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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRANSGENDER?

An Introduction to the Term

What does it mean to be transgender? Think about yourself for a moment. How do you know that you are the gender you are? What makes you a woman or a man?¹ At first glance, the answer might seem simple.

Let's start with men. Maybe you think what makes you a man is your physical anatomy—your sex organs and secondary sex characteristics. Seems reasonable. But let's say that an unfortunate accident leaves you without one or more of these organs. You can no longer produce sperm. You're still a man, right? The question again: how do you know?

Maybe you think it's the large amount of testosterone in your body compared to females. But what if tomorrow your testosterone level dropped significantly? What if a female had a higher level than you? Chromosomes aren't foolproof, either. Stay with me. You're still a man, right? How do you know?

Let's move on to women. Perhaps you know you are a woman because you have given birth to a child. But what if you hadn't? What about before you did so? Were you unsure of your gender until you got pregnant? My guess is probably not. Maybe you point to menstruation.

Is it possible to be a woman and not menstruate? Sure. You've always known you were a woman. What we've just said is true of men is true of women, too. It's not because of your physical anatomy or your chromosomal makeup or the fact that the doctor pronounced you female at birth. Do you have an answer yet? How do you know you're a woman?

Suddenly these seemingly simple questions aren't so simple. Who you're attracted to, the toys you played with as a child, the clothes you wear now, your ability to process emotion or think analytically—all of these could be true of someone who is of the "opposite" gender. ("Opposite" is in quotation marks because as you will see, gender exists on a continuum; there may be two ends opposite each other, but there is so much more in between.)

By now you may be yelling out loud, "I just know! I've always known!" Well, that is probably the truest answer you can give. The proof of what gender you are lies within your brain.

DEFINING TRANSGENDERISM

The root of the word *transgender* comes from the Latin word *trans*, meaning "across." A transatlantic flight goes across the Atlantic Ocean; a transnational issue affects people all across the country; and so on. Transgender literally means "across gender."

Transgender is defined today as an umbrella term with many different identities existing under it. Some of these identities, such as *gender-variant*, *genderqueer*, and *cross-dresser*, are covered in chapter 8. We are going to put those aside for now. The type of transgenderism that we are most concerned with in the bulk of this book is *transsexualism*.

Many people see the term *transsexual* as dated, perhaps akin to calling a gay or lesbian person "homosexual." However, many people still use it to describe themselves. What is most important as you read this book is to keep in mind that transgender and transsexual are not exactly interchangeable.

By and large, *transsexual* refers to a person who identifies as the opposite sex of that which he or she was assigned at birth. *Transgender*, on the other hand, includes transsexual people, but the term also encompasses many more identities that are discussed later in the book. Many people use the terms transgender and transsexual interchangeably, but on a technical level this is incorrect. All transsexual people are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual.

An analogy to simplify things: transsexual is to transgender as Kleenex is to tissue. When you think about tissues (transgender people), Kleenex (transsexual people) is the most popular brand that comes to mind. Some people even call tissues Kleenexes. But tissues come in many other brands, and it is important to remember that, for instance, Puffs are not Kleenexes. They are Puffs; they are a type of tissue. If you were the CEO of Puffs and someone who worked for you asked you to hand her a Kleenex, you would probably be irritated and want to correct her. But again, for simplicity's sake, the brand of transgender people we refer to throughout the book is transsexual, unless otherwise specified. This includes the usage of the abbreviation "trans." So, think "Kleenex" until you get to chapter 8, where we discuss other "store brands."

Contrary to popular belief, being transsexual does not necessarily mean that someone has "changed sex." Confusing, I know. It does not require surgery or any medical intervention for that matter. Many transsexual people undergo surgery and hormone treatments, but some do not, for economic or other personal reasons. Surgery or other medical interventions are not what legitimize someone's transsexuality.

Language is a very important tool to us as human beings. You may have realized this when you had trouble answering the question at the beginning of this chapter. It is important to point out that every transperson has his or her own journey; just as a book about African American heritage doesn't speak to every single African American person's history, this book does not seek to describe every transperson's experience. This book speaks in general terms.

