Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water. Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up. Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

And everyone “does gender” without thinking about it. Today, on the subway, I saw a well-dressed man with a year-old child in a stroller. Yesterday, on a bus, I saw a man with a tiny baby in a carrier on his chest. Seeing men taking care of small children in public is increasingly common—at least in New York City. But both men are quite obviously stared at—and smiled at, approvingly. Everyone was doing gender—the men who were changing the role of fathers and the other passengers, who were applauding them silently. But there was more gendering going on that probably fewer people noticed. The baby was wearing a white crocheted cap and white clothes. You couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl. The child in the stroller was wearing a dark blue T-shirt and dark print pants. As they started to leave the train, the father put a Yankees baseball cap on the child’s head. Ah, a boy, I thought. Then I noticed the gleam of tiny earrings in the child’s ears, and as they got off, I saw the little flowered sneakers and lace-trimmed socks. Not a boy after all. Gender done.

Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them—unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated. In our society, in addition to man and woman, the status can be transvestite (a person who dresses in opposite-gender clothes) and transsexual (a person who has had sex-change surgery). Transvestites and transsexuals carefully construct their gender status by dressing, speaking, walking, gesturing in the ways prescribed for women or men—whichever they want to be taken for—and so does any “normal” person.

For the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth. Then babies are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category because parents don’t want to be constantly asked whether their baby is a girl or a boy. A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. Once a child’s gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving differently. As soon as they can talk, they start to refer to themselves as members of their gender. Sex doesn’t come into play again until puberty, but by that time, sexual feelings and desires and practices have been shaped by gendered norms and expectations. Adolescent boys and girls approach and avoid each other in an elaborately scripted and gendered mating dance. Parenting is gendered, with different expectations for mothers and for fathers, and people of different genders work at different kinds of jobs. The work adults do as mothers and fathers and as low-level workers and high-level bosses, shapes women’s and men’s life experiences, and these experiences produce different feelings, consciousness, relationships, skills—ways of being that we call feminine or masculine. All of these processes constitute the social construction of gender.

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Gendered roles change—today fathers are taking care of little children, girls and boys are wearing unisex clothing and getting the same education, women and men are working at the same jobs. Although many traditional social groups are quite strict about maintaining gender differences, in other social groups they seem to be blurring. Then why the one-year-old’s earrings? Why is it still so important to mark a child as a girl or a boy, to make sure she is not taken for a boy or he for a girl? What would happen if they were? They would, quite literally, have changed places in their social world.

To explain why gendering is done from birth, constantly and by everyone, we have to look not only at the way individuals experience gender but at gender as a social institution. As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. Human society depends on a predictable division of labor, a designated allocation of scarce goods, assigned responsibility for children and others who cannot care for themselves, common values and their systematic transmission to new members, legitimate leadership, music, art, stories, games, and other symbolic productions. One way of choosing people for the different tasks of society is on the basis of their talents, motivations, and competence—their demonstrated achievements. The other way is on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity—ascribed membership in a category of people. Although societies vary in the extent to which they use one or the other of these ways of allocating people to work and to carry out other responsibilities, every society uses gender and age grades. Every society classifies people as “girl and boy children,” “girls and boys ready to be married,” and “fully adult women and men,” constructs similarities among them and differences between them, and assigns them to different roles and responsibilities. Personality characteristics, feelings, motivations, and ambitions flow from these different life experiences so that the members of these different groups become different kinds of people. The process of gendering and its outcome are legitimated by religion, law, science, and the society’s entire set of values.

Western society’s values legitimate gendering by claiming that it all comes from physiology—female and male procreative differences. But gender and sex are not equivalent, and gender as a social construction does not flow automatically from genitalia and reproductive organs, the main physiological differences of females and males. In the construction of ascribed social statuses, physiological differences such as sex, stage of development, color of skin, and size are crude markers. They are not the source of the social statuses of gender, age, grade, and race. Social statuses are carefully constructed through prescribed processes of teaching, learning, emulation, and enforcement. Whatever genes, hormones, and biological evolution contribute to human social institutions is materially as well as qualitatively transformed by social practices. Every social institution has a material base, but culture and social practices transform that base into something with qualitatively different patterns and constraints. The economy is much more than producing food and goods and distributing them to eaters and users; family and kinship are not the equivalent of having sex and procreating; morals and religions cannot be equated with the fears and ecstasies of the brain; language goes far beyond the sounds produced by tongue and larynx. No one eats “money” or “credit”; the concepts of “god” and “angels” are the subjects of theological disquisitions; not only words but objects, such as their flag, “speak” to the citizens of a country.

