

MARK A. YARHOUSE

UNDERSTANDING
GENDER
DYSPHORIA



NAVIGATING TRANSGENDER
ISSUES IN A CHANGING CULTURE

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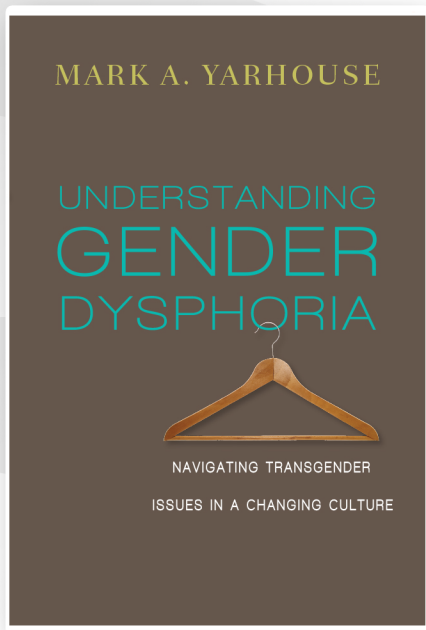
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DYSPHORIA**

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—**Shirley V. Hoogstra**, president, Council for
Christian Colleges & Universities

UNDERSTANDING GENDER DYSPHORIA



INTERV

NAVIGATING TRANSGENDER

ISSUES IN A CHANGING CULTURE

MARK A. YARHOUSE


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Introduction

MOST OF MY PROFESSIONAL WORK has been in the area of sexual identity or the act of labeling oneself based on one's sexual attractions. In that area of scholarship, I try to be clear about what we know and do not know about sexual identity, while identifying ways in which current research can inform our understanding of how Christians in particular navigate sexual identity questions in their own lives.

Several years ago I was talking with a colleague who was aware of the intense level of scrutiny I receive for my work, often receiving criticism from people or organizations on both sides of the broader culture wars. I was providing a consultation for a family whose daughter was gender dysphoric. He said, "That's a good idea; maybe move into a less controversial area of work." He was serious! It was one of those funny moments because I realized he did not know how controversial the issues are surrounding gender dysphoria and transgenderism.

That has been confirmed for me as I have conducted research for this book: no one is satisfied with anyone else's perspective on the topic of gender identity. There are considerable professional and popular divisions that have made it a virtual minefield for any author who wants to step foot on this terrain.

So I want to tread cautiously.

At the same time, I have spent years now meeting with children, adolescents and adults who have been navigating gender identity concerns, and I have had the opportunity to publish one of the first studies of its kind on a sample of Christians who are transgender. With the revelation of popular figures identifying as trans (e.g., Cher's child who is a biological female and named Chastity Bono at birth and now identifies as male, Chaz Bono) and legal challenges in Christian institutions for transgender students, faculty

and staff, this topic is clearly moving toward greater cultural salience.

The fact is that there is a need for a resource that is written from a Christian perspective and is also informed by the best research we have to date, as well as seasoned with compassion for the person who is navigating gender dysphoria. I thought it would be worth trying to put together that kind of resource, and the reader will be left to decide whether I have succeeded, as the whole topic is difficult to fully understand let alone explain.

One of the first times I moved from professional discussions about gender dysphoria to a more personal discussion was a few years ago. I had met an acquaintance who is a male-to-female transsexual person and a Christian and who lived not too far away. She accepted my invitation to join my family for dinner one day after church. I had not really thought much about it. My parents invited people over for dinner all the time when I was a kid growing up in Pennsylvania and Maryland. But my parents tended to invite missionaries who were home on furlough. This was going to be different, and I don't know that I thought it all through. Then, as we spoke about finalizing the invitation, I realized she was bringing her wife. I hadn't really asked much about relationships throughout our initial exchanges. As they shared with me, they were conservative Christians who had been married and raised a family together. They did not believe in divorce. At the same time, they looked like a lesbian couple. I was then beginning to appreciate how complicated this could get.

