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978-1-108-73113-3 — Undoing the Gender Binary
Charlotte Chucky Tate , Ella Ben Hagai , Faye J. Crosby
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1 Introduction

This is a scholarly work about "gender" and the vast array of its meanings in US society. Open-minded people who are not transgender constitute our primary audience. For at least one of the authors, who is cisgender (which we will define), the endeavor to demystify "gender" and unpack its multiple meanings is profoundly personal. A few years ago, a member of the author's family, deeply loved by the author, announced his intention to live as the gender he had felt to be his true gender even when the world saw him first as a girl and then as a woman. The author wished to understand more about the experiences of her family member but did not want to burden the family member with the task of education. She found texts like Nicholas Reich's (2012) *Transgender 101* and Anne Boedecker's (2011) *The Transgender Guidebook* that offered excellent beginnings, and these texts spoke primarily to a trans audience rather than to an audience of cisgender allies. The author was left with questions, especially about the fit between society and trans individuals. She hungered for more concepts to help guide her thinking. When the opportunity arose to join forces with the other two authors, both authorities on issues of gender identity and sexual orientation – and how they differ – the knowledge-hungry author felt joy and relief.

Yet, the project of writing a monograph is also personal and, in this case, the challenge we faced as authors was trying to coordinate the thoughts, perspectives, and voices of three very different women. We come from three very different generations (or cohorts) of academic scholarship within the same discipline (psychology), which means that our own ideas about how to introduce, discuss, and explain issues of gender are quite distinctive. Unabashedly, our perspectives come from different waves of feminist thought in the United States (even if some would disagree about whether "waves" is a useful way to discuss this) including the 1960–70s, the 1990s, and the early 2000s, in addition to trying to speak to current feminist issues (circa 2019). Consequently, the narrative voice of this monograph is not univocal; instead, the reader will hear three different voices – alternating sometimes between sentences – but those voices are directed toward a common goal. We hope that a strength of the different voices is that a broad set of readers can access this work and find their own cultural references and touchstones within the trove presented that literally spans many decades. It is in this spirit that we invite readers to bring their own experiences and find whatever usefulness they can in this work. Additionally, we focus squarely on the United States in our discussion of these issues. Two of the authors were born and raised in the United States, and all authors have conducted scholarly work (in whole or in part) in the cultural context of the

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United States. Consequently, we feel most comfortable making statements about the US cultural context and not necessarily about cultures with which we have little direct experience.

Many humans classify themselves and are classified by others as either female or male. Some societies (e.g., Argentina, Denmark, India, Malta, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom) have gone further in their cultural expectations of what two genders could mean and that there are more than two genders. Some cultures (e.g., India, Sweden) even include third-gender pronouns that refer to people rather than the generic third-person forms of many languages. Nonetheless, when thinking about just two genders – think Adam and Eve, Romeo and Juliet, Fred and Ginger – the list of couples could go on and on. Such a list would seem natural to those who assume that humans come in two forms: men and women. Such a list also would – and often does – reinforce the assumption of the universality of the gender binary. So strong is the tendency to see the world in terms of the gender binary that the men–women division is often extended to nonhuman entities as well (Bem, 1993). Think mother earth and father sky. At first glance, the division of the world into male and female might seem to spring inevitably from the demands of sexual reproduction. Sexual reproduction, we learn from elementary textbooks, occurs when the combination of genetic information from two separate organisms or two types of organisms (i.e., the male type and the female type) results in new life. Sexual reproduction contrasts with asexual reproduction, which occurs when a single organism reproduces itself, as in mitosis. Sexual reproduction is critical for evolution, allowing as it does for novel combinations of genetic material. Upon reflection, the division between male and female becomes less universal and rigid. Some animals, like the banana slug, are hermaphroditic. Other animals, like striped bass, change their biological sex over the life span (Berlinsky & Specker, 1991). Fungi have many sexes (Raper, 1966).

The vast majority of humans self-categorize their gender in the way that is consistent with how those in authority categorized them at birth. Yet, if only one half of one percent of humans did not see themselves as entirely male or female in accord with the label given them by one or more experts, an estimated 35,000,000 people worldwide would defy the gender binary. That's more than ten times the population of Mongolia; it's four times the population of Switzerland.

