

Gender

MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on gender. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

Note that some of these pieces were written over a decade ago now, and before many of the most profound shifts that the world - and I - have recently been through. I hope that it is of interest to see how my ideas have evolved over this period. But please do be mindful of the context in which they were written as they may not always represent either my own, or culturally current, thinking/practice on these topics.

If you enjoy the book, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

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Gender In General

What Gender Affirmative Therapy is and is not

March 2019

Two years on from 2017 when it began, we're still in the midst of a [moral panic about trans](#). Daily news stories across all sections of the media continue to spread myths and misinformation about trans people. It's hard to even imagine the extent of the damage caused to trans people living our lives in this culture of hatred and denial of our basic existence and human rights, particularly young people who are growing up in this climate.

One topic which comes round frequently in this moral panic is the help and support given to people – particularly young people – who are gender diverse, or exploring their gender. Claims are often made that people are pressured to go down particular routes, for example that anybody who questions their gender is pressured to come out as trans, or that everyone is quickly pushed down a particular pathway of medical treatment and surgeries.

I was recently asked to put together a factsheet about what Gender Affirmative Therapy – or Gender Affirmative Practice in general – actually looks like: to put the record straight about what therapists, activists, and other practitioners in this area are actually doing – and inviting others to do. Here it is. You can download the pdf on my [website](#), or read the whole thing below that.

What is Gender Affirmative Therapy (GAT)?

Gender affirmative therapy (GAT) is any form of counselling or psychotherapy which seeks to help people to come to a consensual, comfortable, and self-accepting place with their gender. It is founded on the position that no gender identity, expression, or experience is any more valid, 'natural' or 'normal' than any other. In this way GAT sits in opposition to any form of conversion therapy which attempts to change a person's gender identity or suppress their experience or expression of their gender.

Why is GAT important?

We all have a relationship to gender and these are often related to our experiences of mental health difficulties, for example:

- Attempts to conform to rigid masculine gender roles – including demonstrating strength and suppressing emotion – are linked to the high suicide rates, and to addictions and violent behaviour which also impact the mental health of others
- Attempts to conform to rigid feminine gender roles – including being defined by attractiveness and relationships with others – are linked to high rates of body image problems, depression, and anxiety
- Cultural transphobia and assumptions that people should remain in the gender they were assigned at birth are linked to high rates of suicide attempts, self-harm, and mental health struggles among trans people via common experiences of bullying, discrimination, and family rejection
- Assumptions that gender is binary, and the cultural invisibility of non-binary genders, are linked to the high rates of mental health struggles among non-binary people (those who do not experience themselves as male or female)

For these reasons it is vital that therapists and counsellors are gender-aware and gender-affirmative: able to help their clients to understand the range of options they have in relation to gender and to support them in navigating these

What are the underpinning assumptions of GAT?

GAT is based on the position that gender is diverse and that no gender identity or expression is inherently superior or more 'natural', 'normal' or valid than any other. This includes the following assumptions:

- It is no more preferable to be cisgender (remaining in the gender you were assigned at birth) than it is to be trans (shifting from the gender you were assigned at birth), or vice versa. Both trans and cisgender are big umbrella terms encompassing a diverse range of experiences, expressions, and identities
- It is no more preferable to identify as a woman, as a man, or as a non-binary person, or to express femininity, masculinity, or any form of androgyny or non-binary gender
- Most people identify, express, and experience their genders in different ways over time as they find more comfortable and consensual relationships to their gender. This can involve: changing dress and appearance; shifting titles, names, pronouns and other identifiers; taking external hormones; undergoing surgical procedures, etc. It's important to remember that such changes are commonplace among cisgender and trans people alike (e.g. women and non-binary people may take oestrogens and progesterones because they are menopausal, trans, seeking birth control, intersex, or experiencing endometriosis; people may have mastectomy/breast reduction because they are trans or non-binary, because they are a man with gynecomastia or pseudogynecomastia, because they are a woman who doesn't wish to be sexualized or otherwise stereotyped on the basis of their breast

- size, or because they are a person who is at risk of breast cancer or migraines related to breast size)
- No particular gender journey is preferable to any other. For example, it is no more preferable: to express gender in culturally normative or non-normative ways, to undergo social or physical changes or not to

What happens in GAT?

The emphasis in GAT is on supporting the client towards a gender experience, expression, and identity that feels comfortable and consensual to them.

- We live in a culture which privileges being cisgender over trans, being binary over non-binary, being a man over being any other gender, and being masculine over expressing gender in other ways. Therefore GAT may well involve unpacking cultural norms around gender and how they have impacted the client
- Our culture also regards some gender identities, expressions, and journeys as more acceptable or 'normal' than others, so GAT may involve normalising and legitimising the various options available to the client
- Gender intersects in vital ways with other aspects of experience (e.g. race, class, sexuality, age, generation, mental health, disability) so GAT does not focus exclusively on gender but rather explores it in the context of the client's background and wider world
- Given that there is still a great deal of stigma and discrimination around any gender non-normative expression there may well be exploration of how clients can navigate the wider world in ways that are safe-enough, and the balance between this and expressing their gender in ways that feel comfortable and consensual to them

What doesn't happen in GAT?

There are many myths about what happens in GAT, largely due to the current moral panic about trans. The following things would never happen in GAT:

- Suggesting that a person must be trans simply because they have a gender non-normative experience or expression, many cisgender people also have these
- Suggesting that a person must be cisgender because they do not seem trans and/or non-binary enough to 'count'
- Encouraging a person to take puberty blockers or hormones, or discouraging them from doing so if that feels like the best path for them
- Encouraging a person to have surgical interventions, or discouraging them from doing so if that feels like the best path for them
- Rushing anybody into any form of gender identity, expression, or experience

- Encouraging any decision before a person is fully informed about what it would involve and what impact it would have on them physically, psychologically, and socially. Informed consent is vital

Further Resources

You can find the research this factsheet is drawn on in:

- [Barker, M-J. \(2017\). British Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy Good Practice in Action Fact Sheet 095: Gender, Sexual, and Relationship Diversity \(GSRD\).](#)
- [Government Equalities Office \(2018\). National LGBT Survey: Research Report.](#)

Other useful resources include:

- [The Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK, Version 2](#)
- [Stonewall trans report](#)
- [Trans panic](#)
- [Iantaffi, A. and Barker, M-J. \(2017\). How to Understand Your Gender. London: Jessica Kingsley.](#)
- [Pink Therapy](#)

Letting go of gender reveal parties

20th May 2021

I was recently interviewed for Vogue about whether gender reveal parties are something we might leave behind in 2020. You can read the excellent piece they wrote here, and my full interview below...

Gender reveal parties have been called problematic because they've started wildfires, but why are they problematic when it comes to how we think about gender

Wildfires aside, the main problem is that gender reveal parties reinforce several ideas about gender which are pretty bad for kids, and for society in general. Three main ones are:

- That gender is the most important thing we can know about a person,
- That we can know what gender somebody is going to be by knowing what their genitals are like, and
- That gender is binary (they're either a boy or they're a girl).
- These ideas are bad for all kids.

These ideas bad for any kids who don't end up conforming to sex and gender norms, like intersex, trans, and non-binary kids, because they mean that those kids will have a far greater battle to be recognised in their sex/genders than they would have done if we didn't make such a big thing of sex/gender at the start of their life.

These ideas are also bad for all kids because they set them up to believe that the division between girls and boys, women and men, is a really important one, and that they need to conform to rigid ideas of what it means to be a girly girl or a 'big brave boy', a feminine woman or a masculine man.

They take place before the child is born, so do they actually affect the child?

We know that from birth onwards, and perhaps even before birth, the gender attitudes of the people around a child have a huge impact on the kid. The famous 'Baby X' studies found that adults who were given the same baby to look after behaved very differently towards them depending on whether they were dressed in pink or blue. Babies dressed in pink were treated more gently, given dolls to play with, and assumed to be 'upset' if they cried. Babies dressed in blue were treated more roughly, given trucks, and assumed to be 'angry' if they cried.

Scientists like Cordelia Fine and Sari Van Anders have found that such different treatment has a big impact on our physiology, including the ways our brains wire up, and our levels of circulating hormones. We're literally shaping kids' bodies and brains when we treat them differently according to their gender.

The BBC documentary No More Boys and Girls showed that, by primary school, kids raised like this all believed that boys were better than girls and that girls should aspire to be 'pretty' rather than having career goals. Boys found it difficult to ask for support when they were struggling, and couldn't come up for words for emotions other than anger. We can see the toll that all of this takes in later life when we consider gender pay inequalities, toxic low self esteem and body dissatisfaction in women, and the high rates of suicide and aggression in men, for example.

It all starts with the idea that the gender of a kid is the most important thing about them.

Why do you believe that gender reveal parties no longer have a place in 2020? Did they ever have a place?

I don't believe they ever had a place. Looking back in time, and around the world today, we find that this idea that people can be divided into two 'opposite' genders is actually a pretty new, western thing. Many places and times have celebrated gender diversity as something sacred, have had more than two gender categories, and have regarded gender as only one feature of a person among many, not something to determine their whole lifecourses.

Another reason to leave gender reveal parties in 2020 is the increasing awareness, in our culture, of intersex, trans and non-binary people. Between one and two percent of babies are born with some variation of sex characteristics. In the past, such babies often received surgical interventions to make their genitals conform to norms of what we think male or female genitals should look like. Such surgeries can be risky, can deaden sexual sensation in later life, and can lead to later struggles if the decision is made in a different direction from the way that person ends up experiencing their gender. The need to 'reveal' the gender of a baby is part of a cultural pressure which makes parents more likely to believe that they should ask for such surgical interventions, rather than waiting until the child themselves is able to make that choice consensually - unless there's actually a good medical reason for surgery.

Also, now that we know that over a third of adults experience their gender as to some extent the other gender, neither gender, or both gender, and that many people identify as trans and non-binary, we should be wary of anything that puts people in a box regarding gender that it's hard to move out of later.

What would a better approach be?

Some parents are now raising all kids gender-free until they're old enough to make a decision about what gender they experience themselves as being - if any. Even if we don't go that far, we can clue ourselves up about the strong impact of rigid gender stereotypes on all kids, and work to challenge these in our own childrearing.

For example, on the No More Boys and Girls documentary they tried providing all kids with gender diverse toys and clothes and allowing them to make their own choices, they deliberately

exposed kids to people who worked in non-stereotypical occupations like a male ballet dancer and a female mechanic, and they did activities that showed the kids how equal boys and girls were on physical strength and all kinds of activities at that age.

It's important that schools and families move in this direction, towards raising human beings who have all the choices available to them, rather than restricting their future possibilities, and later mental health, with rigid gender stereotypes.

Trans author and educator S. Bear Bergman also suggests that, while things remain so tough for gender diverse people, we could consider having gender reveal parties for people when they come out as trans or non-binary. What might it be like - for everyone - if we saw gender creativity as something to celebrate, rather than something to commiserate? What if we regarded trans, intersex, and non-binary people as a gift - as artist Travis Alabanza puts it - who have something vital to teach everybody about the beautiful, unique, complexity of all of our genders.

Find out more

There's more on these topics in my books *Gender: A Graphic Guide*, *How to Understand Your Gender*, and *Life Isn't Binary*. There's also a free zine for exploring gender on [rewriting-the-rules/zines](#).

The future of gender

October 2014

Since *Rewriting the Rules* was published I sometimes get asked to do email interviews with journalists on various topics. Some of these get published in an edited form and some never see the light of day, so I thought I'd post some of the original interviews here.

Here are my thoughts when asked about the future of gender. You can read more about this in my book *How To Understand Your Gender*.

I think we're at a really complex time in relation to that question. The future I would like to see – and there is some evidence of movement towards it – is one where:

- Gender isn't such a defining feature (i.e. we're only interested in it when it's actually relevant rather than being the first thing we ask or notice about someone);
- There is a lot more flexibility in what we regard as being male/masculine or female/feminine – as well as realising that many people don't fit well into either box;
- There is an understanding that gender is fluid and can be – and is – expressed differently throughout life (e.g. think about how femininity is expressed by a toddler, a teenager, a middle aged woman and an old woman);
- We get that gender is complexly biopsychosocial – it has all those elements running through it and woven together – so we stop asking about nature vs. nurture and start respecting people's experience of their own gender as well as acknowledging just what a major part our social rules about gender roles have on people's bodies and brains.

However, there seem to be constant pushbacks to more rigid and limited ideas of gender, where women and men are seen as being from different planets, and where masculinity and femininity are narrowly defined in specific ways and there is no room for anything between or beyond these two.

Of course, people do get something out of these ideas. It is hard to completely let those things go. For example, it is tough for a lot of men to recognise the things they gain from the power that they have in our current society and to work to shift that power even though it risks making things more difficult for themselves. Also it is tough for many women to let go of aspects of the current norms of femininity – like placing a great deal of importance on being attractive and desirable, or like the idea of being someone who needs protecting rather than being a protector.

I find it optimistic when we see thoughtful and critical conversations about these things happening in popular culture which recognise how complex it all is, like some of the debates we've seen in the last couple of years around the songs by Robin Thicke, Mylie Cyrus, and Lily Allen.

At the same time it is still often taken for granted, in everyday ways, that there are two and only two genders, and that they are naturally – and rightly – different to each other. People make gendered decisions about their lives and generally don't consider them from a gender perspective. I'd like to see awareness raised so people could at least realise that gender is a part of that – a part of what makes us find this thing pleasurable and that thing scary – for example in terms of our choices around work, relationships, hobbies, family, etc. Then we would be more empowered to challenge those messages, or at least to go along with them in a more mindful way.

Definitely less gendering (of things like toys, clothes, products, toilets, etc.) would be – to my mind – a good way forward in making that shift. I'd like to get to a point where people were seen as people first, and their gender (and other aspects of their identity) second. But we have a long way to go, and many external and internal forces which have an interest in keeping the status quo.

Gender & Sexual Diversity

February 2016

I recently did an [interview on gender and sexual diversity](#) with the excellent folk at Sheffield Central Counselling.

This seems even more timely now that it's been published because of the [current debates that are going on](#) about whether guidance against gay conversion therapy should be extended to encompass bisexual, trans, and asexual people. I find it very frightening that some people in the therapy profession are arguing against this extension, as if there are circumstances in which it might be appropriate for a therapist to try to change a bi, trans, or asexual person's sexuality or gender. There is clear evidence both that conversion therapy is far more common in these contexts, and that it is incredibly damaging. I hope that they will see sense and extend the guidance to encompass everyone, not just gay people.

Here's my interview. If you want to know more about the topic, check out my – more recent – free resource on [Gender, Sexual, and Relationship Diversity](#).

You are a writer, academic, psychotherapist and campaigner for rights in the area of sexual minorities and, especially, gender diversity. Many people have heard of transgender, but can you explain a bit more about gender diversity?

Sure. I guess I like the term 'Gender and Sexual Diversity' (GSD) because it gets at the fact that there are a whole range of genders and sexualities beyond the 'sexual and gender minorities' that we tend to hear about: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT).

That range includes all the people who are attracted to the same gender who don't necessarily identify as bisexual or gay (around 50% of young people according to a recent YouGov poll). It also includes all those who are into kink or BDSM, and asexual people who don't experience sexual attraction. And, as well as trans people (whose gender is different to the one they were assigned at birth), GSD gets at all the people who experience themselves as something other than 100% male or 100% female. That's around a third of us according to one recent study.

GSD also reminds us that everybody has a gender and a sexuality – not just those of us who are somehow outside of the cultural 'norm'. In the books that I write about these topics I always make a point of including heterosexuality and cisgender (people who aren't trans) because those things can also have a big impact on people's experiences of life. For example, some heterosexual and cisgender people struggle because they feel such a pressure to conform to social expectations of what it means to be a straight guy, or a straight woman, in our culture.

Sometimes people fail to distinguish between gender and sexuality. How can this be problematic?

It can lead people to have stereotypical assumptions – for example the classic prejudice that gay men will be ‘cissy’ or feminine, and lesbians will be butch or masculine. Of course we know that’s not the case. Where you sit on the spectrum of sexual attraction isn’t necessarily related to where you sit on the spectrum of gender.

