

Sold to

mdanielski@email.medfield.net



*Featured as #1 best-seller in Gender on Amazon, used by gender studies & sociology professors on 3 continents*

*2nd Edition*

*Now with a new foreword by the author, brand new chapters, fixed typos, and more gender!*

# A GUIDE TO GENDER

## The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook



**BY SAM KILLERMANN**

*"[Killermann]'s perfectly O.K. with being known as the toilet sign guy" - The New York Times*

# A GUIDE TO GENDER

The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook

BY SAM KILLERMANN

A Guide to Gender:  
The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook  
Uncopyright 2017 by Sam Killermann



Published by  
Impetus Books  
Austin, TX  
[www.impetus.pw](http://www.impetus.pw)

Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by schools, corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above. Kindle version available. Pay-what-you-want/can E-book version available at [www.guidetogender.com](http://www.guidetogender.com).

ISBN-13: 978-0989760249

ISBN-10: 0989760243

Cover photography & design, layout design, and all illustrations  
by Sam Killermann

Second Edition Published March 2017

4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

To Albina and Helmuth, without whom this book would not exist.  
To Megan, who gave me the words I needed to see it to completion:  
The, Be, To, Of, And, A, In, and [see, using that one already] That.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

“OUTSIDE OF A DOG, A BOOK IS MAN’S BEST FRIEND. INSIDE OF A DOG IT’S TOO DARK TO READ.”

– *Groucho Marx*

Foreword ix

## BASIC TRAINING

Learning the things every social justice advocate needs to know, before we get into the gender-specific material.

1. General Address 1
2. Navigating the Book 3
3. Defining Social Justice 11
4. The Cycle of Oppression 17
5. The Corruption of the Golden Rule 25
6. Understanding Intersections of Identity 33
7. Checking Your Privilege 39

## BREAKING THROUGH THE BINARY 52

Moving from a traditional, incomplete understanding of gender to an inclusive, cognitively complex understanding of gender diversity.

8. Gender Norms 55
9. Introduction to the Genderbread Person 65
10. Genderbread 101: Getting Started 71
11. Using the “Spectrums” Genderbread Person 81

12. An Improved Way of Visualizing Gender	89
13. Using the “-Ness” Genderbread Person	95
14. Gender Identity Explored	103
15. Gender Expression Explored	109
16. Anatomical Sex Explored	119
17. Attraction and Gender	127
18. An Assortment of Gender Identities	133
19. How to Diagnose Someone as Transgender	141
20. The Dangers of Normalized Binary Gender	147
21. A “Non-Vital” Medical Procedure	155
22. Let’s Talk About Bathrooms	161
23. A Unified Understanding of Gender	169

## FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUITY 176

Taking a quick look at the most contemporarily prominent gender movement and how it aligns with a more comprehensive cause.

24. The Well-Intentioned Misogynist	179
25. A Gender-Inclusive Feminist Perspective	187
26. Why People Believe Feminism Hates Men	193

## SOCIAL JUSTICE COMPETENCE: WORKING FOR GENDER EQUITY 200

From comprehension to competence, knowledge to action, thinking to doing—this section focuses on preparing you for social justice interventions and education.

27. Why My Approach to Social Justice is Better than Yours	203
28. Being Well-Intentioned Isn’t Good Enough	209
29. No Such Thing as a Positive Stereotype	219
30. Making Forms Gender Inclusive	225

“Partner” and Other Inclusive Language	
<b>31. “Partner” and Other Inclusive Language</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>32. Political Correctness vs. Being Inclusive</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>33. Responding to Non-Inclusive Language</b>	<b>241</b>
Conclusion	<b>249</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>254</b>
The more you know, the more you know. Additional bits and pieces that help complete this gender puzzle.	
<b>A. Glossary</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>B. Trans* Asterisk</b>	<b>275</b>
<b>C. Recommended Reading &amp; Works Referenced</b>	<b>279</b>
<b>D. Heartfelt Thanks</b>	<b>287</b>
<b>E. Cut-Outs</b>	<b>290</b>
About the Author	<b>297</b>





# FOREWORD

February 23, 2017  
Austin, Texas

A few months ago, I was cleaning bird poop out of Katie Couric's hair and I thought, "I've got to include this in the second edition of *A Guide to Gender*." I've been meaning to write this second edition for a few years now, but every two months something big happens and I think, "Well, *of course* I have to include that now," and the can gets kicked down the road.

I wrote the first edition of this book four years ago. In gender years, which are like dog years, that's a lifetime.

I wrote this book before National Geographic declared a *Gender Revolution*. Before half a million women marched on Washington, and millions more marched around the world. I published it before the world met Caitlyn Jenner, or the United States recognized marriage equality. It came out the year before Facebook added over 50 different options for gender identity, and Laverne Cox became the first transgender person to be nominated for an Emmy, or to grace the cover of TIME (that we know of, anyway).

When I first wrote this, I couldn't have anticipated how it would be used. I thought I knew, because I was writing with a particular audience in mind, but I was woefully wrong.

At the time, I was traveling around the U.S. performing comedy shows with a social justice bent, after which I would often do Q&As with the crowd. When I would get a question that was too complicated, or would require too lengthy a response, I would promise to blog my answer later. I started blogging, and that platform grew.

I loved the writing, and I started dedicating my downtime from the road to that, as well as creating other little social good projects online. Soon, I realized that a lot of the blog posts I wanted to write were too complicated, or too lengthy, for a blog. By this point, several

publishers had reached out to me to ask if I'd ever thought of writing a book. Many of my readers had goaded me into the same thing. I hadn't thought of that, but then I did.

So I started writing a book. And I had what I would soon realize were unreasonable demands when it came to publishing. Central among them, the book needed to be available, somewhere, somehow, for free: because access is a core value of mine, and a tenet of social justice.

"We can't give it away for free, because nobody will buy it," I would be told several times by publishers I would later walk away from.

I just wanted to have a book that I would be able to give to the people who asked me questions after shows, or through email. Gender is core to everything I do, and sometimes I would feel like I was creating more questions than answers. I wanted something to give to people who were looking for ways to do good in the world, but didn't know the steps.

Or for people who were struggling to understand a dimension of themselves, or others in their lives, that they knew was important, but couldn't quite wrap their minds around.

Above all, I knew what I wasn't writing: a gender studies textbook. Or a book that would have a broad appeal. Or a book that was, based on my experience thus far, and my stubborn ways, likely to be published at all.

It couldn't have come as more of a surprise to me that now, just four gender years later, I would get to brag that I've given away over 15,000 copies of this book (and sold some, too); that it would make its way into 100 countries; that it would get incorporated into more gender studies curricula than I could keep track of (against my protesting); or that, yes, that I would end up cleaning bird poop out of Katie Couric's hair because of it (again, against my protesting, "Katie, I do *not* think I'm the right person to do this").

The first edition of the book was the indirect result of thousands of conversations with strangers, and the direct result of feedback from about 40 different editors. In this way, it was very much a creation of the commons. I'm grateful beyond words to everyone who contributed to the first edition, and helped me share it with the world. Writing it helped me better understand myself. Sharing it helped me better

understand my role in the world.

With this edition, I've updated everything that needed to be updated (I hope), overhauled most of the chapters, added a few shiny new chapters, and I even doodled a toilet and smacked it on the back cover (find a restroom door that needs it for me, will ya?).

I'm sure something big is going to happen soon (with any luck, it will be *impeachment* big), and I'll think "Dang! I really wish I could have included that in the second edition."

But I didn't feel like this could wait any longer. The world has been changing a lot these past few months, and not necessarily for the better.

In many respects, despite how much has changed these past few years, and how much this edition differs from the first, this is the same book I wrote four years ago: it's an entry point to a concept that affects the world in big ways, with the hope that it will help you effect positive change in the world.

I hope you can use it to do some good. We need it.

– sK

Section 1

# BASIC TRAINING

LEARNING THE THINGS EVERY SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE NEEDS  
TO KNOW, BEFORE WE GET INTO THE GENDER-SPECIFIC MATERIAL.



1. GENDERAL ADDRESS	1
2. NAVIGATING THE BOOK	3
3. DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE	11
4. THE CYCLE OF OPPRESSION	17
5. THE CORRUPTION OF THE GOLDEN RULE	25
6. UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY	33
7. CHECKING YOUR PRIVILEGE	39



## CHAPTER I

# GENDERAL ADDRESS

“AS A STAND-UP [COMEDIAN], I TRY TO CHANGE THE WORLD. AS AN ENTERTAINER, I TRY TO ENTERTAIN. AND AS A LESBIAN, I TRY TO PICK UP THE PRETTIEST GIRL IN THE ROOM.”

– *Lea Delaria*

Attennnnnnshun!

I have been ordered to lead this battalion into battle, and I have to say that I’ve never had the privilege of commanding such a finely assembled, almost-overbearingly eager, terrifyingly adorable group of soldiers. And I *know* privilege!

It’s an honor to have you in this regimen, but we have a long way to go before you’re battle-ready. Our fight is for justice, and we’re up against oppression.

Let’s talk about the enemy: the no-good, good-for-nothing, but usually not actually that bad, layperson and I’m talking about the *lay-est* of the lay. We’re up against people who wouldn’t know privilege if it hit them squarely in the mouth on a daily basis, like when privilege hits them squarely in the mouth on a daily basis; people who don’t know their cissexism from their internalized oppression, and definitely don’t understand, bear with me here, troops, that *one perpetuates the other*. I mean, come on!

Now let’s get serious.

There are rumors going around that some of the enemy have infiltrated this battalion. These laypeople are hiding among us, trying



to learn our ways, to understand our battle plans and gender formations... and you know what I say to that? *Bring 'em on.* Like Granddaddy always said, "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies preoccupied by reading your secret military handbooks because maybe you'll convert one to an ally and have another friend on the battlefield, which is always nice."

Oh Granddaddy, how I miss your eloquent way with words.

Enough talk. It's time to get into basic training. There's a war waiting for us, fellow social justice warriors, and wars ain't been known to wait kindly.

*At eeease!*

Sam Killermann

Five Smile Genderal

Social Justice Forces

## CHAPTER 2

# NAVIGATING THE BOOK

“I MAY NOT HAVE GONE WHERE I INTENDED TO GO, BUT I THINK I HAVE ENDED UP WHERE I NEEDED TO BE.”

– *Douglas Adams*

First things first: I promise I’m done with the military references, but you should admit it was fun for that first chapter. Admit it, soldier! OK. Now I’m done.

There is a lot to this book, and it may seem overwhelming if you try to take it all in at once, so I wanted to take a moment here to explain some things. I hope that’s OK.

### IT’S A HANDBOOK, NOT A NOVEL.

Think of this book as more Noah Webster than Stephenie Meyer. While it’s certainly more fun to read than the dictionary (and has way more cartoons and Star Wars references), it’s not meant to be a binge-read over a long weekend while reminiscing on high school loves lost.

By all means, read it cover to cover if you’d like, but also highlight, fold corners, write notes, and treat it as a textbook. At the end of several chapters there is a blank page for you to fill with reflections, so don’t hesitate to fill them up. That’s why they are there.

You may need to read a chapter a few times before its concepts click. That’s OK. I attempt to explain complicated things with simple language and visceral metaphors, which can sometimes result in a different level of complication. Sometimes this is solved by re-reading a

passage once you know where it's going, and you'll start to see all the pieces fit together. This is intentional, and will hopefully help you get more out of the book outside of the book (more on this in a bit).

Some chapters may not mesh as well with your approach to social justice as others. That's also OK. In my effort to simplify things, sometimes I paint a complicated, multifaceted issue with a broad brush (e.g., Chapter 5 has been known to rub some folks as "It's not this simple"). Sometimes I muddy up things that you may have thought of as clear, because I think that social justice is inherently messy (jump to Chapter 18 if you're interested in traipsing through the mud). If it's not your style, great: I hope you can appreciate it as a different, not necessarily better or worse, approach to social justice. If it is your style, also great: and I hope you'll appreciate that our style isn't for everyone.

## IT'S A GUIDEBOOK, NOT A TEXTBOOK

You know how in that last section, I just said you should treat this as a textbook? You certainly should, but mostly in the physical ways you treat textbooks. You should not (please do not) grant this the same academic prestige you would a textbook<sup>1</sup>.

There are great textbooks out there about sociology, psychology, and social psychology (the pervasive themes of this book), and every year, more and more accurate scholarly books about gender are published. I reference several in the recommended reading in the appendix. Those books are great at being scholarly textbooks about those subjects. This book isn't that, nor is it meant to be that.

This is a guide to gender from a social justice perspective based on my lived experience advocating for gender justice through education and activism. It's meant to provide understanding about the topic of gender for folks who are hoping to set out to do the same. Certainly, it

---

<sup>1</sup> I seem to be in a bit of a pickle. Over the years, since the first edition of this book was released, I've gotten far too many Instagrams, tweets, and emails from readers informing me that this book is, in fact, a textbook. That is, it's part of their university curriculum, generally for a gender studies, sociology, or justice-themed course. Apparently dozens of professors have been using it. So I'll preemptively say here now what I've said to all of them: your professor knows better than I do, and if they say this is a textbook, then it's a textbook. I'm happy to lose this fight. Also, yes, you're cute. *We all get it.*

is informed by my understanding and synthesis of some of the books I mentioned in the last paragraph, a ton of other literary and scholarly writing by other folks, reading blogs and first-person narratives, and also my first-hand research (i.e., conversations with thousands of people of as many different gender perspectives) and work in the field.

## WHOM THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book was written with a particular person in mind: a social justice advocate who is doing gender justice activism and education. That said, it was also written with a ton of other people in the back of my mind, which can be summed up thusly: this book is written for anyone who wants to learn a *little bit more* about gender.

It's written for anyone, because regardless of where you're coming from, this book is accessible, understandable, and (dare I say it) useful. It's a wonderful foundation of gender from a social construction perspective. It's also a great "What is happening in the world right now?" primer. And, because of the unique angle from which I'm approaching this conversation, it'll likely add something to even an astute gender geek's knowledge base.

And I say "learn a little bit more about gender" for everyone, gender geek or gender noob, because, as much as we may not realize it, we've all already learned a lot about gender. In fact, we're learning more about gender in every social interaction we have, every commercial we watch, every newscast we listen to. We just don't always make sense of it in that way. After reading this book, I hope you'll have a hard time *not* making sense of it in that way.

## DO THE DRILLS

At different points in the book, I have included exercises. These may seem silly or make you uncomfortable (not an accident), or you might think, "Who really has five extra minutes?" But do them. They're an order, private! (Sorry... again.)

I intentionally included these exercises as key points. They are designed to help you reflect on what you already know about this stuff and what you've been learning throughout the book, then apply it all to whatever is being discussed at that point in that chapter.

Kirkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it

must be lived forwards.” That’s the spirit of what I’m getting at here.

Yoda said, “Do or do not. There is no try.” That’s a pretty awesome quote in general.

**DRILL:** This is what drills look like. Now you have no excuse not to do them. Gotcha!

In order to understand where I’m trying to take you, you need to first understand where you’ve been. We are all coming into this subject with different levels and flavors of experience, and it’s important to address and embrace those.

So, to sum up: do the drills, Padawan<sup>2</sup>.

## THE APPENDIX IS A VITAL ORGAN

Unlike in the silly human body, the appendix of this book is quite necessary for survival. I tried not to overload it with excessive info, so the things that are there are intentionally included bits and pieces that will help you tackle this book and further your understanding of these issues.

If nothing else, check out the glossary of terms. There will occasionally be terms that I will define in-text, but for the most part I will leave the definitions for the glossary. If you see a word and you think, “What the what?” there is a good chance it’s defined in the glossary.

The glossary itself is almost its own little Social Justice Advocate’s Handbook, in that you will rarely find such an exhaustive list of LGBTQ-inclusive and justice-oriented gender terms defined all in one place. If “gender isn’t just male or female” is a new(ish) or fuzzy idea to you, Appendix A might be a good place to start this learning adventure. Think of it as eating dessert before dinner.

I’m also collecting links and other resources on the book’s website,

---

<sup>2</sup> You might also notice names or words that aren’t familiar, but don’t seem like gender jargon. These are [generally nerdy] pop-culture references, and it’s totally okay if they don’t click. If understanding a reference, or word, is required to understand a point in the book, I’ll explain it. When it’s not, I won’t. I’ll resist explaining my nerdisms for the sake of page length and not boring those who don’t care (but for those wondering, a “Padawan” is an apprentice to a Jedi. Oh, and a “Jedi” is actually, never mind... I’ll resist).

which you can find [www.guidetogender.com/links](http://www.guidetogender.com/links) (creative, I know).

## I HEART THE SINGULAR “THEY”

I’ll be deploying the grammatical supertool that is the singular they in this book. I’m doing this for three reasons.

One, because it’s the easiest way to write generalizable, non-gendered examples about people, without doing grammatical judo (e.g., rewriting everything in plurals, even when you just want to talk about a single person), or creating Frankenwords (e.g., “s/he”).

Two, because this is a book about gender justice, and using the singular they is a great step in that direction. It’s helpful because it allows us to remove gender from examples that don’t need a particular gender in mind, and because it moves us beyond thinking about gender as being “he” or “she” (and good news: if this concept is new to you, you’re reading the right book).

And three, because I love the singular they in general. I love it so much that I wrote a love poem to it, and created an animated website based on that poem and that love ([www.iheartsingularthey.com](http://www.iheartsingularthey.com)). Using the singular they is one of the smallest things you can do to create a big impact in gender equity in general, so of course I’m going to use it in this book.

## TAKE THE CONVERSATION FURTHER THAN BETWEEN YOU AND ME

If you read this book, learn a lot, come to understand gender better than you ever did before, and never tell anyone about it, and I find out about this, I’ll experience the equivalent of passing a kidney stone, but with my brain.

Please don’t do that to me.

Talk to your friends about this. Bug your loved ones. Sit down to tea with your frenemies. Start a debate with a former or current teacher. Cut out the toilet graphic and stick it on an unnecessarily-gendered bathroom door. Whatever your method, it’s fine with me. Just make sure the conversation continues beyond us.

I’m doing everything I can to pull my weight on this (beyond just writing the book, I mean). A lot of what you read here can be found in some form on my website, [www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com](http://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com), or on the book’s website. The graphics, comics, and other silly doodles

are available, ready and primed for social network sharing, and you can even discuss a lot of the content on the various social platforms connected to the site. Plenty of e-options for you there, and it's all uncopyrighted for unrestricted sharing and repurposing.

Most of what I've learned has been through conversations with others. And it's all shared here, collected and organized for your eyes. This book is, in more ways than one, a creation of the commons. I encourage you to get out there and continue building on this repository of knowledge.

## HAVE FUN, AND ENJOY

I do my best to make what is generally an at-best intense, at-worst depressing subject into something light, enjoyable, accessible, and fun. I take this approach because I, like Mary Poppins, think that sugar helps the medicine go down.

This occasionally puts me in hot water with some social justice folks who think I'm not respecting the seriousness of these issues. I assure you, this is far from the case. I deeply respect the seriousness of this subject, and that's exactly why I engage it with the tone that I do: the last thing I want is for anyone to be scared away from something this important. And I also have a healthy respect for happiness, prefer focusing on the light in the darkness, and think there is always room for a little silliness in life.

And even though you don't need it, I give you my full two-thumbs-up approval to do the same.

**BLANK:** Occasionally, you'll find a blank page between chapters. Use this space for drills, notes, or lists of things you might want to look up, or dig into, later. Or don't. Your call.



Here, David, you can use this slingshot.

Equity



Equality

Slingshots for EVERYONE!



## CHAPTER 3

# DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE

“IF YOU TREMBLE WITH INDIGNATION AT EVERY INJUSTICE, THEN YOU ARE A COMRADE OF MINE.”

– Ernesto “Che” Guevara

My first year of graduate school, I took a class called Social Justice Education and Training. On the first day of class, our professor, the amazing Dr. Ellen Broido (check out her fantastic work on allyship, among other things), asked us a simple question:

“Do you think it’s possible for us to achieve social justice?”

I’m already getting ahead of myself.

### WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE?

For a simple definition, consider social justice to be the following:

**Social Justice:** a status in society where all people, regardless of their individual identities and social group memberships, have an equitable shot at achieving success.

Working for social justice, or being a social justice advocate, means educating people, informing policy, and creating a shift in culture that will make institutions more accessible to people of all backgrounds, or at least of the particular background for which you’re advocating. The goal is to make change at the system (big picture) level, not just at the level of individuals or components of that system.

Because social injustice exists across such a wide gamut, many folks find it easier to focus on a particular identity or identity group

to try to advance that group's status, rather than working toward what might seem like an insurmountable goal of equity for all identity groups. Even if someone is focusing on advocating for a particular justice (e.g., gender justice advocates, or racial justice advocates), they may also call themselves social justice advocates in general. This is because the movement for social justice is an all-hands-on-deck, intersectional effort where innumerable small endeavors combine to form one massive, synergistic movement that will lead to a more equitable society for all.

An even simpler definition of social justice: equity.

## EQUITY VS. EQUALITY

You may have noticed my use of the word equity in place of a word you may have chosen (or seen used before): equality. This was no accident, I assure you. This is an example of what I like to call “jerk-proofing” my writing.

While the two words are similar, they are not synonymous. Equity literally means “the quality of being fair” or “impartiality.” Equality, on the other hand, means “the state of being equal.”

Accordingly, “social group equity” could be defined as a quality where members of all social groups experience equity in society; that is, they experience impartial access to societal resources. “Social group equality” could be defined as a quality where members of all social groups have equal status in society; that is, members of all social groups will have the same experiences and quality of life.

See the difference? It's subtle but important.

Social equity is all about access to success (where we might define “success” as wealth, education, happiness, etc.), whereas social equality focuses more on possession of success (everyone gets an equal level of wealth, education, happiness, etc.).

That's all to say that fighting for social justice is not the same as fighting for socialism, but the two are often conflated by opponents who (sometimes intentionally, sometimes ignorantly) mash the two into the same thing and take up a platform against “entitlement” (e.g., “Work hard,” “No handouts,” yada, yada, yada).

Let's make this definition extremely clear: social justice means removing barriers so that all individuals, regardless of their identities or

social group memberships, will have equitable *access* to social resources; it does not mean that all individuals in a society will *possess* equal social resources.

## DO YOU THINK IT'S POSSIBLE FOR US TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Now that we have that out of the way, let's get back to Dr. Broido's question. Do you think it's possible for us to achieve social justice? (Answer yes or no in your head, and then read on to the next paragraph for the correct answer.)

The correct answer is an emphatic "yes."

Actually, I'm pulling your chain. There is no "correct" answer. It's an opinion-based question, after all. Most of the questions posed in this book will not have any one "correct" answer. It's all different shades of gray—but not in a kinky way.

But I answered "yes" so many years ago, and I hope you did, too. Because, to paraphrase my professor, "If your answer is 'no,' what are you doing in this class?"

As social justice advocates, we're fueled when we believe that it's possible to achieve social justice. Otherwise, what's the point in fighting? If Sylvester Stallone's character in *Rocky* didn't think he would be able to defeat that beast of a man Apollo Creed, do you think he would have trained so hard, working tirelessly until he defeated him, and been crowned champion? (*Editor's note: apparently Sam has never seen Rocky and doesn't realize that in the ending Creed actually defeated him. We apologize.*)

Tricked you! I am the editor, sillies. The point is that you can certainly still work for social justice even if you don't believe it's absolutely achievable in our society, because every step in that direction, even the small ones, can build up and lead to huge leaps in the de-marginalization<sup>3</sup> of and increased access for oppressed group members.

So fight on, Rocky! It's OK that you didn't win. In fact, it's damned

---

<sup>3</sup> A different word that we often use in social justice circles is "centering." For example, we might say we want to "center a group's experiences" in a particular dialogue, or movement. Imagine a piece of paper, where you could write something in the margins (often ignored), or smack dab in the middle of the page. The nice thing about "centering" is it is a positive word, instead of an anti-negative word. The other nice thing is it's *actually a word*.

impressive you even made it that far considering you have a tiger's eyes. That must have been tough as a kid, not having human being eyeballs. I bet they picked on you so hard for that. Wait, I'm referencing the right movie, yeah?

I should probably go watch it.



I don't separate my whites from my colors.

Because you're lazy?

Actually, no. Because I believe in equality.

And I will not perpetuate the spin cycle of oppression.

Oh, so you're creatively lazy.



## CHAPTER 4

# THE CYCLE OF OPPRESSION

“THE OPPRESSED ARE ALLOWED ONCE EVERY FEW YEARS TO DECIDE WHICH PARTICULAR REPRESENTATIVES OF THE OPPRESSING CLASS ARE TO REPRESENT AND REPRESS THEM.”

– *Karl Marx*

It’s impossible to talk about oppression without first talking about power. For the sake of this book, we are talking about a specific type of power (not the kind that turns on light bulbs, nor a setting on your microwave that burns popcorn): social power, which can be thought of as the ability to achieve an outcome you desire in your life, or in society at large.

Oppression is the exercise of authority or power in an unjust manner. Oppression plays out between social groups<sup>4</sup> when one group has disproportionate power and limits another group’s access to that power.

**DRILL:** Take five minutes, with a group or by yourself, and write down all the things that come to your mind when you hear the word “oppression.” Don’t define it necessarily, just record

---

<sup>4</sup> You can think of social groups as divisions of a society, either based on an aspect of society members’ identities (e.g., gender) or status (e.g., class). And generally, within any aspect of identity or status, we have oppressed members (also referred to as targeted, marginalized, minoritized) and oppressing members (also referred to as dominant, privileged, or majoritized).



all the word associations and concepts that run through your mind as you think about the term (you can use page 23).

Oppression is a key roadblock in the way of achieving social justice. Indeed, it's *the* roadblock. The equitableness of social justice can be summed up as a society without oppression. There are a number of ways to understand oppression, but we're going to focus on a cyclical model of oppression conceived by Sheri Schmidt.

Schmidt visualized oppression as a perpetual cycle where members of society knowingly and unknowingly participate in advancing oppressive attitudes and behaviors in a manner that progressively builds upon itself, like a really depressing snowball rolling down a really depressing hill.

This is an incredibly useful manner of looking at oppression, because it helps you understand how the different elements of oppression interact, and it gives you a better sense of why oppression is so prevalent from generation to generation.

To understand the Cycle of Oppression, let's first discuss the various components, starting with the entry point into the cycle itself:

## DIFFERENCE

Before we can oppress, we must first recognize a difference. We notice a behavior, an attitude, a disposition, a belief, or something else, that exists or is embodied by someone else, as *different*—different from our own, or different from what we expect<sup>5</sup>. And we attribute this difference to some perceived aspect (generally a social group membership) of the person in whom we notice it.

From noticing that difference, we begin to see the group they be-

---

<sup>5</sup> Our individual expectations, whether we realize it or not, are based on our particular culture's expectations. We don't often recognize that our assumptions of "default" are really quite subjective, even though we think of them as objective. And it's tempting for us to take this default further, and uncritically assume that our default is inherently right, or best. There are words for this phenomenon, like "ethnocentrism" (assuming your culture superior or "default"), "heteronormativity" (assuming straight people to be superior or "default"), "cisnormativity" (assuming cisgender people to be superior or "default").

long to through the lens of a...

## STEREOTYPE

A stereotype is a preconceived or oversimplified generalization about a group of people or a particular identity. Stereotypes can be negative or positive (in a later chapter I'll address so-called "positive" stereotypes, but for now, let's move on) and are taught to us by peers, parents, and other social groups, and reinforced through social interactions.

A common example of a "negative" gender stereotype is "girls are bad at sports;" on the flip side of that, a "positive" stereotype is "boys are good at sports." Hooray! I'm good at sports! Someone, please tell my fifth grade basketball coach, because I can assure you he didn't realize this.

**DRILL:** Take five minutes and write down as many stereotypes about a particular group (ideally a gender-based group) as you can think of. Go as fast as you can, don't judge yourself, and see how many you can come up with.

In the Cycle of Oppression, stereotypes serve as the basis for our formation of...

## PREJUDICE

Like a stereotype, a prejudice is a preconceived or oversimplified generalization about a group of people or a particular identity. What separates the two is that a prejudice is a conscious or subconscious negative or otherwise limiting belief about a group.

A common example of prejudice is the belief that women aren't capable of being successful bosses and are better suited for or prefer detail-oriented work. This prejudice totally makes sense though (does it?) because, *stereotypically speaking*, a successful boss is someone who is trustworthy, a good listener, able to empathize with their employees, and a strong multi-tasker (hold on a sec...), which are all *obviously* "man" qualities (Oh, wait, they aren't? Oops. I guess sometimes prejudice doesn't make sense).

Continuing the cycle, when an individual knowingly or unknow-

ingly acts on their prejudicial belief, we get...

## DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination occurs when an individual has prejudice and power and uses that power to unfairly deny access to or limit someone's ability to obtain resources because of that person's identity. Discrimination happens on an individual level; that is, from one individual to another (rather than from a group to an individual).

An example of discrimination is a person giving a job to an unqualified cisgender person in place of a qualified trans\*<sup>6</sup> person (which is generally legal, by the way).

And when a social group discriminates against another social group, we get...

## OPPRESSION

As I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, oppression is essentially discrimination on an institutional or societal level. I cannot oppress you, but a social group with a lot of power (let's say...straight + white + cisgender + nondisabled + male) can. And even though I just so happen to be a member of that group, I am by no means in control of it.

An example of oppression would be a law that allows organizations to legally deny transgender people employment solely because of their gender identity (this is in fact the case in most US states and it's this lack of protection under the law that enables our example of discrimination in the previous section to be possible).

When an individual grows up in a society with oppression and adopts the oppressive perspective, we get...

---

<sup>6</sup> In this book, I'll be employing the asterisk after trans as a form of inclusivity shorthand. You can read more about this in the appendix, but to keep it simple for now, you can think of this abbreviation as representing all transgender and non-binary identities (not simply referring to transgender men and transgender women). A simpler way might be to think that "trans\*" means "anyone who is not cisgender. If that's not simpler, that's okay. It'll make more sense when you get to section two. I just didn't want you looking to the bottom of the page every time you saw the asteriskthis isn't that kind of asterisk.

## INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

This happens when members of a target group are socialized into supporting and believing the oppressive beliefs (stereotypes and prejudice) about one or more social groups they belong to (i.e., identities they possess).

Based on how naturally each aspect of this cycle flows into the next, you can likely see how easily someone could internalize oppression—and how dangerous this can be. The same way we are taught to hold oppressive beliefs about members of other social groups, we're being taught to think this way about ourselves.

An example of internalized oppression would be a girl believing that girls are inherently bad at sports and deciding not to try to be good at sports because of this belief. Internalized oppression sometimes goes by another name: "The saddest byproduct of a social influence in the history of the universe and now I want to cry."

When individuals internalize oppressive beliefs about themselves and then act in ways that support and reinforce those oppressive beliefs, we get...

## STEREOTYPES (SECOND GENERATION)

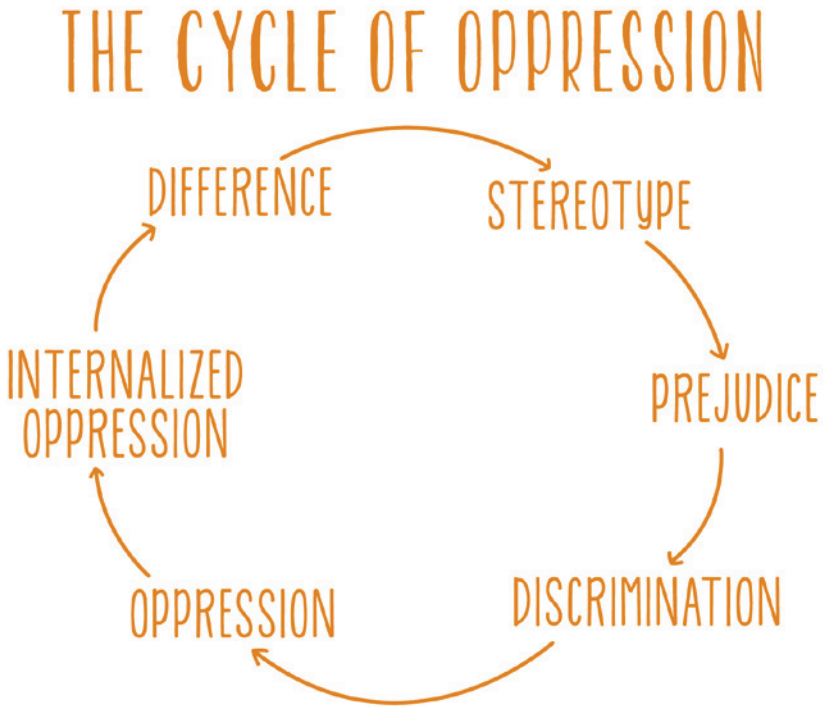
A girl who doesn't try at sports (because she "knows" she can't do well) ends up being bad at sports, so all the boys see this and think, "See! Girls *really are* bad at sports."

Transgender people who don't believe they are worthy of employment (because they "know" something about them is unsuitable for the workplace) are then unable to find gainful employment (and end up underemployed, unemployed, or homeless), so cisgender people see this and think, "Wow! Trans people *really aren't* employable."

A woman never asks for a promotion (because she "knows" the men around her are better suited for management positions, finding "evidence" of this in the fact that only 4.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women), so the men around her see this and think...OK. I'm done with these examples. I'm sad again. But you get the picture.

## THE CYCLE OF OPPRESSION

So that's how it works. Those are the components and their relationships to one another. Now, how about a visual representation?



*Oppression Word Associations*

*List of Stereotypes*

We have an agreement?

Yes. Let it be written.

We will share this one common value.

One universal ideal.

So what about the rest?

Can we come to any understanding?

Uhhh...

Ummm...

Yeah...

No.

Just kill each other?

Sounds good!



The Golden Rule Accords

## CHAPTER 5

# THE CORRUPTION OF THE GOLDEN RULE

“IT IS TEMPTING, IF THE ONLY TOOL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER, TO TREAT EVERYTHING AS IF IT WERE A NAIL.”

– *Abraham Maslow*

Have you ever heard the term “trigger” used in a social justice context? Basically, a trigger is a situation, word, or action that “triggers” an intense (and often destructive) emotional response in someone, the same way the trigger on a gun (small, unassuming, simple) can lead to big, horrible things when pulled.

The Golden Rule is a huge trigger for me, so writing this chapter is going to be intense. I’ll try my best to keep calm.

### THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule is considered one of the most basic, universal social laws governing human interaction. It has religious origins and dates back thousands of years to Babylon (which was more than just a pretty garden), but unlike most religious tenets, it is practiced and celebrated by atheists and theists alike. Awesome.

In case you’re somehow unfamiliar, the common understanding and application of the Golden Rule is “Do unto others as you would



have them do unto you.”

To really drive home the universality of this, let’s look at how different versions of the Golden Rule are presented in the world’s religions. Don’t worry. I’ve only seen a couple examples of it cropping up.

Baha’i Faith: “Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.” (Baha’u’llah, Gleanings)

Buddhism: “Treat not others in ways you yourself would find hurtful.” (Udana-Varga 5.18)

Christianity: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Jesus, Matthew 7:12)

Confucianism: “Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.” (Confucius, Analects 15.23)

Hinduism: “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.” (Mahabharata, 5:1517)

Islam: “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.” (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith)

Jainism: “One should treat all the creatures in the world as one would like to be treated.” (Mahavira, Sutrakritanga)

Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary.” (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

Native American Spirituality: “We are as much alive as we keep the world alive.” (Chief Dan George)

Sikhism: “I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all.” (Guru Granth Sahib, pg. 1299)

Taoism: “Regard your neighbor’s grain as your own grain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.” (T’ai Shang Kan Ying P’ien, 213–218)

Unitarian Universalism: “We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” (Uni-

tarian Universalist Principle 7)

Zoroastrianism: “Do not unto others whatever is injurious to yourself.” (Shayast-na-Shayast, 13.29)

Oh, did I say a “couple examples” of it appear in religions? Sorry. I meant to say that some version of it’s taught in just about every freaking major religion or faith system there is. And it says a lot, considering how historically divisive religion typically is, that one of the most fundamental beliefs of so many of the major religions is basically the same.

Not only is it the same, but it’s celebrated in its similarity. I pulled many of the examples above from a poster bragging about this universality. Hell, the name itself is braggadocious: The *Golden Rule*. The one rule to rule them all. What is this? Lord of the Rings?

No. This is real life.

## WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE GOLDEN RULE?

Let me tell you a story.

I was playing soccer one day when I overheard a spat. It had nothing to do with soccer (a largely drama-free sport, at least verbally: our drama is performed through an interpretive dance called “diving”), but we were on the field.

“I’m pissed that you made that comment on my picture [on Facebook],” he snapped.

“I didn’t realize it’d make you mad,” she replied. “That kind of thing never upsets me. It was a joke. Why are you so sensitive?”

The Golden Rule’s corruption doesn’t even respect the sacred boundaries of a soccer pitch.

You didn’t catch it? Oh, sorry. Let’s review the play-by-play.

**“I didn’t realize it’d make you mad.”**

We often base our assumptions on hypothesizing how someone else might feel, react, etc. in a certain situation. And we all know the danger with assuming and that silly expression I never get right (it does something to our asses?). Some might say it’s human nature. It’s in our DNA. I don’t think that’s necessarily the case. But we can all agree, whatever the root, assumptions can be dangerous.

**“That kind of thing never upsets me.”**

Another way we fuel our assumptions is by “putting ourselves in others’ shoes” and guesstimating (a word I learned in fifth grade that means “to make up”) how they would react. Try as you might, you *cannot* put yourself in someone else’s shoes. This statement is the essence of what’s wrong with the Golden Rule, so I’ll say it again: try as you might, you cannot put yourself in someone else’s shoes. And the above statement is the essence of the Golden Rule in action: “I didn’t do unto you as I would not have you do unto me, dude.” The “dude” freshens it up a bit, don’t you think?

**“It was a joke. Why are you so sensitive?”**

Ouch. Salt in the wound. What she was really saying was, “Dude (fresh, right?), I did unto you exactly how I would have had you do unto me, yet you are still upset, so clearly there is something wrong with *you*. What I did was completely justified and reinforced by thousands of iterations of the Golden Rule that have been socialized *unto* my head recursively since birth, dude.”

## THE CORRUPTION OF THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule, despite being based upon what I would assume (oops!) are good intentions, is inherently flawed. Treating others how we want to be treated assumes others want to be treated how we want to be treated, and *ipso facto*, that all people want to be treated the same way. Without going any further, you should already have a strong basis for ditching the Golden Rule.

So following the Golden Rule requires us to assume what will make other individuals happy/comfortable/not grumbly and then act on those assumptions in an effort of goodness. Bad plan.

But what’s worse is that we have been taught and retaught the Golden Rule so many times that we internally justify this method of behavior as invincible, despite the fact that it fails constantly. We believe that our intentions are more important than the outcomes of our actions, because “it’s the thought that counts,” right? Wrong. You can read more about this in Chapter 26, but for now, just know that it’s outcomes that count, not intentions.

Have you ever worked with a “difficult person”? I would bet (not

much money, because I don't have much money) that those "difficulties" you faced were exacerbated by your (probably) inadvertent exercising of the Golden Rule. Do unto a difficult (=different from you) person as you would have done unto you (=same as you), and you're going to be done unto with a headache and a screaming sound inside your head.

Or have you ever tried to help a friend, loved one, or family member through a tough spot, thinking "What would I need right now if I were them? Chocolate. Loads of chocolate." Then surprised them with a wheelbarrow of assorted chocolates, only to learn they have a deadly nut allergy (something you probably should have known if they were really your friend). Now your friend is dead. Ever had that one? No? Is this one too extreme? This one is too extreme. Anyway, as I was saying...

The Golden Rule is as relentless in ruining our happy relationships as it is universal.

So what? Am I just going to tear apart your social foundation of goodness and leave you starving for a way to make those around you happy? Never. I'll feed you.

## INTRODUCING: THE PLATINUM RULE

Platinum is worth about three times as much as gold (per ounce, market value). That's important for the name. Keep that in mind. The Platinum Rule is so simple that I'm going to write it twice.

"Do unto others *as they would have done unto them*, dudes." Again, but with emphasis, that's "Do unto others as they would have done unto them, dudes."

"How do I figure out how other people want to be treated?" I'm always asked in a sassy, know-it-all tone.

"Easy," I slyly reply (good rhyme!). "Ask them."

Ask others how they want to be treated. Ask them how you can be the best friend, teacher, student, boss, employee, child, parent (etc.) possible, based on their needs and wants.

Ask them how you should support them when they are down, and how you can help them celebrate when they are up. Learn what frustrates them and avoid that. Learn what helps them deal with frustrations they are experiencing and foster that.

Ask them how you can be a good person to them, the kind of person you always wanted to be while you were following the Golden Rule but so often fell a bit short of.

It can't be that simple, can it?

Oh, it can. And it is.

The basis of the Platinum Rule is similar to the basis of the Golden Rule: above all else, attempt to do no harm. But the unfortunate flaw of the Golden Rule is that the more strictly you follow it, the more inevitably it leads you to doing harm by accident.

The Platinum Rule is also based on this “do no harm” philosophy, but following it provides you with the means to actually do no harm. And even better, the Platinum Rule goes a step further, from proscribing you from harming others to prescribing you to do the best you can to see to others’ needs. It was coined by this guy named Milton Bennett back in the 80s, who did a lot of work trying to understand international affairs, and why intervention often leads to negative outcomes (based on the title of this chapter, you can likely guess his argument).

Avoiding harm is great, but seeking out opportunities to provide support and foster happiness is even greater.

## A FINAL NOTE: THE PLATINUM RULE AND THIS BOOK

The Platinum Rule is my life philosophy. I truly believe in its ability to improve the quality of life for all those who practice it, and it underlies everything I write about in this book.

When making recommendations and talking about entire groups of people (like “trans\* people,” for example), I do my best to present the best way to handle situations most of the time (i.e., fifty-one times out of a hundred). But for every rule, there are exceptions, and when it comes to discussing and understanding identity, there are far more exceptions than there are rules.

With all this considered, every recommendation I make in this book (e.g., “intersex people don’t like being labeled as ‘hermaphrodites’”) is superseded by the Platinum Rule (e.g., if an intersex person tells you they identify with the label “hermaphrodite,” that is their right to do so, and you’ll serve them best by using that label). Resist

the Golden Rule<sup>7</sup>, and embrace the Platinum.

It's helpful to learn general ideas of how you can be inclusive of different groups of people and understand a group in a broad sense, but whenever you can, you should treat individuals on an individual basis.

---

<sup>7</sup> All bashing aside, there is one indisputable nugget that can be gleaned from our reflex to apply the Golden Rule in every situation: the Golden Rule does a great job of pointing out to us what we need, what we prefer, and what we desire. If someone says “How can I be a good friend to you?” and you have no idea how to respond, you might consider “How would I be a good friend to someone else?” Boom. Golden Rule workaround.

# YOU SOUP Recipe version 2 by its pronounced **METRO**sexual.com



## Ingredients:

### base & broth

- race
- ethnicity
- gender
- sexuality



### early additions

- socioeconomic status
- geographic location
- education
- family structure



### optional

- hobbies & passions
- religion & faith
- career
- political beliefs



### secret ingredients

- personal experiences
- changes to other ingredients
- hidden identities
- misperception of ingredients



## Procedure:

Combine base ingredients to create broth and bring to a boil. Toss in early additions and simmer over low heat for many, many years, adding optional and secret ingredients to taste. Makes one You.

## CHAPTER 6

# UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY

“HUMAN TRAGEDIES: WE ALL WANT TO BE EXTRAORDINARY AND WE ALL JUST WANT TO FIT IN. UNFORTUNATELY, EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE RARELY FIT IN.”

– *Sebastyne Young*

In doing the work I do, I often find myself struggling to help people make sense of the two extremes of identity: on one side we have the idea that people in a group are all the same (stereotypes), while the other side supports this idea that everyone is absolutely unique (snowflakes).

I find myself saying, “We’re not the same, but we’re also not *that* different,” to the furrowing of brows, so I wanted to take a moment here to talk about the relationship between individual identity and social group memberships, as well as to introduce a new graphic concept.

This chapter will help you reconcile a lot of what I’ll talk about later, specifically the recurring theme of the relationships among individuality, gender norms, gender roles, and gender identity.



## THE SNOWFLAKE VS. THE STEREOTYPE

You have been told all your life that you're unique, special, like a snowflake. Nobody is like you. You're one in seven billion (or one in 108 billion, an estimated total number of humans ever, if you want to get technical), and nobody can take that away from you.

Yet at the same time, you've been told that you can guess that someone else will be like everyone else in a particular group based on their membership in that group (e.g., a gay person will be like gay people). And in your life you've seen evidence that supports this idea.

So which is true?

Both. Kinda.

### **You're Part Snowflake**

You, at a basic level, are a combination of dozens (or more) of identities that merge to form one unique individual. Some of these identities were granted to you at birth (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality), others were imposed on or ascribed to you as a child (e.g., socioeconomic status, geographical location, education), some are your choice throughout life (e.g., religion, hobbies, career) and some aren't (e.g., disability status, identities falsely assumed of you by others).

Take all of your identities, add them up, and you get you. There has likely never been another person, in all the 108 billion of Earth's history, whose You Soup recipe was identical to yours. Deeeelish.

### **And You're Part Stereotype**

Calm down, Snowflake. Gimme a second here. Remember all those identities I talked about before? Each one has a long list of stereotypes attached to it—expectations we make of people based on their group identities. This affects you in two distinct ways.

One, in situations where one of those identities is salient (a fancy word we use to mean “particularly prominent”), folks will tend to ascribe the stereotypes of that identity to you (whether you're expressing them or not), or may be hypersensitive to anything you might do to reinforce those stereotypes. And if people see you as a stereotypical X, they will treat you like a stereotypical X.

Two, many of us unknowingly act out stereotypes of group identities we possess or are drawn (knowingly or subconsciously) to par-

ticular groups based on certain stereotypes. Further, some folks act in stereotypical ways when figuring out their identity because they feel like they should (remember internalized oppression from the previous chapter?).

So as much as you know you're a fully unique You Soup, in many situations throughout your life you will only be seen as one or two commonplace ingredients (rhubarb if you're lucky, because that one's fun to say).

### **Why This Doesn't Rock**

You know you're not one ingredient; you're a unique flavor that could only be created by a combination of all of your ingredients, in exactly the right proportions (which, if you're Paula Dean, would be a proportion of 2:1, butter to everything else). Yet many times in your life you're going to be viewed as a one-ingredient dish.

You also know that other people are just as unique, yet whether you realize it or not, you're constantly seeing them as one-ingredient concoctions as well, and if that one ingredient is one you've heard nothing but bad things about, you'll probably never even taste them and learn their true flavor. OK. This analogy is getting gross.

### **Why This Rocks**

As you start forcing yourself to realize that everyone is made up of dozens and dozens of different ingredients, many of which make up a part of your You Soup, you'll realize something reality-shaking: even though you're completely unique, you're really not unique (you're a unique combination of common ingredients), and that can be awesome.

It's rocks to know that every person you meet probably shares at least one aspect of identity with you, a form of common ground. It's comforting to know that there are other people out there who know your plight or have shared in your experiences. In this way, these big-picture group identities are wonderful to have.

## THINGS TO MULL OVER

OK. So you understand the idea of You Soup, and you have a better idea of how we can be absolutely unique and not absolutely unique, all at the same time. Here's some food for thought as you continue to

chew on this idea. OK. Yes, I'm a little addicted to this analogy:

Even though you may share a group identity with someone, you don't necessarily know their story. Ever noticed how some foods taste better with other foods in the same bite (like how cheese makes broccoli edible?). Identities are the same way: the combinations make a huge difference.

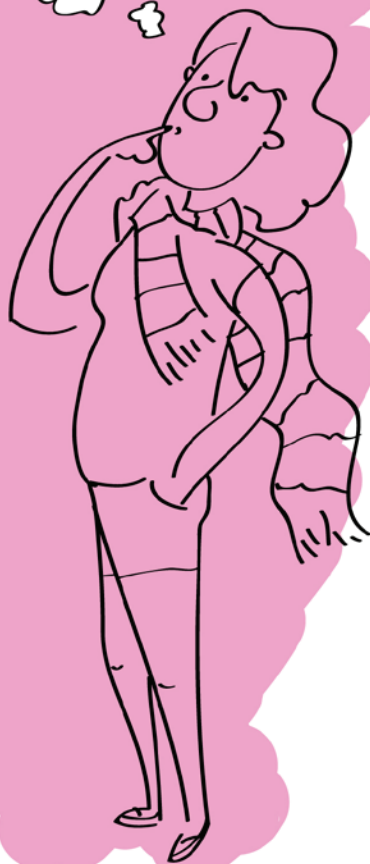
Even though you may share a group identity with someone, you don't necessarily know their story. Sorry. This is incredibly important, so I felt I had to say it twice.

Be careful deconstructing a person (even yourself) down to the individual ingredients. While this will be a great learning experience and eye-opening in many ways, for every ingredient you know about, there is likely one you don't (this goes for you, but more so for others), and those secret ingredients might have the biggest impact of all.

Try to have a relationship with an entire person, not with one of their identities. You are inevitably going to be drawn to certain ingredients more than others, but a healthier relationship is one that is holistically inclusive of all identities.

