



Understanding **GENDER IDENTITY**

Don Nardo





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Chapter One

Many Alternative Gender Identities

Jessy was born in Thailand. But his parents moved to the United States when he was an infant, and he grew up in Cooper City, Florida. Now in his twenties, he says that the first time he can remember his gender being an issue in his life was when he was three. “I had a lot of boy friends,” he recalls, “and we were always playing with toy guns. One day I went into the boys’ bathroom with them, and my mom pulled me out. ‘You can’t go into that bathroom.’ I was heartbroken.” Then the child asked, “Why can’t I go into that bathroom?” The mother answered, “You’re a girl. You have to act like one. You can’t always be with the boys.” From that moment on, Jessy says, “I knew that being a girl is not me. That is not how I feel.”⁶

As the years went on, Jessy continued to feel like a boy and did “boy things” whenever possible. Those included taking karate and boxing lessons. Because he was still biologically a female, he also joined the girls’ basketball and soccer teams at school.

In the tenth grade, seeing so many classmates dating, Jessy wanted to do the same. But he did not want to date boys, because he was attracted to girls. At that point, he started to suspect that he might be a lesbian, or a girl who is attracted to other girls. But it soon became clear that the situation was more complicated than that. “The thing was,” he

remembers, “although I dated lesbians, I was attracted to straight women. I was attracted to girls who like men.”⁷

As still more time passed, Jessy realized that he was not a lesbian, after all. It became clear to him that he was attracted to straight girls because, despite his female appearance, in his mind’s eye he was a straight male. He realized that he must be transgender. He eventually underwent a physical gender transition that included hormone treatments and became what he had long realized he was—a man.

Now a young adult, Jessy says that he cannot erase the fact that he was born in a girl’s body. That is a fact of his life, he states. But he is grateful that he went through the transition. “God made me transgender for a reason,” he asserts.

“God made me transgender for a reason.”⁸

—Jessy, transgender man in his twenties

Maybe not God, but whoever created me. Whoever created me made me this way for a reason. I enjoy life from a different perspective. I can see the world simultaneously from a male and female perspective. When I speak with [my girlfriend], I understand where she’s coming from as a woman. . . . And then, when I speak to my male friends, I get along with all the guys ’cause I think like a guy. I always thought like a guy.⁸

Age-Old Assumptions About Gender

One major reason that Jessy went through so many years of confusion in trying to understand his true gender is that society as a whole has not yet fully shed some age-old misconceptions about gender. A majority of people not only in the United States but in most parts of the world see themselves as either male or female. Moreover, there has long been and remains a general assumption that those are the only possible genders that human beings can be.



Some transgender boys will pursue activities they perceive as masculine, such as karate.

It remains unclear whether one's gender identity—each person's internal experience and feeling of gender—starts right from birth. Scientists are in general agreement, however, that most people have an awareness of their gender identity by about age three. At that age, children do not have the intellectual ability to understand this, but they can feel it in an intuitive, or instinctive, sense.

Gender identity is about, or is rooted in, who a person is in his or her brain or mind's eye. Alana Biggers, a professor at the Chicago College of Medicine, explains:

Gender identity is your own personal understanding of your gender and how you want the world to see you. For many cisgender [strictly male or female] people, gender identity is automatically respected. When most people encounter a normative [regular] cisgender man, they treat him as a man. This means acknowledging his autonomy and using the correct pronouns—he/him/his—when addressing him. It's important to treat everyone with this level of respect.⁹

Only Two Possible Genders?

Throughout most of human history, the vast majority of people assumed that gender was binary in nature; that is, that there were only two possible genders: male and female.

A newborn baby was seen as either a girl or a boy. In the traditional binary system, therefore, if a person was born with female genitals, or sex organs, she was a girl; likewise, if a newborn baby had male genitals, he was a boy. A great many of the ideas, customs, and traditions of most cultures are based on

this seemingly simple binary determination of physical characteristics, says Trent University psychologist Karen L. Blair. Among numerous others, these ideas, customs, and traditions include

“Gender identity is your own personal understanding of your gender.”⁹

—Alana Biggers, Chicago College of Medicine professor

the clothing we buy, barbershops vs. salons, and men’s rooms vs. women’s rooms. In fact, one of the first things new parents often learn about their future child is their sex, based on a grainy ultrasound image of tiny little genitals. From this point forward, a parent’s idea of who their child will grow up to be is significantly shaped by the sex, represented through the color of the nursery room, the types of clothing purchased, and of course, the list of potential baby names. Our expectations based on gender do not stop there. When we find out that a baby is a boy, we are more likely to describe him as strong, tough or handsome, whereas we will view baby girls as sweet, gentle and kind.¹⁰

Although most people fit within this binary system of gender, many individuals do not. These individuals have recognized that although they were born with the physical form of a male or female, they do not perceive themselves as that gender. They may instead view themselves as a man trapped in a woman’s body

Gender Identity Versus Sexual Orientation

Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different things. Gender identity is the gender a person identifies with. Sexual orientation is who, or which gender, a person is attracted to. For example, a person who identifies as female sees herself as a woman. Depending on her sexual orientation, she might be attracted to men or she might be attracted to other women.

This can be confusing, even to some trans and nonbinary individuals. For instance, Christina, a young trans-woman, explains her initial confusion, saying that early on, “I *thought* I was gay because I was attracted to men. But I’m attracted to straight men, not gay men. Before I educated myself about what being transgender really is, I thought that I must be a gay person.” Then Christina read an online medical article that explained the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. It also noted that a trans person can be either straight or gay. Thus, a trans woman like herself, who was born with a male body and is attracted to men, is straight, not gay.