This experience, together with other personal and professional experiences, led my research group to a series of trainings and consultations around gender dysphoria and eventually the decision to conduct the study of the experiences of transgender Christians. In the course of conducting that study, we asked several questions of participants to ensure that they were Christians—questions about what being a Christian meant to them and so on. When I presented the results at the Virginia Psychological Association, I found myself presenting the gospel as I read through the content analysis of how participants responded during that part of the interview. Participants referenced a personal relationship with Jesus, recognizing Jesus as their Savior, and so on. At a talk I gave recently on gender dysphoria, a person in the audience challenged the assumption that the people were *really* Christians: “But how do you *know* they were Christians?” he asked. “Wouldn't they just be saying what they thought you wanted to hear, to be included in the study?” I suppose so. That is always a consideration when conducting research. People can misrep-

resent themselves. But if we took out of every textbook every study that relied on that kind of self-report, we would have pretty thin resources, at least from the behavioral and social sciences. Back to the presentation: The majority of participants denoted starting a personal relationship with Jesus through being saved by grace through faith, thus claiming a conversion experience that is consistent with truth claims that are central tenets of Christianity. It was rather remarkable, really, and it was humbling to me as a Christian and as a researcher.

This book invites Christians to reflect on several issues related to these findings, a broader research literature I will attempt to explain, and other anecdotal accounts. I would like the reader to gain greater insight into the experiences of people who navigate gender dysphoria, recognizing that there is no one story that can capture the range of experiences that exists today. In the opening chapter, I introduce the reader to the language, categories and key terms associated with the topic. I also note that as we wade into this particular pool, we are going to quickly be in the deep end, as the topic is complex.

The second chapter helps us think through a biblical perspective on gender dysphoria and transgender issues more broadly. I look at the biblical passages that are frequently cited in these discussions. It is here that I also introduce the reader to three different frameworks or lenses through which the topic can be seen: the integrity framework, the disability framework and the diversity framework. In addition, I introduce an integrated framework that draws on the best of each of the other frameworks.

Chapter three looks at the debates about causation. There has been a recent attempt to offer a unifying theory of causation (i.e., the brain-sex theory) that captures our current interest in biological explanatory frameworks. Proponents of the brain-sex theory have been criticized by proponents of other theories, and vice versa. I essentially conclude that we would do well to humbly admit that we do not know at this time what causes gender variance or transgender experiences, including transsexuality, which has been the primary focus of research to date.

Chapter four explains the phenomenology and prevalence of gender identity issues. I review the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5) diagnostic criteria for Gender Dysphoria. Although the diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria (previously Gender Identity Disorder) is rare, recent research suggests gender dysphoria may be experienced along a continuum and that the various expressions of gender variance that fall under the umbrella of transgender are more common.

Chapter five considers issues related to prevention and treatment, particularly when gender dysphoria rises to the level of a diagnosable condition. There are a considerable number of debates here, particularly whether gender dysphoria resolves naturally, whether it can be prevented from continuing into adolescence or adulthood, and whether it should be prevented. There are fewer debates among mental health professionals about treatment options for adults, although there are several paths adults take when they are navigating gender dysphoria, such as resolving to live according to one's birth sex, managing dysphoria or expressing one's preferred gender identity intermittently, or full-time cross-sex typed identification.

Chapter six brings all of what we have covered into a Christian response to gender dysphoria. The focus in this chapter is at the level of the individual, as I discuss how to respond at the level of the individual in clinical practice and ministry contexts.

The last chapter looks at how the church positions itself in relation to the broader culture with respect to gender dysphoria and transgender issues. This is particularly complicated, as the topic of gender dysphoria is subsumed under the transgender umbrella that has been closely associated with the topic of homosexuality. The church has struggled in the twenty-first century with how to conceptualize some of these concerns, as well as how to be a unified witness in the area of sexual ethics. At the level of the institution, there is a question as to what it means to be missional as a church given the dramatic changes in our culture within the past several decades.

I would like to acknowledge the many reviewers who provided me with feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript. I sought out people I knew who were familiar with the topic of gender dysphoria either personally or professionally. The range of perspectives is noteworthy and included transgender, genderqueer, and transsexual persons, each of whom is a Christian, as well as gay and lesbian Christians, and scholars and pastors who are straight and have never experienced gender dysphoria to my knowledge. Specifically, I would like to mention Trista Carr, Stanton Jones, Judson Poling, Julie Rodgers, Melinda Selmys, Sandra Stewart, William Struthers, Caryn LeMur, Peter Ould and Amy Williams. The final version is not one any of the reviewers would necessarily endorse, and I take responsibility for it as they were generous with their time and their suggestions, many of which (but not all) were incorporated into the final manuscript.

