

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SEX, GENDER, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION



Time: 25-35 minutes

Audience: College students, Adults

Goal: To untangle sex, gender and sexual orientation and present them as individual variables which intersect uniquely for each person.

These resource sheets are designed to help you shape a conversation that will challenge the prevailing binary concepts of gender, sex, and sexual orientation that create rigid gender roles and expectations for human behavior. The two diagrams provide a framework for examining the lessons we have been taught about the relationships among these three aspects of identity and some of the myths that may still condition our expectations and interactions with others. You may choose to present the information in these diagrams prior to doing one of the activities that specifically addresses gender diversity, or you may just use them as resource sheets to help answer questions that arise in trainings that examine gender diversity.

Whether you choose to present the framework as part of a workshop on gender diversity or as a combined workshop on both sexual orientation and gender diversity, keep in mind that this may be new information for many people. Beyond popular culture images, few people – even those involved in gay and lesbian community – have knowledge about or experience with transgender issues. Reading testimony from trans, intersex, and genderqueer Jews about their experiences is a powerful and important way to connect the abstract ideas of gender, sex, and sexual orientation to the experiences of real people. The “Gender Journeys” activity is also valuable for helping participants connect to their own experiences with gender and to the topic of gender diversity. As always, it is important to create a space in which people feel comfortable asking questions.

Note: The diagrams sex, gender, and sexual orientation found on pages 73-74 can be useful visual aids or handouts to help clarify how these three distinct but related aspects of human identity interact. It is important to make clear that this is one of many ways to understand the relationship between these three aspects of identity. Others may be familiar with different frameworks.

1. Define sex, gender, and sexual orientation using the LGBTQI terminology on pages 60-61.
2. Give examples of each, highlighting common terms used for each of them (i.e., male/female/intersex, boy/girl/masculine/feminine/trans/genderqueer, gay/lesbian/queer/bisexual/asexual).
3. Explain that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are fundamentally different aspects of a person’s identity, but often linked and related either by choice or by external pressures. It is helpful to highlight that once gender is destabilized as a category, the terms one uses to describe their sexual orientation are at best complicated and often rendered obsolete.
4. Take questions. (There are usually a lot.)

Additional Steps (Optional)

5. In groups with a high level of comfort and openness, you can continue this activity by asking people to share their own experiences of the intersection of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. If you choose to do this, it is a good idea to a) remind folk of confidentiality agreements, and b) only share what they are comfortable sharing.
6. Bring the group back together to address any lingering questions and give participants an opportunity to share any insights this discussion has opened for them.

GENDER encompasses at least three components, incorporating how we think of ourselves, how we show ourselves to the world, and how others see us.

GENDER IDENTITY refers to the way you think of yourself: your internal or psychological sense of your own maleness, femaleness, both, or neither. Those of us whose GENDER IDENTITIES are not necessarily indicated by our SEX (at birth, right now, or at any moment of our lives) might identify as TRANSGENDER, or as PERSONS OF TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE.

GENDER EXPRESSION or PRESENTATION refers to the way you present yourself outwardly to the world (including dress, appearance, behavior, etc.). Your GENDER EXPRESSION might differ from your GENDER IDENTITY for many reasons and at lots of different moments in your life, including reasons of your own comfort or safety, or for entertainment or performance.

GENDER ATTRIBUTION refers to the way other people perceive you, and how they treat you in response. For example, have you ever been told that you or a child you know were wearing the “wrong” clothes, colors, or accessories?

GENDER

SEX refers to biological & chromosomal makeup, primary sex characteristics (genitalia and reproductive organs), and secondary sex characteristics (hormones, body hair, fat distribution, etc.).

Many people think of SEX as being binary: you are either MALE (XY chromosomes, penis, and testes) or FEMALE (XX chromosomes, vagina, uterus, and ovaries). In fact, there are a variety of possible SEXES, with male and female as two possibilities.

You may have heard the word HERMAPHRODITE (from Hermes and Aphrodite, the Greek god of love) to describe individuals whose biology does not fit into medically defined ranges for male and female. The more appropriate term is INTERSEX. For example, INTERSEX might refer to those of us with XXY chromosomes, or with primary and secondary sex characteristics that are neither clearly male nor female.

