

HOW TO UNDERSTAND **YOUR GENDER**

A practical guide for exploring who you are



ALEX IANTAFFI and MEG-JOHN BARKER

Foreword by S. Bear Bergman

THE ZINE!

Illustrations by Julia Scheele

Contents

- 3** Common Wider Cultural View of Gender
- 4** The Gender Binary
- 5** Reflecting on Cultural Gender Understandings
- 6** Sex/Gender isn't Binary
- 7** Gender is Biopsychosocial
- 8** Our Experience of Gender is Intersectional
- 9** Gender in your Wider World, Institutions, Relationships, Self
- 10** Your Gender Journey
- 11** Your Gender Experience
- 12** Your Gender Across Situations & Relationships
- 13** Your Gender Identity
- 14** Your Gender Expression
- 15** Gender Role Models & Communities
- 16** Further Resources

Common Wider Cultural View of Gender

- There are two *genders* which are opposite (men/women)
- This also determines our *sexual attraction*

		Attracted to	
		<i>Man</i>	<i>Woman</i>
Person is	<i>Man</i>	Gay	Straight
	<i>Woman</i>	Straight	Gay

- Gender roles map directly onto specific *body parts* (vagina→female→feminine / penis→male→masculine)
- Our gender is *fixed* throughout our lives

Does this match your experience of gender? What about people you know? Who does this view include and exclude? What does it open up and what does it close down for you and for others?



The Gender Binary

Note down in the two columns below what it means to be feminine and masculine in wider culture (including behaviours, roles, emotions and appearances). You might find it helpful to think how women and men are represented in magazines, adverts, Hollywood movies, TV shows, and other dominant cultural media.

Feminine	Masculine

Reflecting on Cultural Gender Understandings

Thinking about the lists you just produced:

- Do you fit into either column perfectly? What about people you know?
- Can you think of any men who fit better into the feminine column and women who fit better in the masculine column? Can you think of people that do not fit into either column or fit in both?
- What impact does the binary cultural understanding of gender have on people who fit it, and on people who don't?



Sex/Gender isn't Binary

Chromosomes

There is variety in sex chromosome combinations (e.g. XX, XY, X, XXY, XYY). And there are definitely more than two combinations! There can be different chromosomal make-up in different parts of our bodies. Sex/gender characteristics are influenced by genes.

Hormones

We all have different levels of hormones like oestrogen and testosterone. These are influenced by any external hormones we take, and by environmental factors and the roles we take.

Bodies

Bodies have historically been gendered on appearance of genitalia and on the basis of length of clitoris/penis. Secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts, height, hairiness, depth of voice, etc.) are often used to identify gender but people of any gender might be more or less tall, hairy, or have deeper or higher voices. Many people have physical interventions at some point to change their bodies in ways that may be gendered in broader culture.

Brains

The vast majority of us combine aspects of what were previously thought of as 'male' and 'female' brains, and there are very few consistent sex/gender differences in cognitive abilities. We now know from neuroscience that there are more differences between individual people than between the categories of 'men' and 'women'.