Gender Identity, Gender Dysphoria and Appreciating Complexity

INTRODUCTION

On May 30, 1926, George Jorgensen Sr. and Florence Jorgensen welcomed their son, George William Jorgensen, into the world. Danish Americans who had married only four years earlier, they would christen George Jr. in the Danish Lutheran Church a few weeks later.¹ George Jr. grew up in New York City and graduated from Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx. He was considered rather slight and frail and interpersonally shy. George Jr. avoided rough-and-tumble play, sports and other stereotypically male interests. He would go on to study photography at Mohawk College in Utica, and did a brief stint in the military. He later received training at a medical and dental assistance school in Manhattan.

Growing up in New York, George Jr. often felt that he had some kind of sexual and emotional disorder. In search of answers, he would investigate possible explanations by scouring books and articles at the New York Academy of Medicine library. His fear was he was homosexual; after all, he was sexually attracted to men. However, that did not appear to explain everything. George Jr. eventually experimented with the female hormone estradiol, and he learned during this time about a possible intervention taking place in Sweden that extended his experiments into a more meaningful and satisfying resolution. He went overseas and eventually found Dr. Christian Hamburger, an endocrinologist who was willing to provide him with hormonal replacement therapy. George Jr. would later have his testicles and penis removed; he also had vaginal plastic surgery. In 1952, George Jr. changed his name to *Christine* Jorgensen out of respect for Dr. *Christian* Hamburger.

We are talking about the 1950s. This course of events would make headlines. Indeed, the *New York Daily News* banner headline read in all capital letters: “EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY: OPERATIONS TRANSFORM BRONX YOUTH.” Although Christine was not the first person to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, she noted in her autobiography that she was the most well known at that time.

Gender identity concerns were not that well understood in the 1950s. Frankly, they are not that well understood today. There are many questions left unanswered about what causes a person to have the psychological experience of being born in the wrong body.

Controversies also exist in the area of treatment or care: How should parents respond when a child displays behaviors more characteristic of the opposite sex? Should cross-gender identification be redirected toward identification with one’s birth sex? Should cross-gender identification be encouraged for a child who is already gender dysphoric? Should puberty be delayed to provide time for that kind of decision making? Or what options exist for teens and adults? Should they be encouraged to enter into therapy to resolve the conflict through psychological intervention? Is cross-gender identification to be avoided, or should it be facilitated? When people have tried different interventions, what has been helpful? What are the reasons people pursue hormonal treatment and sex-reassignment surgery? How often are these procedures helpful to people? What are the long-term effects of these kinds of interventions?

These are remarkable complicated questions that deserve our attention.

We are no longer answering these questions in a cultural context of the 1950s. One difference we can all acknowledge is that our culture has shifted toward more supportive and varied sexual and gender identity labels and communities that are very accessible to people and their families. There have certainly been increased attempts to understand and respond to this often bewildering experience.

The changing culture can be seen in both professional and popular treatment of the phenomenon. In the professional literature, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*² reflected a shift away from Gender Identity Disorder toward the use of the phrase Gender Dysphoria³ to reduce stigma. Actually, several steps in the new nomenclature were intended to reduce stigma. The first is the shift from an

emphasis on identity as the disorder to the emphasis on the dysphoria or distress associated with the gender incongruence for many people who report it. The other was the wording to allow for someone to no longer meet criteria following a transition.

Our culture has in some ways moved past the afternoon television shows that capitalized on “shock and awe” in their presentations, where you might see producers orchestrate a dramatic confrontation between a male-to-female transgender person who once dated a woman and is now surprising her with her true sense of self. These colorful presentations in the media were once an expression of almost gawking at the phenomenon, but they did not represent the kind of cultural sea change that would soon follow.

The shift in the popular media can also be seen in journalism. A few years ago Barbara Walters aired a special in which she interviewed a young biological male who was being raised as a girl.⁴ In discussing the decision of the parents to raise their son as a daughter, there was tremendous compassion generated around the challenges those parents and that family faced. In that same story, Walters interviewed an adolescent female who identified as male (or, more accurately, as a female-to-male transgender person). Walters interviewed his parents and they shared the challenges they faced, particularly for the mother in terms of wanting this to resolve in a way that would return her daughter to her. These are heartbreaking stories and challenging for everyone involved.