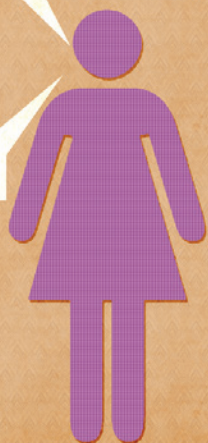
BEING AN INDIVIDUAL  
BEING AN A PERSON

But which way for individual people who wear scarves during the summer?

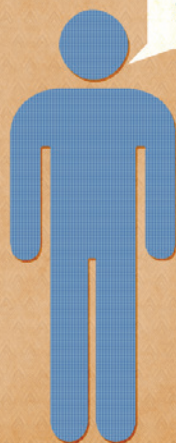


Sometimes it's easy to forget how good we have it.

Agreed!



You're right. Let's try to do that less often.



## CHAPTER 7

# CHECKING YOUR PRIVILEGE

“WHAT IS A MINORITY? THE CHOSEN HEROES OF THIS EARTH HAVE BEEN IN A MINORITY. THERE IS NOT A SOCIAL, POLITICAL, OR RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE THAT YOU ENJOY TODAY THAT WAS NOT BOUGHT FOR YOU BY THE BLOOD AND TEARS AND PATIENT SUFFERING OF THE MINORITY. IT IS THE MINORITY THAT HAVE STOOD IN THE VAN OF EVERY MORAL CONFLICT AND ACHIEVED ALL THAT IS NOBLE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD.”

– *John B. Gough*

Privilege is a term we use to describe any unearned advantages you have in society as a result of your identity group memberships. Privilege is not something you choose to receive or dismiss. It is automatically granted to you based on your identity, and it informs the ways individuals and groups interact with and view you.

Privilege is an artifact of oppression, and groups that hold power in the oppression differential typically possess the most privilege. In order to work against oppression, we need to work against our own inherent privilege.

While we cannot “turn off” our privilege, we can “check” our privilege, meaning we can examine and address the privileges that our identities grant us. Checking your privilege makes you more aware

of the privilege while putting you in positions where you can make efforts to neutralize your privilege and level the playing field for members of all identity groups (in everything from informal social settings to formal occupational settings).

The first step to checking your privilege is simply gaining awareness of the privilege that comes with (or doesn't come with) your various identity group memberships. In the early '90s, Peggy McIntosh conceived a simple and effective way of doing this that is now commonly referred to as a "privilege checklist."

## THE PRIVILEGE CHECKLIST

In a short 1990 essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," McIntosh introduced the idea that people who are white are always carrying with them an "invisible knapsack" filled with resources, guides, maps, blank checks, and other helpful tools that make life easier for them. Members of different races are born with different knapsacks, or sets of tools, that they have at their disposal.

She "unpacked" her own knapsack by writing what became the first example of a privilege checklist. In it, she addressed roughly fifty ways she experiences unearned social advantages on a daily basis because of her whiteness.

Expanding on her work, following you will find a few lists I've written that share the contents of several other identity groups' invisible knapsacks. The goal in creating these lists is not to shame members of privileged groups, but rather to make cognizant in their minds the privileges with which they were born in hopes of increasing their ability to empathize with individuals who were not so fortunate.

It's worth noting that, as with everything in identity, all of the items on each of these lists apply broadly to the identity groups and are the privileges they typically experience. It is by no means meant to say that every individual within each of these groups will experience every privilege, nor experience it in the same way. Intersections of identity play a large role in privilege, as a particular underprivileged identity a person possesses may cancel out, or at least impose upon, the privileges of a privileged identity they possess.

In the next few sections, you'll see three different privilege lists. These are three examples of how privilege might show up for three

different dimensions of identity. (For more privilege lists, or resources related to privilege, visit [www.guidetogender.com/links/#privilege](http://www.guidetogender.com/links/#privilege))

### **Cisgender Privilege**

Following is a list of cisgender identity privileges. If you're not already familiar with the term, "cisgender" means having your sex assigned at birth correspond to your gender identity (e.g., at birth, doctors said "It's a boy" and, later in life, when you could speak for yourself, you agreed, "Yes, I'm a boy! Please don't call me it."). We'll discuss this more in, well, most of the rest of the book. But for now, the simplest way to think about cisgender is someone who is *not* transgender.

If you are cisgender, listed below are benefits that result from your alignment of identity and perceived identity. If you are cisgender, there's a good chance you've never thought about these things. Try to be more cognizant, and you'll start to realize how much work we have to do in order to make things better for the transgender folks who don't have access to these privileges. (If you're unsure of what it means to be "transgender," don't worry—again, you have a whole book ahead of you to figure it out.)

1. You can use public restrooms without fear of verbal abuse, physical intimidation, or arrest.
2. You can use public facilities such as gym locker rooms and store changing rooms without stares, fear, or anxiety.
3. Strangers don't assume they can ask you what your genitals look like and how you have sex.
4. Your validity as a man/woman/human is not based on how much surgery you've had or how well you "pass" as non-transgender.
5. You can walk through the world and generally blend in, not being constantly stared or gawked at, whispered about, pointed at, or laughed at because of your gender expression.
6. You can access gender-exclusive spaces (e.g., a space or activity for women), and not be excluded due to your trans status.
7. Strangers call you by the name you provide and don't ask what your "real name" (birth name) is and then assume that they have a



- right to call you by that name.
8. You can reasonably assume that your ability to acquire a job, rent an apartment, or secure a loan will not be denied on the basis of your gender identity/expression.
  9. You can flirt, engage in courtship, or form a relationship and not fear that your biological status may be cause for rejection or attack, nor will it cause your partner to question their sexual orientation.
  10. If you end up in the emergency room, you do not have to worry that your gender will keep you from receiving appropriate treatment or that all of your medical issues will be seen as a result of your gender.
  11. Your identity was not formally (until 2013) considered a mental pathology (“gender identity disorder” in the DSM IV) by the psychological and medical establishments, and still pathologized by the public.
  12. You don’t need to worry about being placed in a sex-segregated detention center, holding facility, jail, or prison that is incongruent with your identity.
  13. You don’t have to worry about being profiled on the street as a sex worker because of your gender expression.
  14. You are not required to undergo an extensive psychological evaluation in order to receive basic medical care.
  15. You do not have to defend your right to be a part of “queer” (or the queer community), and gays and lesbians will not try to exclude you from “their” equal rights movement because of your gender identity (or any equality movement, including feminist rights).
  16. If you are murdered (or have any crime committed against you), your gender expression will not be used as a justification for your murder (“gay panic”), nor as a reason to coddle the perpetrators.
  17. You can easily find role models and mentors to emulate who share your identity.
  18. Hollywood accurately depicts people of your gender in films and

television, without tokenizing your identity as the focus of a dramatic storyline or the punchline of a joke.

19. You can assume that everyone you encounter will understand your identity and will not think you're confused, misled, or hell-bound when you reveal it to them.
20. You can purchase clothes that match your gender identity without being refused service, mocked by staff, or questioned about your genitals.
21. You can purchase shoes that fit your gender expression without having to order them in special sizes or asking someone to custom-make them.
22. No stranger checking your identification or driver's license will ever insult or glare at you because your name or sex does not match the sex they believed you to be based on your gender expression.
23. You can reasonably assume that you will not be denied services at a hospital, bank, or other institution because the staff does not believe the gender marker on your ID card to match your gender identity.
24. Your gender is an option on a form.
25. You can tick a box on a form without someone disagreeing and telling you not to lie.
26. You don't have to fear interactions with police officers due to your gender identity.
27. You can go places with friends on a whim knowing there will be bathrooms there you can use.
28. You don't have to convince your parents of your true gender and/or have to earn your parents' and siblings' love and respect all over again because of your gender identity.
29. You don't have to remind your extended family over and over to use proper gender pronouns (e.g., after transitioning).
30. You don't have to deal with old photographs that do not reflect

who you truly are.

31. If you're dating someone, you know they aren't just looking to satisfy a curiosity or kink pertaining to your gender identity (e.g., the "novelty" of having sex with a trans person).
32. You can pretend that anatomy and gender are irrevocably entwined when having the "boy parts and girl parts" talk with children, instead of having to explain the actual complexity of the issue.

### **Male Privilege**

Following is a list of male privileges. If you are male (and a man), listed below are benefits that result from being born with that gender and sex. If you identify as a man, there's a good chance you've never thought about these things. Try to be more mindful of these privileges in your daily life, and you'll understand how much work we have to do to make a society that is equitable to all people, regardless of their sex or gender.

1. If you have a bad day or are in a bad mood, people aren't going to blame it on your gender.
2. You can be careless with your money and not have people blame it on your gender.
3. You can be a careless driver and not have people blame it on your gender.
4. You can be confident that your coworkers won't assume you were hired because of your gender.
5. If you are never promoted, it isn't because of your gender.
6. You can expect to be paid equitably for the work you do and not paid less because of your gender.
7. If you are unable to succeed in your career, that won't be seen as evidence against your gender in the workplace.
8. A decision to hire you won't be based on whether the employer assumes you will be having children in the near future.
9. You can generally work comfortably (or walk down a public street)

without the fear of sexual harassment.

10. You can generally walk alone at night without the fear of being raped or otherwise harmed.
11. You can go on a date with a stranger without the fear of being raped.
12. You can dress how you want and not worry it will be used as a defense if you are raped.
13. If you are straight, you are not likely to be abused by your partner nor be told to continue living in an abusive household for your children.
14. You can decide not to have children and not have your masculinity questioned.
15. If you choose to have children, you will be praised for caring for your children instead of being expected to be the full-time caretaker.
16. You can balance a career and a family without being called selfish for not staying at home (or being constantly pressured to stay at home).
17. If you are straight and decide to have children with your partner, you can assume this will not affect your career.
18. If you rise to prominence in an organization/role, no one will assume it is because you slept your way to the top.
19. You can seek political office without having your gender be a part of your platform.
20. You can seek political office without fear of your relationship with your children, or whom you hire to take care of them, being scrutinized by the press.
21. Most political representatives share your gender, particularly the higher-ups.
22. Your political officials fight for issues that pertain to your gender, or at least don't dismiss your issues as "special interest."

23. You can ask for the “person in charge” and will likely be greeted by a member of your gender.
24. As a child, you were able to find plenty of non-limiting, non-gender-role-stereotyped media to view.
25. You can disregard your appearance without worrying about being criticized at work or in social situations.
26. You can spend time on your appearance without being criticized for upholding unhealthy gender norms.
27. If you’re not conventionally attractive (or in shape), you don’t have to worry as much about it negatively affecting your social or career potential.
28. You’re not expected to spend excessive amounts of money on grooming, style, and appearance to fit in, while making less money.
29. You can have promiscuous sex and be viewed positively for it.
30. You can go to a car dealership or mechanic and assume you’ll get a fair deal and not be taken advantage of.
31. Colloquial phrases and conventional language reflect your gender (e.g., mailman, “all men are created equal”).
32. Every major religion in the world is led by individuals of your gender.
33. You can practice religion without subjugating yourself or thinking of yourself as less because of your gender.
34. You are unlikely to be interrupted in conversations because of your gender.

### **Heterosexual Privilege**

Following is a list of examples of heterosexual privilege. If you are straight (or, in some cases, perceived to be), you can live without ever having to think twice, face, confront, engage, or cope with anything listed below. These privileges are granted to you simply for being born straight, and many of them are things you’ve likely taken for granted.

1. Receiving public recognition and support for an intimate relationship (e.g., congratulations for an engagement).
2. Expressing affection in most social situations and not expecting hostile or violent reactions from others.
3. Living with your partner openly.
4. Expressing pain when a relationship ends from death or separation and receiving support from others.
5. Receiving social acceptance from neighbors, colleagues, and good friends.
6. Learning about romance and relationships from fictional movies and television shows.
7. Having role models of your gender and sexual orientation.
8. Having positive and accurate media images of people with whom you can identify.
9. Expecting to be around others of your sexuality most of the time. Not worrying about being the only one of your sexuality in a class, on a job, or in a social situation.
10. Talking openly about your relationship, vacations, and family planning you and your lover/partner are doing.
11. Easily finding a neighborhood in which residents will accept how you have constituted your household.
12. Raising, adopting, and teaching children without people believing that you will molest them or force them into your sexuality.
13. Working in a job dominated by people of your gender, but not feeling as though you are a representative/spokesperson for your sexuality.
14. Receiving paid leave from employment when grieving the death of your spouse.
15. Assuming strangers won't ask, "How does sex work for you?" or other too-personal questions.

16. Sharing health, auto, and homeowners' insurance policies at reduced rates.
17. Not having to hide or lie about women- or men-only social activities.
18. Acting, dressing, or talking as you choose without it being a reflection on people of your sexuality.
19. Freely teaching about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals without being seen as having a bias because of your sexuality or forcing your "homosexual agenda" on students.
20. Having property laws work in your favor, filing joint tax returns, and automatically inheriting from your spouse under probate laws.
21. Sharing joint child custody.
22. Going wherever you wish knowing that you will not be harassed, beaten, or killed because of your sexuality.
23. Not worrying about being mistreated by the police nor victimized by the criminal justice system because of your sexuality.
24. Legally marrying the person you love, and not having that marriage questions or refuted in court.
25. Being granted immediate access to your loved one in case of accident or emergency.
26. Knowing that your basic civil rights will not be denied or outlawed because some people disapprove of your sexuality.
27. Expecting that your children will be given texts in school that support your kind of family unit and will not be taught that your sexuality is a "perversion."
28. Freely expressing your sexuality without fear of being prosecuted for breaking the law.
29. Belonging to the religious denomination of your choice and knowing that your sexuality will not be denounced by its religious leaders.

30. Knowing that you will not be fired from a job nor denied a promotion based on your sexuality.
31. Not being asked by your child's school to only send one parent to back-to-school night so as not to upset the other parents by having two same-sex partners in the class together.
32. Playing a professional sport and not worrying that your athletic ability will be overshadowed by your sexuality and the fact that you share a locker room with the same gender.
33. Not having to worry about being evicted if your landlord finds out about your sexuality.
34. Not having to "come out" (explain to people that you're straight, as they will most likely assume it).
35. Knowing that people aren't going to mutter about your sexuality behind your back.
36. Knowing that being open with your sexuality isn't going to change how people view you.
37. Being able to live anywhere in the world and find people like yourself, unlike gay people, who are limited geographically. (Even if the people in more rural areas aren't homophobic, living in a low-density population means social isolation, lack of a dating pool, etc., for queer folks. Even among urban areas, there are only a few cities in the world, relatively speaking, where gay people can live openly and without too much fear.)
38. Being able to have your partner from a different country obtain citizenship in your country through marriage.
39. Not having people think your sexuality is a mental health problem.
40. Not having to think about whether your kid's friend's parents will flip out when they pick their kid up from a play date and are greeted by you and your partner.
41. Not having to worry that people won't let their children play with your children because of your sexuality.



42. Not having to worry about where you can move, alone or with your spouse, and have equal job opportunities abroad.
43. Being able to move abroad with your children without sudden changes of your legal status and the possibly of even losing your children.

## HOW (NOT) TO USE A PRIVILEGE LIST

The privilege lists that I've published on my site (those above, and others) have been downloaded over 100 million times cumulatively. I share this because it's cool to say (big number!), but also because that reach has allowed me to see these lists used in a variety of ways: some good, some neutral, and some downright harmful.

The ways to use this tool are innumerable, and the creativity I've witnessed has been astounding. So instead of using this space to advocate for ways I encourage using the lists, because I don't feel equipped to write that (y'all are doing great), it'll be easier to write few quick "Please Don't Do This" bullets:

- **Please don't use privilege lists to shame people for the identities they possess.** Read up on shame and guilt from Brené Brown for more clarity on how this might look, and why it isn't helpful.
- **Please don't use privilege lists in a way that requires folks without privilege to become educators of those with privilege.** Some activities, or other formats of discussion, push the least privileged people in the room onto a soapbox to be spokespeople for life without privilege. This can be, and often is, harmful.
- **Please don't use privilege lists in a way that makes the privileges seem immutable.** The idea of this tool is that it's unjust that we have a system that rewards certain ways of being, and punishes or ignores others. These are lists that should (and hopefully can) be expanded to people of all identities. They shouldn't be privileges, but *rights*. Create room for this growth, or evolution, in the ways you use the tool.

## CHECKING THE REST OF YOUR PRIVILEGE

The above are only a few examples of privileged identities. There is a good chance you possess other identities that are granted some level of privilege in society (e.g., based on race, ethnicity, disability status, religion, social class). If you're curious to dig more into this, you can find more examples on the book's website, and elsewhere online.

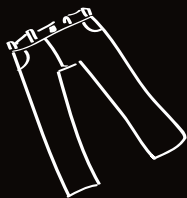
**DRILL:** Take some time to write lists like these for the various identities you possess. It may seem overwhelming, but it's actually frighteningly easy once you get going. Just start with "As a member of \_\_\_\_\_ group, I have unique access to..." and go from there. This is one of the most important exercises in which you can partake when it comes to understanding and advocating for social justice, so dedicate some time to it before moving on.

Peggy McIntosh, in her aforementioned seminal essay, wrote that when considering privilege, the key question we should ask is, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?" In the next section of the book, and the two sections that follow, we'll get into just that.

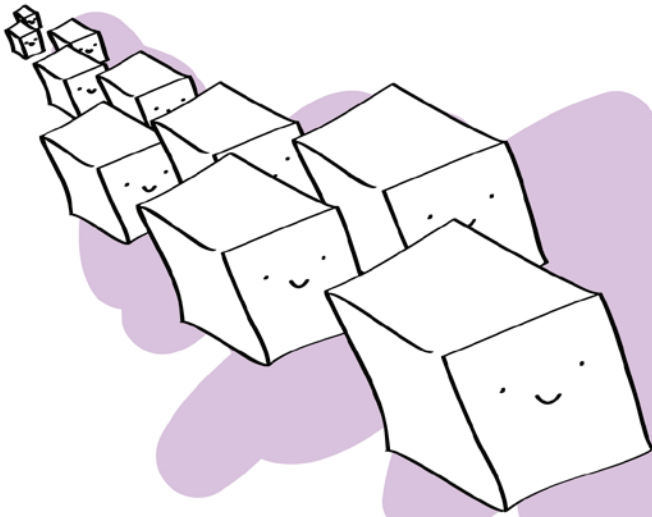
## Section 2

# BREAKING THROUGH THE BINARY

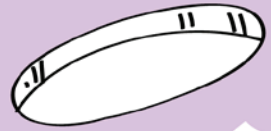
MOVING FROM A TRADITIONAL, INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF  
GENDER TO AN INCLUSIVE, COGNITIVELY COMPLEX UNDERSTANDING  
OF GENDER DIVERSITY.



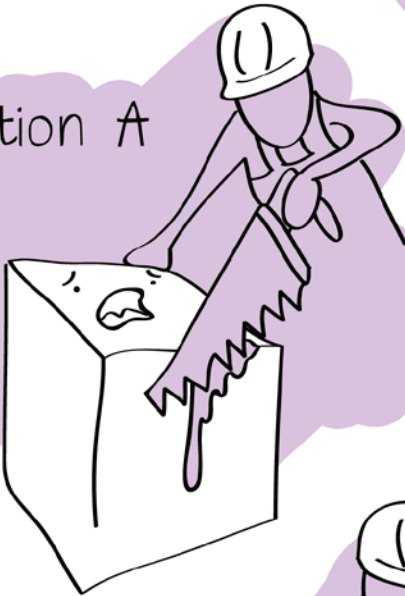
8. GENDER NORMS	55
9. INTRODUCTION TO THE GENDERBREAD PERSON	65
10. GENDERBREAD 101: GETTING STARTED	71
11. USING THE “SPECTRUMS” GENDERBREAD PERSON	81
12. AN IMPROVED WAY OF VISUALIZING GENDER	89
13. USING THE “-NESS” GENDERBREAD PERSON	95
14. GENDER IDENTITY EXPLORED	103
15. GENDER EXPRESSION EXPLORED	109
16. ANATOMICAL SEX EXPLORED	119
17. ATTRACTION AND GENDER	127
18. AN ASSORTMENT OF GENDER IDENTITIES	133
19. HOW TO DIAGNOSE SOMEONE AS TRANSGENDER	141
20. THE DANGERS OF NORMALIZED BINARY GENDER	147
21. A “NON-VITAL” MEDICAL PROCEDURE	155
22. LET’S TALK ABOUT BATHROOMS	161
23. A UNIFIED UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER	169



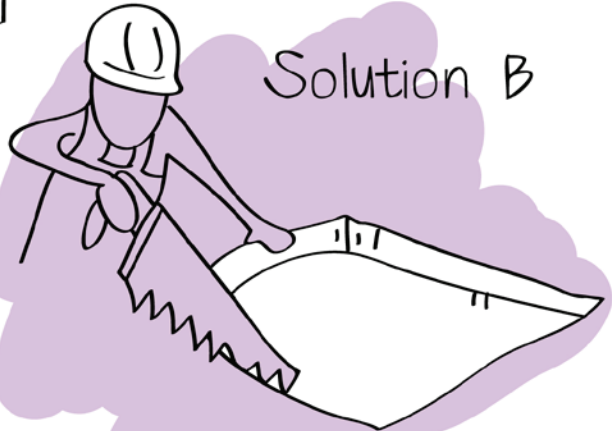
Problem



Solution A



Solution B



## CHAPTER 8

# GENDER NORMS

“I HAVE NOT LIVED AS A WOMAN. I HAVE LIVED AS A MAN. I’VE JUST DONE WHAT I DAMN WELL WANTED TO, AND I’VE MADE ENOUGH MONEY TO SUPPORT MYSELF, AND [I] AIN’T AFRAID OF BEING ALONE.”

– *Katharine Hepburn*

When studying gender, three distinct fields of science interplay with one another: psychology, sociology, and biology. And several other subjects jump into the fray here and there: anthropology, history, economics, and more. This is as fascinating as it is potentially confusing, particularly if you don’t have much background in these areas of study.

My education and perspective have led me to approach gender (and most of social justice) with a heavy sociological slant, so you’ll see that sociological themes are the most prevalent throughout this book. One of the most fundamental ideas in sociology is that of social norms.

Let’s talk about social norms in general and then discuss their effect on gender.

## SOCIAL NORMS

The down-and-dirty explanation of social norms is that they are informal (usually) rules that a society reinforces and that members of

the society live by. Sociologists and psychologists have slightly varied takes on this, but the overall idea is the same.

A few examples of social norms: chewing with your mouth closed (and just about anything else you'd group under the umbrella of "politeness" or "courtesy"); wearing conventional clothing for a particular situation (no PJs at the opera, no tuxedos or dresses to bed); and, a particularly famous one, facing the doors in an elevator and keeping chitchat to a minimum.

While most norms are only informally reinforced (i.e., they aren't illegal), you will often find that the pressure to conform to them is far greater than the pressure to conform to some formally reinforced laws (like jaywalking).

**DRILL:** Go find an elevator—right now, or rather, after you finish reading this paragraph—and ride it up and down a few times. First, ride it the normal way: facing the doors, mostly silent. See how that feels; take note of your internal dialogue and how you perceive your elevating peers' attitudes toward you. Then, and this is the fun (horrible) part, do the exact opposite: stand with your back to the door at the front of the elevator, facing your soon-to-be elevating friends (enemies), make solid eye contact, and engage in serious conversations with them (e.g., introduce yourself, ask them why they are riding the elevator, what they are doing with their lives, what their social security numbers are—ya know, normal stuff). Now take note of your feelings and what you perceive their attitudes toward you to be.

What's fascinating about social norms is how powerful their influence can be. Take the example of incorrectly riding an elevator compared to the example of jaywalking.

We are never taught how to ride elevators. There are no signs, rule-books, or other formal indicators that inform us what the correct way to ride in an elevator is. However, even without that, we could each individually write down a list of "rules of elevator riding" and they would be remarkably similar. The process through which we learned those rules is called socialization.

Now let's consider jaywalking. Jaywalking is a formal crime complete with indicators from signs on the street and written laws in law books, and our government and our parents formally teach us that it is unacceptable behavior. There is even a serious repercussion (if you're

not rollin' in the dollas) if you choose to break this rule and are caught.

But if you were to break the jaywalking rule (legal note: this publication does not condone reckless abandon of the law even for the express purpose of social experimentation—*Kidding! Freak what you feel!*), and then break the elevator riding rule, Vegas odds go to the second experience feeling far more wrong. Why is this?

Social norms often trump formal laws when it comes to prescribing acceptable behavior. And in this particular case, it just so happens that engaging in jaywalking is a social norm (i.e., it is something we as a society encourage, or at least condone). What a crazy, mixed-up, hypocritical society we live in, where formal laws are often felt less severely than informal laws and our informal laws often directly conflict with formal laws.

And we're just getting started.

## SOCIAL NORMS + GENDER = GENDER NORMS

Keeping everything I just presented in mind, let's focus on a particular subset of social norms: gender norms. Just about everything in this book is based on gender norms, so it's probably worth giving them a once-over.

Like all social norms, gender norms are informal rules that our society imposes on us and that we feel an immense amount of pressure to follow. But unlike a lot of social norms, gender norms are often formally taught to us, and the consequences for following or breaking them can be equally dire, depending on your individual identity (I'll come back to this, so don't worry if you don't follow right now).

And also unlike most social norms, gender norms are so pervasive in our society that they are inescapable. No matter what you are doing, where you are, who you are with, or what time of day it is—even when you're asleep—you're being influenced by a gender norm (or a few hundred).

Gender norms tell us what types of things we should wear, buy, be interested in, and want to be when we grow up. Gender norms are why we might say “boys like video games” (despite people of all genders loving video games, because video games are awesome), or “girls just like pink.”

Gender norms, like all norms, change over time, sometimes quite



dramatically. Which is why it might be surprising to know that in the U.S., about a century ago, it was boys who liked pink (“a strong color for boys”) and girls who liked blue (“a delicate color for girls”).

## GENDER NORMS VS. GENDER ROLES

A “role” is a societal station or position with a list of prescribed behaviors and responsibilities. An example of a role we’re all likely familiar with is worker. As with norms, occupiers of roles are informally pressured to behave in certain ways or possess certain characteristics (e.g., workers should be timely, be appropriately dressed, put their employers’ needs before their own, etc.). Or, put another way, every role comes with a specific set of norms.

The difference between gender norms and gender roles, then, is that gender norms are informal laws of society pertaining to gender, while gender roles are specific groupings of gender norms that result in specific societal positions. Think of gender norms as ingredients (tomatoes, onions, avocados, salt, pepper, lime, cilantro) and gender roles as finished dishes (guacamole, or should I say *guacamanle*? OK. I guess I shouldn’t have).

One of the most powerful gender roles that people often think of is “mother.” This is different from the social role of “parent,” because it implies a specific subset of parenting personality traits (e.g., caring, sensitive, compassionate, empathic, nurturing) and actions (e.g., preparing food, feeding, swaddling, hugging). Contrast those against “father.” Now, you can do the same thing for “child,” compared to “son” or “daughter.”<sup>8</sup>

**DRILL:** Take five minutes and write a list of gender norms. Go as fast as you can, don’t overthink it, don’t consider what’s “right” or “wrong”—just write down everything that pops into your mind and see how many you can come up with.

---

<sup>8</sup> The examples in this paragraph, as with almost every example I write in this book, are from the perspective of how I was socialized to understand these roles. This will be different for you, and could be dramatically different, depending on how similar our cultural upbringing was. This is why examples are a double-edged sword that I try to wield cautiously: they help anchor an abstract concept, but I don’t want you to think they’re “correct.”

## A SQUARE SOCIAL ROLE FOR A CIRCLE SOCIETY

Unlike most social roles, adhering to sets of gender norms (gender roles) can create as much dissonance for some folks as breaking them. That is, there are millions of people for whom gender roles create a no-win situation: breaking them creates external conflict, but following them creates conflict within.

This is because unlike other social roles, gender roles tend to overlap and intersect and form one fluid, multifaceted role, instead of several independent roles. How about a concrete example of what I mean?

Consider the following social roles: worker, teacher, student, boss, father, mother, son, daughter. The first four could be considered genderless social roles (even though this isn't entirely true, let's just go with that for the sake of time), while the latter four are gendered.

The first four roles could be filled by one person, all in the course of the day, without any issues. This happens in many workplaces every day. Take my previous career of university administrator, for example. All day, I was an employee of the university who followed all the inherent worker norms (e.g., I dressed professionally, showed up on time, worked hard all day, was polite and helpful whenever I could be, etc.) in order to be viewed in a positive light; I would often be called on to be a teacher for a colleague (generally this involved helping someone with something computery); similarly, I was constantly learning new things from my colleagues (i.e., being a student); and I supervised student groups, occupying the boss role for them.

No problems there, right? Right. Now, let's consider the latter four roles, the gendered ones, from my list above: father, mother, son, daughter.

In an attempt to fill all four of these social roles in one day in my interactions with individual people in my life (i.e., being simultaneously fatherly, sonly, motherly, and daughterly to each person I encounter), I would likely end up, at the least, alarming everyone. An impressive feat, since my friends and family already expect "abnormal" behavior from me. For many people, this type of behavior would result in much more severe social repercussions.

Why can I not be all those roles? Because the gendered roles I'm allowed to play are ascribed to me based on the gender those around me ascribe to me. Think of life as a play with limited roles to fill and

every time you interact with someone else as an audition, with them considering your audition and casting you for a part in the play.

But instead of being cast as a Montague or a Capulet, you're cast as a Man or a Woman. And even if you're not prepared for one of those parts (you don't know the lines, you can't fit into the tights, you're afraid of heights and don't like balconies), you're going to play it anyhow because those are your options, and you're going onstage whether you want to or not.

## IS IT THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK TO "BREAK" GENDER NORMS?

No. In fact, it's possible for gender norms to be a generally supportive and healthy component of a society, to contribute to ideas that are important for understanding our own and other people's genders, and eventually work toward a goal of gender equity.

"Whaaaaa?" you might be thinking. Don't worry. There's a small part of me screaming that, too. Give me a second to try to make you and me feel a bit better with this before we move on, Gender Warrior. And remember, "Wars not make one great."

While gender norms (and particularly the roles that spawn from them) can be incredibly restrictive, norms also create a common language with which we can discuss and explore gender, our own identities, and those of others. This common language is key to having a meaningful discussion about the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And for some, gender norms aren't a bad thing at all. They provide many people with the ability to feel as if they are a member of a group with which they identify—a group filled with other people experiencing similar struggles and successes.

One of the goals of this book is to help you separate the idea of gender from gender roles in order to help us move toward a society that allows individuals to embody their gender, the unique mixtures of all the gender ingredients available to them, or that they resonate within whatever ways that may be, instead of taking measure of a few external traits and forcing a person into a role they weren't born to play.

## BY DEFAULT, GENDER NORMS ARE RESTRICTIVE

Gender norms foster a certain autopilot that goes something like the following: “Boys are messy because that’s what being a boy *is*.” You can replace “boy” and “messy” with just about any role and attribute, and get the same outcome.

This autopilot might be called “biological essentialism,” or the idea that we are just the result of genetic programming. We’re some way because of some part of our physical selves (our brains, our genes, etc.). “*Of course* boys are more aggressive. It’s the testosterone.” “*Of course* girls like pink. It’s the estrogen.”<sup>9</sup>

But when we examine the norms, we realize that they are the by-products of our society, *not* our biology. (Remember the “girls like pink” example from earlier?) And that the norms differ from society to society, and time period to time period. When we recognize that something is a social norm, not a “biological imperative,” we start to undermine the power the idea has over determining our behavior.

And in doing so, we create a lot of opportunities for healthier next steps. We make room for questions like “What are the ramifications of continuing to reinforce this norm?” and “Might there be a healthier norm we can replace this with?” or “Maybe it’s better if we don’t enforce a norm here at all?”

## USING GENDER NORMS CONSTRUCTIVELY

Throughout this book, I’ll refer a lot to gender norms as we explain gender identity and diversity. In the Genderbread Person, my favorite model for depicting gender, I rely heavily on gender norms. I’ll break gender into three key aspects (identity, expression, and sex), with each aspect split into degrees of normalized characteristics (woman-ness & man-ness, masculinity & femininity, and male-ness & female-ness—more on all these later). It makes me uncomfortable to do this, but it’s necessary discomfort.

It’s important that you realize I advocate for these terms in understanding gender solely for the commonality of language they provide. If I say masculine, you have an immediate idea of what that means to

---

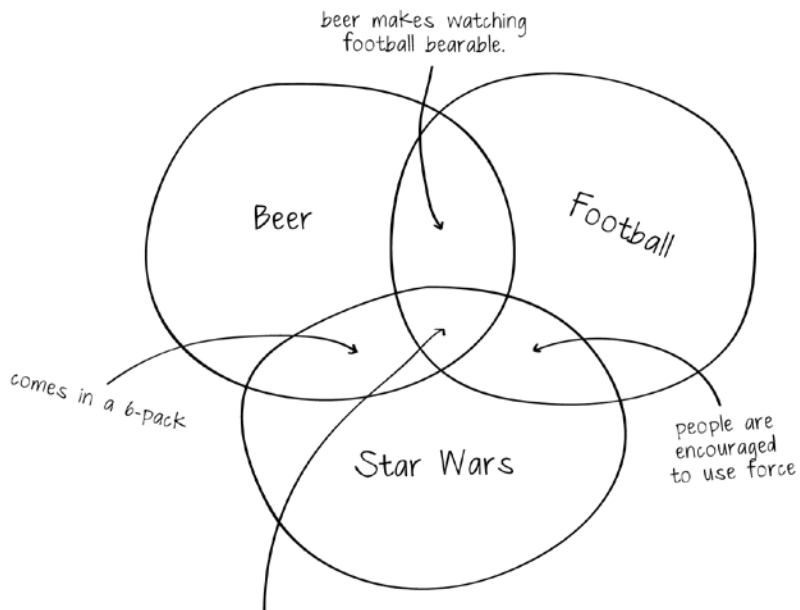
<sup>9</sup> An actual sentence I’ve heard. Unfortunately, more than once.

you, how you've been socialized to understand masculinity, and it is likely extremely similar to the idea of what it means to me and others around you. This is incredibly helpful.

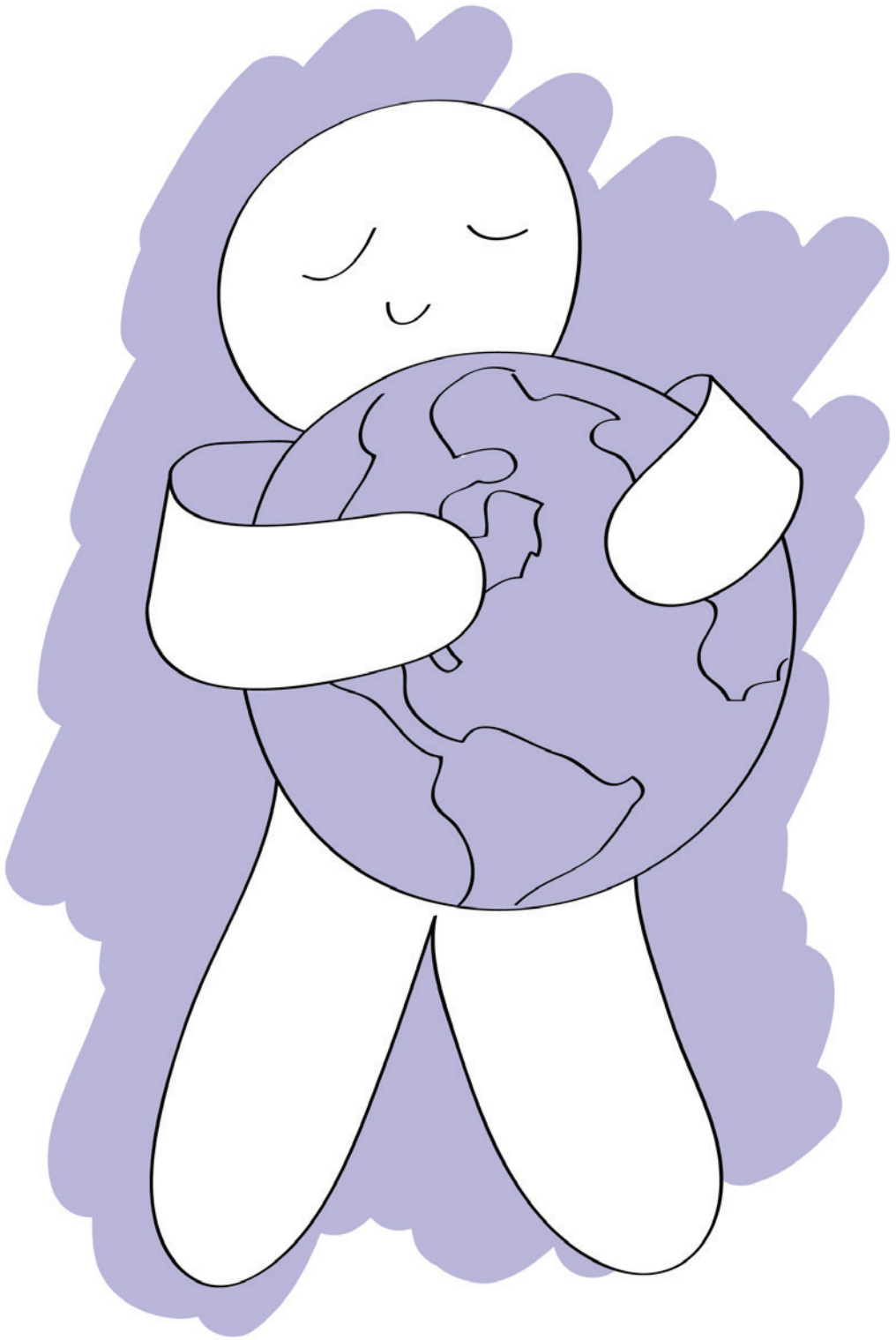
It's also important that you remember that what masculine means to us may not be the same as what it means to someone who was not socialized in the same ways as we were. Folks from different age groups, different regions of the United States, and different countries—just to name a few social groups—are socialized in different ways. So while using these norms provides the closest possible thing to a commonality of language, it's by no means universal.

So let's tread lightly and intentionally when employing gender norms, trying to undermine their restrictiveness and construct a healthier view of things: one where we're not *imposing* a reality upon someone, but *exposing* the constructed reality we occupy.

And be sure to keep in mind there is no skeleton key when it comes to understanding any aspect of human identity, particularly not something so complex and near-universally misunderstood as gender.



Things men complain that women don't enjoy, while men simultaneously reinforce gender norms that prohibit women from being able to enjoy them without threatening man-ness.



## CHAPTER 9

# INTRODUCTION TO THE GENDERBREAD PERSON

“LIKE MOST QUALITIES, CUTENESS IS DELINEATED BY WHAT IT ISN’T. MOST PEOPLE AREN’T CUTE AT ALL, OR IF SO THEY QUICKLY OUTGROW THEIR CUTENESS...ELEGANCE, GRACE, DELICACY, BEAUTY, AND A LACK OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: A CREATURE WHO KNOWS HE IS CUTE SOON ISN’T.”

– *William S. Burroughs*

The Genderbread Person is a simple, accessible, adorable way of depicting gender diversity. It has been around, in numerous forms and fashions, for the past several decades. In this book, we’re going to walk through two versions that I’ve created, and I’ll be doing this in detail in the following chapters. But first, I wanted to take some time to give some broader perspective on the model itself.

### A BRIEF REVERSE-HISTORY OF THE GENDERBREAD PERSON

In this book, I’m publishing my fourth version of the Genderbread Person (we’ll get to that next). But my second version, which introduced the “-ness” model, the most popular Genderbread iteration that



I'm aware of, with over a billion downloads worldwide, was published in 2012, as an improvement upon my first version in 2011 (more on that in a bit).

My first version of the Genderbread Person was inspired by the social justice trainings in which I participated starting in the mid-2000s, and a couple versions of the Genderbread [Person] (it was often referred to as "Genderbread Man," which kind of hurts the point) I'd seen popping up online.

The various (and mostly anonymous) online iterations that popped up in the early 2010s came after a model for understanding gender and sexual orientation created in 2005 by Rodriguez, Prell, Rivas, and Schwartz. Before that, in 2001 and 1999, respectively, there were a couple examples of curriculum that used earlier versions of the model and idea, the "Genderbread Person" activity by T.A. Hands & T. Sangrey and the "Gingerbread Person" activity by Cara Tramontano. All of this came after at least two decades of innumerable folks using a "Gender Gumby" model to teach gender on continua, and to dismantle gender into the components of identity, sex, and expression.

This telling of history is at best limited, and more likely misleading in its specificity. The above paragraph is formed from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, the following: my experience participating in gender trainings and social justice workshops in undergrad and grad school; hundreds of folks emailing me over the years to tell me stories of their experiences with the Genderbread Person/Gender Gumby over the past several decades; and the anonymous author of an online campaign accusing me of plagiarism and bad allyship. While it's hard to acknowledge that ambiguity (and the vitriol), I think it's better to be openly ambiguous than misleadingly certain.

Folks have written in to help me give credit to the absolute originator of the idea, but they are unable. Often, the emails I get are further rabbit holes, citing "a workshop presenter back in '94", or more abstract ownership like "all of these ideas really trace back to Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*." But the trail doesn't seem to end. Or at least we haven't found the end just yet, but we have identified a lot of the pivotal crossroads along the way, and the folks who created the signposts.

What is clear: the Genderbread Person existed long before the In-

ternet, and is one of the best examples of creative commons learning that I have been part of. Indeed, it still exists in a variety of capacities independent of the Internet in many workshops, retreats, and classroom settings today, and is being modified, built upon, and improved by folks all over the world. It is being created and recreated, modified and improved, on flipcharts and chalkboards and even as finger drawings in the dirt.

This idea is one that belongs to no person, but is truly a synthesis of decades of learning, conversation, and thought. My versions popularized the concept, and have built upon it, but they are just that: my attempt to improve a tool. This is part of what led to my decision to uncopyright my contributions to the model (my first version, as well as the “-ness” schema, which is now being incorporated by lots of other educators and researchers) back in 2013. But moreso, it’s the general truth that everything I know, and everything I create, is built upon centuries of learning and thought that drives my motivation to uncopyright, which is why I’ve uncopyrighted all of my work.

## ADDING MY SPATULA TO THE MIX

My goal in creating my first Genderbread Person was to combine the best available gender schema with an adorable and easy-to-grasp aesthetic. I used a schema that was tried and true because I wanted to do my best not to misinform (which happens too often already); I made it adorable because I wanted it to be inviting and share-worthy; and above all, I wanted to present it in a way that didn’t require any experience in gender studies to understand.

It was my hope that with a mere glance, folks would be able to learn the most important thing about gender: quite simply, that what we’ve all been taught growing up is, at best, incomplete.

Anything beyond that was bonus.

A few minutes past that first glance, folks were able to better understand the ways in which what they were taught was incomplete. It would provoke internal dialogue as well as external dialogue and be a first step in a long process of unpacking misconceptions and starting to get a truer sense of one’s self and others.

With the original goal of the graphic accomplished, I began receiving hundreds of emails and comments that the graphic wasn’t in-

clusive of all genders and was, in many ways, reinforcing the traditional view of gender that it was meant to reject. Basically, folks were looking for a master's level Genderbread Person, and the one I'd given them was barely a college sophomore.

Not one to walk away from a challenge, I got to work.

## FROM SPECTRUMS TO “-NESS”

The way I was taught about gender diversity oh so many years ago was based on the schema I used to create my first version of the Genderbread Person: the spectrums (with “opposing ideas on each side”) representing each component of gender.

And just as it's difficult to think about gender as anything other than “male and female” if that's what you've been taught your whole life, it can be as difficult to think beyond a system you've been relying on your entire adult life—even a more advanced, inclusive system, such as the first Genderbread Person.

I had to unpack everything I thought I knew about gender the first time I learned it, back when I was at the stage where the original Genderbread Person would have blown my (freakin') mind. Further, I had to start unpacking everything I thought I knew about teaching gender.

That's a lot of unpacking.

To do this, I opened up a dialogue with hundreds of people, ranging the gamut of gender identities and levels of experience with gender issues. For a few weeks I asked and listened, asked and listened, and asked and listened some more until I thought my head was going to pop. Then I started to synthesize what I'd heard and try to make sense of it all.

Various versions of the Genderbread Person concept have been created and contributed to by many trans\* people throughout the years, and it's a model that has been used by and for the transgender justice movement. The gender privileges I hold as a cisgender man (and other privileges accorded to me, for example, as someone who is white and straight) have amplified my voice in unjust ways, and are also prone to cloud my ability to see the model. With this in mind, in my stewardship of the concept and my attempts to build on it, I have always given disproportionate weight to input from women, trans, queer, and non-binary people, and people of color (the same goes for

the editors of this book, and the folks from whom I get feedback on just about everything I do).

I finally reached a point of understanding where I knew what I had to accomplish with the new model and what range of identities I needed to represent, but I couldn't get it out of my head and onto paper.

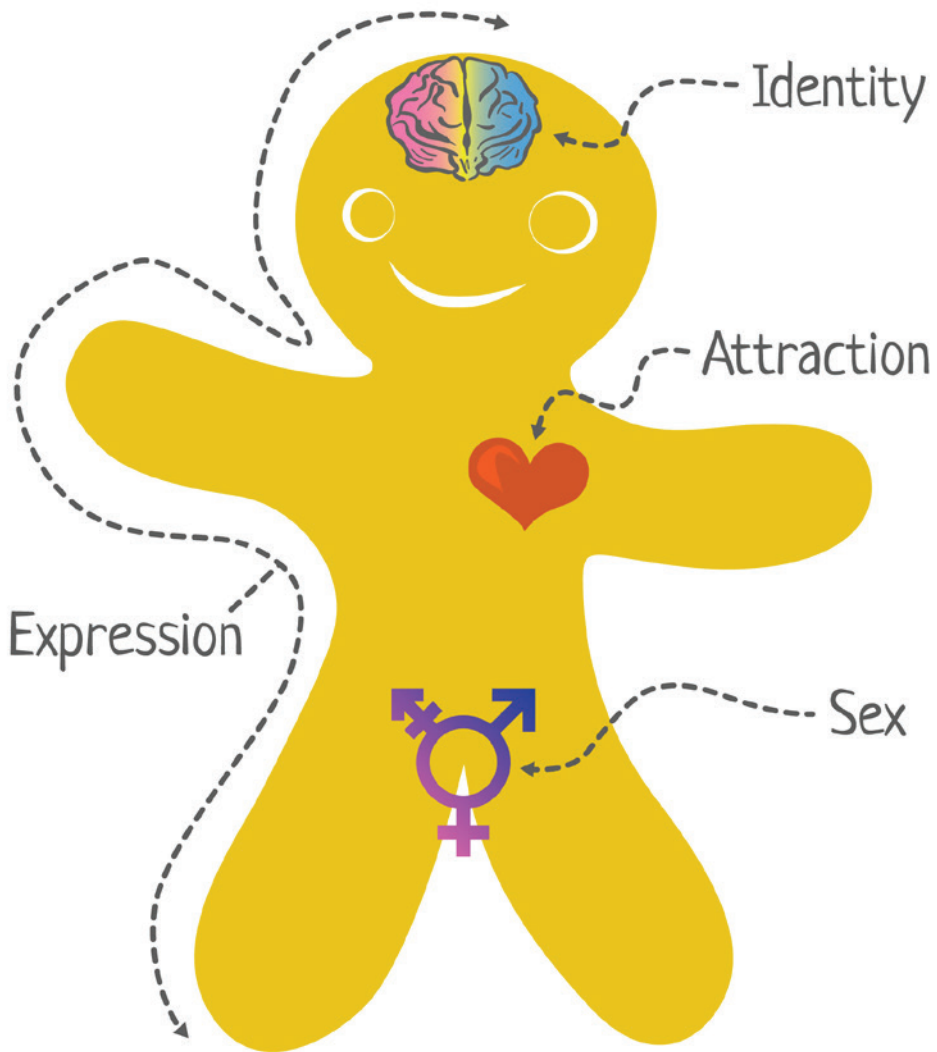
Then, thanks to a few cups of coffee and an in-person conversation with a brilliant colleague and comprehensive sex educator, Karen Rayne, we were finally able to come up with a seed of an idea for a new schema. That initial seed grew into what became the “-Ness” version of the Genderbread Person and is a much better attempt at visualizing and simplifying something as muddy and complicated as human gender.

In this book, I'm including both my original and the improved versions of the Genderbread Person, with full write-ups explaining how to use each. All of the models have their merits, and because of its simplicity, many folks still share the spectrums model with people new to understanding gender, while others rely on the “-ness” model. I'll start by walking through the spectrums model, then go into a little more background for the “-ness” model before walking through it.

The Genderbread Person is certainly far from perfect. With this book I am releasing version 4, and hopefully someday soon I'll come up with a version 5 that makes as much of an improvement over 4 as 4 did over 3, 3 did over 2, and 2 did over 1. No matter what version of the Genderbread Person you use (spectrums or “-ness,” mine or someone else's, or one you create yourself), it's a wonderful starting point for learning about gender.

One final, incredibly important note: the Genderbread Person is descriptive, *not* prescriptive. Meaning this is meant as a tool to describe how gender exists in society, and for folks to help describe themselves to others (or better understand themselves). It is not a diagnostic tool, nor does it paint a picture of the ideal world I would like to live in. It's just my best attempt at honestly addressing, and making sense of, the complexity of the world we currently occupy.

Now if only I can come up with a sensible way to organize my sock drawer.



## CHAPTER 10

# GENDERBREAD 101: GETTING STARTED

“THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS.”

