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6 Understanding Gender
Her mass of red hair is as unruly as she is. We first meet Merida on her birthday, and although she’s but a “wee Scottish lass,” her father Fergus gifts her with what will become her most treasured possessions: a hand-carved bow and a set of arrows. Her mother, Queen Elinor, challenges the gift, but her protest falters in the face of her daughter’s joy and immediate attachment to archery. As the years pass, Merida matures, and so, too, does the tension between her fierce spirit and the desire of her mother to constrain her within what’s expected of “ladies.” Elinor diligently instructs Merida regarding the responsibilities, duties, and expectations of a princess. She is admonished to “remember to smile!” and that “a princess does not put her weapons on the table!”

But once a week, Merida is free from her royal tutoring, and on these days, she revels in her independence. As the background soundtrack underscores, she is “strong as the seas,” honing her archery skills as she gallops through the forest on the back of her horse Angus, her red curls flying as she “chases the wind.”

The tension between expectation and rebellion peaks when Merida is informed of an upcoming tournament in which the eldest sons of three Scottish clans will compete for her hand in marriage. The constraints placed on her become physical when she is fitted for her princess gown, leading her to protest, “I can’t breathe! I can’t move! It’s too tight!” On the day of the event, Merida rebels, opting to compete for her freedom. Unleashing her hair from beneath a tight royal hood, ripping the seams of her fitted gown, and drawing her bowstring determinedly to her cheek, she easily bests her would-be suitors in an archery contest, winning the day, and her independence.
The Disney movie Brave opened in theaters in June 2012, celebrating Merida’s triumph over gender norms on screens worldwide. But on May 11, 2013, Disney crowned Merida a “Disney Princess” — releasing an assortment of merchandise in support of this labeling — and with their coronation came an extraordinary makeover. What differences do you notice in the picture below? “Merida the Disney Princess” looks older and curvier. She sparkles. She’s sexier too, with an angular face, tinier waist, and a lower-cut dress. Her eyes are different; the wide-eyed gaze of childlike wonder has been replaced by an adorned and more knowing look. The tangled red tresses that so energetically blew in the wind as she sped through the woods on horseback are now carefully coiffed, yet also fuller, as if extensions have been added. But her down-to-earth demeanor and delightful dishevelment are not all that has been stolen from her. Merida’s most prized possession — her bow and quiver of arrows — has been replaced by gold, glitter, and a sash that accentuates the hips of a princess. The brave girl has lost the signature symbol of her strength.

A few decades ago, such a metamorphosis for the sake of marketing might have gone unnoticed. But in the new millennium of rapidly shifting cultural attitudes about gender, a willingness to challenge historical assumptions and constraints, and embrace new norms, has emerged. Consequently, in the wake of Disney’s “Merida makeover,” over 200,000 angry fans signed a petition on change.org, demanding that Disney return Merida to her original, unbridled state: “Keep Merida Brave!” And fans around the world were not the only ones to defend the strong and courageous girl with her bow. The original creator of the character, Brenda Chapman, fiercely defended Merida’s right to be free from the gender constraints of a “princess” label. “I think it’s atrocious what they’ve done to her,” declared Chapman. “Merida was created to break that mould: To give young girls a better, stronger, role model; a more attainable role model; something of substance, not just a pretty face that waits around for romance!” (Osborne, 2013).
To some it might seem silly to ponder the cultural significance of an animated feature film. But the tension between the rival depictions of Merida is emblematic of broader cultural tensions regarding gender, and gender expression— that is, “the presentation of an individual, including physical appearance, clothing choice and accessories, and behaviors that express aspects of gender identity or role” (APA, 2015). Are men and women polar opposites, each with a narrow and biologically established set of attributes, behaviors, and artifacts? Or, should we consider multiple dimensions of masculinity and femininity, with each of us living at a unique intersection of them?