Similarly, gender cannot be equated with biological and physiological differences between human females and males. The building blocks of gender are socially constructed statuses. Western societies have only two genders, “man” and “woman.” Some societies have three genders—men, women, and berdaches or hijras or xaniths. Berdaches, hijras, and xaniths are biological males who behave, dress, work, and are treated in most respects as social women; they are therefore not men, nor are they female women; they are, in our language, “male women.”

There are African and American Indian societies that have a gender status called *manly hearted women*—biological females who work, marry, and parent as men; their social status is “female men” (Amadiume, 1987; Blackwood, 1984). They do not have to behave or dress as men to have the social responsibilities and prerogatives of husbands and fathers; what makes them men is enough wealth to buy a wife.

Modern Western societies’ transsexuals and transvestites are the nearest equivalent of these crossover genders, but they are not institutionalized as third genders (Bolin, 1987). Transsexuals are biological males and females who have sex-change operations to alter their genitalia. They do so in order to bring their physical anatomy in congruence with the way they want to live and with their own
sense of gender identity. They do not become a third
gender; they change genders. Transvestites are
males who live as women and females who live as
men but do not intend to have sex-change surgery.
Their dress, appearance, and mannerisms fall
within the range of what is expected from members
of the opposite gender, so that they “pass.” They also
change genders, sometimes temporarily, some for
most of their lives. Transvestite women have fought
in wars as men soldiers as recently as the nineteenth
century; some married women, and others went
back to being women and married men once the war
was over.³ Some were discovered when their
wounds were treated; others not until they died. In
order to work as a jazz musician, a man’s occupation,
Billy Tipton, a woman, lived most of her life as
a man. She died recently at seventy-four, leaving a
wife and three adopted sons for whom she was hus-
band and father, and musicians with whom she had
played and traveled, for whom she was “one of the
boys” (New York Times, 1989).⁴ There have been
many other such occurrences of women passing as
men who do more prestigious or lucrative men’s
work (Matthaei, 1982, p. 192–93).⁵

Genders, therefore, are not attached to a bio-
logical substratum. Gender boundaries are breach-
able, and individual and socially organized shifts
from one gender to another call attention to “cultural,
social, or aesthetic dissonances” (Garber, 1992,
p. 16). These odd or deviant or third genders show
us what we ordinarily take for granted—that people
have to learn to be women and men. Because trans-
vestism is direct evidence of how gender is con-
structed, Marjorie Garber claims it as “extraordi-
ary power … to disrupt, expose, and challenge,
putting in question the very notion of the ‘original’
and of stable identity” (1992, 16).

**Gender Bending**

It is difficult to see how gender is constructed
because we take it for granted that it’s all biology, or
hormones, or human nature. The differences
between women and men seem to be self-evident,
and we think they would occur no matter what soci-
ety did. But in actuality, human females and males
are physiologically more similar in appearance than
are the two sexes of many species of animals and
are more alike than different in traits and behavior
(C. F. Epstein, 1988). Without the deliberate use of
gendered clothing, hairstyles, jewelry, and cosmet-
ics, women and men would look far more alike.⁶
Even societies that do not cover women’s breasts
have gender-identifying clothing, scarification, jew-
elry, and hairstyles.

The ease with which many transvestite women
pass as men and transvestite men as women is cor-
rorbarated by the common gender misidentification
in Westernized societies of people in jeans, T-shirts,
and sneakers. Men with long hair may be addressed
as “miss,” and women with short hair are often
taken for men unless they offset the potential ambi-
guity with deliberate gender markers (Devor, 1987,
1989). Jan Morris, in Conundrum, an autobiogra-
phical account of events just before and just after a
sex-change operation, described how easy it was to
shift back and forth from being a man to being a
woman when testing how it would feel to change
gender status. During this time, Morris still had a
penis and wore more or less unisex clothing; the
context alone made the man and the woman:

Sometimes the arena of my ambivalence
was uncomfortably small. At the
Travellers’ Club, for example, I was obvi-
ously known as a man or sorts—women
were only allowed on the premises at all
during a few hours of the day, and even
then were hidden away as far as possible
in lesser rooms or alcoves. But I had
another club, only a few hundred yards
away, where I was known only as a
woman, and often I went directly from
one to the other, imperceptibly changing
roles on the way—“Cheerio, sir,” the
porter would say at one club, and “Hello,
madam,” the porter would greet me at the
other. (1975, p. 132)

