

Dimensions of the Gender Spectrum

This entry examines the complex nature of gender. Rather than a rigid, binary concept grounded in biology, it presents a model for understanding gender that incorporates a spectrum of characteristics, including an individual's sex, gender expression and gender identity. In the process, a more nuanced understanding of this core aspect of self emerges, accounting for each person's unique gender experiences.

Beyond Biology

When someone has a baby, the question most frequently asked is, "Is it a boy or a girl?" This seemingly innocent query reinforces the ubiquitous notion of the **binary gender system**, which rests on two deeply held, but nonetheless flawed assumptions: that gender is binary, and that this core aspect of self is biologically determined. Rarely challenged, this notion has a significant and costly consequence. Not only are individuals who fail to meet narrowly defined criteria frequently marginalized, society as a whole risks losing access to the potential contributions of many of its members as they choose or are needlessly forced to cast off aspects of themselves to fit narrowly prescribed expectations.

The binary gender system typically conflates "gender" and "sex." One's sex includes physical attributes such as external genitalia, sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, and internal reproductive structures. At birth, this "biology of gender" is used to answer the "boy or girl?" question. For many, this is cause for little or no dissonance. By default, most environments are designed around this simplistic model. However, beyond typically "male" or "female" bodies, there are naturally occurring conditions (often referred to as "intersex") that occur in all species, including humans. Rather than just two distinct boxes, sex exists across a continuum of anatomical variation that by itself should be enough to disregard the simplistic notions of a binary gender system.

Yet gender is not inherently nor solely connected to one's physical anatomy. *Gender biology* (sex) and gender are not one and the same. Beyond anatomy there are multiple dimensions influencing gender. Put simply, gender is the complex interrelationship between an individual's **sex** (gender biology), **one's internal sense** of self as male, female, or something else (gender identity), and one's **outward presentation and behavior** (gender expression) related to that perception. In turn, each of these can be independently characterized across a range of possibilities.

Gender Identity: Can You See the Real Me?

Beyond biology, another dimension of gender is gender identity, which can be defined as an individual's deeply held sense of self as male, female, or another gender altogether. Most people have an early sense of their gender identity, and if it is not congruous with their anatomical sex they may begin voicing this between the ages of 2 and 4. If you ask individuals when and how they recognized themselves as male or female (or perhaps something else), most will reply that they have simply always known. This core aspect of one's identity is internally driven. Gender identity is believed to be an inherent aspect of a person's make-up, most likely formed in the brain. A variety of factors, such as prenatal hormonal exposure, neuro-genital development, and environmental influences, may play a part in its formation, but most agree that one's gender identity is determined prior to birth. Individuals do not choose their gender identity; rather, gender identity emerges from within.

Gender Expression

The third dimension of gender is gender expression, which can be defined as the way we show our gender to the world around us. Given the prevalence of the binary gender system, children face great pressure to conform to narrow definitions of “boy” or “girl.” Expectations around gender expression are taught to us from the moment we are born. Social constructs of gender are communicated through every aspect of our lives, including family, culture, peers, schools, community, media, and religion.

Like other social constructs, gender expression is closely monitored and reinforced by society. Practically everything is assigned a gender—toys, colors, clothes and activities are 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.

But children who express gender in ways that transgress these social norms often have a very different experience. Boys seen as feminine at any age, and girls thought to be too masculine (especially as they move into their teens), face a variety of challenges. Pressures to conform at home, mistreatment by peers in school, and condemnation by religious or other institutions are just some of the difficulties facing a child whose expression does not fall into line with the binary gender system. For many young people, whether typical in their presentation or not, gender expression is the most immediately experienced aspect of gender, impacting them in most if not all of their interactions with others.

Yet we also know that norms around gender expression change across societies and over time. One need only examine the history 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. It is well documented that not until the mid-twentieth century were notions of pink for girls or blue for boys so firmly ensconced.

Gender vs. Sexual Orientation

One final distinction to make is the difference between gender and sexual orientation, which are often incorrectly conflated. When someone’s gender expression or identity is perceived to be inconsistent with others’ expectations, they are frequently assumed to be gay. But gender is about who we are, and sexual orientation is about our physical, emotional and/or romantic attractions to others. Sexual orientation is a distinct aspect of self. Why is it so critical to distinguish these two notions?

First of all, they are simply different, and accuracy of language is critical as we discuss issues of identity. Further, it is not uncommon to “read” a young person’s gender expression and assume it tells us something about their sexual orientation. The boy who loves to play princess is assumed to be gay, and the adolescent girl who buys clothes in the boys’ section and favors a short haircut must be a lesbian. These are faulty conclusions. What someone plays with, or wears, or does is about gender expression, not orientation. Finally, when we think about gender identity as sexuality, we are attaching a meaning that may well have nothing to do with the young person’s authentic assertion of self. This error, however, can have significant impact on the manner in which others interpret the child’s gender identity and/or expression.

