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Understanding Trans* Identities

Trans people have been the focus of much media interest in recent years. This has generated a great deal of debate and comment around the current state of the law in the UK, in particular in relation to the role of medical professionals, in relation to children and young peoples' identities, and also in relation to the wide variety of trans identities which are emerging. This short piece provides a brief overview of the terminologies used to describe trans identities in the hope that those working with, advising, and employing trans individuals gain an awareness of the spectrum of identities with which individuals might identify.

Terminology

Although the terms *transgender* and *transsexual* are often used interchangeably they do have particular meanings and refer to particular identities in different ways which renders the interchangeability of the terms incorrect. In addition the term trans is often used more broadly so it would be useful to define what these terms mean and how they can be used at this stage.

A person's identity is personal to their sense of self and how they seek to be in the world. For many trans people one of the main challenges is around how to live an authentic life in a society which seeks to maintain fairly rigid gender norms and beliefs and so it is important that the terminology is defined and clarified to ensure that it is used in the correct context. *Transsexual* usually refers to those who identify as members of the sex opposite to that which was assigned at birth. Often, but not always, transsexual individuals will seek medical help as a result of the incongruence they experience between their identity and their physical body. The accepted medical position is that, where appropriate, intervention should be provided to allow the individual to alter their body in a way that reduces this incongruence – often referred to as transition. *Trans men* are individuals who were assigned female at birth but who identify as male, *trans women* are those who were assigned male at birth but who identify as female. Not all transmen or transwomen are able to undergo medical transition for a variety of reasons and currently the Gender Recognition Act 2004 does not require anyone to undergo any form of hormone or surgical treatment prior to obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate. Whether or not a person identifies as trans* post-transition is a personal choice; some may choose to do so and others not.

Transgender is a much more broad term which is used as an umbrella term to cover all *trans** identities. The umbrella analogy is one of the most useful ways of thinking about *trans** identities, as advocated by the Scottish Trans Alliance.

The Trans* Umbrella

The trans umbrella (see <https://www.scottishtrans.org/trans-rights/an-intro-to-trans-terms/transgender-umbrella/>) covers: trans men; trans women; and cross-dressing people, and raises the issue of binary and non-binary identities; something that will become increasingly more important should the Scottish Government reform the legislation to provide legal recognition of non-binary identities. Whereas trans men and trans women are often acknowledged as binary identities, i.e. either identifying as male or female, non-binary identities tend to be much more fluid. The binary/non-binary identity distinction makes sense when we think of sex and gender not as absolutes but rather as existing along separate spectrums. Although the idea of gender – how one sees oneself as masculine or feminine, or otherwise – as a spectrum is not new, the idea that sex – one’s physical make up; including genetics, anatomy, endocrinology, etc. – exists along a spectrum is only relatively recently being acknowledged. The sex and gender spectrums challenge the idea that sex and gender are linked and that they are fixed. Therefore a number of non-binary gender identities are emerging. These identities enable individuals to live a more authentic life, expressing how they see themselves and how they want others to see them. The list below is not exhaustive, just as non-binary identities create space for fluidity the terms used to describe such identities evolve and develop.

Agender –

individuals do not identify with either male or female. Often seen as being ‘without gender’ so it can be classified as a non-binary identity (neutral identity) but, perhaps more accurately, agender individuals could be argued to sit outside the gender spectrum altogether.

Androgynous –

simultaneously masculine and feminine identity. There is some debate whether androgyny is a gender identity or a gender expression (non – binary identity)

Bigender –

identifies as both man and woman; sometimes simultaneously, sometimes respectively (non – binary identity)

Genderfluid –

moves between identifying as masculine and feminine. Sometime genderfluid individuals align towards either of the ends of the gender spectrum but sometimes they identify as a mix of both masculine and feminine (non – binary identity)

Genderqueer –

This is often a more politicised identity which disrupts the idea of a binary gender completely. However, it can also be used as an umbrella term to encompass a variety of non-binary identities (non – binary identity)

Gender non-conforming –

anyone who is/appears not to be completely male or female. This can be an identity or used in the context of gender expression i.e. someone who identifies as transmasculine or transfeminine (non – binary identity)

Non-binary –

identifies as neither/both male and female (non – binary identity)

Third gender –

disregards binary of male and female completely. This identity has been historically recognised by a number of non-Western societies which recognise more than two genders (non – binary identity)

As noted above, the terms outlined in the above section is a brief attempt to outline some of the non-binary identities that are emerging and that will have to be considered as the law is reformed.

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