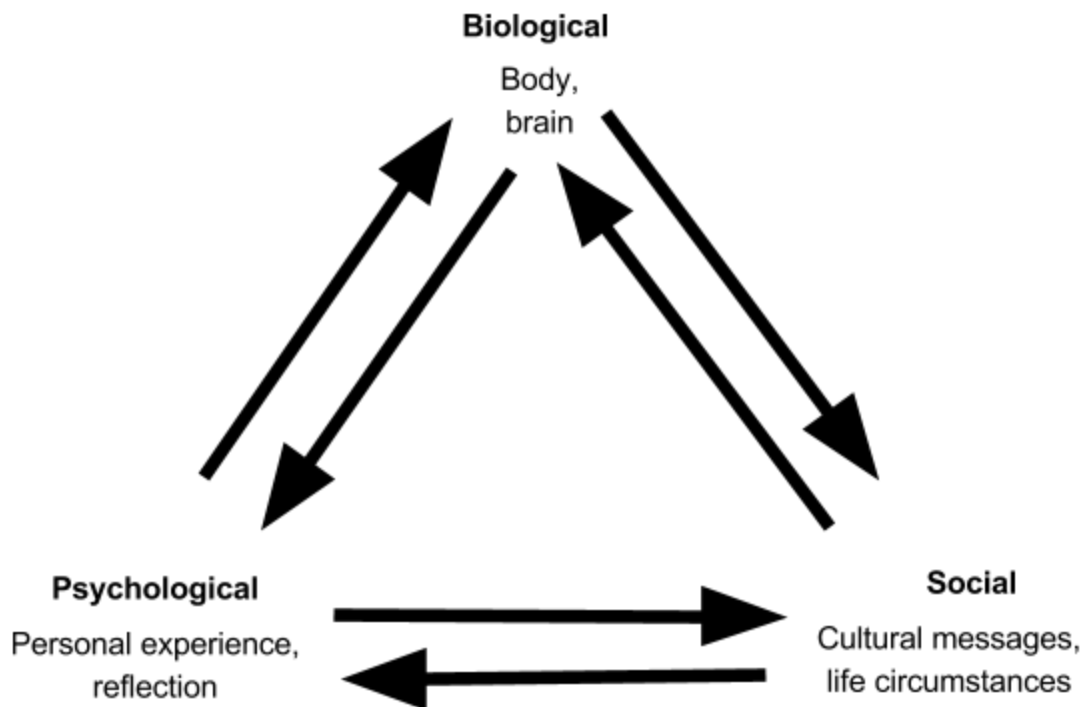
Identities, expressions, experiences

At the psychological and social levels, gender is diverse.

Gender is Biopsychosocial

Our experience of gender involves a complex, ongoing inter-relationship between our body & brain, our personal characteristics and experiences, and the wider culture we live in.

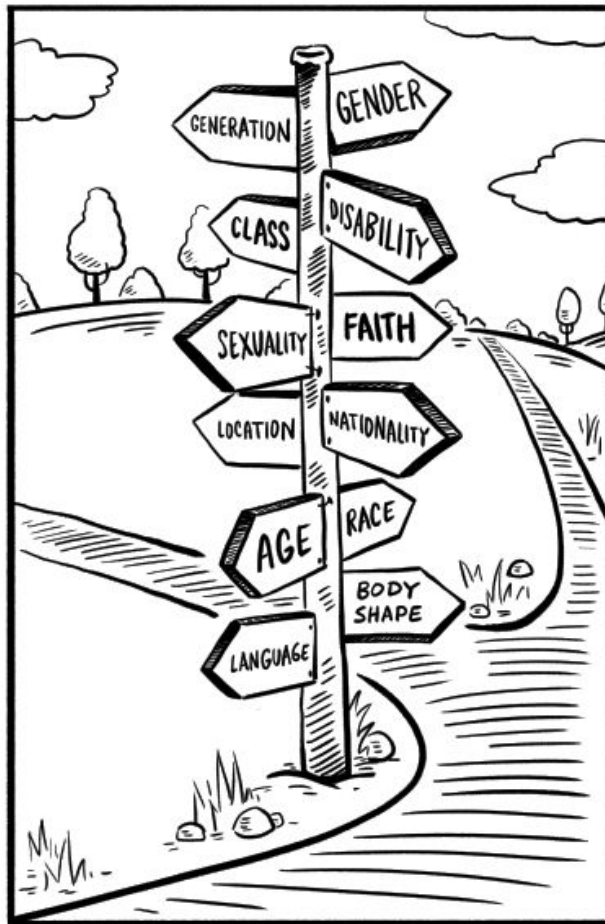
For example, the configuration of our bodies & brains shapes how we're read and treated in gendered ways by others, and our bodies and brains are shaped by our repetition of the gendered ways we've learnt - from wider culture - to move, speak, dress, take up space, express emotion, find pleasure in things, relate to others, etc. (e.g., neuroplasticity, epigenetics)



