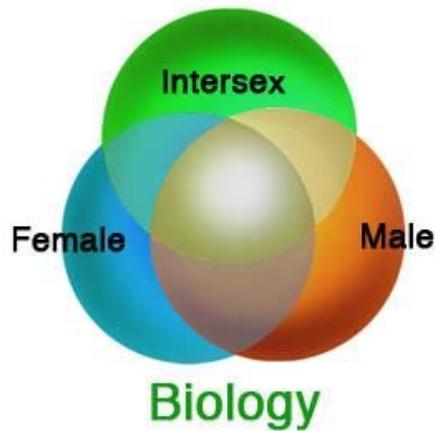
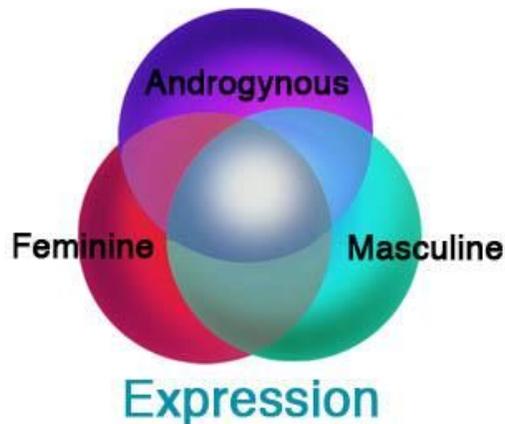


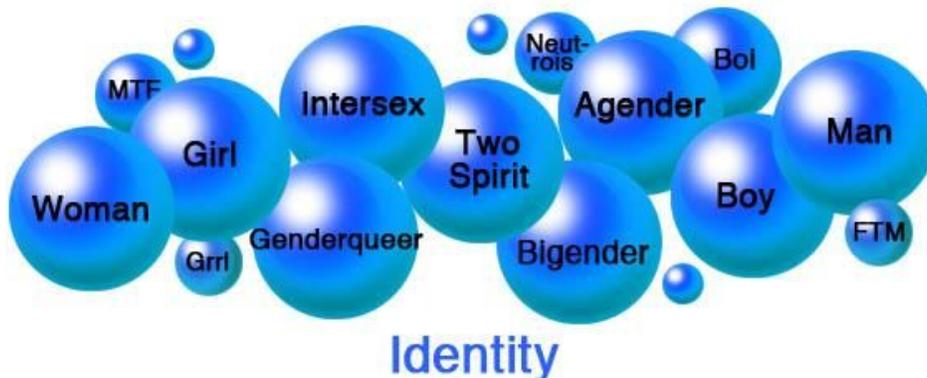
A Twenty-First-Century Gender 101



Biology contributes the biological attributes that inform whether you are female, male, or intersex, what is known as your “biological sex.” These attributes include anatomy, chromosomes, and hormone levels.



Expression is about your behavior, appearance, preferences, roles, speech patterns, occupation, and more, and how they relate to culturally defined gender stereotypes and expectations.



Identity is about your inner sense of being—what your own internal understanding of your gender is and how you describe yourself.

A 21st-Century Gender 101

When we say *gender* in this culture we are lumping together a number of things. The three primary elements that get combined are biology, expression, and identity.

The assumption and the expectation is that these things dictate each other: that a person who is assigned female at birth will express herself in stereotypically feminine ways and identify as a girl, and later a woman; that a person who is assigned male at birth will express himself in stereotypically masculine ways and identify as a boy, and later a man.

But although this might well be how gender plays out for many people, human diversity is far more complex than we've been led to believe.

Biology: the “hardware”¹

Biology is about the physical, chemical, and genetic attributes that inform whether you are **female**, **male**, or **intersex**—what is known as your “biological sex.” These attributes include chromosomes, hormone levels, gonads, reproductive anatomy, and secondary sex characteristics.

The myth is that there are two discrete sets of biological attributes that divide all of creation into two mutually exclusive sets: female and male. But the fact is that biology is anything but simple. There is a frankly stunning diversity within the biological attributes that contribute to our sex. Anyone can see that secondary sex characteristics like body hair, chest size, and fat distribution couldn't be more different from person to person. But that's not all.

For example, our 23rd chromosome varies widely—far from there being only two options, XX and XY. Some people have an extra X, an extra Y, or just a single X. And hormones are all over the map—not only are levels anything but standardized, different bodies interact differently with hormones. Some people have levels of testosterone that are typical for males, but their bodies lack the ability to process it, for instance.

And then there's that bastion of biological sex, the attribute that makes the first people who lay eyes on us label us as female or male: external genitalia. The truth is that there is no dividing line between a clitoris and a penis—there is only a range, and human efforts to separate all people into two discrete

¹ A tip o' the hat to Jamison Green, who described biological sex as the “hardware” in his groundbreaking book [*Becoming a Visible Man*](#).

campus are relatively contrived. According to the [Intersex Society of North America](#) (ISNA), between 1 in 1,500 and 1 in 2,000 people is born with ambiguous genitalia.

