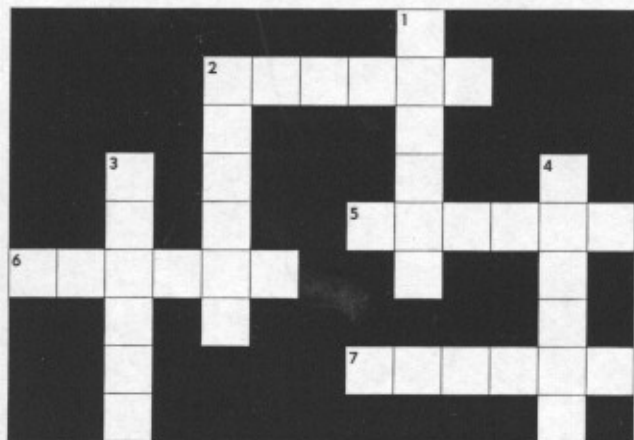


© Solving the Gender Puzzle ©

So, what is gender anyway? It's not such a difficult puzzle after all.

© The Not-So-Difficult Puzzle After All



ACROSS:

2. a fanatical cult, demanding blind obedience to mostly unwritten, unagreed-upon rules, regulations, and qualifications.
3. any standard (usually, but not necessarily biological) by which we can easily and without much thought conveniently divide the human race into two neat parcels. (e.g., sociological, genital, chromosomal, psychological, hormonal, et cetera, *ad nauseum*)
6. an oppressive class system of two and only two classes, usually held in place by the assumption that the class system is "natural," in which system one class has nearly total economic and political power over the other.
7. a means of cultural traction, an identity or persona by which to identify oneself to another or maintain some position within a relationship or culture.

DOWN:

1. currently a system of dividing people into one of two impossible-to-live-up-to standards: male or female.
3. a means by which we can express our sexual desire.
4. a means by which we can attract others, to whom we are attracted.

(Answers on page 33)

Now that wasn't very hard, was it? Of course not. Where gender begins to get difficult is when we mix sex into the equation.

⑥ **Everything You Need to Know about Sex Versus Gender. Honest!**

She has sex, but no particular gender.

—Marlene Dietrich on Greta Garbo

Gender and sex are two distinct phenomena working in any given culture as well as in and on our minds. Gender and sex obviously influence who we are and how we relate to others. The weird thing is that the concepts referred to by *both* words tend to get jammed into “sex,” as in

“What sex do you think that person across the street is?”

or

“I think we all need to take responsibility for safer sex in this day and age.”

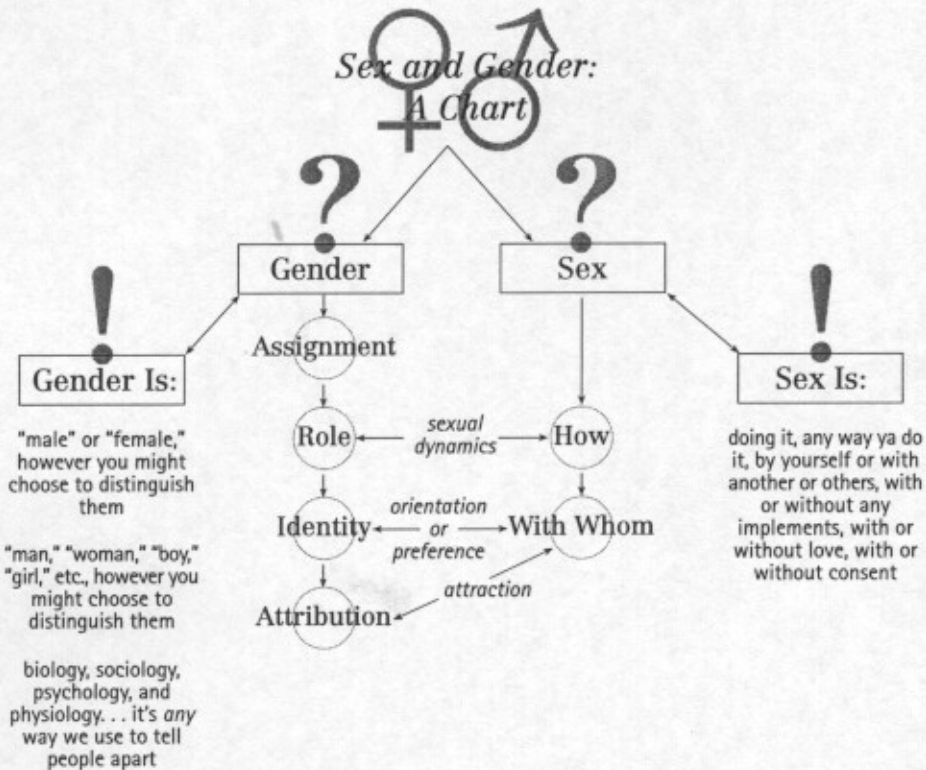
The concept of gender is muddled enough without our confusing it with something entirely different like biology. Sure, some people differentiate sex and gender by saying things like “My sex is male, but my gender is woman.”