– Aristotle

A friend of mine, when leading gender and sexuality workshops, will introduce the Genderbread Person by saying “I’m going to walk you through this model for understanding gender. If you, like me, have *attention issues*, I’m going to ask you to fold the paper in half, so we can just focus on the cookie part for now, not the arrows.”

People laugh, then knowingly fold the paper in half. This stuff is too enticing, and it’s hard to restrain ourselves.

This chapter is us folding paper, so to speak. Before we get into how one might use the Genderbread Person, let’s identify the ingredients in the mixing bowl.

## THE INGREDIENTS

Like any good recipe you find, let’s first lay out the ingredients, then we’ll talk about how we combine them.

As you’ll see, we have four elements. Before I break them down, I want to talk in generalities. First of all, if you noticed that the first three categories all pertain to gender while the fourth pertains to sexuality, great job! Skip ahead to the next paragraph. For everyone else:

if this doesn't make sense to you, or you're unsure of how all four interrelate, worry not. By the end of this chapter, it'll all make sense or you can have your money back. And if you never gave me money, give me money.

Whenever I talk to groups about gender using this model, a common problem arises: people tend to assume that someone will consistently experience these different concepts (i.e., that if you see where someone is on one, you can predict where they'll show up in another). Gender identity, gender expression, anatomical sex, and sexual orientation are interrelated, but they are not interconnected (i.e., one concept is not inherently tied to another). With that said (I'm going to say it again later), let's move on.

### **Gender Identity: who you know yourself to be on the inside**

Gender identity is how you, in your head, experience and define your gender, based on how much you align (or don't align) with what you understand the options for gender to be.

What you understand gender *to be* is going to have a massive impact on how you understand your gender identity. Many of us are brought up in societies where there are only two options (binary gender); other societies have more (third gender options<sup>10</sup>, and beyond). In all cases, the ways we've been socialized to understand what gender is are going to be dependent upon many dimensions of our self<sup>11</sup>.

Gender identity is all about how you think about yourself. It's about how you internally interpret your personal chemistry in the face of the socialization you experienced growing up. As you understand them, do you think you fit better into the societal role of "woman" or "man," or does neither ring particularly true for you? That is, are you somewhere between the two? Or do you consider how you understand yourself to fall outside the gender binary completely? How do you make sense of your personality, in light of what you understand gender to be?

---

<sup>10</sup> "Third gender" can be thought of as an umbrella term to describe the genders present in cultures where more than two genders are traditional. Many third genders have unique names (e.g., the *hijras* of India) and definitions.

<sup>11</sup> Shout back to You Soup for more details on this.

The answers to these questions are what we would define as your gender identity. And the gender identity label you might choose to place on yourself, based on those answers and what label makes the most sense, is how you attempt to translate that understanding to others.

It has been accepted that we already have a strong sense of gender identity and gender differentiation by around age 3. After that, our growth and development is less about the change of our personality, as much as it is about us entering different settings, situations, and interactions and seeing what shows up. Formation of gender identity is affected by our environment as much as it is determined by brains. After all, our brains are physically reshaped by our experiences and environment.

In Chapter 14, we'll further explore gender identity. For now, let's leave it at saying that problems often arise when someone is assigned a gender based on their sex at birth, and that assignment doesn't fit with how they come to understand themselves.

### **Gender Expression: what you present on the outside**

Gender expression is how you present gender (through your actions, clothing, and demeanor, to name a few), and how those presentations are viewed based on social expectations.

Gender expression is interpreted by others perceiving your gender based on traditional gender norms (e.g., women wear lipstick; men wear ties). Gender expression is something that often changes from day to day, outfit to outfit, and setting to setting. It is likely that you fluctuate in how you express gender throughout the months, weeks, and sometimes minutes, often without even realizing it. How about an example?

You wake up wearing baggy gray sweatpants and a T-shirt. As you walk into your kitchen to prepare breakfast, you're expressing as slightly masculine. However, you see your partner in the kitchen and prowl in like Halle Berry from *Catwoman*, a hyper-feminine expression. You pour a bowl of cereal, wrap your fist around a spoon like a Viking, and start shoveling Fruit Loops into your face, and all of a sudden you're hyper-masculine<sup>12</sup>. After breakfast, you skip back into

---

<sup>12</sup> Always a bummer to me how I've been socialized to associate "masculinity"



your bedroom, stand in front of a mirror, and playfully place outfits in front of you, pleading with your partner to help you decide what to wear. You're feminine again.

I assume this entire time you were imagining it was you, with your gender identity, acting out that example. Now go back through the whole thing, but this time imagine someone with a different gender identity from you going through the motions. We'll dig more into gender expression in Chapter 15, but hopefully you're already starting to understand how these concepts interrelate but don't always interconnect.

### **Anatomical Sex: the physical make-up of our bodies**

Anatomical sex is the physical traits you're born with or develop that we think of as "sex characteristics," as well as the sex you are assigned at birth.

Sex refers to the objectively<sup>13</sup> measurable organs, hormones, chromosomes, and other anatomy you possess (or don't possess). Let's consider sex in the ultra-reductive way society does: being female means having a vagina, ovaries, two X chromosomes, predominant estrogen, and the ability to grow a baby in your abdominal area; being male means having testes, a penis, an XY chromosome configuration, predominant testosterone, and the ability to "put a baby in" a female's abdominal area; and being intersex can be any combination of what I just described.

In reality, sex, like gender identity and expression, is more much more nuanced than that. Further, all of the structures that make up "male" or "female" characteristics exist in people of all sexes; we often just call them different names in different bodies (e.g., "clitoris" and "penis" are two different words for the same anatomical structure: a

.....

with "gross."

<sup>13</sup> By "objectively" here, I mean that we can use an instrument to get a concrete number (e.g., parts per million of a certain hormone in the blood) or location (e.g., an x-ray to see if gonads are in the abdomen or the scrotum). But what these measurements *mean* (e.g., that what we see are ovaries or testes, and the implications thereof), as we'll discuss in Chapter 16, is anything but objective.

clitoris is a short penis, or a penis is a long clitoris<sup>14</sup>). We will get more into this in Chapter 16, but for now I want to talk a bit more about intersex people.

For example, someone can be born with the external appearance of being male (i.e., visually identifying a penis at birth), but have a functional “female” reproductive system internally. There are many examples of intersex, and below you can see some statistics from the Intersex Society of North America illustrating the frequency of intersex births. (Check out the stat I bolded, but be prepared to be shocked.)

Difference in Sex Development	Rate
Not XX and Not XY	1 in 1,666 births
Klinefelter (XXY)	1 in 1,000 births
Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome	1 in 13,000 births
Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome	1 in 130,000 births
Classical Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia	1 in 13,000 births
Late Onset Adrenal Hyperplasia	1 in 66 individuals
Vaginal Agenesis	1 in 6,000 births
Ovotestes	1 in 6,000 births
Idiopathic (no discernible medical cause)	1 in 110,000 births
Iatrogenic (caused by medical treatment)	No estimate
5 Alpha Reductase Deficiency	No estimate
Mixed Gonadal Dysgenesis	No estimate
Complete Gonadal Dysgenesis	1 in 150,000 births
Hypospadias (in perineum or penile shaft)	1 in 2,000 births
Hypospadias (between corona and tip of penis)	1 in 770 births
<b>Total number of people whose bodies differ from standard male or female</b>	<b>1 in 100 births</b>
Total number of people receiving surgery to “normalize” genital appearance	1 or 2 in 1,000 births

---

14 This is intentionally reductive. As anatomical structures develop (or don't), it affects their physiology (the function they serve), but by speaking this simply, we highlight an interesting truth: not just males get erections.

A quick note: the term “hermaphrodite,” which you’ve likely heard used to describe an intersex individual, is frowned upon. “Hermaphrodite” is a stigmatizing word (consider it a slur), and, for what it’s worth, technically inaccurate: it means an organism that is entirely male *and* female, a biological impossibility for us.

**Attraction: the romantic and sexual ways some of us are drawn to others**

Attraction is how you find yourself feeling drawn (or not drawn) to some other people, in sexual, romantic, and/or other ways.

The ability that we have to experience certain attractions, as well as the inclination to act on it, are both major factors in making sense of our sexual orientation<sup>15</sup>. Sexual attraction is a broad range of interest in the physically intimate (things like kissing, touching, and/or intercourse), while romantic attraction is a broad range of interest in the relationally intimate (things like flirting, dating, and/or marriage).

When we classify our attraction based on others’ genders (generally in relation to our own), we call this our “sexual orientation.” And we often think of sexual orientation as being pretty simple.

Girls who are into boys? Straight. Boys who are into boys? Gay. Boys into boys and girls? Bisexual. These terms are what we most associate with sexual orientation, and the general ways we’d define them. It’s pretty cut and dry, right? Maybe.

Interestingly enough, pioneering research conducted by Dr. Alfred Kinsey in the mid-twentieth century uncovered that most people aren’t absolutely straight or gay/lesbian. Instead of just asking “Do you like dudes or chicks?” (very sciency, I know), he asked people to report their fantasies, dreams, thoughts, emotional investments in others, and frequency of sexual contact. Based on his findings, he broke sexuality down into a seven-point scale (see below) and reported that most people who identify as straight are actually somewhere between 1 and 3 on the scale, and most people who identify as lesbian/gay are between 3 and 5, meaning most of us are a little bi.

---

<sup>15</sup> The fancier words we’d use for this are “capacity” and “propensity,” and these are important concepts, because they help us better separate attraction from behavior.

0—Exclusively Heterosexual

1—Predominantly heterosexual, incidentally homosexual

2—Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual

3—Equally heterosexual and homosexual

4—Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual

5—Predominantly homosexual, incidentally heterosexual

6—Exclusively Homosexual

Now, more interestingly, none of these understandings of sexual orientation make much room for the “ability” and “inclination” part of romantic and sexual attractions, as mentioned above. They also don’t address attraction outside of the gender binary. We’ll dive into all of this in Chapter 17. I just wanted to point it out for those who were thinking “Wait! This seems too simple.”<sup>16</sup>

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: INTERRELATED BUT NOT INTERCONNECTED

Wow. That was a lot of information all at once, can we agree? The startling part: I held back. As I referenced above several times, later in this book are individual chapters on each of the sections above, because there is still so much to convey.

But you don’t need to worry about that right now. First, we need to make this all make sense—synthesize some knowledge all up in your brain.

Remember earlier when I said that thing and then said I would say it again? This is me saying that again: though the four things I presented above are certainly interrelated, but they are not interconnected. What do I mean by that?

Gender identity, gender expression, anatomical sex, and attraction are independent of one another. People’s attraction doesn’t determine their gender expression. And their gender expression isn’t determined

---

16 And if you weren’t thinking that, now you hopefully are.

by their gender identity. And their gender identity isn't determined by their sex. And also, every other mismatch of Y isn't determined by Z combination you can dream up from these inputs<sup>17</sup>. These things certainly relate to one another, but they do not determine one another.

We often want to connect the dots, and think that certain dots have to connect in certain ways (e.g., if a person is male, they'll be a man, and therefore express gender masculinely). That's a recipe for failure.

Knowing where an individual exists within two gender concepts does not mean you can accurately predict where they will land in the others. This is an erroneous assumption we often make (e.g., that because you know someone identifies as "woman" and expresses femininely, she is female). Further, knowing all the aspects of a person's gender does not mean you can predict what their sexual orientation will be. For example, "Man, male, feminine means he's gay, right?" Wrong.

However, these things do tend to be socially linked in ways that trick us into thinking they are biologically determined. For example, if someone is born with male reproductive organs and genitalia, he is very likely to be raised as a boy, identify as a man, and express himself masculinely. We call this identity "cisgender" (when your sex assigned at birth corresponds with how you identify), and it grants a lot of privilege (you already read about that, remember?), including reinforcing the assumption that anyone who is assigned male at birth will identify and express this way.

They are also interdependent in ways that are tricky. What's "feminine" for one person might be "masculine" for another, depending on sex and gender identity. My friend (from the beginning of the chapter) and I often have the exact same haircut<sup>18</sup>, but she often has to convince the stylist she wants a cut *that* masculine; while I have to convince a stylist I want a cut *that* feminine. Because of the way the stylist is perceiving her female-ness and my male-ness (e.g., features of our faces, and our body shapes), the same hairs express gender in different ways.

---

<sup>17</sup> There are 8. And we know this because of math. Thanks, Math!

<sup>18</sup> You know the one: buzzed on the sides, long on top, super cute.

## STOPPING HERE

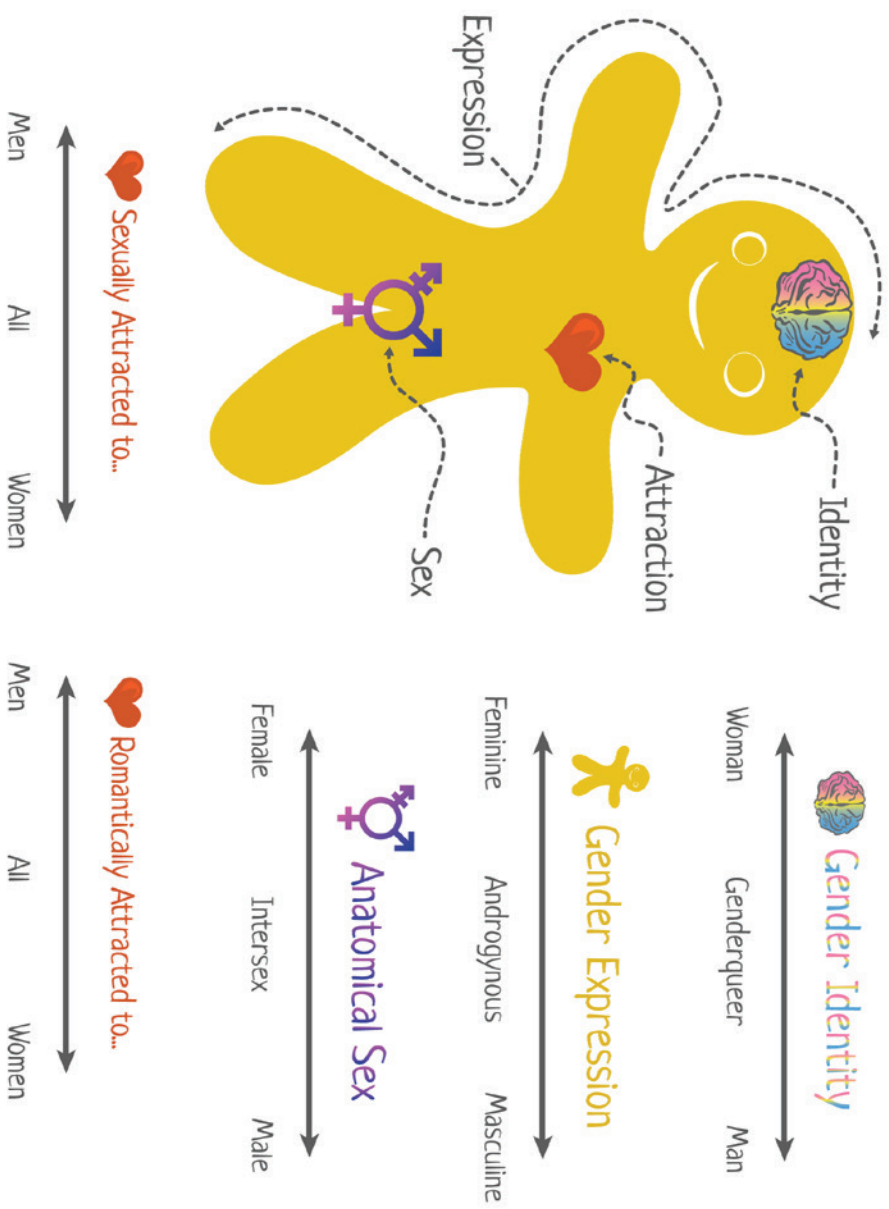
In a lot of trainings I facilitate, we could never make it past this point and still have accomplished a lot of powerful learning. Simply separating gender into these component parts is often a massive step for a person, or for a group. It takes something that was simple (“Gender is just boy and girl”) and complicates it in a way that resonates with people (“Oh yeah, some boys are girly.”). Sometimes it even hits home a little too hard for people (Wait, *I* was a girly boy. How did I manage to forget that? What does that mean *now*?).

Sometimes it’s even necessary to stop here, because a group isn’t ready to move on, and needs more time to process all of what I’ve presented above. Laying this foundation is necessary for the concepts we want to build on top of it, so stopping here is occasionally as far as I might get in a training.

I could stop at this point in the book, write a nice conclusion, and you’ll have already, I hope, accomplished a lot of learning. With any luck, you’ve complicated your understanding of society and gender in a way that leads to healthier outcomes, or at least points out the unhealthy in a helpful way.

But we’re not stopping here. This book is all about pointing out rabbit holes, and intriguing you to go and explore them on your own. And we’ve only just gotten started.

“Hold onto your butts.”



*There's a cut-out-friendly version of this page (and others) at the end of the book, in case you'd like to have the image beside the text as you read.*

## CHAPTER II

# USING THE “SPECTRUMS” GENDERBREAD PERSON

“IF YOU CAN’T EXPLAIN IT TO A SIX-YEAR-OLD, YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND IT YOURSELF.”

– *Albert Einstein*

What does gender look like, if it doesn’t fit neatly into a little checkbox with an “M” or an “F” beside it? Well, polls have shown that about half of millennials say that gender is a spectrum. What do they mean by that?

### GENDER AS SPECTRUMS

A spectrum is a way to represent an issue by positioning two oppositional views at the extreme ends of the same line. A common spectrum we think about a lot is the “political spectrum,” where we plot progressive to conservative perspectives.





On the left we have progressives and on the right conservatives. This is such a common visualization that we frequently refer to progressives as “the left” and conservatives as “the right.”<sup>19</sup> We even call moderates “centrists.” If you were to consider your political beliefs, and everything you know “progressive,” “moderate,” and “conservative” to mean, you may be able to plot yourself somewhere on this spectrum.

Now, let’s replace the political terms on this familiar visual with gender terms, and in this instance (like in the rest of this book), I’m going to be picky about language.

### Gender Identity: From “Woman” to “Man”



On the left we have “woman” and on the right we have “man,” two terms you are likely already familiar with. In the middle, we have the term “genderqueer,” which, you guessed it, is used for an identity that is somewhere between woman and man, comprised of a combination of traits of both.<sup>20</sup>

How much one identifies with “woman” or “man” (or in-between) will be based on how a person aligns with the social roles, attitudes, dispositions, and/or personality traits that they associate with those identities. If, when pondering “man,” and considering oneself, there’s a 1:1 match (i.e., every trait that pops into mind for “man” also describes that person), odds are they identify strongly on the right side of that spectrum.

It’s important to note that many people consider their identity to fall outside of the binary (and limited) woman-to-man spectrum, so

---

<sup>19</sup> Although, despite popular misconceptions, this is not the origin of these terms. They go back to an interesting story that occurred during the French Revolution, but that’s a story for another book.

<sup>20</sup> Another term for genderqueer that some folks use is “genderfuck.” That’s a bit racy for this text, but it’s perfect for a footnote.

they wouldn’t see themselves on this spectrum at all.

**DRILL:** Consider where you might land on this spectrum. If you have a friend or close person in your life who you confide in, ask them where they think you would land and have a discussion about the two results.

### Gender Expression: From “Feminine” to “Masculine”



On the left we have “feminine,” and on the right we have “masculine,” the two expressive terms related to traditions and norms associated with “woman” and “man.” In the middle, we have what might be a new term for you, “androgynous,”<sup>21</sup> which describes an form of expressing gender that has traits of both masculinity and femininity.

To plot your gender expression, you need only think about the clothing, mannerisms, speech patterns, grooming habits and other forms of personal expression that you typically present to the world, and how much those things are associated with what you’ve been taught to be feminine or masculine.

Because gender expression is so fluid, a lot of folks will see themselves as a range of points on this spectrum, or as expressing in many different ways depending on the situation.

**DRILL:** Write down a list of situations where you (or people of your gender) typically express more femininely, and a different list where you typically express more masculinely. What would happen if you were to reverse those?

---

<sup>21</sup> Word parts! Andro = man; gyn = woman. When it comes to gender and sexual identity terms, knowing Greek and Latin word roots and prefixes comes in handy.

### Anatomical Sex: From “Female” to “Male”



On the left we have “female,” and on the right we have “male,” the two sexes we all grew up knowing about. In the middle, we have what might be a new term, “intersex,” which describes someone whose sex characteristics are not strictly male or female.

As we mentioned earlier, the sex characteristics we’re talking about here range from the obvious (e.g., “genitals”) to the relative (e.g., “how coarse your body hair is”).

The anatomical sex we embody often differs slightly from the sex we were assigned at birth, and for many people it differs dramatically. That could be because of how their bodies produce or respond to hormones (e.g., during puberty), or via surgeries, hormone therapy, and other life events.

**DRILL:** Practice saying the phrases “assigned male at birth” and “assigned female at birth” aloud.

### Attraction: From “Men” to “Women”



On the left we have “men,” and on the right we have “women,” the two traditional gender identities from above. In the middle, we have “all,” representing attraction to men, women, and everything in between. We’ve swapped this from the pattern we were following earlier, and I’ll explain why in the next section.

Note that there is no place on the scale for someone who doesn’t experience attraction to men or women, and/or for someone whose attraction is outside of the binary altogether.

## The “Spectrums” Genderbread Person

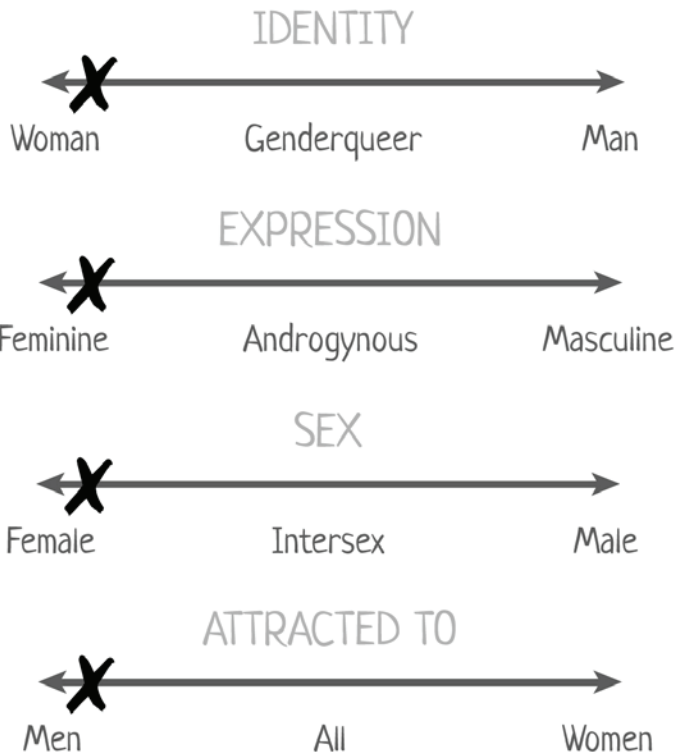
**DRILL:** On a piece of paper, draw out the gender identity spectrum and the attraction spectrum, and create plots for the sexual orientation labels you’re familiar with (e.g., “straight,” “gay,” “bisexual.”).

### IDENTITY LABELS AND IMPLICATIONS

This model makes it really easy to illustrate one of the points I was making in the last chapter: these concepts are interrelated, but not necessarily interconnected. Let’s start with that before moving into some of the implications made by this model.

#### The Meta-Checkbox

Because our society isn’t neutral, and we have a lot of oppressive forces pushing and pulling on our every movement, idea, and belief, while gender may be as complicated as it’s presented above, we often see it as a checkbox. And that checkbox is about much more than gender. When we check “F” on a form, for example, we’re often implicitly saying something similar to the following:



We see other people, and often think of ourselves, as being entirely on one side or the other. A nice straight line down all four of these spectrums.<sup>22</sup>

We're pushed to one side of these spectrums or the other. As soon as we're assigned a sex at birth, just about every social pressure we experience for the rest of our lives is going to either intensely or indirectly nudge us to that side of the spectrum for identity, expression, and attraction. Whether or not that's how we identify, or express, or experience attraction, it's what society is telling us we *should*.

Now, of course, you, dear reader, know better. You know that these things aren't necessarily interconnected in that way. That someone may (and many of you *do*) zig-zag through these spectrums like a skier in the X Games.

And when that happens, we start to get a visualization of a lot of the gender sexuality labels we've already discussed, and will be discussing more later in this book.

### Implications of Spectrums

So, spectrums are a great way to add complexity to something we often see as a checkbox. And most millennials see their gender as existing on a spectrum. Also great! But there's an implication working beneath the surface here, and it's one that in just about every sense stands in opposition to the goal of this model to begin with. To see it, we need to look no further than the definition of spectrum:

**Spectrum:** used to classify something, or suggest that it can be classified, in terms of its position on a scale between two extreme or opposite points.

Thanks, Google. Do you see it? Are you already there? No? No worries. I'm not going to leave you hanging.

The operative word in the definition of spectrum, and the word standing between us and the goals of this entire book, is "opposite."

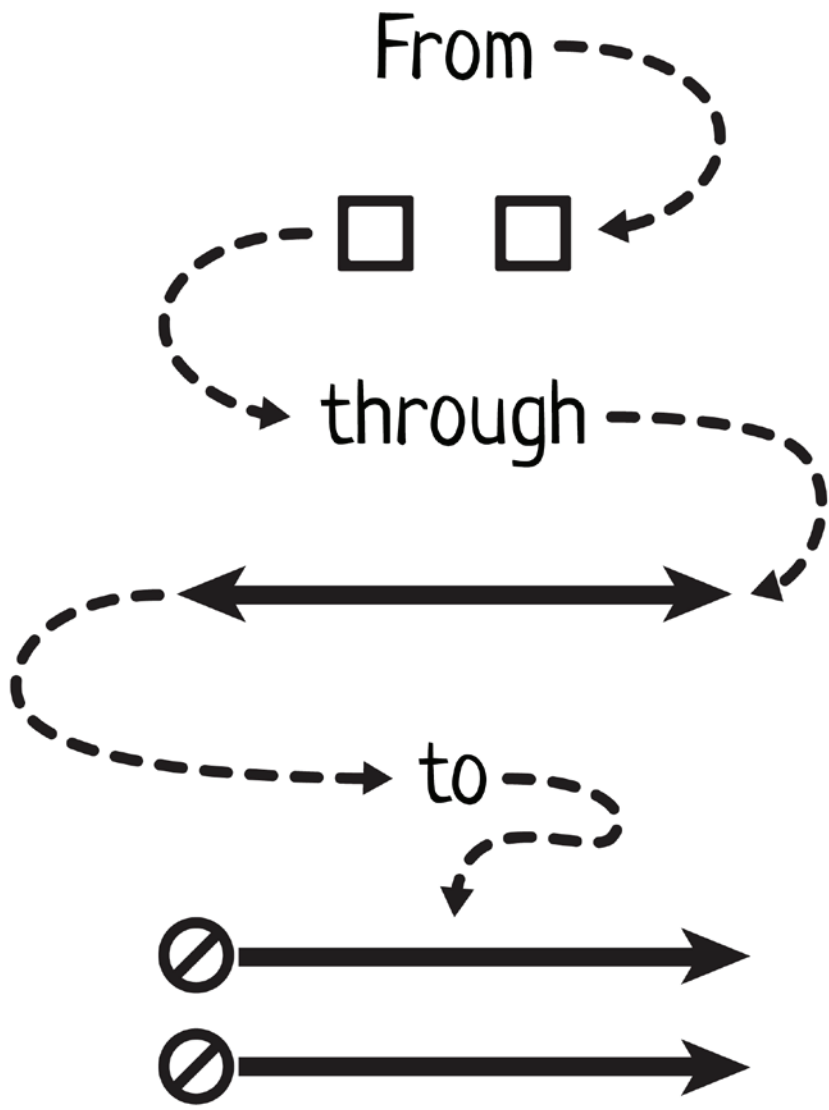
If you're still not having an "Ah ha!" moment, then you're just like me. As ashamed as I am to admit this, I was teaching on this model for

---

<sup>22</sup> See why I swapped the pattern for attraction? We could also describe the attraction continuum with "Opposite Gender" on the left side, and "Our Gender" on the right, but there's a better way than that. I'll explain in the next chapter.

half a decade, and had conversations with tens of thousands of people about gender before it clicked for me. But don't worry: it's not going to take all that for it to click for you. All *you* have to do is turn this page.

*Lucky.*



## CHAPTER 12

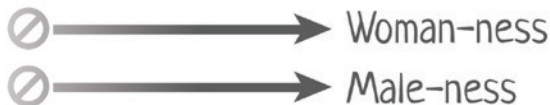
# AN IMPROVED WAY OF VISUALIZING GENDER

“ANY CHANGE, EVEN A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER, IS ALWAYS ACCOMPANIED BY DRAWBACKS AND DISCOMFORTS.”

– *Arnold Bennett*

What’s the problem with putting gender on spectrums? Why is it so bad to have “woman” on one end and “man” on the other and allow those who don’t identify with either of those concepts to see themselves as somewhere in-between? Because, quite simply, many of us aren’t in-between, and many of us are a lot of both. Spectrums erase both of these truths.

“Woman” and “man” are two different concepts, but they’re not inherently “opposite.” Further, while for some people “genderqueer” may exist between woman and man, for others it exists somewhere else altogether. So, if these are separate concepts, why are we measuring them both on the same scale? Let’s not. Allow me to present to you my “-Ness” model of visualizing gender:





Two separate continua, not one spectrum, with a “zero” (as an empty set, or “null” symbol) on one end and a concept on the other, where someone can be a lot of both, or neither of each. A prompt might be, “On a scale from 0 to 100, how much would you say you identify with woman-ness?”

While it took me awhile to get to this understanding, once it hit me, there was no turning back. I would really like to see the new model replace all instances of the “Spectrums” Genderbread Person, because it’s more accurate, more inclusive, and still just as accessible (adorable).

However, I realize that this model takes a bit more of a leap of understanding for some newcomers to the gender identity discussion, particularly those who were introduced to gender diversity on the spectrums visual.

I’m calling the new way of mapping things out the “-Ness” Model because independent unidirectional linear continua model seemed wordy. It overcomes most of the hiccups of the “Spectrums” Genderbread, and other potential models for visualizing gender (2D plots, universe models, matrices, Venn diagrams, etc.).

Let me address some of the key reasons I think this new version is better, and you can decide which you’d rather use after it’s all said and done.

## THE “-NESS” MODEL IS MORE ACCURATE

Men are from Mars and women are from Venus is a funny expression (and scientifically dubious), but it actually nails down the strength of this model: two planets, not two poles of one planet. Placing man/masculine/male on one end of something (continuum, 2D plot, etc.) and woman/feminine/female on the other (as we did with the old model) creates and reinforces a fallacy central to gender misunderstanding: to be more of one, you need to be less of the other. That’s incorrect. You can have both. You can have your Genderbread and eat it, too.

Let’s take gender identity for example. I identify as a man, but I also identify with a lot of what it means to be a woman. I’m sensitive, kind, familial, and I really love dark chocolate and red wine and rom-

coms (Kidding!<sup>23</sup>I'm exaggerating for effect<sup>24</sup>). Possessing this “woman-ness” doesn't make me any less of a man. But it's a large part of my gender identity, and those traits affect my life and influence my decisions as much as (or more than) much of my “man-ness” does.

Identifying with aspects of femininity doesn't make you less masculine; it makes you more feminine. We can be feminine *and* masculine. We can embody male-ness *and* female-ness. Being, possessing, or identifying with one aspect does not cancel out the other.

To understand gender, and in turn create a safer space for people of all genders, we need to realize that these concepts aren't in a tug of war—they're in separate arenas altogether.

This model allows one to define their gender in a way that accounts for varying intensities of -ness, mapping out the *intensity* with which they align with that concept. And sometimes intensity is the most important part.

## IT'S MORE INCLUSIVE

What was lacking in the “Spectrums” Genderbread Person was the ability to define intensities of identification, or the amount of “blank-ness” one possesses. And what's lacking in other available models is the ability to define intensity independently for the two major aspects of gender. Our new model comes up spades in both.

Let's take “Attraction” for our example. We know that most people aren't 100 percent straight or gay, and a continuum of gay to straight (think Kinsey) leaves us with bi- in the middle. What about folks who are asexual? Or *mostly* asexual? Or hypersexual? None of those identities can be mapped on our old model. Ditto for the other elements of the model and folks who are agender, pangender, two-spirited, and the list goes on.

The amount of -ness is, in many cases, as crucial to one's identity as which -ness they possess. A man who is hypersexually attracted to women and a man who is demisexually to women may both identify as “straight,” but there is no question that the ways they're experienc-

---

23 I am not.

24 If anything, I'm understating things.

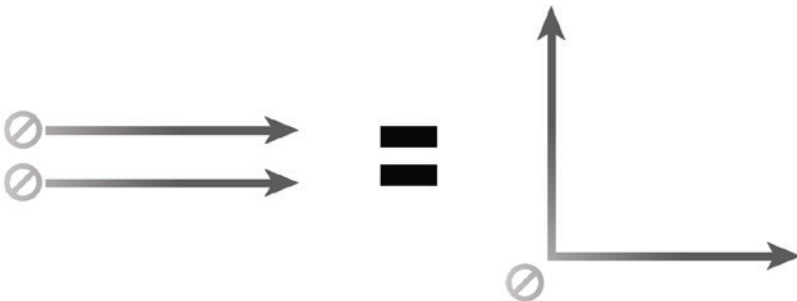
ing attraction is different.

For people who identify with neither of the concepts, they can occupy the empty set on the left (instead of being forced to plot themselves along a spectrum they have no relationship with). For people who identify strongly with both, they can occupy the very ends of the arrow of each.

## AND IT IS JUST AS ADORABLE

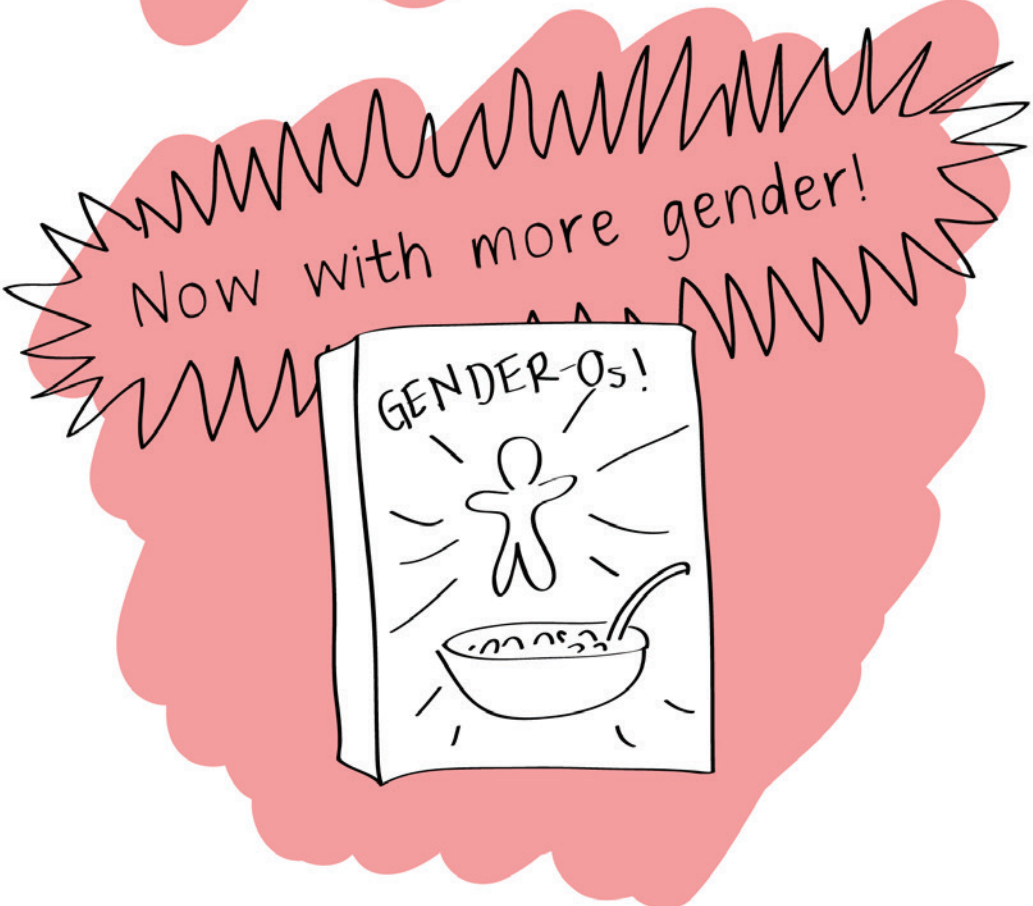
While this one might be a harder to understand at first glance, mostly due to the fact that I'm using a plotting method I created instead of a standard graph, most people still get it with a thoughtful look (even "non-mathy" people). It's an introduction, after all, and we know how important introductions are.

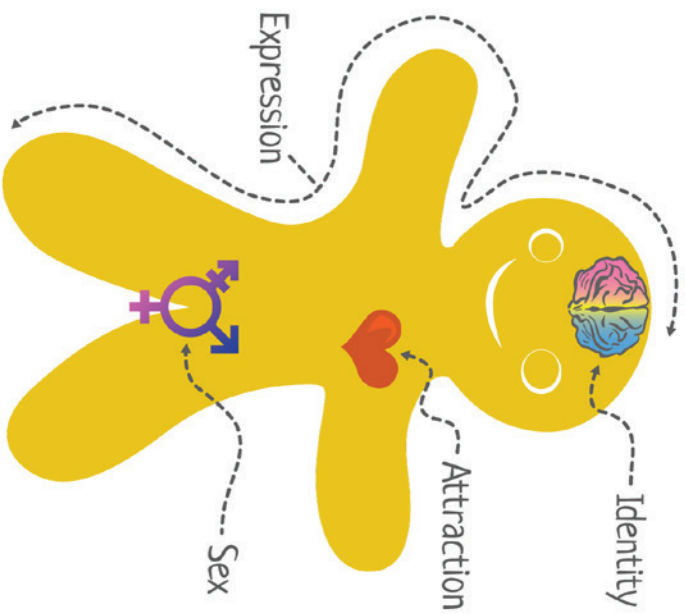
And here's the secret: this really isn't a new idea at all. What we're actually doing with this is taking a well-known way of visualizing information (an X/Y Graph, or 2D plot) and making it more accessible. So we have all the informational complexity of a 2D Plot without the mathematical overwhelm.



While I upped the ante on accuracy and inclusivity, I did my best to avoid compromising what was arguably the most effective aspect of the old Genderbread Person: it's adorable! The first Genderbread was popular, but my first version including the "-Ness" concept has been downloaded a billion times: that's a whole different echelon of popular. I attribute the wealth of that interest to the fact that it was easy to understand, visually appealing, *and* resonated with people.

Icing, meet cake.





Gender Identity

- Woman-ness
- Man-ness



Gender Expression

- Femininity
- Masculinity



Anatomical Sex

- Female-ness
- Male-ness



Sexually Attracted to...

and/or (a/o)

- Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People



Romantically Attracted to...

- Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

## CHAPTER 13

# USING THE “-NESS” GENDERBREAD PERSON

“THERE’S NOTHING AS EXCITING AS A COMEBACK—SEEING SOMEONE WITH DREAMS, WATCHING THEM FAIL, AND THEN GETTING A SECOND CHANCE.”

– *Rachel Griffiths*

Let’s take another go at explaining gender, this time with fewer spectrums, and a lot of “-ness.”

Before we get into gender, let me ask you a question I’ve now asked thousands of middle schoolers<sup>25</sup>: pizza or tacos?

There are a few ways I could allow you to answer that question. I might give you a choice between the two, like below:

Pick one:  Pizza  Tacos

But what about people who like both? Or don’t like either? Or really, really like one of these. Or just *kinda* like one. To create room for

---

25 Much to the horror of Fox News.

those folks, maybe I could provide a spectrum, or a Likert-type scale, from Pizza to Tacos, and ask you to plot where you land:



This is better for people who like both, but what does the middle represent? Some sort of Taco Pizza? (or Pizza Taco<sup>26</sup>?) And, again, what about those people who don't like either of these foods? (I don't know why... maybe they're lactose intolerant? Nah, there's vegan cheeze. Maybe they just despise happiness?)



That, my friends, is the power of “-ness.”

## GENDER-NESS

Within each component of gender, we'll have two continua (or scales, if that's more your lingo), and you can think of a person as existing within that concept on both continua, one continuum, or neither.

For some people, it'll make most sense to see themselves as a static dot on that line, perhaps thinking of it as a scale from 0-100 of whatever idea is presented at the right. For a lot of other people, it may make more sense to plot several points, or a range along the line, to depict how their gender might vary (as a result of different social situations, stimulations, or other -ations).

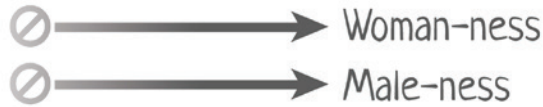
If that was a bit dense for you, it'll all make sense soon. Just know that in each category (gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and attraction), you are to place a point or range on each of the directional lines representing your man-/ woman-/ masculine-/ feminine-/ male-/ female-ness, whether it be nada or a lotta.

---

26 Actually, this sounds amazing. Patent-soon-to-be-pending.

**FACT!** The “-ness” model I created to attempt to adequately depict the diversity inherent in human gender has been adopted by several university researchers as the model for their ongoing gender studies.

### Gender Identity: “Woman-ness” and/or “Man-ness”



On the right of the top continuum we have “woman-ness”, and on the bottom continuum we have “man-ness.” To the left of each we have a “lack of” symbol, or you can think of it as a zero.

Just as in the spectrums model, how much one identifies with “woman-ness” or “man-ness” will be based on how a person aligns with the social roles, attitudes, dispositions, and/or personality traits they associate with those identities. If, when pondering “man,” and considering oneself, there’s a 1:1 match (i.e., every trait that pops into mind for “man” also describes that person), odds are they land on the right side of that continuum. And when pondering “woman,” and considering oneself, if there’s a 1:1 match, that person would likely land on the far right side of *that* continuum.

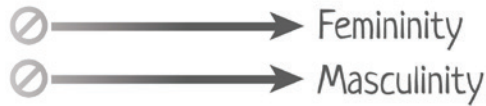
Where this differs from the spectrums model, is that in the two hypothetical examples above, we could be talking about the *same* person (someone who identifies strongly with both of these).

Folks who identify as genderqueer might show up by identifying with combinations of a lot of woman-ness and man-ness, or by having only a little (or a total lack) of each. We also now have room for other gender identities to be visualized, like bigender and two-spirit.

**DRILL:** Consider where you might land on these continua, now that we have two. If you have a friend or close person in your life in whom you confided during the last drill, ask them where they think you would land and have a discussion about the two results. Contrast this discussion against the last one. Which feels like a more authentic version of you?



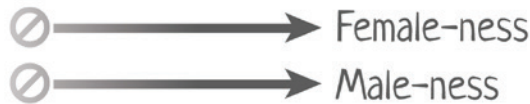
### Gender Expression: “Femininity” and/or “Masculinity”



On the right of the top continuum we have “femininity”, and on the bottom continuum we have “masculinity.” To the left of each we again have a “lack of” symbol, which you can still think of as a zero.

Just like before, to plot your gender expression, you need only think about the clothing, mannerisms, speech patterns, grooming habits and other forms of personal expression that you typically present to the world, and how much those things are associated with what you’ve been taught to be feminine or masculine. And, because these ideas are no longer competing, you can simply think of each aspect of your expression and move yourself along the relevant continuum.

### Anatomical Sex: “Female-ness” and/or “Male-ness”



Here, we have one continuum of “female-ness,” and one of “male-ness.” On each line you might plot the traits you embody that are considered characteristics of one of these two sexes, or the degree to which you embody them. *In addition to this*, we might also consider, or plot, our sex assignment at birth (which would be a simple “male,” “female,” or “intersex”).

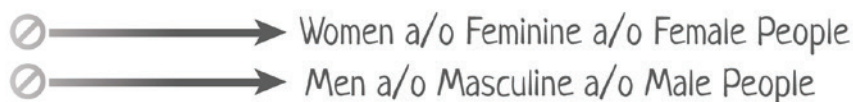
If you have coarse body hair, that would be a trait of male-ness. So maybe you see yourself a bit further right on that continuum than you would otherwise. If you have super-duper-triple-thick body hair, maybe you’re a leap to the right.

This distinction is helpful, because a lot of the gender friction some people experience is in relation to others’ perception of their sex, juxtaposed against their gender identity or expression. If you’ve ever accidentally referred to someone on the phone who had an incredibly low-pitched voice as “sir,” only to have them correct you, “Actually,

it’s ma’am,”<sup>27</sup> or been the person to whom this happened, then you’ve experienced this.

When external, visible aspects of anatomical sex (e.g., how pronounced your “Adam’s” apple is, or how deep-set your brow), the degree to which we embody them matters as much as embodying them at all.

**Attraction: “Women” and/or “Men” and/or other, specific aspects of gender**



This is getting a little complicated. But hey, so is attraction. On the right side of each continuum, we have the potential for every aspect of gender from above. For some people, this complexity is unnecessary: they can easily envision their attraction to just men and/or women.

But for others, the types of attraction they experience may be directed at specific subcomponents of gender. For example, someone may be really sexually attracted to femininity, no matter what the gender identity or anatomical sex of the person expressing. Or someone may only be attracted to queerness, and define queerness as a non-normative combination of some of these descriptors (e.g., attracted to femininity, but only in men; or man-ness, but only in women).

And in every case, we, here, have the ability to map out an experience of attraction that is as inclusive of asexual people (who may not experience a strong attraction, or any attraction at all, to any gender) as it is of straight, gay, and bisexual people.

## MOVING FORWARD, WITH THIS IN MIND

In the rest of this section of the book, we’re going to be digging into all of these concepts, both in greater detail and in broader scope.

We’ll start by further exploring identity, expression, sex, and attraction. Then move into explaining the different ways these ideas show up in people (and the labels associated with those experiences).

---

<sup>27</sup> This is an example of “misgendering” someone.

Finally, we'll get into some of the more pernicious aspects of gender, or, rather, the negative outcomes that pop up when we try to force something as huge, and complex, and diverse as what we've just covered into a tiny little box.

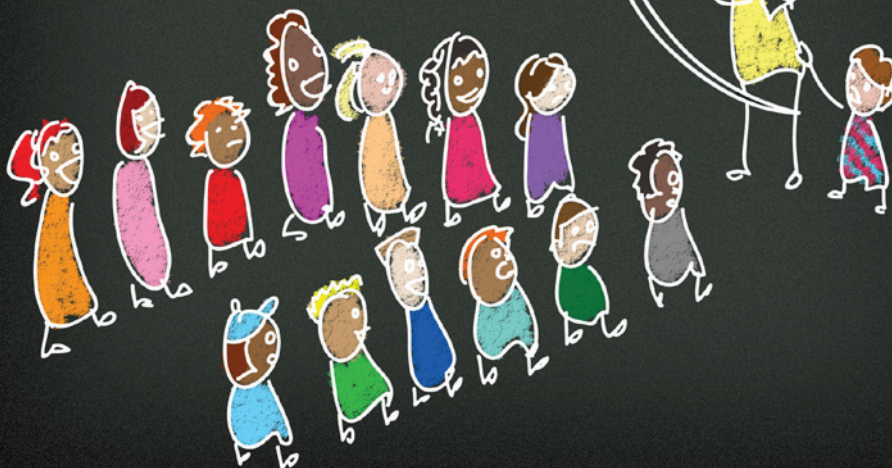
Through all of this, I'll encourage you to keep this "-Ness" idea in mind. You might, when you hear terms that are new, visualize how they might show up on this model: great! Or struggle with understanding a term, because you're seeing it only through a checkbox, or the lens of a spectrum: totally reasonable, and a perfect time to revisit this chapter.

But before we move on, I just want to reiterate something I've already said: the Genderbread Person is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. While this version of the model is certainly better, it's not without its flaws. It still reinforces (or, rather, represents) binary norms in our society that are, in many respects, overtly harmful.

It's not perfect (or even close), but it is honest. And if we're going to fix these problems, we need to start by having an honest conversation about them.



Sorry, Teacher, but where do the kids whose most salient identity isn't gender and instead self-identify as "awesome" line up?



## CHAPTER 14

# GENDER IDENTITY EXPLORED

“THE PUBLIC HAVE AN INSATIABLE CURIOSITY TO KNOW EVERYTHING, EXCEPT WHAT IS WORTH KNOWING.”

– *Oscar Wilde*

The definition I provided for gender identity in the writing that accompanies the Genderbread Person, *who you think you are*, is a bit simplistic in scope, and I glossed over quite a bit in the explanation that followed. Let’s talk more about gender identity: what it means, where it comes from, and the roles it plays in our lives.

### WHAT IS GENDER IDENTITY?

A society consists of a number of individuals who fill various social roles. These roles form our occupations (politician, teacher, doctor, farmer), establish family structures (mother, brother, daughter, uncle), and establish the terms of group and individual relationships (government and electorate, politician and voter, teacher and student).

Roles are established implicitly as a means of making sense and promoting order in a society. A number of societal needs must be met, and creating and fulfilling roles is one way we meet those needs. The roles that have existed the longest tend to have the clearest guidelines for the actors of the roles. They have been established and refined by hundreds (or thousands) of years of iteration and have been demonstrated to be valuable and necessary; in an ever-changing society, some needs have not changed much, and accordingly, the roles used

to satisfy these needs have changed little as well.

There aren't many roles as old as gender roles, and therefore, there aren't many roles that are so clearly defined or immutable as gender roles.