Today Americans, especially those who live on either coast, seem increasingly accepting of gender fluidity (Aitken et al., 2015; Travers, 2018). But while overtly accepting of new norms, many individuals still harbor old prejudices (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019). And prejudiced or not, many people acknowledge an uncomfortable lack of knowledge and a galling

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confusion about terminology. Many potential allies to the transgender (trans) community may fear that they create a bad impression on would-be friends through sheer ignorance about terminology and basic concepts.

The central purpose of our Element is to present the basics, clarifying terms and demystifying knowledge about people who identify as transgender. We hope to present sound scholarship in a nontechnical and inviting way. We hope that those who are not part of any trans community will gain new understandings of what is involved in living as a trans person.

Cisgender people (or cis people, for short) are those who experience their gender with the same label that they were gender assigned at birth. Transgender people (or trans people, for short) are people who experience their gender as different from their assigned gender at birth. Some, but not all, transgender people may choose to change their legal status or their physical appearance. Identification with a gender different than the one assigned by authorities is the essential component of the definition of transgender identity that we adopt in this volume.

Even though cis people constitute our primary audience, we hope that our work will prove reassuring as well as helpful to people on the transgender spectrum. We expect that some of the information contained here will be new even to those who are active in trans communities. For those who are questioning aspects of their gender identity, this work is meant to be an aid. For example, in Section 4, we present the multifaceted model of gender. Some of the conceptualizations presented there might give expression to ideas that have sought concrete form in the minds of some trans people. Even for people who have been thinking about these issues for a long time, we hope that we are providing a vocabulary for helpful discussions. We wish to allow for affirmation through concepts and information.

Our work proceeds in seven sections. After this introduction, we present basic information, defining terms and outlining the biological foundations of what is called "sex." In the third section we give basic information about different paths that can be taken when a person transitions away from the sex assigned at birth, including information about hormonal and surgical interventions. The fourth section presents the "facet model of gender." We do not claim that individuals walk around with this model in their heads any more than we name the parts of speech each time we form a sentence. Our model, developed by Charlotte Tate, provides conceptual clarity, allowing us to keep the referents of "gender" separate from each other. We turn in Section 5 to the lived experiences of those on the transgender spectrum as recounted in popular memoirs. It is through these sources that most of the public learns about transgender issues, and so we accord to them a separate part of our

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work. In Section 6 of our Element, we examine the attitudes of the majority toward those in the minority as documented by social scientists. Our short final Section 7 is speculative, addressing questions of both a philosophical and practical nature.

General readers may find themselves skimming over some sections of the work, especially if they have a low tolerance for technical details. And specialized readers like gender researchers may find themselves lingering over some new information while feeling quite familiar with other information. Although it is of course impossible to satisfy and intrigue all audiences all the time, we hope that our work offers a welcoming entry for many into a world of thought-provoking knowledge and ideas, and we hope that some readers will develop into the next generation of researchers and perhaps even authors on issues of gender and gender identity.

1.1 Topical and Enduring Issues

We believe that contemplation of what it means to be transgender is important not only because it allows us to understand the lived experiences of a particular demographic group. Rather, we propose that thinking about a world in which some people are transgender – whether or not you are one of those people – allows us to explore the idea of gender fluidity and to thus rethink what is gained and what is lost when we think of human beings as falling into discrete, immutable categories.

Our Element project is quite topical, but the transgender experience is quite ancient (Green, 1998). Consider the Hijra in India who appeared first in ancient Hindu texts like the Kamasutra. The Hijra community in India are understood as being a third gender. Hijra wear colorful saris and makeup. They are believed to have a spiritual power to bless or curse. The Ramayana tells the story of Rama who was banished to a forest for fourteen years. In the forest, he called to his followers telling those who were men or women to return to the city. Members of the Hijra community did not feel bound to such a call (as they did not identify as men or women), so they stayed in the forest and Rama blessed them for their loyalty. Currently, the Hijra live mostly in Mumbai; their community is hierarchical in that older Hijras take care of younger Hijras (Hylton, Gettleman, & Lyons, 2018; Michelraj, 2015). As early as the sixteenth century, two-spirit people held important roles among the Cherokee and other Native American tribes. The two-spirit category represents people who integrate feminine and masculine traits. Two-spirit identity was believed to be grounded in supernatural intervention that became known through visions or dreams. Two-spirit people were and are often healers, shamans, and ceremony leaders (Smithers, 2014).

