

Commentary

KIMBERLY RESNICK

The concept that individuals are male in some ways and female in others is not new. Jung wrote about this nearly 100 years ago when describing the *anima*, the female element in the male unconscious, and the *animus*, the male element in the female unconscious. And, of course, he is not alone. Many prominent theorists have pondered this inner duality. McCain now encourages clinicians to more fully acknowledge the existence of people who are male in some ways and female in others. I am enthusiastically receptive to embracing this concept. It seems reasonable to assume that if we could bring about a greater appreciation of the wide range of traits observable in each gender, individuals might have more choice about how they lead their lives. McCain rearranges the status quo with a drastic reorganization of our binary gender classification system for the stated purpose of improving or enhancing quality of life. Has he succeeded?

“Acknowledging Mixed-Sex People” demonstrates a keen understanding of how varied and multidimensional individuals can be. Yet, ironically, it egregiously fails to respect peoples’ subjective experiences. The proposal that a gay man who is comfortable with his homoeroticism cannot be thought of as possessing a male gender identity is preposterous. An example of McCain’s argument is that because a majority of men are attracted to women, the remainder are not men. My objections to McCain’s logic are three-fold: it flies in the face of reality; it is politically regressive; and it ignores the nature of sexual identity.

Like Scrabble,[™] McCain’s proposal to swap definitions of *homosexual* and *heterosexual* is word play. We can call sexual behavior among same-sex couples anything we want, but that will not change the long-standing, pervasive distaste for the behavior in our culture. It is naive to think that mere substitution or rearrangement of labels will change deeply entrenched social mores and belief systems. The unfortunate reality is that individuals who are different are still targets of discrimination and ridicule.

I explored McCain’s proposal with some of my gay and transsexual patients. Their strong negative reactions reinforced my initial sense that

Kimberly Resnick, MSSA, is a clinical social worker at The Center for Marital and Sexual Health, 3 Commerce Park Square, Suite 350, Beachwood, OH 44122, and adjunct faculty at Case Western Reserve University’s Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences.

Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, Vol. 22, No. 4, Winter 1996 © Brunner/Mazel, Inc.

this idea is harmful. A 31-year-old lesbian said, "I'm a woman who loves women . . . that's the point. I feel feminine and value my gender identity as a female." A 43-year-old biologic male who lives as a female and is awaiting sex reassignment surgery said, "I long to be a woman, not a mixed-sex person. I have always experienced myself as a female and that is how I want to be perceived by others. I have no interest in being referred to as a mixed-sex person, I find the concept incredibly insulting."

A third category, mixed-sex people, may well increase the plight of sexual minorities. It reminds me of the civil rights concept "separate but equal." Separate proved to be far from equal. Is McCain proposing we should have three restrooms in public places—male, female, and mixed-sex? How will we determine if an individual meets the criteria? At what point in a person's life? Who will the "we" be?

Clinical understanding of sexuality has come a long way in one generation. It began without distinct definition. Now, sexual identity is perceived to begin with the conglomeration of three separate and distinct components: gender identity (one's sense of masculinity or femininity), orientation (who am I attracted to: males, females, both, neither), and intention (what a person wants to do during sexual behavior). Less objectively, however, sexual identity is the result of the person's interpretation of inner experience. Make no mistake, this interpretation is profoundly culturally influenced. McCain's paper ignores the existence and importance of sexual identity's three components, but the most glaring omission is of the individual's right to label his or her own evolving inner world. Objective behavior does not always match the subjective experience of an individual. Gender identity, orientation, and intention have shocking lapses of correlation.

It is because we have binary divisions in the first place that we can appreciate the rich pluralism of sexual identity outcomes. The world chooses this illusion of simplicity. Humans have a profound need for order and structure. Most people, including children, find it comforting to differentiate between girls and boys in a glance. There will always be differences, anomalies, ambiguity. Rather than relabel the outcomes, we should continue to learn how to empathetically relate to them. To diagnose individuals as mixed-sex based on reproductive, distribution, and correlation criteria, while negating their subjective reality, is just as discriminatory and close-minded as the status quo. By being more "realistic," McCain's proposal actually obscures and complicates things.