Beyond that I think it’s also worth seeing both sexuality and gender on a number of dimensions, rather than just the ones we’re used to thinking about. We’ve got very used to thinking about sexuality as being all about the gender we’re attracted to (the same gender or the ‘opposite’ gender). There’s so much more to sexuality than that. For example, whether we experience sexual desire at all and how much, whether we’re more active or passive sexually, what kinds of people we find attractive, and what kinds of sexual practices we enjoy. Similarly with gender, it’s worth thinking about what we mean when we talk about someone being masculine or feminine. Very few of us fall completely into the ‘manly’ or ‘womanly’ stereotypes.

What do you think are the most misunderstood aspects of non-binary gender?

I guess – as with many minorities – the biggest misunderstanding is that it’s one thing. There are many different experiences of being non-binary, and many different ways of expressing those experiences. Some non-binary people experience themselves as having a pretty stable gender somewhere between male and female. Others have something more like a third gender which is different to either of those. Others see themselves as without a gender at all. Bigender people might feel male some of the time, and female at other times. Genderfluid people find that their gender shifts and changes over time.

How can counselling and psychotherapy support clients who are beginning to question their assumptions about their gender?

I think it can be very helpful so long as it comes from an affirmative stance which recognises that there are many ways of experiencing and expressing gender, all of which are equally valid. The important thing – as always – is to be led by the client and to create an open and safe-enough space for them to explore the possibilities. I think it’s helpful if the counsellor or therapist is educated enough about gender to know what is out there in terms of community support and medical services, as well as what the options are, and how they are currently viewed in the wider culture and community. There are plenty of good books, websites and trainers that cover these topics. For example my colleagues Christina Richards, Walter Bouman and I are publishing a book on non-binary gender in 2016. And it’s important to remember that

it's always okay to refer clients on if you don't have enough knowledge yourself. Pink Therapy is a good place to find clued up therapists and counsellors.

As someone who argues against a conservative and often restrictive view of gender and sexuality, what worries you most?

The mental health statistics – sadly, compared to heterosexual and even to lesbian and gay people, bisexual and trans people (including non-binary people) have the very worst rates of mental health problems. That includes things like self-harm and suicide. In a world which assumes that gender and sexuality are binary (male or female, gay or straight) and that people will remain in the gender they were assigned at birth, it is still very hard to live as a bi or trans person. You're constantly having to come-out to people, to correct assumptions and to deal with suspicion. You rarely see people with your gender or sexuality on TV or in films, and when you do they are often represented as ridiculous or dangerous. You may find yourself being treated badly by family and friends, and by professionals. It can be a very alienating, shaming and isolating experience.

Those who seek to campaign and argue for new rights often experience exhaustion because it can be such a thankless task. What inspires you to keep writing, speaking and organising on these topics?

Great question! I think that burn-out is a real problem in this area. Although we see real progress in some ways there is often a backlash and it is hard when things seem to go two steps forward and then three steps back. Also when you're trying to move things forward in a way that will work you often find yourself being viewed as too radical by some people, and too conservative by others. For example there are difficult questions about whether it's better to work within systems like the NHS, government or education system, or whether it's better to work outside those areas because they are so entrenched in problematic ideas and practices.

What inspires me is when I see the difference it can make to the clients I work with, or the people who read my writing on these topics. I feel like these conversations about how we shouldn't value people differently on the basis of their gender or sexuality tap into far bigger issues about how we treat people generally. So much of the current struggle we're having as humans relates to that kind of 'us and them' thinking. It feels good to be a small part of such a big, and important, conversation.

57 genders (and none for me)? Reflections on the new facebook gender categories

February 2014

February is a pretty busy time for somebody who writes about sex, gender and relationships what with the coinciding of **LGBT history month** and Valentine's Day. This year, however, I thought I could rest up a bit on February 14th given that I said everything I wanted to say about the celebration of romantic love **last Valentine**.

I was wrong. Facebook chose February 14th 2014 to do one of **the most exciting things** that has happened in the area of gender and social media for a long time. It changed its gender option so that, instead of choosing from 'male' and 'female', users could pick from a range of over 50 gender terms (listed at the end of this post), as well as choosing to be referred to as 'they' if they didn't want a **gendered pronoun** ('he' or 'she').

As usual, rather than getting into whether this is a good move or a bad move by Facebook, I am going to ask a different couple of questions which I think are more helpful: What does this change open up, and what does it close down? As with most shifts, what Facebook has done achieves something which is important and useful, but in other ways it is problematic and limited. Reframing the question to what is opened up and closed down gets away from **polarised ideas** of right and wrong, good and bad. Instead it acknowledges the complexity of the situation and the fact that something can simultaneously expand understanding in some ways and constrain it in others.

Opening up

The main, extremely important, thing that the move to a range of gender options does is to demonstrate to people that gender is not dichotomous. The previous options – like most depictions of gender in western cultures – suggested that everybody could be captured under one of two genders: either you are 'male' or you are 'female'. The new options suggest that this is far too limiting and that there are actually over 50 different possible gender categories, and presumably more.

[edit: of course as Christine Burns helpfully points out in a comment, many of these terms do mean the same/very similar things – e.g. cis female, cis woman, cisgender woman and cisgender female – so it is not that there are 50 distinct genders represented here. Also it is important to point out that few of these terms are new, most have been around for a long time now.]

Why is this important? Two reasons: First it means that those who don't experience their gender as 'male' or 'female' can feel both visible and included, and perhaps this paves the way to further social inclusion as other organisations and bodies follow Facebook's example. Second it means that everybody can see that the model of gender which this huge social networking service adopts is one of diversity rather than dichotomy.

Starting with the first reason, the range of terms now offered mean that many people are able to pick the exact label that matches their experience of gender, rather than feeling forced into a box which doesn't fit them. It may well also give many people a sense of greater validity, and encourage policy-makers, schools, workplaces and practitioners to move towards similar acceptance of multiple genders (and using the appropriate terminology). The impact of this could be huge given the current high rates of discrimination against trans and non-binary gender people, and the associated high rates of [mental health problems and suicide](#) in these groups. As somebody who identifies [outside the gender binary](#) myself, I can feel this shift. Of course I shouldn't need a big social networking service to tell me that I'm legitimate, but it does make a palpable difference to how I feel right now writing this post.

Increasing numbers of people find that the gender dichotomy doesn't capture their experience. For example, the US [Human Rights Campaign](#) reports that nearly 10% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans youth were ['gender expansive'](#). The recent UK [Youth Chances survey](#) found that 5% of those surveyed identified as something other than 'male' or 'female'. Of course these statistics are percentages of the young LGBT people who were willing and able to complete these surveys, not of the population as a whole, but they are certainly suggestive. And, of course, it is not clear how many others would identify in such ways if the wider cultural understanding shifted from gender dichotomy to gender diversity.

This brings us to the second reason why what Facebook did was important. The gender dichotomy is not just problematic for those it excludes, but also for those who it includes. This is something that I spent a whole chapter on in [Rewriting the Rules](#), but to attempt a brief summary, the idea of two, and only two, genders is associated with commonly held attitudes that those genders are 'opposite' to each other and that they involve having to behave in stereotypically 'feminine' and 'masculine' ways. When people hold rigidly to such attitudes and try to conform to limited ideals of masculinity and femininity they often struggle. For example, high rates of depression and body image problems in women, and high rates of criminal conviction and suicide in men, have all been linked to limiting and rigid ideas of what it means to be a woman or a man. Also, gender stereotypes limit people's opportunities in the world in [various material ways](#).

So, while many people will not feel any need to change their previous 'male' or 'female' status on Facebook, their increased knowledge of the existence of multiple categories and the very different model of gender that these suggest, may help them to hold onto their own gender more lightly and/or to be more flexible in their own ideas about what 'counts' as masculine or feminine, in ways that are helpful to them.

A few of the specific terms that Facebook has included are worth noting here before we go on. There are words that enable people to identify as neutral or without any gender, words that enable people to say that they combine aspects of masculinity and femininity, words that capture the idea that there are third, fourth or multiple genders, and words that enable people to say that their gender is something that has – or can – change over time (see the bottom of this post for the complete list). All of these expand our understandings of how gender can operate in interesting and useful ways.

One word that has caused particular debate following the change is 'cis' or 'cisgender'. This is the word for people who remain in the gender that they were assigned at birth (unlike trans people). A lot of people balked at the idea of having to change their status from simply 'male' or 'female' to something like 'cis man' or 'cis woman'. Of course nobody is forcing them to do this, and it is up to each individual to decide whether they want to make a change or not, but the following analogy might help those who are considering it. People who aren't gay, lesbian or bisexual generally wouldn't claim – any more – that they were just 'regular people' or had a 'normal sexuality'. Rather they would accept the label of 'heterosexual' or 'straight': we all have a sexuality and it is offensive to suggest that some sexualities are more normal or acceptable than others and therefore don't require labelling. Similarly, when it comes to gender status, it is useful if people who aren't trans use the term cis or cisgender in order to avoid the impression that being trans is somehow less acceptable or normal. Of course much of the time gender status (whether you are trans or cis) just isn't relevant, and most people would refer to themselves simply as a woman, a man, or a person, regardless of whether they are cis, trans or otherwise.

Closing down

So what are the problems with Facebook's new ways of capturing gender? Several people have asked whether there is a cynical aspect to the change given that it may enable companies to better target their social media advertising. But are there also limitations and constraints in what it offers for our understanding of gender?

The first point to make is that the list is not exhaustive. For example it does not include the terms 'femme and butch' which are perhaps two of the most common words which LGBT+ people use to refer to their gender. Consider how it might feel if a major organisation finally made a change designed to encompass people like yourself, but then failed to include your own experience within that. Also, when you choose a custom gender, you no longer have the options of 'male' or 'female' available to you, so there is still perhaps the suggestion that people are either 'male', 'female' or a 'custom gender', rather than all of the genders being placed on an equal footing.

Additionally, in relation to this, the vast majority of the new terms developed in a white, US, context and therefore will not be applicable globally. Of course the change has only rolled out in the US so far, and I'm not sure what gender terms Facebook has previously had available in

South Asia, for example. However, even among those currently living in the multicultural US, there are many people who will understand and experience their genders in ways which are not captured on the list. For example, as I understand it, no list of gender terms (separate from sexual identity terms) could ever completely capture Thai identities which often combine elements of gender and sexual identity in one word. There is one word on the list which refers to an indigenous North American gender identity (two spirit). However, there is a risk that this implies that there is one unified indigenous American understanding of gender rather than capturing the diversity of understandings which are actually present across indigenous American communities.

The suggestion of an open box for people to write in whatever gender term they use themselves would be one solution to such issues. However a list of categories probably lends itself more easily to data analysis. This could potentially be useful if Facebook were able to release figures of the numbers of people who are identifying in each way for the reasons of visibility and inclusion mentioned previously.

Finally, having any kind of gender option, by its very existence, implies that gender is relevant. Indeed, it implies that it is perhaps the most important feature of your identity given that it is the first thing that comes up on Facebook's 'basic information'.

Some people have argued that it would be better to have no box for gender rather than just expanding the list of possible genders. As mentioned before, a person's gender status (whether they are cis, trans or otherwise) is rarely relevant, and – for important reasons – most people generally do not choose to reveal their gender status unless directly relevant (for certain medical procedures, for example). Similarly, although we are used to being asked our gender on all kinds of surveys and documentation, it is actually very rarely relevant. Research has found that being asked our gender primes us to behave, and even think, in more gender stereotypical ways which can limit us, and the opportunities that are available to us. Perhaps having no gender box at all would be a more radical step in questioning how we currently understand – and prioritise – gender.

Conclusions

In conclusion I welcome the change that Facebook has made, not least because it opens up the possibility for exactly the kinds of conversations that I'm referring to here. I hope that it will encourage people to keep reflecting on their own understandings of gender in ways that are helpful to themselves and to those around them.

Read more

My book with Alex Iantaffi, [How to Understand Your Gender](#) introduces the basics of gender and helps you reflect on your own gender identity, expression, and experience. You can also find our zine [here](#).

Paris Lees's reflections on the Facebook shift are [here](#).

A DIVA article that I wrote on non-binary gender more broadly is [here](#).

Trans

2017 Review: The Transgender Moral Panic

December 2017

Today there's a piece by me on the trans moral panic of 2017 in [The Conversation](#). You can read that article [here](#), as well as an interview with me on the same topic in [The Independent](#) [here](#). I've also included a longer version of the same argument, with more detail and links, below...

Three years ago 2014 was hailed 'the transgender tipping point'. The American Psychiatric Association had just changed their category of 'Gender Identity Disorder' to 'Gender Dysphoria' removing much of the stigma of mental illness which had been attached to being trans. Trans actors finally played trans characters in popular shows like [Transparent](#) and [Orange is the New Black](#), moving away from old tragic/evil stereotypes. Laverne Cox made the cover of Time Magazine and Janet Mock's memoir [Redefining Realness](#) became a *New York Times* bestseller. The first trans pride march in Europe took place. Two major non-binary websites appeared, recognising the many trans people who don't experience themselves as men or women. The Facebook 'gender revolution' offered over fifty possible gender identity categories, as well as a gender neutral 'they' pronoun option. Trans was becoming more visible and better understood.

If 2014 was the year of the transgender tipping point, then 2017 was surely the year of the transgender moral panic. Earlier this year each month brought a new story: we had two BBC documentaries, Trump's attempted ban on trans people in the military, moves towards gender neutral school uniforms, bathroom bills in the US, Piers Morgan's repeated dismissal of non-binary gender, and many more. Trans communities had only just dealt with the impact of one report when the next one hit.

However the last few months of the year made the rest of 2017 feel relatively spacious. There were trans-related headlines virtually every day, and even several days when one paper published two or three separate articles on the topic. The reports also became increasingly negative.

One reason for this media onslaught is the coming revision of the Gender Recognition Act. Currently trans people who want to be legally recognised in their gender have to pay to submit paperwork – including a medical diagnosis – to a committee who make that decision. The proposed changes – in line with several other countries – would allow people to self-determine their gender, de-medicalising the process, and hopefully making it possible for non-binary people as well as for men and women.

As a trans person myself I've noticed the impact of this tsunami of negative press on my own mental health, so I'm deeply concerned about the toll it's taken on younger trans folk who already have alarmingly high levels of distress and suicidal thoughts. This moral panic will likely bolster existing high levels of trans-related bullying, which eight out of ten of young trans people experience, with one in ten receiving death threats. I also fear a background of heightened cultural transphobia as article after article across broadsheets and tabloids alike give the sense that there are sensible reasons to be concerned about trans people.

Is this a moral panic?

There are many reasons to label this current wave of trans-negative media a moral panic: a process where social concern is aroused over an issue by mass media and others. These include:

- The scattergun nature of the content. There's no one coherent narrative here which could be sensibly discussed, but rather multiple concerns which become unhelpfully intertwined, such as the treatment of trans and gender-questioning kids, trans people as perpetrators – rather than victims – of violence, the changing nature of gendered language, access to rape and domestic violence services, and whether boys should be allowed to wear clothing currently associated with girls. When you trace back the history of the stories, several turn out to be years old rather than current 'news', or based on wilful misinterpretation of what somebody has said.
- The contradictory nature of the concerns. Trans people are currently being blamed both for dismantling the current gender system and for reinforcing it. Trans-related media calls for both the relaxing and tightening of gender roles for children. Trans women's status as women is questioned due to their biology in some pieces and their socialisation in others.
- The misinformation within the reporting. One of the most concerning features of the media onslaught is the staggering lack of fact-checking that's going on. For example, many pundits – who should know better – expressed anxiety around young people being given hormones and surgeries when even a cursory online search would inform them this never happens on the NHS. The most adolescents are given are blockers to pause puberty until they reach the age of consent, and even this is relatively rare and only done after full consideration by a multidisciplinary team. Similarly the ludicrously unsubstantiated claim that a large proportion of convicted sex offenders are trans was gleefully reported with zero critical evaluation, as are amplified statistics about people regretting surgeries.
- The similarity of the current panic to past panics. Several people have pointed out how similar this wave of reporting is to the media treatment of gay men back in the 1980s during the AIDS epidemic and the introduction of Section 28 – which banned teaching about sexual diversity in schools. Gay men then, like trans people now, were branded as paedophiles, and any mention of homosexuality was regarded as having the potential to turn children gay, just as there is now a concern that young people will be 'turned trans' by 'social contagion' if they learn about gender diversity.

- The lack of positive news stories or inclusion of trans experts. There are so many positive trans-related stories we could be hearing about, and so many wise, knowledgeable, and engaging trans experts we could be hearing from, so why this huge skew to the negative and the focus on celebrities with no expertise or experience around trans issues?

