4.4: Gender Identity and Gender Expression

A person’s subjective experience of their own gender and how it develops, or gender identity, is a topic of much debate. It is the extent to which one identifies with a particular gender; it is a person’s individual sense and subjective experience of being a man, a woman, or other gender. It is often shaped early in life and consists primarily of the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of one’s membership into a gender category. In most societies, there is a basic division between gender attributes assigned to males and females. In all societies, however, some individuals do not identify with some (or all) of the aspects of gender that are assigned to their biological sex.

Those that identify with the gender that corresponds to the sex assigned to them at birth (for example, they are assigned female at birth and continue to identify as a girl, and later a woman) are called cisgender. In many Western cultures, individuals who identify with a gender that is different from their biological sex (for example, they are assigned female at birth but feel inwardly that they are a boy or a gender other than a girl) are called transgender. Some transgender individuals, if they have access to resources and medical care, choose to alter their bodies through medical interventions such as surgery and hormonal therapy so that their physical being is better aligned with their gender identity.

Recent terms such as “genderqueer,” “genderfluid,” “gender variant,” “androgynous,” “agender,” and “gender nonconforming” are used by individuals who do not identify within the gender binary as either a man or a woman. Instead they identify as existing somewhere along a spectrum or continuum of genders, or outside of the spectrum altogether, often in a way that is continuously evolving.

The Gender Continuum

Viewing gender as a continuum allows us to perceive the rich diversity of genders, from trans- and cisgender to gender queer and agender. Most Western societies operate on the idea that gender is a binary, that there are essentially only...
two genders (men and women) based on two sexes (male and female), and that everyone must fit one or the other. This social dichotomy enforces conformance to the ideals of masculinity and femininity in all aspects of gender and sex—gender identity, gender expression, and biological sex.

According to supporters of queer theory, gender identity is not a rigid or static identity but can continue to evolve and change over time. Queer theory developed in response to the perceived limitations of the way in which identities are thought to become consolidated or stabilized (for instance, gay or straight), and theorists constructed queerness in an attempt to resist this. In this way, the theory attempts to maintain a critique rather than define a specific identity. While “queer” defies a simple definition, the term is often used to convey an identity that is not rigidly developed but is instead fluid and changing.[1]

The Genderbread Person

In 2012, Sam Killerman created the Genderbread Person as an infographic to break down gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation.[2] In 2018, he updated it to version 2.0 to be more accurate, and inclusive.[3]

![The Genderbread Person v2.0](image)

Figure 1: The Genderbread Person explains gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation.[4]

Trans Parenting

There is little to no visibility or public support through pregnancy and parenting resources directed towards trans parents. In the case of trans individuals who desire to become parents and to be legally recognized as mothers or fathers of their children, courts often refuse to legally acknowledge such roles because of biological discrimination.[5]
Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming Children

Children who do not feel that they are the gender they were assigned with birth, deserve a bit of special attention in this discussion about gender as. “Gender identity and expression are central to the way we see ourselves and engage in the world around us. This is certainly true of transgender and gender-expansive children and teens, for whom family support is absolutely critical” (Human Right Campaign, 2019).

Transgender issues manifest at different times in life in different individuals. In most cases of gender dysphoria, the condition is often apparent in early childhood, when such a child may express behavior in-congruent with and dissatisfaction related to their assigned gender. However, many of these children experience rejection as a result of their differences and quickly attempt to repress them. Therefore, people who see these children regularly may be unaware that they are unhappy as members of their assigned gender.

Family acceptance among transgender children predicts an increase in greater self-esteem, social support, and general health status. It also protects against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviors. Parents’ access to information is critical in aiding and advocating for transgender youth.

A safe school climate is essential for transgender, gender dysphoric, and gender non-conforming children, who likely experience stress and anxiety due to their desire to transition or display themselves as a different gender. While many schools have become more accepting and allow children to express their desired gender identity, current research shows that there is an increased amount of harassment, bullying, indifference by school staff, and antigay victimization towards transgender and gender non-conforming youth.

[1] Boundless Psychology - Gender and Sexuality references Curation and Revision by Boundless Psychology, which is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

[2] The Genderbread Person by Sam Killermann is in the public domain

[3] The Genderbread Person v2.0 by Sam Killermann is in the public domain