But why not say “I’m a woman with a penis!”

For so long, we’ve bought into a biological imperative that has labeled genitalia as “male” or “female”; what’s more, we’ve dignified that imperative by giving it its own word: *sex!* Anyway, who says penises are male and vulvas are female? “Sex” as a designation of gender says it. Sex-as-gender says that penises are male, and that vaginas, vulvas, and clitorises are female. I don’t get it. I know too many male men with vaginas and too many female women with penises to any longer buy into some wishful thinking on the part of old-guard scientists who’d like to have things all nice and orderly in some predictable binary. For a long time, we’ve tried to explain two different, admittedly related concepts, with one word: sex. We need to pull them apart if we’re going to make any sense of it.

Gender is real easy to sum up in one word: categorization. Anything that categorizes people is gender, whether it’s appearance or mannerisms, biology or psychology, hormones, roles, genitals, whatever: if we’re trying to categorize or separate people out, it’s gender. So where does that leave sex? Sex is fucking: any way, shape, or form, alone or with another or others. Once we’ve got *that* distinction, things start to clear up. Let’s do a little chart thing here to sort it all out.

© A Little Sex/Gender Chart



Components of Sex and Gender

These things are *really* tangled up! Let's take this chart apart, starting with SEX. The world becomes a lot brighter when we say that sex is simply the act, that it does *not* mean the designation of category. Taken in this light, sex has only a few aspects, mainly: how you'd like to do it, and whom (if anyone) you'd like to do it *with*.

Naming sex as the act and only the act robs essentialist thinkers of their biological imperative, which is usually based on some arcane combination of genitals, chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive ability. Who says that biology has the last word in determining someone's identity anyway?

It's one thing to say that someone has a vulva, vagina, clitoris, breasts, ovaries, etc., etc. It's quite another thing to assume that person is either female, feminine, or a woman.

Gender, unlike the straightforward word sex, has several aspects:

- ⑥ **Gender Assignment** answers the question, "What do the authorities say I am?" In most cultures, it's the M or F designation. What the doctor says you are at birth, usually determined by the presence (male) or absence (female) of a penis. Most cultures assign some permanent, immutable gender at birth. A few cultures allow people to change their gender assignment later in life; some cultures even build in a possible switch in gender assignment. Gender assignment is something that's done *to* each one of us, long before we have the ability to have any say in the matter.
- ⑥ **Gender Role** answers the question, "What does the culture think I should do with my life?" It's the sum total of qualities, mannerisms, duties, and cultural expectations accorded a specific gender.
- ⑥ **Gender Identity** answers the question, "Am I a man or a woman or something else entirely?" Most people don't think about this one very much. They let gender assignment nonconsensually stand in for gender identity. But identity *is* personal; it's what we feel our gender to be at any given moment. Sure, this feeling might be influenced by biological factors that have a cultural tag sticking out of each one of them. The feeling of being some gender might also have to do with a sexual fantasy, or a preference for some role. There are as many good reasons for having or choosing a gendered identity as there are people.
- ⑥ **Gender Attribution** is what we all do when we first meet someone: we decide whether they're a man or a woman, or something indeterminate. We attribute a gender to someone based on an intricate system of cues, varying from culture to culture. The cues can range from physical appearance and mannerisms to context, and the use of power.

Where It Gets Messed Up

So far, so good. Seems simple. Here's where the tangles lie:

- ⑥ In the majority of cultures in the world, the socially acceptable easy way to define one's sexual preference or orientation (who we want to be sexual with) depends on the *gender identity* of our sexual partners. To make things worse, the gender identity we're attracted to must also be phrased in terms of men and women. We're attracted to men or women

or both; that's the sum total of our desire. So, sex (the act) becomes hopelessly linked to gender (the category).

- ⊙ And what about sexual attraction? That's linked to gender attribution. First we attribute a gender, then we decide if we want to be attracted to that person; but the first filter is almost always "Is that person the right gender for me, sexually and romantically?"
- ⊙ Finally, what we enjoy actually *doing* sexually, the sex act itself, often involves a specific sort of genital play, and as genitals have been gendered in this culture, so sex has become gendered.