Gender shifts are actually a common phenom-
emon in public roles as well. Queen Elizabeth II of
England bore children, but when she went to Saudi
Arabia on a state visit, she was considered an hon-
orary man so that she could confer and dine with the
men who were heads of a state that forbids unrelat-
ed men and women to have lace-to-unveiled-face
contact. In contemporary Egypt, lower-class women
who run restaurants or shops dress in men’s clothing
and engage in unfeminine aggressive behavior, and
middle-class educated women of professional or
managerial status can take positions of authority
(Rugh, 1986, p. 131). In these situations, there is an
important status change: These women are treated
by the others in the situation as if they are men.
From their own point of view, they are still women.
From the social perspective, however, they are men.⁷
In many cultures, gender bending is prevalent in theater or dance—the Japanese kabuki actors are men who play both women and men; in Shakespeare’s theater company, there were no actresses—Juliet and Lady Macbeth were played by boys. Shakespeare’s comedies are full of witty comments on gender shifts. Women characters frequently masquerade as young men, and other women characters fall in love with them; the boys playing these masquerading women, meanwhile, are acting out pining for the love of men characters.8

But despite the ease with which gender boundaries can be traversed in work, in social relationships, and in cultural productions, gender statuses remain. Transvestites and transsexuals do not challenge the social construction of gender. Their goal is to be feminine women and masculine men (Kando, 1973). Those who do not want to change their anatomy but do want to change their gender behavior fare less well in establishing their social identity.…

Paradoxically, then, bending gender rules and passing between genders does not erode but rather preserves gender boundaries. In societies with only two genders, the gender dichotomy is not disturbed by transvestites, because others feel that a transvestite is only transitorily ambiguous—is “really a man or woman underneath.” After sex-change surgery, transsexuals end up in a conventional gender status—a “man” or a “woman” with the appropriate genitals (Eichler 1989). When women dress as men for business reasons, they are indicating that in that situation, they want to be treated the way men are treated; when they dress as women, they want to be treated as women:

By their male dress, female entrepreneurs signal their desire to suspend the expectations of accepted feminine conduct without losing respect and reputation. By wearing what is “unattractive” they signify that they are not intending to display their physical charms while engaging in public activity. Their loud, aggressive banter contrasts with the modest demeanor that attracts men.… Overt signalling of a suspension of the rules preserves normal conduct from eroding expectations. (Rugh, 1986, p. 131)

FOR INDIVIDUALS, GENDER MEANS SAMENESS

Although the possible combinations of genitalia, body shapes, clothing, mannerisms, sexuality, and roles could produce infinite varieties in human beings, the social institution of gender depends on the production and maintenance of a limited number of gender statuses and of making the members of these statuses similar to each other. Individuals are born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine or feminine.9 As Simone de Beauvoir said: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman…; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature … which is described as feminine.” (1952, p. 267).

Children learn to walk, talk, and gesture the way their social group says girls and boys should. Ray Birdwhistell, in his analysis of body motion as human communication, calls these learned gender displays tertiary sex characteristics and argues that they are needed to distinguish genders because humans are a weakly dimorphic species—their only sex markers are genitalia (1970, p. 39–46). Clothing, paradoxically, often hides the sex but displays the gender.

In early childhood, humans develop gendered personality structures and sexual orientations through their interactions with parents of the same and opposite gender. As adolescents, they conduct their sexual behavior according to gendered scripts. Schools, parents, peers, and the mass media guide young people into gendered work and family roles. As adults, they take on a gendered social status in their society’s stratification system. Gender is thus both ascribed and achieved (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The achievement of gender was most dramatically revealed in a case of an accidental transsexual—a baby boy whose penis was destroyed in the course of a botched circumcision when he was seven months old (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972, p. 118–23). The child’s sex category was changed to “female,” and a vagina was surgically constructed when the child was seventeen months old. The parents were advised that they could successfully raise the child, one of identical twins, as a girl. Physicians assured them that the child was too young to have formed a gender identity. Children’s sense of which gender they belong to usually develops around the age of three, at the time that they start to group objects and recognize that the people around them
also fit into categories—big, little; pink-skinned, brown-skinned; boys, girls. Three has also been the age when children’s appearance is ritually gendered, usually by cutting a boy’s hair or dressing him in distinctively masculine clothing. In Victorian times, English boys wore dresses up to the age of three, when they were put into short pants. (Garber, 1992, p. 1–2)

The parents of the accidental transsexual bent over backward to feminize the child—and succeeded. Frilly dresses, hair ribbons, and jewelry created a pride in looks, neatness, and “daintiness.” More significant, the child’s dominance was also feminized:

