

# Transgender and Gender Identity Issues

## BACKGROUND

Transgender behavior has existed in most societies throughout human history. There is considerable physiological and anatomical variation among women and among men, and as much or more diversity in gender. Contrary to popular belief, many of our concepts of what constitutes acceptable feminine or masculine behavior are derived from our social and cultural environment and beliefs rather than from some "natural" order. For example, at the start of the 20th century, pink was considered a "boy's color," while blue was a "girl's color," an order that reversed completely by the end of the century. Gender norms depend strongly upon the time, location, and history of culture (Bornstein, 1994; Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Wilchins, 1997). Minority gender identity terms may include: transsexual, transvestites/cross-dressing, transgenderist, androgyne, and intersex.

*Cross-dressing.* Many individuals enjoy dressing in clothing reserved exclusively for use by the "opposite sex." When this cross-dressing is stigmatized as a perversion, the desire to cross-dress can cause considerable distress in the individual. Such distress, and the resultant self-repression, can result in various emotional and relational problems and dysfunctions. The act of repression may transform the desire into a compulsion. In general, relieving the prohibition, ending the repression, and asserting the healthiness of cross-dressing practice reduces any attendant distress and dysfunction. Primary obstacles to such relief may be negative family response, employment discrimination, as well as personal difficulties in surmounting long-held, self-defeating beliefs (Boenke, 1999).

*Transsexualism.* While most people consider themselves either female or male based on their anatomical characteristics, there are people whose gender identity does not match their sex. Such persons are generally referred to as "transsexuals," a medically derived term. Such individuals may feel "trapped in the wrong body" and generally yearn to replace their primary and secondary sexual characteristics with those of the other sex, so they can live as members of that sex. Effective practice has shown that such persons are healthiest when assisted toward residing within their gender of choice, which may or may not include hormonal treatment, sexual reassignment surgery, and/or other gender-transforming procedures.

Reports indicate equal numbers of male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals (Bullough, Bullough, & Elias 1997; MacKenzie 1994). Some transsexuals identify themselves at a very early age, well before puberty, while others emerge in their retirement years. There appears to be a surge of such emergence during the mid-life years, when re-evaluation of life's direction may take place.

The outcomes of transsexual transition vary greatly. Generally, those who approach gender reassignment with careful preparation, rigorous self-inspection, careful progress monitoring, and good relationship problem-solving techniques are able to lead satisfying lives. Those who go through the process in an impulsive or perfunctory way often have difficulty assimilating into their new gender role. However, some strong-willed individuals have self-directed their transformation outside of recommended guidelines and produced significant benefit for themselves. Good clinical

practice will accommodate the needs of such individuals.

Estimates vary widely as to the number of individuals in our society whose gender identity does not match their sex at birth, as much as 3 percent or more of the population (Bushong, 1995). Due to the stigma and shame many transgender people experience, an accurate enumeration is impossible. (For a meticulous and inclusive discussion of transsexualism, see Brown and Rounsley, 1996.)

*Gender and sexual orientation.* Transgender persons have varying sexual orientations ranging from heterosexual to bisexual to homosexual. At least one study has shown that the incidence of bisexuality among transgender people is higher than average, while incidence of homosexuality among transgender persons is generally considered to be about the same as in the overall population (personal communication with N. Nangeroni, former executive director, International Foundation for Gender Education, 9/28/98).

In the past, a person's sexual role was considered to be embodied in one of two opposite genders. Now, however, we know that one's gender identity is on a continuum with most people at either end of a female to male scale, but a significant minority exist somewhere in between. To quote Deborah Blum, "with rare exceptions, the anatomy of gender is straightforward, separate, but the chemistry of gender is more complex. It's a continuum, I think, and we can each find a place within the wide band of normal: What's more, we can change our place" (Blum, 1999, pp. 44-57).

*Transgenderist and other.* Increasingly, individuals of transgender experience are choosing to cross-live without resorting to genital surgery. In part, this is a response to the risks and limitations of surgery, and in part, it is an expression of gender outside of the binary norm. It may also result from a desire to reside in an opposite social gender, while retaining existent sexual functioning. Such persons may sometimes be referred to as transgenderists, although an increasing number of persons who identify as transsexuals are forgoing surgery while retaining the transsexual identity, and may refer to themselves as "non-op" transsexuals.

At the same time, there is a growing population of "gender-benders" of all persuasions and identities, whose personal synthesis of gender may be an expression of their personal uniqueness, and as such tends to defy attempts at categorization (Feinberg, 1998). Indeed, politically, transgenderism has come to represent the leading edge of the struggle to end social discrimination based upon category. It is helpful for those providing support services around gender issues to be aware of, and if possible receptive to, the category-challenging nature of the subject area.

*Androgyne:* An androgyne is an individual who presents both or neither culturally constructed gender signifiers (feminine or masculine) (Transgender Education Network, 1999).

*Intersex.* Intersex is a medical term that is used to identify a mixed sexual physiology, aspects of both male and female presented at birth (Transgender Education Network, 1999).