As we journey through this chapter, we will discuss many aspects of gender, including some of the challenges faced by the character Merida: how we learn to do gender in our society, how society places gender expectations on us, socializing gender roles, and ultimately how we each can challenge these expectations to write our own stories, just as Merida bravely did.

In this chapter, you’ll learn:

- How to describe gender and distinguish it from related concepts
- The ways we “do” gender in society
- The influence of gender roles
- The ways gender relates to our communication and relationships
- How to move beyond gender stereotypes

Let’s begin by discussing several characteristics of gender.
binary male–female categories is illustrated in many ways now in our culture, whether it be “all gender” signs on public restrooms, or celebrities who discard binary understandings of gender, and instead describe themselves as gender fluid or genderqueer. For instance, actress/model Ruby Rose describes gender fluidity as “not really feeling like you’re at one end of the spectrum or the other. For the most part, I definitely don’t identify as any gender . . .” (Sakiri, 2016). And singer Sam Smith identifies as much as a woman as a man (Petit, 2017). This cultural shift is reflected in our language and interpersonal encounters, such as when a person identifies preferred pronouns as they/them or she/her or he/him, and within public and professional communities, as illustrated by the American Psychological Association and the National Association of School Psychologists’ resolution on gender and sexual orientation diversity for public schools, which asserts that “all persons” are entitled to equal opportunity and a safe environment (see Table 6.1).

As stated by the second clause in the APA’s resolution (listed in Table 6.1), we are in the midst of “rapid cultural and political change” with regard to gender. The fact that we currently are transitioning from a predominantly binary (male–female) understanding of gender to one that recognizes greater diversity means that many people still are in the process of learning the definitions of new concepts and terms. Because this is a chapter about gender within an introductory textbook on interpersonal communication, our coverage is designed to introduce you to gender as it relates to interpersonal communication and relationships. Thus, our coverage may differ from what you would find in a different discipline, such as sociology or psychology, and may not be as thorough as what you would find in a class specifically on gender. If you find yourself curious about some of the issues we discuss — and we hope that you do! — we encourage you to further your studies by enrolling in a gender and communication course, or a gender class in another discipline.

To begin our introduction to gender and interpersonal communication, we first need to start with some terminology, so let’s differentiate sex, gender identity, and gender; then we’ll consider some characteristics of gender.

**Gender Is Distinct from Sex and Gender Identity**

Each of us is born with anatomical, biological distinctions, known as our sex, which include differences in external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, hormones, and sex chromosomes. At birth we are assigned a “sex category,” and our birth certificates

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**Verbal Aggression about Gender Expression**

Handling derogatory comments about your gender expression:

1. Manage your immediate emotional reaction — breathe.
2. Remind yourself that the attack is more reflective of the character of the other person than of your character.
3. Remain polite and respectful in what you choose to say.
4. Deftly deflect the attack by apologizing that the person felt the need to comment and ask a question to switch the topic.
5. If needed, end the encounter early.
6. If a particular person repeatedly behaves this way, consider reducing your contact.

**Media Note: Examples of Gender Fluidity**

For more information on gender fluidity, check out the 2016 CNN article by Lauren Booker entitled, “What it means to be gender fluid.” In her article, she articulates the concept and the ways gender changes not only from day to day but also even from hour to hour. She offers a few compelling examples of gender fluid individuals.
state “male,” “female,” or “intersex” to denote “atypical combinations of features that usually distinguish male from female” (APA, 2012). We see these distinctions as we grow older: men tend to develop greater height and more upper body strength compared to women, and consequently, we see differences in motor skills, such as men’s greater grip strength, as well as throwing velocity and distance (Hyde, 2005).

In contrast, gender identity is internal to you: it is your deeply felt awareness or inner sense of being a boy, man, or male; a girl, woman, or female; or an alternative, such as genderqueer, gender-nonconforming, or gender-neutral (APA, 2015; APA & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Individuals may identify on the transgender spectrum if their gender identity does not correspond to their assigned sex category, or may be described as cisgender if their gender identity and gender expression correspond to their assigned sex category.

