Hilary M. Lips

Gender

the basics

Second Edition

ROUTLEDGE

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– Dr. Alynn Gordon, Research Consultant, Atlanta, Georgia

GENDER

Gender: The Basics is an engaging introduction to the influence of cultural, historical, biological, psychological, and economic forces on ways in which we have come to define and experience femininity and masculinity, and on the impact and importance of gender categories. Highlighting that there is far more to gender than biological sex, it examines theories and research about how and why gender categories and identities are developed and about how interpersonal and societal power relationships are gendered. It takes a global and intersectional perspective to examine the interaction between gender and a wide range of topics including:

- Relationships, intimacy, and concepts of sexuality across the lifespan
- The workplace and labor markets
- Gender-related violence and war
- Public health, poverty, and development
- Gender and public leadership

This new edition includes increased coverage of trans visibility and activism, LGBTQ studies and critical masculinity studies, global developments in women's political leadership, links between gender and economic well-being, and cyberbullying.

Supporting theory with examples and case studies from a variety of contexts, suggestions for further reading, and a detailed glossary, this text is an essential read for anyone approaching the study of gender for the first time.

Hilary M. Lips is Emerita Professor of Psychology and Research Professor at Radford University, USA, where she served for many years as Chair of the Psychology Department, and Director of the Center for Gender Studies.

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GENDER

THE BASICS
SECOND EDITION

HILARY M. LIPS

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To Marian, Karen, and Tom: Siblings who are also friends.

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Hilary Lips
June 2018

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GENDER

EVERYBODY HAS/DOES ONE

Years ago, Ursula LeGuin (1969) described a fictional world in which there were no "women" or "men," but only individuals. *Gender* categories were absent from this society—except for a few days in each individual's monthly cycle when sexual desires became insistent and individuals became "female" or "male" for the time it took to establish a sexual relationship. Even then, no persistent biological or social tendency toward maleness or femaleness was established: one individual could be the father of some children and the mother of others.

My students have been intrigued but discomfited by this fantasy. Most say they cannot imagine a world without gender categories. It would be boring, bland, they protest. Everyone would be the same; relationships would be uninteresting. And how would anyone decide who was supposed to do what? Most react with similar perplexity and stubbornness when I ask them to "imagine yourself as still 'you,' but as a different gender." They argue that they would not, could not, be the same person if they were a different gender—and anyway they would be unskilled and awkward at doing what the other gender is supposed to do.

These responses provide some clues to the pervasive importance of gender categories in our lives. They also suggest that we view

gender not as a category that someone simply biologically "is" but as something that individuals do or act out. So what exactly is gender?

GENDER AND SEX: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

Most of us are used to dividing people into two categories: female and male. If pressed, we might say the distinction is based on simple biology: male and female individuals look different, have different reproductive organs. Women have breasts. Men can grow beards. A woman can get pregnant and give birth. A man can inseminate a woman—even against her will.

However, we also know that individual women and men vary a great deal in how close they are to society's ideals of femininity and masculinity. Simply being biologically female does not ensure that a person is "womanly," and being biologically male does not mean that an individual is "manly." Some people who are clearly men are described as not very masculine; some women are termed unfeminine. Clearly, there is something more complicated going on than placing people into well-defined biological categories. In fact, with respect to these issues, there seem to be two broad dimensions on which individuals might be categorized: biological and sociocultural.

In recognition of these two dimensions, people who study the differences and similarities between women and men have sometimes made a distinction between sex and gender. They may use the term *sex* to mean biological femaleness and maleness, and the term *gender* to refer to culturally-mediated expectations and roles associated with masculinity and femininity (e.g., Oakley, 1972; Unger, 1979). Although this is the general approach taken in this book, it must be acknowledged that the biological and social dimensions that define women and men cannot be cleanly separated. For example, the biological fact that women can become pregnant helps shape social expectations for femininity. Men's biologically based propensity to have larger, stronger bodies is enhanced by social norms that encourage men to work at becoming strong and reward them for doing so. Thus sex and gender are intertwined, and it is usually impossible to separate them

