

Understanding Gender

What is Gender?

For many people, the terms “gender” and “sex” are interchangeable. This idea has become so common, particularly in western societies, that it is rarely questioned. We are born, assigned a gender, and sent out into the world. For many people, this fact is cause for little, if any dissonance. Yet biological sex and gender are different; gender is not inherently nor solely connected to one’s physical anatomy.

Biological sex includes physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. At birth, it is used to identify individuals as male or female. *Gender* on the other hand is far more complicated. Along with one’s physical traits, it is the complex interrelationship between those traits and one’s internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither as well as one’s outward presentations and behaviors related to that perception.

The Gender Spectrum

Western culture has come to view gender as a **binary** concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female. When a child is born, a quick glance between the legs determines the gender label that the child will carry for life. But even if gender is to be restricted to basic biology, a binary concept still fails to capture the rich variation observed. Rather than just two distinct boxes, biological gender occurs across a continuum of possibilities. This **spectrum** of anatomical variations by itself should be enough to disregard the simplistic notion of only two genders.

But beyond anatomy, there are multiple domains defining gender. In turn, these domains can be independently characterized across a range of possibilities. Instead of the static, binary model produced through a solely physical understanding of gender, a far richer texture of biology, gender expression, and gender identity intersect in a multidimensional array of possibilities. Quite simply, the **gender spectrum** represents a more nuanced, and ultimately truly authentic model of human gender.

Falling Into Line

Gender is all around us. It is actually taught to us, from the moment we are born. Gender expectations and messages bombard us constantly. Upbringing, culture, peers, community, media, and religion, are some of the many influences that shape our understanding of this core aspect of identity. How you learned and interacted with gender as a young child directly influences how you view the world today. Gendered interaction between parent and child begin as soon as the sex of the baby is known. In short, gender is a socially constructed concept.

Like other social constructs, gender is closely monitored by society. Practically everything in society is assigned a gender—toys, colors, clothes and behaviors some of the more obvious examples. Through a combination of social conditioning and personal preference, by age three most children prefer activities and exhibit behaviors typically associated with their sex. Accepted social gender roles and expectations are so entrenched in our culture that most people cannot imagine any other way. As a result, individuals fitting neatly into these expectations rarely if ever question what *gender* really means. They have never had to, because the system has worked for them.

About Gender Variance

Gender variance is when a person's preferences and self-expression fall outside commonly understood gender norms. Gender variance is a normal part of human expression, documented across cultures and recorded history. 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 *calabai*, and *calalai* of Indonesia, two-spirit Native Americans, and the *hijra* of India all represent more complex understandings of gender than the simplistic model seen in the west.

Further, what might be considered gender variant in one period of history may become gender normative in another. One need only examine trends related to men wearing earrings or women sporting tattoos to quickly see the malleability of social expectations about gender. Even the seemingly intractable “pink is for girls, blue is for boys” notions are relatively new. While there is some debate about the reasons why they reversed, what is well documented is that until the 1950s, pink was seen as a more decided and stronger color, and thus more suitable for a boy, while blue, viewed more delicate and dainty, was commonly worn by girls.

Gender And Privilege

When someone is “typically gendered (or cisgendered),” they benefit from gender privilege. For individuals whose biological sex, gender expression, and gender identity neatly align, there is a level of congruence as they encounter the world. Like many forms of social privilege, this is frequently an unexamined aspect of their lives. Forms they fill out, the clothing stores in which they shop, identification papers they carry, bring few if any second thoughts. Yet for a transgender or gender nonconforming person, each of these, and many more examples, are constant reminders that they move about in a culture that really does not account for their own experience. Social privilege comes from an assumption that one's own perspective is universal; whether related to race, or language, or gender, privilege comes from being part of the “norm.”

To understand this more intuitively, think about the last time you were in a public setting and needed to use a restroom. For gender-typical individuals, this rarely presents a problem or question (issues of cleanliness notwithstanding!). Yet for an individual who does not fit into narrowly defined expectations of gender presentation or identity, restroom use can present a whole host of challenges, sometimes even becoming a matter of life and death. The daily need to make judgments about what one does, or wears, or says based on other people's perceptions of their gender is a burden that many people never encounter. These everyday reminders of being different are also constant reinforcement of being “other.”

Conclusion

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of a person's identity, gender deeply influences every part of one's life. In a society where this crucial aspect of self has been so narrowly defined and rigidly enforced, individuals who exist outside its norms face innumerable challenges. Yet this does not have to be the case in perpetuity. Through a thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness and validity of every person's experiences of self, we can develop greater acceptance for all. Imagine a world in which the phrase “Be Yourself” was honored. It would truly “Change the World.”