Why the moral panic?

I suspect, as with anything, there are multiple complex reasons behind this moral panic. Certainly the current uncomfortable alliance between some men's rights activists, some feminists, some religious spokespeople, and various left and right wing campaigners and journalists, suggests a plethora of motivations which could usefully be explored. For now I'll focus on one reason which may underlie much of what's going on.

This reason occurred to me when comparing reporting around trans and intersex issues. We hear a huge amount about the former and relatively little about the latter, despite the similar numbers of people in each group. If a major concern about trans is really that children might be subject to non-consensual irreversible surgeries, then why are the same commentators not making serious noise about the continued medical treatment of intersex children? Many intersex people are operated on as babies in ways that are medically unnecessary and frequently lead to adverse effects such as the impairment of sexual sensation in later life, not to mention the potential impact of such early trauma which is often kept a secret from the person concerned.

One reason that springs to my mind for the silence around intersex surgeries, and the deafening roar around trans surgeries, is that the concern is not about physical interventions, nor is it about irreversibility, nor is it about capacity to consent. It's about normativity. Genital surgeries take intersex babies closer to our current gender norm of two and only two genders which remain fixed throughout life, whereas surgeries on trans people potentially take them away from it.

One key outcome of the moral panic is that it helpfully distracts our attention from this current gender system which we're all implicated in, and which is bad for everybody whether trans or cisgender, whether intersex or not, and whether woman, man, or non-binary.

We don't need to look far for evidence of this: it's been all around us all year as well. The BBC documentary *No More Boys and Girls* demonstrated the distressing impact of rigid binary gender roles on kids. Viewers saw how seven-year-old girls virtually all aspired to grow up to be nothing but 'pretty'. Boys lacked the capacity to express – or even find words for – emotions other than anger. All the kids agreed that boys were obviously 'better' than girls. When I tweeted about this show, many respondents accused it of 'social engineering' or 'child abuse' in endeavouring to shift such gender stereotypes. But how are those phrases any less applicable to the current situation of rigidly enforced gender roles?

Earlier this year Robert Webb's memoir [How Not to be a Boy](#) helpfully drew attention to the troubling impact of norms of masculinity on the wellbeing of boys and men, a group with a [frighteningly high suicide rate](#). The current gender system can also be implicated in [continued pay inequalities between men and women](#). The acceptance of toxic gender roles and a ['boys will be boys' mentality](#) are a huge part of the [cultural normalising of sexual harassment and violence](#) which the recent [#metoo campaign](#) so helpfully highlighted.

Shifting the conversation

The conversation I believe we need to be having about gender is one which encourages everyone – young people included – to critically engage with current cultural stereotypes and media representations. This involves [opening up our understanding of gender diversity rather than closing it down](#).

I'm in agreement with those who argue against the replacement of one rigid gender system with another which is equally rigid: for example one in which we assume that any kid who doesn't conform to gender stereotypes must be a trans man or woman and must therefore follow one of only two very specific pathways of hormones and surgeries. However it cannot be emphasised enough that this is [not what any gender-affirmative practitioners, activists, or educators I'm aware of are trying to do](#). Rather we're endeavouring to open up understandings so that everybody can find more comfortable, consensual ways to be in relation to gender.

We want girls and boys to be free to express their genders however best fits them, without bullying or coercion, and for that to be able change over time – as it inevitably does for all of us. We want the [third or so of people who experience themselves as to some extent between or beyond the gender binary](#) to be able to identify and express that in whatever way feels right. And we want those people – trans and cisgender – for whom some form of social or physical gender-related change will vastly improve their physical and/or mental health to be able to follow whichever pathway suits them in well-informed, well-supported, and consensual ways.

Let's make 2018 a year when, instead of attacking trans and non-binary people, we listen to what they have to teach us: about the way gender works in our culture; about the diversity of possible identities, expressions and experiences; and about how shifting rigid social scripts and policies can improve things for everybody. Let's make it a year when we return to [celebrating trans voices](#) – as we began to do in 2014 – instead of dismissing them: I've listed just some of the amazing people, groups, and projects we could be celebrating and learning from in below.

All the ideas in this article are explored, in more depth, in my book with [Alex Iantaffi](#): [How to Understand Your Gender](#) (a book aimed at everybody). If you're a practitioner of any kind, you might find my Gender, Sexual and Relationship Diversity BACP resource helpful as an overview of how gender works, and how to work with gender (and other) diverse people: [GSRD resource](#)

Find out more...

For guidance and support about covering trans in the media, check out: [Trans Media Watch](#), [All About Trans](#)

[Jessica Kingsley](#) have been publishing a range of helpful and important books on gender diversity, and continue to do so. Check these out [here](#).

There have been many other excellent publications, performances, and events on this topic in the last year or so. Here are just a few of my favourites.

- [Trans Like Me – CN Lester](#)
- [Before \(I\) You Step Outside. \(Love\) \(Me\) – Travis Alabanza](#)
- [Trans Britain – Christine Burns edited collection](#)
- [Brown, trans, queer, Muslim and proud – Sabah Choudrey](#)
- [Trans: A Memoir – Juliet Jacques](#)
- [Man Alive – Thomas Page McBee](#)
- [Transpose](#) (ongoing event)
- [Trans Pride](#)
- [My Generation films](#)
- [I am They film – Fox Fisher and Owl](#)

For more information check out these websites:

- [Gendered Intelligence](#)
- [Gender construction kit](#)
- [Tranz wiki](#)
- [Beyond the Binary](#)
- [Non-Binary Inclusion Project](#)

If you want to improve things for trans people in your workplace, then this is an excellent book:

- [Transgender Employees in the Workplace – Jennie Kermode](#)

Trans: Adventurers Across Time and Space

November 2018

This is a piece I wrote for the [Gendered Intelligence](#) conference and to celebrate [Trans Awareness Week](#).

Introduction

This past year it was confirmed beyond all doubt that Dr Who is trans as Jodie Whittaker began playing their latest incarnation. During the same year we've been in the midst of an unprecedented [moral panic](#) where trans people have been treated much like the mutant characters in the X-men, echoing similar treatment of gay people in earlier decades.

Here I want to play with the idea that trans people can usefully be regarded as time travellers and shapeshifters – or shifters of space. Given these impressive superpowers it's sad indeed that we tend to be regarded as threats to time and space, rather than as heroes who may be able to transform both time and space for everybody's benefit.

This is – for me – a reaction against the unremittingly [horrible onslaught](#) against trans people that we're going through. It's an onslaught that I feel the visceral impact of on a daily basis, like most trans people. It's one which has come close to home many times over, requiring levels of heroism from myself and the people I love which has left us exhausted and shredded, retraumatised and barely able to continue.

As we head towards [trans day of remembrance](#) on November 20th we remember the lives of those – mostly trans women of colour – which have been lost to anti-trans violence: a list which this year includes [Naomi Hersi](#) who was murdered in London last Spring. Those of us in the trans community are also painfully aware of the toll that the past year of virulently anti-trans media reporting has undoubtedly had on the already high levels of distress among our trans siblings; how many [young people in particular](#) have likely been pushed over the edge by the prevailing climate and the impact it has likely had on the reactions of their family and friends. And yet we continue to be used carelessly by journalists, politicians, researchers and others who feel entitled to take our stories, to make decisions which impact our lives for their own gain, and to get money and recognition on the back of our struggles.

In the face of all this violence and suffering I wanted to write something unapologetically celebratory about trans people. I know that the picture is more complex than this. I know that the world is a bleak place to be trans right now and getting bleaker all the time with the news from

the [US](#) and [Brazil](#). I know that trans people don't really have magical superpowers (don't we?) But humour me: we all need a bit of gender euphoria right now.

Trans Time Travellers

Two excellent colleagues of mine, activist-academics [Kat Gupta](#) and [Ruth Pearce](#) have been exploring the concept of trans time in their work. They point out that the way trans people are treated often denies us vital experiences of time that other people can easily access and take for granted. For example, the way that the media often continue to misgender trans people when reporting about us can be seen as refusing us the possibility of a future in our gender. At the same time, popular trans narratives may mean that we feel we have to erase our pasts to be granted rights and recognition.

There is what [CN Lester](#) calls 'cultural amnesia' around trans past, where anything trans related is always reported as new and therefore shocking and sensational, even when it has happened many times before: like a trans man being pregnant, or recognition of genders beyond the man/woman binary for example. The strong trans movement going back decades which Christine Burns documented in [Trans Britain](#) is written out of history as trans is presented as a new and fashionable threat to young people.

Policies and practices often expect trans people to be clairvoyant: promising to remain a certain way forever if we are to access services or obtain a gender recognition certificate, for example. Finally, the lack of sufficient services for trans people means that those seeking physical transition often feel like their life is delayed – or on hold – while they wait for treatment.

Dr Who: Quiet, I'm trying to think. It's difficult. I'm not yet who I am. Brain and body still rebooting, reformatting. Right now, I'm a stranger to myself. There's echoes of who I was, and a sort of call towards who I am, and I have to hold my nerve and trust all these new instincts. Shape myself towards them. I'll be fine, in the end. Hopefully.

But Ruth and Kat suggest that trans people respond to such challenges in skilful and smart ways, finding many ways to travel, trick, and transcend time. For example, trans folks often experience non-linear life-courses which include disruption, disjuncture, and discontinuity of time. We might go through more than one puberty, with the second adolescence occurring later in life, which we experience in diverse, creative ways. Many trans people also look younger than we are. Some talk of our age in terms of 'trans years': the number of years since we came out or transitioned. So trans people of the same chronological age who came out at different ages are likely to have vastly different trans time experiences, which belie our apparently similar ages.

Like Dr Who many of us find ways to regenerate over time as we find our ways to bodies, identities and expressions which feel like a better fit.

Another common form of time travelling is that of revisiting past versions of ourselves. For example, in her anthem for trans and gender non-conforming people, **Black Tie**, **Grace Petrie** sings to the younger version of herself, letting her know that she will find her way to a version of herself that fits. At the same time there's a sense of a future version of Grace holding out hope that we'll get through the current tough trans times.

*I'm in black tie tonight
Get a postcard to my
Year 11 self in her year 11 hell
Saying everything's gonna be alright
No you won't grow out of it you will find the clothes that fit*

*And the images that fucked ya
Were a patriarchal structure
And you never will surrender
To a narrow view of gender
And I swear there'll come a day
When you won't worry what they say
On the labels, on the doors
You will figure out what's yours
Grace Petrie, Black Tie*

My own experience of trans time is of returning to sides of myself that I lost – or disowned – along the way because they were deemed inappropriate or unacceptable on a body like mine. Each shift and change becomes a way to reclaim part of me that was left behind, leaving me with a sense of being many different selves, ages, and stages all at once.

Trans Shape Shifters and Space Shifters

This brings us on to being a trans shape-shifter or space-shifter.

Again, most trans people have pretty negative experiences of space. We're **deeply unsafe** in many spaces, risking discrimination, ridicule, and even violent attack if our transness is read off us. At the same time we're called **snowflakes** and dismissed if we point this out or try to fight for spaces to be safer for us to occupy along with everyone else.

Cruelly, despite our own deeply **unsafe experiences of public spaces** – and **domestic spaces** – the only images we tend to see of ourselves in the media are of being a danger to other people's safety. It is a deep irony to see the battle being fought over our assumed threat in public toilets, when most of us have experienced bullying, attacks, and violence in such toilets. We all know about the strong **'trans bladder'** that we develop to avoid using restrooms when we're out and about, or at school or work. We do a violence to our own bodies because such spaces are so unsafe to us.

Many of us, particularly **non-binary trans people**, also have the disorienting experience of moving through space and being read differently at different times: but in ways that rarely mirror the ways we experience ourselves, even when we've repeatedly told people what that is. The affirming experience most people take for granted of having themselves correctly reflected in the important spaces they occupy day-to-day is unavailable to many of us.

So, as with time-travelling, we find ways to shapeshift in order to survive dangerous spaces, as well as ways of shifting space itself to turn it into a better fit for us, despite all the resistance to us doing this.

Like Mystique in the Xmen many of us learn to use our shapeshifting powers to present in ways that enable us to navigate the spaces of our lives. Perhaps on the street we learn to present as more feminine when we might be perceived as a threat to others, but more masculine when we might be at risk of harassment. Maybe we learn in which spaces it is safe to foreground our transness, and which we need to background it or pass as cis. As **H Howitt** points out, we may well learn, for example, that the only way to access vital gender services is to foreground certain versions of transness, and the only way to access services for our disabilities or physical/mental health conditions is to deny or downplay our transness. It is another cruelty then that these vital survival strategies are turned against us in accusations of inauthenticity and deception.

Like Magneto in the Xmen we also find ways of shifting the space around us to make it safer for ourselves and other trans people. For example during this moral panic trans people have found creative and innovative ways of making the online and offline spaces where we support each other safe-enough to occupy in spite of the frequent attacks and trolling we receive there. We may use certain platforms rather than others, curate our friend-lists, employ transphobe blockers on Twitter, or – as **@1queer1** does – use algorithms to fill transphobic hashtags with cute animal pics or similar. We organise events of all kinds where we can support each other and share our experiences, or just know that we'll be mirrored accurately by the people around us for once. Some of us take it a step further to make our whole lives more like these spaces.

In shifting space we often create something that's better for everyone. For example the practices developed by **Open Barbers** to develop a hairdressers that is safer for trans people are ones that would be useful everywhere: not gendering customers or haircuts, creating a space that is also available for the community to use in other ways, and putting accessibility and

consent at the heart of the project with diverse staff, sliding scale payment, options not to talk or look in the mirror, and more.

Conclusions

Travis Alabanza's beautiful chap book *Before I Step Outside [You Love me]* brings together these themes of trans time and space. Travis speaks back to the older version of themselves that they were before they stepped outside into the risky space of the street and – in so doing – speaks to all trans people – particularly femmes and trans people of colour – who have to face this fear and uncertainty every time they step outside. Through their work they offer themselves – and the reader – the love that can give them the strength to step outside and to feel as though they matter.

Trans people are repeatedly presented as threats to time and space. In relation to time, we're accused of taking the world back to older versions of gender that threaten equality while simultaneously being accused of taking the world forward towards new versions of gender that will hurt the next generation. We're perceived as threats to spaces such as public toilets, refuges, prisons, and schools. We're mutants who threaten others through gender contagion and supervillains who hold ridiculous amounts power in some mysterious trans cabal.

But maybe we shouldn't reject this perceived power. Travis suggests that rather than being pitiable people who rely on others' benevolent generosity, trans people should be seen as a gift to those around us. We invite our friends and family into new ways of thinking about themselves, their genders, and their relationships, which can ultimately be just as liberating for them as it is for us. Imagine if families could celebrate finding out that one of their kids was trans instead of being horrified or sad.

How to Understand Your Gender with Alex Iantaffi was our attempt to write the book we wished we'd had when we were young. In a way it's a love letter to our former selves and also an attempt to contribute to changing the space of gender for the benefit of everybody. Nobody is served by the current rigid gender system: not men, not women, not non-binary people, not trans people or cis people. All of us suffer from it.

The normative check-box life which is set out for people from the moment of the first scan or gender 'reveal' party hurts all of us, and will inevitably be painfully disrupted at some point because it's an impossible task to follow it perfectly. Trans people remind us not to make any assumptions about how a person's future will unfold, and to prioritise shifting spaces to enable each person to find their own ways rather than imposing any ideals or assumptions upon them.

Trans and sex

July 2020

I recently took part in an Instagram Q&A for [Sh! women's sex store](#) all about trans and sex. I thought I'd share my responses here. You can watch the live stream [here](#).

You have written three books relating to non-binary and trans issues – *Gender: A Graphic Guide*, *Life Isn't Binary* and *How to Understand Your Gender*. Could you give us an idea on how you got into writing about sex, relationships and gender?

Sex, relationships and gender have always felt important to me personally and politically. I grew up really buying the cultural norm that a romantic relationship was where I would find love, happiness, and belonging, and the related ideas that – as a woman – that would be with a man, and would involve having only certain kinds of sex.

Over the course of my life I've come to see all these interrelated cultural norms as damaging for those who are excluded from them, and also for those who are included in them.

The norm the romantic love is all important keeps many people in damaging relationships, makes others feel like a failure for not managing such relationships, and takes our attention from other forms of love that it is vital to cultivate (self-love, friendship love, solidarity with our fellow humans, and love of the planet, to name a few).