completely. In fact, one researcher has suggested using *gender/sex* as "an umbrella term for both gender (socialization) and sex (biology, evolution) […] [that] […] reflects social locations or identities where gender and sex cannot be easily or at all disentangled" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1181). Furthermore, gender itself is multidimensional. One dimension is *gender identity*: thinking of oneself as male, female, or as someone who does not fit neatly into these categories. Another is *gender role* or *gender expression*: behaving in ways considered appropriate for women or men in the surrounding culture. Still another is *sexual orientation*: attraction to members of one's own and/or other genders.

IS GENDER "BUILT IN," OR DO WE CONSTRUCT IT?

As will be obvious in the discussion of theories about gender in Chapter 2, one key to the arguments surrounding gender is the debate about how strongly it is rooted in biology. Do our bodies predispose us to be, feel, and behave differently as males and females? How much are such differences affected by the way we are raised, by the culture in which we grow up? This *nature-versus nurture* question has haunted researchers who study every aspect of human behavior; however, it is particularly perplexing and complicated in the realm of gender. And the more we explore the role of nature and nurture, the more we confront the conclusion that virtually nothing in gender development is the result of only one or the other of these forces. Nature and nurture cannot be separated: they are intertwined and work together at every stage of human development. Thus, most people who have studied these issues deeply claim an *interactionist* position: they do not argue about *how much* nature or nurture influences particular aspects of development, but try instead to figure out *how* the two sets of influences interact to produce certain results.

THE ROLE OF BIOLOGY

THE STEPS IN HUMAN SEXUAL DIFFERENTIATION

The path to joining the category of male or female begins at conception. Through a series of developmental steps, a fertilized egg moves toward developing a body that will be classified as male or female:

- *Step 1: Chromosomes.* When sperm meets egg to produce fertilization, each normally contributes a set of 23 chromosomes, which pair up to form the genetic basis for the new individual. The twenty-third pair, known as the *sex chromosomes*, is the pair that initially determines sex. Normally, this pair comprises an X chromosome contributed by the mother's egg and either an X or Y chromosome contributed by the father's sperm. If the pair is XX, the pattern of development is predisposed to be female; if it is XY, the pattern is predisposed to be male. If some unusual combination, such as XO or XXX, occurs, development tends to proceed in a female direction—as long as no Y chromosome is present. Only the sperm, not the egg, can contribute a Y chromosome. Thus the genetic basis of sex is determined by the father.
- *Step 2: Gonads.* During the first seven weeks after conception, the embryo develops "neutral" gonads (proto-gonads) and the beginnings of both female and male sets of internal reproductive structures. Up until this point, the embryo has the potential to go either way, to develop either female or male reproductive equipment. In the eighth week, if a Y chromosome is present, the SRY gene on that chromosome promotes the organization of the neutral gonad into an embryonic testis. If there is no Y chromosome, a neutral gonad will start to become an ovary.
- *Step 3: Hormones.* Once formed, the testes or ovaries begin to secrete sex hormones, and these hormones influence the remaining steps in sexual differentiation. Testes secrete both testosterone, which influences the male reproductive tract to develop, and Mullerian Inhibiting Substance (MIS), which causes the female reproductive tract to atrophy and disappear.

Ovaries secrete estrogens and progesterone, which organize the development of the female reproductive system.

- *Step 4: Internal reproductive tract.* Over the next four weeks, the sex hormones gradually organize the internal reproductive structures in a male or female direction. Under the influence of testosterone, these internal ducts become the vas deferens, epididymis, seminal vesicles, urethra, and prostate. If no significant amount of testosterone is present, the internal structures differentiate in a female direction: as fallopian tubes, uterus, and vagina.
- *Step 5: External genitalia.* Also by the end of the twelfth week, the external genitalia, which are indistinguishable by sex at eight weeks, differentiate as either male or female. Under the influence of testosterone, the "neutral" genitalia develop into a penis and scrotum; without the influence of testosterone, the genitalia develop as a clitoris and labia.

