

Do stereotypes perpetuate alternative gender identities?

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With Facebook now sporting 71 gender options to choose from, cisgender users may be confused at all these identities seemingly being created out of thin air (Williams, 2014)

Cisgender means that they identify as their birth gender (Steinmetz, 2014), and is sometimes shortened to ‘Cis’. The figurative “opposite” of cisgender, is transgender, an “umbrella term” (GLADD, 2017) covering all gender identities other than cis, therefore all 69 Facebook gender options that are not “Male” or “Female”, are trans identities. These labels have not been in use for very long, hence the confusion among uninformed users. In the early twentieth century, sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld began to apply the label “transvestite” to those that did not conform to the gender binary, or the two choices of male and female. This label differentiated trans individuals from gay and lesbian people, who were previously all thought of as one category of “sexual deviants” (Arundel, 2017). Hirschfeld’s work in the trans community brought attention to thousands of stories of “in-between” men and women and was an important aspect LGBT history, as he founded some of the world’s first LGBT organizations.

As has happened to LGBT people throughout history, transgender individuals- even in the relatively progressive society of 2017- are not understood by some. Even self-proclaimed feminists may not stand with transgender women, which has led to calls for more modern, intersectional, inclusive feminism by those seeking to accept everyone’s identities. After first-wave suffragettes, second-wave hippies, and finally the more modern third-wave activists, there is a new developing fourth-wave (Munro, 2014). Dr. Ealasaid Munro, a social researcher, cultural geographer, and self-described feminist (School of Culture and Creative Arts, 2017), says the distinguishing factor of the fourth-wave is intersectionality and “the realisation that women are not a homogenous group”. More modern social justice activists assert that the struggles of different walks of life must be understood by all women in order to move forward and improve the current state of society.

The intersectionality missing from earlier feminism left out transgender women under the premise that they were not “real women”, but just men seeking to act like one. A quote from Michelle Goldberg, NYU graduate and journalist with many publications, including a New York Times best-selling book and many articles in well-known news outlets, explains. Much of her writing focuses on women’s rights and she is a self-proclaimed feminist, which may predispose her to the views of more modern feminism.

Radical feminists reject the notion of a “female brain.” They believe that if women think and act differently from men it’s because society forces them to, requiring them to be sexually attractive, nurturing, and deferential. (Goldberg, 2014)

The radical feminist movement, “a specific strand of the feminist movement that emerged in Europe and North America in the late 1960s” (Dean, 2011), upholds the belief that because there is no inherent difference between the minds of the sexes, men and women are naturally equal, but the oppression of women by the patriarchy, or the male-dominated world, suppressed women and prevents them from being equal in society. It is theorized that from this lack of equality stems gender itself, because the males oppress the females, creating a lesser caste position: the position of a woman (The Category of Sex, 1976). Therefore, some subscribe to the idea that

anyone who believes to be a member of another gender other than their birth is simply giving in to the forced gender roles and stereotypes imposed by our andro-centric society. In other words, because society dictates what women are, radical feminists may think that anyone who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman, only chooses to do so because they look around in the world, see what the patriarchy has forced women to be, and feels that they belong within these “limitations”. Because of this, some radical feminists may conclude that it is the traditional views of men and women, or stereotypes, that lead to alternative gender identities, but this is an outdated view riddled with fallacies. Not all radical feminists believe this, but a sub-group of feminism dubbed “Gender Critical Feminism” (or GCF) rejects gender as a social construct, and therefore does not view transgender as a valid identity. However, as Cristin Williams, trans activist, says GCF “is a euphemism for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism”, also known as TERF. In order to combat the negative connotation of “exclusionary”, they have adopted the term GCF as opposed to TERF, but the concept is essentially the same.

An example of a Trans-Exclusionary-Radical-Feminist would be of the founders of the American radical feminist movements, Robin Morgan, an activist and author who has been credited as being a key member of the women’s movement in this era, even internationally (Morgan, 2017). At the 1973 Westcoast Lesbian Conference she is quoted as saying

I will not call a male “she”; thirty-two years of suffering in this androcentric society, and of surviving, have earned me the title “woman”; one walk down the street by a male transvestite, five minutes of his being hassled (which he may enjoy), and then he dares, he dares to think he understands our pain? No, in our mothers’ names and in our own, we must not call him sister.