Our understanding of these terms parallels our opening discussion surrounding the movement away from binary, polarized categories. As we witness societal knowledge and awareness of gender expanding, we see an increase in illustrative role models across multiple arenas accompanying this societal movement. The life of Jazz Jennings, a transgender high school girl, is portrayed on the TLC reality show I Am Jazz. Laverne Cox, an actress on the Netflix series Orange Is the New Black, is the first openly transgender person to be nominated for a primetime Emmy acting award. Danica Roem, who campaigned on the issues of traffic congestion, inadequate teacher salaries, and Medicaid expansion, is the first openly transgender person elected to a state legislature, now serving in Virginia’s House of Delegates (Bruni, 2017). Additionally, we have exemplary policies, including the APA resolution previously discussed, and the U.S. military policy affirming the ability of transgender members to serve openly, stating that they cannot be discharged solely due to their transgender identity (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016). Despite the affirmations of the military to “treat all personnel with respect” (Lopez, 2017), President Donald Trump banned most transgender military service in March 2018 (Tatum, 2018), and this policy reversal likely will be the subject of continued political and legal debate.

To fully appreciate where we are—in the midst of transformative change regarding our understanding of gender—we need to first consider how far we have come. Take, for example, the confusion between the words sex and gender. Although gender and sex refer to two distinct concepts, many people commonly use one term to refer to the other, or mix them up. Some of this muddling occurs because language evolves...
Gender Is Learned

Recall Chapter 5, and our discussion of culture as something that is learned from a variety of sources ranging from your family and friends, to schools and the media. Similarly,
gender is learned from a variety of sources, all of which contribute to the lifelong process of gender socialization. Through the advances of ultrasound imaging technology, many people choose to learn the sex of their baby before birth. This allows parents to begin the gender socialization of their child before the child is even born, through selecting masculine or feminine names, baby clothing, toys, nursery decorations, or even hosting a “gender-reveal party,” during which they reveal to family and friends (and sometimes to themselves) whether their baby will be a boy or a girl. Explore YouTube and you may find more than half a million videos of couples at such parties (Hafner, 2017).

After we are born, this gender socialization process continues and escalates, as parents—like Merida’s mother in Brave—encourage or discourage behaviors they deem gender “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” In one study, parents of 3- to 5-year-old children often encouraged gender nonconformity in young daughters—such as wearing sports-themed clothing or playing with trucks, trains, or building toys—but were less thrilled with gender nonconformity in their young sons. Though they supported their sons playing with kitchen centers to learn domestic skills, parents were more troubled by their sons crying, playing dress-up, or being passive (Kane, 2006).

As they grow, children themselves take a more active role in learning about gender, whether it’s voicing their preferences for toys, Halloween costumes, or birthday parties. Think back to when you were quite young and may have been involved in planning your birthday parties. Did you plan pink “dress-up” parties? Sports-themed parties? Disney character parties? How did your parents or caregivers respond to your requests? All these decisions function to bolster gender. But if such decisions run against societal norms for gender, everyone involved feels pressure to conform. For example, when one of our sons decided he wanted to have a “Disney Mulan birthday party,” we set out to plan and prepare for the party. We were stunned, however, when we discovered not only that few Mulan decorations were available for purchase, but that salespeople were skeptical about selling them to us when we mentioned the party was for a boy! Kelly ended up making most of the decorations for the party, crafting both fans and swords for all the kids to decorate and play with.

GENDER IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED

As our experience with the Mulan birthday party illustrates, families are free to make their own choices regarding how their children learn gender, but at some point we all must participate in society. This may entail having a pink, blue, or combination pink-and-blue knit hat placed on a newborn’s head in a hospital, hosting a birthday party, or sending kids off to their first day of school where they have different public restrooms for boys and girls. A central aspect of learning gender is learning the norms and standards that your society associates with the sex categories.