In response to this increased coverage, I asked the questions above: When a child is gender dysphoric, how should parents respond? Should parents raise a gender dysphoric child in the identity of the child’s biological sex? Should they facilitate cross-gender identification? Or should they take a “wait and see” posture with the assumption that the right direction for that child is what will unfold?

In addition to questions about gender dysphoric children, What are the obligations for employers who have transgender employees? How should bathrooms be designated? Should medical coverage extend to hormonal treatment and sex-reassignment surgery? What about room assignments at campgrounds and at colleges and universities? What about hiring policies at churches, faith-based ministries, and at Christian colleges and universities?

As churches consider relating to a dramatically changing culture, what steps should be taken to reach unchurched persons who identify as transgender or who are part of the transgender community? Are there specific steps that

could be considered to accommodate the experiences of gender dysphoric persons who visit churches?

In all of these discussions it should be noted, too, that the transgender experience is not one experience; it is best understood as an umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience their gender identities differently from people whose gender identity is congruent with their birth sex. The experiences vary considerably and are only matched by presentation and expression or the living out of one's gender identity, which can range from pushing against gender norms (gender "bending") to cross dressing for sexual arousal to show/performance/ entertainment (drag) to transsexuality.

The transgender community, then, is broadly defined, and it has positioned itself alongside sexual minorities in the broader cultural discourse. Sexual minorities are people who experience their sexual identity in ways that are different than those in the majority (gay, lesbian, bisexual). When we speak of sexual minorities, then, we are typically referring to how people navigate sexual identity and convey their sexual preferences to themselves privately or to others publicly (e.g., frequently using the self-defining attribution "I am gay").

To enter into an informed discussion of transgender issues is to switch gears a little away from a discussion about sexual orientation. We can return to it, but it is not the focal point in the way it is when discussing homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality.

To discuss being transgender is to discuss one's experience of gender identity, one's sense of oneself as male or female, and how that psychological and emotional experience is not aligning with one's birth sex.

BACKGROUND

To begin to understand gender dysphoria, it can be helpful to back up and discuss a broader context based on our understanding of sex and gender. When we refer to a person's sex, we are commonly making reference to the physical, biological and anatomic dimensions of being male or female.⁵

These facets include chromosomes, gonads, sexual anatomy and secondary sex characteristics.

Sex is frequently distinguished from gender. Gender refers to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female. When we refer to someone's gender identity, we are thinking of how a person experiences him-

KEY TERMS

Biological sex: As male or female (typically with reference to chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, and internal reproductive anatomy and external genitalia).

Primary sex characteristics: Features that are directly part of the reproductive system, such as testes, penis and scrotum in males, and ovaries, uterus and vagina in females.

Secondary sex characteristics: Have no direct reproductive function, for example, facial hair in males and enlarged breasts in females.

Gender: The psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female.

Gender identity: How you experience yourself (or think of yourself) as male or female, including how masculine or feminine a person feels.

Gender role: Adoptions of cultural expectations for maleness or femaleness.

or herself (or thinks of him- or herself) as male or female, including how masculine or feminine a person feels. Gender identity is often associated with gender role. Gender role, then, refers to ways in which people adopt cultural expectations for maleness or femaleness. This includes but is not limited to academic interests, career pursuits and so on.

For most people, these various facets or dimensions of sex and gender align in ways that are essentially taken-for-granted realities. Most people you have met have a relatively unremarkable experience (or remarkable in the sense of all of these facets coming into alignment) of being born male or female (with the alignment of the various biological/physical/anatomical features noted above), identifying as a man or a woman, and feeling masculine or feminine within the cultural context in which they are raised.

But variations occur in these areas. For example, there is likely greater variability in how masculine or feminine a person feels, and that is often a reflection of whether they are reared in an environment with rigid gender roles and how well that person's experiences line up with those expectations.

These variations occur in other areas as well and are often discussed as intersexuality or an intersex condition.⁶ In the area of biological/physical/anatomical sex, we can note several deviations from the norm of being born male or female. For example, a former client of mine had been diagnosed with

Klinefelter Syndrome, a genetic disorder of gonadal differentiation in which that person had an extra X chromosome (XXY).⁷ Another person could be born with either incomplete or mixed ovarian and testicular tissues, a condition that has often been referred to previously as true hermaphroditism.⁸

Table 1.1. Physical/Biological/Anatomical Facets of Being Male or Female

| Facet | Male | Female |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Chromosomes | XY | XX |
| Gonads | Testes | Ovaries |
| Sexual anatomy | Scrotum, penis, vas deferens, etc. | Labia, clitoris, vagina, fallopian tubes, etc. |
| Secondary sex characteristics | Greater muscle mass, etc. | Wider hips, enlarged breasts, etc. |

A friend of mine has yet another physiological condition—androgen insensitivity syndrome—as a result of malfunctioning gonads and other prenatal concerns. Although she does not choose to identify as intersex, many of these individuals would describe themselves that way, referring to any number of variations from the norm that make identifying as male or female problematic.