Gender roles have always existed primarily to satisfy the need of a society to continue existing. Creating children and fostering their growth to self-sufficiency are the foundational needs that gender roles were created to meet. In modern societies, these needs are met more and more by a variety of specialized roles that exist outside of gender roles, yet we still perpetuate and reinforce gender roles in observance of tradition.

Unlike most roles, gender roles permeate and intersect with every other role individuals occupy, often resulting in compounded roles (e.g., consider the “female doctor” or “male teacher,” where the person's gender role is bearing weight alongside—and sometimes more than—their occupational role). This obfuscates both the individual's gender and occupational roles, resulting in sometimes brackish combinations of the two that subvert social norms.

Gender identity is the way we, as individuals, make sense of how our bodies, personality characteristics, and predispositions align or don't align with established gender roles and norms.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER ROLES?

Think about someone who is honest, has a strong sense of justice, and is responsible and articulate. Based on our understanding of norms, that person has characteristics that would lead them to fill the role of “judge.” But let's imagine that person does not identify with the role of “judge” and instead identifies internally with the role of “entertainer” and decides to pursue a career in theatre.

Is that person wrong for not becoming a judge? Are they denying their biological or sociological imperative? Should they be corrected and assigned the role of judge?

The answer to all of those questions should be an emphatic “Nope!”

You could argue that this person's internal social identity is “entertainer” and that any other role they might fill, despite their alignment

with what we would normally consider to be elements of that role, would result in dissonance between who they are and the role they fill.

This is very similar to how gender identity and gender roles relate to, and sometimes conflict with, one another.

Gender roles and norms are what we use to define and make sense of our gender identity (i.e., measure how much we align or don't align with what's been established to be man or woman to determine if we are man, woman, or someone else), but they are not the same thing. Think of gender roles and norms like the role of "judge" and the characteristics that comprise that role. Possessing certain characteristics may predispose someone to align with a particular gender identity, but it does not predetermine it.

Unlike in the example of the would-be judge, in instances where people's gendered characteristics don't align with the gender roles they fulfill (as with the would-be judge identifying as entertainer), they will not likely be met by a supportive and understanding society. This happens when a person's gender identity doesn't align with their gender expression or biological sex, and they choose to fulfill gender roles that align with their gender identity instead of the roles their external traits dictate they "should" fill.

For a lot of folks, this isn't a big problem. If someone is cisgender, where their gender identity aligns with their expression and sex, there is a good chance that the gender roles they will be pushed to fulfill will at least partially align with their identity.

However, at the same time, few people *completely* align with all aspects of a particular gender role, whether they are cis or trans\*, meaning that the pressure for anyone to conform fully to gender roles will generally lead to at least a small amount of identity dissonance.

## SO, WE BASE OUR GENDER IDENTITY ON GENDER ROLES, BUT GENDER ROLES INHERENTLY CONFLICT WITH OUR GENDER IDENTITY?

Yep. And it's a real bummer. There's an explanation for why this happens, but to understand it, you may have to take a leap: gender is a social construction based on a misattribution of a biological imperative.

Remember how I told you earlier that gender roles are some of the



earliest roles, and they originally existed to support the population growth of a society? At our most basic, instinctual levels, organisms that reproduce sexually (i.e., by doin' it with other organisms) have an urge to reproduce, at least many of the species do. If they didn't, there wouldn't be a species. This is no news to you, I'm sure. But after establishing that primal urge for reproduction (something we share with all reproductive organisms), our brains continued to develop, and we now have capacities for reasoning and feel the need to have greater meaning in our lives (greater than just making miniature versions of ourselves).

The conflict comes into play when we take something that is a pure biological imperative (reproduction) and try to make sense of it in a social manner (gender).

The capacity for sexual reproduction is objectively classifiable. A scientist can biologically measure a person from any area on the planet's ability to reproduce and pair that person up with another person who is a reproductive match from any other area on the planet.

Gender is not objectively classifiable. You cannot objectively measure or compare a person's gender with that of another person across cultural borders. Gender is a relative, social construction that varies extremely widely among humans.

We have done a great job of connecting sexual reproduction (and the biological components necessary to do so) with a social role and personality predisposition. And in doing so we have created a couple of roles (man and woman) into which we expect an infinite number of identities (a unique interpretation of self for each person on Earth) to fit.

## SO WHAT IS GENDER IDENTITY?

Now that we've done a lot of unpacking and rearranging of understanding, let's answer this question again. What is gender identity?

You've likely realized by now that there really is no simple answer to this question. Gender identity is how you internally define yourself in terms of what you understand gender to be, but that's really just the surface-level answer.

### Let's go a bit deeper

Gender identity is our internal response to a social construction that attempts to make a connection between a person's biological makeup and their eventual role in society. It is a social analog to a biological classification that conflates a person's reproductive capacity with their personality and predispositions, and limits us to a few constricting (and problematic) social roles to align with the few biological roles inherent in our anatomy.


The social roles I'm talking about here are, simply, the concepts of "man" and "woman," and all the personality traits, dispositions, likes, hates, and expectations associated with those roles. And we expect them to correspond with the reproductive roles of "male" and "female." And it's problematic because of everything I've already talked about in this book, and will continue to address, but put simply, because we are sorting 7.5 billion individual personalities into one of two ill-defined, restrictive personality types.

### Even deeper

Gender identity is a reductive version of categorizing personality. It's a way for us fit everyone on earth into a few broad categories ("man," "woman," "other"), in hopes that this will add some order to the chaos that is interpersonal life. We take all the personality traits available to people, divide them into two groups, assign everyone (with their infinitely different personalities) to one of those personality group options (based on something unrelated to personality), and—*Voilà!*—now we know how to treat everyone!

But do we?

**Howdy!** Just want to check in and make sure everything is going okay. This chapter got pretty intense at the end, and we are only about halfway down this rabbit hole. Allow me to reiterate that it's okay to reread (no shame!), take a break (strongly encouraged!), or ask for clarification (phone a friend!). Keep the Platinum Rule in mind (especially in light of my not-so-tongue-in-cheek wrapping up of this chapter). Also did you know that "Howdy" comes from "How do you do?" I mean, talk about reductive.



It doesn't annoy you that they're all men?

I guess so, but in the sculptor's defense, there are a lot of rumors that Washington cross-dressed.

That has to count for something.

## CHAPTER 15

# GENDER EXPRESSION EXPLORED

“IF I’M NOT WITH A BUTCH EVERYONE JUST ASSUMES I’M STRAIGHT. IT’S LIKE I’M PASSING TOO, AGAINST MY WILL. I’M SICK OF THE WORLD THINKING I’M STRAIGHT. I’VE WORKED HARD TO BE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST AS A LESBIAN.”

– *Leslie Feinberg*

Gender expression, *how you present gender*, is a relatively simple concept to understand—at least compared to gender identity. Though simpler than gender identity, gender expression is the aspect of gender that has the most influence on your interactions with others.

Gender expression is what most determines the adversity you will face as a result of your gender. It is also what most determines the privilege you will experience as a result of your gender. Gender expression is often confused with sexuality, which is the reason I ended up sitting here writing this and you ended up sitting wherever you are reading it. Sounds like we have a lot to talk about.

## WHAT IS GENDER EXPRESSION?

Gender expression is a way of labeling how much someone does or does not present in ways that are traditionally gendered. We usually describe someone's expression as masculine or feminine, and when neither is particularly salient, we have androgyny (three concepts that are brought to us courtesy of gender norms).

Gender expression is generally discussed in terms of gender norms. This is important to remember because while gender norms enable us to use terms like “feminine” or “masculine” and have a universal (within the scope of a particular culture) idea of what we are talking about, they are also drastically different from culture to culture.

For example, if we didn't define wearing tights as “feminine,” then wearing tights would just be wearing tights. Further, until a couple hundred years ago, many western cultures would have viewed tights as “masculine,” or at least “androgynous.” Even further, tights—or more accurately, “meggings” (man + leggings)—were becoming trendy again for men to wear, particularly in the United Kingdom. My, what a topsy-turvy world we live in.

But gender expression goes far beyond clothing.

Gender expression encompasses all the ways you present yourself that are governed by gender norms, which, as you likely now realize, is just about everything. Clothing, mannerisms, gait, pitch of voice, language choices, pronunciation of language, posture, grooming, social interactions, and much, much more all go into what we would merge together in our minds to be an individual's gender expression.

## WHAT DETERMINES YOUR GENDER EXPRESSION?

Gender expression can be a way of demonstrating your gender identity, but it can also be an intentional way of rejecting your gender identity. It can align with the gender norms attached to your biological sex, or not. It can be driven by your want to conform, your want to rebel, sexual or relational desires, or something else altogether. It can make perfect sense to you as you look in a mirror and reflect on who you are, or it may make no sense at all and leave you confused and wondering what drives you to wear pants so tight you regularly rip them while dancing—or maybe that's just me?

Or, the shorter version: the determining factors in an individual's gender expression are as diverse as the ways individuals express gender.

If you are socialized in a way that allows for more flexibility in your gender expression, there is a good chance you will express gender more flexibly. If, however, you were socialized with strict, rigid norms pertaining to gender expression, you are likely to follow those norms and express gender in a normalized way.

But neither of these is a guarantee. Plenty of folks brought up in households where it would have been just as OK for boys to wear dresses and girls to wear ties still express gender in traditional ways. And plenty of folks brought up in households where it might be dangerous for a boy to wear a dress or a girl to wear a tie still express gender in nontraditional ways.

## GENDER EXPRESSION IS FLUID AND HARD TO CATEGORIZE

Gender expression, unlike gender identity, is not something you establish at an early age and stick with your entire life. It's something that is always changing, both culturally and individually, whether you intend for it to change or not.

### **What society considers “feminine” and “masculine” changes**

Even if you try to dress, behave, interact, and present yourself the same way your entire life, the implications of those actions change. Style, demeanor, and all the other things that make up gender expression change on a regular basis, sometimes as often as from season to season. Need an example? Just look at skinny jeans.

### **What you try to express may be interpreted otherwise**

As much as your intention in expressing gender matters, how that expression is received and interpreted matters more, at least if we are talking in terms of affecting your interactions with others. Individuals will interpret gender expressions using a lens unique to them—based on their experiences, their predispositions, and a number of other variables.

### **Labels for gender expression like “femme” and “butch” have**

**limited effectiveness.**

While terms describing gender expressions certainly exist, their ability to convey universally understood meaning isn't nearly as effective as that of the terms for gender identities. Part of this is because many of these terms come from relatively small subcultures, but in general, these terms can be confusing because of how broad the range of gender expression is, even within gender expression labels like "femme" or "butch" (one person's butch is another person's femme).



**ARE THERE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH GENDER EXPRESSION?**

Gender expression is, in society's eye, inexorably linked to sexuality, gender identity, and biological sex. Most folks think it's not just linked to but predetermined by those things. This is not a healthy misconception, and it results in a lot of unhealthy outcomes. Let's start small and build up.

### **Gender expression can cause others to confuse your identity**

This is what I was referring to earlier when I said gender expression confusions have led us here. This is what led to the creation of *It's Pronounced Metrosexual* and has put me in hundreds of situations where I've found myself explaining to people that I'm not gay. It has nothing to do with my sexuality but everything to do with my gender expression (I'm... pretty).

Due to the connection people draw between gender and sexuality, and the feminine ways I tend to express gender (through language, demeanor, dress, and grooming), I am always experiencing this gender confusion side effect.

This little misunderstanding has affected my life in a more drastic way than is likely typical (you know, determining my career), but there are plenty more folks than me who experience friction on a daily basis because of this. And friction isn't fun when you're just trying to be *you*.

Gender expression leads folks to incorrectly assume someone's gender identity, by doing a form of identity math where we add up one aspect of what we're noticing (e.g., the person's gender expression) against another (e.g., a perception of male-ness in someone's face). And mis-assumptions about gender identity rarely come out nicely (i.e., I'm sure you've heard someone ask, or asked yourself, "Is that a dude or a chick?" A little rough, to say the least).

### **The pressure to express gender in a particular way can lead to anxiety and depression.**

Society places a lot of pressure on us to be cisgender. If you are cisgender, you can live where you want, eat where you want, and pee where you want—all good things. For folks who aren't cisgender, attempting to "pass" as cis by way of gender expression is one way to give into this pressure<sup>28</sup>.

Similarly, we feel a lot of pressure to be straight. Due to the connections we draw between gender and sexuality, people who are queer may also give into the pressures of heteronormativity and do their best

---

<sup>28</sup> The term for this is living "stealth." Like a lot of other terms associated with identity, it's a pernicious one, like a double-edged sword with a dozen edges. A mace? Would that be a mace?



to be read as straight (i.e., men expressing masculinely, women expressing femininely).

Giving into pressure to express in a way other than how you're comfortable leads to identity dissonance—a gap between your inner self and the self you are presenting to the world—that can lead to anxiety and depression.

Resisting the pressure to express gender in a particular way and expressing it how you are comfortable can also lead to dissonance between you and those around you who are pushing you to conform (and giving into those pressures themselves). This too can increase your likelihood of experiencing anxiety and depression.

Dang. But don't worry. It only gets worse.

### **Your gender expression can put you at risk for serious bodily harm**

I'm not going to spend much time explaining this unfortunate outcome of gender expression, so just take my word for it or do some Internet searching later.

If it doesn't fit into some people's boxes of acceptable options, the way you express your gender can provoke them to threaten, attack, and in some particularly horrifying cases, kill you. This seems to most commonly happen in bathrooms, locker rooms, and other gender-defined spaces.

## BUT IT'S NOT ALL BAD: GENDER EXPRESSION IS ALSO A LOT OF FUN

Wow. This chapter got heavy fast. It's important not to gloss over the sad stuff, but I also think it's important we realize that while it's not all sunshine and rainbows, it's also not all tornadoes and killer leprechauns waiting at the ends of those rainbows.

One of my favorite aspects of gender expression is the ability to have fun with it, experiment with different ways of expressing gender to see how they feel. It's like trying on clothes, but instead of clothes you get to try on different types of language, mannerisms, demeanors, and—well, yes—clothes.

**DRILL:** “Try on” another gender expression for a bit. Wear clothing that aligns with a gender expression you don't typically express, behave in ways you consider more masculine

or feminine than normal (do both!), the whole package. Do this in a space where you are around people who make you feel comfortable, and remember that “a gender expression you don’t typically express” doesn’t mean “act like a ‘woman’ if you’re a man, or a ‘man’ if you’re a woman” (e.g., it would make me far more uncomfortable to express hypermasculine than super feminine, even though I’m a man). We’re past all that binary stuff by now, right? Phew.

A lot of the more extreme gender expressions you see are just this: a show of sorts, or at least a conscious presentation. Drag (e.g., drag queens and drag kings) is the most recognizable example of this, but you see more subtle examples all the time. A formal dinner party tends to bring out the extremes in feminine (dresses, makeup, fancy woman hair) and masculine (suits, ties, fancy man hair). People often get hilariously masculine while playing sports (I grunt, I’m not ashamed to admit it) and hilariously feminine while watching *The Lion King* (I cry every time).

### **Experimenting with Gender Expression**

Gender expression is the most flexible component of gender. It’s not determined by some consistent and deeply-embedded psychological sense of self (like identity), nor embodied in physical, anatomical traits that are difficult to change (like sex). When it comes to experimenting with gender expression, or seeing others do so, a helpful distinction is in order: the difference between gender expression and “cueing.”

Cueing an aspect of our identity (often through expression) is when we attempt to demonstrate on the outside something we are on the inside. The quote at the beginning of this chapter is a comedic example of this. Cueing can generally be thought of as intentional (even if the intention isn’t read or understood by others), but it might also be subconscious.

I highlight the difference here to make an important point: even though a lot of cueing is done through gender expression, not all gender expression is cueing. That is, the ways we express gender, or the ways we notice others expressing gender, may not at all correspond to any other aspect of our identities (even if the assumption made by others is that it does).

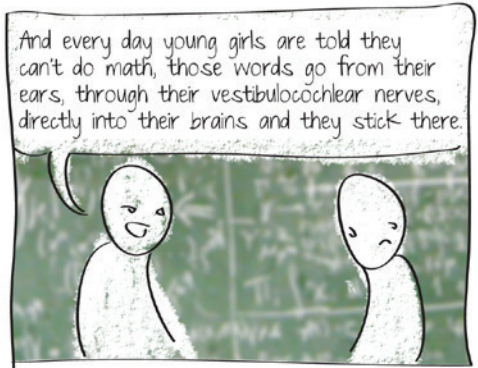
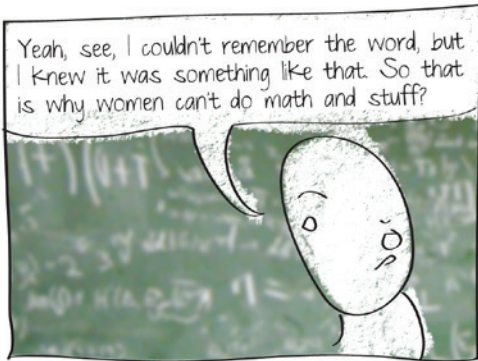
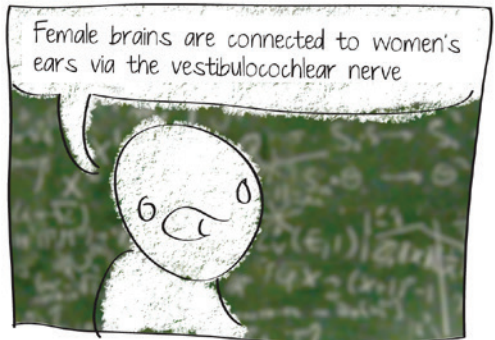
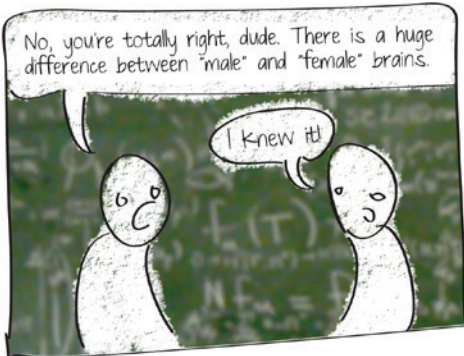
So, when noticing others expressing gender, we can often get wrapped up in trying to figure out what they're cueing, but it is sometimes in everyone's best interest to remember that they might *not* be cueing.

## EXPRESSING OURSELVES

Ultimately, it would be wonderful to be at a place where the clothes we wore, the mannerisms we used, our vocal affectations, our demeanor, and more, where all the things we now associate with gender expression were simply seen as aspects of individual expression. Where they weren't bound by assumptions about other aspects of our identity, or policed by those around us.

Because, everything that we think of as gender expression can be a lot of fun. And it will all be fun when we're finally in a place as a society where we realize gender identity, biological sex, and sexual orientation interrelate with gender expression, but they do not determine it. And where people feel comfortable, and above all safe, expressing gender, or just expressing themselves, however they please.





## CHAPTER 16

# ANATOMICAL SEX EXPLORED

“IN BIOLOGY, NOTHING IS CLEAR, EVERYTHING IS TOO COMPLICATED, EVERYTHING IS A MESS, AND JUST WHEN YOU THINK YOU UNDERSTAND SOMETHING, YOU PEEL OFF A LAYER AND FIND DEEPER COMPLICATIONS BENEATH. NATURE IS ANYTHING BUT SIMPLE.”

– *Richard Preston*

People tend to come easily to the understanding that gender identity and gender expression are more varied than we learned as kids, but anatomical sex is generally a hang-up. “How can someone be more male or more female than someone else? And what do you mean there are more than two sexes?” There are a few ways to look at this, but let’s start with the basics.

### WHAT IS SEX?

*Doin’ it, amiright?* Sorry. Had to get that one out of the way. Here, we aren’t using sex as a shorthand for sexual intercourse. This is why it’s helpful to specify “anatomical sex,” or some prefer the phrase “bio-

logical sex,” while others prefer “physical sex.”<sup>29</sup>

Sex is the word we use to categorize certain physical anatomy someone has, based on how it aligns with what we understand to be “intersex,” “female,” or “male.” The easiest way to examine these labels is with example characteristics.

Some characteristics of “male” sex include testes; penis; scrotum; 46, XY karyotype; more testosterone than estrogen; thick body hair; facial hair; wide shoulders; and a deep-pitched voice.

Some characteristics of “female” sex include ovaries; vulva, vagina; uterus; 46, XX karyotype; more estrogen than testosterone; breasts; fine body hair; fine (or no) facial hair; wide hips; and a high-pitched voice.

Characteristics of “intersex” sex include combinations of male and female characteristics above, in addition to unique karyotypes like 45, X; 45, X0; and 47, XXY.

If someone has all the characteristics of male anatomical sex, we may consider them to be “male.” If someone has all the characteristics of female anatomical sex, we may consider them to be “female.” And if someone has characteristics associated with both sexes, we may consider them to be “intersex” (or we may do something more drastic, which I’ll explain in a bit).

But, more honestly, the sex we label someone with rarely has anything to do with anything beyond one thing: external genitalia present at birth.

## THE EFFECTS OF ANATOMICAL SEX

Due to the incomplete way we understand gender, the sex someone is assigned at birth is also seen as a gender identity assignment. If you’re male at birth, you’re a boy, and we’re going to raise you to be a man. If you’re female at birth, you’re a girl, and we’re going to raise you to be a woman. And if you’re intersex at birth, we have to figure it out (more on this later).

In most cases, this assignment means a child is beginning to be socialized into one of the binary genders from birth on. If the child happens to have a gender identity that aligns with the gender norms

---

<sup>29</sup> Like there’s another kind AMIRIGHT?! Okay, now I’m done.

they are being socialized to adhere to, there isn't much of a problem. Although there is a lot to be said about gender-neutral parenting and the general benefits of this practice (that help cis and trans\* youth alike in their development), I'll leave that for a book about gender-neutral parenting.

The problem is when this doesn't work out, when a kid is pushed to adopt norms that don't align with their sense of self, creating a confusing worldview at a young age, and all in response to a sex assignment at birth.

## SEX ASSIGNMENT FOR INTERSEX BABIES

As I mentioned a few times, a sex (usually male or female) is assigned to a baby even if that baby is born intersex. How does this work? It depends on how ambiguous the baby's sex is at birth.

### **Slightly ambiguous genitalia**

If a baby is born with genitalia that are ambiguous enough for a doctor to notice, the doctors will tentatively make a sex assignment and then perform a few simple tests before making it official. A typical example of ambiguous genitalia present at birth would be an enlarged clitoris in an otherwise "female" body. The tests the doctors will conduct range from chromosome tests, hormone levels, or ultrasounds to check for sex organs. Once the results of these tests come back, assuming they reflect what the doctors originally suspected, they will confirm the sex assignment.

### **Completely ambiguous genitalia**

If a baby is born with genitalia that are too ambiguous for a doctor to make a sex assignment, the process is a bit more drawn out. The doctors will have to guess and check hypotheses using elaborate tests, sometimes relying on endocrinologists' suggestions, and use surgical interventions to eventually adjust the genitals of the baby to align with whatever sex they decide is best for the child.

### **Criteria used in sex assignment for intersex babies**

The criteria for making sex assignments has changed a bit in the last sixty years, and I don't want to get lost in the nitty-gritty details in this book, but let me paint you a general picture of how this works.



In the cases above, where a baby is born with ambiguous genitalia, doctors are put in a position where they attempt to assign the child a sex that will lead to the least gender and social conflict later in life. It's generally accepted in the medical community that sex and gender aren't the same thing (gender is viewed as "nurture" while sex is "nature"), which is a start, but the problem lies with how this information is used.

Instead of saying, "We don't know what this kid's gender will end up being, so let's hold off on assigning a sex," they say, "We don't know what this kid's gender will end up being, so let's assign them a sex and tell their parents to socialize them into the gender that corresponds with the sex we assigned them. Yeah, that'll work out just fine." And by "assign" them a sex, here, I am not just speaking of a letter on a birth certificate. Surgical sex assignments at birth are practiced.

So close. They have the right idea of the problem, but a patently wrong idea of the solution.

## HOW CAN SOMEONE BE DIFFERENT DEGREES OF A PARTICULAR SEX?

The way I have sex depicted in the Genderbread Person model, there are varying degrees of "male-ness" or "female-ness" an individual can possess. "What do you mean by that?" I get asked by confused people. "That doesn't make sense, does it?" I hear frustrated people wonder. "Tell me your ATM pin code!" the confused, frustrated people demand. I get robbed.

Anatomical sex is a bit of a misnomer because it tears the term out of the sociological (or psychological) world where gender typically lives. But it's about much more than *just* the anatomy we do or don't have.

The more your body is pumping out and utilizing androgens (like testosterone), the more "male-ness" you may develop; and the more estrogens your body makes and utilizes, the more "female-ness" you'll develop. And while development of hormones is strongly linked to your "sex," there is a huge amount of variation in levels (much more than the three categories of variation "sex" affords), and other ways that hormones can be introduced into our bodies.

Examples of male-ness in me: wide shoulders (not bragging), testes, beard, hard jaw and brow lines, penis (still not bragging).

Examples of female-ness in me: lack of protruding Adam's apple, fine body hair, wide [child-bearing] hips (bragging), relatively high-pitched voice.

Starting to think the term "male" might not apply that well? Me too. But it'd be misleading to label me "intersex."

That said, sex is as much a social construct as it is a biological one. Sure, you are born with what we call "sex characteristics" (like all the ones mentioned in the lists above). That part's biological. But the way we make meaning of those characteristics is all sociology, baby.

Beyond the most basic understanding of sex, the reproductive understanding, our entire understanding of sex (and its impact on our lives) is formed by how we are socialized.

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEX

And that's what brings us, finally, to this conundrum of an idea. Sex is more complicated than just what we're assigned at birth, and a lot of the "male" *and* "female" characteristics can be embodied by someone who was assigned with just one of those labels. So what is sex?

Well, it must be about reproduction. It all comes back to reproduction, after all. Okay, so, then, we must face the obvious questions like "Are female people who have hysterectomies still female?" "Are male people who are infertile still male?" Sure, of course they are. Right?

What about children who haven't yet hit puberty, and who are unable to (and may never become able to) reproduce? Or what about people who never avail themselves of reproduction? People who either say "nope," or aren't attracted to the types of people they may be able to reproduce with, or who are unable to reproduce for other reasons altogether?

If you'd classify any of the aforementioned people as "male" or "female," then it can't solely be about reproduction.

Making things more complicated, most of the things we consider to be "sex characteristics" (including everything I talked about earlier) aren't just associated with sex differentiation. From chromosomes to hormones, everything mentioned serves a litany of purposes in our bodies. We consider them to be sex characteristics, but that's like considering a fork to be broccoli stabber. Forks stab broccoli, yes, but we

also use them for much more than that.

Which brings us to the heading of this section: our understanding of sex, like gender, is socially constructed. We measure sex against a set of criteria that we created. Well, not “we” like “you and me” we, but specific researchers and medical professionals of the past couple centuries.

Now, that doesn’t mean it’s not “real,” or that those physical structures don’t exist in your body<sup>30</sup>. Money is a social construction (the paper itself, and the coins, don’t have much inherent value), but that doesn’t mean it’s not real. Money is life-or-death real. And so is sex.

So, while a lot of folks are onboard with the “nurture” of gender, it might be time we jump off the “sex is nature” part of the train. Because what we’ve created sex to mean goes far beyond nature. Or we can pretend all of this isn’t true, and keep trudging forward desperate to hang onto the simplicity of that dichotomy.

Personally, I’m starting to feel pretty desperate that we don’t.

Mr. Spock, what do you make of this?


“Quite simply, Captain, I examined the problem from all angles, and it was plainly hopeless. Logic informed me that under the circumstances, the only logical action would have to be one of desperation. Logical decision, logically arrived at.”

Desperation it is.

---

**30** If you had a penis before reading this section, you still have a penis. I didn’t just steal your penis. I’m no penis thief!





It's beautiful! How did he pop the question?

A simple line drawing of a hand with a ring on the ring finger, set against a light green, cloud-like background.

Well, first he cooked us this amazing meal...

Then we went on a walk through an enchanting meadow...

And then he ran a test on my blood to ensure my hormone levels were satisfactory.

So romantic!



## CHAPTER 17

# ATTRACTION AND GENDER

“THAT’S ALWAYS SEEMED SO RIDICULOUS TO ME, THAT PEOPLE WANT TO BE AROUND SOMEONE BECAUSE THEY’RE PRETTY. IT’S LIKE PICKING YOUR BREAKFAST CEREALS BASED ON COLOR INSTEAD OF TASTE.”

– *John Green*

We understand that sexual orientation and gender are separate but interrelated concepts. This is relatively easily understood within the contexts of cisgender identities. But how does sexual orientation “work” for people who are genderqueer?

Before we address attraction as it plays out with genderqueer folks, I want to focus on attraction as a general idea, and then we can move into the more complex stuff.

Also, it’s worth noting that “sexual orientation” itself is a loaded—and in some ways limiting—term. I’m using it here to employ at least one term most people are familiar with and to describe a combination of physical, emotional/romantic, and spiritual attraction. Sexuality is a complicated subject that deserves a book entirely to itself, but as the focus of this book is gender, I will only be scratching the surface of sexuality as it relates to gender.

## BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND ATTRACTION

Attraction is a powerful—and can feel like an inexplicable—force for those who feel it. The draw to a specific grouping of characteristics, your “type,” or to moods and feelings that are elicited by certain people is a mysterious force, but it’s not inexplicable. It’s quite explicable. Let’s explicate it. (Bet you didn’t know that was a word. Even I was surprised when a red squiggly didn’t pop up underneath it.)

**DRILL:** Write down examples of the types of people or characteristics you are attracted to romantically, physically/sexually, and emotionally/spiritually. Categorize these things into traditional gendered categories (feminine/masculine, man/woman, male/female) as you come up with them, and then share and discuss your list with a friend who did the same thing. If you’ve never explored or considered this, really spend some time (thirty to forty-five minutes, to start) on it before you continue reading.

## ATTRACTION IS IN YOUR HEAD, LIKE AN IMAGINARY FRIEND

For a moment, stop thinking in terms of cisgender versus genderqueer and instead think just think about attraction. Attraction is something that comes from within. There are a lot of theories on what drives attraction—or where it comes from.

I buy into the theory that attraction is the result of your subconscious interpretation of hormonal influences on your brain chemistry, and your ability to make sense of attraction is a result of your socialization and self-awareness. That is, attraction is largely out of your control, but how you make sense of it and act upon it is up to you.

This understanding of attraction applies equally to both cisgender and genderqueer folks.

### **It’s about whom you’re attracted to, not you**

Still just thinking about attraction in general (rather than cisgender attraction versus genderqueer attraction), which do you think plays a larger role in the attraction dance: the other person’s identity(ies), or yours?

A lot of cisgender straight people would say that if they became the opposite gender (through magic, I guess—perhaps a spell woven

by Åndrøgyne, a Gender Mage of the Circle of... too far?), they would still be straight. You've probably heard a straight cis guy say something like "If I was a girl, I would totally be into Brad Pitt."

Guess what, dude: you're into Brad Pitt, at least a little.

Sexual orientation and gender aren't dependent on one another like that. If you suddenly became a different gender, you would still be attracted to the same type of people, or you would no longer be you.

Now this is smudgy, because one could argue that if you became a different gender, you would likely have a different mix of hormones floating around inside your hat rack, which might have influenced your attraction, but we're not going to go there. Remember, there was magic involved.

What's important is that attraction—truly, absolutely distilled and rinsed—is about the other, not about the you (or, for all the grammar nerds, it's about the object, not the subject). Though it might be hard to imagine ("I've just always imagined my penis going into a vagina," a guy told me once, to my mirth), it is the case. Or it's at least most of the case.

Understanding identity is like utilizing the light side of the force: there are no absolutes (except for the one absolute absolving that there are none, of course).

## UPDATING OUR TERMINOLOGY

In order to make this as clear as we can, we need to be speaking the same language. Conventional terms to describe sexual orientation (hetero-, homo-, and bisexual) don't work well outside of the cisgender world, because they are dependent on the gender relationship between the attracted and the attractee (or the subject and the object of, in some cases, doin' it). Many have argued that I shouldn't use these terms at all in my gender writings, because they aren't inclusive of genderqueer folks. While that's true, the conventional (and non-genderqueer-inclusive) terms are more accessible to people who are new to these concepts, which is why I kept them in place.

### **New terms for expressing sexual orientation**

**Androsexual/Androphilic:** attracted to males, men, and/or masculinity



**Gynesexual/Gynephilic:** attracted to females, women, and/or femininity

**Skoliosexual:** attracted to genderqueer and transsexual people and expressions (people who aren't identified as cisgender)

**Pansexual:** attracted to all genders of people, regardless of anatomical sex, gender identity, or expression

**Asexual:** no sexual attraction, but often romantic or spiritual attractions exist

Note: for all of these terms, attraction can be further broken down into romantic, sexual/physical, emotional, or spiritual attraction (e.g., a person may be romantically androphilic but sexually gynephilic).

### **Limitations of these terms, and in general**

The terms presented above are far better than the conventional terms for describing sexual orientation, but they are certainly not perfect. You have to remember: identities are far too numerous for any list, graph, or book chapter to describe them all. Some would argue that the list above, for example, isn't super inclusive of third-gender (or fourth-, or some-) folks, or two-spirit folks, but it's another step toward understanding an incredibly complex concept. When in doubt, rely on the Platinum Rule.

## SO, HOW DOES GENDERQUEER SEXUAL ORIENTATION WORK?

Just from reading the terms above, you should start to have a basic understanding of how attraction works for our genderqueer friends. If you're particularly quick, you'll realize it's not really different from how it works for our cisgender friends. Not quite there yet? It'll be my pleasure to explain.

In short, genderqueer sexual orientation works just like cisgender sexual orientation works. People are attracted to certain kinds of people; attracted to certain expressions of masculinity and femininity; attracted to certain physical manifestations of sex and gender (breasts and/or hair and/or penises and/or etc.); and attracted to a certain gender or certain self-identities as they pertain to relationship and societal roles.

If a genderqueer person is attracted to women, using these terms,

you would say that person is gynosexual. If a cisgender person (man or woman) is attracted to women, you would also say that person is gynosexual. If a genderqueer person is attracted to genderqueer people, you would say that person is skoliosexual. If a cisgender person (man or woman) is attracted to genderqueer people, you would say that person is skoliosexual (see how much more inclusive these terms are?).

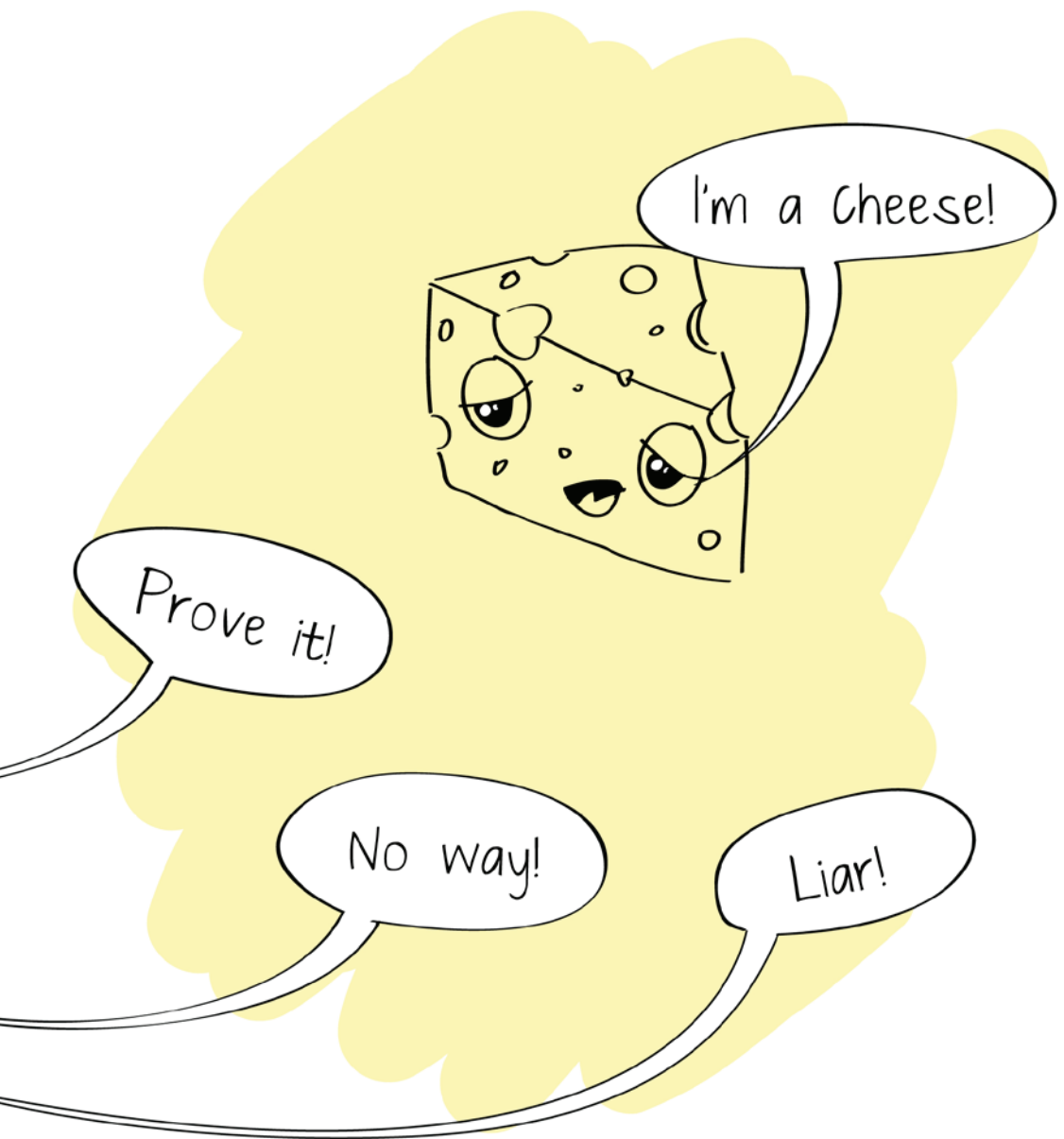
So let me say it again: genderqueer sexual orientation works just like cisgender sexual orientation works. In fact, these “new terms for expressing sexual orientation” work just as well for cisgender people as they do for genderqueer people.

Some (I) would argue we should do a better job adopting them into our vocabularies, but some (I) also understand that just beginning to understand the complexity of gender is already a lot to ask.

### IT CAN'T BE THAT SIMPLE

No, of course not. Nothing in identity is actually simple. But it can be simplified to be this simple, and it just was. The sooner we stop thinking of genderqueer people as “the other” and stop finding more ways to differentiate between cisgender and genderqueer, the sooner we’ll begin to understand one another, accept one another, and legislate fairly for one as well as the other.

Hopefully, at least that last one.



I'm a Cheese!

Prove it!

No way!

Liar!

## CHAPTER 18

# AN ASSORTMENT OF GENDER IDENTITIES

“IF EVERY EVENT WHICH OCCURRED COULD BE GIVEN A NAME,  
THERE WOULD BE NO NEED FOR STORIES.”

– *John Berger*

Defining and labeling specific gender identities creates a system of understanding that’s as reliable as the hyperdrive on the Millennium Falcon. That is, relying too heavily on them often leads to more bad than good, but when they work, they can make the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs.

The benefit of labeling identities, as I’ve said before and will continue to say forever, is that they create solidarity, a shared experience, and a support system for a community. The downside is that people rarely embody every trait of any particular identity label.

In the spirit of that duality, I am presenting in this chapter an alphabetically-arranged guide to several gender identity labels. For each term, I’m including the best explanations and backgrounds I can muster, and also anonymous accounts of individuals (sent to me via email) who use these labels for themselves, explaining what the terms mean to them.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but more of a primer on the world beyond two genders. The genders I left out were either done

so intentionally (I don't know enough about the identity to feel comfortable writing about it, or I couldn't connect with a person with that identity to share their account) or by accident (less likely). In both cases, I apologize dearly to anyone who feels marginalized by omission.

**Note:** this is a brave new world, and any list of gender identities is perpetually incomplete due to the constant advent of new identity monikers. Don't think that because you hear of something you don't see here that it's any less real or deserves any less respect than the identities in this chapter.

## AGENDER (SOMETIMES GENDER NEUTROIS, GENDER NEUTRAL, OR GENDERLESS)

Agender people have no, or very little, connection to the traditional system of gender, no personal alignment with the concepts of either “man” or “woman,” and see themselves as existing without gender. They often don't have strong, or any, connection to the ideas of masculinity or femininity and may attempt to present gender (or alter their secondary sex characteristics) in ways that don't embody aspects of either.

Agender is a relatively new term to describe a particular type of gender nonconformity. Estimates of “gender nonconforming” folks within the trans\* community hover around 10 percent, and there are no good numbers on what percentage of these folks may identify as agender (or similarly).

*“I was born female, but it never clicked. If it were up to me, I wouldn't have nipples. My ideal physical body would be without genitalia or breasts, and I prefer when people refer to me as ‘they.’ I came out two times in my life (once as a lesbian, then as a transman) before realizing that my issue wasn't with attraction or figuring out what gender I was but was with gender itself. I don't feel it the way other people seem to.”*

## BIGENDER

Bigender (not to be confused with genderfluid) people fully identify with two separate genders, often “man” and “woman,” or any two

gender identities (e.g., “woman” and a third gender). For some bigender people, this means the prominence of the two gender identities fluctuates throughout the day, week, or year; for others, their experienced gender is a bit more gray, hovering between the two at any given time, but at all times they still fully identify with both.

For bigender people whose biological sex and assigned gender align with one of their gender identities (essentially making them “half” cisgender), it can be difficult not to defer to that gender identity at all times, because of the pressure of others to do so (or an internal pressure), thereby creating dissonance with their other identity. This issue can be similarly troublesome during a bigender person’s coming out process, as the people in their life may continue to only see them as a cisgender person and may not recognize the other gender identity they embody within.

*“A lot of people think of gender as a continuum, and that’s fine, but I see it more like apples and oranges. Some people are apples, some people are oranges, some people are grapes, etc. For me, I just happen to be an apple and a grape—like a fruit salad. At times you’ll taste 100 percent apple. Others it’s 100 percent grape. Others it’s a bite with both, so you taste them both at the same time. But I’m not a grapple. I’m a grape, and I’m an apple. I fully align with “man” just as much as I fully align with “woman.”*

## GENDERFLUID

Genderfluid (not to be confused with bigender) people experience varying gender identity at different times, or a lack of a static gender identity. For some genderfluid people, this means shifting slowly back and forth along a spectrum from one gender to another through a day, month, or year; the identities of other genderfluid people shift more based on particular situations they may find themselves in (e.g., when around certain people or other genders, or engaged in activities that they might consider to be more suitable for a particular gender).

The core trait of someone who is genderfluid is the idea that their sense of their gender is dynamic. The aspects of gender different genderfluid people identify with can be any of the gender identities mentioned in this chapter, any other dimension of gender described in

this book, or none of the above, and the number of aspects someone flows among as well as how that flow happens is different for different genderfluid people.

*“When I was younger, my parents thought I suffered from chronic depression because I would consistently go through phases where I was despondent and just turned off from the world. As I grew up, I realized this was just my gender shifting from woman to man, and my body not knowing how to make sense of it. I would feel completely outside of myself, because I was a girl and didn’t feel like a girl for a few months, but then it would all come back to normal for a while. I’ve since realized what was happening and can support the boy part of me when it comes out better and not feel like an alien in my own body every couple of months.”*

## GENDERQUEER

Genderqueer is often used as an umbrella term for anyone who doesn’t identify within the gender binary, meaning that genderqueer isn’t an identity itself but rather a grouping of identities (e.g., someone who is bigender is also genderqueer). Some people who are genderqueer are also transgender.

And many folks identify simply as genderqueer, embracing the ambiguity of the term and demonstrating that the only certainty in their gender identity is that it’s not a man or a woman (A friend of mine, when asked if they’re “a boy or a girl” simply replies “Nope.”). People who identify as genderqueer may see themselves as existing between the concepts of man and woman, possessing combinations of both, or transcending beyond the gender binary completely.

*“I see saying I’m genderqueer the same way someone might say they are agnostic: I believe that gender exists, and I have it, but it’s beyond me to say that I can comfortably define what it is. If you think you know what gender is, and are sure about yours, I think you’re making a leap of faith.”*

## MAN (ALSO TRANSMAN, TRANS MAN, OR FTM MAN)

A person who identifies as a man aligns fully—or at least mostly—with the roles and norms ascribed to people born male in a society.

This person has no personal friction with the options presented by the traditional gender binary.

A lot of people who identify as men have never questioned that identity and are simply expressing and embodying the traits they were taught to be appropriate for men in childhood.

And a lot of men who were assigned male at birth and have explored gender do not fully align with all aspects of “man-ness” but still identify as men because it mostly represents them, or because they don’t want to trivialize the struggles of trans\* people.

For transmen, trans men, or FtM (Female-to-Male) men, while they were not assigned male at birth, they have likely always identified as men, or realized upon exploring what gender meant to them that they were men.

*“It makes sense to me that I’m a man. I like manly things, and I’m comfortable around other men. I’m not super athletic and have a job as a teacher, which I guess to some people might make me ‘less of a man,’ but I see being a man more as being comfortable in the gender I’ve always had and never feeling any pressure from inside that something wasn’t right.”*

## WOMAN (ALSO TRANSWOMAN, TRANS WOMAN, OR MTF WOMAN)

A person who identifies as a woman aligns fully—or, at least, mostly—with the roles and norms ascribed to people born female in a society. This person has no personal friction with the options presented by the traditional gender binary.

A lot of people who identify as women have never questioned that identity and are simply expressing and embodying the traits they were taught to be appropriate for women in childhood.

And a lot of women who were assigned female at birth and have explored gender do not fully align with all aspects of “woman-ness” but still identify as women because it mostly represents them, or because they don’t want to trivialize the struggles of trans\* people.

For transwomen, trans women, or MtF (Male-to-Female) women, while they were not assigned female at birth, they have likely always identified as women, or realized upon exploring what gender meant to them that they were women.

*“As a kid, seeing the girls on TV playing with Barbies, I was always like,*



*‘Yes, that is so me. That’s my friends. That’s my life.’ I never needed another option. I was a pink girl. I was a fashion girl. I want a career, but I also want to be a mom—yes, a ‘mom,’ not a ‘parent.’ There’s a difference.”*

## TRANSGENDER

Transgender is often understood to be an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity doesn’t correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth in the socially expected way (essentially, a parallel term for “cisgender”). Many folks’ identities could be best understood as “transgender and...” (e.g., transgender and third-gender), in that transgender is an all-encompassing term that binds many of the other gender identities together.

The umbrella term “transgender” is great because it can be used in a constructive way to lump together all of the diverse gender identities and create a sense of group cohesion. This is helpful for civil rights purposes (transgender people fighting for “transgender rights” as a group is much more effective than bigender people fighting for “bigender rights” while genderfluid people fight for “genderfluid rights” and so on).

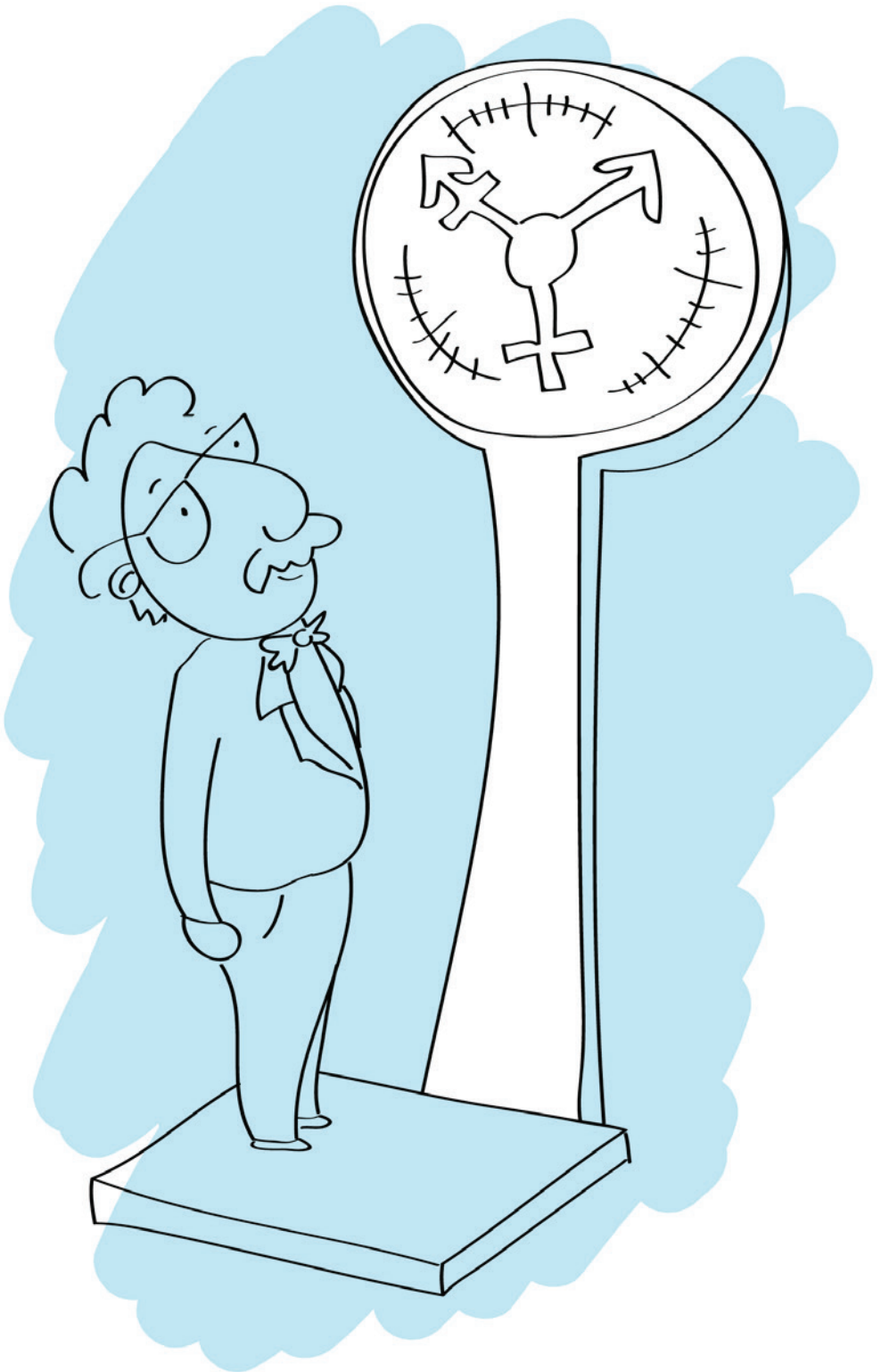
The identity label “transgender” is troublesome because it’s often mischaracterized as describing “a woman trapped in a man’s body” (and vice versa), which is not only a damaging way to view gender and sex, but also an incredibly generalizing way to convey a term that is used to describe people of diverse gender individual identities and experiences.

