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Gender: An Infinite and Evolving Theory

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Gender: An Infinite and Evolving Theory

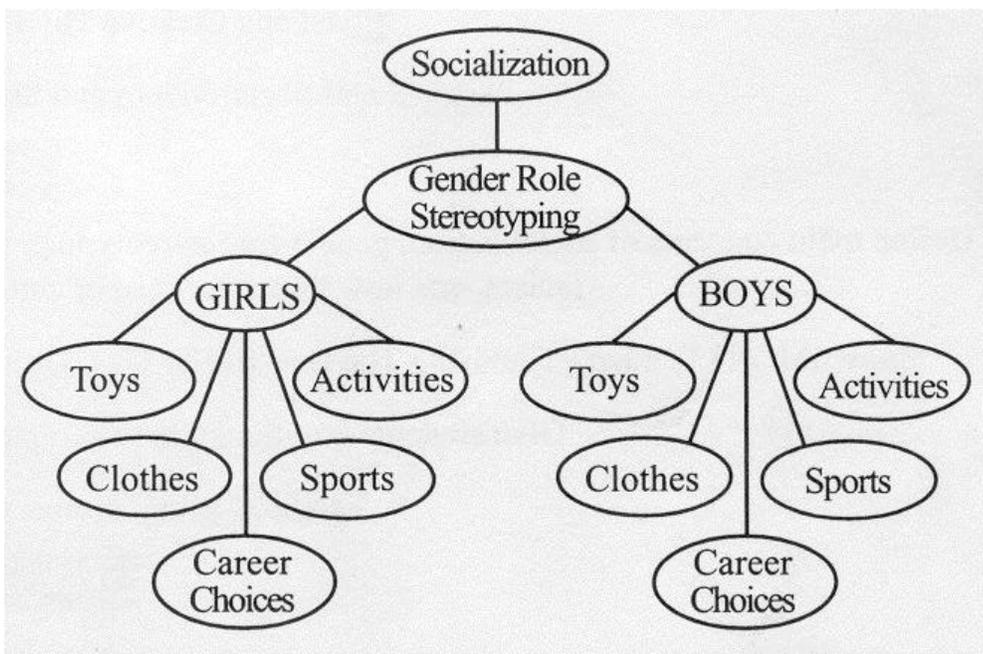
Julie Schoellkopf

Many perceive sex and gender to be the same concept or at least related to each other, but this is not the case. If they do perceive it as different concepts, it is usually understood simply as biological sex. For many people gender is part of daily routine and questioning it is absurd (Lorber). In virtually all societies gender is defined by characteristics associated with one's sex.

This definition stems from the social construction of gender, meaning that gender is not based solely on physiological qualities. As a social construct, gender is not internalized gender roles, but instead how people are categorized and respond to changing norms in society (Deutsch). Gender is constantly evolving by changing norms as a result of “human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life” (Lorber). According to the categories and norms in societies, some traits are only associated with women and others only associated with men. This idea does not hold factual evidence given that many men and women display both feminine and masculine characteristics. Another question to ponder is why certain traits are only considered to be either masculine or feminine. To make sense of these arbitrary assignments, it is necessary to understand that gender is simply a social construct and not derived from attributes of one’s biological sex.

Instead of internalizing the existing qualities of gender, one “does gender” to categorize themselves (Lorber). The problem with the social construct of gender and its mistaken relation to sex is that it limits people in their identities and expressions of those identities. Instead, gender and the ideas of masculinity and femininity should be redefined into something more inclusive of all people and less restricted and confined. People are complex and cannot be easily classified into two categories. Sex and gender are not intrinsically bound, and acknowledging gender as a boundless theory allows this idea to be understood.

As previously stated, gender can be



thought of as socially constructed. To make sense of this concept, it is important to understand that social construction is the idea that the many things people take to be of reality are partially, if not completely created out of social situations (Berger and Luckmann). The social construction of gender can be thought of as actions rather than intrinsic to one's genitalia. As said by the feminist writer Judith Butler, being female is not "natural, but rather appears natural through repeated performances of gender which reproduce and maintain traditional categories of sex and gender alike (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). In the following video, Judith Butler discusses how gender is performed: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>. A large part of the social construct gender is simply conforming to the stereotypical gender roles in a given society, but also that people are behaving as a certain gender in their actions. Because gender is produced directly through one's social interactions, it is assumed that any behavior we engage in can be considered gendered. By doing gender, we are also perpetuating the gender binary. The gender binary is the idea that all behaviors must be categorized into two groups – male or female. It is important to note that in this society, these two groups are mutually exclusive. Even though these behaviors are based on biological sex, they are created, recreated and maintained through the presentation of gender.