Table 1.2. Understanding Sex and Gender

| | | |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|
| Biological sex | Male | Female |
| Gender identity | Man | Woman |
| Gender role | Masculine | Feminine |

Where do gender identity concerns fit into all of this? I located androgyny in between man and woman as gender identity. Androgyny can refer to not having a clearly defined sense of self as a man/woman, or it can refer to a bringing together of male/female qualities or characteristics.

Table 1.3. Exceptions to Binaries

| | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------------------------|----------|
| Biological sex | Male | Intersex ↔ | Female |
| Gender identity | Man | Androgyny ↔ | Woman |
| Gender role | Masculine | Outside cultural norms ↔ | Feminine |

This book is about an experience that is different from what I have been discussing so far, although there are elements of biological sex, gender role

and gender identity that are all important in the discussion. Gender identity concerns—or what we refer to as gender dysphoria—refers to experiences of gender identity in which a person’s psychological and emotional sense of themselves as female, for instance, does not match or align with their birth sex as male. This would be the more common presentation, but the reverse may also be experienced: a person’s psychological and emotional sense of themselves as male does not match or align with their birth sex as female.

Our illustration changes, then, to something that does challenge the binary, but it does so not by residing in between the two experiences of man/woman; rather, the experience locates itself in the other (psychologically/emotionally) in ways that are often quite difficult to fully understand or empathize with.

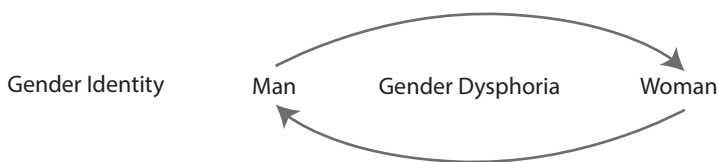


Figure 1.1.

Dysphoria means being uneasy about or generally dissatisfied with something. Thus, gender dysphoria refers to the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female, and that your psychological and emotional identity does not correspond to your biological sex—this perceived incongruity can be the source of deep and ongoing discomfort. Specifically, gender dysphoria, is on the one hand the experience of being born male (biological sex) but feeling a psychological and emotional identity as female. Similarly, gender dysphoria is the experience of being born female (biological sex) but feeling a psychological or emotional identity as male. When a person experiences gender incongruence and it is causing them significant distress or impairment, they may meet criteria for the diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria.⁹

However, as we broaden the discussion to transgender issues, we begin to extend the discussion beyond merely the experience of gender dysphoria, an experience that might be characterized by gender incongruence in which the person does not experience an aligning of birth sex and psychological sense of gender. Transgender is an umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and express (or live out) their gender iden-

KEY TERMS

Gender dysphoria: The experience of distress associated with the incongruence wherein one's psychological and emotional gender identity does not match one's biological sex.

Transgender: An umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and express (or live out) their gender identities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex.

Cisgender: A word to contrast with transgender and to signify that one's psychological and emotional experience of gender identity is congruent with one's biological sex.¹⁰

Gender bending: Intentionally crossing or "bending" gender roles.

Cross-dressing: Dressing in the clothing or adopting the presentation of the other sex. Motivations for cross-dressing vary significantly.

Third sex or **third gender:** A term used to describe persons who are neither man nor woman, which could reference an intermediate state or another sex or gender or having qualities of both man/woman in oneself.

Transsexual: A person who believes he or she was born in the "wrong" body (of the other sex) and wishes to transition (or has transitioned) through hormonal treatment and sex-reassignment surgery.

Male-to-Female (MtF): A person who is identified as male at birth but experiences a female gender identity and has or is in the process of adopting a female presentation.

Female-to-Male (FtM): A person who is identified as female at birth but experiences a male gender identity and has or is in the process of adopting a male presentation.

