

we use for fucking and so on. Using the word sex *only* for fucking and so on robs essentialist thinkers of their gendered 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. It's quite another thing to assume that person is either female or a woman.

## Components of Gender

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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 non-consensually stand in



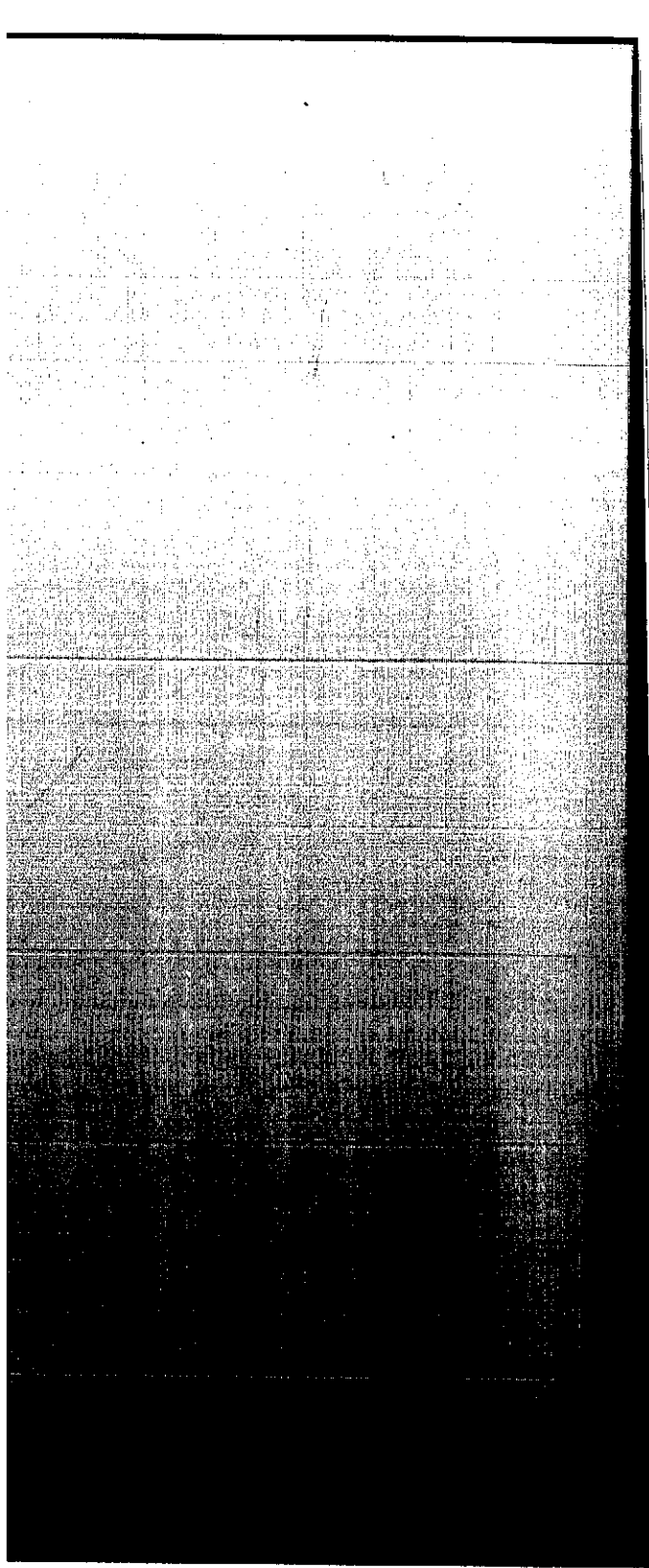
for gender identity. But identity *is* personal; it's what we feel our gender to be at any given moment. Sure, this feeling might be influenced by biological factors that have a cultural tag sticking out of each one of them. The feeling of being some gender might also have to do with a sexual fantasy, or a preference for some role. There are as many good reasons for having or choosing a gendered identity as there are people.

4. **Gender Expression** is how we show to the world the gender we feel ourselves to be. This can shift over the course of our lives, or even moment to moment.
5. **Gender Attribution** is what we all do when we first meet someone: we decide whether they're a man or a woman, or something indeterminable. 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.

The 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 1st time I had to refuse in public to fulfill my gendered duties, I didn't know how I'd ever face my friends again. Until the 1st time I was beaten up, I didn't know how I would have survived 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 refused 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

**Exercise:** Ask three different people how they would define for themselves the five components listed above. How do their answers compare to (a) your perception of each person and (b) your own answers to those questions as they apply to you?



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

## Where It Gets Messed Up

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**, usually (but certainly not always) based on a person's **gender expression**. 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.

Once you add sex into the gender mix, instead of the nice, easy gender puzzle we had before, we end up with a puzzle that looks more like the scary looking thing on the next page.



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.

## The Easy Way Out is Neither Easy Nor a Way Out

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: Identity as Armor?



I've been living on the border of the two-gender system for nearly three decades. More and more frequently, 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?" We forge our identities, or actively fortify the identities we seem to be born with in the

## Finding Gender

same manner and with a similar purpose, as an armorer forges a suit of armor for a warrior. The problem is, once the suit is fitted, you'd better not get any bigger or smaller. Identity isn't us.

It's *safe* having an identity—it's secure. It's safe having a gender. But there's a price for that 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 for it is to come out of that shell, leave it behind us, and begin the whole process over again.