care from care plans:

While there are many who feel that morality must be built into law, I believe that the elimination of transsexualism is not best achieved by legislation prohibiting transsexual treatment and surgery but rather by legislation that limits it and by other legislation that lessens the support given to sex-role stereotyping, which generated the problem to begin with. Any legislation should be aimed at the social conditions that initiate and promote the surgery as well as the growth of the medical-institutional complex that translates these stereotypes into flesh and blood. More generally, the education of children is one case in point here. Images of sex roles continue to be reinforced, at public expense, in school textbooks. Children learn to role play at an early age. - Raymond (1980), Technology on the Social and Ethical Aspects of Transsexual Surgery

Here again, we see the TERF narrative mirroring the religious fundamentalist narrative by asserting that the issue transsexuals face is one of identity and expression. Nowhere in Raymond's burblings does she recognize that each of us has a subjective experiences of our own physical phenotype.

Either controlling gender identity and expression changes one's gender orientation or it doesn't. Either the TERF/Fundie position harms people or it doesn't.

To be clear: The issue for me as a transsexual wasn't that I was a culturally constructed woman trapped in the physical body of a man; rather, my subjective experience of my physical phenotype has always been female. When I assert that my subjective experience of my phenotype has been always female, I mean exactly that. My pain wasn't about a need to wear certain clothes or to act a certain way. I went to bed praying to have a god fix me or allow me to die in my sleep not because my gender identity and expression wasn't feminine; I began praying to die around the age of 5 because my phenotype betrayed me.

While TERFs and religious fundamentalists seem particularly invested in asserting that the issue of gender orientation for transsexuals is simply a question of cultural modality, all one need do to test the real-life efficacy of their theoretical framework is to look at the suicide rate among transsexuals living within systems which attempt to modulate gender orientation through controlling their gender identity and expression (BTW, in a study of 6,400 trans folks, the rate of attempted suicide was 41% as compared to 1.6% in cis folks). TERFs and religious fundamentalists use gender identity and expression as a means to "cure" our innate gender orientation.

Nonsexist counseling is another direction for change that should be explored. The kind of counseling to "pass" successfully as masculine or feminine that now reigns in gender identity clinics only reinforces the problem of transsexualism. It does nothing to develop critical awareness, and makes transsexuals dependent upon medical-technical solutions. What I am advocating is a counseling that explores the social origins of the transsexual problem and the consequences of the medicaltechnical solution.

- Raymond (1980), Technology on the Social and Ethical Aspects of Transsexual Surgery

Here we have Raymond herself advocating for the development of a curative therapy model focused on gender identity and expression as a way to readjust gender orientation. If you want to know what happens to a someone who is forced to adopt a female identity and expression even though his orientation was male, I suggest you read up on the cautionary story of David Reimer.

Feminists like myself envisage a time beyond gender when there is no correct way to behave according to

body shape. In such a world, it would not be possible to conceive of a gender identity clinic. The idea of GID is a living fossil - that is, an idea from the time when there was considered to be a correct behaviour for particular body types. - Sheila Jeffreys

Contrast TERF/Fundie dogma with what the evidence has born out over the last half-century:

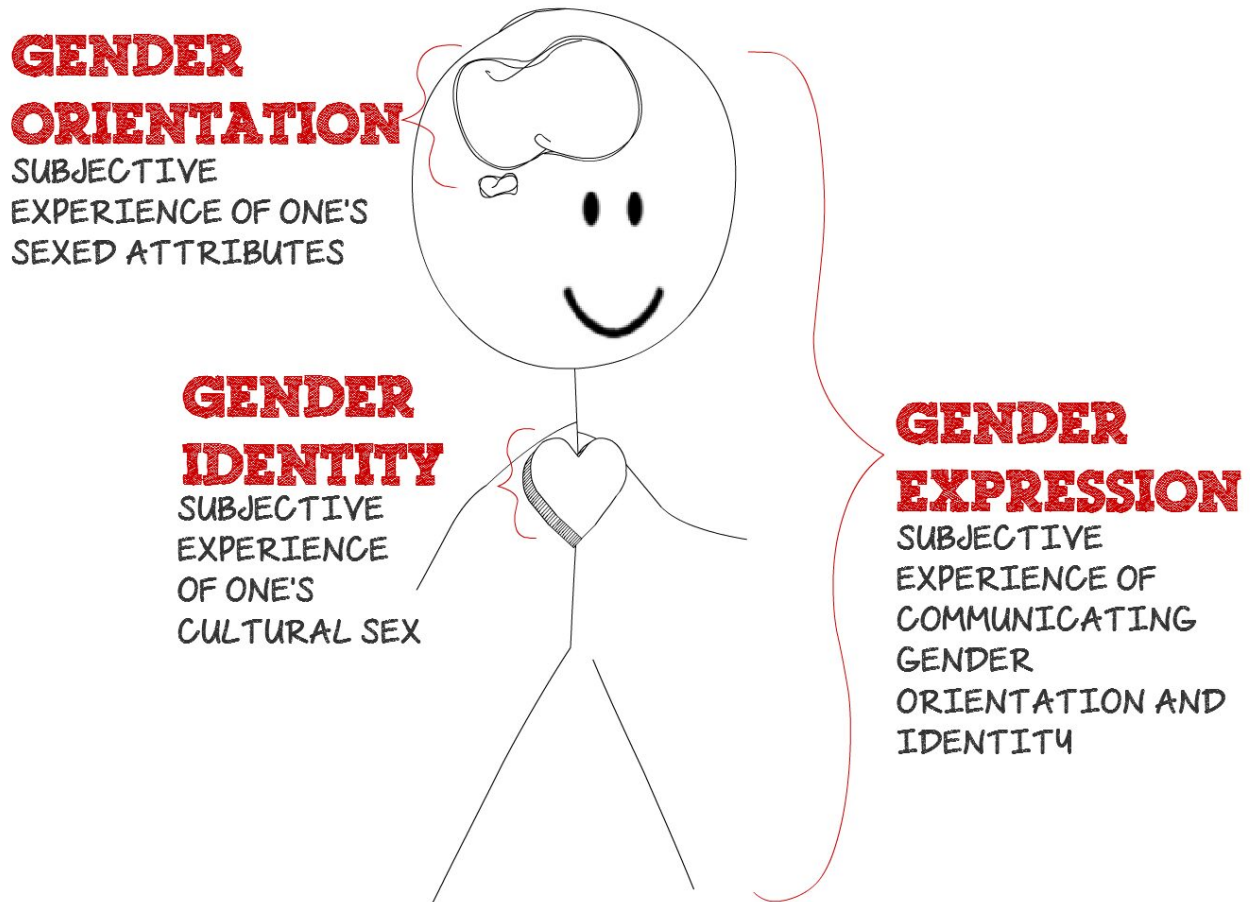
In over 80 qualitatively different case studies and reviews from 12 countries, it has been demonstrated during the last 30 years that the treatment that includes the whole process of gender reassignment is effective. Accordingly, all follow-up studies mostly found the desired effects. The most important effect in the patients' opinion was the lessening of suffering with the added increase of subjective satisfaction. - Pfäfflin F, Junge A. (1998). Sex Reassignment. Thirty Years of International Follow-up Studies After Sex Reassignment Surgery: A Comprehensive Review, 1961-1991 .

Now, contrast the above demonstrable reality with the apparent schadenfreude TERFs enjoy by conflating gender orientation, identity and expression with sexual orientation, identity and expression:

“... because the fact of the matter is that unlike born-women, who have everything (literally, everything) to lose from rape culture, transwomen have at least something (everything?) to gain. to a transwoman, cutting off her dick and turning it (inside out) into a fuckhole between her legs makes her feel better. from transwomens own mouths, we know that these fake fuckholes alleviate transwomens suffering. turning their dicks into extra-large condoms for other men to penetrate (or not, whevs...thats my hat-tip to the internet “lesbian transwomen”) actually tamps down their anxiety, and feelings of dysphoria.” - factcheckme.wordpress.com

In the above purportedly feminist representation of the issues facing transsexuals, the subjective experience of one's phenotype is reduced to sexual function. In the above context, my issue at the age of 5 was that I wanted a “fuckhole” so that men and/or women could sexually gratify me. In this version of “feminism,” it is represented that my 5-year-old death wish fueled by anxiety and feelings of dysphoria could have been cured by a man penetrating me.