Genderfluid: A term used when a person wants to convey that their experience of gender is not fixed as either male/female but may either fluctuate along a continuum or encompass qualities of both gender identities.

Genderqueer: An umbrella term for ways in which people experience their gender identity outside of or in between a male-female binary (e.g., no gender, genderfluid). Some people prefer a gender-neutral pronoun (e.g., "one").

Drag queen: A biological male who dresses as a female (typically flamboyant dress and appearance) for the purposes of entertaining others. Such a person may not experience gender dysphoria and does not tend to identify as transgender.

Drag king: A biological female who dresses as a male (stereotypic dress and appearance) for the purposes of enter-

taining others. As with drag queens, such a person may not experience gender dysphoria and does not tend to identify as transgender.

Transvestism: Dressing or adopting the presentation of the other sex, typically for the purpose of sexual arousal (and may reflect a fetish quality). Such a person may not experience gender dysphoria and may not identify as transgender. Most transgender persons do not cross-dress for arousal and see transvestism as a different phenomenon than what they experience.

Intersex: A term to describe conditions (e.g., congenital adrenal hyperplasia) in which a person is born with sex characteristics or anatomy that does not allow clear identification as male or female. The causes of an intersex condition can be chromosomal, gonadal or genital.

tities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex.

A person could be under the transgender umbrella and be gender dysphoric (experiencing significant incongruence that is distressing). Another person could cross-dress and find the act of cross-dressing sexually arousing (but they might not experience the gender dysphoria the other person reports). Still another person could cross-dress with a strong desire to start hormonal treatment with an eye for sex-reassignment surgery. Yet another person could do drag shows and be quite flamboyant in presentation (e.g., drag queen or drag king), which may have little if anything to do with a subjective experience of dysphoria or a desire for sexual arousal. That person would unlikely identify as transgender, although some might, and that person's decision could be tied to motivations to cross-dress in this manner.

It should be noted that not every expression of gender variance defined in the sidebar would report gender dysphoria. Most people who have an intersex condition, for instance, do not experience gender dysphoria, although they have a higher incidence rate than those who do not have an intersex condition, and many would report going through a time of navigating gender identity questions.¹¹ Likewise, most people who perform in drag would not report gender dysphoria as such and may not identify themselves as transgender—nor would those who do identify as transgender necessarily consider those who perform drag to be transgender.

If you are beginning to get the sense that this could get complicated, you are not alone. This is an area that requires time and patience to unpack and truly understand—and even then, we do so with humility given how much we do not know at this time. But the church is going to need to spend some time on this topic. I urge church leaders to spend time in careful reflection as we think about the best way to engage the broader culture from more of a missional approach while simultaneously considering how to come alongside people within our own Christian communities who are navigating this terrain.

TOWARD A REASONED RESPONSE

This brings us back to the person. I am thinking here of the person who is navigating gender identity questions in his or her life. I am thinking of the person who experiences gender dysphoria. That experience of gender incongruence—the experience of biological sex and psychological experience of gender not aligning—can also be experienced along a continuum. In other words, gender identity concerns are not one thing experienced in exactly the same way by all people everywhere who experience it. Rather, think about the experience of incongruence and distress/discomfort reflecting different degrees of both incongruence and discomfort.

What is the best way to proceed for the person who experiences gender dysphoria? The remainder of this book takes that into consideration, but let me outline a few things for us to consider as we move in the direction of a more thoughtful response.

Let's consider what we have said so far: the person is navigating gender identity concerns. These concerns are real and often quite confusing and isolating. The person worries about who would believe them, what people would think about them, and so forth. This is tremendously isolating and often associated with other concerns, such as depression and anxiety. One reviewer shared with me that she had a good friend who cross-dressed and abused a significant amount of alcohol to suppress her dysphoria; she shared that the substance abuse abated once her friend was able to come to a place of congruence.

This is also not a particularly common concern. Most people experience a remarkable alignment of the many facets that make up biological sex and their sense of themselves as male or female. But for those who experience gender identity conflicts, the church will need to consider how best to respond.

At the level of the individual, it can be helpful to ask a simple question, such

as: How is the gender identity conflict experienced by this person? Invite the person to tell you more about their experiences.