Gender in 3-D

Alone, each dimension of gender challenges the binary model so common in many cultures. But when considered as a whole, the diversity of gender truly unfolds. Just as three dimensions of space provide a more detailed landscape for understanding physical objects, the three dimensions of gender provide a much richer model for exploring this misunderstood concept. When thinking about gender, it is the **interaction of the three dimensions** that really captures gender's complexity.

For many individuals, gender is "aligned." That is, gender biology (assigned gender), gender expression (presentation of gender) and gender identity (internal sense of self) line up. An adjective sometimes used to capture this alignment is "cisgender." The prefix *cis-* comes from Latin and means "on the same side as" or "on this side of." While perhaps the most common pattern, even within this arrangement there is tremendous room for variation. Nonetheless, the term "cisgender" is an important one in that it names the dominant experience, rather than simply assuming it to be the default or "normal" way to be.

However, being cisgender is not the only description available for capturing individual experiences of gender. Another possibility is for biology and identity to line-up, but for expression to be seen as inconsistent. A child assigned and identifying as female who is seen by those around her to gravitate towards the masculine is often referred to as a "tomboy." A child assigned and identifying as male who is seen by those around him to gravitate towards the feminine has no comparable name.

We also know that these two young people may well face drastically different experiences as they grow up. Particularly when young, a "tomboy" is sometimes celebrated by the adults around her, and the term "tomboy" is not necessarily negative. However, there is no widely used positive or neutral term for a child assigned male who is perceived to be feminine in some way. Pejorative words that immediately come to mind in the form of schoolyard taunts are: "faggot," "sissy," "homo," or "gay." Though the norms for expression that are seen as "male" or "female" are artificially created, many are nonetheless deeply invested in making sure they are adhered to.

Still other individuals are labeled as a particular sex based on biology while identifying as the "other" gender. Where "cisgender" refers to someone whose identity is "on the same side as," their assigned sex, "**transgender**" refers to someone whose identity is "across from" their assigned sex. Expression for transgender individuals can be anywhere along the spectrum. There are transgender individuals who express gender in very stereotypical ways, and others who do not. In part, this may be about preferences, and in part this may be indicative of the context in which they find themselves. In other words, a transgender boy may wear skirts and blouses because the people around them will not allow a more typically masculine style. However, they may also simply prefer to dress this way.

Beyond the Binary: About Gender Expansiveness

"**Gender expansive**" is an umbrella term used for individuals that broaden commonly held definitions of gender, including its expression, associated identities, and/or other perceived gender norms, in one or more aspects of their life. These individuals expand common definitions of gender through their own identity and/or expression. Some individuals do not identify with being either male or female; others identify as a blend of both, while still others identify with a gender, but express their gender in ways that differ from stereotypical expectations. A gender expansive person's preferences and self-expression may fall outside commonly understood gender norms within their own culture; or they may be aligned with them even as one's internal gender identity doesn't align with the sex assigned at birth.

Documented by countless historians and anthropologists, this diversity of gender is a normal part of the human experience, across cultures and throughout history. Examples of individuals living comfortably outside of typical male/female expectations and/or 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 allowed for by a simplistic binary model. Put simply, gender-expansiveness as a concept recognizes that it is society's narrow perceptions of gender and the consequent limitations that it imposes that must be questioned, rather than the individuals who don't conform to them.

Gender Spectrum

These expanded notions about gender inform the work of Gender Spectrum, an organization whose mission is the creation of gender inclusive spaces for all children and teens. Recognizing the limitations and pressures that the binary gender system places on young people, its work takes place in four distinct ways. Through education and training, they work with schools and other organizations to build their capacity to support the gender diversity of every child. They provide direct services to parents and caregivers through support groups, resources and consultations. Each year, the Gender Spectrum Conference brings these two elements together for a weekend of learning and engagement for families, professionals, and young people of all ages. Finally, the organization seeks to lead a deeper conversation about the evolving understandings of gender and how it affects young people.

Conclusion

In summary, this multi-dimensional model provides a far more dynamic way to think about the complex subject of gender. Instead of the static, binary model produced through a solely physical understanding of gender, a far richer tapestry emerges with recognition of gender as the intersection of biology, expression, and identity. Quite simply, the **gender spectrum** represents a more nuanced and accurate model of the diversity of human gender, affirming each person's unique and authentic experience of this core aspect of self.

See also:

Cisgenderism; Gender Binaries; Gender Nonconformity, Youth; Genderqueer; Gender Spectrum; Intersexuality (As It Intersects W/LGBTQ); Masculinity Stereotypes; Non-Binary Genders; Transgender Identities; Transgender Youth and Well-Being

Further Readings

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