Morgan calls all self-respecting women to cast out the trans community because transgender women can never understand the *true* struggle of being female. While she cites the suffering of womanhood as validation of her own, she belittles transphobic hassling that an individual may experience everyday as an activity to enjoy, a perverted thrill they get from what may be thought of as simply cross-dressing by radical feminists. Within this double standard lies the weakness in the argument of non-intersectional feminism. Connecting this to Dr. Munro’s earlier quote, the rejection of the trans community comes from not understanding that they, too, are mistreated in society, not only as a separate group, but alongside and within woman-kind.

Saying that a transgender woman is not valid because she has not lived as female her whole life, and therefore cannot identify with a woman’s struggle, is a fallacy that assumes trans individuals do not face discrimination, let alone an equal amount to cisgender women. The U.S Transgender Survey is a compilation of responses from nearly 28,000 people reporting statistics on trans issues, although it is a self-reported online survey which may result in skewed data, however large the sample size. Last year, the USTS reported that of those who had been “out”, or open about their transgender identity, during their K-12 school years, over three quarters had faced mistreatment for their identity, over half had been verbally harassed, and 24% had experienced physical violence. The suicide attempt rates found in respondents was nine times higher than the U.S. national average (U.S. Transgender Survey, 2015).

This shows that even from a young age, transgender individuals, though not just trans women, face more hardship than cis people of similar ages, a study found. In a survey by Ditch the Label of nearly 5000 young adults from the United Kingdom, with only 1% self-reporting as transgender and 85% reporting as straight, it was found that under half of them had experienced bullying throughout their life, 19% of which had reported it to be as a result of their masculinity or femininity (Annual Bullying Survey, 2015). Though the sample size was of this survey much smaller, Ditch the Label is a large international anti-bullying non-profit organization, reaching thousands each month, but this may cause the organization to represent the facts to promote their cause (Ditch the Label, 2017).

Comparing the two reports, it can be inferred that cisgender individuals suffer from less mistreatment throughout their teen years than trans people, and of those that do experience comparable harassment, a fifth of it is *still* related to gender expression. So, saying that transgender women people are invalid and “we must not call [them] sister” because they do not “understand our pain” and a woman’s experience in a patriarchal society, is belittling the struggles that trans and gender-nonconforming people face every day.

The radical feminist notion that individuals that identify with alternate genders, especially male-to-female transgendered people, are only ‘choosing’ to be so because of the patriarchy, is outdated and untrue, taking into consideration the steeper harassment that people in the trans community face from young ages. Therefore, it can be concluded that these preconceived notions of gender roles, or stereotypes stemming from female oppression, are not what has led to the appearance of these alternative gender identities to cisgender.

The basis of Robin Morgan’s argument is her assumption that male and female brains are originally the same before any societal influence, so any difference in gender identity in a woman is attributable to them trying to fit in, or that the rejection of the binary is a result of male perceptions of women, or stereotypes produced by the patriarchy. As Goldberg puts it, “In this view, gender is less an identity than a caste position”(Goldberg, 2014). When this view on gender is adopted, gender becomes irrelevant (hence the phrase “gender is a social construct”), so biology is the binary. The male or female sex are the options.

Monique Wittig, a French writer and self-proclaimed Radical Lesbian who was an activist in the feminist movement in France of the 60’s and 70’s, states that

Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. (The Category of Sex, 1976)

She makes this claim with expertise from a PhD in social sciences, though her activism and inclusion in the radical feminist movement at its peak would influence her view point. In her 1976 book “The Category of Sex”, Wittig asserts that gender is created by men in the sense that slaves are created by masters. She believed that gender and categorized gender expression (labeling actions as either masculine or feminine) are something made by male-dominated society (The Category of Sex, 1976). However, she differs from other feminist theorists in that this idea led her to conclude that “the cultural construction of sex, taken in its most material

sense, is part of the process of embodying a gender” (de Chiara, 2017). This quote was taken from an essay in the Proceedings of the 18th Conference of the Simone de Beauvoir Society, a collection compiled by two editors over six years, of essays inspired by the conference. Simone de Beauvoir was a French activist and feminist, and the society created after her death is made up of scholars studying her lifetime works. This specific essay is “From Judith Butler to Ranjana Khanna: Looking Back to Simone de Beauvoir” by Marina de Chiara, an academic from the University of Naples, Italy. From Chiara’s essay, Wittig’s idea of gender was created by social influences and power struggles between the sexes, but she believed that not despite, but *because* gender is a social construct, individuals can still embody any gender, male, female, between the two or outside the established binary (Duranti, 2017).