The norm that we should have particularly forms of (hetero) sex in our relationships exclude most people including ace people, LGBT+ people, kinky people, and non-monogamous people. It often leads to people severing their sexual desires and fantasies from the sex they have with other people. And it means that people feel a failure when they can't sustain erotic attraction through a long-term relationship – even though this is extremely common.

When it comes to gender, the man/woman binary hurts all of those whose experiences don't completely fit the binary, over a third of people according to one study. Also, the cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity – and their mutual attraction – are bad for most men and women too. For example, norms of men being providers, not seeking help, and not showing emotions relate to men's mental health problems, as do norms of women prioritising other people, and focusing on appearance and desirability.

What does it mean for a person to be trans?

Being trans means that you no longer experience yourself as the gender that people assumed you were when you were born: when the doctor said 'it's a boy/girl', for example. Anybody who has such an experience is 'trans enough'!

Being trans doesn't have to be associated with going through particular 'transitions' like changing name and pronouns, having surgical interventions, or taking hormones. However, many trans people do find some or all of those things to be affirming of their gender and/or alleviating of 'dysphoria', or painful feelings about their body/identity. It's important to remember though, that many cis people go through transitions with names, hormones, surgeries, etc. over their lifetimes too.

How about gender nonconforming, genderqueer, and non-binary people?

Mostly these words are used pretty interchangeably for all folks whose experience falls outside of the current cultural gender binary, in other words anybody who doesn't experience themselves as male or female.

It's important to remember, however, that many cultures around the world don't have binary models of gender, and that the binary model of 'two opposite genders' is pretty new in western cultures also. In places and times where there have been diverse gender options, or where gender hasn't been such an important category of human experience, very different possibilities have been available.

How do people realise they're trans, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, or non-binary?

Experiences vary. Many people have a sense of their assumed gender not fitting from a very young age, but for others it's a deepening understanding over time, or even quite a sudden realisation in later life. As well as not being binary, gender is fluid: which means that most peoples' experiences and expressions of gender change over time. Think about how you might express your gender as a kid, teen, adult, and older person, and how others might respond to you, for example.

For many people, having some kind of cultural language and media representation is vital in recognising their transness, as the recent documentary [Disclosure](#) highlighted. The increasing visibility of non-binary people has helped many people to recognise that spaces between or beyond man and woman are a better fit for them.

Generally people's mental health improves a lot if they are able to find a gender expression and identity which feels congruent to them, especially if that is mirrored and supported by those around them.

If I want to know someone's gender identity, but I don't want to be offensive. Is there a polite way to ask?

The important question is really why you want to know. If it's just your curiosity then best not to ask! If there's some reason why it is definitely relevant then it's worth asking yourself whether you ask this of all people, or just this person. Remember that you can't tell by looking at somebody what gender they identify with or what pronouns they use.

It's great practice if everyone can start giving their pronouns when they introduce themselves, or on email signatures etc. This makes it easier for all of us to do that. Saying 'I'm Nancy and I use she/her pronouns, how would you like me to refer to you?' is a good opener with anybody where you might need to refer to them beyond a short encounter.

Someone I'm talking to just misgendered another person while referring to them. How do I correct them, and how should they respond?

Best practice here is to be matter of fact and kind. We all mess up on this occasionally. 'Oh actually Ki uses they pronouns,' would be a great way to put it, and then a response like, 'I'm sorry, so Ki was telling me that they have a great recipe for brownies...' Just apologise and move on.

Many people experience shame and fear about 'getting it wrong' in areas of oppression they aren't personally familiar with. If that's the case for you then I'd suggest putting some time into this area. Engaging with media and social media by trans people can help the terminology to come more naturally, as well as helping you get a sense of key issues, and the diversity of trans experience.

Sitting kindly with your uncomfortable feelings rather than avoiding them or reacting defensively is a great approach. Practise using unfamiliar pronouns, for example by talking aloud about people who use them, or using gender neutral pronouns to refer to animals. Check out trans organisations like **Trans Media Watch**, **All About Trans**, or **Gendered Intelligence** to find out what kinds of support you might usefully give in this area.

Why does society give people who don't follow gender norms such a hard time?

There are probably many reasons for this, but one of the big ones – in my view – is that people know, deep down, the injustice and violence which flow from a structurally transphobic and

patriarchal society. Facing up to that truth – and all the damage that has been done – is so painful that it is easy for many to engage in a form of cultural gaslighting in this area. This involves minimisation, denial, victim blame, and defensiveness.

In the area of gender, we see this in the ways in which the behaviours of women survivors of sexual assault and harrasment are scrutinised, as if somehow they might be responsible for what happened to them. Also the impact of such experiences on them is downplayed, while the impact of being named as a perpetrator is seen as potentially ‘ruining someone’s life/career’. We also see this cultural gaslighting in the way trans people are represented as perpetrators of violence when they are actually way overrepresented as victims of violence (particularly trans women of colour).

In this time of #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the trans moral panic it’s vital to draw the links between these movements, for example, how the criminal justice system is violent towards survivors, trans people, and black people. It’s important to engage in collective struggle, and to reveal the cultural gaslighting which follows whenever we draw attention to structural oppression of any kinds.

Do you have any advice for communication around sex with a trans partner?

Yes! The advice for good sex with a trans partner is actually identical to the advice for good sex with anybody. The problem here is that most sex advice is so poor that it suggests things that only work well for a very narrow group of cisgender people who have certain kinds of bodies and enjoy very specific kinds of sex.

As Justin Hancock and I say in our [book](#) and [podcast](#), good sex involves assuming nothing about the person – and body – in front of us. We need to [be present](#) to that particular person and body, learning what they need in order to be comfortable and consenting, what lights them up, what kind of touch they do and don’t enjoy, what kinds of experiences they do and don’t want during sex, what these experiences mean to them.

In a way sex with a trans person – like sex with a disabled person – could be seen as an opportunity to get way better at sex with all people, because we should never assume how somebody’s genitals work – for example – or that their body will be comfortable in a certain position, or enjoy certain kinds of stimulation. All sex should be an ongoing conversation between people – verbally and/or non-verbally.

In addition to our work, Juno Roche’s book [Queer Sex](#) is great on highlighting the diversity of forms of sex trans people – just like cis people – can have (and not have).

How can sex educators be more inclusive with their language with regards to trans people?

Again making no assumptions and talking about what's relevant. It's generally good practice to avoid making sweeping statements about 'women' and 'men' anyway. If you're advising people on how to engage with parts of the body then talking about 'people with penises' or 'people with vulvas', for example, is better language than gendering those bodies.

However, I would go a stage further to question whether much of the advice about how to stimulate penises or vulvas is that helpful. It centres the genitals in ways that don't work for many people (whose main eroticism is located in other parts of their minds and brains, and/or who aren't into genital stimulation); it suggests an anatomical binary rather than the spectrum that there actually is around genital structures; and it suggests that similar things work for all penises, or all vulvas, when actually there's massive diversity in how people with these anatomies like to be touched.

How does taking hormones affect sexuality?

There definitely can be impacts, but 'biopsychosocial' is a useful word here. It's hard, for example, to determine how much of an increase in sex drive after taking testosterone is due to the direct impact of the hormone, or expectations about what that impact will be, or feeling liberated to finally be on a transmasculine journey, or feeling more comfortable in your body, or being read more accurately in the wider world and not experiencing so much everyday misgendering.

Many people take hormones – or have experiences that alter their hormones – at some point in their lives, including adolescence, birth control, menopause, HRT, some cancer treatments, engaging in some sports, etc. As sexuality – like gender – is fluid – some people experience big shifts in their sex drive, the kinds of people they find attractive, or their desires and fantasies. Others experience few changes. And all of that is okay.

With the government proposing even harsher, transphobic policies around bathrooms etc. and the coverage that JK Rowling's transphobic comments are receiving in the media, how can we best support the trans community right now?

I've been writing about the current trans moral panic since 2017 and it truly has been horrendous for trans people. It is infuriating and exhausting to get to a point, now, where it seems that the whole consultation – and the frenzy it whipped up – was pointless, because the GRA will not be changed, and in fact other trans rights may also be rolled back.

JK Rowling's comments hit some of the most vulnerable members of our community with the highest levels of mental health struggles – young people. It is particularly painful given how

many young trans and queer people grew up seeing some kind of mirror of their experiences in the Harry Potter books and films: the idea of those who are different being special rather than unacceptable, and the strong stance in the series that those who are 'half-blood' should not be discriminated against, speaking to the experience of those who have moved away from cultural ideals of purity – like conforming to a fixed gender binary.

What people can do is to keep putting pressure on the government directly, and their MP, to follow the recommendations of the GRA consultation, and to stand against any rolling back of trans rights. They can also put pressure on the British media which has an appalling track record of demonising trans people. They can understand that trans people are being used as a handy scapegoat to take attention away from governmental mishandling of the C-19 pandemic, and to create divisions within feminism, LGBT+ movements, and the left, which take us away from the kind of collective solidarity which is so needed around interlocking axes of structural oppression.

Could you recommend some good resources for trans people, or people thinking about their gender identity?

Yes! For young people we have Gendered Intelligence and Mermaids

Hopefully my book with Alex Iantaffi *How To Understand Your Gender* is a good starter for anybody and everybody. And *Gender: A Graphic Guide* is a comic book introduction to how gender works.

There are so many amazing trans authors in the UK currently writing on these issues. Some I particularly love right now include:

- Amrou Al-Kadhi
- Ben Vincent
- CN Lester
- Eris Young
- Juliet Jacques
- Juno Roche
- Kuchenga
- Ruth Pearce
- Sabah Choudrey
- Travis Alabanza
- Yvy deLuca

Trans sex

April 2021

My new book with Jules Scheele – [Sexuality: A Graphic Guide](#) – is out now, following up on our previous book [Gender: A Graphic Guide](#). So it seemed a good time to bring the two topics of sexuality and gender together in one place, and write up the workshop I did for Glasgow [LGBT Health & Wellbeing](#) a couple of years back on trans sex. Thanks so much to the participants in the workshop for agreeing that I could share some of their answers here.

This post is mostly aimed at trans people – and those who have sex with us – who want to think more about sex. Using both ‘trans’ and ‘sex’ in the broadest possible ways of course. For more of a basic overview about the topics of trans and sex for everyone, check out [this post](#) I wrote last year. Hopefully there’ll be something useful here for everyone – whatever your relationship to gender and sexuality – though.

This post is based around four questions which are useful for us all to reflect on. For each question I’ll give you the opportunity to make some notes of your own answers before reading other people’s responses, and my thoughts. The post ends with some further resources which can help you to tune into your erotic desires, and to communicate them to others.

Question 1: How do I feel when I’m most alive?

I borrowed this question from awesome mental-health activist [Sascha Altman DuBrul](#). I think it’s a perfect starting point for thinking about sex, just as much as it is mental health.

Generally when we think about sex – perhaps particularly as trans people – we make so many assumptions about what we should be doing, and how we should do it, that we lose track of what we’re doing it for. That is because of all the cultural baggage about what sex is, how it is gendered, and how bodies should work.

So let’s put all that aside for a moment and think about the feeling we might look for from sex – and from aspects of life beyond sex.

Consider the times in your life that you’ve felt most alive. These may not necessarily be sexual times. How did you feel at those times? For Sascha and myself, for example, we came up with answers like ‘I notice I feel keen to make eye contact with people’ and ‘I feel comfortable in my body’...

How do I feel when I’m most alive?

Here are some of the answers that came up in the trans sex workshop I ran, in response to this question:

- Expansive, taking up space.
- Bouncy, moving.
- Competent.
- A surge of energy.
- Creative, motivated.
- Relaxed.
- Trusting.
- Connected to everyone.
- Free.
- Spontaneous, like I want to laugh out loud.
- Like I'm uncovering the truth.

What would it be like for this feeling to be the starting point for thinking about what we want to do erotically? How might we invite this feeling into our sex lives, and everywhere else for that matter?

The problem with much sex advice is that it's not about inviting that kind of feeling at all. It's much more about how to do what wider culture defines as 'sex' in the most 'normal' way, and how to achieve a specific goal such as erection, penetration or orgasm. As [Juno Roche](#) points out, this approach can leave trans people feeling deficient, because it's based on a cisgender ideal of what sex is, and how bodies should operate. Also this approach doesn't actually work so well for many cis people either.

Starting with pursuing the kinds of sex – and other activities – which make us feel most alive is way more helpful. It helps us to tune into whether we even want sex at all. For many folks on the [ace spectrum](#), other activities bring this feeling way more than sex does. You don't have to have sex at all, unless it *does* bring that feeling for you or you want to do it for other reasons.

This question also helps us to tune into what kinds of sex we enjoy, instead of feeling we have to do certain things. It puts [solo sex](#) on a level with sex with other people, rather than thinking that sex with other people is somehow better.

It also helps sex to be more [consensual](#), because we get familiar with checking in with what we – and anybody else – actually wants, instead of doing what we think we – or they – *should* do.

As Black feminist [Audre Lorde](#) – and many who have [followed her](#) – have pointed out, this question of how we feel when we're most alive could be a useful starting point for much more in

life than just sex. If we took it seriously, we'd be inviting life in general to be pleasure-giving and consensual for all, and challenging the ways in which it isn't.

Question 2: What blocks me (in general / as a trans person) from being open with myself about my desires, and from tuning into what turns me on or gives me pleasure?

Sascha Altman DuBrul says that two things are vital when it comes to mental health: Cultivating the capacity to communicate well with ourselves, and with others. The same is very much true for sex, but this is an area where many people struggle hugely.

In the next two questions we'll explore what blocks us from being open with ourselves about our desires, attractions, turn-ons and turn-offs, and what blocks us from being open with other people about these same things.

Let's start with what makes it difficult to be open with ourselves...

What blocks me (in general / as a trans person) from being open with myself about my desires, and from tuning into what turns me on or gives me pleasure?

Here are some of the answers that came up in the trans sex workshop I ran, in response to this question:

- Body dysphoria.
- Peer pressure from others outside or inside the trans community.
- Internalised transphobia.
- Shame.
- Overthinking things.
- Wanting to be politically correct.
- Pain from physical conditions.
- Disability.
- Confusion.
- The way these things can change over time.
- Being monogamous.
- Other people's perception of gender.
- Lack of feeling.
- Worrying about a partners' pleasure.

For trans people in particular it can be hard to grapple with cultural ideals about what bodies 'should' look like and respond like, given that these are cisgender ideals. We can feel pressure to be 'normal', and fear that we might not be. On the flip side there can be a sense of pressure

to be 'trans enough' or 'queer enough' which can make us feel bad if we do want 'normal' sex, or if we have discomfort with our trans body. It's fine to enjoy what you enjoy, to have the body you have, and to feel how you feel about it. Whoever you are, you are trans enough.

It can be hard for us to accept dysphoria and to allow that we might want to avoid touching certain parts of our bodies, keep certain clothes on, etc. It can also be difficult – if we don't feel dysphoria – to allow ourselves to enjoy parts of our body which don't fit cultural assumptions about our current gender. It's fine to be anywhere on the spectrum from dysphoric to euphoric about any parts of your body, and for that to change over time, or not. It's fine to use your anatomy sexually in culturally expected ways, or in culturally unexpected ways, for your gender.

In order to access medical services, many trans people have had to distance themselves from the idea that their transness is in any way erotic for them. This can make it hard to really tune into what we enjoy, especially if it does involve eroticising our gender in some way. It's important to remember that many – if not most – cis people find it a turn-on to be desirably feminine and/or masculine, and to 'perform' their masculinity or femininity during sex. It's fine to be turned on by your transness, or femininity, or masculinity, or non-binary-ness. And it's also fine not to be.

We can feel pressure to be sexual in ways that map onto our current gender rather than our birth-assigned sex, in order to affirm our transness. It's fine for everyone – trans or cis – to enjoy things sexually which match the stereotypes of how their gender is sexual, and which don't. For example, whether you are a woman, a man, or a non-binary person, it is fine to be active or dominant, or passive or submissive, sexually – or both, or neither, or different things at different times.

Question 3: What blocks me (in general / as a trans person) from communicating my desires, turn-ons, and pleasures with others?

This isn't just an issue for trans people. Research on cis people has found that even those who have been having sex together for years know under two thirds of what each other enjoys sexually, and under a quarter of what they dislike. People are also unlikely to communicate openly about their turn-ons and turn-offs with people they are dating or hooking up with because there's so much stigma and fear about being 'dysfunctional' or 'abnormal' when it comes to sex.

