



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H6 Sex vs. Gender: Does it Really Matter?

Frank P. Saul, PhD* and Julie M. Saul, BA, Consultants, Lucas County Coroner's Office and Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office, 3518 East Lincolnshire Boulevard, Toledo, OH 43-1203

After viewing this presentation, participants should have a better understanding of the terms "sex" and "gender" and the practical and research implications of their usage.

In these days of increasing awareness, if not increasing frequency, of unintentional as well as intentional cross dressing and similar practices, it is increasingly important to maintain the distinction between the terms "sex" (biologic identity) and "gender" (social identity). The authors believe that it is potentially confusing to refer to "gender identification of dried blood stains" as has occurred in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. The individual whose biological remains are one sex may have been "passing" as the other.

Walker and Cook (1999), speaking primarily to anthropologists, eloquently expressed their concern about the increasing use of the terms sex and gender as synonyms. They reviewed the usage and etymology of the two terms, but basically, sex refers to an individual's biologic identity and gender refers to an individual's social identity (which may, or may not, coincide with that individual's sex or biologic identity). Sex is determined by the presence or absence of the Y chromosome but gender may be assumed or chosen by the individual.

One of the most interesting examples of gender assumption may be found in the Sioux Indians of the past in the American Great Plains. The Sioux epitomized the stereotypical Indian warrior on horseback who sought out hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. Less well known is the fact that Sioux culture made provision for males who did not wish to become warriors to declare instead that they were berdaches and assume female gender clothing and roles such as food preparation and camp chores. Apparently they did this without stigmatization and homosexual orientation was not necessarily involved.

History also records individual females who donned male clothing so that they could assume a male gender role and serve as soldiers during the American Civil and other past wars.

In an otherwise excellent text, Steele and Bramblett (1988) matter of factly (and with no explanation) refer to "The Estimation of Gender" and continue to do so in contexts where the term sex had previously been used in similar publications.

However, the seemingly academic distinction between sex and gender has profound significance for both archaeological and forensic applications of osteological analysis.

The authors were unaware of the extent of the problem until several years ago when they were asked to assist a graduate student about to undertake archaeological field research on gender as revealed by cultural associations and context in ancient Maya burials (Geller 1998). It was at that time that they learned how influential (and obfuscating) Steele and Bramblett's text had been in helping to train a generation or so of anthropologists.

In addition, a number of presumably well-meaning non-anthropologists apparently have come to believe that gender is a more politically correct way of referring to sex and this inappropriate term now shows up on official forms and in similar contexts. (For a discussion of some of the ramifications of this usage, see Jennifer Mather Saul (2003)).

The authors' research on the ancient Maya involves assigning male or female sex to skeletons using standards based preferably on the proportions and contours of the human pelvis, which has been designed by natural selection for successful birthing in females. As indicated above, some of their archaeologist colleagues are attempting to learn about the gender/sociocultural roles played by these individuals in life, using the artifacts/grave goods encountered within the burial. Some of the artifacts used to denote female gender/roles include the problematic spindle whorls that appear to be associated with weaving. Unfortunately, when skeletal remains are fragmentary and pelvic sex indicators have not been available (and in some instances even when appropriate pelvic remains were available) assumptions of biologic sex of burials have been made using such artifacts, or, even more misleading - the dictum that only males are buried in tombs. The authors have previously demonstrated the fallacy of the latter at Altar de Sacrificios (1972) and Rio Azul (2000) using pelvic remains that indicated the occupants were females. In fact, both females within the Altar tomb also possessed the pre-audicular sulci that denote the changes that occur in late pregnancy due to the release of the hormone relaxin.

Fortunately, mistakes have been avoided in their forensic practices at the Wayne County Medical Examiners Office (WCMEO) in Detroit, Michigan, and the Lucas County Coroners Office (LCCO) in Toledo, Ohio, by proceeding cautiously. It is always tempting to use clothing to jump to conclusions when confronted with otherwise immediately unidentifiable remains, but obviously clothing (and jewelry) are transferable and should not be used for sexing or positive identifications. A recent WCMEO case involved the mostly skeletonized remains of a probable black child. The authors' biographic profile estimated the age at 4-6 years and although they are always hesitant to sex an immature individual they noted: Sex Uncertain, but *possibly* male based on the left ilium and mandible. An accompanying T-ball league T-shirt later led to a girls T-ball team and a young female whose black father had passed her outgrown shirt on to a male relative who passed it on to his 5-year-old son, who turned out to be the victim in this case.



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In an LCCO case, as reported in the first news broadcasts, involved the discovery of an apparent black female at the foot of the stairs in the home of an apparently missing white male golf professional. The apparent black female was fully clothed in a dramatic dress, jewelry, hose and high heels and wrapped from head to ankles in a plastic bag and duct tape. Wisely, the deputy coroner did not jump to conclusions and the careful unwrapping of the mummy revealed a sad case of death by accidental sexual asphyxiation of a white male.

Additional examples to be presented include brightly painted toenails on a male airplane crash victim who had attended a bachelor party the night before and similar cautionary cases of potential sex/gender confusion.

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