Our Experience of Gender is Intersectional

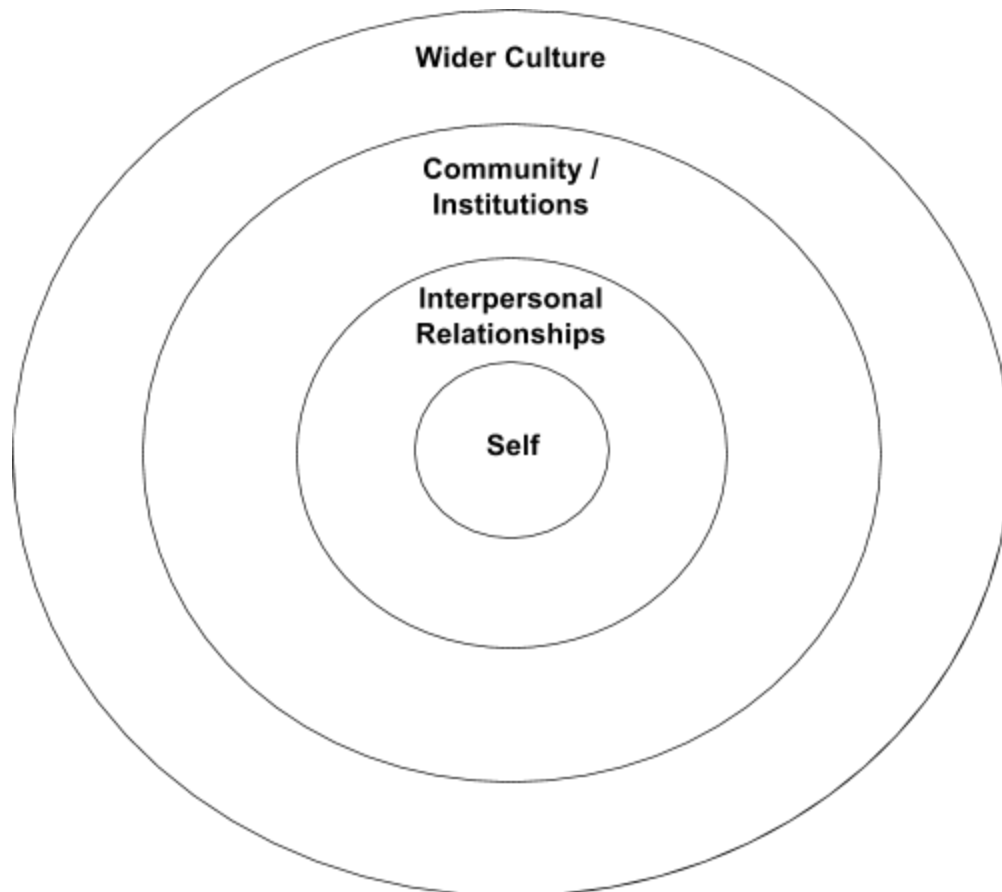
Our gender experiences and options are shaped by other intersecting aspects of experiences and identities, and the systems of privilege and oppression these are embedded in. E.g. White women are read & perceived differently than Black women because their bodies are read as both gendered and racialized.

Consider your place on one or more of the intersections on this sign-post and how that has intersected with your gender experiences. Has these stayed the same or changed over time?