SEX VERSUS GENDER

Merriam-Webster defines sex and gender as the following:

Sex: either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures.²

Gender: the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.³

Let's focus on the relationship that the dictionary has drawn between gender and sex. After all, this is what we have always been taught. If I am female (sex), then I am a woman (gender). If I am male, then I am a man. It seems to fit that logic statement we learned in grade school: if P, then Q. Right? Well, actually, life isn't quite that neat and simple. It is difficult to try to get components of human identity to fit perfectly into a logic equation. For many people, the link between gender and sex, as it is defined above, does not fit. For others, it fits perfectly.

We just learned that someone's transsexuality is not necessarily defined by surgery. Sex is not fully explained by its dictionary definition. According to some people, organs and structures do not dictate someone's sex just as they do not dictate someone's gender. For example, if someone asked a female-to-male transgender person what sex he was, he would likely respond "male," regardless of the fact that he might still have typically female organs. So, if someone feels that he is a man (gender), he would likely also consider himself male (sex). The key when talking about sex is differentiating between what sex people are labeled with at birth and what sex they consider themselves to be now.

Most transpeople feel that their gender differs from the sex they were labeled with at birth. Why that is, we have yet to figure out. But it doesn't much matter. The reality is that gender identity and sex line up differently from person to person. You might wonder why I am using the term "labeled with at birth." I don't always use this term, but you will definitely see it throughout the rest of the book. I use it because many transpeople feel that they were born the gender that they identify as; in other words, a male-to-female transperson might say that she was bio-

logically always female, because her brain was wired to be that way, and the brain is part of biology. So, instead of always saying “born male” to refer to someone like her, I might differentiate by saying that she was “labeled male at birth” by a doctor, midwife, parents, and so on. Other terms that are becoming more common are *affirmed female*, someone who identifies as female but was not labeled female at birth, and *affirmed male*, someone who identifies as male but was not labeled male at birth.

Gender is a social construction. In most of Western society, children born male (sex) are expected to behave like boys and then men (gender), which means a host of things from playing with certain toys to assuming certain roles as an adult to refraining from showing too much emotion, and so on. There are hundreds—even thousands—of traits that our society puts in the “male” column or the “female” column, and not too many overlap. This is simply not realistic for everyday life, and it never has been.

THE GENDER BINARY

Merriam-Webster defines the word binary as “something made of or based on two things or parts.”⁴ The gender binary is a social system whereby people are thought to have either of two genders: man or woman. These genders are expected to correspond to birth sex: male or female. In the gender binary system, there is no room for interpretation, for living between genders, or for crossing the binary. The gender binary system is rigid and restrictive for many people who feel that their natal sex (the sex they were labeled with at birth) does not match up with their gender or that their gender is fluid and not fixed.

The gender binary exists for easy categorization and labeling purposes. For most people, it is something that is taken for granted. People who are not transgender—meaning those whose gender identity does match up with their birth sex—often naturally accept the gender binary system as a given. Females who identify as women use the women’s restroom. Males who identify as men dress in suits and ties or tuxedos for formal events. It is the way it is, and that fits well for many people. But

for transpeople living in a culture where the gender binary rules all, it is a daily battle. We discuss some of these struggles later in the book.

SEX, GENDER IDENTITY, AND GENDER EXPRESSION

We have covered the main differences between sex and gender. Now we are going to divide gender into two parts: gender identity and gender expression. The University of Minnesota's Transgender Commission defines these terms as the following:

Gender identity is one's internal sense of who they are; being a woman or man, girl or boy, or between or beyond these genders.

Gender expression is the external representation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through feminine or masculine behaviors and signals such as clothing, hair, movement, voice or body characteristics.⁵

Some people may use the terms male and female for gender identity instead of or in addition to man and woman.

You may be familiar with the term *gender role*. Historically, a typical gender role for a man would be to work and be the breadwinner, while a woman's role would be to take care of the home and children. Gender roles are closely tied to gender expression. For simplicity's sake, we are going to leave the term gender role out and just concentrate on sex, gender identity, and gender expression. Table 1.1 shows the relationship between these three and the way the lineup is expected to occur (as dictated by our society).