As an identity label, folks who solely identify as transgender (or trans) have many different interpretations of what this means. For some, it’s interchangeable with the identity label “non-binary” (meaning a person who neither identifies as man nor woman); for others, it has elements of genderfluid or genderqueer (another label that is often interchangeable with transgender, when used as a specific identity label). Due to this wide range, I would rather not include a specific example of someone who uses the identity label “transgender,” because it will likely be more misleading (in its specificity) than helpful (in its ability to be generalized).

Instead, I want to end with a passage from someone who has an

identity label so specific you will not likely see it in any list, but one that embodies how personal and individual gender really is:

*“Some view gender as if there is no middle-ground – the only options are “male” or “female.” Personally, I identify as a genderqueer trans\*boi and due to hormones and surgery, I pass as a cisman even in trans\*spaces. I often hear the words “femme,” “Why bother transitioning if you’re going to do drag?” and “Is that dude rocking a beard and glitter nail polish?” used in reference to me. A lot of the time I identify as “mostly male”, which is why I chose to undergo a medical transition, but I’m never “completely male” (or “completely female” either!); usually my gender falls somewhere in the middle, a mixing-pot of male and female and everything else in between, and am happiest when my presentation causes people to second-guess themselves.”*



## CHAPTER 19

# HOW TO DIAGNOSE SOMEONE AS TRANSGENDER

“HE EXPLAINED TO ME WITH GREAT INSISTENCE THAT EVERY QUESTION POSSESSED A POWER THAT DID NOT LIE IN THE ANSWER.”

– *Elie Wiesel*

If you immediately flipped to this chapter because after opening the book and looking at the table of contents, you saw this and were excited because this was one of the things you were hoping to learn from this book—tricked you!

If you immediately flipped to this chapter because after opening the book and looking at the table of contents, you were mortified—worry not!

And if you are reading this chapter because you just finished reading the chapter before it...well, ignore those first two paragraphs. Start with the next one.

This one.

Actually, start with this one: you can't “diagnose” “someone” “as transgender.” That's a weird way to quote that, but I want to break this troublesome statement down into those three separate, troublesome parts. Before I do, let me talk about this idea of diagnosing someone

as transgender in general.

I initially wanted to have this chapter in the book, with this title, and simply have the entire contents of the chapter be “You can’t.” Then I thought it’d be funnier to have it be “you can’t you can’t you can’t” repeated over and over and over like I was Jack in *The Shining*.

These super funny “jokes” I came up with are the result of the myriad times I’ve been asked this question, both in person after giving talks or performing and also via email or comments on the web. Initially, I would respond with a long, drawn-out explanation (see the rest of this chapter) unpacking the issues with this question, but over time I simplified, breaking it down more and more until my response eventually became “You can’t.” Just those two words. Then I would move on to the next question.

I have gone with this response in person, and I recommend it to anyone and everyone because I found that while my comprehensive explanations conveyed a lot of the rationale behind “You can’t,” they also allowed other people to have wiggle room in their rationales for asking the question to begin with. That is, every point I’ll address in this chapter brings with it counterpoints that folks may mull in their mind or argue out loud. The conversation then becomes a debate and people get defensive, and nobody learns when they’re defensive. That’s why there is so much beauty in “You can’t.”

“You can’t” isn’t an answer to the question so much as it is pointing at some fact of nature. It’s like if you were to ask someone how much it hurt when they got punched in the head, and as a response, they punched you in the head. Now you know. “You can’t” is that punch in the head (but without all the violence), because it dismisses any other possibilities, rhetoric, or creative debate that might crop up. Like how someone might think, “I wonder if it would hurt more if I wasn’t expecting to be punched in the hea—” and they got popped. No need to wonder. They *know*.

Another great thing about “You can’t” is it’s also a great response to use when someone asks me “How can you tell when someone is gay?” One answer, perfect for two questions I get asked all the time. So helpful.

But the best thing about “You can’t” is it ends the discussion. We can move on. And when someone asks “Why not?” I punch them in

the head. Not because I'm violent, but because I am not sure if they were going to ask what getting punched in the head feels like eventually, and I'm a giver<sup>31</sup>.

Now let's talk about that question, bit by bit.

## "DIAGNOSE"

This is probably the most troublesome part of this question because it reiterates one of the biggest contributors to misunderstanding and poor mental health for people regarding their gender: the idea that being transgender is a mental disorder.

You can't diagnose someone with any gender, because for that to happen, we would need several things: (1) A scientific understanding of what gender is and where it comes from that is agreed upon by specialists in the field; (2) A tool for consistently and accurately "measuring" one's gender; and (3) A standard definition of "transgender" (or any "gender") that is accurate, universal, and agreed upon by specialists in the field.

We don't have any of those things. Gender is a muddy subject that has scientists and theorists locked in a seemingly unending debate. Due to this muddiness, we don't have any sort of a test to measure someone's gender in a universal, accurate way (e.g., like the test we have for diabetes). The definitions of what it means to be transgender, genderqueer, man, woman, or any other gender identity are constantly in flux—and have been since forever.

All this goes to say that "diagnose" is a terrible word choice for this question. "Guess" would be a better one, but it still leads to the same shortcomings in the rest of the question.

## "SOMEONE"

Someone, here, can usually be interpreted as "someone I don't really know that well," "someone I just met," or "someone I saw on the bus." In all cases, the "someone" describes a person with whom the asker does not have an open, personal relationship, and that's the key problem: people with whom you have an open, personal relation-

---

31 Please don't punch people in the head.

ship are the only people whose gender you can [somewhat] accurately guess...

...though I would still recommend against it.

When people ask about “diagnosing someone’s” gender, it’s generally for one of two reasons: they aren’t sure what pronouns to use around that person, or they’re just plain curious. If it’s only the former, there’s an easy solution to that dilemma in the next paragraph. If it’s only the latter, you should keep your curiosity in check. Gender is a personal thing, and while you might not think there’s any harm in asking a stranger “Are you transgender?” that’s because there wouldn’t be, if it were the only time a transgender person were ever asked that. But that’s not how it works, and the questions asked of transgender people aren’t always that politely phrased (e.g., “What do your genitals look like?”).

If you aren’t sure what pronouns to use for a person, simply ask them. A good way to ask this question isn’t “Are you a boy or a girl?” but rather “What are your preferred gender pronouns?” This is a great question to get in the habit of asking in general, and one that will make the gender-diverse people in your life much more comfortable being in your life.

## “AS TRANSGENDER”

Transgender is, as you likely know by now, an incredibly broad term. It’s generally used as an umbrella term under which many different gender identities are sheltered, all grouped by the commonality of being “non-cisgender identities.” So “diagnosing someone as transgender” is about as much of an insight into who they are as “diagnosing someone as cisgender.”

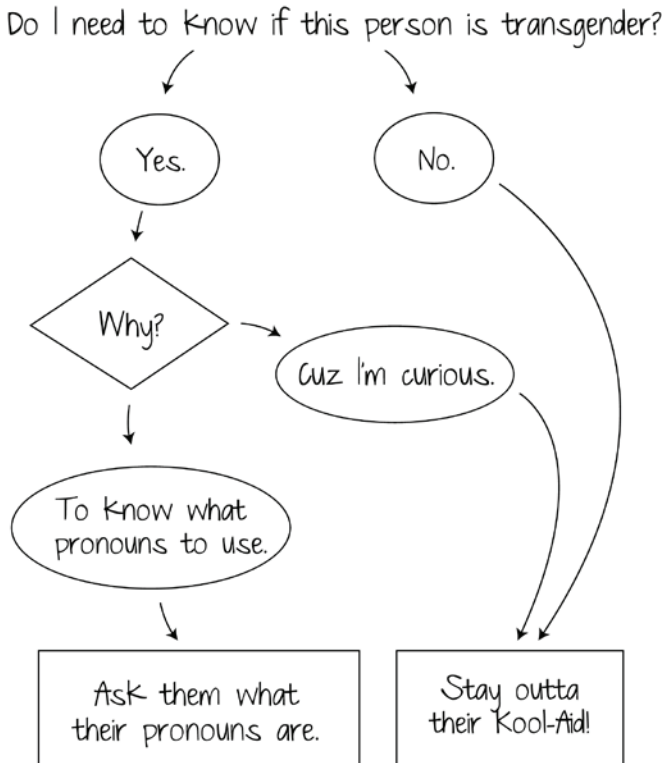
**DRILL:** For the next few days, when referring to cisgender people in conversation (e.g., “Then my friend Jim said...”) add the descriptor “cisgender” (e.g., “Then my cisgender friend Jim said...”). If you don’t normally do this, it will likely be a bit uncomfortable—and will raise eyebrows—but embrace it. It’ll help you internalize the issues of “otherness” and marginalization regarding transgender people, as well as highlight the ineffectiveness of that label in providing helpful additional information about a person.

I bring this up because it hits at the crux of why the central question of this chapter is a problem: because many times when we ask if someone is “transgender,” what we are really asking is if they are “different,” “other,” “non-cisgender,” or, at its worst, if they are abnormal, weird, or broken.

Being transgender means being marginalized, and that marginalization is never as apparent as when we attempt to sum up a person as “other.” A “normal” person is described and viewed in the myriad ways that make them unique (e.g., “Jim is my friend who is a twenty-year-old engineering student who likes riding ponies”) because describing them with the labels one can assume (“Jim is a cisgender man”) sates no curiosity. An “other” person can be simply described using their “otherness” (e.g., “Jim is my transgender friend”).

## WHAT TO ASK INSTEAD

The next time you hear yourself wondering whether someone is transgender, or what gender a person is, ask *yourself* the following questions instead:





What's "binary" gender?

When humans are born, we assign them to be either male or female based on their external genitalia. Based on that assignment, we raise them to be either men or women, which are essentially the polar opposite options of personality, occupations, dress, behavior, and demeanor.

As they grow up, we constantly curb their behavior if they don't fit within the extremely limited options they are given based on their gender assignment and place an incredible amount of social pressure on them to embody every aspect of that identity. If they question their identity, we silence them. If they act in ways that conflict with their assigned identity, we ridicule them. If they don't align with one of the two options available, we stigmatize them. And if they decide we assigned them the wrong identity, we question their mental health.

After spending two decades in this incredibly rigid system (that most of us realize is at best limiting and at worst dangerous) we make babies and impose the same restrictions of identity on them.

Why?

Because we always have.

Oh, so it works?

Not even a little.

Cool story, bro.



## CHAPTER 20

# THE DANGERS OF NORMALIZED BINARY GENDER

“TO BE YOURSELF IN A WORLD THAT IS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO  
MAKE YOU SOMETHING ELSE IS THE GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT.”

– *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

When we think about the gender binary, it’s common for our minds to go in one of two directions: we think of the folks who “fit” into and are supported by the binary options (typically, cisgender people), or we think of folks who don’t “fit” and experience hardship as a result of the binary options (typically, trans\* people). The gender binary leads to dichotomous thinking—who’d’a thunk?

Relying on a gender-diverse, spectrum-based understanding of identity, I want to explore the potentially negative effects the gender binary has on most people, not just trans folks.

Let’s start by establishing a common definition for some specific terms I will be using in this chapter:

**Binary Gender:** a system of gender with only two options (here:

woman or man)

**Dissonance:** an uncomfortable sense of confusion, or a lack of harmony, between one's individual identity and their cultural identity

**Normalized:** reinforced by society through social norms

## EXPLAINING THE BINARY GENDER SYSTEM TO AN ALIEN

How would you explain the gender binary, and all of its implications, to an alien (what a galactocentric term!) who just landed on Earth? Fun idea! Here's how I would do it:

"When humans are born, we assign them to be either male or female based on their external genitalia. Based on that assignment, we raise them to be either men or women, which are essentially the polar opposite options of personality, occupations, dress, behavior, and demeanor.

"As they grow up, we constantly curb their behavior if they don't fit within the extremely limited options they are given based on their gender assignment and place an incredible amount of social pressure on them to embody every aspect of that identity. If they question their identity, we silence them. If they act in ways that conflict with their assigned identity, we ridicule them. If they don't align with one of the two options available, we stigmatize them. And if they decide we assigned them the wrong identity, we question their mental health.

"After spending two decades in this incredibly rigid system—that most of us realize is at best limiting and at worst dangerous—we make babies and impose the same restrictions of identity on them."

Alien: "Why?"

Me: "Because we always have."

Alien: "Oh. So it works?"

Me: "Not even a little."

Alien: "Cool story, bro."

## THE GENDER BINARY WORKS "NOT EVEN A LITTLE"

Let's consider the best-case example for the gender binary, an imaginary person I am making up named Jack Jackson.

Jack was born with a penis and testicles, labeled male at birth,

raised to be a boy, and has never once questioned that assignment. He is naturally athletic, aggressive, domineering, physically strong, emotionally reclusive, loves working with his hands, and doesn't cry even when he gets a really bad splinter (like, size of a toothpick under the fingernail bad). His jaw and brow are as pronounced as his shoulders are wide. He feels comfy in boots, blue jeans, and a slightly dirty plaid shirt; has never trimmed any hairs but the ones on his head (which he keeps at a standard 1" length, unstyled); speaks in a low voice; prefers logic over sentiment; and once killed a grizzly bear with a knife while riding bareback on another grizzly bear.

**DRILL:** Create your own character who is a hyperbole of a male as dictated by societal expectations of maleness (like my Jack Jackson), and do the same for a character who is a hyperbole of femaleness (Jill Jillson?<sup>32</sup>).

Jack Jackson is everything that is the binary idea of "man." Even his name says man...twice. So how does the binary hurt him?

Because even for Jack, who experiences no dissonance between his internal identity and the binary option he was assigned, the binary gender system isn't just a lens we use when we look internally, but one we use when we examine other people. The odds of Jack finding satisfaction in a romantic partner (another "perfect" man or woman) or friend are extremely slim. Having a binary expectation of people in your life constantly leads to people in your life falling short: they either aren't woman enough or man enough, and in either case they are at least somewhat inadequate.

Further, Jack is going to gauge his interactions with others based on his assessment of which binary gender they are, because both options bring with them an incredibly specific set of how-to instructions. When things don't go well with treating individuals based on the prescriptions the gender binary has provided him, he's going to be miffed, but he'll be unable to explain that miffed-ness, because dudes don't get miffed.

*"I am Jack's miffed disposition. I get miffed. Jack ignores me. I eat*

---

32 Actual editor's note: "Jillson still has 'son' in it. Plus, Jill is only a little bit of a feminine name. Maybe Arabella Queensdaughter."

*Jack alive from the inside.”*

## MOST MEN AREN'T JACK, AND MOST WOMEN AREN'T JILL

Even for people who absolutely align with every aspect of their binary gender option, the binary doesn't work, because they have to interact with others who don't align. But most of us don't align absolutely, and this is where we start to experience dissonance.

Dissonance happens in varying degrees. It's not the yes/no picture we often paint it to be (are we starting to sense a theme yet?). You can (and likely do) experience some dissonance as a result of your gender even if you don't consider yourself to be trans\*.

**DRILL:** Make a list of all the expectations of you based on your gender identity that you don't live up to or embody. Now, make a list of all the expectations of another gender identity (not your gender) that you do live up to or embody. The completed list is one way of assessing your gender dissonance.

For some people, the dissonance they experience is so mellow it's something they don't realize until they're asked about it—until they realize it's an option to experience dissonance. I have had conversations with plenty of people about this idea, and it's amazing how relieving it is for some people when they realize it's more “normal” (my language) to not fully identify with their normalized gender. Here's a story from a friend (an actual friend, not like an *I need advice, but it's for a friend* “friend”) who experienced mild dissonance growing up:

*“It was like when there is a word on the tip of your tongue, but you can't think of it. You know it's there, but you don't know exactly what it is. But you feel pressure to get it out, to say it—almost anxiety. Then, when we first talked about what gender really is, it was like the word finally came to me, all these years later.*

*“I always felt friction—friction with my family, my dad, my brother, my friends, myself. I never felt completely comfortable, and it just felt like something was off. In hindsight, I think it's because I was never the most boyish of boys. At the time, it felt like there was something wrong with me. Or that was just how all teenagers were. I had no idea it was a gen-*

*der thing.”*

This experience, or a version of it, is something a lot of people are able to relate to. You might call it “growing pains,” “teenage awkwardness,” “[something hormoney],” or something else, but what it all boils down to is experiencing and coping with identity dissonance: being told you’re one thing and knowing on the inside you aren’t that. If you’re not 100 percent whatever you’re being told you are supposed to be, you’ve likely experienced some dissonance. And the less you are whatever it is you’re “supposed” to be, the more severe your dissonance will be.

At its worst, giving people just two polar-opposite options for gender based on their sex and forcing them into one of the two can lead to extreme levels of dissonance, depression, anxiety, and self-harm. Here’s a story from a person about his daily experience with his gender identity and female body (warning: this story contains suicidal ideations and self-harm):

*“I most feel like I don’t fit into the gender I was assigned when I am using the bathroom, or any time I am near a mirror. I hate seeing my body. My female features in my face can’t be hidden, and they always make me uncomfortable, but that’s not even the worst. It’s the rest of my female body. I try to never see myself naked, because when I do I hate myself the most. In my worst moments, I have taken a knife to my breasts, crying, threatening myself, wanting to be dead, before collapsing.”*

## A LOT OF PEOPLE AREN'T JACK OR JILL

Beyond the mild to severe dissonance binary-identified folks may experience not being Jack enough or Jill enough, there is a whole group of people we’re overlooking: folks who don’t see themselves as Jack or Jill.

For some of these people, a normalized binary is restrictive because they don’t see themselves aligning with either option but as more of a combination of both. And for others, they may see themselves as a third option altogether. Some folks who fit into these groups may use labels for themselves, such as “non-binary,” “bigender,” “genderfluid,” “neutrois,” “third-gender,” something else, or—hold onto your hats—

they may simply stick with the labels they were assigned and identify as “man” or “woman.”

We all cope with dissonance experienced from fitting into the gender binary differently. It feels like there are new labels popping up every month that are, in many ways, people trying to find ways to cope with this. For some people, they externalize their dissonance and attach themselves to a label group that most closely describes their experience, and in that they find comfort and support. For others, this is an internal experience, and while they may simply identify as “woman” or “man,” they may internally have a completely different idea of what that means from the normalized definition we all share.

But ultimately, what this all spells out is that a lot of people, for a lot of different reasons, aren't Jack or Jill, but they live in a world where they are being told again and again and again that they are.

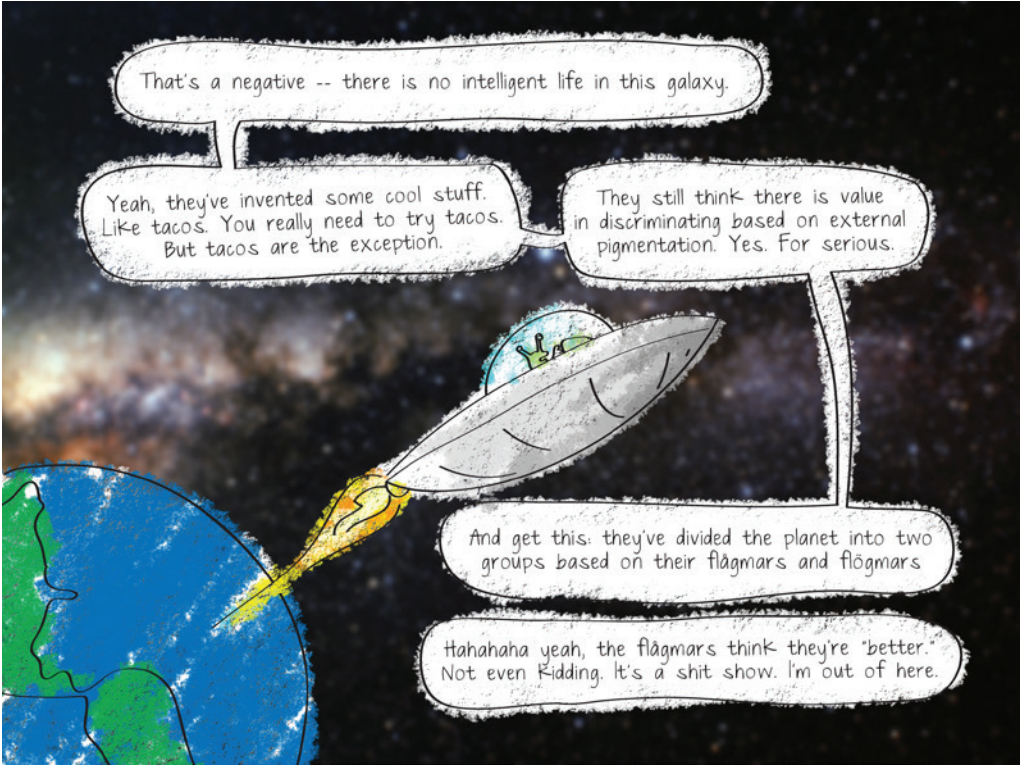
## I GOT 99 PROBLEMS AND NORMALIZED BINARY GENDER IS MOST OF THEM

Would it be a reductive way to view complex social issues to say that moving beyond the gender binary would lead to a far happier society, like adding a pile of kittens to any person lying in a bed? Yes. It would.

It'd be impossible to know unless we tried it. But you've probably never had a pile of kittens added to you while you were lying in bed, yet (barring allergies or kitten-related trauma histories) we can probably agree it would be just plain delightful.

What I can say with certainty is that moving beyond a binary understanding of gender on the individual level can be an incredibly liberating, life-and-self-affirming, stress-relieving experience. It will help you have healthier expectations for yourself and others in your life. It's like opening up a pressure valve that's been building your entire life. Even if there was just a little pressure in there, it's still a relief to let it out.

Two options for gender is too few. There are billions of people on this earth. We owe ourselves at least that many choices for how to be a person.



That's a negative -- there is no intelligent life in this galaxy.

Yeah, they've invented some cool stuff.  
Like tacos. You really need to try tacos.  
But tacos are the exception.

They still think there is value  
in discriminating based on external  
pigmentation. Yes. For serious.

And get this: they've divided the planet into two  
groups based on their flågmars and fløgmars

Hahahaha yeah, the flågmars think they're "better."  
Not even kidding. It's a shit show. I'm out of here.



D'awwww! Is it a boy or a girl?

Not sure. It hasn't told me yet.



## CHAPTER 21

# A “NON-VITAL” MEDICAL PROCEDURE

“SOME PEOPLE SEE THE GLASS HALF FULL. OTHERS SEE IT HALF  
EMPTY. I SEE A GLASS THAT’S TWICE AS BIG AS IT NEEDS TO BE.”

– *George Carlin*

For some people who are trans\*, gender confirmation surgery (GCS)<sup>33</sup> or hormone therapy are medical interventions that can allow their minds to align with their bodies in a way they’ve never experienced, a way that most cisgender people take for granted.

This is still considered a controversial topic by many. It’s rarely covered by health insurance, is exceedingly expensive, and is viewed by many critics to be “elective” or “non-vital” surgery, the same way one might view a cosmetic rhinoplasty.

As I was publishing the first edition of this book, a scandal covered by the media focused on this particular issue. The way it was covered was problematic—as is usually the case when things of this nature are covered, but it brought about a few realizations for me that helped to

---

**33** GCS is sometimes called Sex Reassignment Surgery, or “a sex change operation.” Both of these phrases are outdated, and the latter is wholly inaccurate, painting a picture of one procedure (GCS can involve many different surgeries and treatments) that acts as a sort of light switch from M to F, or F to M.

inform this chapter and will hopefully help you have a better understanding of GCS and transgender health.

Let me give you a rundown of how these situations often pan out and how GCS is viewed and then present a metaphor for a different method of understanding.

## THE SITUATION

A trans\* person says they need money for GCS and chooses to raise money using a crowdfunding platform or via donations from friends and family. The former option, crowdfunding, is becoming an ever more popular method of raising money for GCS, due to the popularity and success of crowdfunding platforms like Indiegogo.

## THE ARGUMENTS MADE

The argument I keep seeing in the media, in discussion boards, and in forums is that this is an elective, “non-vital” surgery and is tantamount to raising money for cosmetic surgery. People question the ethics of raising money, stating that GCS is something the trans\* person “needs” because it unfairly tugs at emotional heartstrings.

As I’ve seen it said many times, “A vital procedure is something you cannot live without, like an organ transplant,” or in other words, “If you don’t get GCS, your body will continue to work, even if your identity is ‘misaligned’ within it.”

## THE METAPHOR

Let’s consider for a few moments a procedure not many (if any) would consider “elective” or “non-vital”: a liver transplant. Liver transplants are a solution for liver failure or disease. We all have livers (and only one!), and without livers none of us would be able to live. Mind you, I’m no hepatologist, and this book is not meant to stand in for medical consultation (happy, lawyers?), but I’m pretty sure all this is true.

This metaphor is off to an impressively strong start.

Liver transplants are risky procedures. If the liver donated to the patient isn’t a match with the patient’s body, the body can reject the transplant through a hyper-medical-jargon-sounding process called

“transplant rejection.” If the body rejects the organ, innumerable leukocytes (Latin for little liver-attacking jerks) will be created and will start destroying the liver.

Where am I going with this?

Besides showing off what I remember from high school biology, I’m sharing this to point out how the liver is a vital organ required for a person to live a healthy life. Let’s consider that a person’s mind (in this case, their gender identity), though usually an abstract concept, is similarly a vital organ required for someone to live a healthy life. If you’re not onboard with this analogy, allow me to quote one of our era’s great neuroscientists, Morpheus, who said simply “The body cannot live without the mind.”

OK. So the mind is a vital organ. Listen to Morpheus. He showed you the door. Now let’s walk through it.

What if someone is born with an organ that their body is slowly rejecting? In transplant terminology, this would be called “chronic rejection,” something that happens constantly, slowly over time, with leukocytes engaged in a never-ending battle, eventually deteriorating the organ completely. We would consider transplanting that organ to be vital and would realize that the sooner we were able to do so, the more likely that person would be able to live a happy and healthy life.

Now consider how the experience of being born with a gender identity that doesn’t align with one’s physical body might be tantamount to being born with an organ that one’s body is rejecting. In this case, rather than being white blood cells, the leukocytes are innumerable instances of socialization and microaggressions that say over and over again that the person’s mind and body aren’t a match, they are wrong, unhealthy, or broken. When the person points out how they’re suffering, they’re silenced and told what they’re experiencing is a non-issue. When they say they know how to fix this important problem, their solution is dismissed as cosmetic, or superficial. And, eventually, if this person doesn’t receive a transplant, allowing their mind to find a body that it is a match with, the leukocytes (microaggressions) may eventually win their war, and we will lose our patient.

This is a pretty lurid metaphor, and a bit sensational, no? No.

In a 2012 study conducted by the Scottish Transgender Alliance, 84 percent of transgender people reported they had considered sui-

cide. About half of them had attempted it. The social pressures and constant microaggressions that told these people their minds did not belong in their bodies (the leukocytes) prevailed. And society failed.

Now to be clear, I am not saying GCS would have “cured” these people of their ailments and saved their lives. Nor am I saying that all trans\* people need, seek, or desire GCS. What I am saying is that viewing GCS for those who *are* seeking it out as a non-vital medical intervention, instead of viewing it with the same respect we hold for a liver transplant, is a huge problem.

### WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

If we want to care for the health of trans\* people who are experiencing the mind and body dysphoria I described in the metaphor (note: this is, again, not to say this is how all—or even most—trans\* people experience their gender, but is rather a particular type of dysphoria some trans\* people may experience), I see two clear options:

One, and this one is my preference, we can create a society that no longer exerts the social pressures and microaggressions that lead to any level of unhealthy dysphoria, a society in which individuals' minds will always match their bodies because we take individuals as individuals and don't attempt to force them into molds they weren't born for (so we, in our sense, abolish gender). A society where there are no pressures relating to bodies, so someone is empowered to seek bodily changes for themselves, or not to, trusting they know what they need to be well. And this happens... now!

Or two, we understand that GCS and hormone therapy are procedures that allow a person to be healthy in a way they may never be healthy otherwise, and we find ways to support individuals in pursuing these treatments, hold the treatments in the same esteem and with the same “vital” gravity as organ transplants, and push our medical institutions and insurance companies to do the same.

GCS can be a complicated conundrum, but it doesn't have to be. A lot of people view it pessimistically, others view it optimistically, but it can be simply what it is: a medical treatment to help a person get healthy.





**ALL-GENDER  
RESTROOM**



Cut and use, or print your own at [guidetogender.com/toilet](http://guidetogender.com/toilet)

## CHAPTER 22

# LET'S TALK ABOUT BATHROOMS

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: "CONGRATULATIONS! HOW DO YOU FEEL?"

FORREST GUMP: "I GOTTA PEE."

– *Forrest Gump*

In the winter of 2013, I was bouncing around North America attending town halls. I was invited by local activists, trans\* folks, and advocacy groups who wanted me to hear about or weigh in on a discussion that was taking center stage in their communities. The issue being discussed: bathrooms. And, more specifically, who gets to pee where.

Two sides took hold: one side said that everyone (cisgender and transgender people alike) should have a right to use the restroom that makes sense for them; the other side said everyone should use the restroom that matches the sex they were assigned at birth, regardless of their gender identity or expression.

A few years later, in the U.S. and elsewhere, a national discussion similar to the ones I experienced in little town hall meetings erupted. The two sides became further entrenched, and each found its own rallying cries, statistics, and boilerplate arguments. We'll call the first side, the one advocating for people to use restrooms that correspond



with their identity, “Pro Restroom Equity.” And we’ll call the other side “Against Restroom Equity.”

Now, I suppose it goes without saying which one of these camps I find myself in. But if you’re somehow left in suspense, I’ll keep you there for just a bit while I lay out some of the common arguments made against restroom equity.

## ARGUMENTS AGAINST RESTROOM EQUITY

The majority of what I heard back in 2013 is still echoing around today, and can be neatly grouped into 3 primary categories: safety, tradition, and logistics.

**“If we let people use whatever restroom they identify with, it will be dangerous.”**

The first thing to clarify in the safety arguments is *whose* safety folks making these arguments are concerned about: generally, the safety of cisgender women and girls. While the argument may not be posed exactly as above, or explicitly state “women and girls,” this is the implication.

The concern is that “sexual predators” (and other “deviants,” or people labeled with deviant-sounding descriptors) will see an equitable bathroom policy as an opening to attack women and girls. And the implication made by this argument is that anyone unmoved by it, or who argues against it, doesn’t care about safety or avoiding public dangers.

**“Bathrooms have always been this way, and it’s been fine. Changing that is a slippery slope.”**

The tradition arguments, whether they are connected directly to restrooms and public facilities, or to sensibilities about gender more broadly, are generally built on two premises: one, that things have always been this way; and two, that changing it up would be bad.

As an example, one might argue that we have always had men’s and women’s public restrooms, they’ve always been separated that way, and it’s worked out well so changing it would be inviting unnecessary risk.

Occasionally, an element of “social experiment” is added to these arguments (e.g., “We shouldn’t let this liberal conspiracy into our

bathrooms”). This argument, for me, evokes the image of a mad scientist whose method of wreaking havoc is slightly altering bathroom policies.

**“How would this even work? What would we put on the door?”**

The logistics arguments are what I initially heard the most, specifically from people who were likely harboring the above sentiments, but were reluctant to speak on them. These would often be progressive-leaning politicians, or townspeople who didn't want to “stir the pot,” but still wanted to make their objections known.

These arguments range from the superficial (e.g., focusing on signage) to the hyperbolic (“If transgender people get to use their restroom do we need to build more restrooms? Do we need to rebuild all of our public buildings?”<sup>34</sup>), but the key differentiator from the above arguments is that these intentionally avoid values statements either for or against affirming trans\* people. Or they're made with *exception* to some values statement (e.g., “I'm not against transgender people, but what do you put on the door?”).

## ARGUMENTS FOR RESTROOM EQUITY

Responding to the themes above, there are about a million different rabbit holes we might find ourselves navigating. But let's keep it simple. How might one make a case for restroom equity, only by rebutting the arguments above? By not rebutting at all, but championing those same three sentiments.

**Restroom equity is a safety issue.**

Let's talk about the problem we're trying to solve by preventing restroom equity: transgender people entering restrooms to harass or assault cisgender people (women and girls). In 2015, the year this argument really started to explode in the United States, how many of these cases were reported?

None.

Literally zero. Now, that's not to say that it's never happened, nor that it won't ever happen. It's just to say that there doesn't appear to

---

<sup>34</sup> That's an actual statement, from a well-intentioned city councilperson in a small midwestern US town, who will remain unnamed.

be a big risk (or any risk) imposed by transgender people in public restrooms.

So how is this a safety issue?

Well, the 2015 United States Transgender Survey found that about 9% of trans\* people had been denied access to a restroom, in public restrooms 12% had been verbally harassed, 1% sexually assaulted, and 1% physically assaulted. Further, over half of those surveyed had said they'd avoided using public restrooms (out of fear of confrontation, or other problems), resulting in 32% limiting the food and water they consume, and 8% developing kidney problems or urinary tract infections.

So it's great that so many people are concerned about safety, because reforming the current policy, policing, and norms of restrooms are necessary to achieve safe public spaces.

**Evolving policies about public restrooms is a longstanding tradition.**

Our current conversation about restrooms is a reprisal of one that's happened several times throughout history. You don't even have to go back very far to see how much this has changed, and how flexible we are as a society.

Speaking about the U.S., we didn't have laws segregating restrooms by gender until the late 19th century. Until 1954, it was legal to segregate a restroom by race. And it wasn't until 1990 that we had laws to prevent restroom discrimination against people using wheelchairs (and folks with other disabilities affecting restroom access).

The conversation about restroom equity is one we've had so many times, and revised our public opinion, laws, and norms on so many times, you might say that changing the ways we think about restrooms *is* our tradition.

We've done this lots of times, and we were not only okay, but better as a result. In fact, when we look back on the restroom policies of the pre-90s, pre-50s, and pre-1890s, they all seem backwards and overtly discriminatory. Because they were.

And, if you want to get really traditional, we used to not have public restrooms at all: the public *was* our restroom. Those were the days.

**And restroom equity makes for the easiest logistics.**

Let's consider two laws: one that says people use the restroom with which they identify, and the other that says we are only to use a restroom that corresponds to the gender marker on our birth certificate.

For the second law, suppose we notice someone we suspect to be entering the wrong restroom. How might we enforce this?

Ask them to see their birth certificate? Is this before or after they pee? Must we all carry our birth certificates around at all times? Also, who is the one checking the birth certificates? Must we hire bathroom deputies? How much will that cost? What if people create fake birth certificates? How will we verify authenticity? Ooo! One of those little blue lights like at bars? Oh no, but what about the lines?

For the first law, suppose we notice someone we suspect to be entering the wrong restroom. How do we enforce the law: we go about our day. End of enforcement.

If this sounds ridiculous, or like I'm manufacturing an absurdity and arguing against that, I can assure you of two things: yes, it's ridiculous, and no I didn't make it up. North Carolina did, with their now-infamous HB2 "Bathroom Bill."

And it's not just North Carolina. Many other U.S. States and municipalities have introduced similar legislation through 2015, 2016, and beyond. Texas, the state that I live in, and from which I am writing this chapter, introduced a bill on January 5, 2017 that says much the same, and more.

## MOVING TOWARD RESTROOMS FOR FOLKS OF ALL GENDERS

Now, suspend your disbelief, but I'm going to come out and say it: I'm in favor of restroom equity.

We should allow transgender people to pee in peace because it's the safest policy, most traditional approach to this issue, and offers the simplest logistics.

By simply *not* making exclusionary laws, a chunk of this controversy is settled. As I described above, cisgender people are not at risk of being attacked by trans\* people in restrooms. So we don't have to make new laws to protect cisgender people<sup>35</sup>. Great!

---

35 If a bunch of cisgender people report being assaulted or harassed by trans\*

But that won't solve the entire problem.

In following our tradition of restrooms being at the center of civil rights, it's important for us to consider what laws we already have that are exclusionary, and in ways that don't benefit the public good.

For example, every restroom that is single occupancy could easily be an all-gender restroom. That change is as simple as changing the sign on the door.

But when it comes to shared restrooms, there are laws in place (in the U.S. and elsewhere) that set strict building standards related to men's and women's restrooms. These laws exclude folks who don't fit within that binary, and those who identify with a third gender. So changing them, and finding workarounds in the meantime, will be necessary to achieve restroom equity on the gender front.

As for signage, the "What do we put on the door?" argument, you are, in your hands, holding a sign you can use. The back cover of this book features a design I created after those town halls, and published on my site in a fit of frustration and snark. Much to my surprise, it is now being produced and implemented on several continents. I invite you to cut it out (or print it, available through this book's website), attach it to a restroom door, and create your own all-gender restroom.

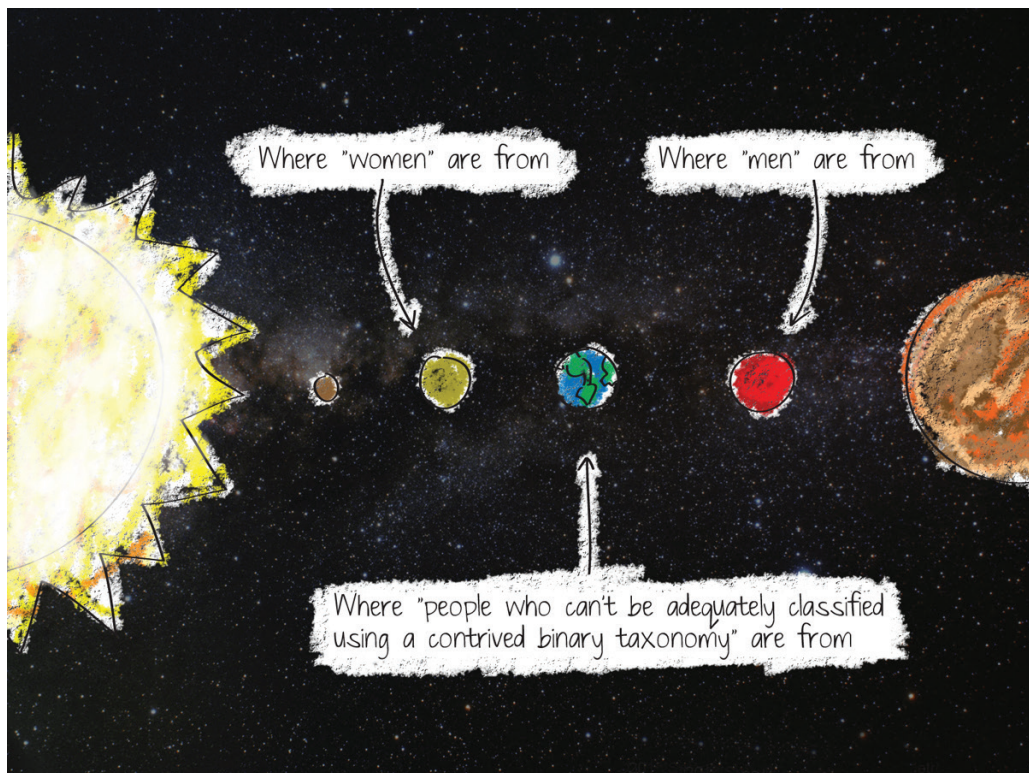
That's how easy this *can* be. This whole problem doesn't have to be a problem, and there's a good chance we'll look back on it the same way we look back on past restroom controversies: with a sense of shame mixed with a matter-of-fact "how ridiculous we used to discriminate like that."

Or at least I hope that's the case.

.....

people, that will be a bummer. But there is an already-existing-before-this-hypothetical-situation silver lining: that behavior is already illegal, and can be enforced. That is, we already have laws that make assault and harassment, sexual and otherwise, illegal.





## CHAPTER 23

# A UNIFIED UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER

“SOMETIMES THE THING THAT BRINGS US TOGETHER ALSO PULLS US APART. SORT OF LIKE A ZIPPER.”

– *Jarod Kintz*

Let’s review.

Gender is a cultural construction. The labels we have for gender identities are essentially a means of classifying personality, with a misinformed importance put on physical characteristics people are born with. And if people don’t identify with one of the two main gender identity options—specifically, the one they were assigned at birth based on their physical characteristics—they will have a tougher life than those who do.

But we know it’s not that simple.

Gender is like a Rubik’s Cube with one hundred squares per side, and every time you twist it to take a look at another angle, you make it that much harder a puzzle to solve. A normal Rubik’s Cube is tough enough; a one-hundred-squares-per-side cube is indecipherable. Your best bet may seem to be to just leave it as it came from the factory and enjoy the uniformity of the pretty colors on each side.

Unless you break the rules.

The conventional way to solve a Rubik’s Cube is, without question,



the most cumbersome. My brother and I developed an infatuation for Rubik's Cubes many years ago. We both mastered the 3 X 3 cube quickly, but the 4 X 4 gave me a run for my money. When I wasn't feeling particularly clever, I would dismantle it into its fifty-seven fundamental pieces and rebuild it as a completed puzzle. So pretty. So simple. Sam Killermann: 1; Ernő Rubik: 0.

Maybe we're approaching the gender puzzle wrong.

A lot of the toughest questions that used to keep me up at night are based on our current understanding of gender, with answers (if they're even answerable) that may or may not modify that current understanding. These are questions like "Why do so many cultures have only two genders?" "How would a society without a gender taxonomy work?" and "Why am I not allowed to wear halter tops when they make my shoulders look so good?"

Attempting to understand gender by modifying our basic understanding of gender is like attempting to solve the puzzle using the rules given to us—twisting and pivoting and rotating this one-hundred-sided cube, hoping we'll have a breakthrough. One night, a couple years ago, when I wasn't feeling particularly clever, I thought maybe it'd be best if we just took the whole thing apart and rebuilt it as a completed puzzle.

Then I realized something that changed the way I looked at gender.

## IT'S MORE ABOUT THE PIECES THAN IT IS ABOUT THE PUZZLE

Bartenders will tell you that if you have a favorite mixed drink at a particular bar, and you want to ensure you're able to enjoy that drink elsewhere, you should ask the bartender how it's made, not what it's called. Sorry. You're not going to be able to order your Screaming Pelvis in Ft. Lauderdale. But if you know the ingredients, the relative amount of each, and the process that goes into making a Screaming Pelvis, you can tell those things to the bartender and your pelvis can scream with no geolocative restraint.

I've had conversations with thousands of individuals about their gender. I have read a ton about gender in general, both in "peer-reviewed" journals and "peer-bashed-in-comments-section" blog posts. I know most of the big theories, and I know most of the science. And

for the longest time, I tried to synthesize all of that information and reconcile it with my own gender experience—to make it all make sense—until I decided I was looking at it all wrong.

Every person I've talked to (no hyperbole: *every* person) has had a different take on gender. Like a specialty drink, sometimes these different takes were as minor as the relative amount of each ingredient ("My Screaming Pelvis has two parts tequila to one part hot sauce"), but sometimes the ingredients were different altogether ("Who puts hot sauce in their Screaming Pelvis?"). The majority of these people were self-identified cisgender women or men, but a hugely disproportionate number were self-identified within the transgender umbrella. When you read about gender, you get a similarly diverse take on what gender is. The only thing most people seem to agree upon is that they have gender, but even that's not a universal theory.

So riddle me this: what merit does the label "man" have if it means different things to different people, and what criteria do I need to meet in order to identify myself with that label?

Further, for someone to self-identify as non-binary, how much do they need to not identify with one of the binary options? That is, what're the thresholds at which a person goes from "I'm a woman," to "I'm a bit butch, but still a woman," to "I'm not a woman or a man, but something in between," to "I'm neither man nor woman, but I'm intrigued by this Screaming Pelvis you keep talking about."

Or, going back to the metaphor, how many ingredients can someone omit or add to a drink before it stops being a Screaming Pelvis and becomes something else altogether? (A round of Laughing Rectums, anyone?)

How far away from the societal definition of "man" can I be before I should start considering another label (e.g., "genderqueer") to describe myself?

## WE'RE ALL A BIT GENDERQUEER, AND NONE OF US IS GENDERQUEER

Writing that is one of the scarier things I've ever done, because I realize it takes me from being this "Accessibility matters! Everyone should be able to understand gender!" type of person, to a "Down with society! Everything is a lie! There is no spoon!" type of person. I promise I'm not nearly interesting enough to be the second person.

This idea isn't actually that radical at all. Give me a moment to explain. Then we can spoon.

From biggest picture to smallest picture, any understanding of gender we have is, at best, flawed. We know there are only two types of people on Earth: men and women. But we know that there are more than men and women: there's also "other." But we know that we can't just divide the globe into men, women, and other, because gender varies from continent to continent, country to country, region to region. But we can't just say that this region has men, women, and other, because even within regions, gender varies among ethnicities. And economic classes. And age groups. But we also can't say that all people in a particular region of the same ethnicity, economic class, and age group will be either man, woman, or other, because each person's embodiment of gender varies slightly.

In other words, we know one thing: we don't know anything.

At worst, we have "There are 7 billion people on this planet, and they can all be adequately grouped into one of two categories." And on the other end, we have "There are 7 billion people on this planet who all have individual identities, but we still group most of them into one of two categories." Both of these options, and every option in between, are flawed. What I'm suggesting is a third option.

What if we consider that the binary understanding of gender we have, the one that a vast majority of people identify with, is really more about threshold than it is about identity?

Earlier, I said it's impossible to "diagnose someone as transgender" because, for one reason (of many), we don't have a tool for measuring gender. Let's use our imaginations and pretend such a tool exists.

The simplest (and most non-magic-dependent) way I can imagine such a tool working would be a test where people self-identify with gendered traits, descriptors, and characteristics. There would be a huge list of things, some of them attributes of man-ness, masculinity, and male-ness and others attributes of woman-ness, femininity, and female-ness, but they wouldn't be labeled such. The prompt would simply be "Check all that describe you." And every person in a society would take this test.

Now, the question I'll pose to you is, what percentage of the man-ness, masculinity, and male-ness options does a binary-identified

“man” need to check to consider himself a man? All of them? 90 percent for an A? 70 percent, like what you need for a college degree? 51 percent, for a majority of manitude? Or perhaps more importantly, how many of the woman-ness, femininity, and female-ness traits is he allowed before he’s disqualified?

Further, upon completing the test, what would happen if, before giving him his results, he was asked to classify all the traits in the list (not just the ones he checked)?

My experience tells me that if everyone were to take such a test, our understanding of “genderqueer” might be turned on its head. Right now, we think of roughly 1 to 3 percent of the population as trans\* and the rest as cisgender, and living happily within the binary or “normal.” If everyone were to take our imaginary test, I’d be surprised if even 1 percent of people were 100 percent in either of the binary options. And even if they were, it’s important to note that if you controlled for region, race, class, and age, we would all grade that test differently. We would all classify these traits differently, so a 100% of “woman” traits for one person would be quite different from another person’s 100%.

So if my theory is true, that would mean we’re all a bit genderqueer. And if that were true, that would mean that none of us is really genderqueer because queerness ceases to be queer if it’s the norm, and we’d have an entirely new understanding of what “normal” means<sup>36</sup>.

Meaning we’re all a bit genderqueer, and none of us is genderqueer.

## SO IS EVERYTHING A LIE? IS THERE A SPOON OR NOT?

What I’m suggesting here, Neo, is more about changing the way we look at things and less about changing what things are. Your gender hasn’t changed. The world hasn’t changed. You’re still you. The world is still the world.

If we reconsider the semantics—the labels we use to unite and divide ourselves—of gender and realize they aren’t concrete and well-defined, but rather amorphous and more about degrees of alignment than categories, we will erase the stigma attached to non-binary and trans\* gender identities.

---

36 “New” here might be a misnomer. Truly, if my suspicions are accurate here, there’s nothing new about it; we’re just finally revealing our collective truth.

I'm arguing that we're more alike than we are different. That the degree of "otherness" between a particular binary-gender person and a particular non-binary person may not be any more different than the degrees of difference between one particular woman and another woman.

And I'm arguing that we're more different than we are alike. That your identity may be more closely aligned with a particular person who possesses a different identity from you than with a particular person who is a member of your identity group.