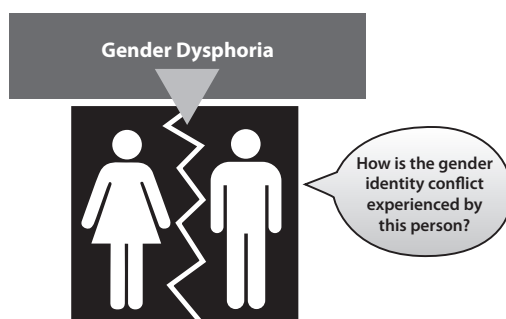


Figure 1.2.

Keep in mind, too, that the person is navigating gender identity questions in a cultural context in which many people will respond to them out of a culture war mentality. No one navigates gender identity concerns in a vacuum. Rather, each person who faces this unique challenge does so in a sociocultural context in which sex and gender are being discussed and debated.

As I mentioned earlier, some people are capitalizing on discussions in this area to deconstruct sex and gender. I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter two. David Kinnaman of the Barna Group, in discussing gay marriage and reflecting on our rapidly changing culture, observed that

the data shows that evangelicals remain countercultural against a rising tide of public opinion. If the sands have shifted under evangelicals' feet in the last 10 years, we at Barna predict it will seem the ground has completely opened be-

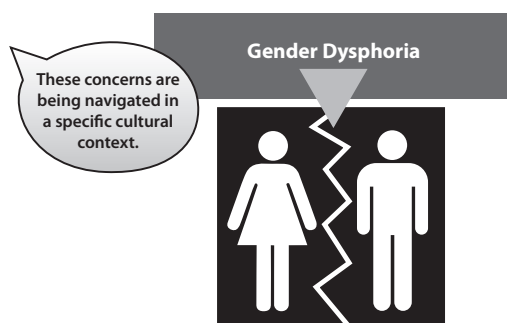


Figure 1.3.

neath them during the next 10. In part, that's because the very belief that same-sex relationships are morally wrong is deemed by many to be discriminatory and bigoted.¹²

This comment by Kinnaman is in reference to same-sex sexuality, but the overarching discussion is about LGBT issues in general. In other words, the cultural opinion surrounding gay marriage represents a broader cultural opinion that extends to transgender issues and gender variant persons. These cultural shifts frequently trigger a response from social conservatives of concern and, in some cases, fear for the erosion of long-held norms. These battles are played out in politics, entertainment, the media and education. The person you are talking to is unlikely involved in these spheres but may simply be looking for support as they navigate this terrain.

As Christians provide care to people in a sociocultural context characterized by ideological and political battles, we need to think about rising above the culture war when providing ministry and meaningful pastoral care and support. We keep it in view (it is inescapable) while we provide services and compassionate care.

Why is this important? There is good reason to believe that the next generation of Christians tends to value a relational ethic that does not sacrifice relationships even when drawing distinctions in ethics and morality:

The Christian response to these issues [marriage, ethics, human flourishing, and so on] has to be rooted in a deeply relational ethic—that sexuality is a relational and interconnected aspect of our humanity. That relationships matter, including those between people who disagree.¹³

We will want to keep this in mind, and this book is intended to respect that shift in how discussions are carried out between people where there is disagreement, but it is at least important to recognize this cultural shift among Christians.

Unfortunately, one way people respond to transgender issues is to devalue the person who is gender variant and simultaneously turn to rigid stereotypes of gender. That reaction is not only overly restrictive, but it can create a forced choice for those who do not fit into those rigid categories. It won't be helpful to stress stereotypes that people are unable to adopt. Also, keep in mind that we have witnessed a cultural shift that may contribute to greater uncertainty around sex and gender.¹⁴

Also, I will share later some thoughts and suggestions on what it looks like to live out various expressions of gender identity concerns, but generally speaking, I can see the value in encouraging individuals who experience gender identity conflicts to resolve the conflicts in keeping with their birth sex if possible. Where those strategies have been unsuccessful, I recognize the potential value in managing the gender identity conflict or concern through the least invasive means (recognizing surgery as the most invasive step toward expression of one's internal sense of identity). I will come back to this, as it warrants more attention. There is a risk, too, with so much media attention focusing almost exclusively on transsexuality while there are many other expressions and experiences of transgenderism and gender variance. I will say this for now: *Given the complexities associated with these issues and the potential for many and varied presentations, pastoral sensitivity should be a priority.*

Also, I know many people who are navigating gender identity concerns who love Jesus and are desperately seeking to honor him. I think it would be a mistake to see these individuals as rebellious (as a group) or as projects. Some do identify as transgender or use other labels or ways of naming their reality, and I would like the church to provide a supportive environment for them as they navigate this difficult terrain.