For transpeople, this lineup does not occur. Any of the words in these boxes can be switched around. Chances are, whether you know it or not, you have come across someone of each and every possible combination.

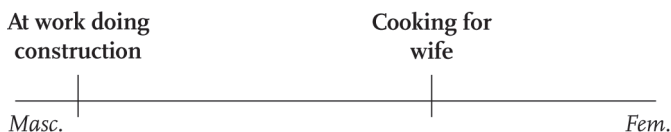
Table 1.1

Sex	Gender Identity	Gender Expression
Female	Woman	Feminine
Male	Man	Masculine

Now place yourself in this table. At this moment, and at most moments, you might feel that you line up like one of the examples. But at other points, you might feel differently. For example: let's take a man, born male, who does multiple things on a given day. This man works in the construction industry, doing heavy lifting, operating a crane, and getting dirty. At work, it would seem that this man's sex, gender identity, and gender expression are lining up perfectly as table 1.1 shows. He is a man, born male, and is working a job that is typically deemed to be masculine. But when he gets home, he remembers that he needs to cook dinner for his wife who is returning from a business trip later in the evening. The man does so not thinking that anything has changed within him—even though cooking dinner for a spouse is a stereotypically feminine activity. As he moves from hands-on construction to putting on an apron and cooking a meal, his gender expression may be changing. He doesn't take conscious notice of this; for him, it's all in a day's work. On a continuum, his gender expression on that particular day might look like table 1.2. So, does that make him transgender? He might not think so; but remember, in the true sense of the word, he is moving "across" gender.

Out of the three terms—sex, gender identity, and gender expression—which do you think we notice most about people on a daily basis? If it were a person's sex, then we would have to see under that person's clothes or test his or her chromosomes (and even then we could get a conflicting report). If it were a person's gender identity, we would have to either ask that person how he or she identifies or somehow get inside the brain and find the answer for ourselves. By process of elimination, you guessed it: it's gender expression. As we learned from the ability to mix up the terms on the chart, someone's gender expression does not necessarily tell you what that person's sex or gender identity is. But, as

Table 1.2



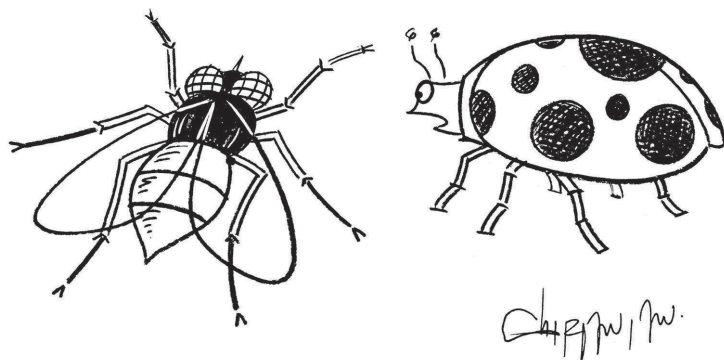


Figure 1.1: “You think you have problems! Try being a male ladybug.”

Source: © www.cartoonstock.com

human beings, we tend to assume by looking at how people express themselves.

Here is an example: you see a person walking down the street with a short haircut wearing a shirt and tie and men’s dress pants. The short haircut and outfit are typically signs of a masculine gender expression. Because you see this person’s masculine gender expression with your own eyes, you fill out the chart in table 1.1 in your mind, assuming that this person identifies as a man and that he is anatomically male. But what if this person has been hiding a secret for many years? What if this person was indeed born male but feels like a woman inside and cannot, for various reasons, express that to the world? This is more common than you might think. That person’s chart would look like table 1.3.

Table 1.3

Sex (Labeled at Birth)	Gender Identity	Gender Expression
Male	Woman	Masculine

It is only natural to assume. We need to make assumptions on a daily basis. We assume that a car will stop at a red light; we assume that the grocery store is stocked with the ingredients we will need for dinner; and we assume that the sun will rise and set. However, it is good to be

aware that we are assuming people's gender identity on a daily basis. Inevitably there are times when our assumptions are wrong, whether or not we know it.