Instead of the nice, easy gender puzzle we had before, once you add sex into the gender mix, we end up with a puzzle that looks more like this:

⊙ The More Difficult Puzzle

E	H	N	E	E	U	Q	G	A	R	D	S	R	G	B	S	A
H	L	I	I	T	L	V	F	R	R	E	O	I	U	H	T	Y
R	E	A	M	M	Q	D	Y	U	X	L	R	T	E	T	O	A
L	Y	S	M	M	I	K	Z	D	E	L	C	M	R	B	H	T
L	E	O	H	D	U	I	M	Y	T	H	A	A	T	P	O	T
Q	A	S	B	E	O	D	E	B	F	L	C	R	R	A	M	R
J	H	U	B	M	X	O	Y	H	E	T	A	C	I	N	O	I
J	E	Z	X	I	O	G	G	K	I	N	L	P	O	S	S	B
G	V	P	W	E	A	T	Q	O	S	G	Z	C	T	E	E	U
C	P	P	P	G	S	N	N	V	B	V	N	R	G	X	X	T
E	O	R	E	L	G	O	E	F	N	A	P	L	R	U	U	I
T	E	V	R	E	D	S	R	M	E	V	D	Q	R	A	A	O
H	O	R	N	E	T	Q	I	E	O	M	E	K	R	L	L	N
L	R	D	S	I	J	L	A	T	T	T	A	M	L	E	B	R
G	E	I	T	W	J	P	E	K	T	E	T	L	M	Y	H	H
R	R	E	L	A	U	X	E	S	I	B	H	O	E	E	A	S
E	W	R	E	D	N	E	G	S	N	A	R	T	B	E	F	G

Can you find the gender and sex-related words in this puzzle? (It can be done, but wasn't the first puzzle a lot easier? And I only used a *few* of the words we can mix up in our lives!)

For a list of the words hidden in this puzzle, turn to page 33 of this chapter.

A woman wearing a man's suit, "and getting away with it", in this [corporate] environment is subversive. Don't get me wrong, I do not try to pass as a man. I am a woman in the uniform of a corporate businessman. I don't walk those halls without gender, I do it without a "specific" gender. . . or perhaps with multiple gender. I believe that the dissonance of my female body in that masculine garb causes other folks to recognize the shades of, and yes, to question gender. In those double takes, I see confusion and fear and sometimes a small smile. Sometimes I also see anger. I think all of those are necessary for humans to evolve. The fact that we are so rarely confronted with issues of gender—that we simply accept it as either/or—means that we haven't really had the opportunity to reflect upon it. What makes gender? Who decides? What does it mean to be male? Female? What does it mean to be something other?

I don't have answers, don't expect to ever figure gender out, really, but I do know that being challenged is prerequisite to thinking, and thinking is prerequisite to growing.

—Teresa Stores

The Easy Way Out Is Neither Easy Nor a Way Out

No wonder people want to use the term "sex" for both the identity (gender) and the act (sex). The two have become interdependent. In terms of our sexual desire and our gender identities, we've opted for the easy way out, the "everybody knows it's this way" solution. "Everyone knows that the way I define my desire is by the gender of my partner."

Personally, I can't buy that. If the world's great thinkers have taught us anything, it's that we rarely achieve personal fulfillment by mindlessly wandering through life, taking the path of least resistance and little or no responsibility for our actions. We need to question our assumptions, and that includes our assumptions about sex and gender, if we're going to understand those aspects of ourselves and others.

© Gender: The Shell Game

I've been living on the border of the two-gender system for the past couple of years. Sometimes I manage to escape the system entirely. I claim no socially sanctioned gender, and I'm trying to retrace the steps it took for me to arrive at this point. I think it comes down to an understanding of gender as simply one aspect of identity. Gender is a kind of identity, that's all.

The question "How do you live without a gender," broadens into "How do you live without an identity?" I think we create our identities, or actively fortify the identities we seem to be born

with, in the same manner and with a similar purpose that a crab excretes the substance that eventually hardens into a shell, its armor. It's *safe* having an identity, it's secure. It's safe having a gender. But there's a price for safety and security within some hard shell. We can't grow any more. Our identities become so hard and so restrictive that we can no longer stretch and explore, we can't find new ways of experiencing the world, new ways

to delight ourselves, new ways to please others. We're frozen in that shell. And the only thing to do is to come out of that shell, leave it behind us, and begin the whole process over again.