I am hoping this understanding can lead to empathy (if you're more the emotional type) or cognitive complexity (if you're more the logical type), or both (if you're more of a "-ness" of each of those type).

I am hoping we can experience empathy for others that is not amplified or guided by our alignment with their gender identity (or a similarity between ours and theirs), but driven by the fact that we're all gendered people composed of different combinations of similar ingredients.

I am hoping we can embrace cognitive complexity and realize gender is not either/or in most cases, but both/and. I'm suggesting we realize that the black and white only exist when folks are only given two options, and that most people aren't black or white, but a full spectrum of colors.

And through reframing gender, which is something that is so core to how many of us see ourselves and others, and through this book in general, I am seeking a world where we place compassion above judgment. Because we really don't *know* much, but now, at least, we know better. We can be better.

Above all, I want you know that after all this, I am totally down for a round of Screaming Pelvises.

*Pelvi?*



Section 3

# FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUITY

TAKING A QUICK LOOK AT THE MOST CONTEMPORARILY PROMINENT  
GENDER MOVEMENT AND HOW IT ALIGNS WITH A MORE  
COMPREHENSIVE CAUSE.



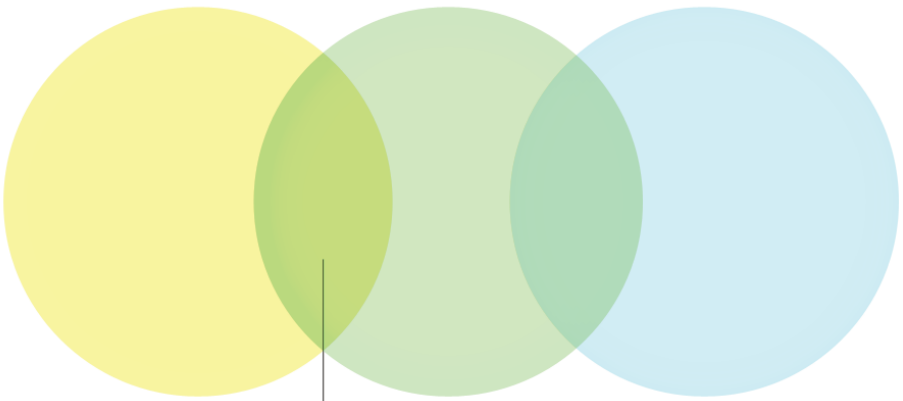
24. THE WELL-INTENTIONED MISOGYNIST	179
25. A GENDER-INCLUSIVE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE	187
26. WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE FEMINISM HATES MEN	193



feminists

people feminists  
call misogynists

misogynists



me

## CHAPTER 24

# THE WELL-INTENTIONED MISOGYNIST

“I MYSELF HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO FIND OUT PRECISELY WHAT FEMINISM IS. I ONLY KNOW THAT PEOPLE CALL ME A FEMINIST WHENEVER I EXPRESS SENTIMENTS THAT DIFFERENTIATE ME FROM A DOORMAT.”

– *Rebecca West*

Feminism is, to many people, a loaded word packed with negative connotations. When I was first introduced to the concept, it was through a less-than-positive manner, but it’s just the first part of a long story that ends with me, now, proudly wearing the “feminist” badge.

### THE STORY OF THE WELL-INTENTIONED MISOGYNIST

I’m a misogynist. I am quite sure of this fact because of how many times I’ve been told so. I’ve been told so in comments on my website, responses to my comments on other folks’ websites, indirectly by speakers at conferences, and on a few occasions, directly to my face.

And as the old saying goes: if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably hates women.

### **I Remember the First Time I Learned I Was a Misogynist**

I was a bright-eyed college freshman auditing a gender studies (read: women's issues) class at Purdue University. In a class discussion about objectification of women, I asked, quite earnestly (read: naïvely), "Why is it bad for me to say 'Jessica Alba is super hot'—I mean, isn't she?"

In the discussion (read: crucifixion) that followed, I was called a misogynist by a few of my classmates and, indirectly, by the professor. Ignorant to what that word meant but understanding via context clues it wasn't good, I shut up and did my best to make myself invisible for the remaining 50 minutes of class.

When I got back to my dorm, I immediately hopped on my computer and looked up the word. And much to my surprise, I learned that I hated women.

### **I Never Knew I Hated Women**

I learned that I hated women from my classmates and professor the first time I was called a misogynist. If you had asked me a few hours before learning that what my feelings were towards women, I would have told you that I opposite-of-hated women.

I grew up in a two-mom household. One of my moms was my biological mother, who regularly reminds me that she "grew me" so I need to listen to her. My other mom was my oldest sister, who didn't take much encouraging to fill the head-of-household role when my mom (the one who grew me) was working. Or not in the house. Or in the bathroom. Addie was authoritative.

As a byproduct of this, I (apparently incorrectly assumed I) grew up with the utmost respect for women. Between my mom, my sister who pretended to be my mom, and my other older sister, I had plenty of positive female role models.

My mom worked miracles in a solo effort to keep us housed and fed. My sisters played sports, got solid grades, went to college, and never once got arrested for shoplifting (unlike my scumbag friends). And other than two men, all of the other positive figures in my life (teachers, a couple of neighbors) were women.

If anything, based on my mostly rocky experience with would-be male role models, one could even argue that I was inclined to be a misandrist. I would have been one of the people to argue that, if I had

known that was a word.

### **I Thought I Wanted to Support Women**

This opposite-of-hatred I thought I held for women is what led me to check out that gender studies class my freshman year of college in the first place.

I started getting an inkling of what the term “oppression” meant, and word on the street was that all these women I thought I loved were members of one of the biggest groups being targeted by that nasty idea. I didn’t like that, so I wanted to learn what I could do about it.

It was a shock and a relief when I learned that I didn’t respect women, but in fact hated them, so I guess I didn’t need to worry about remedying that oppression thing any more. That feminist thing was going to be a lot of work, and being a misogynist was so easy I didn’t even know I was doing it.

### **Meet Me: A Misogynist-Labeled Feminist**

Okay, enough of that “writing from the perspective of those who labeled me a misogynist” thing. Thanks for sticking with me.

That was exhausting. But it was necessary because I wanted to tell you a story that is unfortunately all too common: the story of the Well-Intentioned Misogynist, a semantic impossibility that plays out on a daily basis.

Like freshman me, a lot of people (of all genders) don’t know what the word “misogynist” means. It’s likely they’ve never even considered that a word like that is necessary, because they don’t think there is such a thing (a person who hates half the people in the world). Of course, those people *do* exist, but isn’t naïveté endearing?

And like freshman me, a lot of people (of all genders) who aren’t up to speed on the ideas of gender-based privilege and systemic oppression, are packed full of misconceptions of how the world works. They’re also all taught lots of prejudice, and have likely internalized some harmful perspectives about most, if not all, social groups.

They aren’t always aware of how gender (and surely, all the identities one possesses) shapes one’s individual experience, oftentimes in a limiting way. They don’t realize that we’ve created and that we support systems that are, in the simplest sense, unfair.

And like freshman me, a lot of these people are incredibly well-in-

tioned.

Many times when well-intentioned people express their incomplete (or inaccurate, ignorant, ill-conceived... pick your i-word) understanding of the world and the issues women, trans\* people, and/or non-binary people face, instead of being educated, they are written off as misogynists or bigots, and the discussion ends there. Or worse, the conversation moves further in a direction of vilifying that person.

I've seen this happen in articles on feminist websites (you likely have, too), in comment sections and forums, at women's issues conferences, and, on rarer occasions, during in-person interactions. It's not the only thing that happens in these spaces, and I in no way want to paint any of these endeavors with too broad a brush: all of these are spaces that, generally speaking, are doing a lot of good and doing it well.

That said, labeling someone a misogynist, sexist, bigot, racist, etc. is a weaponized way to use language, and we might be better off reserving those labels for situations with sufficient evidence, discussion, and after offering room to grow (i.e., not after just one comment). Otherwise it will quickly make someone who's trying to learn (even if stumbling at it) shut down, go on the defensive, or worse.

This is the story of the "Well-Intentioned Misogynist." And like I said earlier, it's told every day and it's hurting our feminist cause.

### **It's Time We Start Telling a New Story**

We need to start realizing that everyone is at different levels of understanding of social justice and feminist issues. We're all raised in a society and bombarded by messages from mass media that normalize oppression and exploitation.

Some people are exposed to feminist or progressive thinking that challenges the dominant culture, but many aren't. Some folks who are exposed to it want to learn more, and some don't.

And for those who do—for the people willing or interested to pursue social justice concepts, or tug at the threads—we need to meet folks where they are in order to help them learn, develop, and grow. We can't expect everyone to start at 100, when we ourselves only started at 1. If someone is at 1, let's work to bring them to 2, instead of demolishing them for not being at 100.

We need to start realizing that while creating an enemy in a mi-

sogynist (because certainly, intentionally hurtful misogynists do exist) can be affirming and create unity and strength within the feminist community, it can also create apprehension in prospective members who are ignorant but wanting to learn.

So before jumping to the conclusion that you're talking to a misogynist because they made a sexist comment, try sharing with them in a non-judgmental way why that comment was hurtful even if it is normalized in our society.

You just might be surprised at how open-minded they are.

## CALLING PEOPLE MISOGYNISTS ISN'T HELPING FEMINISM

I'm called "misogynist" less and less as time passes and I learn how to be a proper feminist, but, as I mentioned before, when I first started wading into these waters, I was errantly labeled a misogynist on a regular basis.

To say it was discouraging is to say cheesecake is "tasty." Cheesecake is freaking delicious.

As a feminist, I regularly find myself reading an article or a comment and having the knee-jerk reaction in my mind "this guy's a misogynist."

But I do my best to leave it at just that—a thought in my mind.

Let me tell you why, and introduce you to two ideas that might be new, but will likely strike you as "I think I already knew that" once you read them.

### **A Rose by Any Other Name Wouldn't Be a Rose**

Labeling theory has been fostered and developed since the origins of sociology, and really gained prominence in the 60s. There is a ton you can read about the idea, but I am going to crudely sum it up in a few core points:

1. We, as a culture, create a system of "do's" and "don't's" that are informally taught to people as they mature, and are reinforced through social interaction and sanctions.
2. As social creatures, human beings derive a lot of what becomes us from our interactions with others.
3. If someone is labeled as a deviant (for breaking our cultural rules

in #1) they are likely to internalize that label and continue (or begin) acting in that deviant way (because of #2).

*Example:* If you label a young person a criminal, that young person is more likely to become an adult criminal.

### **The Person Is Not the Problem, The Problem Is the Problem**

Externalization therapy is a practice developed by an Australian psychotherapist named Michael White. Again, there is much and more you can read about White and his work, but I want to give you the gist of this idea in a few points:

1. It's important to understand that an individual and the behavior an individual participates in can be viewed as independent concepts.
2. Separating individuals and their destructive behavior (i.e., externalizing their behavior) is important in helping them move through it to positive behavior.
3. Re-focusing conversations in a way that makes a clear distinction between an individual and their behavior is one way to accomplish this positive development.

*Example:* Instead of labeling a youth as a criminal, explain that an instance of their behavior was a crime and reinforce the fact that a majority of the behavior they engage in is not.

### **My Humble Request: Think Twice Before Calling Someone a Misogynist**

Every time we call someone a misogynist, there's a good chance we're creating a roadblock on our path to gender equity and social justice. How is this happening?

One, calling people misogynists means they are more likely to continue being (or become) a misogynist. Labeling theory has taught us that people internalize the labels they are given and are more likely to act in ways that support that label after being labeled that way. Label! (Sorry, couldn't resist)

And two, calling people misogynists encourages them to internalize their misogynistic behavior, and internalized behavior is tough to change. Externalization therapy has taught us that if you are trying to help people change behavior, we need to do our best to help folks sep-

arate their behavior from their self. To do this, we need to change our conversation from talking about “misogynists” to “people who engage in misogynistic behavior.” Finally, creating an enemy out of misogynists inspires those so-called misogynists to create an enemy out of feminists.

There’s some interesting (and controversial) social-psych research that shows that clearly defining an enemy can help strengthen a group and inspire action. This would be a great reason to support the use of the label misogynist (as it’s an obvious, and powerful enemy for us to create), if relationships weren’t reciprocal. They are. Creating a strong “Feminists against Misogynists” community also creates a strong “Misogynists against Feminists” community. Not helpful.


### **What Can We Do Instead?**

My mother taught me “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” But that’s absurd. I don’t think we should not say anything at all. We should definitely point out negative or destructive behavior and thinking and explain why those actions are sexist in a civil tone. But we shouldn’t call the person a misogynist and make them wrong *as a human being*.

By avoiding labeling a person, and focusing on labeling the behavior, using careful effort to practice language that separates them from their misogynistic actions, we’ll have a much better chance at helping them move into a greater understanding of gender issues.

And with luck, we’ll have a new ally instead of a hardened enemy.





A cosmopolitan? Why don't you drink a real man's drink?

Translation: I didn't know we were allowed to order cosmos. Damn it. If I had known -- no! Screw this! Not fair. Time to be an asshole.

## CHAPTER 25

# A GENDER-INCLUSIVE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

“THE WORD FEMINISM NEEDS TO BE TAKEN BACK. IT NEEDS TO BE RECLAIMED IN A WAY THAT IS INCLUSIVE OF MEN.”

– *Annie Lennox*

Feminism is a multi-faceted, deeply-segmented movement. If you ask five feminists “What is feminism?” there is a good chance you’ll get five different responses. If you ask ten random people, that good chance moves up to a guarantee. There are many feminists who think feminism means working toward gender equity for everyone. I’m one of those feminists. But that’s not a universal sentiment.

There are some feminists who believe that trans\* people shouldn’t be included in the feminism movement; some feminists see feminism as a means for retribution against men, a payback of sorts for innumerable years of male oppression; some feminists want to do away with gender and gender roles altogether; others don’t; and some people think “feminist” is just another way of saying “lesbian” (these people are usually delightful to meet in person).

This isn’t a book about all the types of feminism, and I wouldn’t be the right person to write such a book. But this is a book about gender, and my general theme is one of working toward equity for people of all genders. And I don’t feel comfortable writing about that without

reconciling how feminism can (and, in my opinion, should) play an integral part in achieving that goal.

## WHY DO WE NEED FEMINISM?

While there aren't a ton of things *all* feminists agree on, there is one: the world is socially organized in a way that it's easier to be a man than it is to be any other gender. Remember that list of male privileges you read? This is that.

Feminism has been working to lessen the severity of male privilege since a long time ago in a galaxy not so far, far away. Feminism has been responsible for key achievements like women's right to own property (rather than, well, being property) and vote. These are great things for the gender equity movement.

Another way of putting all this is to say that feminism works to dismantle the patriarchy. Unfortunately, this way of putting it usually brings to mind a "*Les Miserables*, flag-waving, down with the government, all men are evil" brand of feminism, but this doesn't have to be the case.

## DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY IS GOOD FOR EVERYONE

On its surface, patriarchy (men being granted disproportionate social power, as compared to people of other genders) may seem like a good thing for men. I'll give you that. But, as we've discussed, the label "men" is a less than flawless way to describe half the people in the world. Because it's easy to understand why dismantling patriarchy would be good for other genders, let me focus here on how this will benefit men.

While it's hard to argue that things aren't better for men in society right now, things are far from perfect. There are a lot of societal problems that acutely affect men: men are less likely to graduate from college, and much less likely to continue education post-grad than women; men are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of crime, especially violent crime; due to this, men are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system; men are more likely to experience clinical anxiety and depression; due to this and other compounding factors, men are far more likely to take their own lives.

### **What does any of this have to do with patriarchy?**

All of this can be explained as being a byproduct of patriarchy, or, specifically, the socialization of men that is dictated in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy sets up a series of strict and unrealistic expectations for all men. It says men should be aggressive and not submissive; men should take charge and not take no for an answer; men are smarter and better than women; and showing emotion or weakness is a lowering yourself to the level of women, and forbidden.

The unrealistic and unhealthy expectations set forth for men in a patriarchal society, one that reinforces a gender binary and gender hierarchy, can be just as destructive for men as it is for individuals of any other gender.

### **Dismantling “male” power can be as empowering to men as it is to others**

Removing the expectations for men to be dominant and in power, as well as opening up access to these attributes to people of all genders, results in a society where people are empowered to be themselves, and not forced into certain roles or to possess certain attributes as a result of their gender.

People who want to fill roles with social power can do so and experience no dissonance in doing so. And people who do not want power can live a life without power. Which is great for them, assuming they don't want to hoverboard on water because “hoverboards don't work on water... unless you've got power!”<sup>37</sup>

## LET'S TALK ABOUT THE WORD “FEMINISM”

“Is what I'm describing here really feminism?” you might be wondering. Or you might think “What you're talking about is humanism. I'm a humanist. Humanists are better than feminists because reasons.” And it's possible all that's on your mind is “Did I have tacos for breakfast *and* lunch today?” Or maybe that's just me.

In any case, I'm a strong proponent for “feminism” (and an equally strong opponent against “humanism” as a replacement for “feminism,” though I'm not anti-human, mind you), both the moniker and

---

37 How's that for an obscure quote?

the movement, and I think the term already represents a gender-inclusive gender equity movement. All you have to do is think about the movement from a different perspective.

### **Dismantling patriarchy or affirming femininity**

Patriarchy celebrates masculinity in its traditional sense, and pushes for a society where men are absolutely masculine, women are absolutely feminine<sup>38</sup>, and that's all the people (Sorry, everyone else). In this line of thinking, the brunt of the negative impact of patriarchy could be considered to be a dichotomous look at gendered behavior, where masculinity (for men) is good, and femininity (in general) is bad.

Feminism can be (and is) a movement about affirming femininity in society, and all that's typically associated with it, including woman-ness and female-ness. As feminists, we can argue that there is as much power and potential inherent in femininity as there is in masculinity, and that nobody should be chastised or disadvantaged for embodying aspects of femininity. For folks who don't identify with either femininity or masculinity, they can still experience the benefits of a society that doesn't hold masculinity as supreme.

### **Let's stop talking about the word "feminism" and start talking about gender equity**

The other reason I'm pro "feminism" is because—and this is going to be blunt—I am quite fed up with all the in-group fighting, energy, and effort that's gone into debating "feminism" (the word, not the idea). I get similarly frustrated when I read an article on a feminist publication debating whether someone (e.g., Beyoncé) is a "perfect feminist." Let me do everyone a favor: nobody is a perfect feminist, and "feminism" isn't a perfect label.

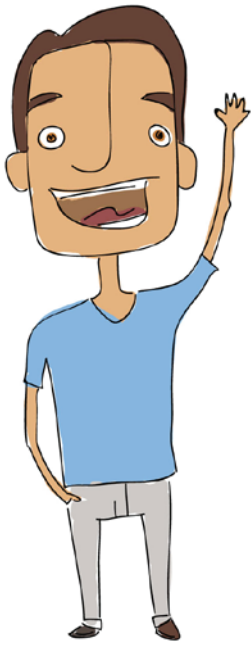
But I vote for sticking with "feminism" because feminism has deep roots, is a recognizable movement, and, despite its faults, has done a lot for the betterment of people of all genders, and specifically for women and trans\* people. But you don't have to agree with me. You can call yourself a Humanist, a Gender Equitist, or a Separatist for all I care—I think we can focus our time and energy on working together

---

38 The word for this is "genderism."

to make things better for people of all genders, not squabbling over semantics.

Feminism isn't a bad word, and the less time we spend debating and discussing that and the more time we spend working toward a society where femininity isn't persecuted the happier we will be and the closer we will be to a society where people can be themselves and write run-on sentences.



Hi! I'm a feminist.

No, I don't hate men.

No, I don't think men are evil.

No, I don't think all men are rapists.

Yes, I want equity for all genders.

Yes, I'm a feminist.

Keep blowing them up. I want to fly away to a planet where the people are nice to each other.



## CHAPTER 26

# WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE FEMINISM HATES MEN

“THE FEMINIST AGENDA IS NOT ABOUT EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN. IT IS ABOUT A SOCIALIST, ANTI-FAMILY POLITICAL MOVEMENT THAT ENCOURAGES WOMEN TO LEAVE THEIR HUSBANDS, KILL THEIR CHILDREN, PRACTICE WITCHCRAFT, DESTROY CAPITALISM, AND BECOME LESBIANS.”

– *Pat Robertson*

Pat Robertson famously said those words in the '90s, and the sentiment still rings as true in the ears of many today. It's an understatement to say that feminism has a bad rap.

But feminism doesn't hate men.

So why do so many people think feminism = man-hating? Let's look at a few explanations for this fallacy.

### BECAUSE SOME INDIVIDUAL FEMINISTS HATE MEN

Surprised to hear me say that? It's true. There's no point in avoiding it, so we might as well start with it. Just look around the Internet.

In thirty seconds on Google, I found plenty of articles written by



feminists who are anti-men and a delightful collection of quotes featuring anti-men feminist sentiments. Just opening my email inbox often presents me with the same (e.g., “All men deserve to die,” was in an email I received from a self-identified feminist recently. *Valar Morghulis*, I guess.).

Without belaboring the point, what I’m trying to say is you don’t have to look very hard to find examples of “feminists” who hate men.

**But there’s a difference between “feminists” and “misandrists.”**

Ever heard the term misandrist? It’s like misogynist but for hating men instead of women.

Yes, misandrist is a word. But feminist doesn’t mean “person who hates men.” Feminist means “person who believes people should have equitable places in society regardless of their gender.”

Some feminists may be misandrists. I quoted one above. But it’s by no means a criterion to join the club. More than that, these are two separate movements; they just have some overlap in membership.

**A portion does not equal the whole, even if that portion is really loud.**

They’re not even that loud, but can seem so, because anti-feminists like to cherry-pick quotes and ignore the much greater number of feminist writings, people, and organizations that say otherwise.

Some individual feminists hate men. A lot of feminists might hate men. You might even argue, based on what you find on the Internet, that most feminists hate men. It’s irrelevant.

What matters is that feminism, distilled down to its absolute core, is about gender equity. The goal of feminism is to create a society in which individuals’ genders don’t restrict them from an equitable shot at success and happiness.

Most feminists actively disagree with the belief that women are better than men, and think that feminists who are anti-men are going against the fundamental principles of feminism, which say we’re all deserving and worthy human beings—women, men, trans\*—and should be treated as such. So man-hating isn’t a part of that goal. It’s an unfortunate reactionary sentiment bought into by some people (misandrists) who also identify with the feminist movement.

A lot of people get drunk in college, but we know that college is

more than a big drinking club, right? Isn't it? Maybe I attended the wrong college.

## BECAUSE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TOLD FEMINISTS HATE MEN FOR 200+ YEARS

The whole “feminists hate men” thing has been tossed around for quite a long time now. It's not new. The first “feminist” women who began advocating for equal status of women in the United States did so in the late 1700s, but it didn't really pick up steam until the late 1800s.

What crazy, radical things were these man-haters asking for? Primarily, the rights to own property, attend college, and vote.

In response to these requests, they were labeled as radical anti-family, anti-God, anti-men hedonists. That labeling has continued to today because—surprise! —a group with a lot of power (men) tends to do whatever it can to maintain that power (dismiss equal rights as radical).

It's happened with every oppressed ethnic group (from the Irish to the Africans) that's immigrated to the country. It happened with oppressed religious groups (from the Catholics to the Muslims), and it continues today with the oppressed gender group.

### **Why do people believe it if it's not true?**

Because people are irrational. There are entire books presenting evidence of this (check out Sway for a great example). One way we act irrationally is called diagnosis bias.

A particularly fascinating study showed that the smallest change in the way you describe someone can completely alter the way you perceive their behavior. How about an example?

A university class (unknowing lab rats) had a substitute professor. To introduce the professor, the class members were given short bios. What they didn't know was that half the bios had been very slightly altered (e.g., exchanging warm, positive adjectives for cold, callous ones).

After the lecture, the students were asked to review the professor. The entire class saw the same man say the same things, yet the reviews were split 50/50 positive and negative. Half the class said he was personable, considerate, and engaged while the other half said he was

ruthless, would do anything for success, and didn't care about students or people. The smallest change in the way someone is described can make a dramatic change in the way you interpret their behavior and demeanor.

Now, hypothetically speaking, imagine how twisted the perceptions would have been if the students were told the professor was a student-hating, self-serving, radical hedonist.

## BECAUSE MOST MEN AREN'T BAD BUT THINK FEMINISM SAYS THEY ARE

Let me bust a few myths:

**1. Being a feminist doesn't mean you believe "all men are rapists."** This quote comes from a book by Marilyn French, and it seems to be recited more by anti-feminists (as a means of debunking feminism) than by feminists themselves. It's simply a ridiculous statement that's been given a ridiculous amount of airtime.

**2. Being a feminist doesn't mean you think all men are evil.** Following up on the last point, a lot of antifeminist folks make the argument that feminists believe all men are evil. This is not true.

**3. Being a feminist doesn't mean you blame every individual man you know for hundreds of years of oppressive behavior.** Just like you wouldn't point at a random white person today and blame them for slavery, you can't blame an individual man today for a history of sexism.

A lot of people think about the things above, think about the men they know (or if they are men, they think about themselves), and think "That's ridiculous. isn't an evil rapist who is responsible for hundreds of years of sexism."

A lot of people are right.

The thing feminism thinks is bad is the hundreds of years of sexism part, as well as the existence of sexism today. Sexism is the problem—sexism that a lot of men engage in and a lot of women internalize. Men engage in sexism because they've been taught to behave/think that way. Women internalize it for the same reason. Feminism asks both men and women to critically think about those normalized behaviors and their impact and holds people accountable to sexist

thinking and behavior even if they didn't initially realize it was sexist.

So yes, it's natural to get defensive when someone brings up feminist issues, because it's likely you never thought you were doing anything wrong. Does that make sexist behavior acceptable? No.

That's why we need to do a better job as a society of teaching people how to treat each other with equity. That's what feminism is trying to do.

## BECAUSE SOME FEMINISTS AREN'T WILLING TO ADDRESS MEN'S ISSUES

Working toward gender equity means equity for all genders, right? Then what about men? And what about trans\* folks? This is a question that often gets raised by men (about men, not as much for trans\* folk). Feminism in general has mixed feelings about addressing men's (and trans) issues.

I'll be the first person to admit that there are a lot of gender-based men's issues to address. Like why young men today are less likely to graduate from college, attain a high GPA, be active in extracurricular organizations, or seek leadership roles; or why men in general have always been more likely to be caught up in the criminal justice system or be homeless. These are real issues, surely, and things our society should work to correct.

But do many feminists ignore these issues because they hate men? No.

Their mixed feelings about addressing men's issues tend to stem from the fact that "men's issues" tends to be the default in our society. We're a male-dominant society. Many feminists are concerned that addressing men's issues (or gender issues as a broad goal) will move the conversation completely away from women's issues, resulting in no progress for the women's part of the gender progress. So instead they focus on women's issues and allow others to focus on others' issues. Many feminists would like to see pro-feminist men tackle men's issues in a way that doesn't blame women and feminism for all their problems (like many men's rights activists do).

However, it's worth noting that plenty of feminist publications and movements are both men- and trans\*-inclusive. This is the type of feminism I personally support, the kind that takes an intersectional approach to feminism and looks at how different groups of genders,

sexual orientations, races, classes, and more are dominated in our society.

## BECAUSE SENSATIONALISM IS A GOOD WAY TO DISTRACT FROM REAL ISSUES

It's pretty messed up that being born a certain way means you're going to be less likely to earn as much money, achieve the same tier of success, be treated with respect and fairness, or be elected into political office, among other things, but these restrictions are objectively measurable.

The issues mentioned above affect just about every identity group in the United States that is not white and male (and straight, nondisabled, etc.). Instead of dealing with inequality and giving up a bit of unearned power, it's far more fruitful to change the conversation and put the oppressed group on the defensive.

Blacks are more likely to be imprisoned because being a criminal is part of being black. Have fun arguing about that while we enjoy our unfairly granted "innocent" verdicts.

Gays can't be given rights to form families because being a child molester is part of being gay. Go ahead and re-read all of those nonsensical studies and commission some more while we enjoy our access to the 1,138 benefits granted solely to married couples.

Women don't earn as much as men because earning a lower wage for the same work is part of being a woman. Oh, and babies. Don't forget, you make the babies. What a miracle! That should be payment enough.

**Social change is slow because the people in power are the ones writing the narrative, and they often choose a distracting narrative**

Did you know that up until the early twentieth century there was an actual medical condition called "female hysteria" (yes, "hyster-," as in hysterectomy, or pertaining to the uterus)?

Some of the symptoms of female hysteria: loss of appetite, nervousness, irritability, fluid retention, emotional excitability, outbursts of negativity, excessive sexual desire, and "a tendency to cause trouble."

In other words, if a woman wasn't eating, was eating too much, was angry, happy, wanted to have sex, or wanted equal rights for wom-

en (you trouble causers, you!), she was mentally ill and her behavior could be dismissed as such.

Guess who came up with that idea? You guessed it! White dudes.

## AM I TRYING TO BRING THE STRAIGHT WHITE MAN DOWN?

No. I am a straight white man. That wouldn't serve me well at all. So let me use this last section to speak to men specifically.

What I'm trying to do, and what feminism is trying to do, is bring the other genders up. And, in doing so, liberate men from a lot of the harmful, poisonous, toxic implications of gender that confine us as well.

While an understandable response to this idea for men is a defensive one, considering so many of the bad things in history have been caused by men (by so many, I mean, like, all of them), that's also a positive response because it means you're accessing empathy.

You don't want to be seen as the "bad guy" (what a misandrist term!). You don't hate women. You've never oppressed women. Of course you haven't. Oppression doesn't happen on the individual level.

But it happens. And as a man, particularly one who is white, you are granted a lot of privileges that stem from hundreds of years of oppression. You get these privileges whether you choose to have them or not. The only choice you get is what you do with your privilege.

Do you use it to make for a more equitable society for people of all genders?

Or do you keep whining about how feminists hate men and distracting yourself and others from serious issues of inequality?

*Your call, dudes.*

## Section 4

# SOCIAL JUSTICE COMPETENCE: WORKING FOR GENDER EQUITY

FROM COMPREHENSION TO COMPETENCE, KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION,  
THINKING TO DOING—THIS SECTION FOCUSES ON PREPARING YOU  
FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE INTERVENTIONS AND EDUCATION.



27. WHY MY APPROACH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE IS BETTER THAN YOURS	203
28. BEING WELL-INTENTIONED ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH	209
29. NO SUCH THING AS A POSITIVE STEREOTYPE	219
30. MAKING FORMS GENDER INCLUSIVE	225
31. "PARTNER" AND OTHER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE	231
32. POLITICAL CORRECTNESS VS. BEING INCLUSIVE	237
33. RESPONDING TO NON-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE	241



**SOCIAL JUSTICE  
ADVOCATE'S HANDBOOK**

**FIELD SCENARIO #1:**

**KNOWLEDGE GRENADES**

In the field, the adversary will often bunker down and resist your social justice education methods. Worry not. Once the adversary's guard is up, begin a relentless barrage of SJA Standard-Issue Knowledge Grenades until their defenses crumble. Aim for weak structural points.



Take that, Commie!

**S.J.A.H. TIPS:**

- ★ Attack their values before they can attack yours.
- ★ Lead off with "you're a terrible person because..."
- ★ You are doing it right if they are crying.



## CHAPTER 27

# WHY MY APPROACH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE IS BETTER THAN YOURS

“YOU HAVE YOUR WAY. I HAVE MY WAY. AS FOR THE RIGHT WAY,  
THE CORRECT WAY, AND THE ONLY WAY, IT DOES NOT EXIST.”

– *Friedrich Nietzsche*

The way I approach social justice and ally work has a distinct flavor. Some would call it sweet, but I think it's a bit more spicy-sweet, like Thai food. I don't often do things in my life by accident, and in the case of how I do social justice work, it is extremely on purpose. My flavor is even so noticeable that having read this far in this book, you're likely taken aback by the title of this chapter. Well, that actually leads me into my first point.

### I TRY NOT TO TALK DOWN TO PEOPLE

Did the title of this chapter irk you a bit? It likely did. That's a reasonable reaction. I wanted to make a point (and I'm sorry!).

How could I possibly know that my approach is better than yours?

I don't know you. I don't know your experiences. Nor do I know your dispositions. I can't know my approach is better, so why would I start the conversation out that way? Unfortunately, a lot of folks I've seen trying to do good start things out this way.

You can't know what people know without asking them, so start by asking. Get a sense for what they know, and attempt to build on that; don't just assume they have everything wrong and start at square one. At the very least, people likely have a decent idea of what is wrong with society, even if they don't know how to fix it.

An important thing to remember is that you weren't always an "expert" on the stuff you now know so much about. In fact, it's likely that you've only known something for a short amount of time. I'm learning and relearning things every day; it's a huge part of doing this work. Try to keep that in mind when you approach someone, because it'll help you keep yourself out of the ever-seductive ivory tower.

**Icebreaker prompts to figure out on what level to start a conversation:**

1. Tell me what you know about the hardships of X group.
2. When in your past have you felt like life was just plain unfair?
3. What's your experience with / knowledge of social justice and equality issues?

## I TRY TO MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Following up on the first point, I'm drawing on a phrase I learned in grad school. In trying to help people learn and grow, it's wise to meet them where they are. That is, to use terms, concepts, and ideas they are familiar with to help them begin to grasp slightly more advanced concepts. Nobody should start out eating a sundae; they should get a sense of what banana and ice cream and strawberry and chocolate and peanuts taste like individually to know how much more delicious they are when you mash them all together. OK. Now I'm hungry.

The biggest problem here is that you might know 100 percent of an issue about which your target knows (let's be generous) 10 percent. And you, being a well-intentioned person, want your target to instantly go from 10 percent to 100 percent. Well, sorry friend, but that's not

how it works. Instead, try aiming for 11 percent. Or, if you really want to challenge them, 12 percent. Challenge is OK if there's not too much. Too much challenge and they'll snap like a dry waffle cone. Sorry. I'm still in sundae mode.

I create all my graphics and writings with a particular knowledge level in mind. For most of what I do, that level is introductory. But in some, I build on introductory concepts and expand them into more complex ideas. That's because the goal of my work is to help "average" people help other people understand these issues.

**Tips for meeting people where they are:**

1. Figure out where they are (see the first point above).
2. Be patient, and don't skip steps. People may fake understanding if you go too fast, and that doesn't help anyone.
3. Think about where you were when you first confronted these issues, and what it took to get to where you are now (not that it will take the exact same steps—it won't—but to help you remember *it took steps*).

## I TRY NOT TO BE OVERBEARING OR AGGRAVATING

Looking back at the title of this chapter, you may have been a bit pissed off when you read it. If you're like a lot of folks, you may have started reading the chapter with the sole intention of finding something wrong that you could correct or denounce later—and all this happened before you even heard what I have to say. This happens in real-life conversations about social justice all too often.

Well-intentioned people see an opportunity to educate someone on a social justice issue (e.g., they overhear the person say something homophobic) and they pounce. Before the unsuspecting student (prey) knows what's happening, the social justice educator (predator) has ripped out their throat and is nibbling on their entrails. Yum.

Just bringing up a lot of these issues is enough to put someone on the defensive. People don't like being attacked. When they sense that happening, they'll prepare their defenses. Once someone is holed up in a bunker with you whipping knowledge grenades at them, it's guar-

anteed to be a long siege<sup>39</sup>. People don't often change their minds on important issues by force (read up on holy wars).

### **Ways to avoid a social justice holy war:**

1. Use "I" statements whenever possible (e.g., "I use this term because" instead of "You should use this term because").
2. Dip your toes into the pool before you cannonball. It's not good to take a potential social justice trainee (victim) by surprise.
3. Know what your triggers are and how to navigate them (Check out "Navigating Triggers" by Kathy Obear for some help).

## I CREATE CUTE GRAPHICS AND MAKE SILLY JOKES

Gender issues could be lightly described as hot-button issues, meaning they are likely to make calm people become nuclear if pushed too hard. It's important to be aware of this and attempt to mitigate it when you're chatting with people about this stuff. There are a number of ways one can do this; I use cute graphics, and in person, I use humor.

For me, humor is the best tool for diffusing a situation. I've been doing it since I was just a wee little social justice educator, and it's my go-to tool. In some situations, this doesn't work well, and there are definitely great (or better) alternatives. But I've learned that for my style of writing and talking, cute graphics and silly jokes work.

Figure out what works for you.

The big idea here is to create a space that feels safe and welcoming for anyone you're chatting with about social justice and equality issues. As you've learned above, there's plenty stacked up against it going well. Don't do something you're not comfortable with (e.g., trying to be funny if you're not or trying to be warm-hearted if you're naturally more room temp), and experiment to find what works. Just do something to make the space as safe and welcoming as you can.

Some ways to make a space feel a bit safer:

---

<sup>39</sup> Once I wrote that sentence, I couldn't resist drawing it, which resulted in the comic at the beginning of this chapter, which led to initial theme of this book, which I then abandoned after the first chapter. True story.

1. Respect/establish confidentiality. Ask if the person wants the talk to remain confidential, and if so, make it so.
2. If you share, they will share. This is one of the few real “rules” I can think of that always works.
3. Remind the person/group that you aren’t perfect (because you aren’t) and are still learning yourself (because you are).

## I TRY TO KEEP TRYING AND TO KEEP LEARNING

I don’t always do the above things well (or at all), but I always try. And if one approach doesn’t work for an issue, I try another. Trying and failing and trying again is a huge part of social justice work, and it’s something I’m always doing. Knowing that I’m going to fail allows me to take the risks necessary to keep growing. This prevents me from being afraid to take risks, in the hope that I never fail. Because failing is inevitable. (Hammered in enough?)

If you’re “educating” people in social justice or equality issues and it turns out they know something you don’t, great! Ask questions; learn more; let them teach you. You’ll be better off for it on your next adventure, and you’ll have established a genuine trust with that group. Trying and failing often leads to learning. Let it. It’s good for you, like aloe vera. Don’t pretend you knew something you didn’t. That’s not good for you or the group, like tasting aloe vera. (Seriously, don’t taste it; it’s horrendous.)

And above all, try to keep trying. Achieving social justice is definitely possible, but it’s not going to happen after one toss of a knowledge grenade. Keep hurling those things relentlessly! Wait. That might be bad. The point is not to give up. If you give up, the war is lost. Actually, let’s try not to stop using the word “war.”

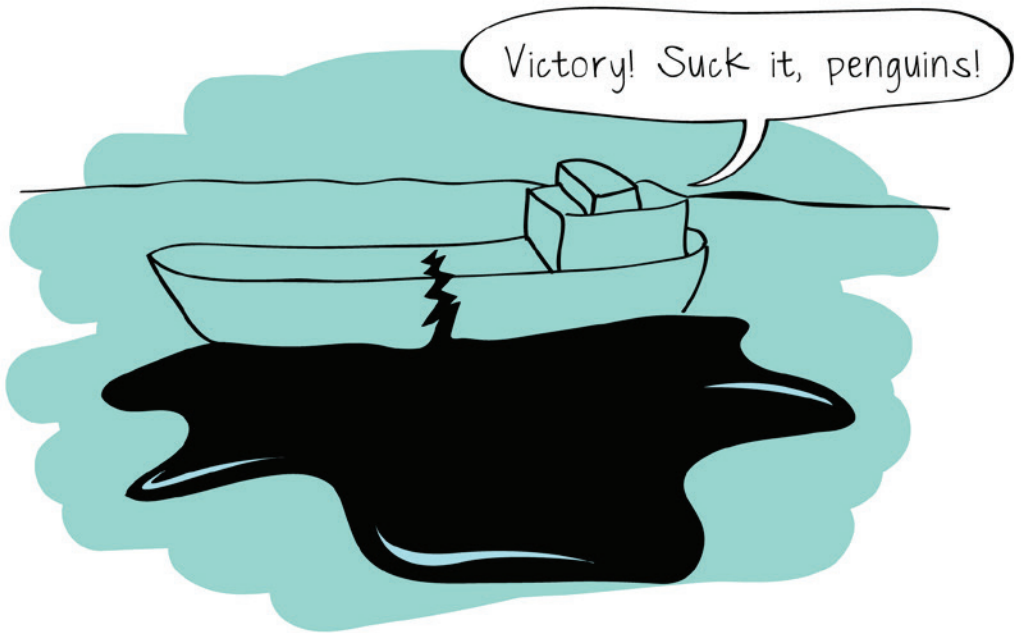
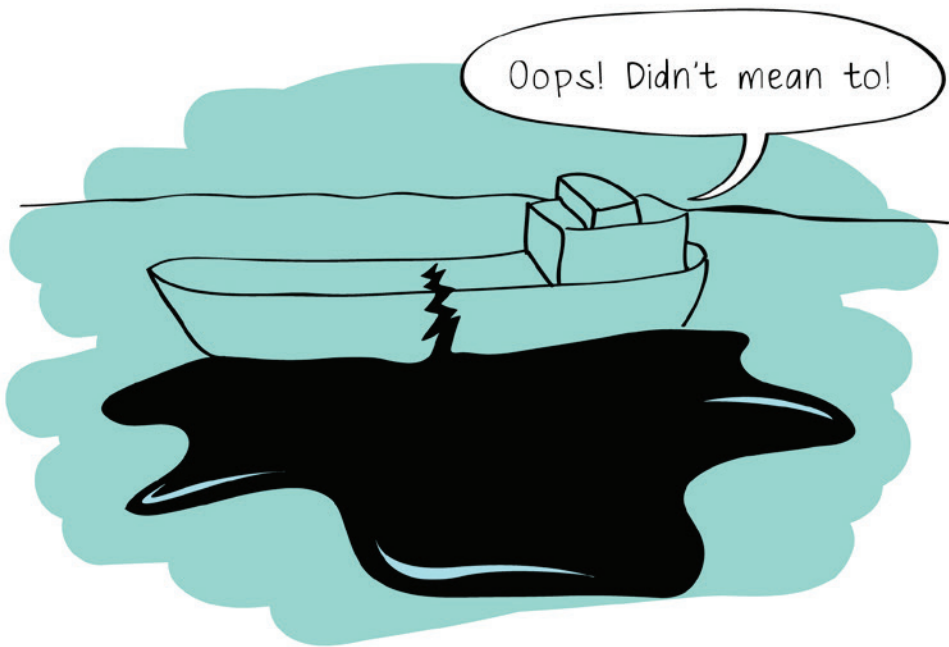
### **What helps me to keep fighting this war<sup>40</sup>:**

1. I remind myself why I do what I do. Sometimes I do it in writing; sometimes it’s through a quality convo with a friend.
2. I spend time with positive people and do my best to interact with

---

40 Hey! I said I make mistakes.

Different intentions.



Same oily outcome.

## CHAPTER 28

# BEING WELL-INTENTIONED ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH

“NO ONE WOULD REMEMBER THE GOOD SAMARITAN IF HE'D ONLY HAD GOOD INTENTIONS; HE HAD MONEY AS WELL.”

– *Margaret Thatcher*

Throughout my career, I've created many resources intended to inform people on how they can use language to be more inclusive and respectful. A common reaction is “How can you regulate language? What's offensive to one person is not to another. What matters are your intentions.”

My response is universally “Intentions don't matter; outcome matters.”

I will elaborate on that more in a bit, but first I want to pose another question that I think is important for understanding all of this—and posit an answer.

### WHY THE FASCINATION WITH INTENTIONS?

Why is it that we have such a high regard for intentions and try hard to be (and cherish) “well-intentioned” people? What is it about intentions that attracts us like mosquitos to a bug zapper? (You'll realize soon that this simile is even more apt than you might know.)



There are a couple of things at play here that lead to the focus on intentions rather than outcomes: the ideas of “political correctness” and “victim blaming” and, most importantly, how they interact. Before I can explain the interaction, let me explain what they are.

### **Victim Blaming 101**

The phrase “blaming the victim,” coined by psychologist William Ryan in his mid-seventies book about race and poverty, *Blaming the Victim*, is tossed around a lot these days surrounding instances of rape (and date rape). The concept hasn’t changed much in the past forty years. So, what is it?

Victim blaming is when a perpetrator of some crime deflects the fault back onto the person they committed the crime against, effectively justifying the crime and absolving themselves of any guilt. As I mentioned before, the most common use of it these days is in cases involving rape, and the most common argument is “She was asking for it” (usually because of how she was dressed or because of a previous relationship with the offender).

Sound screwy to you? Then you’re in the minority. Most people (in studies and polls) seem to think that rape victims are at least partially to blame for being raped. That says a lot about a lot, but tuck it away for a minute while we focus on the other part of this equation.

### **“Political Correctness”**

I don’t think anything about this book, my website, or even my live show is encouraging being “politically correct.” I support being inclusive. I wrote an entire chapter about the difference between being inclusive and politically correct, so refer to that (Chapter 30) if you want to hear more about this particular subject. For this chapter, all that’s important is knowing that a lot of people oppose what I do because they oppose the idea of being “PC.”

The opposition to “political correctness” appears to be strong across the political spectrum. Regardless of left or right leanings, people don’t like to be told what to say, and they don’t like being censored. I echo these feelings. Hooray! Something we all can agree on.

The problem is how this gets twisted with victim blaming into some confusing and contradictory outcomes.

## VICTIM BLAMING + POLITICAL CORRECTNESS = INTENTIONS > OUTCOMES

If math isn't your thing, the heading here means that victim blaming and political correctness interact in such a way as to lead folks to believe and support the idea that intentions are more important than outcomes. As I mentioned before, outcomes are what matter most (more on that in the next section; patience for now), so this is a problem. But how does it play out?

### **The Situation**

Let's consider an example. A well-intentioned cisgender person (Friend A) calls his trans\* friend (Friend B) a "hermaphrodite," because he's trying to use the most technical term he can think of and strays away from "trans" because it's so close to "tranny" (all of this being an extremely common mode of thinking). Friend A is trying to be a good dude and a good friend. But Friend B corrects him, pointing out that "trans" is a better term, and "hermaphrodite" has negative, science-experimenty, uncomfortable vibes.

### **The Reaction**

Well-intentioned Friend A is now spurned because he feels that he was trying his best to be inclusive and that Friend B is just (a) nit-picking, (b) impossible to please, (c) asking too much, or (d) has a problem with cisgender people. He argues, either verbally with his friend or nonverbally with himself in his head, that he meant well, and his friend should recognize that.

We've all been there, Friend A. It's OK! You're surrounded by friends.

### **The Problem**

People in general don't like to be told what to say—this goes for well-intentioned people as well as jerks. When our well-intentioned person went out of his way to say what he thought was the "right" thing, he was stretching himself in two ways: he was saying something he wasn't comfy with, but saying it because he thought it was "PC" (i.e., "right"), and he was taking a risk to try to be a good dude to Friend B at the expense of failing and feeling like a jerk. And when that failure happened, he jumped from the Political Correctness Frying Pan (patent pending) into the Victim Blaming Fire.

Being corrected by Friend B when Friend A already feels like he is being “corrected” by society at large (being “PC”) is tough medicine to swallow. Throw in the fact that the reason he was being “PC” was due to empathetic concern for Friend A’s feelings and wants—his intent was to make Friend A feel safer/comfier/faster/stronger (sorry, went Daft Punk there)—and you have a recipe for emotional confusion.

To protect himself from feeling like a bad person (he’s not, mind you, but people are quick to take a correction for a particular behavior as code for “You’re a bad person”), Friend A has to deflect blame to someone or something else. He can get pissed at society for wanting him to be “PC,” but society is never an easy target for aggression, so instead he gets pissed at Friend B for being “impossible to please” and ignoring his good intentions. This is how victim blaming works. Making this seem like his friend’s fault will allow him to feel better about himself—after all, his friend is the trans\* one, who has to expect to be misunderstood or mislabeled. *Friend B is basically asking for it.*

## WHY DO OUTCOMES MATTER MORE THAN INTENTIONS?

This is the real doozy. This is a fight I fight every day. “Why am I fighting a war against well-intentioned folks?” you might ask. Well, I’m not. I think well-intentioned folks are awesome. I identify as a well-intentioned folk. But I’m going to stick by my guns: intentions, in the grand scheme, don’t mean squat.

### **When good intentions go bad**

The first (and biggest) problem with intentions is how often good intentions go bad. A common reason they go bad is because we, as individuals, have individual wants and needs that are different from one another. How you manifest your good intentions and how I manifest mine are likely different, and how the object of our intentions receives them will likely be just as different. We often treat others how we want to be treated, instead of how they want to be treated. (We know what that’s called, don’t we?)

This pans out especially poorly any time there is a cultural divide. What is good, nice, or helpful in one culture (family, workplace, city, region, country, continent) is not necessarily good, nice, or helpful in another. In fact, it might end up being just the opposite. Intentions are

flawed.

### **But it's the thought that counts**

Nope, actually, it's not. Even among close friends, arguments are often caused due to the slightest bit of misunderstanding. Why would you not expect this to happen with strangers?

Let's say I, as a well-intentioned Sam, bought a gift for my friend that I thought she would absolutely love (true story). Now let's say that, unbeknownst to me, this gift turned out to be something that triggered an incredibly visceral, damaging memory from her past. Should she wear this thing and tote it around because of how thoughtful I was, or should she tell me what happened and/or decline the gift?

She certainly felt pressured to do the former (because it was a gift, and beggars can't be choosers, and it's the thought that counts, and other clichés), but thankfully for her emotional and psychological well-being, and our friendship, she did the latter. (End of story.)