However, there are reasons why communicating honestly about our desires and attractions can be particularly risky for trans people. Let's reflect on these here...

What blocks me (in general / as a trans person) from communicating my desires, turn-ons, and pleasures with others?

Here are some of the answers that came up in the trans sex workshop I ran, in response to this question:

- Fear of rejection.
- Worrying about losing a partner.
- A sense of scarcity which means you feel that you have to stay with a person if you've found someone who wants you, even if the sex/relationship isn't good.
- The struggle of finding people who aren't either transphobic or fetishising of trans people.
- Avoiding conflict.
- Fear of upsetting people.
- Not wanting to interrupt the flow of sex.
- Lack of confidence.
- Internalised transphobia.
- Other people not holding space for our needs, just going after what they want.
- The impact of hormones.
- Not having the vocabulary or language to communicate with.

The current cultural **moral panic** about trans people makes this such a troubled area. As the documentary, *Disclosure*, pointed out, trans people are demonised in relation to their sexuality. Trans women – in particular – are frequently depicted in the media as sexual predators, despite the fact that they are statistically far more likely to be the victim of sexual assault, and other violence, than they are the perpetrator. It's important to be very kind with yourself about the challenges of navigating your sexuality during this moral panic. It can help a lot to develop communities of support, if possible, and trusting relationships in which to be sexual.

Most trans people carry experiences of trauma which also tend to impact our sexual experience. If we have been painfully rejected, or assaulted, in the past, we may be very fearful of being open with partners in the present about our sexual needs and boundaries. Therapy with a **trans affirmative therapist**, and/or **queer peer support**, can help us to learn how to tune into our needs and wants, limits and boundaries, and to communicate these with others if we find this hard.

There can be big power imbalances in play with cisgender partners, which can also make it hard to communicate openly about sex, and about other vulnerable topics in our relationships. It's important to talk about these power imbalances as part of a **consent conversation**. Of course other aspects of our experience comes into play here too, so it's useful to consider how our transness or cisness intersects, for example, with our race, class, disability, age, HIV status, survivorship, immigration status, etc.

Communicating about sex can also be vulnerable when we're with trans partners given that both/all people are likely to carry trauma, and we might want to be particularly careful to affirm others, and be fearful of hurting them more. Partners – whether one-off or long term – should

want the sex we're having to feel as safe and free as possible. The resources at the end offer some suggestions for how to start having these kinds of conversations if you find it tough.

Hopefully these answers help you to see that you're not alone in finding this tough. Juno Roche's book, [Queer Sex](#), is a great resource outlining various ways in which trans people have found safe-enough and free-enough relationships and situations in which to enjoy their sexuality.

Question 4: Why is sex with trans people so awesome?

It's sad that when we think about trans sex, the things that most readily comes to mind are these blocks that we face to having good sex. It's certainly important to be mindful of how tough things are at the moment, and to affirm that the struggles we experience are very real and understandable, and not our fault. However, it's also possible to flip this and to ask what might be particularly great about trans sex, which everyone could learn from.

Most people who are not trans are actually having unsatisfactory, mediocre, or even unwanted or non-consensual sex. That's certainly the sense you get from the annual [NATSAL](#) survey which finds that at least half of those surveyed see themselves as having one or more sexual problems. This is because most people are trying to conform to a very limited idea of what sex is, what bodies should do, and how the different genders should be sexual, and failing at that.

So perhaps trans people might have something valuable to offer everyone when it comes to sex, given that we have stepped outside – to some extent – the rules and norms about bodies, sex, and gender. That's certainly a key theme in Juno's book, and it relates to [Travis Alabanza's](#) idea that trans people should be seen as a gift for the rest of the world, instead of a problem. So let's consider it...

Why is sex with trans people so awesome?

Here are some of the answers that came up in the trans sex workshop I ran, in response to this question:

- We think and talk a lot about gender, bodies, and sex.
- Communication skills.
- Expertise around consent.
- We are storehouses of knowledge around bodies, hormones, the impact of medical stuff, etc. (which actually impact all people, not just trans people).
- We've had to discover or redefine gender roles.
- We have less assumptions and expectations so can see the full, unique person in front of us.
- Opening up creativity and freedom.

- Humour and playfulness (which takes away ‘performance anxiety’).
- Acceptance of awkwardness and things not working as anticipated.
- We’re more up for the process of sex rather than aiming at a particular goal.
- Generosity.

When sex and relationships educator, Justin Hancock, and I wrote our book about sex – [Enjoy Sex \(How, When and IF You Want To\)](#) – we deliberately didn’t have any separate material about how to have sex with trans people, or as a trans person. This was because we figured that the way we’d want people to have trans sex is actually the way we’d want all people to have any sex. For example:

- Don’t make any assumptions about the body and desires in front of you, whether that is your own body and desires in solo sex, or somebody else’s in partnered sex. All our bodies and desires work differently, and change over time.
- Approach everyone – including yourself – with curiosity, openness, and ongoing consent check-ins.
- Don’t focus on genitals and orgasms. This body may experience different forms of pleasure, in different parts of the mind/body. Leave the genital sex/orgasm script behind and consider all the different things that could count as sex (mentally and/or physically) and explore which of these you might want to try.
- Drop the gendered script as well. There’s no reason you have to have particular sexual desires and behaviours just because you’re a woman, man, or non-binary person. Everyone has a complex, changing, relationship with their gender, body, and desires.

Resources

Specifically on trans sex, I’d recommend [Lucie Fielding’s book](#), [H Howitt’s videos](#), and [Quintimacy](#). Another recommendation is the [Gender Stories](#) podcast by Alex Iantaffi which focuses on trans issues. Alex and I wrote [How To Understand Your Gender](#) and [How to Understand Your Sexuality](#) together which might also be good places to explore this further. Gender GP also has an excellent series on [trans sex education](#). Scottish Trans and Waverley Care have recently brought out an awesome report on [trans sexual health](#).

On sex more generally, check out my [book](#) with Justin Hancock. We also have a zine – [Make Your Own Sex Manual](#) – which takes you through a number of activities to figure out what you do – and don’t – want, and how to communicate that with others. It can be a great idea to create your own living document about your sexuality which you can share with others to explore what you might do together. If you want to explore your sexual fantasies more, we also have a [zine on that](#). Also check out the [So Many Wings](#) podcast by Sascha Altman DuBrul (mentioned above), and his collaborator, genderqueer writer and artist, [Jacks McNamara](#). For more on consent, check out [Justin’s latest book](#), Love Uncommon’s resources on [how to develop self-consent](#), and my [Consent Checklist zine](#).

My queero: S. Bear Bergman

April 2018

Originally published at queerbible.com/queerbible/2018/2/16/bear-by-meg-john-barker

I was so grateful recently to be asked to write a piece for [The Queer Bible](#): a website that invites queer folks to write about the people who have inspired them. Check out these amazing pieces on [Laverne Cox by Paris Lees](#), [Kate Bornstein by Juno Dawson](#), [Lola Flash by Juno Roche](#), and [Karamo Brown by Timothy DuWhite](#), for example.

For me the choice of who to pick was an easy one. [S. Bear Bergman](#) is an inspiration to me as a gender warrior and as a writer, but more than either of those things, as a person who values – and embodies – kindness in their life and work.

[The Queer Bible](#) invited me to write a personal piece about what [Bear](#) means to me, so I wrote about kindness, and about writing and gender, and about how the relationship between writer and reader can be another kind of vital relationship which challenges conventional ways of understanding and valuing relationships (a theme that both [Bear](#) and I both write about).

On a grey London day in March 2014 I took my seat in a small theatre above a pub to see S. Bear Bergman talk. I wasn't familiar with Bear's work: a partner had invited me along. I was accepting every social invitation I received at the time because I'd just relocated to London and knew that I had to start the long, slow work of building up some kind of friendship network. I was coming out of several years of self-imposed isolation following a tough experience of media shaming and the collapse of relationships and community that followed. I'd just gone through yet another painful break-up. Things with my family were strained. I didn't have many close people at all.

Bear was reading from his new essay collection. Like all of his books this includes stories which are funny, thought-provoking, poignant, and frequently all three together. This time, following the birth of his son Stanley, the focus was on relationships with family of all kinds - biological and logical - including people - as he puts it - who share bonds of blood, of marriage, of wine, and of glitter.

Bear defines family relationships as the ones where he is 'seen as the person I am, and loved for it... valued for what I've done in the world as the person I am.' The book includes stories of how Bear has cultivated such relationships with members of his original family - some of whom initially struggled to embrace his queerness and transness, with members of his queer and Jewish communities, with the extended family of spunkles, sparkles, pups, fairy godmothers, etc. which were required to bring Stanley into the world, and with his glitter family ('shiny, unruly and hard to get rid of') of: *lovers, exes, people met at conference, friends-and-friends that we let stay in our homes or drive to the airport on someone else's say-so and discover that we really enjoy.*

I confess that I shed a good few tears listening to Bear speak. Looking at the signed copy of *Blood, Marriage, Wine and Glitter* that I bought at that event I see that he wrote in it 'love your family wherever you find them'. When I was asked to write about Bear for *Queer Bible* I assumed that I'd focus on how he's inspired me as a genderqueer trans-masculine person, as a writer, and as an advice-giver - probably the three key aspects of our lives that we share. But I actually think that the biggest thing Bear gave me was that hope that I would be able to find my own family - out of the tatters of existing relationships and out of more careful and considered attempts to cultivate new ones. That definition of a family relationship as one where you're truly seen and valued - rather than as ones born out of a sense of obligation or shame - has been a touchstone for me, as has the recognition that diverse kinds of relationships can be equally precious and meaningful.

In my own writing I've extended this diversity to include the relationship between writer and reader, pointing out that through this relationship we can evoke tears, fond feelings, orgasms, and more in people we've never met, who live on the other side of the world, or who've even been dead for years. Some of my most profound relationships are with people who don't even know of my existence. In Bear's case I've been lucky enough to work on a couple of projects with him - we collaborated on a chapter for Christina Richards's book *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, and he kindly wrote the forward to Alex Iantaffi and my book *How to Understand Your Gender*. I can trace connections between my glitter family and Bear's because I'm lucky enough to include some of the beloveds of Stanley's Fairy Godmother's partner in my own 'constellation of intimates'! But Bear and I don't know each other well. *Queer Bible* told me that they particularly liked essays from people who had personal relationships with the person they were writing about. I like the fact that what I'm writing here expands that idea of a personal relationship in a similar way to the way Bear expands the idea of family.

But let's talk about gender too. Checking out Bear's wikipedia page I discover that he's actually younger than me by three months: we were both 1974 babies. It's that fun thing that trans does to time. When I met Bear back in 2014 I was early in my own trans journey, as evidenced by the fact that he signed his book to my old name. Bear had already written three memoirs about his own shifts in gender identity and expression (the other two are *Butch is a Noun* and *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*). And this is what I really get from Bear's writing on gender: the sense that is absolutely okay for gender to be an ongoing unfolding journey. There's so much pressure on trans people to declare that they are one thing and have always been that thing, as well as on cis people to never deviate from the thing they were defined as when the doc pronounced on them. It's supremely helpful to have people writing openly about the complexities of navigating gender and the ways it intersects with all the other aspects of who we are (race, class, faith, sexuality, body type, etc. etc. etc.). Bear's strong, solid, steady descriptions of his experiences of gender remind me that wherever I'm at with it today, and yesterday, and tomorrow, it's all okay.

There is plenty of room for everyone's gender in the New Gendered Order. Mine, which is as messy as chocolate-chip cookies made by a pack of eight-year-olds, and yours, which may be a perfect soufflé.

Bear is also an ongoing inspiration to my writing. My journey of becoming a writer has been just as slow and messy and complicated as my journey of becoming my gender. In fact it's only in the last year that I've felt able to say, first and foremost, 'I'm a writer' without feeling the need to caveat it by explaining that I haven't always identified in that way, or that I'm not a 'proper writer', or that it's not what actually pays the bills (yet). It was a struggle to allow myself to write the kind of thing that I always longed to write (self-help), and it's been an even greater struggle to let myself diversify from that into the kind of comics, memoir essays, and fic/non-fic mash-ups that now call me.

In addition to his memoirs, Bear publishes two other main kinds of writing: his deeply kind and gentle advice column 'ask Bear', and his awesome feminist, racially diverse, LGBTQ-positive books for kids, which he publishes through his own micro-press Flamingo Rampant. He refuses to be constricted or defined by genre or pigeon-holing and that helps me to do the same.

Which leads me to my final point of inspiration. When you write about sex, as both Bear and I do, it's easy to keep it safe by only writing about it in a distanced way. This can be particularly tempting for queers who are well used to being undermined, or having rights denied us, on the basis of any hint of actual sex. But Bear's books have always included his erotic stories woven in with all the other ones. Give the intro dialogue to *Gender Outlaws* between him and Kate Bornstein a read if you want hot! As Bear himself puts it: *If you find it jarring to read sexually explicit work in this and other books of mine right alongside tender, meditative paeans to making or parenting my small son, I would encourage you to ask yourself: why?*

He goes on to emphasise the dangers of silencing sexual desires and of the history we have of erasing important parts of ourselves in order to be accepted. Perhaps I will have the nerve to publish that erotic fic/memoir/self-help mash-up book after all...

Meanwhile I will thank Bear once more for his continued wit, warmth, and wisdom which have inspired me and supported me in countless ways. As he says, 'individual homages seem like a pleasant way to spend some time and word count'. I entirely agree. And I'd be happy to drive him to the airport anytime.

Non-Binary

Words Matter: Non-Binary Gender

January 2021

Thanks so much to Reina Shimizu who interviewed me for [Vogue Japan this month](#) in their 'words matter' section on non-binary gender. Here's the English language version of the interview:

What is the definition of non-binary (gender)?

Non-binary gender means identifying as a gender other than man or woman. It includes people who experience their gender as somewhere between male and female, people who don't feel that they have a gender, people who are both masculine and feminine, and people who have a gender beyond the binary of man or woman.

Why do we need this term?

We need a concept for non-binary gender because so many people experience their gender in ways outside the man/woman binary. One recent study found that over a third of people experience themselves as – to some extent – 'the other gender, neither gender, or both genders'.

Around the world there are many cultures who don't have the binary man/woman gender system, including places where there are three or five genders, and where gender is tied to other aspects of a person such as sexuality or spirituality, so it doesn't make sense to ask somebody's gender separate to that. To be culturally inclusive we need to include non-binary genders, which is why many countries now include a third gender option on passports.

Why are we getting more and more interested in the term now?

In countries that do have a binary man/woman gender system, more and more people are identifying as non-binary. The internet has helped people to form communities around non-binary gender and to begin to fight for rights and recognition.

At the same time, people have recognised that the binary gender system isn't working well for anybody. Many men and women suffer because of rigid ideas of what it means to be a 'real man' or 'real woman'. For example, high suicide rates in men have been linked to cultural norms that men shouldn't display emotion or seek support. High rates of depression in women have

been linked to norms that women's lives should be based around pleasing others. The binary gender system isn't working well for anybody.

What are the difficulties of lives of non-binary people in today's society? Is the situation improving?

In cultures that still have binary gender systems there is a big problem with invisibility. Non-binary people are misgendered many times a day, by people calling them 'Sir' or 'Madam', for example, or referring to them with 'he' or 'she' pronouns. They may also struggle to find a bathroom to use which isn't gendered, and to be treated as a non-binary person in their workplace or educational institution, or by health professionals.

We know that being treated by the world in ways that conflict with your way of experiencing yourself takes a big toll on mental health. Many non-binary people also experience transphobic discrimination, bullying, and even violence.

What do we need to change? How can we achieve the change?

We need a cultural shift, in binary gender countries, to recognise non-binary genders as legitimate. That means changing policies to include non-binary gender legally, ensuring the availability of gender-neutral bathrooms and changing areas, and giving the option of 'they' pronouns and the title 'Mx' or their equivalent.

An important step in achieving this change is cultural awareness, which is slowly happening through non-binary actors playing non-binary characters on TV shows like *Billions* and *Grey's Anatomy*, and non-binary creators like CN Lester, Jeffrey Marsh, Sam Smith, and Travis Alabanza producing awesome media content.

What are the challenges in order that non-binary should be widely accepted?