Here is one more example of a person whose chart is different than the majority: a female who identifies as a woman but who works as an auto mechanic and wears men's work clothes on a daily basis (table 1.4). Perhaps you know someone like this. Would this woman call herself transgender? Probably not, but again, in some ways she routinely moves across gender.

Table 1.4

Sex (Labeled at Birth)	Gender Identity	Gender Expression
Female	Woman	Masculine

Phrases I have heard again and again about transpeople include "She is really a man" or "He is really a woman." Now that you know about sex and gender identity, you know that this statement is false. "She was labeled male at birth, but is a woman" is correct (though without permission from this transperson herself, it is disrespectful to out her, or reveal that information).

Gender expression is not something that we normally allow our children to form for themselves. Let's think about babies for a moment. They are too young to decide how to express their gender, so their parents do it for them. I was in a baby store recently and overheard a woman (yes, I'm assuming she was a woman) say that she thought a soccer ball mobile was cute but the baby was going to be a girl, so she couldn't buy it. Along those same lines, what do people often dress baby boys in? Blue. If we think about why people do that, it is almost comical.

The baby boy must be dressed in blue so that strangers or acquaintances know that he is a boy and don't mistake him for a girl. Because this baby is dressed in blue, people will assume that he has a penis and a Y chromosome and that he will want to play with trucks, footballs, and army figurines. That's a lot of information for a parent to give simply by dressing a child in a specific color. If you asked his parents why they dressed him in blue, they probably wouldn't think of any of that. They might say, "Because he is a boy." The same is true for pink and baby girls.

Gender is a construction that is ingrained in us from day one of life, literally. What do we fear would happen if we purchased the soccer ball mobile for the baby girl? Might she grow up to be masculine? Might she be confused? Might people who enter her bedroom think that she was a boy or that her parents were crazy for buying a mobile that they liked without taking gender into consideration? What about baby girls who are still relatively bald and have bows wrapped around their heads? “Until her hair grows long,” her parents might think, “we must make sure that everyone knows she is not a boy, so let’s put a bow on her head.”

Most people dress their babies in pink or blue because it seems practical. But no matter the reasons, the social ramifications are far reaching. You could probably stand on a street corner in a crowded city with a baby dressed in pink and get each and every person you saw to guess that the baby was a girl. For adults, it might not be only blue or pink, but clothing is still a major part of expression. This is difficult for those who do not feel comfortable with these norms, especially those who are trans.

WHICH TERM REFERS TO WHICH?

You may have heard someone called a *transwoman* or *transman*. What does that mean exactly? When using these terms, you should always go with the gender with which someone identifies. For instance, a transman/transguy is usually someone who was labeled female at birth but now identifies as a man or a male. Transmen, most of whom use the pronoun “he,” should always be addressed as such. You are describing someone as the gender that person is—not the gender that person was assigned at birth. The opposite obviously goes for transwomen. The term transwoman is usually used as a descriptor for someone who was labeled male at birth but now identifies as a woman or a female.

Another set of commonly used terms are: *FTM* (or *F2M*) and *MTF* (or *M2F*). The former stands for female-to-male transperson and the latter is a male-to-female transperson. Transwoman and *MTF/M2F*

can usually be used interchangeably. The same is true for transman/transguy and FTM/F2M.

You might have heard people use the word *transgendered*. Some people feel that it makes them sound like an object rather than a person. Generally transgender is sufficient as an adjective in the sentence “he is transgender” or “he is a transgender person.” If you are looking for a verb, use *transition*. “He transitioned from female to male,” not “he transgendered from female to male.”

PRONOUNS

One of the biggest challenges people face when addressing or talking about trans individuals is the use of pronouns. What to use: he, him, his, she, her, hers, they, their, theirs? Perhaps you’ve thought about trying not to use a pronoun at all. It sounds difficult and complicated, but there is one element to it that people often overlook. Something else our society has taught us is that it is rude to ask people personal questions. Sometimes, though, it can make things much easier. After age ten or so, it is not considered permissible to ask an adult if he or she is a “man or a woman.” But we can’t all be psychics. It is permissible, and even preferred in some cases, to ask—just not in the same way a ten-year-old might.

