

EXPLORING GENDER



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what is gender?

Gendered interaction between adults and children begins as soon as the sex of a baby is known. From the moment we are born we are subject to a procession of gender-specific messages and expectations, and they are based solely on the nature of our genitals. From that point forward many outside influences contribute to our understanding of gender including our upbringing, our family, friends and peers, and the community, culture and overall environment that we grow up in. This core aspect of identity is all around us, all of the time, but what exactly is gender?

Many people use the terms “gender” and “sex” interchangeably, a practice that has become so commonplace, particularly in western societies, that any difference between these terms is rarely questioned. Yet biological sex and gender are indeed very different. Sex, as mentioned, is biological and includes physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, the gonads, sex hormones, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia and the brain. At birth external genitalia is used to identify individuals as either male or female.

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Gender on the other hand is far more complex and is widely understood to be the interrelationship between those physical attributes (sex), and one's awareness of themselves as masculine, feminine, any combination of both, or neither. This awareness is then usually reflected in society by one's outward expression, including demeanour, behaviour, communication and an overall presentation of themselves (including clothing, accessories, hairstyle etc.).

Over time, western culture has come to view gender as a binary concept, with the two rigidly fixed options being “masculine” and “feminine”. Much of society has come to expect that males will be masculine and females will be feminine. Significant latitude is often widely accepted within these labels, however the premise that a male child will possess a masculine gender identity and a female child will possess a feminine gender identity has evolved to the point where it is both assumed and expected.

gender roles

Gender roles provide a community with guides to normative behaviours that are typical and perhaps expected for each sex within certain social contexts.

The World Health Organisation defines gender as:

“The result of socially constructed ideas about the behaviour, actions, and roles a particular sex performs. The beliefs, values and attitude taken up and exhibited by them is as per the agreeable norms of the society [. . .] personal opinions [are] not taken into the primary consideration of assignment of gender and imposition of gender roles as per the assigned gender.”

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And concludes:

“Intersections and crossing of the prescribed boundaries have no place in the arena of the social construct of the term ‘gender’.”

It is both interesting and important to separate this definition into three distinct parts, for it clearly describes what gender roles are, the purpose they play in a society, and also infers that even though some may struggle to conform, crossing gender boundaries is generally rarely tolerated. Categorising people into social roles based on sex creates a binary in which individuals feel that they have to clearly identify themselves as either man or woman (boy or girl). Globally, the biological differences between males and females have been used to create a set of social expectations that define the behaviours that are "appropriate" for each of these two options.

Theorists consider that the origin of gender roles lay with the unique physical attributes of male and female bodies, in that a male's typical body size and upper body strength provided them an edge over females in activities that demanded these attributes, in particular hunting, herding and warfare. On the other hand, a female's biological capacity for reproduction and child-bearing is proposed to explain their involvement in other less strenuous and more nurturing activities. The forming of such divided activity arrangements for the purpose of achieving an efficient community is believed to have led to the division of labour between sexes. Over time, the characteristics of the activities performed separately by males and females has been confused into becoming a perception and an erroneous belief of the characteristics particular to males and females themselves.

gender roles and socialisation

All societies have a set of gender roles that form the basis of a social identity in relation to other members of that society. The process through which an individual learns and accepts roles is called socialisation.

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Socialisation works by encouraging wanted and discouraging unwanted behaviour. These endorsements by family and friends, society in general, and the media make it clear to a child what society expects of them. As children, we monitor our own, and others' gendered behaviour as, even though much of society has become more tolerant of gender role flexibility, they are still very prevalent in the emotionally charged world of children and teenagers, which can subsequently make life very difficult for those who differ from the established norms.

Humans are social beings and as such we usually strive to belong and we seek approval by complying and conforming to the social and cultural norms within the society in which we live. The conformity to social norms not only shapes the pattern, but also maintains the very existence of sex-typed social behaviour.

gender identity

The way we experience the world we live in, the way we move within the world we live in, the way we interact and communicate with other people, our speech patterns, our instinctive reactions to events and stimuli, the emotions we feel and express, our preferences, likes, dislikes and interests, our thought processes, indeed every aspect of our personality and behaviour makes every one of us a unique individual.

The way that we express these innermost personal aspects of ourselves and subsequently the way that we present ourselves to others, gives an indication of who we are. This of course is our identity. Gender doesn't necessarily play a part in some of the personality and behavioural traits that we feel or express each day of our lives, however it does play an important part in some of the more sociological aspects of life.

Many factors have been suggested as influencing our gender identity.

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It is commonly understood that some of these responses are innate while others, as mentioned are learned and perfected through socialisation, however our basic gender identity is usually formed by about age three.

Biological factors that may influence gender identity include pre-natal and post-natal hormone levels and gene regulation. Social factors which may influence gender identity include messages conveyed by family, friends and society in general including the media.