The girl had many tomboyish traits, such as abundant physical energy a high level of activity, stubbornness, and being often the dominant one in a girls’ group. Her mother tried to modify her tomboyishness: “… I teach her to be more polite and quiet. I always wanted those virtues. I never did manage, but I’m going to try to manage them to—my daughter—to be more quiet and ladylike.” From the beginning the girl had been the dominant twin. By the age of three, her dominance over her brother was, as her mother described it, that of a mother hen. The boy in turn took up for his sister, if anyone threatened her. (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972, 122)

This child was not a tomboy because of male genes or hormones; according to her mother, she herself had also been a tomboy. What the mother had learned poorly while growing up as a “natural” female she insisted that her physically reconstructed son-daughter learn well. For both mother and child, the social construction of gender overrode any possibly inborn traits.

People go along with the imposition of gender norms because the weight of morality as well as immediate social pressure enforces them. Consider how many instructions for properly gendered behavior are packed into this mother’s admonition to her daughter: “This is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming” (Kincaid, 1978).

Gender norms are inscribed in the way people move, gesture, and even eat. In one African society, men were supposed to eat with their “whole mouth, wholeheartedly, and not, like women, just with the lips, that is halfheartedly, with reservation and restraint” (Bordieu, [1980] 1990, p. 70). Men and women in this society learned to walk in ways that proclaimed their different positions in the society:

The manly man … stands up straight into the face of the person he approaches, or wishes to welcome. Ever on the alert, because ever threatened, he misses nothing of what happens around him…. Conversely, a well brought-up woman … is expected to walk with a slight stoop, avoiding every misplaced movement of her body, her head or her arms, looking down, keeping her eyes on the spot where she will next put her foot, especially if she happens to have to walk past the men’s assembly. (70)

Many cultures go beyond clothing, gestures, and demeanor in gendering children. They inscribe gender directly into bodies. In traditional Chinese society, mothers bound their daughters’ feet into three-inch stumps to enhance their sexual attractiveness. Jewish fathers circumcise their infant sons to show their covenant with God. Women in African societies remove the clitoris of prepubescent girls, scrape their labia, and make the lips grow together to preserve their chastity and ensure their marriage-ability. In Western societies, women augment their breast size with silicone and reconstruct their faces with cosmetic surgery to conform to cultural ideals of feminine beauty…. 

Most parents create a gendered world for their newborn by naming, birth announcements, and dress. Children’s relationships with same-gendered and different-gendered caretakers structure their self-identifications and personalities. Through cognitive development, children extract and apply to their own actions the appropriate behavior for those who belong in their own gender, as well as race, religion, ethnic group, and social class, rejecting what is not appropriate. If their social categories are highly valued, they value themselves highly; if their social categories are low status, they lose self-esteem (Chodorow, 1974). Many feminist parents who want to raise androgynous children soon lose their children to the pull of gendered norms (T. Gordon, 1990, p. 87–90). My son attended a carefully non-sexist elementary school, which didn’t even have girls’ and boys’ bathrooms. When he was seven or eight years old, I attended a class play about “squares” and “circles” and their need for each other and noticed that all the girl squares and
circles wore makeup, but none of the boy squares and circles did. I asked the teacher about it after the play, and she said, “Bobby said he was not going to wear makeup, and he is a powerful child, so none of the boys would either.” In a long discussion about conformity, my son confronted me with the question of who the conformists were, the boys who followed their leader or the girls who listened to the woman teacher. In actuality, they both were, because they both followed same-gender leaders and acted in gender-appropriate ways. (Actors may wear makeup, but real boys don’t.)

For human beings there is no essential female-ness or maleness, femininity or masculinity, womanhood or manhood, but once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations. Individuals may vary on many of the components of gender and may shift genders temporarily or permanently, but they must fit into the limited number of gender statuses their society recognizes. In the process, they re-create their society’s version of women and men: “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements…. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 146).