A careful reader may have noticed an overall pattern in these steps: at each stage, without the effect of a Y chromosome or male sex hormone, development apparently proceeds in a female direction. This is also true in other mammals. Some biologists like to say that the basic pattern of mammalian development is female—unless testosterone interferes.

Although we tend to think of female and male as two distinct, non-overlapping categories, the fact that sex develops through a series of sequential steps shows that there are some possibilities for these categories to be fuzzy. If, for example, a genetic male (XY) reaches step 3, in which testosterone is being secreted, but happens to have an inherited condition (androgen insensitivity syndrome) that makes cells unable to respond to testosterone, step 4 will not proceed in a male developmental direction. At birth, the baby will probably appear female and be classified as such; the male genetic configuration and testes may well not be discovered until young adulthood. There are varieties of ways in which the steps of sexual differentiation may be inconsistent, producing an individual whose indicators of biological sex are mixed. Such *intersex* individuals make up between 1 and 4 percent of the population.

There are two other aspects of the journey toward maleness or femaleness which appear even more complex than the development

of a body that may be classified as male or female. One concerns the sexual differentiation of the brain. The other concerns the different ways in which individuals are treated and taught once they have been classified as female or male.

FEMALE BRAINS AND MALE BRAINS?

If different levels of prenatal hormones can affect the development of internal and external genitalia, might they not also affect the developing brain—producing different kinds of brains in females and males? For decades, popular books and articles have argued that women and men think and behave differently because their brains are different. In general terms, this notion is not new. Late in the nineteenth century, women were said to be intellectually inferior to men because they had smaller brains. When it was demonstrated that women's brains were proportionately larger than men's by weight, the argument shifted to the size of particular areas of the brain—first, the frontal lobes, then, when that proved untenable, the parietal lobes—that were said to be smaller in women. More recently, researchers have examined the size, shape, and density of various brain structures in women and men and have found some evidence for sex differences, for instance, in the corpus callosum (the structure that connects the right and left hemispheres of the brain). Since there is a tremendous amount of individual variation in brain size and shape, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about sex differences in brain morphology. Furthermore, it is not clear what functional significance these differences may have. Finally, it is uncertain whether the differences are "built in" or are the results of different life experiences—since brains are very plastic and responsive to experience.

The complexity of the issues is illustrated in the story of one set of researchers (Wood, Heitmiller, Andreasen, and Nopoulos, 2008) who set out to find a brain difference that would mesh with the often-reported finding that women show more interpersonal awareness than men. After using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to examine the brains of 30 women and 30 men matched on age and IQ, they concluded that one particular brain structure, the straight gyrus (SG)—part of a brain region that had already been

linked to the ability to interpret nonverbal cues—was proportionately larger in women than in men. Furthermore, size of the SG was correlated with scores on a test of interpersonal perception. Thus far, this may sound like a clear case of sex differences in brain structure causing sex differences in a particular ability. It turns out not to be so simple, however. In this study, both the size of the SG and the interpersonal perception scores were also correlated with a third variable: respondents' scores on a measure of psychological femininity and masculinity. Respondents (both female and male) who described themselves as having more "feminine" qualities tended to have larger SGs *and* higher interpersonal perception scores. Furthermore, a subsequent study that examined the brains of children aged 7 to 17 found a surprising result: the SG was larger in boys than in girls, and interpersonal awareness scores were associated with smaller, not larger, SGs (Wood, Murko, and Nopoulos, 2009). In this younger sample, both higher interpersonal awareness and smaller SGs were associated with higher scores on psychological femininity. This complicated set of findings illustrates how perilous it can be to try to draw sweeping conclusions about sex differences in the brain and their relationship to female–male differences in behavior. It suggests, for example, the possibility that children's experiences as boys or girls may affect brain development. It leaves us wondering whether women's larger SGs come from many years of being socially sensitive, or whether their social sensitivity stems from their larger SGs—or whether both things may be true.