Rather than reject the person facing such conflicts, the Christian community would do well to recognize the conflict and try to work with the person to find the least invasive ways to manage the gender identity concerns. I will return to this principle throughout the book, but the idea is that there are many ways in which a person who experiences gender identity concerns along a continuum might manage experiences of gender dysphoria. Just as the experiences reside along a continuum, so too do the possibilities for exploration of identity and management of what contributes to gender dysphoria.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Gender identity concerns remain one of the most complex and difficult to fully understand. We know so little about the etiology and best course of care, though there are strong proponents for different theories and approaches, and there is division among mental health professionals on some important points and between some mental health professionals and some members of the transgender community. We will discuss each of these issues in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

When the topic of treating gender dysphoric children is brought up, some professionals focus on resolving gender dysphoria to reach congruence with the child's birth sex. This has been increasingly viewed with skepticism; vocal critics from the transgender community have expressed how this is not unlike conversion therapy for homosexuality. Also, once a child reaches late adolescence or adulthood, there are few large-scale studies of psychosocial interventions toward this end, and even less optimism for such a resolution once a person has reached adulthood. Perhaps as a result, the field has moved in the direction of support for those who wish to pursue cross-gender identification, with several models that either "wait and see" or facilitate such cross-gender identification through puberty suppression. Once a person reaches adulthood, consideration is then given to medical interventions to facilitate cross-gender identification, and these may include hormonal treatment and sex-reassignment surgery.

As we close this chapter, I want to point out that there has been one study published of male-to-female transgender Christians.¹⁵ It noted conflicts with gender identity and religious identity in terms of personal faith, God and the local church.¹⁶ Interestingly, some transgender Christians shared that their gender dysphoria led to a *strengthening* of their personal faith; others reported a *past struggle* with their faith, and still others left the organized religion with which they grew up. For some, the challenges they faced brought them closer to God, but others reported a strained relationship with God because of their gender dysphoria. Particularly common was past conflict with the local church community or the persons and leaders who represent these organizations. I will return to this study throughout this book, as some of the information shared in that context may inform our broader discussion.

It is unclear to me at this time whether there is any one outcome that is ultimately satisfying to everyone who has a stake in these discussions. It is such a rare condition that we have little good research from which to draw strong conclusions, and I have known people who felt gender dysphoria so strongly that they felt nothing less than their sanity and their life was at stake. They desperately sought a resolution to the dysphoria that caused them significant distress and impairment. This is not an argument that they should pursue the most invasive procedures, but we also acknowledge that we understand and empathize with that decision, as painful as it often is. Rather than reject the person facing such conflicts, the Christian community would do well to recognize the conflict and try to work with the person to find the least

invasive ways to manage the dysphoria. Perhaps future programs of research will provide greater insight and clarity into an area that seems particularly difficult to navigate at this time. These include but are not limited to research on the types of resolutions sought by people with an eye for the developmental considerations associated with gender dysphoria in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, how strength of gender dysphoria is related to various attempted resolutions, the role of personal values and religious faith commitments in seeking resolutions, and so on. There is an opportunity here to learn much more than we know at present, and we would do well to enter into the discussion with patience and humility as we balance multiple perspectives on how best to resolve what people often report to be an impossible situation.

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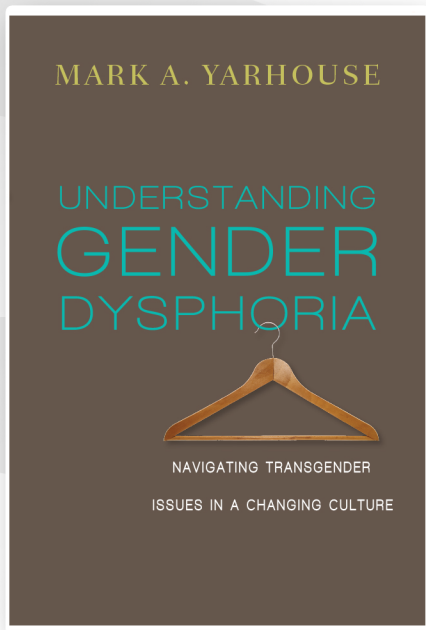
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