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Among other postcolonial Americans, too, history contains examples of individuals who presented as the gender not assigned to them by others. The historian Susan Stryker (2008) writes, "in the eighteenth century, numerous women and trans masculine people – most famously Deborah Sampson – enlisted in the Revolutionary Army as men" (p. 46). Transgender soldiers also participated in the American Civil War. Transgender soldiers, Albert Cashier and Harry Burford, served in the Union and the Confederate army respectively. Frances Thompson, a black slave and transgender woman, was one of the five women who testified in front of Congress regarding the brutal rapes that occurred during the 1866 Memphis Riots (Stryker, 2008).

Although some people have defied the gender binary across the millennia, it is only in recent times that transgender individuals are not singled out as belonging to some defined and separate form of humanity. It is only now that individuals in the mainstream of society are not certain to be stigmatized for defying the impulse toward the gender binary. We believe that twenty years ago, a review like ours would likely not have existed. And thus we see this work as wholly contemporary.

There is another way in which this Element shows a timestamp. We expect and hope that many parts of our volume will be out-of-date within a decade or two. Medical realities will change. The current medical thinking, for example, is that puberty-arresting drugs have few negative side effects, and so are helpful for youth who are not sure if they wish to transition; but continued study over time may change that opinion. Attitudes will evolve. As more and more people feel it is safe to express their identities, gender nonconformity will become less controversial; and that in turn may make it seem even safer to even more people to eschew rigid gender roles. As realities change, scholarly understandings will, of necessity, shift.

Even as we embrace the topical nature of our work, we also hope that the information presented here will do more than contribute to how readers see a specific current issue. We would like to imagine that readers will be sparked to reflect on enduring realities. How privileged we are to be able to pause and contemplate eternal questions of what it means to be female, what it means to be male, what it means to be nonbinary, and ultimately what it means to be human.

2 The Basics

2.1 Terms

Let's start by defining some terms. We do this for expository clarity but not to dictate that all other researchers use exactly the same terms as we do. We recognize that there have been some scholarly battles over evolving

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terminology (American Psychological Association, 2015; Crawford & Fox, 2007). But, like Teich (2012), a social worker with a distinctly compassionate approach to scholarship, we think that some discussion of key terms will help with an understanding of more complex concepts.

In many instances, the terms *sex* and *gender* are used interchangeably, but usually, we use the term *sex to* refer to the anatomical features that are commonly used to classify humans into female and male. *Assigned or birth sex* is the classification that adults – including adult authorities like physicians – use when they classify human babies as female or male. The assignment is generally made on the basis of external genitalia. On an average of one birth per two thousand live births, the genitalia are ambiguous. In such cases, the child might be called *intersex*, but sooner or later, authorities may push the child toward one designation or the other.

When an individual has the same label as their birth-sex throughout life, that individual is said to be *cisgender* because *cis* is Latin for "on the same side as." Individuals who were assigned to the category of female at birth and who continue to experience themselves as female become, as adults, *cis women*. Individuals who were assigned to the category of male at birth and who continue to experience themselves as male become, as adults, *cis men*.

Not all individuals continue to experience themselves as being the sex assigned to them at birth. Such individuals, we call *transgender* (or *trans* for short). In our definition, a *trans woman* (adult) or *trans girl* (child) is any woman or girl who was assigned to the category male at birth (almost always based on external genitals) and who nonetheless experiences gender category as female. Likewise, in our definition, a *trans man* (adult) or *trans boy* (child) is any man or boy who was assigned to the category female at birth (almost always based on external genitals) and who nonetheless experiences his gender category as male.

It should be noted that our definition of transgender is not the first or only that exists in scholarly literature. One of the better-known definitions of transgender is presented by Stryker (2008). Stryker defines transgender broadly, using the concept of the transgender umbrella (also, American Psychological Association, 2015; Williams, 2014). She uses the term "transgender umbrella" to:

> refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender because they feel strongly that they properly belong to another gender in which it would be better for them to live; others want to strike out toward some new location, some space not yet clearly defined or concretely occupied; still others simply feel the need

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> to get away from the conventional expectations bound up with the gender that was initially put upon them. In any case, it is the *movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place* – rather than any particular destination or mode of transition – that best characterizes the concept of "transgender" that I want to develop here. (p. 1; italics in original)

Stryker's definition includes many experiences from changing one's legal designation, to behaving in ways described as gender nonconforming. Our definition is much more targeted because we only focus on the birth-assigned and self-assigned labels for oneself – not behaviors consistent or inconsistent with gender stereotypes or gender conformity.