Another research emphasis has been on exploring possible sex differences in the organization of various cognitive abilities within the brain. Researchers cannot discern this organization by examining brains directly; rather, they ask respondents to perform specific tasks, such as reading, listening, and recognizing objects, and they use various methods to determine which part of the brain is activated and used to accomplish these tasks. Using this approach, some investigators have found results consistent with the idea that women and men may differ in how basic abilities, such as language, are distributed across the two hemispheres of the brain or among the different areas within hemispheres. The findings often involve small differences, are complex, and often contested, so it is not possible to sum them up in brief generalizations. This complexity has

not prevented media commentators from trumpeting misleading headlines such as "Women are significantly more right-brained than men."

If there were differences in the organization of female and male brains, how might this occur? For decades, there have been efforts to understand the extent to which prenatal hormones may be involved and may organize the developing brain in ways that produce average differences between girls and boys in certain interests and social behaviors. This too is a complicated area, but a reasonable amount of evidence suggests that levels of prenatal androgens are associated with later levels of certain kinds of interests (e.g., interest in babies) and behaviors (e.g., rough-and-tumble play) which are more strongly associated with one gender than with the other. For example, one study measured testosterone levels in amniotic fluid (the fluid that surrounds the fetus in the womb), and tested the association between those levels and the levels of masculine-typical play, measured when the children were aged 6 to 10 years (Auyeung *et al.*, 2009). For both boys and girls, parents reported more masculine-typical activities and interests for children whose samples of amniotic fluid *in utero* had shown higher levels of testosterone. The association between prenatal hormone levels and later behavior does not prove definitively that one causes the other. However, this and other studies have been used to suggest that prenatal concentrations of sex hormones may contribute to female–male behavioral differences, and that, to the extent that hormones are responsible for these differences, they may also contribute to the large individual differences in such qualities *among* both girls and boys.

When we learn about scientific findings of differences in the brains of men and women in any particular sample—findings that involve sophisticated techniques such as neuroimaging—it is tempting to conclude that something really definitive has been proven about brain sex differences. However, experts caution that it would be wise to remain skeptical. Neuroimaging results can be affected by extraneous variables such as breathing rates or caffeine intake—a problem if samples are small. Furthermore, it is difficult to interpret the functional significance of differences in the size of brain structures or of more or less activation of a certain area of the brain. And

if scientists are trying to link brain differences to behavior that is "feminine" or "masculine," they have to define what behaviors fall into these categories—a daunting and controversial task.

The role of biology in producing gender-related behavior is complex and fascinating; we have only scratched the surface of it here, and much more research remains to be done. However, biology always works in interaction with the environment, and that interaction is always a "work in progress" as each individual develops (Berenbaum and Beltz, 2016). As one eminent group of reviewers noted (Berenbaum, Blakemore and Beltz, 2011: 814),

> biology is not destiny. Genes are activated or suppressed by environmental factors. Hormones and brain functioning are almost certainly influenced by the different environments in which girls and boys are raised, by their different behaviors, and by joint effects of genes and the social environment.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE

SOCIALIZATION: LEARNING TO BE GENDERED

By the age of 6 months, infants can distinguish women's from men's voices; by 9 months, most can discriminate between photographs of men and women—and sometime between the ages of 11 months and 14 months, they show the ability to accurately pair women's voices with pictures of women and men's voices with pictures of men (Martin and Ruble, 2004). Clearly, children learn very early on of the existence of gender categories and quickly become competent at figuring out who fits into which category.

Not only do children discern these categories very early, they also quickly become adept at associating activities and items with the appropriate gender. By the middle of their second year, infants reliably look at a female face when presented with images of items such as ribbons and dresses, and at a male face when presented with pictures of things such as fire hats and hammers (Eichstedt, Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, and Sen, 2002). By this age, too, children have learned to link more metaphorical, abstract qualities with gender. Infants in this same study associated bears, fir trees, and navy blue

with men, and hearts, cats, and bright pink with women. Children are unlikely to have seen all these items with women and men (for example, most infants will not have seen men with bears); however, they may have learned to connect the attributes of these things with gender. For example, a bear may be seen as strong and fierce; a cat may be seen as soft and quiet. Even very young children have absorbed the message that these characteristics connect to gender. Young children also seem to absorb cultural stereotypes that link very high intellectual ability more with men than with women. One US study found that, among 6-year-olds, girls were less likely than boys to believe that members of their own gender were "really, really smart." In contrast to boys, girls at this age also began to avoid activities that were described as being for "really, really smart" children (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian, 2017).