As a society, we need to find ways to assist those who do not fit into assigned rigid bipolar gender roles in exploring other alternatives. Some feel that cross-dressing is the only alternative to the masculine or feminine roles they feel they must accept. Some, particularly physiological males, feel sufficiently guilty about their cross-dressing that they seek the help of a therapist. Others do the same under pressure from their spouses and/or other family members. Society and the therapeutic community (including the social work profession) would do well to come to view cross-dressing and other ways of transgressing socially imposed gender limitations as normative, no less unnatural, for example, than being left handed in a world that is predominantly right handed. Transgender tendencies exist in varying degrees in all human beings, though they are most often repressed. Indeed, feminism was a movement of gender transgression for women. Human gender diversity is a dimension that has always existed, but is suppressed by our predominant system of beliefs. That suppression is damaging to all of us, and needs to be replaced with compassion, support, and celebration of difference.

## ISSUE STATEMENT

Social workers are required to abide by the *NASW Code of Ethics*, which includes the following statements:

- Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability.
- Social workers should act to expand choice and opportunity for all people with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed and exploited people and groups.
- Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people. (NASW, 1996, pp. 22, 33, 27)

Such statements clearly apply to those persons whose gender identity differs from societal norms. Such persons include those who cross-dress some of the time, those who live in the “opposite” gender full time (including those who undergo sex reassignment surgery), and those who synthesize new combinations of gender traits into unique appearances and expressions that defy conventional categorization. Transgender persons suffer much derision, prejudice, and discrimination from those who feel that a person’s gender should always align strictly with one’s physiology and who have little or no understanding of the discomfort some feel in trying to conform to rigid gender roles.

Social workers have the responsibility to understand and appreciate the full range of differences that exist among human beings and to explore any and all societally induced prejudices that would treat any human being on a less than equal level. Social workers must work to eliminate any legal impediments to full equality of rights and opportunities to anyone

regardless of her or his gender identity and/or expression.

## POLICY STATEMENT

NASW recognizes that there is considerable diversity in gender expression and identity among our population. NASW believes that people of diverse gender—including those sometimes called “transgender”—should be afforded the same respect and rights as any other person. NASW asserts that discrimination and prejudice directed against any individuals are damaging to the social, emotional, physical, and economic well-being of the affected individuals, as well as society as a whole, and NASW seeks the elimination of the same both inside and outside the profession, in both the public and private sectors.

NASW believes that a nonjudgmental attitude toward gender diversity enables social workers to provide maximum support and services to those whose gender departs from the expected norm. Social workers and the social work profession can support and empower such persons through all phases of the healing process. Social workers must encourage the development of supportive practice environments for those struggling with gender expression and identity issues (both clients and colleagues).

### *Professional and Continuing Education*

- NASW supports curriculum policies in schools of social work that eliminate discrimination against people of diverse gender. In conjunction with the Council on Social Work Education, the schools of social work are expected to address the issue of discrimination; to articulate this position in curriculum policy and standards; to require course content on gender diversity issues and concerns; to offer research opportunities for investigating issues of relevance to these issues; to develop and provide training for classroom instructors, field supervisors, and field advisors regarding gender diversity issues; and to seek field opportunities for students interested in working with transgender people.

- NASW encourages the implementation of continuing education programs on practice and policy issues relevant to gender diversity, to include the distinctive, complex biopsychosocial needs of transgender individuals and their families, legal and employment issues, ethical dilemmas and responsibilities, and effective interventions and community resources.

### ***Public Awareness***

- NASW supports collaboration with organizations and groups supportive of the transgender community to develop programs to increase public awareness of the mistreatment and discrimination experienced by transgender people and of the contributions they make to society.

- NASW encourages the development of programs, training, and information that promotes proactive efforts to eliminate psychological, social, and physical harm directed toward transgender people and to portray them accurately and compassionately.

- NASW supports the development of programs within schools and other child and youth services agencies that educate students, faculty, and staff about the range of gender diversity and the needs of transgender children and youth.

### ***Health and Mental Health Services***

- NASW endorses policies in the public and private sectors that ensure nondiscrimination, that are sensitive to the health and mental health needs of transgender people, and that promote an understanding of gender expression and identity issues.

- NASW advocates for the availability of comprehensive psychological and social support services for transgender people and their families that are respectful and sensitive to individual concerns.

- NASW advocates for the implementation of programs including information and refer-

ral, peer support, and safe havens that address the health and mental health needs of youth who are struggling with gender issues and who are at high risk for suicide or other violent behavior.

- NASW advocates for education and support of parents of intersex children, so they will be aware of the full range of options, including forgoing surgery and learning to accept their children as intersex persons.

### ***Legal and Political Action***

- NASW supports the development of and participation in coalitions with other professional associations and progressive organizations to lobby on behalf of the civil rights for all people of diverse gender expression and identity.

- NASW advocates for increased funding for education, treatment services, and research on behalf of people of diverse gender expression and identity.

- NASW encourages the repeal of laws and discriminatory practices that impede individuals from identifying with and/or expressing the gender of their choice in all areas of the public arena, especially employment.

- NASW encourages the adoption of laws that will facilitate individuals in identifying with and expressing their gender choice without discrimination against them and their civil rights in education, housing, inheritance, health and other types of insurance, child custody, property, and other areas.

- NASW acknowledges the importance of social group work and community organizing in supporting transgender community development and helping the larger community to overcome ignorance and fear and to move toward inclusion, equality, and justice.

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*Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 1999. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600; e-mail: [press@naswdc.org](mailto:press@naswdc.org)*