The gendered practices of everyday life reproduce a society’s view of how women and men should act (Bourdieu, [1980], 1990). Gendered social arrangements are justified by religion and cultural productions and backed by law, but the most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made invisible; any possible alternatives appear to be fixed, they still contain within them empty and overflowing categories. Empty because even when they are usually spatially segregated to maintain gender separation, and often the tasks are given different job titles as well, such as executive secretary and administrative assistant (Reskin, 1988). If the differences between women and men begin to blur, society’s “sameness taboo” goes into action (G. Rubin, 1975, p. 178). At a rock and roll dance at West Point in 1976, the year women were admitted to the prestigious military academy for the first time, the school’s administrators “were reportedly perturbed by the sight of mirror-image couples dancing in short hair and dress gray trousers,” and a rule was established that women cadets could dance at these events only if they wore skirts (Barkalow & Raab, 1970, p. 53). Women recruits in the U.S. Marine Corps are required to wear makeup—at a minimum, lipstick and eye shadow—and they have to take classes in makeup, hair care, poise, and etiquette. This feminization is part of a deliberate policy of making them clearly distinguishable from men Marines. Christine Williams quotes a twenty-five-year-old woman drill instructor as saying: “A lot of the recruits who come here don’t wear makeup; they’re tomboyish or athletic. A lot of them have the preconceived idea that going into the military means they can still be a tomboy. They don’t realize that you are a Woman Marine” (1989, p. 76–77).¹¹

If gender differences were genetic, physiological, or hormonal, gender bending and gender ambiguity would occur only in hermaphrodites, who are born with chromosomes and genitalia that are not clearly female or male. Since gender differences are socially constructed, all men and all women can enact the behavior of the other, because they know the other’s social script: “Man’ and ‘woman’ are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendental meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions” (J. W. Scott, 1988a, p. 49). Nonetheless, though individuals may be able to shift gender statuses, the gender boundaries have to hold, or the whole gendered social order will come crashing down.

Paradoxically, it is the social importance of gender statuses and their external markers—clothing, mannerisms, and spatial segregation—that
makes gender bending or gender crossing possible—or even necessary. The social viability of differentiated gender status produces the need or desire to shift statuses. Without gender differentiation, transvestitism and transsexuality could be meaningless. You couldn’t dress in the opposite gender’s clothing if all clothing were unisex. There would be no need to reconstruct genitalia to match identity if interests and life-styles were not gendered. There would be no need for women to pass as men to do certain kinds of work of jobs were not typed as “women’s work” and “men’s work.” Women would not have to dress as men in public life in order to give orders or aggressively bargain with customers.

Gender boundaries are preserved when transsexuals create congruous autobiographies of always having felt like what they are now. The transvestite’s story also “recuperates social and sexual norms” (Garber, 1992, p. 69). In the transvestite’s normalized narrative, he or she “is ‘compelled’ by social and economic forces to disguise himself or herself in order to get a job, escape repression, or gain artistic or political ‘freedom’” (Garber, 1992, p. 70). The “true identity,” when revealed, causes amazement over how easily and successfully the person passed as a member of the opposite gender, not a suspicion that gender itself is something of a put-on.

**Endnotes**

1. In cases of ambiguity in countries with modern medicine, surgery is usually performed to make the genitalia more clearly male or female.

2. On the hijras of India, see Nanda 1990; on the xaniths of Oman, Wikan 1982, 168–86; on the American Indian berdaches, W. L. Williams 1986. Other societies that have similar institutionalized third-gender men are the Koniag of Alaska, the Tanala of Madagascar, the Mesakin of Nuba, and the Chukchee of Siberia (Wikan 1982, 1970).


4. Gender segregation of work in popular music still has not changed very much, according to Groce and Cooper 1989, despite considerable androgyne in some very popular figures. See Garber 1992 on the androgyne. She discusses Tipton on pp. 67–70.

5. In the nineteenth century, not only did these women get men’s wages, but they also “had male privileges and could do all manner of things other women could not: open a bank account, write checks, own property, go anywhere unaccompanied, vote in elections” (Faderman 1991, 44).

6. When unisex clothing and men wearing long hair came into vogue in the United States in the mid-1960s, beards and mustaches for men also came into style again as gender identifications.

7. For other accounts of women being treated as men in Islamic countries, as well as accounts of women and men cross-dressing in these countries, see Garber 1992, 304–52.


9. For an account of how a potential man-to-woman transsexual learned to be feminine, see Garfinkel 1967, 116–85, 285–88. For a gloss on this account that points out how, throughout his encounter with Agnes, Garfinkel failed to see how he himself was constructing his own masculinity, see Rogers 1992.

10. Other societies recognize more than two categories, but usually no more than three or four (Jacobs and Roberts 1989).

11. The taboo on males and females looking alike reflects the U.S. military’s homophobia (Bérubé 1989). If you can’t tell those with a penis from those with a vagina, how are you going to determine whether their sexual interest is heterosexual or homosexual unless you watch them having sexual relations?

**References**


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