



## **Lambda 10 Project**

**I'm so confused:**

### **What is the difference between sex, gender, and sexual identity?**

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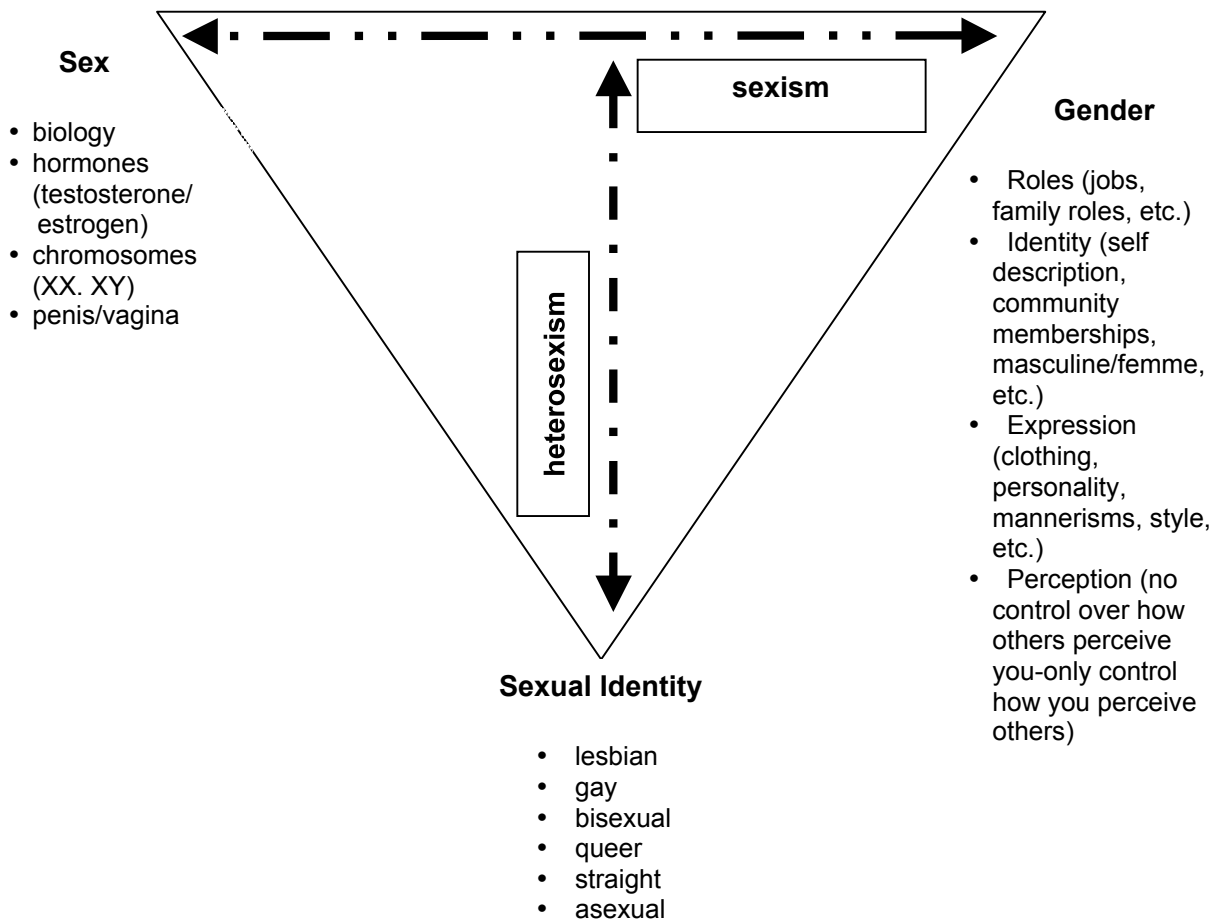
Recently, a director of Greek affairs posted to the fraternity advisor discussion board seeking assistance around trans inclusion. This professional received a barrage of hate mail instead of supportive commentary, resources, or suggestions. There wasn't even room for support, or "hey, me too" comments that I have come accustomed to on student affairs professional listservs. This disconnect is deeply rooted in our larger societies misunderstanding of gender, sex, and sexual identity. I will explain further what I am talking about here in hopes that you, the reader, will meet me in a conversation space.

Transphobia is rooted in fear – fear of the in-between, fear of loosening the binary of gender expression, fear of perforating the boxes of sexuality and self-expression that we neatly contain ourselves and others inside of. What I mean here, is our society likes two options – yin and yang, salt and pepper, up and down, gay and straight, or even gay and lesbian. Someone who is attracted to "both" may be perceived as a lesbian, gay, or straight depending on who they are currently dating. This is confusing so we beg, demand, kick and scream for them to make a choice – to pick a team.

Trans folks may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The confusion comes into play when we perceive another as one gender and that doesn't match with how that person identifies. Whether deemed as complications at birth, hormonally imbalances during puberty, irregular chromosomal make up conflicting with fertility, or navigating impending menopause – gender, sex, and sexual identity are characteristics we all have and we all have to figure out about ourselves and others.