“Intersex” is an umbrella term used to describe people whose biological sex differs from what is considered “standard” for females and males. Some people who have disorders of sex development (formerly known as intersex conditions) feel that “intersex” is their biological sex, or their identity. Others do not. ISNA tells us that about 1 in 100 bodies differs from what is generally considered “typical” for females and males. Check out [“Take the Red Pill,”](#) a detailed piece by Luz Delfondo, for more, or, for a deeper take, check out [Riley Dennis’s explanation](#) of how our understanding of biological sex is a social construct.

Expression: the “software”

Expression is about everything that gets culturally mapped onto biology. It’s about the thousands of ways that gender is expressed—everything from appearance to preferences, from speech patterns to occupations. The myth is that all females express their gender in **feminine** ways, and all males express their gender in **masculine** ways. Exhibiting a lack of gender cues (sometimes referred to as **androgyny**) or an intentional mix of gender cues (sometimes referred to as **genderfuck**) is culturally taboo.

Females are expected to be nurturing, quiet, emotionally expressive, submissive. They are expected to play with dolls, enjoy pink and other pastel colors, be drawn to princesses and makeup. They are expected to enter helping professions and become teachers, support staff, nurses, and social workers. They are expected to want children and become mothers.

Males are expected to be rambunctious, aggressive, emotionally unavailable, dominant. They are expected to play with trucks and machinery, enjoy blue and other bold colors, be drawn to cowboys and pirates and spacemen. They are expected to do “men’s work” like policing, engineering, politics, trade work, and management. They are expected to take up space and be experts.

All of this is expression, and all of it is culturally defined. It is a myth that certain forms of expression “naturally” occur more frequently in males versus females—that, for example, males are more rambunctious and females are more social. Don’t take my word for it—check out [Lise Eliot’s research](#), [Angela Saina’s work](#), and [recent neuroscience studies](#).

It’s also a myth that “feminine” and “masculine” are clearly defined, consistent sets. The fact is that what is considered feminine or masculine is dependent on all sorts of cultural context, including geography, age, race and ethnicity, class, ability, and size, to name just a few factors. What’s considered

“appropriately feminine” is very different depending on whether you live in rural Minnesota or downtown Manhattan. What’s considered “appropriately masculine” is very different depending on whether you are a CEO of a fortune 500 company or a worker on a construction site.

We would inhabit a very different world if all people were allowed to express themselves in whatever ways felt most authentic to them, regardless of cultural expectations. If males were not punished for expressing themselves in stereotypically feminine ways and females were not judged for expressing themselves in stereotypically masculine ways. If people who expressed themselves in androgynous ways were not pressured to change. If mixing masculinity and femininity was understood as fabulous instead of confusing or threatening.

Identity: “Hello, my name is…”

Identity is about your own internal understanding of yourself. It’s what you feel the core or essence of yourself to be in terms of gender. There are as many different understandings of self as there are selves in this world. There is no single, universal experience of being a woman, and there is no single, universal experience of being a man. And there are many more identities than just those two.

Language and labels can help us describe our internal self and how it relates to others’, but there is no singular definition for any one identity term. Humanity is constantly finding new words and new definitions of existing words to better share our unique experiences.

Some people use only a single term to describe their gender identity; others use multiple terms. For example, some people describe themselves as both women and as MTF (male to female), because they feel that both are key parts of their identity. Other people add adjectives and additional descriptors, like “femme woman,” to describe key pieces of themselves that inform their gender identity.

Furthermore, identity shifts and changes over time. An obvious example of this is that a child is very unlikely to identify as a woman or a man. “Boy” and “girl” are distinct gender identities; and usually shift into identities as “man” and “woman.” Some people don’t feel a strong sense of identity, or don’t have the language to express it, until later in life.

Biology + Expression + Identity: where it all comes together

We are taught that gender is a 1 to 1 to 1 relationship: that biology, expression, and identity are all interdependent. We are taught, for example, that a person whose biology is female will exhibit feminine gender expression and will identify as a girl, and later a woman. This 1 to 1 to 1 model reflects many

people's experiences, but for many others it just doesn't work that way. Biology, expression, and identity are far more complex than we've been taught.

The truth is that although biology, expression, and identity often inform each other, they are independent variables. Identity is not dictated by biology. And neither dictates expression. Someone whose biological sex is female might identify as a woman, or as a man, or as genderqueer, or as Two Spirit, or as any other identity. Someone whose biological sex is male might be masculine in terms of expression, or feminine, or androgynous, or a mix of feminine and masculine, or an even more fabulous mix of androgynous, feminine, and masculine. And so on.

Maybe your head is spinning; maybe you're cruising right along; but wherever you are on the journey, if you're seeking to truly expand your understanding of the world and the amazing diversity it contains, here are some steps:

1. Understand that biology, expression, and identity are separate variables that may inform each other but don't dictate each other.
2. Affirm that gender is more complex than you've been taught to believe, that most of what we think we know about gender is based on cultural stereotypes and expectations, and that each individual knows their identity best.
3. Stay open-minded and respectfully curious about each person you meet: never make assumptions about a person's biology, expression, or identity based on your own perceptions.
4. Get into real relationship with people whose gender identities and experiences differ from yours. Educating yourself is good, but you'll never gain a broader worldview or true understanding without relationship.