Quoted in Susan Kuklin, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2014, p. 43.

or a woman trapped in a man’s body. These people are today referred to as transgender, or “trans” for short.

Transgender individuals have long felt the need to hide their true selves, but this is changing. In recent years a number of trans individuals, including some well-known celebrities, have come out, or publicly revealed their gender identities. In 2020, for example, actor Elliot Page, who turned thirty-three that year, did so. During the bulk of his career, including when he received critical acclaim and an Oscar nomination for the 2007 film *Juno*, he had been actress Ellen Page. Even when making that movie, he says, he felt as if he was a young man trapped in a young woman’s body. He adds that this feeling caused him shame and discomfort. But over time, he says, “I was finally able to embrace being transgender and let myself fully become who I am.” He underwent a physical transition from female to male and says he is happy “now that I’m fully who I am in this body.”¹¹

A Diverse Spectrum of Identities

From a technical standpoint, Page and other trans people *do* fit into a binary system, since they identify as either male or female. However, it is not the *traditional* binary system, in which an individual always retains the gender identity with which he or she was born. As a result, transgenderism is an alternative binary gender system.

Similarly, some individuals feel they belong to still another alternative gender system. They do not see themselves as fully male or fully female. Instead, they describe their gender identity lying somewhere between, or perhaps beyond, the traditional two gender variants.



Actor Elliot Page, formerly Ellen Page, attends a film premier in 2019. Page, who came out as transgender in 2020, is one of many public figures to recently do so.

Source Notes

Introduction: Man into Woman

1. Quoted in Niels Hoyer, ed., *Man into Woman*, trans. H.J. Stenning. New York: Dutton, 1933, p. 31.
2. Quoted in Hoyer, *Man into Woman*, p. 113.
3. Quoted in Hoyer, *Man into Woman*, p. 64.
4. Quoted in Hoyer, *Man into Woman*, p. 31.
5. Quoted in Scarlett Conlon, "Eddie's Education." *Vogue*, August 12, 2015. www.vogue.co.uk.

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6. Quoted in Susan Kuklin, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2014, p. 4.
7. Quoted in Kuklin, *Beyond Magenta*, p. 8.
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9. Alana Biggers, "What's the Difference Between Sex and Gender?," Healthline, 2019. www.healthline.com.
10. Karen L. Blair, "Has Gender Always Been Binary?," *Inclusive Insight* (blog), *Psychology Today*, September 16, 2018. www.psychologytoday.com.
11. Quoted in Katy Steinmetz, "Elliot Page Is Ready for This Moment," *Time*, March 16, 2021. <https://time.com>.
12. WebMD, "Non-Binary Sex: What It Is," 2020. www.webmd.com.
13. Archaeology News Network, "Grave of Stone Age Transsexual Excavated in Prague," April 6, 2011. <https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com>.
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15. Quoted in Laurel Wamsley, "Rachel Levine Makes History as 1st Openly Trans Federal Official Confirmed by Senate," NPR, March 24, 2021. www.npr.org.
16. Quoted in Victoria A. Brownworth, "Dr. Rachel Levine: 'Stay Calm, Stay Home, Stay Well,'" Philadelphia Gay News, April 1, 2020. <https://epgn.com>.

Organizations and Websites

Family Equality Council

www.familyequality.org

The Family Equality Council supports and represents the 3 million parents who are gay, bi, trans, and queer in the United States and their 6 million children. The website offers information on how ordinary people, both straight and LGBTQ, can combat anti-LGBTQ discrimination in their communities.

Gender Spectrum

www.genderspectrum.org

Gender Spectrum works to make society more inclusive for alternatively gendered people. Its website allows visitors to join various pro-trans and nonbinary online groups for preteens, teens, parents, caregivers, and other family members.

GSA Network

<https://gsanetwork.org>

This organization's strategy is to fight for justice for LGBTQ people by empowering teens and others to educate the public on LGBTQ issues. The site offers a hands-on tutorial of how young LGBTQ people can build their own local support networks.

Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

www.hrc.org

The HRC deals regularly and frankly with gay, bi, and trans issues and problems. The website offers an array of links to articles that tell what is happening on the front lines of the LGBTQ struggle for equality, broken down on a convenient, easy-to-access, state-by-state basis.

National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE)

<http://transequality.org>

The NCTE's mission is to help trans people enjoy equality and social justice, partly by educating politicians and other leaders

For Further Research

Books

Maria Cook, *Gender Identity: Beyond Pronouns and Bathrooms*. White River Junction, VT: Nomad, 2019.

Erin Ekins, *Queerly Autistic: The Ultimate Guide for LGBTQIA+ Teens on the Spectrum*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2021.

Skylar Kergil, *Before I Had the Words: On Being a Transgender Young Adult*. New York: Skyhorse, 2021.

Eric Rosswood and Kathleen Archambeau, *We Make It Better: The LGBTQ Community and Their Positive Contributions to Society*. Miami, FL: Mango, 2019.

Robyn Ryle, *Throw like a Girl, Cheer like a Boy: The Evolution of Gender, Identity, and Race in Sports*. Ithaca, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020.

Rebecca Stanborough, *She, He, They, Them: Understanding Gender Identity*. North Mankato, MN: Compass Point, 2020.

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