How do children arrive at these conclusions? According to psychologists, they respond to instructions, rewards, and punishments from people such as parents, teachers, and peers, who let them know how to act as girls or boys and try to shape their behavior to fit gender expectations. A boy may be praised for acting "like a little man"; a girl may reap approval for behaving "just like Mommy." Peers may tease a boy for "throwing like a girl"; teachers may criticize a girl for being "unladylike." To cultivate approval and avoid criticism, children bring their behavior into line with the gendered expectations communicated to them. However, children do not simply react to rewards and punishments; they are not mere putty in the hands of socializing agents. On the contrary, it is clear that children are active searchers for cues about how to behave in gender-appropriate ways.

Once children figure out that there are two gender groups and that they belong to one of them, there appear to be some important consequences. They begin to evaluate their own group as better than the other group (although this effect may be limited to qualities thought to be gender-appropriate): children as young as 3 years old like their own gender group more, attribute more positive qualities to members of that group, and show a strong preference for same-gender playmates. They also display more interest in information about their own group, and tend to use gender stereotypes to form impressions of others. They do not seem to need

much of a push to conform to gendered expectations; rather, they seem to be motivated to learn as much as they can about this significant social category—gender—which is so important to their social identity. Thus the instructions, the presence of adult or peer models who can be imitated, rewards, and punishments are all used by children as sources of guidance to doing the best possible job of fitting into the "girl" or "boy" category. In fact, children become quite rigid for a while as they try to work this out. During early childhood, children try to consolidate their knowledge about gender into hard-and-fast categories; these categories can be very inflexible, particularly between the ages of 5 and 7 years. During this period, children are prone to make quick and strong judgments about people based solely on gender, and they are likely to be "sure" that women and men cannot do certain things (Martin and Ruble, 2004). After the age of 7, children tend to relax the categories a little and become more flexible.

Socialization does not end with childhood. It is a continuing process that affects how individuals understand and enact gender at each life stage. As children approach adolescence, they fall more and more under the influence of peers and less under the influence of parents. Older children and adolescents who are not "typical" for their gender often feel peer pressure to conform to gender norms; when this happens, they are vulnerable to low self-esteem and depression. Adolescents who view themselves as gender-atypical but feel accepted by their peers are less likely to face such difficulties. Through the media, children, adolescents, and adults are presented with a continuous stream of gendered expectations and models to imitate. One study, for example, examined the portrayals of male and female characters in 500 top-grossing US films released across the 5-year period from 2007 to 2012. They found that, in 2012, male characters outnumbered females 2.51 to 1—the lowest percentage of females on screen over the 5 years (S.L. Smith, Choueiti, Scofield, and Pieper, 2013). In 2015, male characters had twice as much screen time and spoke twice as often as female characters in the 100 top-grossing US films (Geena Davis Institute, 2016). Researchers studying US films have also found that female characters were more likely than males to be depicted as young, as parents, and as being in a married or committed relationship (S.L.