How many of you have used Sex and Gender as synonyms? Think about surveys or asking demographic data of folks. We usually do, but they are actually very different. For the sake of this conversation – Let's separate the two out. Then we have Sexual Identity. I use the term Sexual Identity instead of Sexual Orientation as it seems to me to be a more inclusive way to describe who someone is romantically or sexually attracted to in that one's label to describe who they are attracted to may change as language becomes known, meet new people, etc.

Starting with Sex: What comes to mind? Remember Sex and Gender is separated for the sake of this conversation. As you see below, Sex is the biology, anatomical, chemistry parts that make up a person.



So if that is Sex, what is Gender? Of the words you came up with what are gender roles? [*jobs, hobbies, etc.*] What has more to do with Expression? [*feminine, masculine, clothes, mannerisms, etc.*] What would I mean by Identity? [*femme, butch, dyke, fairy, fag, man, women, etc.*] Roles, Identity, and Expression are elements of Gender that you control. However, Perception is how others see you. You can try to express yourself in a way that may align with how you identify and that correlate with your roles, but it is really up to other people how they perceive you. A person can also purposefully express themselves, take on roles, and identify, in ways that don't perfectly align as "girl=pink" or "boy=blue" as this system is constructed and changes over time by culture and by the individual. It is also important to note where we can't control how other's perceive us, we can and only we can control how we perceive others. We make the assumption that everything related to gender is clearly "pink" or "blue," but some folks don't feel this is true for them. People could identify as a man and have long hair or be a nurse or a woman could be a professional wrestler and drive a truck. Some people may have been labeled one way at birth and identify as an entirely different gender (transgender) and

some may seek medical treatment, hormone supplements, and surgeries to better express their gender (transsexual). Others may not like the “pink” and “blue” gender binaries and just want to be themselves without labels (gender variant). Transgender and transsexual are preferred terms to transvestite and can be represented by the term trans. The term transvestite is considered pejorative and the term cross dresser is usually preferred for folks that may enjoy wearing articles of clothing or other forms of expression of another gender identity or role in private while Drag King (woman performing as a man) or Drag Queen (man performing as a woman) are terms to describe individuals that publicly perform as another gender identity than the one in which the majority of their life is lived.

Lastly, what are different Sexual Identities? Gay, Lesbian, Straight/Heterosexual, Bisexual, Queer, Asexual, etc., may come to mind. Homosexual is a pejorative term used as an umbrella term for Lesbian, Gay, Queer, and Bisexual. Transgender or transsexual may come to mind here, usually in the form of LGBT, but trans necessarily isn’t a sexual identity. A trans person has a sexual identity before and after transition, but being trans itself isn’t a sexual identity.

There are two oppressive forces at play here keeping this “pink” and “blue” system in check and ordered according to our social constructed cultural norms.

What oppressive force do you think would exist connecting Sex to Gender?

Sexism – in a sexist society who has the power? In our culture the answer would be men. I think of power like poker chips. Someone steps out of a poker game freeing a seat for you and you inherit their poker chips. Men inherit male privilege and therefore have more power over those that are not men. Of those that are not men, who has the most power? Women! This is important to clarify because folks that don’t identify or express themselves or are not perceived by others as a man or a woman have less privilege or power than folks perceived as women and way less than those folks perceived as men. Sexism is what ultimately determines what constitutes “pink” and “blue.”

Heterosexism is the oppressive force that connects what we think are synonyms, but clearly aren’t to sexual identity. We assume everyone is “pink” or “blue” and then we assume that everyone’s internal and external characteristics are also “pink” or “blue” but our culture takes it one step further and we assume that all “pinks” are attracted to “blues” and vice versa. In fact, we use the term “Coming Out” when someone has to announce that they in fact are not heterosexual.

This may sound confusing but we do it everyday all day to every person. Imagine how hard it must be if these assumptions about you are incorrect and you have the burden of correcting others and risking violence, rejection, etc. Understanding how this would feel is the first step to being an Ally for the LGBT Community.

Does breaking Sex and Gender being separate make sense now? Does it also make sense how they are conflated together into synonyms? Once you have a

better understanding of how they are different it is much easier to assess the tools used to gather information. For example, when looking at retention rates at your institution, are you really asking what the connection between testosterone or testicles is to graduation rates? My guess is, you are asking about students living as men on campus and the connections to the roles these men play and graduation rates.

To review, a way to remember how Sex, Gender, and Sexual Identity are different is to think of the three categories like this:

Sex = what I assume is in someone's pants (penis = blue = testosterone, etc. and vagina = pink = estrogen, etc.).

Gender = what the pants are made of and how they are accessorized (fabrics, shoes, size, the way the person in the pants walks in the pants, etc.).

Sexual Identity = what the person in the pants does with at least one other person with their pants off.

This is really only the starting point of this discussion. Without this foundation, the discussion falls flat and is based on erroneous information.

Hopefully this helps continue conversations based on the real complex lives of people. It really is this simple.



**More information online at [www.lambda10.org/transgender](http://www.lambda10.org/transgender)**