The Power of Rhetoric



The Conversations Project, based on work by Cristan Williams

Source: radfem.transadvocate.com/glossary

Figure 1. Figure 1: model of gender orientation, identity, and expression

The Sex Orientation Scale (S.O.S.) likewise lists seven categories or types (not necessarily stages), the zero, however, separately, as it would apply to any person of normal sex and gender orientation for whom ideas of “dressing” or sex change are completely foreign and definitely unpleasant, whether that person is hetero-, bi-, or homosexual. - Dr. Harry Benjamin, 1968

There was a time when we talked about gender in terms of an orientation. We don’t associate the term “orientation” with gender any longer and I think there’s a reason. Everyone from Virginia Prince to TERFs jumped on the John Money ‘everyone is born gender neutral’ bandwagon in the 1970s. Once everyone from Money to TERFs ensured that gender could only be discussed in terms of conditioning and choice, “orientation” became irrelevant to the rhetoric of gender.

Rhetoric in Practice: Gender Orientation, Identity, and Expression

One’s gender orientation might be male, while their gender identity could be female even though their gender expression is androgynous. Gender is, in fact, multi-dimensional and not all of these dimensions are always aligned. When we talk about gender, we’re talking about these three dimensions. When

someone says that their gender is hard-wired, they're saying that they have an innate sense of their body's sexed attributes that is oriented somewhere along a continuum. They're saying that their orientation on this continuum is experienced as being innate.

However, when we talk about the way we subjectively view our orientation, we move into the murky waters of a personal identity that can be affected by a number of factors including (but not limited to) pride and stigma; audacity and aversion; respect and shame; integrity and guilt; etc. How one might identify their gender may not actually reflect one's gender orientation. We call that experience, "being in the closet." Likewise, one's expression of their gender may not reflect the reality of their orientation (or even the way they personally identify, for that matter).

So-called "reparative therapy" is just an exercise in equivocation. When these organizations claim to change someone's "gender," they're merely claiming to change one's gender expression and identity (usually through exposure to fear, shame, and guilt). These organizations pretend that...

Identity + Expression = Orientation

... when the reality is:

Orientation + Identity = Expression

The belief is that behavior drives orientation. That belief is false.

Gender Discourse: Poisoning the Well

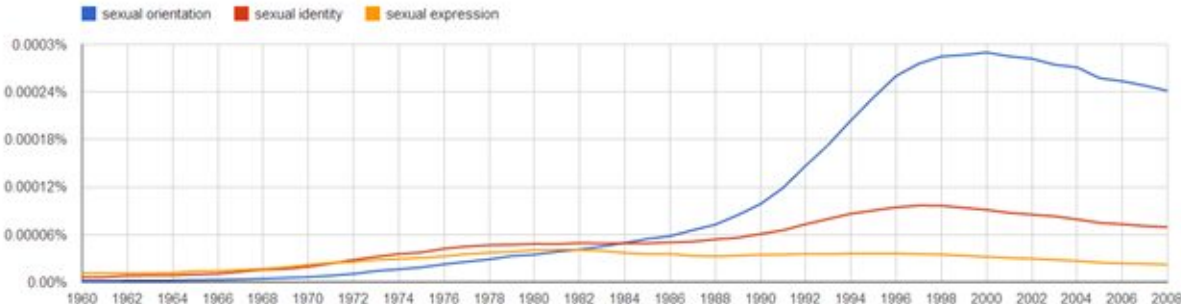


Figure 2. Use of sexual orientation, sexual identity and sexual expression in printed materials, 1960 - 2008

The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the DSM in 1974. What we find is that discussing sexuality in terms of an expression or identity decreased as the public's view of homosexuality as merely being a deviant lifestyle choice also decreased:



Figure 3. Source: General Social Survey, NORC/University of Chicago, September 2011

