

Gender Identity

Gender as a term has often been conflated with sex; at times these terms have been used interchangeably. However, these are not synonymous terms. Gender, while associated with sex, is a separate aspect of an individual. It is ultimately the result of a person's relation to their society's understanding of gendered groups. A gender role is usually determined by a culture or community, and may have rigid or loose definitions depending on the approach by the community for rules placed upon any gender categories. Gender identity, as it develops, is self-identified, as a result of a combination of inherent and extrinsic factors; gender role, on the other hand, is demonstrated within society by a set of expected behaviors or characteristics for a given gender. The relationship between gender identity and role is mitigated by gender expression, which is the manner in which an individual manifests a gender identity. This expression can be seen on a continuum, and in most cases allows for a degree of individual variation, but this depends on the culture and level of acceptance for transgression of expectations. Further, for those with a gender identity that is not easily defined by a culture, for example a gender fluid or non-binary type of identity, the gender role (perceived "norms") for that identity may not exist in explicit terms. Thus the gender expression may be atypical or unusual for the culture as well. A variety of combinations of these factors may occur, and can change over time. For example, if a person considers himself a male and is most comfortable referring to his personal gender in masculine terms, then his gender identity is male. His gender role might carry the expectation to wear a particular type of clothing or behave in a particular manner.

Dimensions of Gender:

People tend to use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably. But, while connected, the two terms are not equivalent. Generally, we assign a newborn's sex as either male or female (some US states and other countries offer a third option) based on the baby's genitals. Once a sex is assigned, we presume the child's gender. For some people, this is cause for little, if any, concern or further thought because their gender aligns with gender-related ideas and assumptions associated with their sex. Nevertheless, while gender may begin with the assignment of our sex, it doesn't end there. A person's gender is the complex interrelationship between three dimensions: body, identity, and social gender.

Body: our body, our experience of our own body, how society genders bodies, and how others interact with us based on our body.

Identity: the name we use to convey our gender based on our deeply held, internal sense of self. Identities typically fall into binary (e.g. man, woman) nonbinary (e.g., genderqueer, genderfluid, etc) or ungendered (e.g., agender, genderless) categories. The meaning associated with a particular identity can vary among individuals using the same term. A person's gender identity can correspond to or differ from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Social gender: how we present our gender in the world and how individuals, society, culture, and community perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Social gender includes gender roles and expectations and how society uses those to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Each of these dimensions can vary greatly across a range of possibilities and is distinct from, but interrelated with, the others. A person's comfort in their gender is related to the degree to which these three dimensions feel in harmony.