### **Intentions are capricious and theoretical**

In any relationship (between two individuals, a teacher and a class, one group and another) countless interactions will take place, all bearing an immeasurable weight of intentions. Those intentions are bound to change from interaction to interaction and be interpreted (or misinterpreted) based on the receiver's mood or disposition.

What's more troublesome is that intentions are theoretical agreements made between the intender and the intensee, without the intensee's awareness of the agreement or the terms. You wouldn't mentally sell someone a car, mentally draw up all the paperwork, and mentally collect the money, and then, after presenting this deal to the person in real life and in past tense (i.e., "You just bought this car from me, bro. Where my dollas at?"), snap when they aren't OK with the "deal" they just made, would you? No. You wouldn't.

Following that example, it is unreasonable for us to hold fast to our intentions after they backfire. The people you are interacting with don't necessarily know your intentions, nor should they trump how your actions made them feel—and if they are offended or hurt by whatever well-intentioned thing you just said, they are in the worst possible mind-set to be buying a car.

### **Outcomes are consistent and real**

On an individual level, outcomes are relatively consistent and predictable. If someone says X to me, I'll likely respond Y. Or, more refined, if someone says X to me, and I'm feeling Z, I'll likely respond Y. For example, if someone calls me a "fag," and I'm in a good mood, I'll respond Socratically by asking them questions and helping them get to their own conclusion of why they shouldn't be calling me that word. It doesn't matter if they said it as a joke, didn't mean anything by it, or said it "because you're wearin' them there flip-flops, boy." (The guy who told me that after a comedy show was a keeper.) If I'm in a bad mood, it'll go similar, but there will be more swearing.

What's more important is that outcomes happen externally. It doesn't matter if you didn't intend to hit that bunny with your car, you did. You were a well-intentioned driver, and now you have a dead bunny. What are you going to do about it? You can try to adjust your driving for the future (pay more attention, drive slower, eat fewer burritos, etc.), or you can blame the bunny for its furry doom (shouldn't've been there; it was asking for it). In either case, it happened, regardless of your intentions, and now you get to choose how to move on.

## MOVING BEYOND GOOD INTENTIONS

When people ask me what I do for a living, I like to respond that I help good people be better people. Well-intentioned people are good people. We all just always have a little ways to go to be better people, and it all takes place after the outcome, not before it.

### **Don't take it personally**

It was not my intention to break a personal record for as many clichés as possible in one chapter, so whoops. But seriously: if you're a well-intentioned person and your good intentions backfire, don't take it personally. It happens. The outcome may have been bad, but that doesn't mean *you* are.

There's a difference there. We are the sum total of our experiences; we aren't defined by one mistake. It's easy to think that, to fall into that trap, but as soon as you take it personally when someone doesn't react well to your good intentions, things are only going to get worse—and you'll soon have a whole colony of dead bunnies on your hands.

Also, is “colony” not one of the cutest animal plurals you’ve ever heard? Bunnies are my jam, so please, for the sake of my psyche, stop killing them.

### **Learn from your mistakes**

You probably think I mean, in a follow-up to the last point, you should try to avoid whatever created that outcome to not have it happen again, right? Wrong.

Focus less on your intentions, the other people, and what happened, and more on yourself. If you don’t take it personally when you screw up, you’ll have a better chance at remedying a situation. If you don’t get frustrated when you are trying to be inclusive and aren’t sure of the best word to say, you’ll do a much better job at being inclusive and saying the “right” things.

Remember, the same action with the same intention can result in an infinite number of outcomes. The only constant is you and how you react to the other person’s reaction, regardless of how it goes. Learn what your triggers are, learn how you can lessen them, and don’t allow yourself to continue tripping over the same roots. And, if you’re really scrambling, maybe this mnemonic will help: *when you lose your cool, use the Platinum Rule!*<sup>41</sup>

### **Open yourself up to failure-learning**

It’s funny to me how much flak I get about this intentions thing. People harp on me about how intentions should matter more— “Everyone doesn’t know exactly what to say all the time like you do,” et-cetera—when it often feels like a majority of my time each day goes to cleaning dead bunnies off my car (metaphorical dead bunnies off my metaphorical car—I’m not an actual bunny-slayer. Remember, I love bunnies. And I ride a bicycle.).

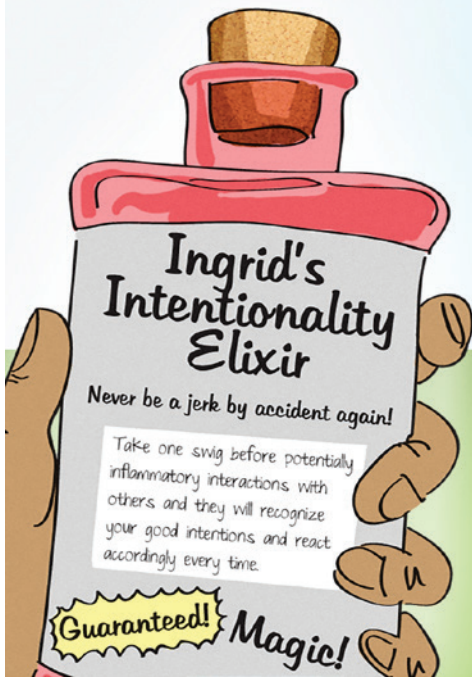
I’m a well-intentioned person, and everything I do professionally is a manifestation of those good intentions, but the outcomes are often bad. But I’m here to fail/learn, and I’ve learned how to fail/learn more gracefully every day. I am a good person who is trying to be a better person. To be frank, this book and everything I write wouldn’t

---

<sup>41</sup> I bet you thought I couldn’t get any more After School Special if I tried. But guess what? I didn’t even have to try.

be nearly the quality it is if it weren't for the amazing readership I've cultivated that doesn't hesitate to correct me when I fail, over and over and over and...OK. Enough.

Realizing that you're likely going to fail and being OK with that is what helps make failing and learning unite to become failure-learning. The two ideas have so blurred into one for me that only a little hyphen separates them. You're going to screw up. Count on it. I'm going to go out on a limb and use another (yes, another) cliché here and remind you that everybody falls down, but it's what you do when you get back up that matters.



Okay, I get it, but what if I actually want to be a jerk?





Be funny!

Be a good friend,  
a confidante!

Be artsy!

Have a refined taste for  
theatre, musicals in particular!

Smell nice!

Be the life of the party!

And sassy!

Be a good dancer!

Be fit! Abs!

Be fun! Like so much fun!

Be compassionate, sensitive!

Be a good listener!

Be stylish!

And nice!

And happy!

And smart!

And brave!

And well-groomed!

And honest!



## CHAPTER 29

# NO SUCH THING AS A POSITIVE STEREOTYPE

“DO YOU DRINK?”

“OF COURSE, I JUST SAID I WAS A WRITER.”

– *Stephen King*

As a reminder, positive stereotypes are assumptions about an entire group or identity (e.g., gay men) that are considered to be “good.” Some examples of positive stereotypes of gay men, for example: artsy, friendly, fun, social, well-spoken, well-dressed, well-groomed, fit. The list goes on. Those are all good things, yeah? There can’t be any harm in perpetuating those stereotypes, right?

Wrong.

**DRILL:** See how many positive gender-related stereotypes you can come up with in five minutes. Write like the wind, don’t overthink it or second guess yourself, and think about the list you came up with as you read the rest of this chapter.

Positive stereotypes exist for just about every identity and have the capacity to be just as damaging as the negative ones. You don’t think so? Well read on, and let’s see if I can change your mind.

## POSITIVE STEREOTYPES SET THE BAR UNREALISTICALLY HIGH

Have you ever met a gay guy who wasn't fit? Or a black guy who wasn't good at sports? Or a woman who wasn't caring? I'm going to guess you have. Now, the important part: did you realize that you were slightly disappointed or perturbed when you found out about the lack of those traits? I'm going to guess you didn't realize it, but you probably were.

Let's take the list of positive stereotypes I wrote above about gay men: artsy, friendly, fun, social, well-spoken, well-dressed, well-groomed, fit. That's a pretty tall order for anyone to fill, and the list goes on and on. And that's just focusing on where the "gay" and "man" identities intersect. "Gay" comes with a whole different set of unique stereotypes, and so does "man," all of which these gay men "should" embody.

Thanks to socialized positive stereotypes, every gay man you meet is being evaluated by a ridiculously tough rubric. If he falls short (let's say he's a bit chubby, or antisocial), he's going to disappoint you. Who wants a B- gay friend when there are so many A+ gay men out there? (There aren't, actually, at least not based on the fulfillment of all positive stereotypes.)

Lesson learned: don't be disappointed when your gay friend isn't helpful in picking out a cute outfit the next time you go shopping. (You can call me. I'm not gay, but I'm great at putting together outfits.)

## POSITIVE STEREOTYPES CAN INHIBIT AN INDIVIDUAL'S ABILITY TO PERFORM

You've heard that Asian people are good at math, right? Well, tell an Asian person that right before a math exam and you increase their potential...to bomb it.

Research has shown that perceived positive stereotypes, when brought into the forefront of an individual's mind, can actually make them do worse at the thing they are supposed to be able to do better. In a recent study by Cheryan & Bodenhausen, the researchers made Asian American women explicitly aware of their ethnicity (and the social expectations attached to it) right before testing their math skills and saw that they were more likely to collapse under the pressure and

do poorly on the test.

This is fascinating because it is a quantifiable way of measuring what has been described as a crippling social pressure caused by positive stereotypes. But it's also depressing, because, well, did you read the last paragraph? Read it again. That's why.

Lesson learned: if you find yourself on a game show and a math question comes up, "Dude, you're Asian. Of course you know the answer" might not be the most effective pep talk. (But tag me in. Six words: Math Bowl, eighth grade, first place.)

## POSITIVE STEREOTYPES ARE ALIENATING AND DEPRESSING TO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE SUPPOSED TO POSSESS THEM BUT DON'T

Being a member of a targeted or minority group is potentially alienating, particularly if you're often surrounded by people who don't identify that way. You will often feel alone, not good enough, or looked down upon. This is likely not news to you.

But all of these negative feelings are amplified if you don't even feel like you can connect with your target or minority group membership because you don't live up to the hype. That is, if you already feel like you're alone because you're the only person of your identity in a social setting, you're going to feel even more alone if you don't even feel like you fit in with yourself (or how you imagine you're supposed to be).

I have an example a friend shared with me. Following is his story: *"I'm a black man who grew up surrounded by white people. Growing up, I was the only black person in my neighborhood, my school, and sometimes it felt like the entire town. I never played basketball. I can't rap or dance well—I don't even like hip hop. I'm really good at video games, and I watch baseball. When I got to college, my skin made me too black to fit in with the white kids, and my skills/hobbies weren't black enough to fit in with the black kids."*

This can be applied to just about any group membership that carries with it positive stereotypes (and, as I mentioned before, just about all of them do). It sucks to feel like you're in the minority sometimes. It sucks even more to feel like you're not even good enough for the minority, feeling individually marginalized within an already margin-

alized group.

Lesson learned: befriend people because of who they are as people, not the traits you assume will come with their group memberships. That is, don't try to make friends with a black guy because you need a point guard for your rec league team. (Also, don't call me, unless you want someone to bring orange slices for halftime. Then I'm your guy 'cuz I cut a mean orange slice!)

**DRILL.** Ever been the “victim” of a positive stereotype? Tell your story of that experience, or share your reactions to times this has happened, to a friend who shares the identity that stereotype was based on. See if their experience has been similar or different. Now do the same with someone who doesn't have that identity. Go, go, go!

## SO, WHAT DO WE DO?

I've noticed that we, as a society, have gotten to the point where, in most cases, people aren't flinging around negative stereotypes that often—unless you're hanging out with some good-ol'-fashioned racists. Modern racism is much subtler.

Most people nowadays have no problem casually tossing around positive stereotypes. Even many of the people who are up for leading the fight against prejudice seem to be completely OK with reinforcing positive stereotypes, because, as I said before, “What's the harm?” Well, now you know.

Positive stereotypes are just as dangerous as negative stereotypes. One could argue (as I would) that they are more dangerous, because of how we generally don't think of them as dangerous. They are like cats that are really pissed off all the time for no reason. You look at them and they seem cuddly, so you want to pick them up and hug them. Then bam! Scratchville is founded on your forearm and population growth is booming!

The next time you're hanging with a friend and they say, “Gay men are so fashionable” (heard it twice the week I wrote this, once from a gay man), or anything of the like, let them know that type of belief can be just as damaging as “Gay men are so child molesty” (only heard this once in my life, thankfully). If you don't feel up to that challenge, give


them a copy of this book (passive aggressiveness is a trait that crosses all identity lines and group memberships).

*And hey—free book!*

## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Which of the following best describes you?

- Male
- Female
- Hungry



Finally! Somebody gets me.

## CHAPTER 30

# MAKING FORMS GENDER INCLUSIVE

“MAYBE IT’S WRONG-FOOTED TRYING TO FIT PEOPLE INTO THE WORLD, RATHER THAN TRYING TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE FOR PEOPLE.”

– *Paul McHugh*

A lot of people are unsure of how to make an inclusive gender or sex question on a form and default to “Are you male or female?” Let’s not do that. Read on for some best practices and suggestions to make your forms more gender inclusive.

The first question I would ask in response to this dilemma is “What relevance does gender have to your membership application process?” I’ve often found that the reason people ask for gender is simply because they always have. Is gender truly a relevant and necessary factor in making your selections (or whatever you’re doing with your applications)? In a lot of cases, it’s irrelevant. If it’s irrelevant, don’t ask. Problem solved. If you think you need to ask it, let’s discuss the implications.

Let’s assume you’ve thought through that first question and want to proceed with a gender question on your application.



## SAMPLE OPTIONS / FOODS FOR THOUGHT

Super simple solution, but one that is not easily sortable (in a spreadsheet):

**I identify my gender as...**

\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)

If you don't need gender, but would prefer to have it, here is one way you could do it:

**I identify my gender as...**

- Man
- Woman
- Genderqueer/Non-Binary
- \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)
- Prefer not to disclose

If you absolutely need to know gender, my next easy suggestion would be to simply remove the “not disclose” option:

**I identify my gender as...**

- Man
- Woman
- Genderqueer/Non-Binary
- \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)

If you'd rather not have a fill in the blank because it will complicate things (e.g., make it harder to sort a spreadsheet), but you want to be incredibly inclusive and specific, here's another suggestion:

**I identify my gender as...**

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Genderqueer

- Agender
- Genderless
- Non-binary
- Cis Man
- Trans Woman
- Trans Man
- Trans Woman
- Third Gender
- Two-Spirit
- Bigender
- Genderfluid

And if you'd rather have fewer options, even at the expense of inclusivity/specificity:

**I identify my gender as...**

- Man
- Woman
- Genderqueer/Non-Binary

And finally, if you need to know sex rather than gender (the only examples that pop into my mind for a reason why are medical), here's a way you can do it and still be inclusive:

**I identify my sex as...**

- Female
- Male
- Intersex
- MtF Female
- FtM Male

## A FEW EXPLANATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THESE EXAMPLES

One of the things you'll notice as a common thread throughout all of the questions is the prompt "I identify my..." I recommend this because it begins the action as a form of empowerment, instead of other options I've seen that often take the power to decide away from the individual answering the question.

Also, consider how you are going to be using the data you're collecting before you decide how to collect it. If you're planning on matching people up based on gender (e.g., partners for activities, team relationships), you might ask for the applicants to report their gender but also ask them which gender they would feel most comfortable working with. Then you can use their responses to place them in self-described comfortable partnerships, or choose to challenge them if you would rather see them working outside of their comfort zone.

I'm not a big fan of exhaustive lists when trying to describe identities (see #4) because they are rarely exhaustive. And if you miss one or two, but include fifteen others, those one or two get the sense of super-marginalization. This feeling of super-marginalization gets heavier with each additional identity you add, because you're making it more and more clear that you tried your hardest to include everyone, so you may not think the identity you left out is worth including. But if you're in need of an exhaustive list, both Facebook and OkCupid are great benchmarks for how you can do it, and do it well, in action.

## LET'S EXTRAPOLATE THIS

Of all the chapters in this book, this is likely one of the most concrete. It's helpful in that way, but it can also be limiting. I want to take a moment to explain why I wrote this "how-to" type chapter and to discuss the implications for future considerations, with hope that you will be able to apply what we've done here to future endeavors that may not be directly related to gender questions on applications.

### **Why did I write it?**

This chapter was the result of an email. Someone wrote me and asked, quite frankly, how to do this properly. I replied to the email by posting an article on my site containing most of what you read above.

Since posting it on my site, it has been one of the top visited arti-

cles as a result of Google searches. Searches like “how do I make applications gender neutral?” “ways to be inclusive on application forms,” or “male/female question on applications what’s a better question?” (which, itself, is a pretty terrible way to ask a question) all end up directing people to the article on my site thousands of times a month.

This is incredibly encouraging to me because it represents a shift in culture. I grew up in an extremely checkboxy world. You were male or female; White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, or other. Organizations seem to be making a shift toward removing the stigma of being other. I couldn’t be happier.

### **What does this mean for the future version of yourself?**

What I’m gleaning from all this is that now is a time when rabble-rousing is far less dangerous than it was just ten years ago. You can now speak up if you are a member of an organization (workplace, school, etc.) that is being gender exclusive (e.g., no gender-neutral restrooms, no protection for gender identity in hiring/firing, or, obviously, the “male or female?” question on any forms), and hopefully do so without risking your job.


So speak up. Use this chapter as the starting point for an ongoing discussion in ways you can make your workplace more inclusive of people of all genders and identities.

Are the people making important decisions for the entire organization all of one gender? Change that. It will make the organization stronger, allowing you to better serve your membership and relate to the external community as a whole.

Are you making it clear that your organization is inclusive of people of all gender identities by holding trainings and instituting gender-inclusive policies and procedures? Make sure you are. It will make for a safer space for everyone and will make your organization more attractive to folks who are trans\* or genderqueer.

Can you honestly say that you would feel comfortable doing what you’re doing and being a member of your organization, no matter what identities comprised you?

Don’t stop rabble-rousing until you can.



Uh... do you prefer trans\*? Because I'm not sure how to pronounce the asterisk... or is transvestite better? How about transgender person? Transwoman? Transman? Transsaurus Rex? Kidding. Sorry, I just don't know what to call you. Speed round: transsexual, trans--

Sandi works.

Saaaaaaaaaandi... gotcha.

## CHAPTER 31

# “PARTNER” AND OTHER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

“IT IS ONLY HUMAN SUPREMACY, WHICH IS AS UNACCEPTABLE AS RACISM AND SEXISM, THAT MAKES US AFRAID OF BEING MORE INCLUSIVE.”

– *Ingrid Newkirk*

Using the term “partner” to replace boyfriend (or husband) or girlfriend (or wife) is widely suggested as a means to speak more inclusively, removing a gendered assumption when asking someone about someone they may or may not be in a relationship with.

When I use the term partner around straight people (either when referring to someone I’m dating, or asking about someone they are), it often results in raised eyebrows, and sometimes discomfort. I’m regularly asked, “Why did you say partner instead of girlfriend?” What’s the point?

Let me explain the three main reasons why I have replaced boyfriend/girlfriend/husband/wife with partner, then we’ll expand this conversation out to other gender-inclusive language.

## WHY “PARTNER” IS GREAT: IT’S UNASSUMING, RESPECTFUL, AND ACCESSIBLE

Using the term “partner,” particularly when inquiring about a someone else’s relationship (“How long have you been with your partner?” instead of “How long have you been with your girlfriend?”), avoids the heteronormative assumption that the guy you are asking has a girlfriend/wife or the gal you are asking has a boyfriend/husband. It also avoids the binary assumption that the person they’re dating must be either a guy or a gal.

If a person is straight, there is generally no harm done. A straight man may raise an eyebrow at the term partner instead of hearing you ask about his girlfriend, but that’s usually it<sup>42</sup>. What’s nice is that beyond the no-harm-done measurement, “partner” is a generally respectful way to refer to someone’s significant other.

Oh, and about “significant other.” While that’s a great phrase, and it conveys the same respect as “partner,” and is just as unassuming, it’s a bit less accessible (it’s multiple words, six syllables, it might come off as more intense). Accessibility, here, is based on two big criteria: is it a word or phrase people will understand; and is it easy to use, say, and/or communicate the right intention.

So partner passes all three of these tests.

It’s easy to think of a word that might meet one, or two, but not all three. Sometimes we can’t pass all three, but some language we often use doesn’t even pass one. And, generally speaking, these rules are listed here in their order of importance: first, don’t assume; second, be respectful; third, be accessible.

## APPLYING THESE RULES TO OTHER LANGUAGE

Consider the above checklist when you’re using other language related to gender (or sexuality, or other dimensions of identity, or really any other part of your life). When looking through this lens, we can

---

<sup>42</sup> A really homophobic straight man may get offended at the thought he might be gay, but that’s another issue for another book. Short version: researchers have correlated homophobia in straight men with experiencing sexual arousal to gay sex.

see some problems with other phrases we might often hear:

**“Both genders,” “Both sexes,” and “Opposite sex”** These phrases fail the respectful test (they are marginalizing other genders, and/or intersex people; the last one also doesn’t respect the concept that genders aren’t inherently in opposition), even if they pass the accessible (and sometimes the unassuming) test. *Instead, I would suggest “all genders.”*

**“Affirm their self-identified gender”**. This is a phrase I’ve said countless times, and likely included in this book (oops). Sometimes it’s helpful, but it’s not accessible (lots of jargon), nor is it really respectful (because we often only talk about “self-identified” genders when we’re talking about trans\* people). *Instead, I would suggest “affirm their gender.”*

**“Born a boy” or “born a girl.”** Often used when talking about someone who has transitioned, this phrase passes the accessible test, but fails the respect test (e.g., a transman wasn’t “born a girl,” he was incorrectly and medically labeled as a female at birth). *Instead, using a phrase that sacrifices accessibility for respect, I would suggest “assigned male at birth” or “assigned female at birth.”*

**DRILL**: Think of a few phrases that you often hear being used about gender (or some other dimension of identity) that don’t pass one of these three tests. Then come up with an alternative that does.

## WHY GO THROUGH THE EFFORT?

Being intentional with language takes effort, but it’s worth it for so many reasons! Following are some of the ones that drive me. I’d encourage you to come up with your own, but you’re welcome to share mine as well.

**Inclusive language makes others (hopefully, as close to all others as possible) feel safe around me**

Taking the initiative to use an inclusive word like partner is tantamount to pinning a button to my chest that says “I care.” Regardless



of your personal identities, efforts to use inclusive language rarely go unnoticed by the people you're trying to include.

One of the toughest things about identifying with a targeted group is knowing who you can confide in and who you might want to avoid, at least until the times change a bit. Language is an effective way to inform others, particularly people who don't know you very well, that you fall into the former group, the group that can be trusted.

It's a really simple, non-burdensome way to make a substantial, palpable shift in welcomitude (not a word, but you get it; don't be a jerk) of the communities you relate with. That alone should be enough, but there's more!

**Inclusive language acts to highlight unjust social norms (that might be invisible to others)**

Many people get comfortable in their lives and become more and more oblivious to the simple fact that we do not live in an equitable society where people of all identities have the same access to resources. Inclusive language is a great direct step to creating a safe space for everyone, but it also has a powerful indirect effect.

When I say "all genders," folks' ears sometimes perk up a bit. Occasionally, someone will ask, "Why did you say 'all' genders instead of 'both.' Are there more than two?"

When a question like this is asked, and it's coming from a place of genuine curiosity, an educational opportunity is presented.

A lot of folks think social justice should be left to "social justice people," the same way they think we should leave whatever type of work they do to them and other people who do whatever their job is. What they don't realize is that most "social justice people" are generally "other type of work people" first and foremost who happen to have a passion for promoting social justice. They are generally people who, perhaps like yourself, weren't always aware of these issues, but as they learned more they became more curious, which made them learn more, which made them more curious, which made them...I think my keyboard is broken.

Inspiring curiosity is a great way to turn people who consider themselves "other type of work people" into "social justice people," one issue or topic at a time, until slowly it takes over their entire body like a warm and fuzzy cancer.

So when someone asks you, “Why do you say ‘partner’ instead of boyfriend or girlfriend?” you can respond, “You take the blue pill, the story ends; you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

**And it’s really a small effort in the end, with big potential benefits.**

Language is a habit. Once you break the old habit, a new one forms, and it becomes little to no work. But the outcome can be big for an individual person you include in a conversation who would have otherwise been excluded, for the person who gets the social justice bug.

So, for me, it’s a no-brainer<sup>43</sup>. I’ll put in a little work for a big change in my life.

## RECOGNIZING THAT THIS IS A FOREVER-LEARNING PROCESS

Not to contrast what I said earlier too directly, but if you commit to using inclusive language, part of that commitment is to being ready to learn that what is considered inclusive has shifted. Adapting to changes in norms, and recognizing bias in language that we didn’t know was there before, are both integral parts to bringing everyone into the fold.

As with everything else in this book, The Platinum Rule takes priority. For some people (queer, trans\*, or otherwise) the term “partner” is *not* respectful. If a woman introduces you to her girlfriend, and uses the phrase “this is my girlfriend,” mirror that language back.

That all said, I screw up a lot, and language is always shifting. But when it comes to talking about other people, or using language that implicates others, it’s important to me that I do my best to find how people want me to describe them, and to describe them properly, because, you know, all that stuff I said up there.

---

<sup>43</sup> Sorry to anyone reading who does not have a brain and finds this flippant phrase assuming and disrespectful.



Being Inclusive



Political Correctness

## CHAPTER 32

# POLITICAL CORRECTNESS VS. BEING INCLUSIVE

“THE GREATEST ENEMY OF CLEAR LANGUAGE IS INSINCERITY.”

– *George Orwell*

I would never ask you to be politically correct. I get a lot of flak for some of my graphics and writing because people feel that I’m soap-boxing for political correctness, when that couldn’t be further from the truth. Before you send me an email, tweet, or Facebook message saying, “Sorry if I’m not all ‘PC’...” know this: I’ve never asked you to be politically correct.

I ask you to be inclusive.

### YES, THERE’S A DIFFERENCE

Before you get all hot and bothered, I want you to acknowledge the idea that there may be a significant difference between being politically correct and being inclusive. If you can’t acknowledge this, there’s no point in reading on. Head outside, de-stress, yell obscenities at strangers, then come back when you’re ready.

Ready? OK...go.

#### **What’s the difference?**

Political correctness is externally driven; being inclusive is inter-

nally driven. When people do something they consider to be “politically correct” (using certain terms, acknowledging certain groups, etc.), it often conflicts with their values—they are doing it because they have been told they should, even if they don’t believe it themselves. In contrast, when people do things they consider to be “inclusive,” even if these things are the same as the politically correct things, they never conflict with their values because being inclusive is a value.

### **The Skinny on Political Correctness and Being Inclusive**

Being politically correct is behaving in a way that will gain you approval from others. It makes you look good to those in power (voters, friends, parents, teachers, Mark Zuckerberg) so that they will think favorably of you. It is externally driven, which means it is guided by your understanding of what you think you should do to be viewed positively by others. Often times, political correctness compromises one’s values for “free speech” and equates to censorship, where a person chooses not to say something solely because they’ve been told not to.

Being inclusive is all about being a better person to other people. It is internally driven by your desire to do what is right, or what will result in you showing the most respect you can for the people around you or in your life. Being inclusive is a mind-set. Once you have it in your mind that you want to make others feel more comfortable around you, you’ll find that you’ll be looking for ways to do so. It’s not about compromising your values; it’s about refining and developing values of empathy and concern for the other. You won’t feel uncomfortable censoring yourself from calling something “retarded”; in fact, you’ll feel uncomfortable when you hear others do so.

### LIMITATIONS (YES, THERE ARE ALWAYS THESE)

As with every good rule, there are exceptions, and I want to write about a few of them here before I get more sassy emails. Actually, scratch that—I love sassy emails. Send them my way even after you read this. But for now, let me address a few of the hang-ups that folks who are new to this “being inclusive” thing often get hung up on. In the grand scheme, they’re more hiccups than hang-ups.

**You don't have to be inclusive of everybody**

*"But Sam, what if someone believes that all people of XYZ group should be exterminated. Should I support that person's belief?"*

Depends on which group they are talking about (kidding). No. You obviously should not support that belief. But seriously, it depends on who they are talking about (kidding again).

(Kinda.)

**There is no absolute "right" or "wrong"**

*"I was saying Native American, but then someone who is Native American said she prefers the term American Indian. I told her she was wrong. She should know better."*

Unfortunately, as with most aspects of life, this is one of those gray rather than black and white things. Rely on an internal compass guided by empathy and you'll be off to a good start, and when in doubt, follow the Platinum Rule.

**Nobody's perfect: we're all learning**

*"I accidentally told my friend that soccer is gay, and then when I realized I said it, I yelled, 'I need to stop saying gay. Why am I so retarded?' so whoops. What now? I'm going to hell, aren't I?"*

A professor/mentor of mine once told me it's inevitable that she'll act with hypocrisy, so she sets a goal to only do five hypocritical things each day. I believe similarly.

# **DON'T** eat their faces off!

If they seemed well-intentioned, or even if you're not sure what their intent was, you'll attract more bees with honey than you will by being a jerk. You want more bees, don't you? Also, bees, here, means social justice friends.



...[non-inclusive word]...

Did you seriously just say that? I thought we were friends, but I can tell you that I am absolutely not friends with people who blindly hate an entire group of people, you blind group hater! People die because of language like that. You might as well Kill them yourself. Is that what you want? Do you want to Kill people, people Killer? Oh, I bet that's exactly what you want you blind group hating people Killer person who I thought was once maybe my friend but is certainly NOT! not anymore I'll tell you what.

## CHAPTER 33

# RESPONDING TO NON- INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

“ANGER IS THE ENEMY OF NON-VIOLENCE AND PRIDE IS A MONSTER THAT SWALLOWS IT UP.”

– *Mahatma Gandhi*

Recognizing bigoted language is one thing; being prepared to respond when someone uses it is another altogether. Moving from being a conscious person to a social justice advocate is a shift from mindset to action.

There are, as you could likely guess, good and bad approaches to social justice interventions. In this chapter, we are going to focus on some of the most common of both. Let's do it!

### DON'T EAT THEIR FACES OFF

It's natural to be angry when you hear someone say a bigoted word, but being angry isn't going to help anything.

Even in “this day and age,” there's a decent chance that the offending person doesn't even realize they are offending. This is something that might come as a shock, particularly if you're a socially conscious person, but trust me. True story: I have conversations with folks on a



near-daily basis about how “nigger” is a bad word. Yes, true story<sup>44</sup>.

Now, not everyone who uses bigoted language is going to be in the “doesn’t realize they are doing something bad” category. There are a few other common categories: people who think words don’t hurt and they should be able to say what they want (I call them “sticks and stoners”); people who use bigoted language because they equate it to other swearing or edginess (“not a big dealers”); and, of course, people whose bigoted language reflects their bigoted mindset or perspective (“bigots”). There are others, I’m sure. But I digress.

In all four instances, being angry will only make the situation worse. If someone doesn’t know what they were doing and you get mad at them, it’s like yelling at an infant knocking their bottle over (something that—and it pains me to say this—actually happens). If they don’t think bigoted language is really that bad, your anger will only add to their impression that you’re being melodramatic. And if the person is a big ol’ bigot, trying to eat their face off might result in a dangerous situation for you.

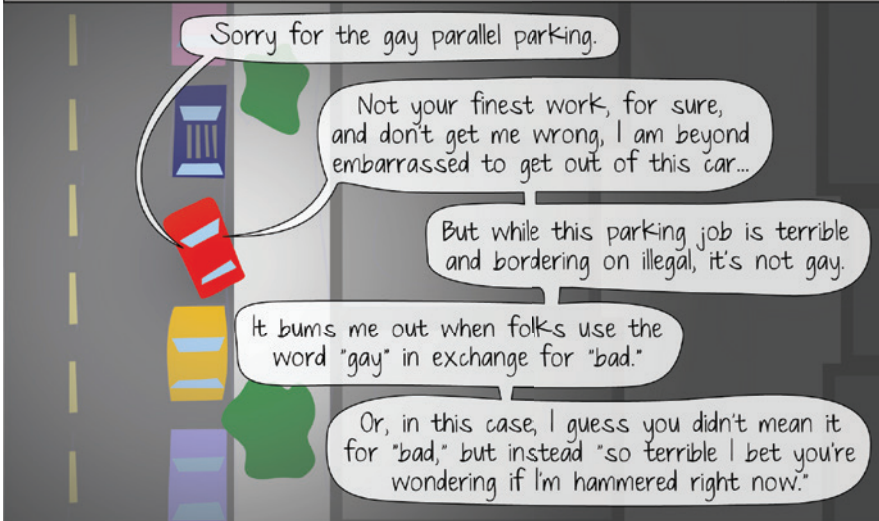
What I’m trying to say is anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering, and we don’t want to lead anyone to the dark side.

---

<sup>44</sup> If you’re thinking, “That’s because you live in Texas,” while you’d be correct to attribute many of the stories of bias from this book to my chosen state of residence, you’d actually be wrong in this case: it’s because I live on the Internet. And not all Texans are bigots.

## **DO** kindly point out their error

Explain that what they said or did wasn't inclusive or good or friendly or correct or, as the social scientists would describe the behavior, "non-douchey." But do it kindly, or run the risk of coming off as a bit pro-douchey yourself.



### DO KINDLY POINT OUT THEIR ERROR

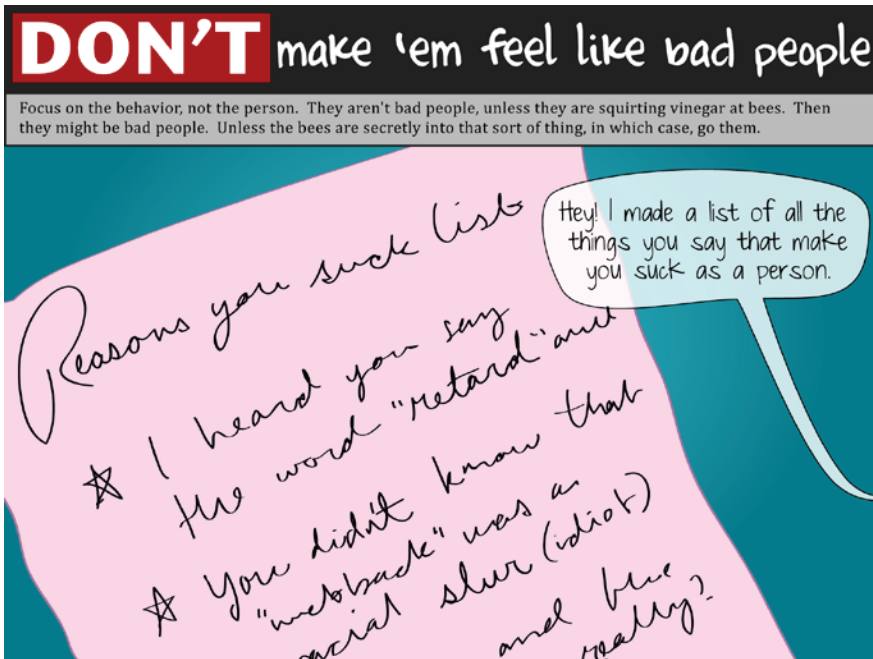
The first step in responding to a person using non-inclusive language is addressing to the person that the language they are using isn't inclusive. This is an extremely important step, and one folks often skip over, but it's helpful because it sets the stage for how we will continue our response with all four of our bigoted language peeps from the first section.

This can play out in a number of ways. I'm a big fan of the Socratic Method, where you use questions to help the person come to a conclusion on their own. For example, if someone calls a transgender person a "hermaphrodite," I might ask, "Why'd you use that term?" This gives me a sense of what type of bigoted language user they might be. In the case of "hermaphrodite," it's often the case that people don't realize it's a non-inclusive term at all. I will then explain the history of the term hermaphrodite, addressing why it's considered to be such a negative word by many people, and ask them, "Do you think it's a term that would make a trans person in your life comfortable if you used it?"

But you can also do this more directly. If someone says "hermaph-

rodite,” you can simply address it by replying, “Hey, not sure if you know this or not—most people don’t—but hermaphrodite is considered to be a stigmatizing term.”

Whatever your approach to address that the term someone is using is bigoted, the one thing I strongly recommend is doing it with as much kindness as you can muster.



## DON'T MAKE THEM FEEL LIKE BAD PEOPLE

Focus on the behavior, not the behavior—or, to use real words, the actions, not the actor. It’s really easy to inadvertently lump the two together, and people will be inclined to feel that you are.

There is a big difference between saying “Hey, this one thing you’re doing is bad” and “Hey, you’re a bad person.” The first one is something that gives a person options, sets the scope of the problem in a surmountable way, and provides them with a clear path if they want to improve. The second one is just mean. Be intentional to show that you are not attacking them personally.

## **DO** provide a correction for the future

Don't leave them flying blind for the future! They are just going to run into the same mistake. Provide a correction, then explain why it's better. Also, did you know that bees literally fly blind? Also, that might be bats.



### DO PROVIDE THEM WITH A CORRECTION FOR THE FUTURE

Following up on our “hermaphrodite” example from earlier, beyond simply addressing that the language a person is using is non-inclusive, you should try to provide them with alternatives for the future.

In the case of “hermaphrodite,” you might explain to someone that a more inclusive term for someone with both female and male sex characteristics would be “intersex.” Or perhaps they are using “hermaphrodite” as a term for someone who is transgender (fairly common), so you might suggest they say “transgender person” or “trans person” if that’s what they mean.

Further, it’s helpful to explain the “why” behind the new term, in addition to giving it to them. “Intersex is better because it is a broad and inclusive term, and doesn’t specifically reference any particular set of sex characteristics. ‘Hermaphrodite,’ on the other hand, describes someone who is 100% male and female, a biological impossibility in humans.” And if they were referring to a transgender person, explain that “hermaphrodite” is a label that reflects a person’s sex, not their gender.

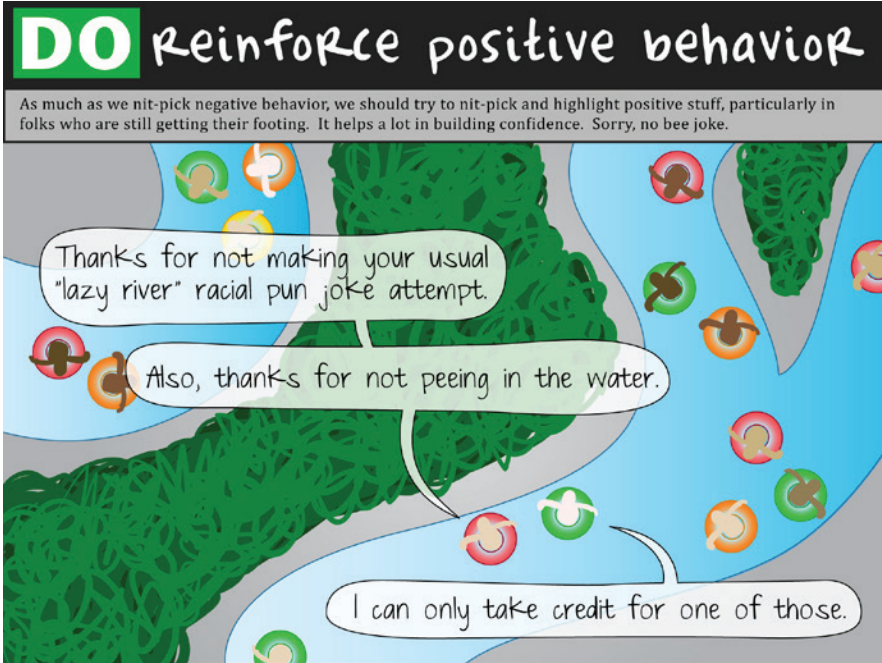


## DON'T REFLECT THEIR BEHAVIOR BACK

This probably sounds childish. I know you are but what am I! But it's a common coping mechanism for people when they are put into these bigoted-language-using situations and they aren't quite prepared for it. It commonly starts with the famous phrase "How would you like it if I called you..."

The problem with reflecting behavior back and starting that line of thought is our goal is to change behavior, not reinforce what's currently happening. We are trying to introduce a new way of thinking for someone, or at least help them see a situation from a different angle.

A good rule to go by is if any of your social justice-oriented conversations start to sound like something two toddlers might be yelling at each other in a sandbox, get out of the sandbox.



## DO REINFORCE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

*Yes! Good job! I like the way you think! Nice fedora!* These are all great things to try to remember to say when someone says something that is inclusive. Other than the last one—that's just a courteous lie.

Social justice people often get a bad rap as being too complainy and not enough congratulatory. I agree that this is often the case, and a lot of good would be done if we did a better job being congratulatory. Encouraging positive behavior can be just as (and more) effective at moving us toward progress as discouraging negative behavior.

Catch people doing something right. It'll make them feel warm and gooey inside, and it will also make it easier for them to swallow the next time you catch them doing something that could use a bit of improvement. They will realize you aren't a jerk who likes telling people what to do, but you're a genuinely motivated social justice superfan and you want the world to be a better place.

You can do this in the moment or you can do it retroactively, by way of my second favorite cookie (topped only by the Genderbread Person, obviously): the Compliment Sandwich.

The Compliment Sandwich is like an Oreo, but instead of cream, you have a corrective behavior, and instead of two cookies, you have affirmations of positive behavior they've done in the past. Start with a cookie ("I appreciate how you're saying "transgender" instead of "transgendered"), then cream 'em ("But it's also generally more inclusive to think of "transgender" as an adjective, not a noun—so "he's a transgender person" not "he's a transgender"), then round it out with another cookie ("And I think it's great that you've been so inquisitive about these things, and that you're looking to learn.")

# CONCLUSION

“DO THE BEST YOU CAN UNTIL YOU KNOW BETTER. THEN WHEN YOU KNOW BETTER, DO BETTER.”

– *Maya Angelou*

Let’s start at the beginning.

Social justice is about equity, and on the path to equity one must confront, and eventually dismantle, oppression. The Golden Rule, our go-to “help others” tool will not be helpful on this path, but the Platinum Rule might serve us well. In addressing oppression, we must be sensitive to the many intersections of identities people occupy. We are not *just* our gender, or our race, or our ethnicity, and so on, so a holistic approach to justice is needed. And, in taking these steps, we must be mindful of the privileges we hold, and how those privileges cloud our perspectives, and inform the ways others receive us (or don’t).

In breaking the gender binary, a necessity to achieving social justice, we seek first to paint a clear picture of gender norms, the foundation upon which gender oppression is built. We can facilitate knowledge of how gender norms show up in our cultures, and how different dimensions of our identities will shape them, by using the Genderbread Person, both as a teaching tool and a tool of self-reflection. For some of us, gender is still visualized as boxes, and for others gender is a spectrum, but we must create an abundance mindset around gender: being more of one thing needn’t require you to be less of another. The “-ness” approach inches us closer to this mindset, and helps us explore the concepts of gender identity, expression, sex, and attraction. It helps us untangle them from one another, and from the harmful ways we’ve been socialized to understand these dimensions of self. In recognizing that there are far more than two gender identities, and the ingredients for as many as there are people in the world, the limitations of a gen-



der binary, and all the baggage that comes with it, present themselves to us. It's possible that we've just been looking at this puzzle the wrong way, and embracing a new way of enacting gender will be necessary for us to create a healthier version of it.

The movement for gender equity that most people are familiar with, while it is certainly not the only movement, has gotten a bad rap. People have weaponized the term feminism, both within the movement and outside of it, and others have shirked it entirely. But there is power in feminism, and for those of us who choose to wear that mantle, we must do so with a shared responsibility for upholding a feminism that is inclusive, intersectional, and identifies the shared suffering caused by patriarchy—a pain disproportionately felt by women compared to men, but also plaguing the bodies of those who are trans and non-binary.

A we step into these visions, attempting to make social and gender justice a reality in our lives and communities, we have a series of maps that can guide us. We know that there are multiple approaches, and that ours may not resonate with others, and others' may not resonate with us, but that a multi-faceted approach to justice is the only approach to justice. Our intentions, though often coming from a compassionate place, aren't enough. It is the outcomes that follow our actions that demand our attention. Language will be key to achieving gender justice, because it not only reflects our world, but shapes it. Things that may seem little (e.g., "positive" stereotypes, binary options on forms, and the phrase "the opposite sex") add up to something big: our entire worldview. Removing harmful, or limiting, or bias language, phrase-by-phrase, will start to create room for a worldview that is just. We'll be met with accusations of political correctness, but we'll know that we're driven by something else, something deeper.

We care. On some level, to some degree, we all care. Our caring is bound up in our capacity to feel compassion, which is tied to social relationships. In the relationship to the "other," to "them," compassion is stunted. In the relationship to one of our own, compassion thrives. It moves us to great feats. It compels us to put another's well-being before our own, to move mountains, to break our backs, and other clichés. When we create a bigger us, and a smaller them, we expand our capacities for compassion.

I envision a world where every individual (of every gender, or irrespective of gender) is healthy, understood, educated, and safe. This book, and all of my work, is a hopeful lily pad toward that world. But lily pads require a leap, and leaps create opportunities to falter. I hope that you will not only leap, but that when you falter, you will recover, learn, and do better.

J.K. Rowling said “Ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure, but the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it.” My definition of failure doesn’t include missteps, because missteps are necessary for success. There are more resources in the appendix than you could likely ever work your way through. And if you exhaust that list, there is a living version of links on the book’s website ([www.guidetogender.com/links](http://www.guidetogender.com/links)). They are presented there for further leaps and falters. As I said earlier, take this conversation beyond you and me. If you read this book, and keep it all to yourself, I have failed you (and “you have failed me for the last time”).

Oh! And I said let’s start at the beginning, but I didn’t. The beginning was me telling you about the time I cleaned bird poop out of Katie Couric’s hair. So, we had just sat down on a park bench in New York City to talk about gender (for what would end up being about four hours non-stop), for a documentary she was filming with National Geographic called “Gender Revolution.” Right as the cameras got set up, and before she asked me her first question—*Blam!*—a bird bombed her golden locks. I am sure I wasn’t the only one who noticed (there were about 20 people on “set,” including several who were there just for hair, make-up, and etc.), but nobody else spoke up. Which is why I broke the bad news, and was shortly (and poorly) attempting to clean bird poop out of Katie Couric’s hair, which was a life experience I never thought I would have. But that’s not *really* the part that I wanted to tell you about.

A few weeks ago, someone was interviewing me, and he knew about *Gender Revolution*. He asked, “Did Katie make you cry?”

“She did,” I replied. Then I told him that at some later point in our conversation, maybe two, maybe three hours in, she asked me what I thought the world as it relates to gender would look like in ten years. In my response to that question, I said something like the following:

Things have moved so fast in the last five years, that it’s possible,

or even probable, that ten years from now we will be looking back at these discussions we're having, the "debates" about bathrooms, and the equal rights amendments that have been contested and defeated, and we'll experience a similar shame as when we reflect on Jim Crow, or Japanese-American internment camps, or pre-suffrage era voting laws. We'll know that we *were* wrong, and we *did* wrong, to bring the subject of someone's very existence up for debate.

As kitschy as it feels to say it, we genuinely are in the middle of a gender revolution. We need all hands on deck, and I hope this handbook served you, and continues to serve you, well.

1 planet.

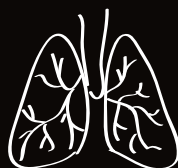
7 continents.

7 billion individuals.

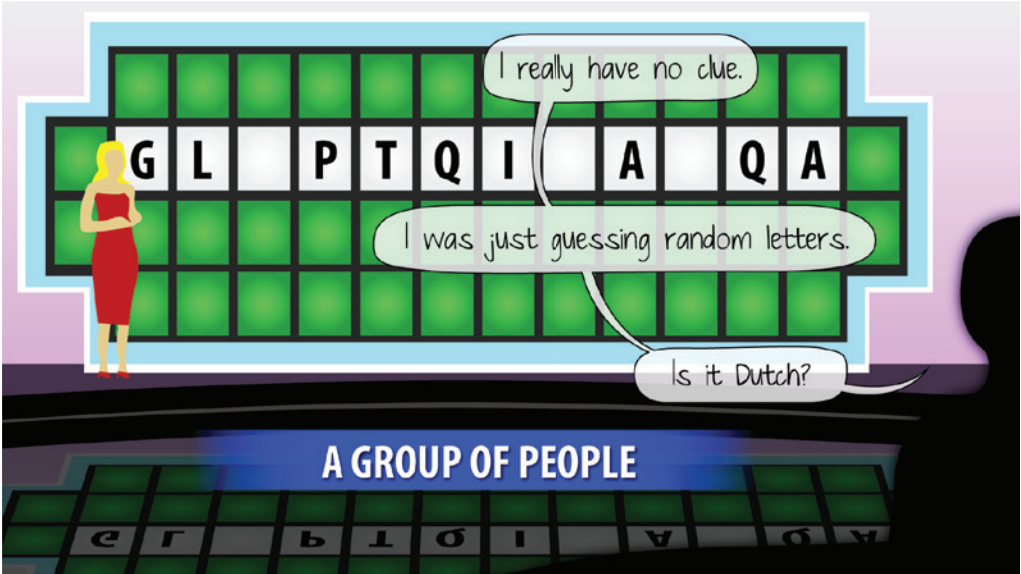


# APPENDIX

THE MORE YOU KNOW, THE MORE YOU KNOW. ADDITIONAL BITS  
AND PIECES THAT HELP COMPLETE THIS GENDER PUZZLE.