The use of “orientation” as a rhetorical foundation of discourse is fundamentally tied to the nuanced way in which our culture viewed sexuality. If you mean to note that that sexuality is innate, you’ll most often speak in terms of “orientation.” Consider the following critique of the use of “homosexual identity” from a 1983 paper:

Despite the fact that the concept homosexual identity has been used extensively in the literature on homosexuality since the late 1960s, investigators have shown little concern for defining or discussing the manner in which it is used. As a result, the study of homosexual identity has been characterized by confusion, disarray, and ambiguity. A multiplicity of terminologies makes comparisons between studies difficult. There has been little attempt to place theoretical proposals or data within the framework of existing psychological literature on identity. A number of assumptions critical to an understanding of homosexual identity are commonly made, and several of these are discussed: The synonymy of homosexual identity and self-concept; homosexual identity as childhood identity; homosexual identity as sexual identity; and homosexuality as distinct essence. This review also considers the following issues: The distinction between identity and behavior; the utility of an identity construct as applied to the study of homosexuals; the definition of identity in developmental theories of homosexual identity; and homosexual group identity. - J Homosex. 1983-1984 Winter-Spring;9(2-3):105-26.

Imagine what sexuality discourse would be like today (especially in politics) if the nuances of sexuality were limited to only identity and expression. Likewise, it seems that when the nuances of gender are limited to only identity and expression, discourse is poisoned. When the parameters of gender rhetoric exclude orientation, every aspect of gender discourse is entangled with culture:

In a hormonal male, after puberty, the imagery of sex reassignment, either way, may appear vividly in masturbation fantasies... It is characteristic of this condition that, in the dissociation manner of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the classic literary example of multiple personality, the two gender identities may be expressed in alternation, the transvestite’s two personalities each has its own wardrobe... The degree to which each personality will appear publicly convincing will depend, for the most part, on the extent of its experience in public, eliciting gender-appropriate reactions from other people, until its

own responded, in turn, become habitual and artless... A full-time cross dresser may eventually achieve the goal of his life-time's longing and quit changing back to his masculine clothes and role. Some such people have for so long felt utterly out of place in the role of their external genitalia that they demand the body, as well as the clothing of the other sex. Properly speaking, they are not transvestites but transsexuals. Their compelling desire is for hormonal and surgical sex reassignment so that they can live full-time in the gender role for which, they feel, they themselves always have had the matching gender identity. - John Money, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl: Gender Identity From Conception to Maturity*, page 20

Without the rhetorical tool of "orientation," trans advocacy seems to be fighting a battle with one hand tied behind its back. This reality hasn't gone unnoticed by those who wish to use the limitations of our current rhetorical landscape to disguise bigotry as a mere concern:

Specifically, the proliferation of legislation designed to protect "gender identity" and "gender expression" undermines legal protections for females vis-à-vis sex segregated spaces, such as female-only clubs, public restrooms, public showers, and other spaces designated as "female only." Females require sex-segregated facilities for a number of reasons, chief among them the documented frequency of male sexual violence against females and the uniquely female consequence of unwanted impregnation resulting from this relatively common form of violence.^[xxi] Public policy, therefore, rationally permits sex segregation in certain settings where a reasonable expectation of privacy exists.

Figure 4. Cathy Brennan and Elizabeth Hungerford's letter to the United Nations seeking to have trans protections overturned.

Compare Brennan and Hungerford's rhetoric with that of the hate group known as the Liberty Counsel:

Under this law, gender identity is defined as the gender related identity, appearance, mannerisms, or other gender related characteristics of an individual with or without regard to the individual's designated sex at birth. If this passes, can we expect rest room gender divisions to become blurred? Could protecting women and young girls in such situations cause a person to be in violation of E.N.D.A.? - Mat Staver, president of Liberty Counsel, 6/12/12

When we talk about sexual orientation, one's identity and expression are viewed as extensions of that which is innate. Currently, our rhetorical landscape does not, IMHO, permit this same type of nuanced yet succinct gender discourse.

Suggested citation

Cristan Williams. "Gender Orientation, Identity, and Expression." *TransAdvocate*, January 16, 2013.
https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-orientation_n_8267.htm