Gender in Your Wider World, Institutions, Relationships, Self

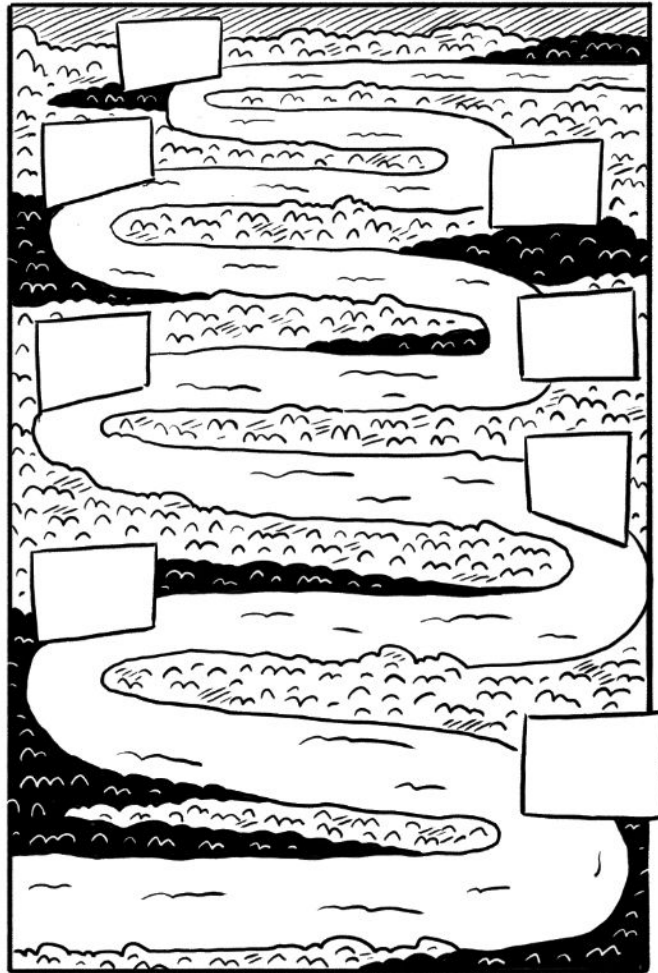
Our sense of our own gender is embedded in the gender options that are available to us in the wider culture; the communities and institutions we're part of; our interpersonal relationships now and in the families we grew up in. Use this diagram to think about how gender is understood at all these levels in your world, and what possibilities that opens up and/or closes down for you.



Your Gender Journey

The way we experience, express, and identify our genders can change over time - or not. E.g., a young girl might demonstrate her femininity by wearing pink, playing with dolls. As a teen she might wear jeans and t-shirts and be a geek. As an adult she might wear a suit to work, and dresses to go out socially. She may or may not parent or be the sole breadwinner. As an older woman she might have short hair and wear patterned shirts over trousers.

You can mark key turning points or phases in your gender journey here...



Your Gender Experience

Given that gender isn't binary, we can conceptualise it on more of a landscape or spectrum. Where would you put yourself on this spectrum of gender according to dominant culture (if anywhere)? Mark an X.

Feminine ----- Masculine

Where you land on the spectrum depends on what we *mean* by femininity and masculinity. Going back to p.4 we could place any of those stereotypes of femininity and masculinity on a spectrum, and we might find ourselves in different places on them. Try it...

Delicate ----- Tough

Emotional ----- Rational

Passive ----- Active

Submissive ----- Dominant

Reliant on others ----- Independent

Cooperative ----- Competitive

Nurturing ----- Distant

_____ ----- _____

Write your own here!

Your Gender Across Situations & Relationships

Where you land on these spectrums - and how you identify and express your gender - may well differ across situations and relationships as well. You might want to think about where you'd fall on the spectrums - and how you'd identify and express your gender - when:

- Out with your friends
- At work/school/college
- Talking to a stranger in a shop
- Dealing with professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.)
- With your family
- In your faith/spiritual community, if you have one