Therefore, if one can embody a gender based on social constructs, one can also be transgender if they feel they are. So, though Wittig does not directly state that transgender individuals choose to identify as such because of gendered stereotypes, her theory that gender is created from social and political influences of the patriarchy may be interpreted to conclude that these alternative gender identities are the result of people interpreting these androcentric influences and labelling themselves accordingly.

In the same book, *A Category of Sex*, Wittig writes “...there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary” (*A Category of Sex*, 1976). If “oppression creates sex” can it be concluded that stereotypes stemming from this oppression of women created gender?

Is gender really, like Wittig theorized, a concrete roll imposed upon women by power-hungry males?

Dr. Deborah Davis doesn’t think so. Dr. Davis is a developmental psychologist who writes advice books for bereaved parents and specializes in medical ethics, and has been cited for guides on the subject. Though she is not an expert on gender, she is an expert on how the brain develops, which may explain certain aspects of gender studies, as discussed later in this paper.

In her 2015 article for *Psychology Today*, Davis said

Gender dysphoria is not cured by simply wearing a dress or a business suit. Being female or male cannot be reduced to culturally assigned uniforms. Gender is a core sense of identity. The transgender person seeks acknowledgement and validation for *being*, not just dressing like, the other gender. (Davis, 2015)

Identifying as transgender is not as simple as having a desire to fit into these “culturally assigned norms”, or stereotypes, like wearing clothing usually assigned to a certain gender. Gender-Critical-Feminists are therefore wrong in the assumption that transgender individuals only identify as such because of these preconceived notions of gendered actions.

WebMD, a peer-reviewed medical advice website, describes gender dysphoria as when people “feel strongly that they are not the gender they physically appear to be” (When You Don’t Feel at Home with Your Gender, 2017) for at least six months. Gender dysphoria is not a fleeting wish to have been born as another sex, but a deep desire and conviction of ones belonging to another gender.

According to Davis, gender is who someone fundamentally *feels* to be, not what they dress as. This can be exemplified when one looks to the drag community. Men dress up as women for dramatic or entertainment purposes, but putting on false eyelashes and a dress does not make a performer a woman, despite the title drag “queen”. As RuPaul, international drag queen icon and host of “RuPaul’s Drag Race”, puts it, drag and transgenderism are “complete opposites”(LGBTQ Nation, 2016).

Extreme discomfort with ones identity cannot be quelled by simply adhering to the stereotypes of the gender one desires to be, like putting on makeup and dressing in a feminine fashion. So, stereotypes cannot perpetuate alternative gender identities, because clearly stereotypes do not define gender.

So, if gender is not reliant on stereotypes and social norms, why are people transgender? If one doesn’t transition to a woman because, for example, they see women wearing dresses, and they want to also, or any one of the multitude of female stereotypes, for what reason do they put up with harassment and mistreatment from society that comes with being trans? The answer may lie within our biology, as opposed to external influences.

In the same Psychology Today piece, Davis stated

Especially compelling evidence of inborn sex differences is found in several studies where young male and female monkeys, like human boys and girls, preferred stereotypical “boy” and “girl” toys (trucks for boys, dolls for girls). (Davis, 2015)

While she has earned a degree in the field with which this study stands, she does not have particular experience with primate psychology.

Obviously, primates aren’t concerned with human gender politics, and therefore there is no way that these observed preferences for gendered toys would be influenced by preconceived notions of normal toys to play with, like a child would be influenced by their peers when choosing what to play with in a school setting. Therefore, Davis conclude that “this phenomenon suggests an innate, biological component to gender-related behaviors”.

Debunking the gender-critical-feminist view that all people are inherently born the same until society corrupts their view of gender and equality, this example shows that even with no societal influences, stereotypical actions are still upheld. This suggests an innate attraction to certain aspects of the toys used in the experiment, trucks and dolls. Academic psychologist Cordelia Fine, in her book “Delusions of Gender: How our minds, society, and neurosexism create difference” suggests that the female monkeys may have been interested in the dolls because of an instinct to nurture something resembling their young, and the males gravitated towards the trucks because of the kinetic parts, relating to their responsibility for hunting. This theory may suggest that even the monkeys used in the study are not free from societal influence and their predetermined roles in it, but considering the ages of those observed, the desire to nurture or play with moving parts may be intrinsic to each sex.