It is challenging to get many people – in binary gender cultures – to acknowledge the existence of non-binary gender. This is despite the fact that, even in such cultures, the idea of two 'opposite' genders is actually a relative recent thing. Previously women were seen as an inferior version of men. Also, historically there have always been people who didn't fit into the binary gender system.

According to the GIDS website, “There are many ways in which people identify or present in a non-binary manner, and perhaps we all do in some respects.” Could you elaborate on this, using some examples?

Most people experience and express themselves in some ways that don't conform to the gender they're generally seen as being. Most men have some stereotypically feminine characteristics (such as sensitivity, nurturing behaviours, or caring about appearance), and most women have some stereotypically masculine characteristics (such as competitiveness, toughness, or being focused on their career). Many women wear 'masculine' clothes, and perform 'masculine' roles, although there is generally more stigma about men doing the 'feminine' equivalent.

While only a few percent of people – so far – identify as non-binary in binary cultures, far more experience and express themselves in somewhat non-binary ways. Of course it is fine for them to do so and identify as a man, as a woman, and/or as a non-binary person.

Will there be any benefits for society and all people if non-binary is widely accepted? What are they?

Huge benefits because it will open up the possibility for everyone to loosen their grip on rigid gender binaries. Boys in binary cultures grow up finding it hard to express or name emotions other than anger. This means they are far more likely to act out their distress in aggressive ways when they're older, potentially hurting others and themselves, and being convicted of crimes. Girls in binary cultures grow up very focused on appearance and relationships, and believing boys are 'better' than them. This means they can find it hard to tune into their own needs and boundaries, and express these, which takes a major toll on their mental and physical health.

There may be people who cannot easily understand or accept the concept of non-binary as they are socially conditioned to see all people either men or women. Is there any effective way to make non-binary more accessible for those people?

Luckily we have many wonderful non-binary creators who write about being non-binary, put out non-binary theatre and art, and portray non-binary people on TV and in movies. Follow some of them on social media, and check out [their content](#).

Also it is a great idea to reflect on your own experience of gender, to recognise how it isn't completely binary. Check out my books to help with this: [How to Understand Your Gender](#), and [Gender: A Graphic Guide](#).

It's helpful to remind those who struggle with the concept of non-binary that the way we understand gender is always changing. Even the cultural roles of men and women will have changed a great deal in their lifetime, and certainly in the last century or two, and that is a great thing.

However, there will sadly be some people who are impossible to convince. If you're non-binary yourself, you may want to get support from trans and non-binary organisations, or groups online, as it can be very hard if friends and family dismiss your identity.

Talking Non-Binary Gender

February 2017

There's a long piece over on [KQED](#) today about [non-binary gender](#), which includes a quote from me. Here's the full interview that I did with them if you'd like to read more...

What are the findings of the little research there is on the topic of non-binary gender identities?

So far we know that around [1 in 250 people identify as non-binary](#) when given a choice between male, female and another option, but in terms of experience [over a third of people](#) say that they are to some extent the 'other' gender, 'both genders' and/or 'neither gender'. Globally many cultures recognise more than two genders.

Those who identify as non-binary, and/or express themselves in ways that challenge binary gender, face [similarly high levels of mental health difficulties to trans people generally](#) due to the extent of transphobia in our culture. [40% of non-binary people have attempted suicide](#) at some point, a third have experienced physical assault, and a sixth sexual assault based on their gender.

Like [bisexual people](#), non-binary people often face erasure or invisibility in cultures that insist that gender and sexuality are binary (you are either male or female, straight or gay). Everyday misgendering and other microaggressions take a toll on non-binary people, as does discrimination from both straight and gay communities, and difficulties being recognised in their gender in the workplace, [by medical professionals](#), and legally.

You mention your upcoming book, which will deal with this topic in-depth. Can you give us a little preview of what you discuss in relation to non-binary gender?

Absolutely. The book that Alex Iantaffi and I have written on gender focuses on the fact that all of us have a unique experience of gender. Whether we are binary or non-binary, trans or cisgender, we all have to navigate rigid social ideals about appropriate gender roles and behaviour, and these also have a negative impact on all of us. The book aims to help everyone to reflect on their own gender journey and how gender intersects with other aspects of their identities and backgrounds such as race, class, disability, age, etc.

So while the book contains lots of information about non-binary gender, including the words that people are currently using to describe themselves, and different options in terms of appearance and expression, it never suggests that those are unique to non-binary people. We all have a gender and we all express it and identify it in various ways.

Do you have any historical take on the genesis of non-binary gender as an accepted idea in the west? That seems to be mid to late 2000s, according to therapists, academics, etc.

Yes I agree. I think the internet has a lot to do with the fact that non-binary gender, and asexuality as well, have been recently far more recognised and understood. People have been more able to find other people with similar experiences, and it's also been easier to raise awareness in the wider world via social media. This has a knock-on effect that a lot of people who experienced themselves in non-binary ways in the past are now able to be more open about that, and identify in that way, because people have more awareness of non-binary experience, pronouns, etc.

Anything to say about non-binary gender in other cultures?

The important point is that there have always been non-binary genders across history and across the world. In the western world our understanding of gender used to be that there was one gender, with women just being an inferior version of men. The current idea of two 'opposite' genders is a relatively new one. And there are cultures around the world which have three or five genders, or where gender just isn't considered to be as important an aspect of being a human as it is in western culture.

Is there any indication that there's a biological basis for those who feel neither male nor female?

Actually for all of us gender is complexly biopsychosocial. That means that it's really impossible to completely tease apart which elements of our gender experience come from our genetic makeup, which from our life experiences, and which from the wider social forces around us.

All those things interact in complex ways. From research with intersex people we know that there is actually diversity (rather than a binary) across all aspects of sex: our chromosomal make-up, our levels of circulating hormones, the structures of our brains, and the ways our bodies express sexual characteristics. [Anne Fausto-Sterling's work](#) on this is very useful. From recent neuroscience we know that our bodies and brains are massively influenced by what we learn growing up, and the social messages around us. So even when something is 'biological' that doesn't necessarily mean we were 'born that way'. [Cordelia Fine's work](#) on this is very helpful.

It's best to view gender and sexuality (whether binary or non-binary) as a complex biopsychosocial thing. It's also useful to question why we're often so keen to find its roots in innate biological factors. Perhaps if we recognised that somebody's gender or sexuality shouldn't make a difference to the way we treat them, then we'd be less concerned with questions of causation.

Have you treated non-binary patients? If so, what are the biggest issues they face?

I certainly have worked with several non-binary clients – all adults in my case. I also looked at a survey done by the [Beyond the Binary](#) website on non-binary experience. The main issues faced by NB people are:

- Inability to access education, work, housing, or healthcare without misgendering oneself
- Inability to have gender recorded correctly on medical, legal, educational, and other records
- Hospitals, prisons, care-homes and other institutions failing to recognise gender accurately
- Lack of accessible public facilities (toilets, changing rooms, sports facilities, etc.)
- Facing constant misgendering by others in relation to pronouns, titles, and everyday terms
- Everyday harassment, discrimination and hate-crime, leading to feeling very unsafe
- Inability to access many trans healthcare services due to lack of non-binary provision
- Feeling forced to present as male/female to be accepted, access work and make a living
- Intense school and/or workplace bullying due to gender expression
- Being labelled as 'difficult', 'dangerous' or 'unprofessional' when being open about gender, and the negative impact of this on employment, salary, childcare and/or accessing services
- Being forbidden in school or work settings from presenting as non-binary -no legal recourse

Anything else you want to say on this topic?

As well as the [book with Alex](#), I have a recent book out which covers a lot of these ideas about gender – and sexuality – in [comic form](#).

My clinical colleagues Christina Richards, Walter Bouman and I are also just finishing [a book which covers everything about non-binary gender](#) for psychologists, medics, surgeons, etc. We hope to ensure that non-binary people have as easy an experience with gender services in the future as trans men and women do. [This paper](#) gives an overview of some of that material.

Non-Binary Feminism: The personal is still political

November 2015

This post overviews tensions between trans-exclusionary radical feminists and trans feminists, and discusses how non-binary gender can be regarded as feminist, exploring what non-binary feminism might look like personally and politically. For more details, check out my books [How To Understand Your Gender](#) and [Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders](#).

Content Note: There's mention in this article of the heated debates around feminism and trans, of societal gender inequalities, and of gender-related bullying in schools. I'm using non-binary and genderqueer interchangeably here to mean genders outside of the male/female binary.

Tensions between trans and feminism rarely seem to be out of the news these days. The so-called TERF wars (where TERF stands for trans-exclusionary radical feminist) smolder on and on, flaring up again every so often, as with the latest spate of articles about [Germaine Greer's inflammatory comments about trans women](#). The TERF wars fit well into the tired old media trope of feminist infighting, where conflict between feminists tends to be reported far more than, for example, areas of agreement between feminists, [key developments in feminist thought](#), or [campaigns about continued societal gender inequality](#). Unfortunately this kind of reporting seems to be a rather good way of discrediting feminism and keeping people's eye off the ball of social injustice more broadly.

Over the last couple of weeks attention has turned to non-binary trans with [Laurie Penny's article](#) on being a genderqueer feminist and [Suzanne Moore's response](#). This is interesting/challenging timing for me as I agreed to speak to my feminist reading group at work about non-binary gender this week. I had already been wondering what wider debates were likely to be swirling around us as we had our discussion, and how I could articulate my own thoughts clearly through all of that. I decided – as I often do – that blogging about it first might help me to figure out what I wanted to say.

What's at stake here?

Reading Laurie Penny and Suzanne Moore's articles helps to get to the heart of some of the deep feeling that's in play in these discussions. This can aid us in understanding why they become so fraught, and why there can be such a [temptation to polarise](#) into 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', 'them' and 'us' – mapping those onto other perceived divisions (e.g. older and younger, authentic and inauthentic, natural and unnatural, etc.)

As [I've said before](#), I think it's useful to recognise the ways in which these kinds of tensions echo and reverberate up and down our multiple levels of experience: in our wider culture, in our

communities and organisations, in our interpersonal relationships, and in our internal conversations. I'm struck by the looming, potentially explosive, cloud of emotion which seemed to be present as I read the social media responses to these two articles, and which has also been there each time I've been at a feminist event where these kinds of tensions have played out in person. I feel the same roiling, sparking thunderhead settling over one-on-one conversations when these issues come up. Also – like Laurie and Suzanne I suspect – I feel it inside myself as I try to make sense of my own experience of these matters, and to **articulate it**. This fact was underlined for me by the fact that I just spent 30 minutes staring at my computer screen wondering how to begin the next paragraph!

I think that one of the main things at stake here is the concern that non-binary people – particularly those who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) – are somehow betraying women and/or feminism in their rejection of the category of woman. Laurie explicitly addresses this in their own retaining of the political identity of woman, in addition to her identity as genderqueer (whilst acknowledging that any genderqueer folks who don't do this are equally legitimate). Jack Monroe – who also recently came out as non-binary – reports that they have been called a **'traitor to women'**. Suzanne hints at the sense of betrayal with her concerns over young 'sexual tourists' adopting 'pick and mix' and 'hall of mirrors' identities. She questions why AFAB genderqueer people could not use identity terms that retain their womanhood (e.g. butch dyke) or recognise that no women feel 'at one' with all of what being a woman entails (physically and socially).

In conversations with feminist friends I've certainly heard such anxieties expressed: The sense that we should be about expanding the category of womanhood so that anything is possible within it, rather than grasping for a different gender identity if we find that we don't feel stereotypically feminine. Perhaps there's a worry that by embracing genderqueer or non-binary labels we're actually supporting gender stereotypes; reinforcing the idea that the only way to be a woman is to conform to rigid social norms. Or maybe there's a concern that by moving away from the category of woman we're somehow suggesting that those who remain within that category are fine with all the restrictions that go along with it. One colleague of mine suggested that some feminists may see gender transitions as individual answers to social problems, leaving them thinking 'you've solved it for yourself, but what about the rest of us?'

It's so tempting when faced with these kinds of arguments to go on the defensive. My own sense is that most – if not all – of us have arrived at the position we're in regarding our gender by a painful and difficult path. In these debates there's often the suggestion that our hard-fought battles were actually much easier and less painful than those of others. Feminists like Suzanne suggest that young queers have it so much better than feminists and queers did in the past – which certainly involves some ignorance of the evidence on **non-binary trans experience**. But some feminists may well be responding – themselves – to an implicit or explicit suggestion that they are taking an easy path by remaining within – rather than challenging – the gender binary with their own identity and expression. For others, a great pain of regret accompanies seeing the options that are – very gradually – becoming available which simply weren't there when they

were going through their own hardest times. Another colleague of mine pointed out that people can feel very unsettled when somebody shifts who they had previously seen as mirroring their own – stigmatised – identity: the representation of themselves that they had seen in that other person has changed, and that can leave them questioning themselves in uncomfortable ways. In fact there are probably many many different reasons why any individual would find this stuff to be threatening and painful.

It seems to me that it's vital in these kinds of discussions to **listen to one another**, and to try to understand the underlying – extremely personal – pain, fear, and rage that is in play. It's also important to recognise how extremely hard it is to do this when you are feeling that both your deeply-held political views, and your very sense of self, are under attack. There's something key – for me – about exploring how we can learn to hold all our various experiences and expressions of gender without that sense of being under threat because somebody else is doing it differently. This is not some call to all 'play nice' and ignore the very real and raw anxiety and loss that these issues can bring up. Rather it's a call to keep doing the messy, difficult, painful work of being with each other in all of our difference: seeing each other as whole human beings despite our desire to objectify and dismiss those we feel hurt by into 'them' as opposed to 'us' (and yes I think the same applies to other areas of gender tension as much as it does to this one).

So – in the hope of such a conversation – here's my take on the political and the personal of being non-binary and feminist.

The political: Non-binary as feminist

Starting with the political it seems to me that (most) feminism is about challenging the notion that men and women are meaningful categories of difference which legitimise women being regarded as inferior to men and therefore treated less well (being paid less, being more subject to sexual violence, being valued differently, etc. on account of their gender). **Intersectional feminism** – rooted in the work of black feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins – challenges us to think critically about any categories into which people can be divided which justify one group being treated less well than another. **Intersectional feminism** is about recognising that we need to challenge all axes of oppression – such as gender, race, class, and disability – rather than just one of them because they cannot be disentangled in terms of their impact on people. If we remove one whilst leaving the others intact then – **as Flavia Dzodan so nicely put it** – that is not feminism, it is bullshit!

There are two aspects to the underlying societal assumption that feminism is trying to challenge: **the bit about the problem with treating one group of people as inferior, and the bit about dividing people into two categories in the first place**. It seems to me that it is part of the same battle to point out and try to change gender oppression, and to point out and try to change the assumption that gender is binary.

Gender isn't binary. On any possible biological, psychological or social measure of sex and/or gender it isn't possible to divide people simply into male or female. Also there have been many times and places in which there has been only one gender, or more than two genders. In western culture at the moment – and for some time now – there has been a lot of pressure to binarise and to keep people in fixed categories of men and women with restrictive norms about what counts within each category. This has an adverse impact on pretty much everybody concerned: on those who struggle to fit those norms, and on those who manage it but then experience immense pressure to remain within the tight confines it imposes. So I think it is important politically to expand what is possible within each of these categories, to question the importance that is placed upon these particular categories, and to point out the arbitrariness of the categories themselves.

The political – and feminist – aspect of being non-binary for me is about continually pointing out that gender isn't binary: that man and woman aren't the only categories that people can fit within. That a continuum is a better way of understanding it, and that even that is an over-simplification because we would need multiple continua to conceptualise all of what is understood by 'masculinity' or 'femininity'. Like Sandra Bem I'm hopeful that the proliferation of gender categories might be a way to break the rigid gender norms that currently hurt so many people in so many different ways.

I also feel that non-binary thinking has a great deal to offer beyond gender – for example when we apply it to our tendencies to divide people in categories along other axes of oppression, and when we think about our wider tendencies towards polarised thinking.

The personal: Also political

As the feminist slogan puts it: the personal is political. It isn't possible to separate out those elements. I feel strongly politically about these matters because of my personal experiences, and it's important for me to 'walk the walk' personally because of my political convictions.

What I know personally is that, for me, the gender binary never felt right. The age at which it started to be imposed rigidly was the age in which I started to learn that I was not okay. I learnt that I couldn't be part of the group where people were into the same things as me. I learnt that even if I could've made a case for joining that group I would have failed (not fitting the ideals of masculinity anywhere near well enough to transgress in that way). And I learnt that trying to join the only available group to me would equally be a fairly constant experience of failure and ridicule until I mastered the performance that would continue to feel restrictive and damaging for decades until I allowed myself to let it go.