Gender is socially constructed because a primary way we understand gender is by interacting with other people in society, as well as with societal structures, such as hospitals, stores, and public restrooms. Because society influences our understandings of gender, as society changes over time, so, too, will our conceptions of gender. To illustrate this, consider the type of career advice you have received thus far in your life. Did it constrain you in ways related to your gender? When Kelly was in high school, for instance, she took multiple classes in typing (on a typewriter!) and shorthand dictation so that she would have strong skills to guarantee continual employment as a secretary (not an

Assignment: Gender-Reveal Parties

Have your students Google “gender-reveal parties” and describe all the different items that can be purchased for such a gathering. Ask students to write a short reflection paper on their opinion. What does this say about the binary nature of gender socialization in our culture? How are gender-reveal parties influencing our future generations’ views on gender polarization?

Do you remember some of the ways you learned about gender? Was it through the toys you played with, or the toys a friend of opposite gender played with? How do you think these early lessons impacted how you conceive of gender now?
“administrative assistant”). Steve, on the other hand, was asked whether he would be a “doctor” or “lawyer.” Nowadays, you will see both men and women occupying the roles of administrative assistant, attorney, nurse, and physician.

To this point, we’ve sought to clarify the difference between sex, gender identity, and gender, and discussed various aspects of how our culture shapes our gender. But to truly understand how gender is socially constructed, we need to explore more deeply how we “do gender” in our society, and it’s this topic to which we next turn.

Doing Gender

In one of the most famous articles written about gender, entitled “Doing Gender,” scholars Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987, 2009) argued that gender is not a “singular thing” (1987, p. 148), it is something we achieve and are held accountable for every day, emerging from social encounters. This suggests three important implications. First, gender is not a static object, or a possession that never changes. It is not something inside of you (like your sense of gender identity). Second, we cannot opt out of doing gender. We are held accountable for doing gender every day, and people expect that we are doing it to the best of our abilities. Third, it is interactional. Because it emerges from social encounters, we achieve it according to the setting, the participants, and the nature of the encounter. Thus, unlike a possession that travels with us, looking and functioning the same way in every context, we accomplish gender by flexibly adapting to our social interactions.

Our understanding of the expected behaviors in a social setting, and the people with whom we are interacting, both influence how we do gender. For instance, when Steve teaches self-defense unarmed combat classes, he acts extremely masculine, talking with a loud voice and using aggressive movements. But when he’s in a different social setting, teaching his yoga students, he acts less masculine, speaking more softly, using different words, and moving more gently. Correspondingly, if you gathered the students from each class, and had them describe Steve’s gender, they would likely report significant differences. Because gender is something we “do in interaction with others” (Messerschmidt, 2009, p. 86), how we “do” gender changes as the roles, societal expectations, people, and settings change in our daily interactions.

As a deeper illustration of this, consider where Kelly professionally landed after graduating from college with an undergraduate degree in business. Her first job was in industrial sales in the packaging industry. She spent her days interacting with many different types of people, primarily men, ranging from computer programmers, to die-room employees and foremen, to plant and account managers. When she was on the factory-room floors, she pulled from the “tomboy” years of her youth, and used much more masculine behaviors to fit in, even though she was wearing a skirt. Many times the men would curse, simply to push her buttons and test how she would respond. When she eventually left her job to move to Michigan, one of the die-room employees gifted her with a button that read, “I’m no lady,” and expressed to her that this was his ultimate form of compliment!

People typically expect your gender expression to coincide with your sex, such that girls and women are expected to enact more feminine behaviors, and boys and men are expected to enact more masculine behaviors. This is a central aspect of achieving, or accomplishing, your gender: behaving in a way that society expects you to, or in a way that typically is consistent with your sex category. But as the above example illustrates, gender expression and sex category don’t always have to coincide: to fit in

In what ways have you adjusted how you “do” gender to match the social setting and people with whom you’re interacting? What behaviors or appearances did you alter? Why? Were your adjustments effective?