Many cultures have evolved to view gender as a binary concept, and have made some rules, even arbitrary ones, and expectations about what is appropriate for each gender (see “Gender Roles” above), society has come to expect that all females will exhibit feminine identity traits and all males will exhibit masculine identity traits. From these arbitrary rules and subsequent expectations, it is clear that the range of identity trait possibilities lay on a continuum with feminine at one end and masculine on the other.

So, for many aspects of life, whether we like it or not, society has come to determine that for many behavioural traits there is a feminine response and a masculine response, and while significant latitude is often widely accepted within these two categories, very little if any overlap is accepted. Gender identity is an individual’s unique understanding of who they are in respect to masculine and feminine responses to every aspect of everyday life.

gender variance

As discussed, a person's gender identity may be anywhere on the masculine-feminine continuum, and not necessarily consistent with society’s expectations which are most-often based misleadingly on biological sex characteristics. Individuals whose gender identity falls somewhere outside of society’s expectations are sometimes referred to as “gender variant”. Gender variance is an accepted aspect of human expression, documented across cultures and recorded history.

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Non-binary gender diversity exists throughout the world, documented by countless historians and anthropologists. Examples of individuals living comfortably outside of typical male/female identities are found in every region of the globe, the “Hijra” of India, “Muxe” of Mexico and “Fa’afafine of the Samoan Islands among many more examples.

Gender Variant people also exist in western society, and may identify with one of the terms that have come to describe a variety of different gender identities, or perhaps they prefer to self-label. Gender Variant individuals may identify as “Androgynous”, a person that is mentally "between" woman and man, “Transgender”, a person that identifies as, or desires to live and be accepted as, a member of the sex opposite to that assigned at birth.

transgender

While people may self-identify as transgender, transgender identity includes many overlapping categories. These include cross-dresser, transvestite, androgynes, genderqueer, people who live cross-gender, drag kings and drag queens, and frequently, transsexuals. Usually not included are transvestic fetishists (because it is considered to be a paraphilia rather than gender identification).

transsexual

Transsexual people identify as, or desire to live and be accepted as, a member of the sex opposite to that assigned to them at birth. Many transsexual people desire to undergo gender transition. People who have transitioned may or may not necessarily identify as transgender or transsexual any longer, but simply as a man or a woman. Transgender and transsexual people may be either open or closeted about their trans status prior to, in the process of, or after fully transitioning.

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Many transsexual people have a wish to alter their bodies. These physical changes are collectively known as gender reassignment therapy and often (but not always) include hormone replacement therapy and sex reassignment surgery.

cross dresser

(See also Gender Centre Fact Sheet: Cross-Dressing)

Cross-dressing is the wearing of clothing and other effects commonly associated with a gender identity that is seen as different from the one that is usually presented by the same person. This excludes female impersonators who look upon cross-dressing as solely connected to their livelihood, actors undertaking roles, individual males and females enjoying a masquerade, and so on. These individuals are cross-dressing but are not necessarily cross-dressers." Cross-dressers may not identify with, or want to be the opposite sex and generally do not want to change their bodies medically or surgically. The majority of cross-dressers identify as heterosexual.

transvestite

A transvestite is somebody who cross-dresses. The term "transvestite" is used as a synonym for the term "cross-dresser", although "cross-dresser" is generally considered the preferred term.

doing drag

Drag is a term applied to clothing and make-up worn on special occasions for performing or entertaining. This is in contrast to those who cross-dress for other reasons or who are transgender.

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genderqueer

Genderqueer is a recent attempt to signify gender experiences that do not fit into binary concepts, and refers to a combination of gender identities and sexual orientations. One example could be somebody whose gender presentation is sometimes perceived as male, sometimes female, but whose gender identity is female, gender expression is butch, and sexual orientation is lesbian.

It suggests non-conformity or mixing of gender stereotypes, conjoining both gender and sexuality, and challenges existing constructions and identities.

androgynous

Androgynes may identify as being beyond gender, between genders, moving across genders, entirely genderless, or any or all of these, exhibiting a variety of male, female, and other characteristics. Androgynous identities include pangender, ambigender, non-gendered, agender, gender fluid or intergender. Androgyny can be either physical or psychological, and it does not depend on birth sex. Occasionally, people who do not define themselves as androgynes adapt their physical appearance to look androgynous.

bigender

A bigender individual is one who moves between masculine and feminine gender roles. Such individuals move between two distinct personalities fluidly depending on context. While an androgynous person retains the same gender-typed behaviour across situations, the bigendered person either consciously or unconsciously changes their gender-role behaviour from primarily masculine to primarily feminine, or vice versa.

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gender fluidity

Gender ambiguity deals with having the freedom to choose, manipulate and create a personal niche within any defined socially constructed code of conduct while gender fluidity is the outlawing all the rules of cultural gender assignment. It does not accept the prevalence of two rigidly defined genders "Female" and "Male" and believes in freedom to choose any kind of gender with no rules, no defined boundaries and no fulfilling of expectations associated with any particular gender.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities in NSW which enhance the ability of people exploring their gender identity to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to gender explorers, their partners, family and friends in NSW. We provide:

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