In “Delusions of Gender”, Fine also states that “the experience of becoming a parent quickly abolishes any preconceptions that boys and girls are born more or less the same”. She goes on to discuss how raising a child, even with the intention of gender neutrality, often yields a

kid that will gravitate towards either “girl things” or “boy things”. This further suggests that there are innate differences between sexes, though in humans, by the time they are old enough to exhibit gender preferences they are old enough to be influenced by society and peers, so, inevitably when nature is brought up, so it nurture. Is it upbringing, rather than biology, that changes expression of masculinity and femininity?

However, just like gender, nature and nurture may not be a binary. Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling is a professor of biology and Gender Studies at Brown University, who has, in the past, researched gender differentiation in early childhood. She says

Saying that everything is 100% nature or 100% nurture is kind of an old-fashioned, erroneous and not very helpful way of looking at how organisms develop. It's not ‘nature versus nurture’ it's ‘How is nature changing under certain kinds of nurturing events?’ (Fausto-Sterling, 2011)

Looking to biology for an explanation of something as society-influenced as gender would not lead to conclusive results. Certain biological traits may predispose people to a certain gender identity, but without examining the external forces that coincide, a conclusion cannot be reached. This is exactly what Dr. Larry Cahill did.

Dr. Cahill is a professor of neurobiology and behavior at the University of California, Irvine. He studies sex and emotions in the brain, and this work has been featured on many news outlets like PBS and 60 Minutes, though he did not contribute to the study mentioned. In an essay for The Dana Foundation, an organization that gives grants for brain research, he writes

The more mothers encouraged "femininity" in their daughters, the more feminine the daughters behaved as adults, but only in those daughters exposed to little masculinizing hormone in utero. Crucially, the greater the exposure to masculinizing hormonal effects in utero ..., the less effective was the mother's encouragement, to the point where encouragement either did not work at all ... or even tended toward producing the opposite effect on the daughters' behavior (Cahill, 2014)

A correlation between hormones in utero and gender expression indicates that the presence or lack of testosterone may be what causes masculine or feminine behavior, the nature aspect. When the parent tries to nurture their way to a child that conforms to societal norms, it works if the hormones that the child was exposed to in the womb are working with them. This indicates that biology and upbringing, or society, work together to form a unique individual with gender expression that varies from one person to the next, so what is expected of each sex may, to some extent, affect gender expression and identity.

However, when scientists evaluate nature vs. nurture, the concepts that they use to “measure” femininity or masculinity come from preconceived notions of gender expression and how the children being studied conform to these ideas, or stereotypes. In the book, *Delusions of Gender* (2010), Dr. Fine discusses the theory of “male brain” and “female brains”. For hundreds of years, some scientists have stated that there is a fundamental difference between the physical aspects in the minds of men and women. This, they believe, is what causes the difference between men and women, where women are more caring and empathetic, while men are

ambitious and analytical. Dr. Fine sarcastically states “What awfully good luck that these womanly talents should coincide so happily with the duties of the female sex”. She says that because society is becoming less openly sexist (some may call it politically correct), people don’t blame the fact that some women seemingly inherently possess “womanly traits” on enforced stereotypes like we could have 50 years ago. So, Fine states, “eyes swivel to the internal”, and people believe that it must be something within women that make them warmer and better relaters, and something in men that make them more business or leadership oriented. Is this justifying stereotypes? Measuring testosterone or estrogen and corresponding them to gender expression is attributing each stereotypical trait to the biological traits of each sex. However, this is a slippery slope, as this reasoning may loop around back to Gender-Critical-Feminism, where the belief that there is no inherent difference between the minds of men and women is upheld.

Though this line may be thin, not measuring gender expression based on our and society’s ideas of gender expression would be difficult. If not from our norms, how to we determine this expression? The relationship between hormones and the generally accepted ideas of masculinity and femininity is convincing. While this correlation may lead some to think that a “female brain” or “male brain” may be due to biological makeup, other statistics indicate otherwise.