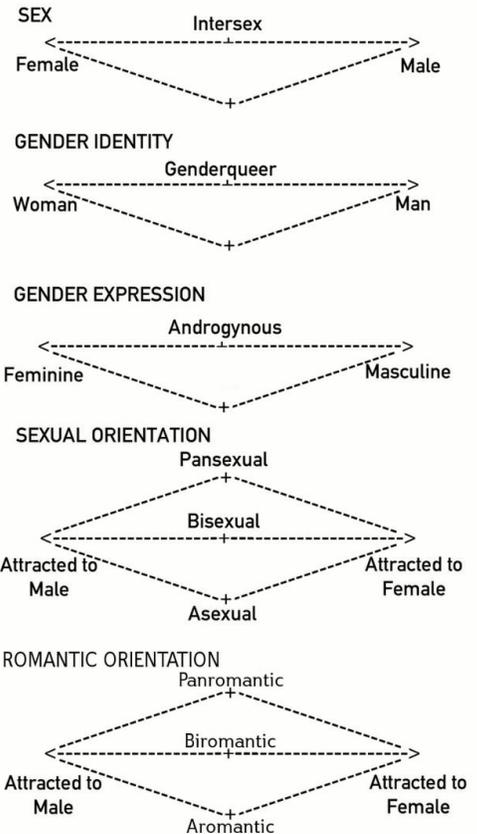
From birth, children are assigned their gender based on what their genitalia looks like. However, as stated before, that child's behavior is not a product of its reproductive sex organs. Instead, from an early age children are typically dressed and treated in ways specific to the assigned gender based on its sex (Lorber). In other words, a child is taught to behave and how not to behave based on his or her gender. In the following video, the socialization of gender at an early age is shown: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWc1e3Nbc2g>. As said Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born but rather becomes, a woman" demonstrates the idea that society at



THE IDENTITY SPECTRUM 2.0J

version 2.0J

This graph is a fun exercise to help one understand that Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sexual Orientation does not have to be black and white as both the Heteronormative/Cisgender Society around us (AKA Straight People) and the LGBT Community ascribe them to be -- find your own identity with this exercise and sincerely explore who YOU are and challenge the stereotypes of Gender and Sexual Orientation. Simply draw a line that best identifies along these spectrums. (Version 2.0 is still completely inadequate. You probably will not fit here. Mess with this graph however you want to make it fit you instead.)



large determines your identity (Lorber). But why is it so important to humans to categorize and gender ourselves? We depend on predictable and organized division of labor, responsibilities, and creative expression. Gender is only one of the ways we decide who does what. In addition, we categorize people based on their talents, race or social class (Lorber). However, if someone of the opposite gender enters a certain role, they are expected to adopt the behavior of the other gender (Fenstermaker and West).

In order to understand gender as a boundless and evolving theory, one must consider humans to be more complex than the two categories of masculine and feminine. According to a social construct, the gender binary must be overlooked, the overlap examined and boundaries blurred. Gender is an infinite spectrum, ranging from masculine to feminine, both or neither and even other ideas. But how can one be sure that humans really are more complex than male and female? This idea can be understood biologically. Not all humans or even animals are born with completely distinguishable sex organs. There are some humans and animals born as intersex, which includes those who have atypical or a combination of physical attributes that usually distinguish male from female (Dreger). These atypical attributes are caused by chromosomal, genital and gonadal anomalies. By recognizing intersex people, one can understand that if there are not always two definite

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sexes, there most certainly cannot only be two definite genders. By not being completely male or female biologically, an intersex person can come to terms with themselves and identify what gender they feel most comfortable with if they want to. It is also important to understand that it is not necessary to identify yourself with a gender, because as said before, gender is simply a social construct. People may choose to express themselves a certain way, but choose to not identify themselves into a confined category. This demonstrates the idea that simply having certain sex organs has nothing to do with how you choose express yourself or what gender you want to identify with.

It is also important to understand that even when someone is born with a definite sex, they can challenge their gender assigned at birth. Unfortunately, all babies are assigned a gender at birth, usually in line with their sex. As said before, sex and gender are not intrinsically bound so their assigned gender may not turn out to be the one they want to identify with. Even though a baby can be born with distinguishable physical attributes of a sex, their gender is completely up to them. One example of people challenging their assigned genders is transgender people. Typically, people who are transgender grew up with their gender socially constructed and rejected the assignment. For them, their gender did not match the characteristics associated with their biological sex. Transgender people usually transition to the opposite sex, which usually translates into their presentation switching to the expected range of the gender (Lorber). Instead of transgressing the assigned characteristics, they try to “pass” by performing as their new gender. Even changing your preferred gender to the one associated with the opposite sex is socially constructed.