Your Gender Identity

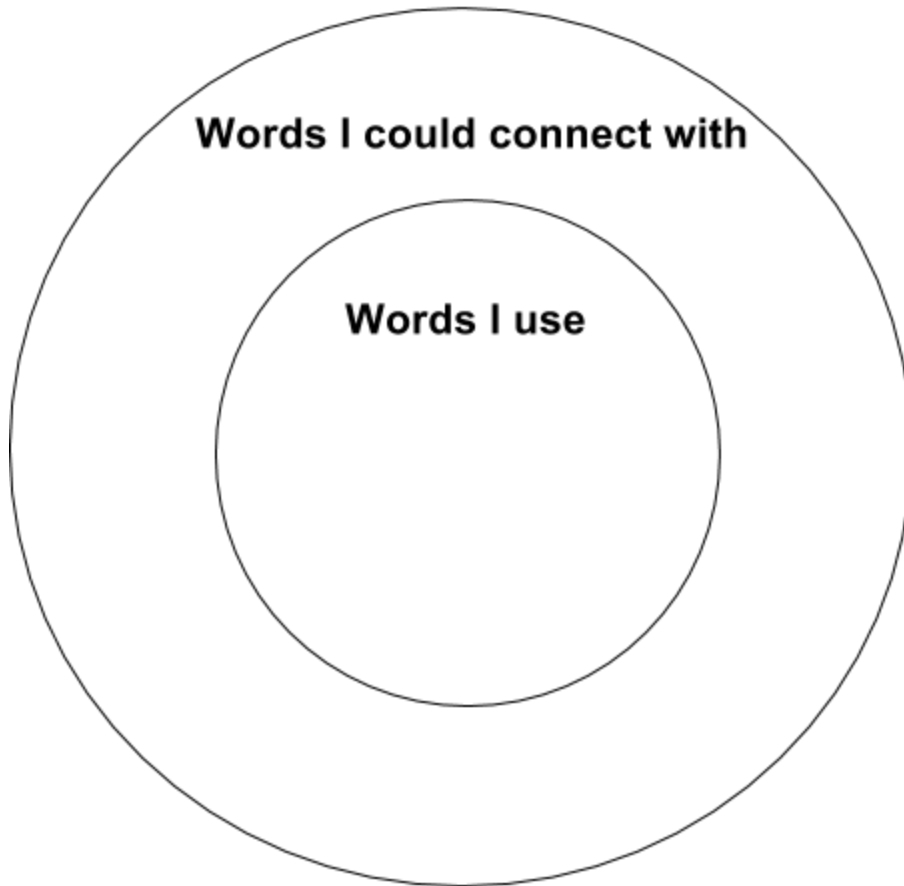
In the centre of this diagram write down all the words you use to identify your gender. In the outside write any that don't fit. Use the middle section for words you could connect with but don't yet use. Consider:

1. Names that you get called. Are these gendered or not? (e.g. being referred to by your surname, nicknames, roles such as mom/dad, etc.)
2. Words that identify your gender (e.g. man, woman, non-binary, guy, tomboy, girl, trans feminine, cis, androgynous, etc.)
3. Titles (Miss, Mr, Mrs, Mx, Dr, Lord, no title, etc.)
4. Pronouns (e.g. they, he, she, zie, per, no pronoun, etc.)
5. Words you like strangers to refer to you as when they say 'excuse me...' (e.g. ma'am, sir, miss, love, squire, mate, friend, etc.)

Words that don't fit me at all

Words I could connect with

Words I use



Your Gender Expression

Consider the following areas of physical and psychological expression. What do you do in each area to express your gender?

Body modification (e.g. smells, make-up, hairstyle, piercings tattoos)

Clothing & accessories

Movement, mannerisms, voice

Spaces you do or don't occupy, & how you occupy them (e.g. how you sit on public transport, changing rooms/toilets you use, which public spaces you do or don't feel comfortable in)

Gender Role Models & Communities

Given the complexity of gender, it can be useful for many of us to find some guidance and support around our gender identities and expressions. You can find some good resources on the next page. For now think about:

- Who supports you in your gender?
- Who would your gender role models be (if any) and what do they give you?
- Do you have a community where you can safely, freely & fully express your gender? How does it work for you?



Further Resources

Books

- Iantaffi, A. & Barker, M-J. (2017). *How to Understand Your Gender: A Practical Guide for Exploring Who You Are*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- For therapists: Richards, C. & Barker, M. (2013). *Sexuality and Gender for Mental Health Professionals: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.
- Bornstein, K. (2013). *My new gender workbook*. London: Routledge.
- Lester, CN (2016). *Trans Like Me: A Journey for All of Us*. London: Virago.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2012). *Sex/gender: Biology in a social world*. London: Routledge.
- Fine, C. (2010). *Delusions of gender*. London: Icon Books.
- Collins, P. H. & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Online

- genderkit.org.uk
- genderedintelligence.co.uk
- tranzwiki.net
- Juliaserano.com

Thanks to

- Jessica Kingsley, our publisher, who publish a range of books on this topic: jkp.com
- The Open University, for funding the illustrations: open.ac.uk
- Julia Scheele for the wonderful illustrations: juliascheele.co.uk