Smith, Pieper, Granados, and Choueiti, 2010). Males were more likely than females to be portrayed as strong and funny; females were more likely to be presented as physically attractive. Both male and female characters were likely to be in gender-traditional occupations. Another study (Paek, Nelson, and Vilela 2011), which examined gender portrayals in television advertising across seven countries, found that males were reliably shown in more prominent visual and auditory roles than females, and that both women and men were used to advertise gender-typed products. A study of women's portrayal in 15 Arab and 3 Turkish television dramas found women underrepresented, less likely to have recognizable jobs, and more likely than men to be shown in gender-typed occupations, activities, and settings (Kharroub and Weaver, 2014). In general, research shows that in television programs and commercials, video games, and popular films, whether created for children, adolescents, or adults, male characters are portrayed more often than females and gender stereotypes are very common (Collins, 2011). We swim in a cultural sea of gendered images and, at every stage, a desire to "fit in" pushes individuals to conform to those images.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GENDER HIERARCHY

It may appear that gender socialization involves fitting people into a relatively arbitrary division of activities and qualities labeled masculine and feminine. Indeed, a look at varying gender prescriptions across cultures or historical eras does suggest a strong streak of arbitrariness. In some cultures, men wear long, flowing garments as a matter of course, but in some the idea of a man in a "dress" is viewed with alarm. In some cultures, men who are good friends walk down the street holding hands, but in others, that behavior is considered a violation of masculinity norms. There was a time in North America when the now-familiar mantra that "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" was reversed and pink was considered a strong, "masculine" color.

However, not all gender prescriptions are arbitrary. Many, in fact, help maintain a hierarchy in which men hold more power than women do. If we consider the behaviors, personal qualities,

and appearances that are considered desirable for men, many involve strength, dominance, and leadership; those considered desirable for women encompass delicacy, flexibility, and agreeableness—and a willingness to bend to a situation rather than take charge. A man often demonstrates his masculinity by wielding power; a woman can often indicate her femininity by behaving submissively. Thus, when people violate gender norms, they are sometimes also challenging the gender hierarchy.

For example, traditional gender roles tend to be entwined with the kinds of work women and men do. The expectation that women will be warm and nurturing means that they are considered a good fit for jobs or tasks that emphasize caretaking and supporting others. The expectation that men will be achievement-oriented and assertive implies that they will be viewed as good candidates for positions that involve taking charge and making decisions. Alice Eagly's (1987) *social roles theory* proposed that we expect women to be warm and compassionate and men to be tough and decisive *because* we so often observe them performing roles that require these very qualities. The gendered division of labor is both based on, and gives credibility to, gender stereotypes. Furthermore, Eagly argued, the requirements of the roles reinforce these qualities: women in "feminine" roles have more opportunity to practice compassion and so develop in that direction; men in "masculine" roles have more scope for decisiveness and so become more used to such behavior and better at it. Thus gender stereotypes reproduce themselves: people are selected for roles congruent with gender stereotypes, and they learn to perform the requirements of these roles, thereby enacting the gender stereotypes and helping maintain both the stereotypes and the gendered division of labor. In maintaining the gendered division of labor, this circular process also maintains the gender hierarchy, since roles requiring masculine-stereotyped qualities such as leadership abilities are almost guaranteed to involve more status and higher pay than those requiring feminine-stereotyped qualities such as warmth and flexibility.

Another approach, *social dominance theory* (Pratto and Walker 2004), suggests that in societies that emphasize hierarchical social arrangements, the values toward which men are socialized are hierarchy-enhancing—values that emphasize the promotion of the

interests of powerful groups. Women, on the other hand, are encouraged to adopt hierarchy-attenuating values—values that stress equality and minimize intergroup status and power differences. The expectation that women and men will hold different values promotes their perceived suitability for different kinds of occupations: men for roles that involve wielding power and influence, women for roles that involve supporting and empowering others. Indeed, even a cursory examination of labor statistics in Western countries indicates that men are far more likely than women to be in powerful, high-status positions such as corporate, professional, and political leadership, whereas positions such as social worker, counselor, secretary, and nurse, which involve helping and supporting others, are dominated by women.

Gender stereotypes and roles, then, represent more than the expression of biologically based sex differences and more than an accidental or random division by societies of qualities and behaviors into "feminine" and "masculine." They are expressions of cultural values, social constructions that help organize behavior and maintain a society's power structures. Since gender is socially constructed, there is room for variation in the ways it is defined.

DOES GENDER HAVE TO BE A BINARY?