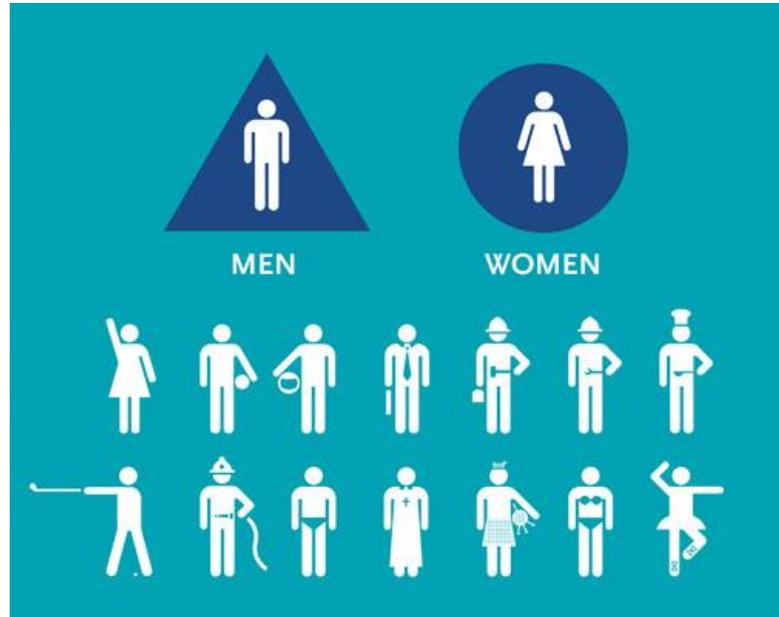
While gender is a social construct, the current construct is too limiting. To allow people to explore their natural behavior, gender should be considered self-chosen identity. People who

are transgender are assigned the wrong gender at birth and at some point choose to transition to their correct gender, if one at all. Some people who are transgender may decide to identify outside of the gender binary. This means they identify as neither male nor female. This concept challenges the current social construct of gender because it rejects the ideas of femininity and masculinity and instead displays an idea of completely different and infinite expressions. This idea also appreciates that behavior and performance are not gendered and are carried out by both biological male and females, which is demonstrated by the above image. In addition, not all members of a given gender fit the exact socially constructed role. According to Kate Bornstein, gender can be ambiguous and fluid (Bornstein), which reinforces the idea that intersections of supposed gender behavior are natural. The man-made creations of femininity and masculinity are very limited of the natural behavior and presentation of humans. Gender roles are superficial and should be challenged because males and females already The above image illustrates that gender roles are not inherent to one's sex but instead constructed and perpetuated by society do not always behave in these manners. If one executes behavior of the opposite gender, they can be ostracized (Lorber). People are complex and changing creatures and our expression ranges from masculine to feminine and anything else, and therefore should be acknowledged and accepted by society.

Most commonly people identify as cis-gender, meaning they feel their sex lines up with their gender. Even though someone with male anatomy may identify as a male, it does not mean he only displays the socially constructed masculine characteristics (Lorber). Why is blue considered a color for boys and pink the color for girls? We have been taught what is for girls and what is for boys from birth. Men and women also have stereotypical behaviors, such as men are considered to be more aggressive. An aggressive woman is not being "manly"; she is

aggressive because that how she is as an individual. Our behaviors, expressions and ideas have nothing to do with neither our sex nor our gender. People should not be defined by their bodies and assigned roles, but by their minds as individuals.

The confines of femininity and masculinity only being considered associated with either sex are oppressive to all people because it does not allow them to fully express themselves (Butler). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler recognizes that gender identity itself is socially constructed



because a distinction is made that people must be categorized by their performance (Butler).

Butler suggests that people “call for gender trouble” through the deconstruction of these gendered performances (Butler). Cis-gender people can challenge femininity and masculinity as much as transgender people because these concepts are man-made. Therefore, people can continue to build on ideas of expression by expanding and creating new concepts. It is especially important to break the assigned gender roles so people can do as they please without being told they’re being “manly” or “girly”. People are not being “manly” or “girly” because these traits simply do not only apply to only one of the sexes. Evidence for this is that men display both feminine and masculine characteristics, as do females display both masculine and feminine characteristics (Butler). Another important idea is that characteristics and expressions can sometimes not be defined as masculine or feminine because that is really how all traits are (Lorber). These characteristics outside of gender roles were simply never assigned to either sex over the course of history. Thankfully, this allows us to recognize how femininity and masculinity are social constructs and not intrinsic to our sex or gender.

Men and women and everything in between and outside of those are real ideas because it is how people are identifying and expressing themselves. The current gender social construct has restricted everyone to a limited amount of social accepted behaviors, which are transcended constantly. Instead of telling people they are behaving like the opposite gender, it should be recognized that people are behaving and presenting as they uniquely are. People are complex with an unlimited amount of expressions shared and not shared by biological males and females. In order to understand these concepts it is imperative to eradicate the misconception that gender is dependent on sex. Gender must be understood as a social construct, but the current construct is heavily flawed due to its limitations. Gender is man-made and is instead an infinite and evolving concept. While gender is always changing, the binary construction of behavior and presentation remains the same. The expressions and behavior of humans are immense and limitless and will continue to unfold as long as we exist. Blurring boundaries and accepting similarities and differences of all people as natural must be executed to reconstruct gender.

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