I also know that this non-binary place does feel right for me. It's hard – if not impossible – to articulate the sense of okay-ness that has come with adopting a name that feels like a better fit and a pronoun that I feel comfortable with. Each step towards the physical changes I'm making

has come with a wave of kindness towards myself that I simply haven't experienced in my life before. There's a sense of giving something back to a person who had so much taken away. There's a gradual lifting of the self-criticism and self-policing that has dominated so much of my life. It's not everyone's path, and – of course – even other non-binary people will have very different paths to mine, but it feels like a path I need to allow myself to follow.

It seems important to me now to work towards a world in which no-one has to go through that kind of bruising and battering gender struggle as a kid, or at any age: Where it's fine to be whoever you are, to enjoy whatever you enjoy, and to hang out with whoever you hang out with regardless of whether that conforms to the gender stereotypes or opposes them or a bit of both; where it's fine to be someone who was assigned female at birth but is a boy, or someone who was assigned as male at birth but is a girl, and where it is equally fine for anyone to occupy any of the positions between or beyond those binaries; where all of those things can be permanent, or temporary, or a bit of both, and not seen as any better or worse for it.

Two things particularly helped me to reach the point in my own life where I'm capable of understanding gender in this way, and of working – through my activism, writing and therapy – to change things. One of them was feminism, and the other one of them was non-binary gender.

Find out more:

These topics are covered in detail in my books [How To Understand Your Gender](#) and [Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders](#), and in this free resource on [Gender, Sexual and Relationship Diversity](#)

There are more blog posts by me on trans and non-binary issues here:

- [Non-binary gender Q&A](#)
 - [Non-binary genders talk](#)
 - [The transgender moral panic](#)
 - [Gender beyond the binary](#)
 - [Non-binary genders and sexualities](#)
 - [Will gay rights and feminist movements please return to your \(binary\) assumptions](#)
 - [The Facebook gender revolution](#)
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- Download our [non-binary gender factsheet](#).
 - Download [employer guidance around non-binary gender](#).

Other useful links:

- Support [Gendered Intelligence](#) in their [campaign against gender-related bullying](#).

- [Beyond the Binary \(online non-binary magazine\)](#)
- [Trans media watch guidelines on non-binary gender](#)
- [Everyday Feminism on Non-Binary](#)
- [CN Lester's blog](#)
- [A talk I did a couple of years back on youtube](#)
- [Jay Stewart's TED talk](#)
- [Julia Serano on the problems with much writing around these issues](#)

Coming out day: Non-binary gender Q&A

October 2015

Today is [international coming out day](#). I wasn't planning to write anything for the occasion because I'm in the extremely fortunate position of already being out about everything about myself that matters. It's a real privilege that I don't face any threats to my employment, relationships, or physical or mental well-being for being out about my sexuality, gender, relationships, and emotional struggles.

That hasn't always been the case for me, and it's also vital to remember that it very much isn't the case for everyone. Part of the reason that it's important that people are out about their experiences in these areas (and others) is that it helps to create the circumstances in which it is safer for other people to be open about all that they are too. Nobody should ever be pressured to be out when it doesn't feel safe enough for them.

However, I have noticed recently that – despite me being open about it – some people seem to struggle to remember, and to understand, my non-binary gender. So here's a Q&A to make it clearer.

Non-binary gender: What's that then?

Non-binary gender, or *genderqueer*, is a big umbrella term used to refer to people who don't experience themselves within the *gender binary*. In other words we don't feel that we really fit into either the 'man' or 'woman' categories.

Isn't that incredibly rare? Surely most people are either men or women

Not as rare as you might think. Although the idea of *identifying* as in some way non-binary is quite a new thing in western cultures – perhaps [around 0.4% of people](#) at the moment – an awful lot of people *experience* themselves in this way. [One study](#) found that over a third of people felt they were, to some extent, both genders, neither gender, or the 'other' gender. Recently in a [YouGov survey](#) 19% of people disagreed with the statement 'you are either a man or a woman', and a further 7% were not sure.

Is being non-binary a kind of trans?

Yep. Trans is an umbrella term referring to people who don't remain in the gender they were assigned at birth. Given that most people at birth are described as being a boy or a girl, non-binary people definitely count as trans. However **not all non-binary people see themselves as being trans**, perhaps because the word trans has mostly been associated – in the past – with transitioning to being a woman or a man, and/or with medical interventions which not all non-binary people have.

What about you?

I personally regard myself as trans. I'm not living in the gender I was assigned at birth; this has involved a transition for me; and – as an activist – I share a lot in common with the agendas of other trans activists (binary and non-binary).

Also it's worth pointing out here that even if somebody *does* identify themselves as a man or a woman, that doesn't mean that they believe that gender is binary (that only those two things are possible).

And what about medical interventions?

As **Laverne Cox nicely pointed out last year**, people get far too fixated on trans people's bodies and on surgeries and that can feel very intrusive and objectifying, so this generally isn't a cool question to ask people.

Non-binary people make a whole range of different decisions – at different times in their lives – about whether to make bodily shifts that reflect their gender experience, or not. For myself, after a lot of reflection, I am getting surgery to flatten my chest later this year. It feels important and very fortunate to me to have that option as it's having a big impact on how comfortable I feel in the world.

I'm also part of a few projects which are gathering information and expertise to hopefully make it easier for non-binary people to access these kinds of services in future.

And what about your name? I'm confused. Some of your books were published under 'Meg Barker' but now you often use 'Meg-John' and you sign your emails 'MJ'. What should I use?

I changed my name officially last year to Meg John Barker because the name John is very meaningful to me for lots of reasons, and I kept hold of the Meg because that also feels like me. I like using Meg-John (with or without the hyphen) because it includes names that are generally

seen as both feminine and masculine. I also like MJ for being completely neutral. I'm happy with other people using whichever of Meg-John or MJ feels best to them.

What if I get it wrong? Will you be really offended?

Not at all. It always takes some time to remember when somebody has made a change like this. It also took me a little time myself of hearing people use different versions of my name to figure out what worked best for me. As somebody who has significant cognitive difficulties in matching names to faces and in remembering how I know people out of context, I have a lot of sympathy with people struggling in this kind of area. It never bothers me if somebody has to keep correcting themselves for a while.

What does feel hard to me is if people don't bother at all even after I've told them a few times. That can begin to feel like maybe they're doing it to make a point, so it becomes harder to stay open and to keep gently reminding them.

And the pronoun thing? That I find really complicated.

As with names, non-binary people make a whole range of different decisions about which pronouns feel comfortable to them. Some use he or she, or alternate between the two, some choose alternative pronouns that have been developed, and some – like me – use they.

But isn't that grammatically incorrect?

Short answer: nope. There's a great youtube by a linguist explaining why not. We use the singular they all the time when we're not sure about the gender of a person. For example, when we're discussing *Bake Off* before we know who has won but we want to speculate about how they will feel or what their showstopper will look like.

Sometimes it can feel like people focus on issues of grammatical correctness when what they're really uncomfortable about is the idea of non-binary gender. It certainly becomes quite tiring having to answer this question over and over again!

It feels too difficult to shift to using such an unfamiliar pronoun for you. Do I have to?

Again different people feel differently about this so I can't speak for every non-binary person. Generally though it is respectful to use the pronoun that the person themselves uses. They pronouns feel a good fit for me. It feels really affirming to me when people use them. As with the name I don't mind at all people when people get it wrong and correct themselves. It does feel hard when people decide not to do it at all, or when they refuse to use 'they' for me in a certain context because they don't think that other people will like it.

If you're struggling with it I'd suggest practising more. I find it helps, for example, to use they pronouns for animals so that they become more familiar. Also make sure you use they pronouns when talking about the person when they aren't around so that you get more practised at referring to them in that way.

If you don't know somebody's pronoun it's fine to check it out with them. The same applies if there's other words you might need to shift in order to refer to them (e.g. like 'sibling' instead of 'brother/sister', or if they're at an event where people would tend to be welcomed with 'ladies and gentlemen' – 'friends and colleagues' is a good alternative).

Listen what I really don't get is why you can't be who you are and stay within the category of woman (or man). Shouldn't we be expanding what can count as a woman or man, rather than inventing new gender categories?

Absolutely I agree that it's a great idea to expand out what things can be regarded as masculine or feminine, and how people can be as a woman or as a man. Rigid categories are bad for everyone. I think it's fab that some people are remaining within those identities and expanding them, and that others are finding other ways to express and label their experience. Seeing gender as diverse and multifaceted, on a **number of dimensions**, feels like a great way forward to me.

So is non-binary just a political thing for you then?

Again all these things are different for different non-binary people (I really can't stress that enough!) For me the personal is definitely political. I think that it's really important that we stop assuming things about people, and restricting them so much, because of their gender. I think that pointing out how gender isn't a simple binary is one good way of challenging that. Partly for me it is about walking the walk of the gender ideas that I have.

At the same time my non-binary gender is also a lot about my own personal experience. When I was young I went to a school where all the people who had the same interests and tastes as me were boys, and where gender was so segregated that I wasn't able to hang out with them or to become friends with them. It was super painful to be able to see a place where I might belong, but not to be able to access it. It was also painful to learn that I had to 'do' a certain kind of femininity which didn't fit me at all in order to be accepted or loved. Forcing myself to do that felt unkind, objectifying of myself, even violent at times. But I still did it.

It's taken a very long time indeed to unlearn all the habits I learnt in order to fit in and to be approved of. Having done a lot of that work I was left with not feeling like I was a woman, but equally not feeling that I was a man. When I came across other non-binary people I experienced that sense of fit. It felt right to me. And it felt like an important kindness to myself to allow myself to be openly non-binary.

But aren't you a queer activist/writer person? Surely that's all about getting away from identities?

Yes it's true that [queer theory and queer activism aims to get away from identity politics](#) (fighting for our rights on the basis of identity). Fixed identity terms often fail to capture the fluidity, diversity, or complexity of experience. And identity politics is often about gaining rights for some groups at the expense of others: redrawing the line between who is culturally accepted and who is not.

My own aim would be for a world where all the diverse experiences of gender are all equally accepted and valued. Non-binary and genderqueer feel like good broad terms for expressing my *experience* of gender given that it feels like it is between and/or beyond what our culture generally assumes is meant by 'woman' or 'man'.

The psychologist Sandra Bem used to say that there were two ways out of the massive [gender inequality](#) we currently have in so many areas. One was dialling down the importance of gender – just treating people as people. The other was dialling it up to the point that we had thousands of different gender terms to capture the full range of gender experience. Her view was that the former approach didn't really work out, so we needed to shift to the latter. I think she may have had a point.

In so many ways it's important to move towards an [intersectional approach](#) where we understand every person as being at a unique intersection point of their gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, generation, geographical location, disability, etc. etc. etc. We need to see each person in all that complexity, and to develop a better understanding of how all these areas operate structurally in combination to create the view that some people are more valuable than others. Then we need to try to shift those structures so that is no longer the case.

Find out more

There's more on all of this in my book [How to Understand Your Gender](#).

Download our [non-binary gender factsheet!](#)

Here are links to:

- [Beyond the Binary](#) (online non-binary magazine)
- [Trans media watch guidelines on non-binary gender](#)
- [Everyday Feminism on Non-Binary](#)
- [CN Lester's blog](#)
- [A talk I did a couple of years back on youtube](#)
- [Jay Stewart's TED talk](#)

Sex and gender beyond the binary

August 2015

This week [Ladybeard magazine](#) published a piece that I wrote for them on thinking in non-binary ways about sex, sexuality and gender.

This seems particularly relevant this week given that the papers have been full of the [YouGov survey findings](#) that nearly half of 18-24 years-olds consider themselves as something other than straight or gay.

Here's the [Ladybeard article](#)...

Why are trans and bi generally so invisible in mainstream media, and so problematic when they are represented? One major reason is that they trouble the binary ways in which we are encouraged to see the world: people are male or female, straight or gay. They are born that way, and they stay that way. So we are told.

Of course bi and trans experiences differ greatly. However, research in these areas has highlighted the common ways in which these groups suffer in light of a mainstream binary perspective. There is the consistent media erasure of each experience, and the suspicion ('you must *really* be X', 'you can't *really* be Y'), and double discrimination from either side of the binary toward such groups that can mean they have no real sense of community.

Turning our attention to sex, two key binaries in play are sexuality and gender. These are inextricably linked: sexuality is defined as attraction to either the same, or the opposite, gender. Binary genders, binary sexualities. Man or woman, straight or gay.

Despite efforts to deny their existence, bisexual folk have long insisted on their experience of being attracted to 'both genders', or – more commonly now – 'more than one gender'. Back in the fifties, the Kinsey report suggested a spectrum of sexuality, rather than a binary, with at least as many people somewhere in the middle as at either extreme. More recently, researchers like Lisa Diamond have shown that gendered sexual attractions and identities are fluid and flexible, often changing over the course of a lifetime.

Turning to gender, while many people – cis and trans – certainly experience themselves within the binary (as men or women), increasing numbers of us identify as, in some way, non-binary: NB, enby, or genderqueer. The recent Facebook proliferation of gender terms and addition of the 'they' pronoun, shows heightened awareness of the fact that gender, like sexuality, isn't binary. Many experience it, too, as a spectrum, changing over time. One recent study found that

over a third of people felt in some way both genders, neither gender, or beyond the gender binary.

Putting this all together we can see that there is a swirling multitude of ever-changing sexualities and genders which makes a nonsense of the assumption that sex is all about attraction to people of the same, or opposite, gender. Several sexualities directly challenge this focus. For many bi-, pan-, omnisexual and queer people, gender of attraction is just one aspect of sexuality, and often not a particularly important one. Just think about the kinds of appearances you're attracted to, the types of people, and personalities. Consider the roles you enjoy taking sexually, and the particular activities, sensations, and fantasies that turn you on. Our sexualities are about so much more than gender: each of them is made up of a constellation of features unique to us, given our own specific bodies, experiences and stories.

There are other sex binaries that are also worth breaking down. Mainstream sex therapy has long rested on the assumption that people can be divided into functional and dysfunctional, normal and abnormal, when it comes to sex. But with half of all people reporting a sexual problem in the last national survey of sexual attitudes (NATSAL), how much are these divisions causing the very problems they seek to address? Our model of sex still rests on erect penises penetrating vaginas and coming to orgasm. If we could expand our erotic imaginations to include all the kinds of sex people actually enjoy (mutual masturbation, group sex, dry-humping, cybersex, solosex, fantasies, sensation play...) the functional/dysfunctional binary could disappear. The popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2011, and the like, make a mockery of attempts to delineate normal from abnormal sex. Despite this, kinky practices are still listed as 'paraphilias' in psychiatric manuals.

The increasingly vocal asexual (ace) communities are also helping to break down the asexual/sexual binary. People can be demisexual or grey-A, aromantic or queerplatonic – they can experience no attraction, specific attractions, or fluid attractions that vary across time. Instead of fixing on a certain type of sex considered 'normal', and trying to fit ourselves to that, perhaps we could all usefully embrace a model – alone and in our relationships – of diverse and fluid sexual desire.

Helen Bowes-Catton writes that bisexual people are tricksters. In occupying a place beyond the binary they reveal the instability of that binary, encouraging others to question static thinking about sexuality. Perhaps we could regard all sexuality and gender warriors in this way. It's certainly not easy to occupy the liminal spaces between and beyond the binaries that are laid out for us. But it is vital that some people do if we are to find our way towards greater acceptance of ourselves and others, and towards forms of sex that prioritise pleasure and connection over conforming to some arbitrary binary.

For more on this topic, check out my books *How to Understand Your Gender* and *The Psychology of Sex*.

Beyond the binary: Gender outside of the two-box world

September 2013

I wrote an article for [DIVA magazine](#) last month (the September 2013 issue) on [non-binary gender](#). DIVA kindly allowed me to reproduce the article here:

Last month, when I flew to the states, the flight attendants frequently referred to me as ‘Sir’ when they appeared behind me with the drinks trolley. Once I’d spoken they’d correct themselves, flustered, ‘I’m sorry Madam’. Neither word really feels like it refers to me.

Once out in America a waitress greeted me and my friends (a cis lass and a trans guy) as ‘ladies’: a term which none of us related to.