Historically, cultures have differed in their accommodation of individuals who are uncomfortable with the gender assigned to them or who do not fit neatly into either the feminine or the masculine gender. Among many Native American groups, for example, there is a tradition of categorizing such individuals as "two-spirit" people. Two-spirit people may be individuals with male bodies who identify and live as women, people with female bodies who identify and live as men, individuals of either sex who are sexually attracted to same-sex others, or anyone who lives outside the traditional definitions of gender and combines elements of both female and male genders. Having two spirits has traditionally been considered a special gift in these cultures. Two-spirit persons have been respected and, in some groups, given special roles in religious ceremonies.

Formal exceptions to a simple two-gender system and fluid gender categories have a long and varied history. Scholars note that

ancient gods were often considered gender-fluid and that the hidden name of God, the four-Hebrew-letter YHWH, used by the early Israelites, was Hebrew for "He/She"; God was understood to be dual-gendered (Sameth, 2016). In parts of Polynesia, a category called *mahu* incorporates male-bodied individuals who adopt a feminine appearance and perform women's work. In India, the *hjiras* are male-to-female transgender people who belong to a religious sect devoted to a particular goddess. They are often called upon to provide blessings at ceremonies such as weddings and births. Some researchers define two-spirit people, mahu, hjiras, and other similar groups as separate gender categories, referring to them as a *third gender*. They argue that such a label is appropriate, since these individuals are not completely incorporated into either the female or male gender, but live by a separate set of rules and expectations. It is probably too simplistic to categorize all these groups in the same way, given the many differences among them. However, the notion that gender categories need not be limited to male and female underlines the idea that gender is a social construction, maintained by agreement among members of a culture.

If gender as a binary concept is a social construction, can people resist, change, or modify that construction? In recent years, a significant number of young people have answered yes to that question. One survey of millennials aged 18 to 34 in the United States revealed that fully half of the respondents (57 percent of women and 44 percent of men) said gender exists on a spectrum and that not everyone fits neatly into female or male categories (Rivas, 2015). A poll of 1000 teenagers in the United Kingdom showed that only 78 percent of the men identified as 100 percent male, and 80 percent of the women identified as 100 percent female (Barr, 2016). Among a sample of more than 2000 adults, Israeli researchers found that more than 35 percent reported that they felt to some extent as the other gender, as both men and women, or as neither (Joel, Tarrasch, Berman, Mukamel, and Ziv, 2014). The findings led these researchers to call for "a new conceptualization of gender, which relates to the multiplicity and fluidity of the experience of gender" (p. 291). Discomfort with traditional binary gender categories is evident in the rise of terms such as genderfluid, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, agender, bi-gender, and pangender—all of which are labels

that express resistance to the idea that everyone identifies clearly, easily, and permanently as either female or male. But what shapes an individual's gender identity?

WHAT SHAPES GENDER IDENTITY?

Earlier in this chapter, we considered the difficulty of imagining oneself as a member of a different gender. For most people, this is quite difficult—perhaps not least because of strong cultural messages that every individual fits into one of two binary, non-overlapping gender categories. Gender identity, the powerful conviction that one is female or male, or that one does not fit into either of these gender categories, develops very early in life for most individuals. What is responsible for this conviction? Do most children simply accept the category to which they are told they belong? Do they try to figure out which category is the "best"? Are there biological underpinnings to gender identity? One thing we know with certainty is that there are limits to the extent children will passively accept their assignment to a gender category. In one very famous case, a circumcision accident destroyed a young boy's penis when he was only 7 months old (Diamond and Sigmundson, 1997). Following what they believed was the best expert advice, this child's parents decided to raise him as a girl. Starting at the age of 17 months, "John" became "Joan." This child had an identical twin brother, and, for the first few years, the doctor supervising his case wrote optimistic descriptions of how the two children were developing: one as a traditional masculine boy and the other (reassigned) as a well-adjusted, feminine girl. The case was offered as proof of the malleability of gender identity in individuals younger than 24 months: at such an early age, it was said, a child would adopt the gender identity she or he was given, regardless of biological factors.

