11.2C: Gender Identity in Everyday Life

Gender identity is one’s sense of one’s own gender. It is the result of socialization, but it also has a biological basis.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the difference between biological and social construction of gender identity

Key Points

• Gender identity typically falls on a gender binary —individuals are expected to exclusively identify either as male or female. However, some individuals believe that this binary model is illegitimate and identify as a third, or mixed, gender.

• Individuals whose gender identity aligns with their sex organs are said to be cisgender. Transgender individuals are those whose gender identity does not align with their sex organs.

• Gender identity discourse derives from medical and psychological conceptions of gender. There is vigorous debate over biological versus environmental causes of the development of one's gender identity.

• As gender identities come to be more disputed, new legal frontiers are opening on the basis that a male/female gender binary, as written into the law, discriminates against individuals who either identify as the opposite of their biological sex or who do not identify as either male or female.

• The extreme cultural variation in notions of gender indicate the socially constructed nature of gender identity.

Key Terms

• **cisgender**: Identifying with or experiencing a gender the same as one’s biological sex or that is affirmed by society,
e.g. being both male-gendered & male-sexed.

- **transgender**: Not identifying with culturally conventional gender roles and categories of male or female; having changed gender identity from male to female or female to male, or identifying with elements of both, or having some other gender identity.

- **gender binary**: A view of gender whereby people are categorized exclusively as either male or female, often basing gender on biological sex.

Gender identity is one’s sense of being male, female, or a third gender. Gender identity typically falls on a gender binary—individuals are expected to exclusively identify either as male or female. However, some individuals believe that this binary model is illegitimate and identify as a third, or mixed, gender. Gender identity is socially constructed, yet it still pertains to one’s sense of self. Gender identity is not only about how one perceives one’s own gender, but also about how one presents one’s gender to the public.

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### Cisgender and Transgender

Individuals whose gender identity aligns with their sex organs are said to be cisgender. Transgender individuals are those whose gender identity does not align with their sex organs. These people generally dress according to how they feel but do not make a drastic change within their sexual organs. Transsexuals, however, take drastic measures to assume their believed identity. This includes hormone therapy and sexual reassignment operations. Recently, there has been a growing gender/queer movement consisting of individuals who do not feel that their sex organs are mismatched to their gender identity, but who still wish to trouble the notion of a gender binary, considering it overly simplistic and misrepresentative.

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### Causes of Confusion in Gender Identity

What causes individuals to sense a sort of confusion between their biological gender and their gender identity? This question is hotly contested, with no clear answer. Some scientists argue that the sense of confusion is a biological result of the pre- and post-natal swinging of hormone levels and genetic regulation. Sociologists tend to emphasize the environmental impetuses for gender identity. Certainly, socialization, or the process of transferring norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors to group members, plays a significant part in how individuals learn and internalize gender roles and subsequently impact their gender identity.

Though the medical emphasis in some conversations about gender identity is frequently scrutinized by sociologists, there is clearly some biological basis to gender, even if it has more to do with appearances and social presentation than identity formation. Women have two X chromosomes, where men have one X and one Y chromosome. However, despite the deep relationship to biology, gender identity cannot only be biologically determined. However, gender identity has a larger social component that needs to be considered. For example, although a person may be biologically male, “he” may feel more comfortable with a female identity, which is a social construction based on how he feels, not his physical makeup.

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### Gender Identities and Law

As gender identities come to be more disputed, new legal frontiers are opening on the basis that a male/female gender
binary, as written into the law, discriminates against individuals who either identify as the opposite of their biological sex or who identify as neither male nor female. On college campuses, gender-restrictive dorm housing is facing opposition by individuals who identify as neither a man nor a woman. Many public spaces and workplaces are instituting gender-neutral bathroom facilities. Gender identity has become a piece of international law as a branch of human rights doctrines. The Yogyakarta Principles, drafted by international legal scholars in 2006, provide a definition of gender identity in its preamble. In the Principles “gender identity” refers to each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the biological sex assigned at birth, including the person’s sense of the body and other expressions of gender.

Gender Identities across Cultures

Gender identities, and the malleability of the gender binary, vary across cultures. In some Polynesian societies, fa’afafine are considered to be a third gender alongside male and female. Fa’afafine are accepted as a natural gender and are neither looked down upon nor discriminated against. They are biologically male, but dress and behave in a manner that Polynesians typically consider female. Fa’afafine are often physiologically unable to reproduce. Fa’afafine also reinforce their femininity by claiming to be only attracted to and receiving sexual attention from heterosexual men.

In the Indian subcontinent, a hijra is usually considered to be neither male nor female. The hijra form a third gender, although they do not enjoy the same acceptance and respect as individuals who identify along the gender binary.

The xanith form an accepted third gender in Oman, a society that also holds a gender binary as a social norm. The xanith are male, homosexual prostitutes whose dressing is male, featuring pastel colors rather than the white clothes traditionally worn by men, but their mannerisms are coded as female. Xanith can mingle with women where men cannot. However, similar to other men in Oman, xanith can marry women and prove their masculinity by consummating the marriage. This extreme cultural variation in notions of gender indicate the socially constructed nature of gender identity.

Men in Montreal Dressed in Drag: The image above exemplifies the subjective and personal understanding people
have of their own gender identities.