Later on it felt good to share stories about the confusion and discomfort we’d received from department store staff when shopping for clothes. The group I hung out with included transmasculine folk, butch women, and people who identified as non-binary.

This latter term is one which I increasingly relate to myself. So what is it like if neither of the accepted gender labels fit?

DIVA spoke to several non-binary people, as well as to professionals who work across the gender spectrum, to find out how it is to occupy a place outside the binary. The main message is that, like bisexual or gay people, non-binary people are ordinary folk who should be treated with the same respect as anybody, rather than as some kind of special case.

Non-binary identities

As with categories like lesbian or bisexual, non-binary covers a vast range of experiences, which may have little in common. Some people incorporate elements of masculinity and femininity (bigender). Others regard themselves as between genders, having a third gender, not having a gender at all, or shifting gender over time (gender fluid). Some recognise multiple genders (pangender) or explicitly want to challenge the binary (genderqueer or genderfuck). Of the people DIVA spoke to, one was androgynous, another genderqueer, and a third non-gendered.

Language is important here because so many of our words are gendered. Many non-binary people have embraced the – [perfectly grammatical](#) – pronoun they (rather than he/she), and some have developed alternative pronouns (like zie, per or hir). There is a useful video about this here (although it is important to remember that some prefer alternatives to ‘they’ for good reasons):

Some use different names in different contexts, or gender-neutral names. Some adopt the title Mx as opposed to Mr/Ms, and words like boi or grrrl are also popular. If you are unsure, the best thing is just to ask what a person's preference is.

Non-binary, intersex and trans

For many people non-binary gender is unrelated to their biological sex, whereas for some these aspects are related. One such person, Lola, said: "I want people to know that intersex people exist and that sex is actually not a binary either." As biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling puts it: "While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many bodies [...] that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females." Between 0.5 to 2% of people are intersex, but don't assume that all intersex people will see themselves as non-binary, or that all non-binary people are intersex.

Being non-binary is part of the wider trans umbrella. Therapist and academic Alex Iantaffi says that "around 10-15% of trans folks seem to identify outside of the gender binary. People with non-binary identities might seek some level of body modification, because this allows them to more fully express their gender identity, but they might also not seek any body modification at all".

Such modifications are possible these days as medics increasingly recognise genders beyond the binary. Christina Richards, who is a senior specialist psychology associate in two NHS gender identity clinics (GICs), says: "There is a common assumption that GICs only see people who wish to transition to male or female, however this is simply not true. At the two GICs I work for (and many other GICs) we see people from a whole spectrum of gender backgrounds with a wide variety of needs and wishes."

As with sexuality, which we know can be quite fluid over a lifetime, some non-binary people remain fixed in their gender while others shift. Researcher, Lisa Diamond, found that many lesbian or bisexual women changed their identity over time. Similarly, some folk identify as non-binary and later as binary (and vice versa). Christina Richards recommends that people are mindful of this when considering changes to their names or bodies. It is important to be respectful whether non-binary is a stable identity or part of a process.

While there is more awareness of non-binary these days it has always been around. Musician and activist CN Lester says 'people other than men or women are nothing new – there's so much out there, if you're willing to open your eyes to it.'

Being Non-binary

Just like being out as lesbian or bisexual, there are many benefits to being open about non-binary gender, including the sense of being true to your experience, the possibility of

meeting others and forming supportive communities, and the potential to be part of wider protests against gender inequalities and rigid ideas about gender.

However there are, of course, challenges. These are similar to those we face by being lesbian when it is regarded as normal to be straight or – perhaps even more similarly – bisexual when it is considered normal to be attracted to only one gender.

Christina Richards says non-binary people must “negotiate a complex path between an authentic sense of self outside of the gender binary and the pragmatic reality of the two gender system”. According to CN Lester this means there is “an enormous struggle simply to be recognised as ourselves – society is so invested in policing a strict gender binary, and the costs of going against that can be high”. Specific issues include “lack of legal recognition, discrimination in education, in the workplace, in social spaces, and problems with healthcare”.

Alex Iantaffi points out that, as for many LGBT&Q people, constant daily micro-aggressions really mount up, such as being misgendered, asked intrusive questions, and having to decide whether to come out multiple times. “The challenges range from toilet access to legal/medical forms to pronouns to other people invalidating identities.”

There are also severe aggressions against non-binary people. Many share the experience, particularly during childhood, of being ridiculed and attacked for not fitting the gender rules. Lola says “I strove for most of my life to be ‘normal’ and part of this included behaving like a binary person should stereotypically behave. I constantly failed at that and was consistently bullied.”

What can we all do?

Experiences of wider LGB&T communities are mixed. CN Lester says: “I’ve found some very supportive people – I’ve also been sexually harassed, insulted, excluded. I’ve had many lesbians tell me that I’m letting the side down, and that I’m ‘obviously’ a butch lesbian – I’ve had quite a few gay men try to treat me as a kind of erotic experiment.”

Lola reports that “being non-binary is difficult because people don’t take it seriously. You’re not a real trans person to a lot of people”. There can be tensions between non-binary and binary trans people, whilst others are welcoming of diversity while appreciating the differences.

It is helpful to use wording which demonstrate awareness. For example, if you’re putting on a women’s event or network you might adapt the wording from the excellent SM Dykes: “We welcome all people who live full time as women as well as genderqueer, non-binary, intersex and transmasculine people who feel that they have links to women’s communities.” It would be great to have explicitly trans and non-binary events too of course.

We might also consider ensuring there are non-gendered toilets available, supporting those who decide not to gender their kids, and helping with campaigns like Christie Elan-Cane's fight for non gender-specific "X" passports, as have been introduced in India and Australia.

Perhaps everyone can learn from non-binary folk that gender is more complex than box M or box F. As Lola points out, gender roles are "unrealistic things that no one can really keep up with... they're almost always about being skinny, able-bodied, white, relatively wealthy, etc..". Maybe we could agree with Alex Iantaffi that "humans are more creative than the boxes we'd like to give ourselves".

Some Non-Binary Dos and Don'ts

Do...

- Say "Hi, fancy some tea and cake?" (We're just ordinary people, remember).
- Make it regular practice to ask for pronouns, and do your best to remember.
- Read articles like this!

Don't...

- Say "What are you really?"
- "Check" by groping us.
- Refer to the gender somebody was assigned at birth as their identity (eg AFAB – assigned female at birth)
- Say "It's a phase" or "You'll feel differently when you transition".
- Assume that all non-binary people are young, or androgynous, or want body modifications, or don't want body modifications, or anything about all non-binary people, really.
- Beat yourself up if you mess up pronouns. We all do it, including non-binary people. Just correct it and move on.

Further reading

- The chapter on "further genders" in Christina Richards and Meg Barker's & Sexuality and gender for mental health professionals: A practical guide (Sage).
- nonbinary.org
- transawareness.org
- Posts on non-binary on boldlygo.co
- Q&As with non-binary people on cnlester.wordpress.com
- The campaigns on elancane.livejournal.com

Masculinity and Femininity

Gender in the workplace

October 2013

This week I was interviewed for a very interesting piece in *The Telegraph* about [gender in the workplace](#). I thought I'd add the whole interview that I did here because it got me thinking about these issues.

Is gender real or constructed?

Both! Like all aspects of experience gender is biopsychosocial: a long word which means that it is made up of biological, psychological and social strands all of which are woven together in complex ways.

For example, genetic information from our parents determines that we are born with certain genitals. The ideas which are present in our culture about what it means to have certain genitals have a big impact on how we are treated and the expectations that others have of us. That treatment means that we get positive or negative responses from others for certain behaviours, and this impacts on the connections that our brains make and the feelings that we have. All of this make us more or less likely to make certain choices in life, and those choices feed back on our brains and bodies, and on the wider society around us.

So our gender is shaped by the 'constructions' present in the world around us (about what it means to be masculine or feminine for example). At the same time we have a very real experience of our gender because it is laid down in our brains and bodies and psyches over years of life experience. That doesn't mean that gender isn't fluid or changeable however: things alter as we make choices in our lives, and the world around us also shifts over time in the way it views gender.

Why do we stereotype different gender roles?

I suspect that there are many reasons. There seems to be a human tendency to put people in boxes in order to create simple rules of how to operate. However, of course, in different times and places we emphasise different aspects of people and in different ways (e.g. gender, race, class, etc.). We have a long history of our society being set up in a certain way, which benefits those in positions of power, and many of the gender stereotypes help to perpetuate that system: for example men being seen as better at business, and women as better at nurturing roles which are less highly valued.

What are the key differences? Are men and women really that different?

The evidence is that there are relatively few gender differences which are consistent throughout the research. The differences between people of the same gender across cultures are far greater than the differences between people of different genders within the same culture. Also, it is very hard to know which of the differences that do seem to be present would still be there if people weren't treated radically differently on account of their gender from an early age.

What do we perceive to be the characteristics pertinent to men, and to women?

Generally, in our culture at the moment, we divide gender into two (men and women). This is not the case for all cultures, some of which have more recognition of the diversity within the genders and/or recognition of intersex people and other genders. In our culture at present men are perceived to be more rational, less emotional, physically stronger, more aggressive, more focused, and having more agency and responsibility. Women are perceived to be more emotional, more nurturing, more concerned about other people, and better at multitasking, but less able to take risks.

How does this prejudice translate in a workplace environment?

It can mean that certain jobs are seen as being more appropriate to men, or to women, and we know that such biases do impact on who is chosen for the job, even if interviewers are trying to treat all applicants equally and to judge them without taking account of gender.

Does society place more importance on having masculine behaviour in general? And in the office? If so, why?

Some of the stereotypes of masculinity are seen as being the things that are necessary to do well in the office – such as being unemotional, able to take risks, and focused on tasks. However, of course, many of the stereotypes associated with femininity are also valuable in managers and high up roles, for example multi-tasking and being good with people. Also there are many men who display more stereotypically feminine traits, and vice versa.

What issues, if any, arise from women adopting masculine personas in the office and vice versa?

Women are often placed in a double bind at work. If they adopt 'feminine' characteristics then these are undervalued culturally and they are given less well rewarded positions. However, if they adopt 'masculine' characteristics they are often seen as un-feminine and criticized for this (e.g. a man is seen as assertive while a woman is seen as domineering, a man is seen as rational while a woman is seen as cold, etc.)

How can we reach a point when both types of characteristics are viewed equally?

I think it's a matter of detaching the characteristics from gender as much as possible, and society learning to value all these characteristics more equally rather than rewarding some far more than others. This is not just important for gender (where nurturing jobs are valued less than technical ones, for example), it is also important in relation to class (where manual labour is valued less than office work, for example).

Becoming a woman: The gender theories of Simone de Beauvoir

March 2012

March 8th marks [International Women's Day](#). I would like to take the opportunity here to celebrate one of my own favourite feminists, [Simone de Beauvoir](#) (1908-1986). I will look back to the past to see if what she had to say about gender still holds today, and what her theories might mean for the kinds of futures that we want to inspire – for girls and for everyone.

One is not born, but rather one becomes, a woman.

Perhaps the most famous quote from de Beauvoir's writing on gender, [The Second Sex](#), is this one. Here she is arguing, from autobiographical experience and from the available evidence at the time, that the things associated with womanhood (such as being passive, concerned with appearance, childlike and in need of protection, and wanting to care for others) are imposed upon women by society rather than being innate characteristics they are born with.

Current understandings of gender view it – like so much of human behaviour – as a complex biopsychosocial interweaving rather than something that can be simplistically put down to 'nature' or 'nurture'. [Gender theory](#) alerts us to the diversity of possible gendered identities and roles available, whilst emphasising the limited patterns of masculinity and femininity which we are pushed to repeat and repeat until they feel 'natural'. [Biological findings on neuroplasticity](#) reveal that the likely underlying brain processes are neural pathways which are strengthened by such repetitions. So we could say that gendered identity is a process of narrowing down from the possibilities which are available at birth.

There are, of course, *some* biological limits on what is possible from the start, which differ from person to person, but de Beauvoir emphasises the social limits which constrain these. Her focus here is on freedom, the fact of humanity that her partner, [Jean-Paul Sartre](#), emphasised in his work. Sartre highlighted the importance in life of becoming aware of the meanings which are imposed upon us by others (societal assumptions about what people like us should be like, or family expectations about what we are going to do) and breaking free of these. De Beauvoir pointed out that such breaking through of 'the ceiling which is stretched over their heads' is easier for some than for others. Embracing one's freedom may be virtually impossible for those who are enslaved, and may be easier for some than others even in times and places where everyone is regarded as 'free'.

The lie to which the adolescent girl is condemned is that she must pretend to be an object, and a fascinating one, when she senses herself as an uncertain, dissociated being, well aware of her blemishes.

De Beauvoir argues that, at the stage in life when boys are encouraged to become 'little men' and to become independent and to 'dominate nature' with their bodies. Girls are taught, through playing with dolls, through being complimented and critiqued on their appearance, and through being warned about various dangers of life, to be passive, that their body is something to beautify, and that the world is something to be scared of.

Focusing on this aspect of 'being an object' in particular, we can see that women are still regarded very much in terms of their appearance, although these days they are encouraged to beautify themselves for their own pleasure and 'fun' rather than explicitly for the pleasure of others. However, it is often difficult to disentangle the pleasure derived from feeling one looks good from the pleasure derived because someone else thinks you look good. Appearance is a key focus of women's magazines, and the ideals of feminine beauty are so narrow that many are excluded from it, and even minor deviations from it are remarkable (as in the recent [Guardian article](#) about models who 'break the mould').

The other focus in women's magazines, and in movies and TV shows aimed at women, are relationships with men. De Beauvoir comments that 'a great many adolescent girls when asked about their plans for the future, reply . . . "I want to get married". But no young man considers marriage as his fundamental project'. Miranda on *Sex and The City* echoed this concern several decades later when she stormed out of a café complaining that all that her (very successful) friends talked about was men, but it is revealed later in the episode that she was only upset because she wasn't really over her ex-boyfriend.

The less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as a subject.

De Beauvoir argues that, in such ways, women are encouraged into 'being for others' rather than 'being for themselves'. Many women struggle to tune into their own desires and needs due to seeing pleasure as something to be gained from pleasing others, and put themselves through unhappiness or pain feeling that this is what they are supposed to do.

Of course we can question the benefits of both the 'for others' and 'for themselves' sides of the binary. It is problematic to feel that our only identity is in the role that we have in other people's lives (as many women find when they lose such roles), and troubling to have to constantly monitor their body and self to ensure that they are pleasing to others. On the other hand, as de Beauvoir pointed out, there are benefits to such a position: not having to feel responsible for your actions because you don't believe that you have power to affect the world, and real pleasure when you are approved of or desired. Being 'for themselves' (as men are encouraged to be) involves the weight of responsibility which comes from being called upon to make autonomous choices and to be self-sufficient and protective of others, when we may well actually feel scared, incapable and vulnerable ourselves. Also, as de Beauvoir suggested, mutual relationships are very difficult indeed if one person needs to be constantly affirmed as a

beautiful object, or one person is constantly denying the other the freedom and responsibility that they have themselves.

De Beauvoir further (and perhaps controversially) highlights the role of women in limiting other women. She points out what a threat it can be for a mother to see a daughter breaking through and embracing their freedom and resisting the roles being thrust upon them in ways they were unable to do themselves. Perhaps we can relate this to the women-produced magazines that still welcome women in to a self-scrutinising, appearance and relationship obsessed world; as well as the tendency to point to the lack of freedom of women in 'other' places as a way of obscuring our own situation.

Inspiring futures

If people become their gender rather than being born into them, and if we regard freedom to become, without limitations, as a vital part of the picture, perhaps the important thing to do is open up possibilities for becoming as much as we can.

We could link this to recent pressures from **intersex activists** who have argued for intersex people (the 1-2% of people who are born with anatomy or physiology which differs from contemporary ideals of 'normal' male and female) to be able to make their own choices about the gendering (or not) of their bodies later in life, rather than having this imposed upon them with surgeries in childhood which often have no medical necessity, as has previously been the case.

There has been a furore in the media recently about **families who have made similar decisions** about apparently non-intersex children, demanding their right to decide upon their own gender later on in life rather than having it imposed upon them from birth. Many commentators have seen this as **deeply problematic or even abusive**. However, we could – from de Beauvoir's perspective – view it in another way: locating the problem in a society that enforces particular ideals of gender onto children; thus limiting what they are able to become.

Thank-you for reading

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