A. GLOSSARY	257
B. TRANS* ASTERISK	275
C. RECOMMENDED READING & WORKS REFERENCED	279
D. HEARTFELT THANKS	287
E. CUT-OUTS	290



I really have no clue.

I was just guessing random letters.

Is it Dutch?

**A GROUP OF PEOPLE**

e l b t o i a d v

## APPENDIX A

# GLOSSARY

“I’M VERY SENSITIVE TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. I STUDIED THE DICTIONARY OBSESSIVELY WHEN I WAS A KID AND COLLECT OLD DICTIONARIES. WORDS, I THINK, ARE VERY POWERFUL AND THEY CONVEY AN INTENTION.”

– *Drew Barrymore*

This list is neither comprehensive nor inviolable, but it’s a work in progress toward those goals. With identity terms, trust the person who is using the term and their definition of it above any dictionary. These definitions are the creation of a cultural commons: emails, on-line discussions, and in-person chats, with the initial curation done by me, then growing into a collaboration between Meg Bolger and me at [TheSafeZoneProject.com](http://TheSafeZoneProject.com).

**advocate** – **1 noun** : a person who actively works to end intolerance, educate others, and support social equity for a marginalized group. **2 verb** : to actively support/plea in favor of a particular cause, the action of working to end intolerance, educating others, etc.

**agender** – *adj.* : a person with no (or very little) connection to the traditional system of gender, no personal alignment with the concepts of either man or woman, and/or someone who sees themselves as existing without gender. Sometimes called gender neutrois, gender neutral, or genderless.



**ally** /“al-lie”/ – *noun* : a (typically straight and/or cisgender) person who supports and respects members of the LGBTQ community. We consider people to be active allies who take action in support and respect.

“Coming out” as an ally is when you reveal (or take an action that reveals) your support of the LGBTQ community. Being an active supporter can, at times, be stigmatizing, though it is not usually recognized, many allies go through a “coming out process” of their own.

**androgyny; androgynous** /“an-jrah-jun-ee”; “an-jrah-jun-uss”/ – *adj.* : a gender expression that has elements of both masculinity and femininity.

**androsexual; androphilic** – *adj.* : being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to some men, males, and/or masculinity.

**aromantic** – *adj.* : experiencing little or no romantic attraction to others and/or has a lack of interest in romantic relationships/behavior. Aromanticism exists on a continuum from people who experience no romantic attraction nor have any desire for romantic activities, to those who experience low levels, or romantic attraction only under specific conditions; and many of these different places on the continuum have their own identity labels (see *demiromantic*). Sometimes abbreviated to “aro” (pronounced like “arrow”).

**asexual** – *adj.* : experiencing little or no sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behavior. Asexuality exists on a continuum from people who experience no sexual attraction nor have any desire for sex, to those who experience low levels, or sexual attraction only under specific conditions; and many of these different places on the continuum have their own identity labels (see *demisexual*). Sometimes abbreviated to “ace.”

Asexuality is different from celibacy in that it is a sexual orientation whereas celibacy is an abstaining from a certain action.

Not all asexual people are aromantic.

**bigender** – *adj.* : a person who fluctuates between traditionally “woman” and “man” gender-based behavior and identities, identifying with both genders (or sometimes a third gender in place of man or woman).

**bicurious** – *adj.* : a curiosity about experiencing attraction to some people of the same gender (similar to questioning), in addition to attraction to those of a different gender.

**biological sex** – *noun* : a medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics that are used to classify an individual as female or male or intersex. Often referred to as simply “sex,” “physical sex,” “anatomical sex,” or specifically as “sex assigned at birth.”

Often seen as a binary but as there are many combinations of chromosomes, hormones, and primary/secondary sex characteristics, it’s more accurate to view this as a spectrum (which is more inclusive of intersex people as well as trans\*-identified people).

Is commonly conflated with gender.

**biphobia** – *noun* : a range of negative attitudes (e.g., fear, anger, intolerance, invisibility, resentment, erasure, or discomfort) that one may have or express towards bisexual individuals. Biphobia can come from and be seen within the LGBTQ community as well as straight society. **Biphobic** – *adj.* : a word used to describe an individual who harbors some elements of this range of negative attitudes towards bisexual people.

Example of bi-invisibility and bi-erasure would be the assumption that any man in a relationship with a woman is straight or anyone dating someone of the same gender means you’re gay. In neither case do we assume anyone could be bisexual.

Important to recognize that many of our “stereotypes” of bisexual people (e.g., they’re overly sexual, greedy, it’s just a phase) have harmful and stigmatizing effects (and that not only straight people but also many queer individuals harbor these beliefs too).

**bisexual** – *adj.* : **1** having the capacity to be emotionally, physically,

and/or sexually attracted to some men and women. **2** having the capacity to be emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to some people of one's gender and another gender. This attraction does not have to be equally split or indicate a level of interest that is the same across the genders an individual may be attracted to.

Can simply be shortened to "bi."

Many people who recognize the limitations of a binary understanding of gender may still use the word bisexual as their sexual orientation label, this is often because many people are familiar with the term bisexual (while less are familiar to the term pansexual).

**butch** – *noun & adj.* : a person who identifies themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally, or emotionally. 'Butch' is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but is also be claimed as an affirmative identity label.

**cisgender** /"siss-jendur"/ – *adj.* : a person whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity align (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth and identifies as a man). A simple way to think about it is if a person is not transgender, they are cisgender. The word cisgender can also be shortened to "cis."

"Cis" is a latin prefix that means "on the same side [as]" or "on this side [of]."

**cissexism** – *noun* : behavior that grants preferential treatment to cisgender people, reinforces the idea that being cisgender is somehow better or more "right" than being transgender, and/or makes other genders invisible.

**cisnormativity** – *noun* : the assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is cisgender, and that cisgender identities are superior to trans\* identities or people. Leads to invisibility of non-cisgender identities.

**closeted** – *adj.* : an individual who is not open to themselves or others about their (queer) sexuality or gender identity. This may be by choice and/or for other reasons such as fear for one's safety,

peer or family rejection, or disapproval and/or loss of housing, job, etc. Also known as being “in the closet.” When someone chooses to break this silence they “come out” of the closet. See *coming out*.

**coming out** – **1** the process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one’s own sexuality or gender identity (to “come out” to oneself). **2** The process by which one shares one’s sexuality or gender identity with others (to “come out” to friends, etc.).

This is a continual, life-long process. Every day, all the time, one has to evaluate and re-evaluate who they are comfortable coming out to, if it is safe, and what the consequences might be.

**constellation** – *noun* : a way to describe the arrangement or structure of a polyamorous relationship. Also called a *polycule*.

**cross-dresser** – *noun* : someone who wears clothes of another gender/sex.

**demioromantic** – *adj.* : little or no capacity to experience romantic attraction until a strong sexual or emotional connection is formed with another individual, often within a sexual relationship.

**demisexual** – *adj.* : little or no capacity to experience sexual attraction until a strong romantic or emotional connection is formed with another individual, often within a romantic relationship.

**down low** – *adj.* : typically referring to men who identify as straight but who secretly have sex with men. Down low (or DL) originated in, and is most commonly used by communities of color.

**drag king** – *noun* : someone who performs masculinity.

**drag queen** – *noun* : someone who performs femininity.

**dyke** – *noun* : referring to a masculine presenting lesbian. While often used derogatorily, it can be adopted affirmatively by many lesbians (both more masculine and more feminine presenting lesbians) as a positive self-identity term.

**emotional attraction** – *noun* : a capacity that evokes the want to engage in emotional intimate behavior (e.g., sharing, confiding, trusting, interdepending), experienced in varying degrees (from

little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and/or spiritual attraction.

**fag(got)** – *noun* : derogatory term referring to a gay person, or someone perceived as queer. Occasionally used as a self-identifying affirming term by some gay men, at times in the shortened form ‘fag’.

**feminine-of-center; masculine-of-center** – *adj.* : a word that indicates a range of terms of gender identity and gender presentation for folks who present, understand themselves, and/or relate to others in a more feminine/masculine way, but don’t necessarily identify as women/men. Feminine-of-center individuals may also identify as femme, submissive, transfeminine, etc.; masculine-of-center individuals may also often identify as butch, stud, aggressive, boi, transmasculine, etc.

**feminine-presenting; masculine-presenting** – *adj.* : a way to describe someone who expresses gender in a more feminine/masculine way. Often confused with feminine-of-center/masculine-of-center, which generally include a focus on identity as well as expression.

**femme** – *noun & adj.* : someone who identifies themselves as feminine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. Often used to refer to a feminine-presenting queer woman.

**fluid(ity)** – *adj.* : generally with another term attached, like gender-fluid or fluid-sexuality, fluid(ity) describes an identity that may change or shift over time between or within the mix of the options available (e.g., man and woman, bi and straight).

**FtM; MtF** – abbreviation : female-to-male transgender or transsexual person; male-to-female transgender or transsexual person. Sometimes abbreviated F2M and M2F.

**gay** – *adj.* : **1** individuals who are primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex and/or gender. Can be used to refer to men who are attracted to other men, and can be applied to women as well. **2** An umbrella term used to refer to the queer community as a whole, or as an individual iden-

tity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual.

“Gay” is a word that’s had many different meanings throughout time. In the 12th century it meant “happy,” in the 17th century it was more commonly used to mean “immoral” (describing a loose and pleasure-seeking person), and by the 19th it meant a female prostitute (and a “gay man” was a guy who had sex with female prostitutes a lot). It wasn’t until the 20th century that it started to mean what it means today. Interesting, right?

**gender binary** – *noun* : the idea that there are only two genders and that every person is one of those two.

**gender expression** – *noun* : the external display of one’s gender, through a combination of dress, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally made sense of on scales of masculinity and femininity. Also referred to as “gender presentation.”

**genderfluid**– *adj.* : a gender identity best described as a dynamic mix of boy and girl. A person who is gender fluid may always feel like a mix of the two traditional genders, but may feel more man some days, and more woman other days.

**gender identity** – *noun* : the internal perception of an one’s gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don’t align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, trans\*, and more. Often confused with biological sex, or sex assigned at birth.

**gender neutrois** – *adj.* : see *agender*.

**gender non-conforming** – *adj.* : **1** a gender expression descriptor that indicates a non-traditional gender presentation (masculine woman or feminine man). **2** a gender identity label that indicates a person who identifies outside of the gender binary. Often abbreviated as “GNC.”

**gender normative; gender straight** – *adj.* : someone whose gender presentation, whether by nature or by choice, conforms with society’s gender-based expectations.

**genderqueer** – *adj.* : **1** a gender identity label often used by people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman. **2** an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or non-binary identities (e.g., agender, bigender, genderfluid): **2a** may combine aspects of man and woman and other identities (bigender, pangender); **2b** not having a gender or identifying with a gender (genderless, agender); **2c** moving between genders (genderfluid); **2d** third gender or other-gendered; **2e** those who do not place a name on their gender, having an overlap of, or blurred lines between, gender identity and sexual orientation.

**gender variant** – *adj.* : someone who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society (e.g. transgender, transsexual, intersex, gender-queer, cross-dresser, etc.).

**gynesexual; gynephilic** /“guy-nuh-seks-shu-uhl”/ – *adj.* : being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to some woman, females, and/or femininity.

**hermaphrodite** – *noun* : an outdated medical term previously used to refer to someone who was born with some combination of typically-male and typically-female sex characteristics. It’s considered stigmatizing and inaccurate. See *intersex*.

**heteronormativity** – *noun* : the assumption, in individuals and/or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities. Leads to invisibility and stigmatizing of other sexualities: when learning a woman is married, asking her what her husband’s name is. Heteronormativity also leads us to assume that only masculine men and feminine women are straight.

**heterosexism** – *noun* : behavior that grants preferential treatment to heterosexual people, reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is somehow better or more “right” than queerness, and/or makes other sexualities invisible.

**heterosexual** – *adj.* : see *straight*.

**homophobia** – *noun* : an umbrella term for a range of negative

attitudes (e.g., fear, anger, intolerance, resentment, erasure, or discomfort) that one may have towards members of LGBTQ community. The term can also connote a fear, disgust, or dislike of being perceived as LGBTQ. **Homophobic** – *adj.* : a word used to describe an individual who harbors some elements of this range of negative attitudes towards gay people.

The term can be extended to bisexual and transgender people as well; however, the terms biphobia and transphobia are used to emphasize the specific biases against individuals of bisexual and transgender communities.

May be experienced inwardly by someone who identifies as queer (internalized homophobia).

**homosexual** – *adj.* & *noun* : a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex/gender. This [medical] term is considered stigmatizing (particularly as a noun) due to its history as a category of mental illness, and is discouraged for common use (use gay or lesbian instead).

Until 1973 “Homosexuality” was classified as a mental disorder in the DSM Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This is just one of the reasons that there are such heavy negative and clinical connotations with this term.

There are different connotations to the word homosexual than there are to gay/lesbian individuals for both straight and queer people. There was a study done prior to the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell about people’s feelings towards open queer service members. When asked, “How do you feel about open gay and lesbian service members,” there was about 65% support (at the time).” When the question was changed to, “How do you feel about open homosexual service members,” to the same demographic of people being asked, support drops over 20%.

**intersex** – *adj.* : term for a combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals that differs from the two expected patterns of male or female. Formerly known as hermaphrodite (or hermaphroditic), but these terms are now outdat-



ed and derogatory.

Often seen as a problematic condition when babies or young children are identified as intersex, it was for a long time considered an “emergency” and something that doctors moved to “fix” right away in a newborn child. There has been increasing advocacy and awareness brought to this issue, and many individuals advocate that intersex individuals should be allowed to remain intersex past infancy and not to treat the condition as an issue or medical emergency.

**lesbian** – *noun & adj.* : women who have the capacity to be attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other women.

The term lesbian is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos and as such is sometimes considered a Eurocentric category that does not necessarily represent the identities of Black women and other non-European ethnic groups.

While many women use the term lesbian, many women also will describe themselves as gay; this is a personal choice. Many prefer the term gay because it is most often used as an adjective.

**LGBTQ; GSM; DSG** – abbreviations : shorthand or umbrella terms for all folks who have a non-normative (or queer) gender or sexuality, there are many different initialisms people prefer. LGBTQ is Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer and/or Questioning (sometimes people add a + at the end in an effort to be more inclusive); GSM is Gender and Sexual Minorities; DSG is Diverse Sexualities and Genders. Other options include the initialism GLBT or LGBT and the acronym QUILTBAG (Queer [or Questioning] Undecided Intersex Lesbian Trans\* Bisexual Asexual [or Allied] and Gay [or Genderqueer]).

There is no “correct” initialism or acronym. What is preferred varies by person, region, and often evolves over time.

The efforts to represent more and more identities led to some folks describe the ever-lengthening initialism as “Alphabet Soup,” which was part of the impetus for GSM and DSG.

**lipstick lesbian** – *noun* : Usually refers to a lesbian with a feminine gender expression. Can be used in a positive or a derogatory way. Is sometimes also used to refer to a lesbian who is assumed to be (or passes for) straight.

**metrosexual** – *noun & adj.* : a man with a strong aesthetic sense who spends more time, energy, or money on his appearance and grooming than is considered gender normative.

MSM / WSW – abbreviations : men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women, to distinguish sexual behaviors from sexual identities: because a man is straight, it doesn't mean he's not having sex with men. Often used in the field of HIV/Aids education, prevention, and treatment.

**Mx.** / “mix” or “schwa” / – an honorific (e.g. Mr., Ms., Mrs., etc.) that is gender neutral. It is often the option of choice for folks who do not identify within the gender binary: Mx. Smith is a great teacher.

**outing** – *verb* : involuntary or unwanted disclosure of another person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status.

**pansexual** – *adj.* : a person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions. Often shortened to “pan.”

**passing** – *adj. & verb* : **1** trans\* people being accepted as, or able to “pass for,” a member of their self-identified gender identity (regardless of sex assigned at birth) without being identified as trans\*. **2** An LGB/queer individual who is believed to be or perceived as straight.

Passing is a controversial term because it often is focusing on the person who is observing or interacting with the individual who is “passing” and puts the power/authority in observer rather than giving agency to the individual.

While some people are looking to “pass,” or, perhaps more accurately, be accepted for the identity that they feel most aligns with who they are, “passing” is not always a positive experience.

Some individuals experience feelings of being invisible to or a loss of their own community when they are perceived to be part of the dominant group.

**PGPs** – abbreviation : preferred gender pronouns. Often used during introductions; becoming more common in educational institutions. Many suggest removing the “preferred,” because it indicates flexibility and/or the power for the speaker to decide which pronouns to use for someone else.

**polyamory; polyamorous** – *noun; adj.* refers to the practice of, desire to, or orientation towards having ethically, honest, and consensual non-monogamous relationships (i.e. relationships that may include multiple partners).

This may include open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves more than two people being in romantic and/or sexual relationships which is not open to additional partners), amongst many other set-ups.

**queer** – *adj.* : used as an umbrella term to describe individuals who don’t identify as straight. Also used to describe people who have a non-normative gender identity, or as a political affiliation. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, it is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ community. The term “queer” can often be used interchangeably with LGBTQ (e.g., “queer folks” instead of “LGBTQ folks”).

If a person tells you they are not comfortable with you referring to them as queer, don’t. Always respect an individual’s preferences when it comes to identity labels, particularly ones with troubled histories like this.

Use the word queer only if you are comfortable explaining to others what it means, because some people feel uncomfortable with the word, it is best to know/feel comfortable explaining why you choose to use it if someone inquires.

**questioning** – *verb & adj.* an individual who or time when someone is unsure about or exploring their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

**QPOC; QTPOC** – abbreviation : initialisms that stand for queer people of color and queer and/or trans people of color.

**romantic attraction** – *noun* : a capacity that evokes the want to engage in romantic intimate behavior (e.g., dating, relationships, marriage), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with sexual attraction, emotional attraction, and/or spiritual attraction.

**same gender loving (SGL)** – *adj.* : sometimes used by some members of the African-American or Black community to express a non-straight sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of European descent.

**sex assigned at birth (SAAB)** – abbreviation : a phrase used to intentionally recognize a person's assigned sex (not gender identity). Sometimes called “designated sex at birth” (DSAB) or “sex coercively assigned at birth” (SCAB), or specifically used as “assigned male at birth” (AMAB) or “assigned female at birth” (AFAB): Jenny was assigned male at birth, but identifies as a woman.

This phrasing is recommended over phrases such as “she was born a boy.”

**sexual attraction** – *noun* : a capacity that evokes the want to engage in physically intimate behavior (e.g., kissing, touching, intercourse), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with romantic attraction, emotional attraction, and/or spiritual attraction.

**sexual orientation** – *noun* : the type of sexual, romantic, emotional/spiritual attraction one has the capacity to feel for some others, generally labeled based on the gender relationship between the person and the people they are attracted to. Often confused with sexual preference.

**sexual preference** – *noun* : the types of sexual intercourse, stimulation, and gratification one likes to receive and participate in. Generally, when this term is used, it is being mistakenly interchanged with “sexual orientation,” creating an illusion that one has a choice (or “preference”) in who they are attracted to.

**sex reassignment surgery (SRS)** – *noun* : used by some medical professionals to refer to a group of surgical options that alter a person’s biological sex. “Gender confirmation surgery” is considered by many to be a more affirming term. In most cases, one or multiple surgeries are required to achieve legal recognition of gender variance. Some refer to different surgical procedures as “top” surgery and “bottom” surgery to discuss what type of surgery they are having without having to be more explicit.

**skoliosexual** – *adj.* : being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to some genderqueer, transgender, transsexual, and/or non-binary people.

**spiritual attraction** – *noun* : a capacity that evokes the want to engage in intimate behavior based on one’s experience with, interpretation of, or belief in the supernatural (e.g., religious teachings, messages from a deity), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and/or emotional attraction.

**stealth** – *adj.* : a trans person who is not “out” as trans, and is perceived/known by others as cisgender.

**straight** – *adj.* : a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to some people of a different gender. A common colloquial term for “heterosexual.”

**stud** – *noun* : most commonly used to indicate a Black/African-American and/or Latina masculine lesbian/queer woman. Also known as ‘butch’ or ‘aggressive’.

**third gender** – *noun* : for a person who does not identify with either man or woman, but identifies with another gender. This gender category is used by societies that recognize three or more genders, both contemporary and historic, and is also a conceptual term meaning different things to different people who use it, as a way to move beyond the gender binary.

**top surgery** – *noun* : this term refers to surgery for the construction of a male-type chest or breast augmentation for a female-type chest.

**trans\*** – *adj.* : An umbrella term covering a range of identities that transgress socially defined gender norms. Trans with an asterisk is often used in written forms (not spoken) to indicate that you are referring to the larger group nature of the term, and specifically including non-binary identities, as well as transgender men (transmen) and transgender women (transwomen).

**transgender** – *adj.* : A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that assigned at birth based on anatomical sex.

A trans\* person can be straight, gay, bisexual, queer, or any other sexual orientation.

Because sexuality labels (e.g., gay, straight, bi) are generally based on the relationship between the person's gender and the genders they are attracted to, trans\* sexuality can be defined in a couple of ways. Some people may choose to self-identify as straight, gay, bi, lesbian, or pansexual (or others, using their gender identity as a basis), or they might describe their sexuality using other-focused terms like gynosexual, androsexual, or skoliosexual (see full list for definitions for these terms).

**transition; transitioning** – *noun; verb* : this term is primarily used to refer to the process a trans\* person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

May also refer to the social and legal steps that a trans\* person may undertake in order to live in line with their gender identity.

**transman; transwoman** – *noun* : An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transgender people or transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as assigned female sex at birth. (sometimes referred to as transguy). **2** Identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female transsexuals or transgender people to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as assigned male sex at birth.

**transphobia** – *noun* : the fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of trans\* people, the trans\* community, or gender ambiguity.

Transphobia can be seen within the queer community, as well as in general society. **Transphobic** – *adj.* : a word used to describe an individual who harbors some elements of this range of negative attitudes, thoughts, intents, towards trans\* people.

Transphobia is often manifested in violent and deadly means. Trans\* people are far more likely than their cisgender peers (including LGB people) to be the victims of violent crimes and murder.

**transsexual** – *noun & adj.* : a person who identifies psychologically as a gender/sex other than the one to which they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals often wish to transform their bodies hormonally and surgically to match their inner sense of gender/sex.

**transvestite** – *noun* : a person who dresses as the binary opposite gender expression (“cross-dresses”) for any one of many reasons, including relaxation, fun, and sexual gratification (often called a “cross-dresser,” and should not be confused with transsexual).

**two-spirit** – *noun* : is an umbrella term traditionally (and exclusively) used by Native American people to recognize individuals who possess qualities or fulfill roles of both genders (if you’re non-Native, you should not use this term).

**ze; zir** /“zee”; “zerr” or “zeer”/ – pronouns that are gender neutral and used by some trans\* people. They replace “he” or “she” and “his” or “hers” respectively. Alternatively, some people who are not comfortable or do not embrace “he” or “she” use the pronoun “they” as a gender neutral singular pronoun.





# TRANS\*

I recently adopted the term “trans\*” (with the asterisk) in my writing. I think you should, too. If it’s new to you, let me help clarify. Trans\* is one word for a variety of identities that are incredibly diverse, but share one simple, common denominator: a trans\* person is not your traditional cisgender wo/man. Beyond that, there is a lot of variation.

## WHAT DOES THE \* STAND FOR?

\*TRANSGENDER

\*TRANSSEXUAL \*TRANSVESTITE

\*GENDERQUEER

\*GENDERFLUID \*NON-BINARY \*GENDERF\*CK

\*GENDERLESS

\*AGENDER \*NON-GENDERED

\*THIRD GENDER

\*TWO-SPIRIT \*BIGENDER

\*TRANS MAN

\*TRANS WOMAN

## APPENDIX B

# TRANS\* ASTERISK

“IF YOU CAN’T BE KIND, AT LEAST BE VAGUE.”

– *Judith Manners*

You’ve likely noticed my frequent use of “trans\*” throughout the book, instead of “trans” or “transgender.” What is this? Why do I do it? What does it all mean?

Allow me to explain.

### AN UMBRELLA OF UMBRELLAS

Trans\* is an umbrella term that refers to all of the non-binary identities within the gender identity spectrum. There’s a ton of diversity there, but we often group them all together (e.g., when we say “trans\* issues”).

Trans (without the asterisk) is often considered to be an umbrella term as well, but it’s also often used as a general term for trans men and trans women. Transgender, similarly, is considered by many to be an umbrella term, but there are individuals who identify solely as “transgender,” so that could lead to some confusion when using “transgender” to refer to all non-binary gender identities.

The asterisk makes special note in an effort to include all non-binary gender identities, including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, neutrois, genderfuck, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third gender, two-spirit, bigender, and trans man and trans woman.

## WHY AN ASTERISK?

The origin behind the asterisk, as I understand it, is a bit computer geeky. When you add an asterisk to the end of a search term, you're telling your computer to search for whatever you typed, plus any characters after (e.g., [search term]\*[extra letters], or trans\*[-gender, -queer, -sexual, etc.]). The idea was to include trans and other identities related to trans, in the most technically awesome way. I heart geekdom.

The asterisk is also a great way to denote this specific usage because in writing asterisks usually signify some fine print or exception to what you're saying. For example, if you were to say free\*, people would immediately know you don't mean whatever you're talking about is necessarily free, and that some conditions may need to be satisfied. Trans\* catches the eye in a similar way, and gives the reader pause to consider the implications of the asterisk.

The pause evoked by the asterisk is a great way to evoke the mindfulness of the comprehensive nature with which you are using that term. While "transgender" or "trans" might accomplish inclusivity for some, others may think you are talking about those individual identities respectively, carrying in their own predispositions as they read whatever you're writing.

## TO \* OR NOT TO \*

There is a debate on the interwebs about whether the asterisk is helping or hurting, necessary or superfluous, helpful or redundant, Team Jacob or Team Edward. I'm on the side that says it's helpful (obviously), and Team Edward (obviously), but I also want to give you a glimpse of some of the arguments against it to best prepare you to make your own decision to asterisk or not to asterisk.


One of the main arguments against the asterisk (and the one I find to be the weightiest) is that it leads to further segmentation of the community, which hinders progress and unity. Adding the asterisk creates a separate term, which means something different from transgender or trans, and, in turn, creates another group of people that folks not familiar with transgender people or issues need to learn about.

But there are other arguments as well. One is that it's unnecessary

to use the asterisk, stating that “trans” was already meant to be an all-encompassing term. Or that the asterisk leads to confusion in print because it generally signifies a footnote. Some people are more fond of a hyphen (“trans-”) because they think it better demonstrates the idea of it being one beginning for many endings. And there are some folks who just plain think it’s ugly.

While I encourage the use of the asterisk, the choice to use or not use it (as with all of my recommendations) is entirely yours\*.

*\*Prices and participation may vary.*



Bookworm? Puh-lease. I only read 'zines.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go reproduce asexually. Mating with partners is so 2012.

## APPENDIX C

# RECOMMENDED READING & WORKS REFERENCED

“ALWAYS READ SOMETHING THAT WILL MAKE YOU LOOK GOOD IF YOU DIE IN THE MIDDLE OF IT.”

– P.J. O’Rourke

Throughout the book, I mentioned a lot of other folks’ work I’ve enjoyed, research I’ve found to be helpful, and other works that were worth mentioning. Beyond that, there is a lot of work that I don’t explicitly reference but has shaped my lens and helped me form my perspective on all of this gender stuff. This appendix is a collection of many of these things for your future learning and lens shaping, and I will keep a running reading list going on the website [www.guidetogender.com/links](http://www.guidetogender.com/links) if you’re looking for more.

## RECOMMENDED READING & INFLUENCES

### **General Books & Articles**

Angier, Natalie. *Woman: an intimate geography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999.

Bernburg, Jön G. and Krohn, Marvin D. *Labeling, life chances, and adult crime: The direct and indirect effects of official intervention*

- in adolescence on crime in early adulthood. *Criminology*, 2003.
- Brafman, Ori, and Rom Brafman. *Sway: the irresistible pull of irrational behavior*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Cheryan, Sapna, and Bodenhausen, Galen V. When positive stereotypes threaten intellectual performance: The psychological hazards of “model minority” status. *American Psychological Society*, 2000.
- Crenshaw, K. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford law review*, 1241-1299, 1991.
- Dreger, Alice. *Galileo’s Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and One Scholar’s Search for Justice*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- Ehrensaft, Diane. *Gender born, gender made: raising healthy gender-nonconforming children*. New York: Experiment, 2011.
- Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002.
- Fine, Cordelia. *Delusions of gender: how our minds, society, and neurosexism create difference*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a queer time and place: transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Jordan-Young, Rebecca M. “Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences.” Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Kinsey, Alfred C., Wardell Baxter Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin. *Sexual behavior in the human male*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1948.
- McIntosh, Peggy. *White privilege and male privilege: a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, Center for Research

on Women, 1988.

Reason, Robert D.. Developing social justice allies. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Serano, Julia. Whipping girl: a transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.

Simpson, Mark. Male impersonators: men performing masculinity. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994.

Steinem, Gloria. Outrageous acts and everyday rebellions. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983.

Sterling, Anne. Sexing the body: gender politics and the construction of sexuality. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000.

Tannen, Deborah. Gender and conversational interaction. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Tannen, Deborah. Gender and discourse. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

### **Interwebz**

Everyday Feminism. Daily articles that help readers apply intersectional feminism in their lives. <http://everydayfeminism.com>

FacilitatingXYZ. A free online resource for all facilitators, with videos, articles, book recommendations, and downloadable tools. <http://facilitating.xyz>

It's Pronounced Metrosexual. Articles and graphics about gender, sexuality, and social justice. <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com>

The Safe Zone Project. An online resource for creating powerful, effective LGBTQ education and ally training workshops. <http://thesafezoneproject.com>

Transwhat? A collection of how-tos and educational pieces for would-be trans allies. <http://transwhat.org/>

WikiQueer. Like Wikipedia, but just for queer stuff! <http://www.wikiqueer.org/>



## SPECIFIC WORKS REFERENCED

Throughout the book, I made reference to specific works, publications, concepts, or data. Sometimes I explicitly mentioned an author or the name of the text, and sometimes I didn't. For the sake of legibility and expediency, and because in-text citations are often distracting (or connote more of an academic intensity, instead of a work directed at the lay person, as this book is), I've collected referenced works here for your further perusal. They are organized by chapter, and displayed in order of when they were referenced.

### **Chapter 5: Corruption of the Golden Rule**

Poster with different versions of the golden rule: <https://www.scarboromissions.ca/product/golden-rule-across-the-worlds-religions>

### **Chapter 7: Checking Your Privilege**

Peggy McIntosh White Privilege Papers: <https://nationalseedproject.org/peggy-mcintosh-s-white-privilege-papers>

Brené Brown, for learning about shame vs. guilt, start here: [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)

1,138 Benefits of Marriage. Human Rights Campaign: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/an-overview-of-federal-rights-and-protections-granted-to-married-couples>

### **Chapter 10: Genderbread 101: Getting Started**

Read more about third genders: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third\\_gender](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_gender)

Martin, C. L., & Ruble, D. N. Patterns of Gender Development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61, 353–381, 2010.

Neural Plasticity: The Effects of Environment on the Development of the Cerebral Cortex. Huttenlocher, Peter R.

Read more about the Kinsey Scale: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinsey\\_scale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinsey_scale)

### **Chapter 11: Using the “Spectrums” Genderbread Person**

Massive Millennial Poll: <http://fusion.net/series/massive-millennial-poll/>

### **Chapter 15: Anatomical Sex Explored**

Read more about sex chromosomes: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allosome>

Read more about sex assignment at birth: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex\\_assignment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_assignment)

### **Chapter 21: Let’s Talk About Bathrooms**

Statistics Show Exactly How Many Times Trans People Have Attacked You in Bathrooms: <https://mic.com/articles/114066/statistics-show-exactly-how-many-times-trans-people-have-attacked-you-in-bathrooms#.hYV14tMC1>

Executive Summary of the Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality. Written by James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016).

Read more about bathroom bills: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bathroom\\_bill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bathroom_bill)

Read all about the advent of sex discrimination in public restrooms (including lots of interesting speculation about Victorian Era influences, and politics) in *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* edited by Harvey Molotch and Laura Noren.

Read more about Jim Crow laws that allowed for racial segregation: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Crow\\_laws](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws)

Read more about the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which was interpreted to affect not only workplaces, but all public spaces (including restrooms): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americans\\_with\\_Disabilities\\_Act\\_of\\_1990](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americans_with_Disabilities_Act_of_1990)

### **Chapter 22: The Well-Intentioned Misogynist**

Read more about labeling theory: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

Labeling\_theory

Official Labeling, Criminal Embeddedness, and Subsequent Delinquency

A Longitudinal Test of Labeling Theory. Jón Gunnar Bernburg, Marvin D. Krohn, Craig J. Rivera.

**Chapter 27: No Such Thing as a Positive Stereotype**

Cheryan, Sapna, and Bodenhausen, Galen V. When positive stereotypes threaten intellectual performance: The psychological hazards of “model minority” status. *American Psychological Society*, 2000.

**Chapter 33: Adopting the Term “Partner” (And Using Other Inclusive Language)**

Adams, Henry E.; Wright, Lester W.; Lohr, Bethany A. Is homophobia associated with homosexual arousal? *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol 105(3), Aug 1996, 440-445.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.105.3.440>



Thanks for not eating me.

Everyone told me owls were jerks.

"Don't be friends with an owl!" they'd say.

"They'll just go and eat you right up."

But I knew I should give you a shot.

Everyone deserves a shot.



## APPENDIX D

# HEARTFELT THANKS

“THROWN OVER A PRECIPICE, YOU FALL OR ELSE YOU FLY.”

– *Margaret Atwood*

My days usually start early. I wake up to my phone, in my bed, rolling around to avoid the morning light creeping through my blinds as I read E-mails & Twitters & Facebooks that have accumulated over the previous few hours while I dreamt. Then I hop on my bicycle, ride to a coffee shop, and get to work on whatever I have in store for that day—generally some little project that I hope will make the world a better place.

Some argue that I never wake up—that I am living my dream. But this job I have, if we’re going to call it that, was never my dream. I wouldn’t have dared dream so boldly. I didn’t even know this was *a thing*, let alone *a thing I could be*. But the slipper fit, and now here I am, being swept off my feet every morning as I wake up to a life I owe—in more ways than I can say—to all you Prince Charmings.

It’s through my writing that I’ve been able to learn much of what I know. It is through the discussions that happen online, via email, or in comments sections of the articles I write, that all of the grayness of identity becomes a little more black and white, or, rather, a higher fidelity of gray.

I believe in what I do. There is harmony in my life, as my head, my heart, and my work all sing different parts of the same song—a song that keeps me smiling every day, even if some days it’s more melancholy than cheerful. And yes, I absolutely do believe that it’s possible

for us to create a world that is socially just. It's already happening. We're making it happen.

There are some specific people to whom I owe specific thank yous, but I also want to broadly thank everyone who has ever linked to one of my articles, shared one of my little doodles with a friend, or seen my show at a college. Thank you for helping me fly.

Never ask for permission to smile,  
sK

For the second edition in particular, thank you to Bethany, whose comprehensive notes charted a course for me through murky waters. And thank you to Alice Fielding, who copyedited this edition, tolerated my grammar activism (Singular They FTW), and cracked me up regularly with reflections and comments on the text.

Thank you to my patient, critical, and (in many cases) hilarious pool of content editors (guinea pigs) for allowing me to test this book on you, and for putting up with me and my silliness through countless rounds of revisions and countless volumes of silliness:

KATE DONNELLY - COREY BERNSTEIN - CHRISTINE ADAME - LEIGH NIEMAN - ERIC MORROW - GABI CLAYTON - REUBS WALSH - CC ALEXANDER - JJ JIMENEZ - PAUL REINERFELT - KATH COOPER - CARL HOLLAMBY - KATRINA LEWIS - KIERAN HIXON - MARY VANCE - NATASHA COX - ABBY ROSENSTEIN - MICHELLE SIMS - STEPHANIE JONES - DEVON GUIDOUX - JENN GALLIENNE, CANDACE JACKSON - VICKY HUMMEL - SARAH VILLARRO-EL - LISA HAMBLIN - ZEE HILDRETH - ELISA KANO - FRAN FUDGE - KARINA OGUNLANA

Thank you to the coffee shops that provided me a home away from home in Austin, giving me the space and comfort I needed to write, edit, & design this book. And special thanks to the smiling staff who were there to give me the push (caffeine, usually) I needed to keep moving (jittering, usually):

DOMINICAN JOE & BOULDIN CREEK CAFE & OPA!

Thank you to my patient, supportive, and encouraging financiers of the publishing of this book who took a leap over a precipice themselves, putting their faith in me and this project:

AARON C SLUSHER - AARON CHRISTINE FULMEK - AIDAN FORTIER - AL VERNACCHIO - ALBERT RICHARD MAYA - ALBINA VELTMAN - ALEX BURSLEM - ALEXANDRA BROWN - ALICE NUTTALL - ALICE TUCKEY - AMELIA NAUGLER - AMIE MCKIBBAN - AMY DONAHUE - AMY

ELMGREN - AMY MILLIGAN - AMY SHEARER - ANA VARGAS-MACHUCA - ANDERSON TEMPLETON - ANDREW BECKNELL - ANDREW HUGHES - ANDY SEMLER - ANGIE BADE - ANNEMARIE SHROUDER - ANNETTE MARQUIS - APRIL NANCE - ASHLEE FERRET - BARBARA FINDLAW - BETH MITCHELL - BETH SHAW - BETH WILSON - BEVIN TIGHE - BRIAN JARA - BUGS - LESIA QUAMINA - NIKITA MITCHELL - CAILIN HAYES - CALLUM - CANDACE ALEXANDRA PRICE - CARL HOLLAMBY - CARLY LUES - CATIA AGUIAR - CHAMINDA MAPA - CHANDRA ALTOFF - CHARLIE MURRAY - CHRIS ALEXANDER - CODY RICHARD - COURTNEY M WATSON - COURTNEY THAMAN - CRAIG LEETS - DAN MOSORA - DANIEL SILVERSTONE - DANNA COOKE - DARA HOFFMAN-FOX - DAVID CAMERON - DEL RAPIER - DENISE CROSS - DENISE HUESO - DENISE MURRAY - DORAN STUCKY - DR. TREVOR CORNEIL - EDWARD BARTOW - ELANA GELLER - ELISSA DIAZ - ELIZABETH TRAN - ELLEN CREGAN - ELOISE STONBOROUGH - EMI SHAW COLORADO - EMILY SWAIN - ENNE ILO PUROVAARA - ERICA JONES - ERICA M. JONES - ERIKA BRIDGEFORTH - ERIN SUBRAMANIAN - ERIN-CLAIRE BARROW - GAIL DUNN - GERY MURCHAKE - GIA CAMPANELLA SCHNEIDER - GILLIAN - GILLIAN CALDER - GINA PATTERSON - GUINEVERE JEANETTE OCTOBER - HANNAH HOWARTH - HEATHER SANKEY - HEATHER WEHR - HELEN BISHOP - HELMUTH BREITENFELLNER - HOLLY ELIJAH - IAN TENNANT - JACKIE MCCLANAHAN - JAKE KOPMEIER - JAMES BUCKLEY - JAROD WILSON - JASREET BADUAL - JEFF SMITH - JEFFREY CHUBB - JEN SALAMONE - JESSE FUCHS - JESSICA D EARLEY - JESSICA GRIFFITH - JESSICA LANGLOIS - JESSICA WOODS - JO FOY - JOAN GARRITY - JODI SHIPLEY - JOHN WARREN - JONATHAN HARDY - JORDAN STRUK - JOY BUTLER - JULIA BERBERAN - JUSTIN KALINAY - KAITY WERNER - KARA SJOBLOM-BAU - KAREN GOLD - KAREN IZZI GALLAGHER - KAREN THORSON - KAROLYN CHOWNING - KATE HAUSER - KATHLEEN HARRISON - KATHRYN SWEENEY - KATRINA LEWIS - KERRI HURMAN - KEVIN MOHABIR - KIER SINCLAIR - KRISTA ROYAL - KRISTEN GILBERT - KRISTEN STUBBS - KRISTINA VANHEESWIJK - KRISTINE ERICKSON - KRUSTINA COLTON - LAURA DELLOSTRITTO - LENNY GREY - LENORA PEUTON - LIAT NORRIS - LINDA EISENSTEIN - LIS MAURER - LISA RUIGROK - LISA SALAZAR - LISA SCHULZE - LN YOUNG - LUCIAN CLARK - LUKYAN BEX ALLES - M. SORGE - MALIA LEWIS - MANSI KATHURIA - MARIA E DOERFLER - MARIE DIPPENAAR - MARION CROMB - MARTHA FISCHHOFF - MARY NEATON - MARY VANCE - MAUA PILGRIM - MEGAN GOODWIN - MEGAN MCRAE - MIAH AKSTON - MICA GONZALEZ - MICHAEL LEICESTER - MICHAEL SKAANING - MICHAELA KIRBY - MICHELE REN - MICHELLE RATNAUKEKE - MIKE MOSS - MORGAN PURRIER - MORGEN CHANG - NANCY WOODS - NATALIE MILLMAN - NICO KERSKI - OLIVER MCKEON - ORR GUILAT - PAULA KAMPF - PRECIOUS PORRAS - RACHEL CRANE - RACHEL ELLIS - REBECCA LEYS - REBECCA WHITTIER - REMY LOURENCO - RENE WINEGAR - RIOT MUELLER - ROBIN WILSON - RUFAI AJALA - SAL PEARSON - SALLY CONNING - SAMANTHA MARGERISON - SANDRA RICHARD - SARAH JEAN TAAVOLA - SARAH SMITH - SARAH SMITH - SEAMUS JOHNSTON - SEAN BARRETT - SEAN EDDINGTON - SEFIK\_A MAI - SEVAN MARLOW BUSSELL - SHAUNA WOODARD - SHELBY LAVIGNA - STEPHANIE RICKETTS - STEPHANIE SMITH - TANJA JACOBS - TEGAN STOVER - TERRI COOK - TERYL BERG - THALIDA NOEL - THEODORE DRAKE WARD - TONY DEAN - TRAVIS AMIEL - TUNAN PAN - VANUA LARSEN LUNDIN - ZARA STEADMAN - ZOYA STREET



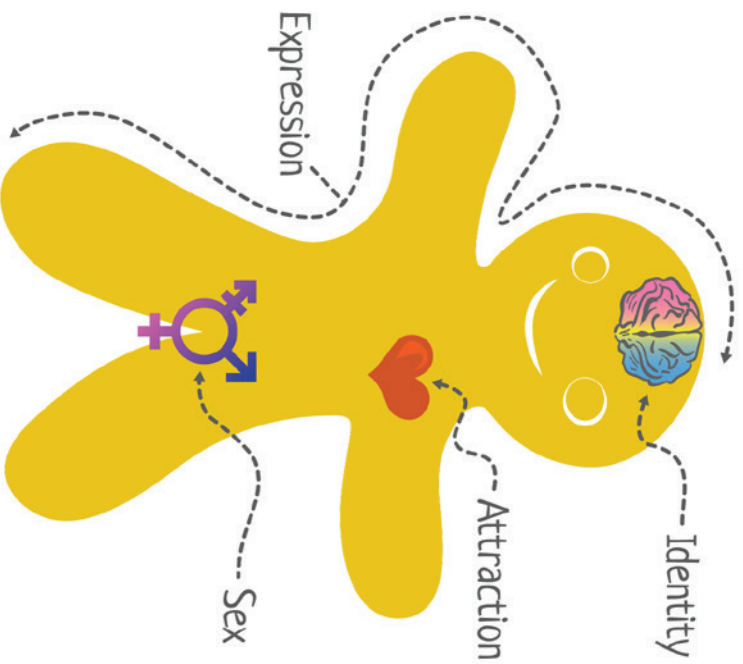
## APPENDIX E

# CUT-OUTS

“IF ALL YOU HAVE IS A HAMMER, EVERYTHING LOOKS LIKE A NAIL.”

– *Proverb*

The following tools are provided with no strings attached: they’re uncopyrighted, open source (get the illustrator files on the book’s website), and yours to share, remix, improve, and put to work.



Gender Identity

- Woman-ness
- Man-ness



Gender Expression

- Femininity
- Masculinity



Anatomical Sex

- Female-ness
- Male-ness



Sexually Attracted to... and/or (a/o)

- Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People

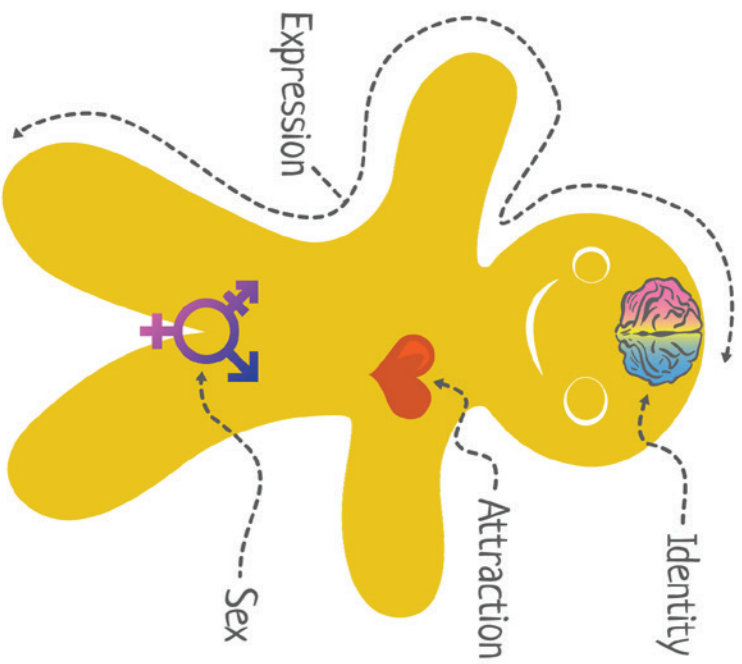


Romantically Attracted to...

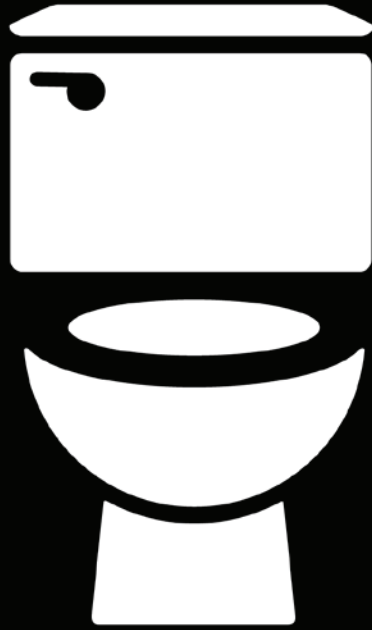
- Women a/o Feminine a/o Female People
- Men a/o Masculine a/o Male People



*Download this graphic and others at*  
[guidetogender.com/downloads](http://guidetogender.com/downloads)



*Download this graphic and others at*  
[guidetogender.com/downloads](http://guidetogender.com/downloads)



**ALL-GENDER  
RESTROOM**



Cut and use, or print your own at [guidetogender.com/toilet](http://guidetogender.com/toilet)



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“I INCLUDE ‘IT’S PRONOUNCED METROSEXUAL’ AMONGST THE PROPELLING, ELUCIDATING RESOURCES AND HOPEFUL MEDIA BASTIONS THAT GUIDED ME INTO AWARENESS OF MY PRIVILEGE, ARTICULATION OF MY QUEERNESS, AND NOW INTO THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK. WHATEVER REPAIRS IN HEALTH AND JUSTICE I SHARE A CONSTRUCTIVE MEASURE IN ACCOMPLISHING, I SHARE THEM WITH [SAM].”

– *Brandon Haydon*

Sam Killermann is a multi-disciplinary artist who puts his gifts to work to achieve global justice as the Director of Creativity for hues. Sam is also the person behind It’s Pronounced Metrosexual, the comedy show performed at colleges and universities, as well as the online resource, which has educated millions of readers on themes of social justice, gender, and sexuality.

Sam’s work (that he uncopyrighted in 2013) has been downloaded by hundreds of millions of people around the world who utilize it to bolster their educational and advocacy efforts toward equity. His version of the Genderbread Person, a model for understanding and teaching gender and sexual diversity, has been translated into over a dozen languages.

In 2014, Sam designed an all-gender restroom sign that he gifted to the commons, which is now being implemented on three continents, was featured in the White House, and is becoming the standard for dozens of communities around the U.S. and world.



Sam is the author of several books, including *A Guide to Gender*, which is an exploration of gender from a social justice perspective, with humor and comics sprinkled in. The book opened as the #1 best-seller in gender on Amazon, and as a reflection of Sam's commitment to access as a core social justice value, he's given away over 15,000 copies of the book. He gave a well-received TEDxTalk that has over 200,000 views called "Understanding the Complexities of Gender," where he distilled the themes of the book into a few minutes of fun, energetic, and easily-digestible speech.

Sam is the co-creator of [TheSafeZoneProject.com](http://TheSafeZoneProject.com), a free online resource for LGBTQ and Ally training materials. The open source curriculum they published is being used by over ten thousand educators in at least 100 countries.

Outside of his key initiatives, Sam is a frequent keynote speaker, serves on the Board of Directors for Healthy Teen Network, is the comedy half of S.E.X., head elf at Socially Just Cards, and is always dreaming up new social good projects. When he's not on the road, he likes to spend at least a few hours a day bicycling around sunny Austin, TX, where he counts himself lucky to live.

