“Understanding Gender”

Submitted by the Tahoe Truckee Suicide Prevention Coalition

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As part of its work raising awareness, reducing stigma and providing outreach to the community, the Tahoe Truckee Suicide Prevention Coalition and the Community Collaborative recently hosted gender awareness workshops for people providing social, educational, and medical services to children and families in the Tahoe Truckee region. The following is an excerpt from an article at [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org) (by permission).

People tend to use the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably. We assign a newborn’s sex as either male or female, based on their genitals (some countries offer a third identification option, for Intersex people). Once a sex is assigned, we presume the child’s gender. Someone born with a penis will be a boy and someone with a vulva will be a girl. For many people, this is cause for little, if any, concern or further thought.

**Dimensions of Gender**

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

– Identity: our deeply held, internal sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither; who we internally know ourselves to be.

– Expression: how we present our gender in the world and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Gender expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses those roles to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Each of these dimensions can vary greatly across a range of possibilities. A person’s comfort in their gender is related to the degree to which these three dimensions feel in harmony. Let’s explore each of these dimensions in a little more detail.

*Body*

Most societies view sex as a binary concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female, both based on a person’s reproductive functions (genitals, sex chromosomes, gonads, hormones, reproductive structures). But a sex binary fails to capture even the biological aspect of gender. While most bodies have one of two forms of genitalia, which are classified as “female” or “male,” there are naturally occurring intersex conditions that demonstrate that sex exists across a continuum of possibilities. This biological spectrum by itself should be enough to dispel the simplistic notion of the “Gender binary”- there are not just two sexes.

The relationship between a person’s gender and their body goes beyond one’s reproductive functions. Research in neurology, endocrinology, and cellular biology points to a broader biological basis for an individual’s experience of gender. In fact, research increasingly points to our brains as playing a key role in how we each experience our gender.

Bodies themselves are also gendered in the context of cultural expectations. Masculinity and femininity are equated with certain physical attributes, labeling us as more or less a man/woman based on the degree to which those attributes are present. This gendering of our bodies affects how we feel about ourselves and how others perceive and interact with us.

*Identity*

Gender identity is our internal experience and naming of our gender. A Cisgender person has a gender identity consistent with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a child whose sex was assigned male on their birth certificate and who identifies as a boy is cisgender (you may hear this term shortened to “cis”). A Transgender person has a gender identity that does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. So, a child who was assigned male on their birth certificate and who identifies as a girl is transgender (sometimes this term is shortened to “trans”).

The two most common gender identities are boy and girl (or man and woman), and often people think that these are the only two gender identities. This idea that there are only two genders is called the “gender binary.” If a child has a binary gender identity, that means they identify as either a boy or a girl, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth.

But gender is a spectrum, and not limited to just two possibilities. A child may have a Non-binary gender identity, meaning they do not identify strictly as a boy or a girl – they could identify as both, or neither, or as another gender entirely. Agender people do not identify with any gender.

Understanding of our gender comes to most of us fairly early in life. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity.” This core aspect of one’s identity comes from within each of us; it is an inherent aspect of a person’s make-up. Individuals do not choose their gender, nor can they be made to change it, though the words someone uses to communicate their gender identity may change over time (e.g., from one non-binary identity to a different non-binary identity). Naming our gender can be a complex and evolving matter. Because we are provided with limited language for gender, it may take a person quite some time to discover, or create, the language that best communicates their gender.

Descriptors for gender identities are rapidly expanding; youth and young adults today no longer feel bound to identify strictly with one of two genders, but are instead establishing a growing vocabulary for gender. More than just a series of new words, however, this shift in language represents a far more nuanced understanding of the experience of gender itself. The 2015 Fusion “Millennial Poll” (“millennial” defined as individuals aged 18-34) revealed that more see gender as a spectrum than as a binary. Other research indicates that today’s teens are even likelier to see identity as a spectrum. There is a generational divide in our fundamental understandings of gender and how we think about this aspect of who we are.

