



Intersex Article 6: Gender

Jennie Kermode, Intersex Activist

It is commonly assumed by outsiders that intersex people must identify as something in between male and female - as intergendered or third gender. On the contrary, although their bodies don't look like what's expected of male or female bodies, most intersex people identify strongly as either male or female.

Many scientists believe that there may be an overlap between the medical circumstances which cause some types of intersex condition and those which cause transsexualism. However, being intersex is not the same as being transsexual. These different conditions have been included in the Scottish Transgender Alliance's site simply because there is one trait which they do have in common - they both involve having a personal experience of gender which is not always understood or respected by society at large.

Like transsexual people, many intersex people experience the trauma of being raised in a gender role which they do not feel is right for them. This can happen whether or not they have been made subject to surgery in early childhood. Doctors used to believe that such surgery, along with corresponding socialisation, could change a child's instinctive sense of gender identity, but it is increasingly accepted that this is not the case. These days, the planning of surgery usually takes into account the gender identity which most commonly develops in people with each particular type of intersex condition; however, there is no way to be absolutely certain how this will develop.

Intersex people who have been subject to surgery in childhood can face extra complications if they wish to transition between genders as adults. Medical options normally available in this situation may be impossible for them due to the presence of scar tissue from earlier operations and the shortage of healthy, sensitive tissue to use in reconstruction. However, general improvements in genital reconstruction surgery mean that intersex adults who are approaching surgery for the first time and wish to look more male or more female can expect increasingly good results. Other intersex people are happy with their different bodies and don't feel any less male or female as a result.

Although some evidence suggests that homosexuality and bisexuality are more common within the intersex population than in wider society, there has been too little research to draw any serious conclusions. Sometimes what appears to be homosexuality is really just one indication of an inappropriately selected gender assignment. For instance, some people with congenital adrenal hyperplasia who are raised as girls discover they are attracted to other girls as part of a process of acknowledging a feeling that they are really boys (however, about fifty percent of people with this condition are happy with a female identity).

Traditionally, doctors working with intersex patients have used sexual orientation as one of the criteria by which to determine whether or not a gender assignment has been fully successful. This means that, for instance, attraction to women can be considered by medics as an implication that such a patient is not properly female even if that patient is actually comfortable with a lesbian identity.

Often intersex people are encouraged or expected to adopt male or female identities which would seem extreme and unusual to most people, so as to conform to stereotypes. This can be confusing for children who want to please adults and who feel uncertain about how it is appropriate for people of their gender (whether instinctive or chosen by other people) to behave. It can make them feel uncomfortable about their assigned gender even if it would otherwise be the one they would prefer.

Most intersex organisations recommend that parents should raise intersex children as either male or female but be open to the possibility of them changing their gender role as they get older. A relaxed attitude to what constitutes appropriate male or female behaviour can make this process easier and can actually enable intersex children to be more like the other children around them, for whom gender is not always a major concern.

Some intersex people do not identify as either male or female and have campaigned to be recognised as part of a third gender group. So far, Australia is the only country which has given legal recognition to this group. Other intersex people have campaigned to have the category of gender made legally irrelevant by way of things like having it removed from official identification, as they don't believe that their gender should be anybody else's business.

All the major intersex organisations agree that it is important that intersex people should have the legal right to determine their own gender, rather than having it determined for them by doctors or their parents. Although the law in the UK requires that a legal gender be assigned at birth, it is important that this should be open to change later in life.