Consider this: most people who present *androgynously* (meaning, in this case, that it is unclear what their sex and/or gender might be) are aware that they present as such. Instead of letting the question of gender distract you from a conversation you might be having with someone, begin by asking what pronoun that person prefers to use. It may sound strange, but it is helpful in many situations. If someone asked you what pronoun you prefer, you might give that person a puzzled look. But someone who lives his/her/their/etc. life appearing to be near the middle of the gender spectrum might appreciate being asked what is the preferred pronoun. Asking shows a level of respect and comfort. At least then you won’t be preoccupied with trying not to offend this person, and you can concentrate on the conversation at hand.

Pronouns can be a bit more complicated than just *he* or *she*. Because we know gender is on a continuum, in a way, pronouns are, too. The vast majority of trans and nontrans individuals use *he* or *she*. Some people may prefer *their* (used as a singular pronoun) or a host of other words. It can be very difficult to remember to use nontraditional pronouns, but it is important to respect people's wishes.

One of the hardest things for people to do is change the pronoun of someone they have known for a long time. If you work with, teach, parent, or just generally know a person as "she" for many years, it is very difficult to immediately adjust to calling him "he" even if that is who he feels he is. There is a happy medium between feeling guilty that you can only get the new pronoun correct 85 percent of the time and refusing to attempt to use the preferred pronoun at all. If someone you know has changed pronouns from *she* to *he* or vice versa, try as best you can to use the preferred pronoun, but give yourself some room to make mistakes here and there. You will get better with time and practice. If you do not live with the person, practice using the new pronoun with other people and you will find that it comes naturally the more you do it. It's like almost anything else; you can train yourself.

It is also important for transpeople to remember that even if their friends and loved ones are trying, they are still bound to make mistakes from time to time. Many transpeople have to make the switch in their own head and may themselves slip. One common misconception is that as the person who is now "she" begins to look more feminine in appearance, you will never again make a pronoun mistake. But a mistake can happen at any time. It is not a reflection on what the person now looks like. It is because old habits die hard, and the first gender we know for a person is what sticks in our mind until such time as we can completely train it to change. For some people it takes longer than others. Some people will slip, out of the blue, twenty years after someone begins transitioning and wonder where that came from. Just correct yourself and move on. After all, if you are referring to a transwoman as "he" in public, and she looks like any other female, people will begin to give *you* funny looks. Pronouns are indeed an important part of the English language. Tell a short story about your best friend, out loud, trying not to use pronouns. Easy? Not quite.

TRANSGENDER BY THE NUMBERS

Unfortunately there is no major consensus on the number of transgender people in the United States or the world today. Estimates of transsexual people in the 1970s were 1 in 37,000 transsexual women (MTFs) out of the general population and 1 in 107,000 transsexual men (FTMs) out of the general population.⁶ Today, estimates of the transsexual population are somewhere between .25 percent and 1 percent of the U.S. population⁷ (a pretty big range) and numbers of the larger transgender population are thought to be greater than that. Hard-and-fast statistics are lacking for a couple of reasons. One is that many transpeople are not out and are either living as trans behind closed doors or are living *stealthily*, meaning that people do not know that they were born differently than they appear now.

Another reason for the lack of statistics is that so many different varieties of transgenderism fall under the umbrella term that it is hard to discern which subcategories should actually be statistically counted as transgender and which should not. For example, male cross-dressers, who don't live their lives as full-time women, are completely different from transsexual women who do live their lives as full-time women. Should they be lumped together because they fall under the umbrella of transgenderism? Some say yes, some say no. Social stigma keeps us from getting accurate numbers for this population. Yet without statistics, the population remains invisible. It is an unfortunate cycle.

By this point you have figured out that the subject of transgenderism includes a little bit of grammar, a basic understanding of biology, a lot of sociology, a lesson in history, some critical analysis, and a hint of language origin. Let's move on to learn about the differences between sexual orientation and gender.