Cornell biology graduate Andrea Alfano discusses one study led by Johanna Olson, M.D., the director of The Center for Transyouth Health and Development at the LA Children’s Hospital. Alfano writes about technology, science, and social issues and even though she describes herself as a “lifelong science enthusiast”, she has no expertise in hormone or gender studies, but Dr. Olson’s expertise more than makes up for it. Alfano says, in an article for TechTimes, a leading technology news site (TechTimes, 2017)

The study, published in the Journal of Adolescent Health, examined the sex hormone levels of 101 transyouth patients at Children's Hospital Los Angeles and found that they did not differ significantly from those typical for the gender they were assigned at birth (Alfano, 2013)

The data from this report suggests that sex hormones (such as testosterone and estrogen) present in the body have no correlation to gender identity. This supports that alternate gender identities are not caused by biology, because estrogen and testosterone, which are thought to dictate gender expression to an extent, are roughly the same in the transgender youth as cisgender teens of their age. However, this study was conducted during the patients’ older childhood to late teen years, and does not examine fetal hormones, like the one Dr. Cahill discussed. Chris Haywood, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University, says in his book “Gender Differences at Puberty”

High levels of testosterone in utero are thought to increase sensitivity to this hormone during puberty. Thus, females with increased androgen levels can exhibit characteristically male traits during puberty. (Hayward, 2003)

According to the quote, the testosterone the baby is exposed to in the womb does not change the hormones levels during puberty, but instead dictates how the adolescent reacts to them by

making receptors more sensitive to certain hormones (Haywood, 2003). So, studies that attempt to disprove the biological correlation of hormones to gender expression by examining the older individual without comparing the results to the same person's hormone levels in utero. The formation of receptors in the brain, and therefore biology, clearly has a strong correlation to gender expression, and therefore gender identity.

Another study by Dr. William G. Reiner yields further convincing evidence of this correlation. Dr. Reiner is a urologist and psychiatrist working with Johns Hopkins specializing in children born with ambiguous genitalia. He has been in this specialty since the early 80's and has gotten international recognition for his groundbreaking work with intersex youth. In a 2005 interview for the New York Times with Claudia Dreifus, Dr. Reiner discusses this data:

As part of a research study, I've personally seen and assessed 400 children with major anomalies of the genitals. Of those, approximately 100 might be called "intersex." Our findings have been many and complex. The most important is that about 60 percent of the genetic male children raised as female have retransitioned into males. (Dreifus, 2005)

Often, especially decades ago when intersex conditions were not as well understood in the scientific community, babies born with ambiguous genitalia underwent surgery at young ages to attempt to fully convert them to one sex. Then, the children are raised as the decided gender, sometimes none the wiser (Dreifus, 2005).

Intersexuality is most often caused by hormone imbalances during fetal development, either caused by genetics or external forces (Causes of Intersexuality, 2017). Over half of the genetic males in the study (meaning they have XY chromosomes) decided to transition to male, despite being raised their whole lives as female. Despite societal influences, stereotypes, and being brought up as female, they felt compelled by their genetics to live as males. This shows that the nurture aspect of their gender had less of an effect on gender identity than nature, or their biological makeup in the womb.

Biology, in tandem with societal influence is what makes up one's gender. Gender-Critical-Feminists may try to abandon this critical sense of identity, but gender, a core sense of who you are, remains fluid and open to interpretation. Like gender itself, there may be no hard limits to the answer to my question, "Do stereotypes perpetuate alternative gender identities?". Stereotypes and the way society views each person based on factors like sex, gender, and orientation must not dictate the individual's views of themselves.

Stereotypes do not perpetuate alternative genders, because, as my research has shown, gender is not determined by stereotypes, but rather biology, in combination with a person's upbringing. At the beginning of my research, I had a very shallow opinion when it came to gender issues, and I wanted to explore this question because I, as many cisgender people I know, did not know where to stand on the many social justice issues that the transgender community still faces today. Being a cisgender person, I did not understand the dysphoria and anguish that can plague trans men, women, and anyone outside the binary, and the personal courage it takes to be oneself, even in 2017. I thought that one is either a woman because they are born one or because they feel the need to conform to the stereotypes of the "opposite" gender. I now understand that a person's gender is much more than what toys you play with in kindergarten, it is a core sense of your being, who you are, and society and stereotypes should not determine this. I feel that if other people would look into these issues as much as I have the past few months,

even on a much shallower level, they would be more accepting of transgender people and more understanding of their hardships. To combat bigotry, I believe people should be educated about these issues at a younger age instead of relying on parents with outdated opinions to teach one-sided views.

One's gender identity should be something determined or felt within oneself, not a caste position forced upon them by society, or an expression of what they *think* they should be. Whether one labels themselves within the binary or without, or even not at all, every person of every gender deserves to express this identity freely and without concern for what society thinks of them.

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