*Expression*

The third dimension of gender is Gender expression, which is the way we show our gender to the world around us (through such things as clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms, to name a few). Practically everything is assigned a gender—toys, colors, clothes, and activities are some of the more obvious examples. Given the prevalence of the gender binary, children face great pressure to express their gender within narrow, stereotypical definitions of “boy” or “girl.” Expectations around expression are taught to us from the moment we are born, and communicated through every aspect of our lives, including family, culture, peers, schools, community, media, and religion. Accepted gender roles and expectations are so entrenched in our culture that most people cannot imagine any other way.

Through a combination of social conditioning and personal preference, by age three most children prefer activities and exhibit behaviors typically associated with their sex. For individuals who fit fairly neatly into expected gender roles and expression, there may be little cause to think about, or question, their gender, or how gender is created, communicated, and reinforced in our lives. However, children who express gender in ways that are perceived to be outside of these social norms often have a very different experience. Girls thought to be too masculine (especially as they move into their teens) and boys seen as feminine (at any age) face a variety of challenges. Pressures to conform at home, mistreatment by peers in school, and condemnation by the broader society are just some of the difficulties facing a child whose expression does not fall into line with the binary gender system. For many young people, whether typical in their presentation or not, expression is the most tangible aspect of their gender experience, impacting them in many, if not all, of their interactions with others.

Norms around gender expression change across societies and over time. One need only consider men wearing earrings or women having tattoos to see the flexibility of social expectations about gender. Even the seemingly intractable notion that “pink is for girls, blue is for boys” is relatively new. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, pink was associated with boys’ clothing and blue with girls’ clothing (still due to the gendering of colors, but with a different rationale associating each color with particular gendered characteristics).

Because expectations around gender expression are so rigid, we frequently assume that what someone wears, or how they move, talk, or express themselves, tells us something about their gender identity. But expression is distinct from identity -we can’t assume a person’s gender identity based on their gender expression. For example, a cisgender boy may like to wear skirts or dresses. His choice in clothing doesn’t change his gender identity; it simply means that he prefers (at least some of the time) to wear clothing that society typically associates with girls.

**Gender Is Different Than Sexual Orientation**

One final distinction to make is the difference between gender and Sexual orientation, which are often incorrectly thought to be the same thing. However, gender and sexual orientation are two distinct aspects of our identity. Gender is personal (how we see ourselves), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (who we are physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to).

Why is it so critical to distinguish these two concepts? When we confuse gender with sexual orientation, we are likely to make assumptions about a young person that have nothing to do with who they are. For example, when someone’s gender expression is inconsistent with others’ expectations, they are frequently assumed to be homosexual. The boy who loves to play princess is assumed to be gay, and the adolescent girl who buys clothes in the “boys” section and favors a short haircut may be assumed to be a lesbian. These are faulty conclusions. What someone wears is about gender expression; you cannot tell what their sexual orientation is by what they have on (for that matter, you can’t know what their gender identity is, either … unless they tell you).

Confusing gender and sexual orientation can also interfere with a young person’s ability to understand and articulate aspects of their own gender. For example, it’s not uncommon for a transgender or non-binary youth to wonder if they are gay or lesbian (or any sexual orientation other than heterosexual) before coming to a fuller realization of their gender identity.

It’s important to understand both gender and sexual orientation, but how we come to understand these parts of ourselves – and the choices we make to disclose and express them – are distinct paths. Thinking of these two aspects of self as interchangeable may, instead of helping us know ourselves and one another better, actually get in the way of our ability to understand and communicate with one another.

**What’s Next?**

Gender diversity has existed throughout history and all over the world. One of the most fundamental aspects of a person’s identity, gender deeply influences every part of one’s life. Where this crucial aspect of self is narrowly defined and rigidly enforced, individuals who exist outside of its norms face innumerable challenges. Even those who vary only slightly from the norm can become targets of disapproval.

This does not have to be the case. Through a thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness and validity of every person’s experiences of self, we can develop greater acceptance for all. Not only will this create greater inclusion for individuals who challenge the norms of gender, it will create space for all individuals to more fully explore and celebrate who they are.