However, this case did not turn out well. As a young teenager, "Joan," who, according to her family, had never been happy as a girl despite their best efforts to support that identity and to socialize her in a feminine direction, discovered the truth about her history and demanded to reclaim a masculine gender identity. He went through genital surgery, adopted a masculine name, and began living life as a young man. Eventually, he married and became the

father of an adopted family. He spoke about his experience in an attempt to protect other children from what he viewed as tragic manipulation by the medical community. Yet he remained troubled for the rest of his life, and later committed suicide.

Supporting the notion that gender identity is fixed very early and not easy to change are the first-person accounts of many people who identify as *transgender* or *trans*: individuals whose gender identity does not match their body's configuration. Most of the people who have written about this experience report that they became aware in early childhood that their bodies did not match their inner conviction about their gender—and that they found it impossible to change that inner conviction despite considerable external pressure. One therapist who collected such narratives reported that 85 percent of her clients recognized before they entered grade school that their gender identities and bodies were discrepant (Brown and Rounsley, 1996).

Transgender issues have increasingly become a topic of popular discussion, in part because of a very public gender transition by celebrity Caitlyn Jenner in 2015 and the high media profiles of other trans individuals such as Laverne Cox and Jazz Jennings. With growing awareness of transgender issues has come controversy. In the United States, there has been bitter and angry debate about whether high school students should be forced to use school bathrooms consistent with the sex listed on their birth certificate, even if they identify and are living as the other gender. A recent decision by the Boy Scouts of America to admit trans boys generated both fierce negative reactions and enthusiastic approval. The hostile reactions appear to stem from discomfort about whether trans individuals should be categorized according to their gender identity or whether they are simply disguising themselves. Some parents argue, for instance, that they do not want their daughter to have to use a bathroom in which she may encounter a (perhaps predatory) male presenting as a female. However, all the available evidence points to the conclusion that trans individuals are not disguising themselves but expressing their deeply experienced conviction that they belong in a gender that does not match their assigned sex. What the evidence has not told us so far is the *source* of this deep and powerful conviction.

If an awareness of a mismatch between inner identity and bodily form occurs so early and is so intractable, may there be some neurobiological dimension to gender identity? There is some limited research suggesting differences between one small aspect of the brains of transgender and *cisgender* (persons whose experience of gender aligns with their assigned gender) individuals (e.g., Kruijver *et al.*, 2000), but samples are small, and conclusions are based only on correlations. There is no definitive proof that such differences are routinely present or that they *cause* variations in gender identity (Smith, Junger, Derntl, and Habel, 2015). It is reasonable to assume, however, that biology and environment interact in complicated processes to produce gender identity—and that the details are simply not yet fully understood.

Adding to the complexity are reports suggesting that, under some circumstances, gender identity has proven to be flexible. In one case, a male child who was the victim of a surgical accident to his penis at the age of 2 months was reassigned as female at the age of 7 months. That individual, who was later followed up as an adult, apparently successfully adopted a feminine gender identity (Bradley, Oliver, Chernick, and Zucker, 1998). The researchers speculated that her successful transition to a feminine gender identity was due to the early age (7 months) at which she was reassigned, in contrast to the later age (17 months) in the unsuccessful case described above.

In cases of variations in prenatal sexual differentiation, the outcome for gender identity tends to be mixed. One study of 14 genetic males who were assigned as females at birth because they were born without a normal penis found that 8 of them later declared themselves male (Reiner and Gearhart, 2004). In another set of cases, children in the Dominican Republic born with male (XY) genetic configurations and ambiguous genitalia were raised as girls, but were then found to change to a masculine gender identity at puberty when male secondary sex characteristics developed (see Imperato-McGinley, Peterson, Gautier, and Sturla, 1979). In these cases, some researchers argue, the children's early gender identity was not "set" as female because their ambiguous genitalia caused them to be recognized in their community as members of a special category: "first woman, then man." This ambiguity paved the way