⑥ Connecting with Your Inner Gender

Hahahahahaha! No way. I'd never inflict anything called an inner gender on anyone. But the fact is if we want to connect with gender, then we need to connect with it on a deeply personal level. Connecting with gender on a purely social or intellectual or even political level isn't going to bring about a personal understanding of the subject.

We can read about gender and identity all our lives. We can study gender and identity, put them under a microscope, talk with people about them, and see endless movies about this stuff, and we won't really know any more about them than we did when we started. We'll be more curious, uh huh. We'll be a lot more apprehensive about the traps we've read about, perhaps. But we won't really know anything. Not until we experience gender—consciously—ourselves.

It's when we begin to poke around in the piles of accumulated emotions, mannerisms, attitudes, and values, when we really let ourselves look at what we've gotten ourselves into; that's when we can begin to get some clarity on gender. That's when we can construct a gender identity for ourselves that best lets us express our needs and wants in this world.

[T]he fear is worst before the fact. Until the first time someone burst out laughing at me, I didn't know how I'd survive the humiliation. Until the first time I had to refuse in public to fulfill my gender duties, I didn't know how I'd ever face my friends again. Until the first time I was beaten up, I didn't know how I would survive the trauma. But now I know what it feels like to be laughed at. It is frustrating, but not frightening. Now I know that I can stand up and refuse to play gender games in public, even if I turn beet red as I do so. Now I know that even broken bones don't hurt forever.

Fear? There is always fear. Anything new is frightening. The only way to get over a fear is to shut your eyes and ignore the pit in your stomach. The second time you do it the pit will be smaller and one day you will have trouble remembering that what you are doing used to be hard.

—Laura Franks,
Moscow, Russia

I was on a radio talk show out of southern Florida once. The (white, heterosexual male) host literally wouldn't let me say on the air I'm not a man or a woman. He accused me of living in some fantasy world. ::shrugging:: What can I say? To some degree he was right. But what good is a fantasy if there's never any hope that you can one day live it out?

::laughing:: Oh right! That's a convention I'm going to be using in this workbook from time to time. Words set off by a pair of double colons will follow the cyberspace convention of indicating an action being done by the speaker, or in this case an action being done by me the writer. ::waving happily:: means I'm waving up at you from the page here.

© The Ten-Minute Gender Outlaw Exercise

Here's a simple, basic exercise to begin poking around in gender. It's one you can do once a day. It doesn't have to take a long time. Take one or more of these three questions a day, and write down a series of answers.

What is a Man?

What is a Woman?

Why do we have to be one or the other?

The trick is that the answers have to be phrased in questions. ::grin:: Yeah, I know . . . kinda like the television game-show *Jeopardy* that way, but it works. It keeps the questions open, which is where I think they belong. It doesn't matter what *track* those further questions take, just as long as more questions come out of it, until the question itself is enough for you and you don't need to write anymore.

So, one day it might look like this:

What is a man?

What's a woman, for that matter?

What's a boy?

Was I ever a boy?

What was it like to be treated like a boy?

Did I like it?

What did I like about it?

How do I like to be treated today?

Does that make me a boy, still?

or the next day, it might look like this:

What is a woman?

Why am I even bothering to ask that?

Doesn't everyone know what a woman is?

Who the hell is everyone anyway?

What business of theirs is it to tell me what a woman is?

and another day, it might look like this:

Why do we have to be one or the other?

What other choices are there?

Or you may go on for pages and pages. The point is to get to a question you want to think about some more, one that really tickles your brain—something you can ponder on for the balance of the day. Once you get to *that* question, you stop. That's all there is to it. Try it every day at first. It's a good discipline for learning to explore one of the most basic facets of our cultural identities. Once you've gotten into the routine of asking these questions, you can taper down to once every couple of days, to once a week, to once a month, as the questions begin to linger. But for now, make it a point to ask yourself one of these questions every day for one month, and to answer it *only* with other questions. Mark it on your calendar. Start today, okay?

I know that I will externally and internally always be a "woman," even though I'm not sure what a woman is or what a man is anymore. I'm just glad for the fact that many of us have both characteristics.

—Mara Oong

Answers to "The Not-so-Difficult Puzzle," pg. 25

1. gender 2. gender 3. gender 4. gender 5. gender 6. gender 7. gender

Gender- and sex-related words hidden in "The More Difficult Puzzle," pg. 29

attraction	heshe
attribution	heterosexual
bad	him
bisexual	homosexual
bottom	it
boy	lesbian
butch	love
desire	male
dragqueen	pansexual
female	riotgrrl
femme	role
gay	sex
gender	shemale
girl	tomboy
good	top
grrrl	transgender
he	transvestite
her	