Focusing on birth-assigned and self-assigned labels also allows us to include those whose self-assigned gender identity labels are not exclusively female or male. For example, there are people who identify as *agender* – being neither female nor male – irrespective of their assigned sex category. There are also people who identify as *genderfluid*, *genderblended*, *or androgynous* – being both female and male, either concurrently or alternately – and other specific labels, that differ from their assigned sex. These specific labels of agender and genderblended fit into a larger class of experiences that other scholars have labeled *genderqueer* –with queer meaning unexpected or unusual, or not fitting within the gender binary (e.g., Nestle, Howell, & Wilchins, 2002). Currently, scholars also use the label *nonbinary* to indicate people who do not think of themselves as exclusively one of the familiar two categories (e.g., Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Ramirez, 2019; Hyde et al., 2019; Tate, Youssef, & Bettergarcia, 2014).

Trans individuals are, by definition, unable to be complacent about issues of sex and gender in a society that is so interested in a very particular form of the binary in which everyone is expected to be cisgender. Because assigned genders almost always convey expectations about how one should act, to whom one should feel attracted, and with whom one should have sexual contact, gay and bisexual people also generally find complacency out of their reach. It seems natural, therefore, that trans and gay people have sought a common cause in resisting prejudice and discrimination. Organizations often use the phrases LGBT (lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender) or LBGTQ (adding queer) or LBGTQIA+ (adding other sexual orientations and gender identities, as well as other sexual and gender identities with the +).

Although solidarity among sexual and gender minorities is politically and socially helpful, phrases like LGBT can introduce confusion among people who are not centrally involved in the issues. The phrase LGBT confounds gender identity and sexual orientation.

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Yet, self-assigned gender is not the same as *sexual orientation* or *sexual preference*. How one thinks of oneself – as female or male or neither or both – that is, one's own identity, is connected to but different from one's attraction to sexual, romantic, or affectional partners. For example, some trans women (i.e., individuals who were assigned to the category of a male at birth and who think of themselves as women) might have sexual partners who are exclusively men; other trans women have sexual partners who are exclusively women; still other trans women have sexual partners who are men and women; still other trans women do not have sexual partners because they are not sexually attracted to other people. The same would apply to a trans man. Stated another way, any trans woman might be a lesbian, straight, bisexual, or asexual, just as a trans man might be a gay man, straight, bisexual, or asexual. Of course, the same applies to any cis woman or cis man. We will return to this issue in the next section, but one simple way to keep the concepts clear is to remember that sexual orientation (straight, bi, gay) refers to whom you would like to go to bed *with* while gender identity (cis, trans) refers to who you go to bed *as*.

2.2 Biological Bases of Gender

Think of a time when one of your friends returned from a special trip and you asked about the people living in the destination. Perhaps your friend replied saying, "Well, fundamentally, people are just people." Perhaps you nodded, agreeing about the universality of humanity.

Notice how different is the assumption of universality from the prejudgment that humans are fundamentally different from each other in profound ways. The profoundly different view of people held sway in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. For instance, Carol Gilligan's (1982) book, *In a Different Voice*, enjoyed huge success in academic circles, purporting to show that women have an ethic of care while men have an ethic of justice. Outside the academy, popularizers like John Gray (2009) gained currency with the catch phrase: "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus."

Those who emphasize gender dimorphism, who see females and males as fundamentally distinct life-forms, might be surprised to learn that biological sex is a multidimensional concept. Researchers usually identify four components that are thought to make up the primary sex characteristics: chromosomes, external genitalia, internal genitalia, and hormones (Crawford, 2006). Some authors also differentiate between prenatal or uterine hormones, on the one hand, and, on the other, postnatal hormones.

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2.2.1 Multidimensional Nature of Biological Sex

The multidimensional nature of biological sex means that gender categories are less black-and-white than envisioned by authors like Gilligan and Gray. Primary sex characteristics usually, but not always, align with individuals' gender identity, behavior, and/or presentation. And to complicate matters even more, the dimensions are just that: dimensional – existing along a continuum.

We suspect that a portion of the discomfort that some people feel about trans people springs from a sense of dissonance and unease that can arise by confronting the errors of "a truth" that we – as a society – have taken as foundational. Just as ancient theologians assumed that the sun rotated around the earth, so do many of us assume that gender or biological sex is uncomplicated, being immutable and unidimensional. In fact, gender is neither immutable nor unidimensional. But while it is simply false to imagine that all humans come in one of two clear, absolutely distinct, and unchanging varieties (male and female), it can also be unsettling to recognize the problems of our prior conceptualizations. Galileo was no hero to many of his contemporaries not only because his calculations were hard to conceive, but also because his new conceptualization of the heavens challenged old truths taken to be sacred and self-evident.