There are lots of different reasons on which we might consider oneself INTERSEX.

A 2004 report from the American Society of Law, Medicine & Ethics estimates that between 1.7 and 4% of the world population is born intersex. For more information about intersex conditions, visit www.isna.org.

SEX

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

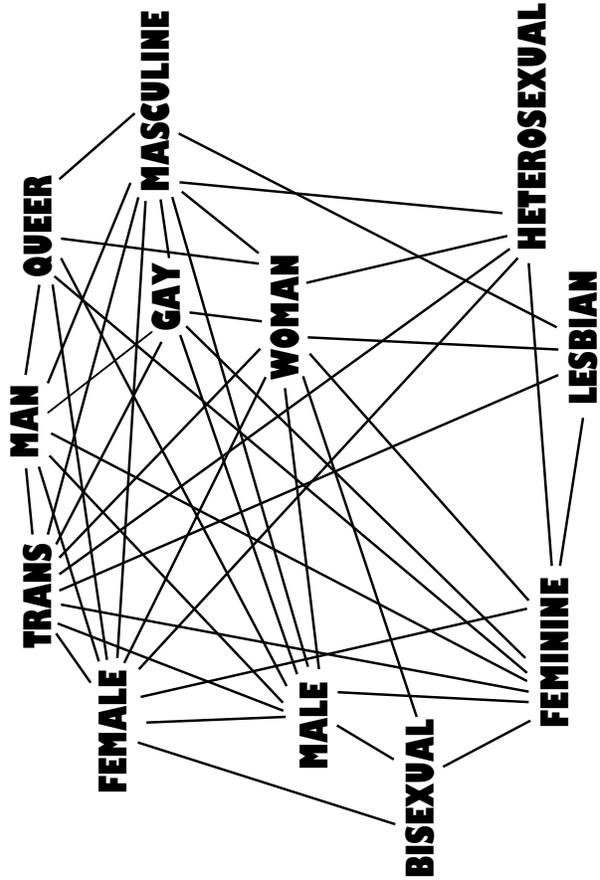
SEXUAL ORIENTATION or SEXUAL ATTRACTION (sometimes called AFFECTIONAL ORIENTATION) refers to one's emotional, romantic, sexual, physical, spiritual, and intellectual attractions to others. Those of us who are attracted to others whose gender is the same as our own might be referred to as HOMOSEXUAL (women as LESBIAN, men as GAY); those of us who are attracted to others whose gender is different from ours might be referred to as HETEROSEXUAL (or STRAIGHT). Those of us who are attracted to more than one gender might identify as BISEXUAL, QUEER, or PANSEXUAL. Our attractions and identities might be different at different times in our lives, and some of us choose not to label our affectional or gender identities at all.

WHERE ARE YOU IN THE CONSTELLATION?

Society usually teaches us to think of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in two ways:

- Male - Man - Masculine - Attracted to women
- Female - Woman - Feminine - Attracted to men

But what if we think about sex, gender, and sexual orientation as a constellation different of possibilities?



Somehow, we got used to thinking that there are only two sexes (male and female), only two sexual orientations (gay and straight), and that sex and gender are the same thing. But if we embrace the idea of a **CONSTELLATION** of genders, sexes and sexual orientations, we realize that there is an **INFINITE NUMBER** of possible combinations of identities, enhancing our world with a wider range of richly diverse experiences and perspectives.

Who decided what **FEMININE** (or, “appropriate for women”) and **MASCULINE** (or, “appropriate for men”) are, anyway? These categories are what we call **SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED**; they’ve been created by people and societies, and their meanings change from time to time and place to place. For instance, American and British men once wore powdered wigs in public, especially on special occasions. Among Hasidim, long hair is considered appropriate for young males, who get their first haircut at age 3.

What happens if we don’t fit into a designated sex / gender box? It depends. Instead of being appreciated for our uniqueness, a lot of times we are ostracized made fun of, or even attacked – maybe because of how we look, how we walk, who we love, how we dress. Sometimes we end up disguising or harming our true selves or hiding our talents because we are afraid how people will treat us. No matter who we are what we do, or what identities we embrace, **SEXISM**, **TRANSPHOBIA**, and **HOMOPHOBIA** affect all of us.