Chromosomes. You can start with chromosomes. Many people believe that assigned sex is controlled entirely by sex chromosomes, which are commonly depicted as X or Y based on how they look when magnified under a microscope. The common belief is that an XX chromosomal pair will always lead to the assigned sex of female and that an XY chromosomal pair will always lead to the assigned sex of male.

Reality is more complex. To begin, there are many sex chromosome configurations in addition to XX and XY. In fact, there are six major chromosomal configurations for humans: (1) XX, (2) XY, (3) X0 (i.e., a single X-chromosome without a partner), (4) XXY, (5) XYY, and (6) XXX (Blackless et al., 2000). In addition to those, there are the even less common configurations of XXYY (Nielsen & Wohlert, 1991), XXXY, and XXXXY (Kleczkowska, Fryns, & Van den Berghe, 1988). It is clear that some chromosomal configurations affect bodily morphology – that is, how the body looks during development. For instance, X0 (also called Turner's Syndrome) has a characteristic lack of development of the secondary sex characteristics, specifically the chest area. Although individuals with an X0 configuration have vaginal and vulval genital structures, they do not develop the fatty tissue and contours around the chest area that are described as adult breasts (e.g., Gravholt et al., 1998). In parallel, those people with XXY configurations (also called Klinefelter's Syndrome) often have adult breasts and a penile scrotal structure (e.g., Kruse et al., 1998).

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While morphological effects of chromosomal configurations are apparent, psychological outcomes are less understood. But for one perspective, reviewing much of the literature to that point, Hines (2005) has argued that the psychology associated with gender identity may have more to do with prenatal hormones – uptake and/or insensitivity to androgens in particular – than chromosomal configurations as such. Part of her argumentation can be seen by the fact that there are some adult women (who have vaginal and vulval structures from birth) who have XY chromosomal configurations based on being insensitive to the update of androgens prenatally (Hines, 2005).

Hormones. Each chromosome in the configuration (whether a singleton, a pair, a trio, or larger) signals the releases of classes of specific hormones collected into the general names of androgens and estrogens. While androgens (e.g., testosterone, dihydrotestosterone) are sometimes called the "male" hormones and estrogens (e.g., progesterone, estriol) the "female" hormones, all sex chromosomes produce some amount of both of these classes. Thus, everyone has "female" and "male" hormones even before birth.

What usually differentiates around the eighth week of gestation into a female configuration (with a vulva and vagina) or a male configuration (with a penis and scrotum) starts out as one mass of undifferentiated genital materials. These are shown in Figure 1. By the twelfth week of in utero gestation, the [internal or external] genitals have usually reached their prenatal maturation state.

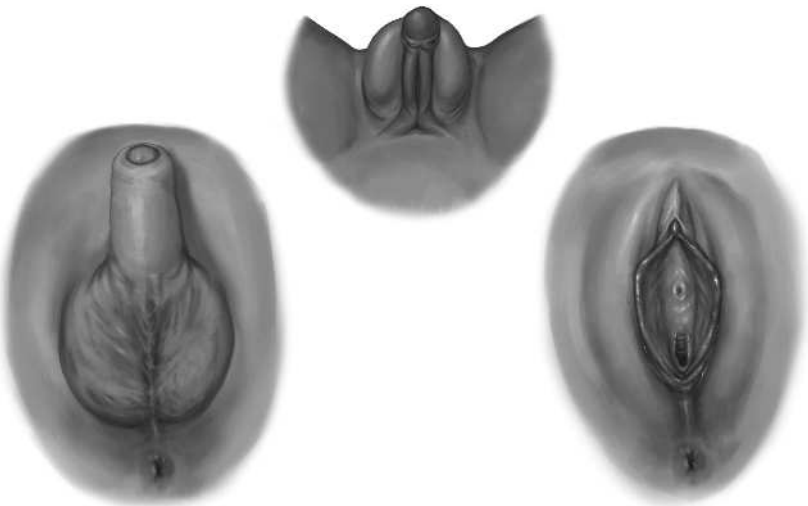

Figure 1 Initial genital material for humans and fully developed genital divergence around twelfth week of fetal development

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