

What You Learned About Gender

The processes whereby our maleness and femaleness are determined, and the manner in which they influence our behavior, sexual and otherwise, are highly complex.

—Robert Crooks and Karla Baur, *Our Sexuality*

- ◆ Are you happy being the gender that you are? Why or why not?
- ◆ What did you learn about being your gender in your family?
- ◆ Do you buy your family's definition of how you should be and act?
- ◆ Who were your role models for your gender identity?
- ◆ Has your gender identity been affected by your sexual orientation?

Gender

Not much is simple about the concept of gender. You were born a particular sex (that is, male or female), but you weren't born a particular gender. This is because there is a difference between the terms "gender" and "sex." Our

"sex" refers to our biological femaleness or maleness. Actually, there are two different parts to our biological sex. First there is our genetic sex, which is determined by our chromosomes (a normal male has two sex chromosomes, an X and a Y; a normal female has two X chromosomes and no Y chromosomes). The second aspect of our sex is our anatomical sex: the obvious difference between having male or female sexual organs.

How secure you feel in your gender is an important ingredient in your comfort with being sexual. Think about it: Gender is the very first thing we notice about another person! In order to be comfortable being sexual, you need to feel good about the sex you were born (male or female).

Gender Identity

The term "gender identity" refers to our own, individual and subjective sense that "I am a male" or "I am a female"—with all that that gender means for you. Each of us constructs our sense of gender differently, depending on the era in which we live, the society in which we live, and our family. Being comfortable with your gender identity is an important part of your sexuality: without the formation of a gender identity, none of us has a framework within which to have a romantic relationship with another person.

Sex therapists are fond of saying, "Your biological sex is between your legs and your gender identity is between your ears!" Gender identity development results from a complex interplay of biological and social learning factors. The question of which—biology or learning—plays the larger role is still being hotly debated by researchers. *Sex Smart* will address what you learned in your family about gender.

I wonder sometimes whether my mother's weird version of femininity has affected my security in my gender. She was in some ways appallingly passive, and yet she was very giving emotionally. As a kid, I vowed never to be that passive, and I'm proud of my accomplishments in law. But I'm also not as devoted to my husband or kids as my mom was. Sometimes I worry that I'm not feminine enough. When I gain weight and my husband isn't as interested in me sexually, I totally withdraw, and sex comes to a complete halt.

—Ruth, 58

Gender Role

Based on the biological sex of a newborn infant, parents immediately begin socializing their baby to be a proper little boy or girl, inducting them into their gender role or sex role: the attitudes and behaviors which are considered normal and appropriate in a specific culture (and during an individual era) for people of a particular sex. The terms “masculine” and “feminine” often come up as descriptions of what a society in general thinks should go with the sexual differences: “feminine” describes attributes that we think should go with femaleness, and “masculine” describes qualities which men should possess—and these cultural definitions perpetuate what children are taught about gender. In American culture, little boys are swung around in the air, and called “tough” and “strong” and “big boy” and “tiger.” Little girl babies are protected and called “little sweetie.” But definitions of proper “feminine” and “masculine” vary with each culture. Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1963) studied cultures such as Tchambuli society in New Guinea, where patterns of masculine and feminine behavior are opposite of our American norms.

You learned about gender from what your parents told you, and by watching each of your parents and how they constructed their gender role, and how your parents interacted. If you didn’t like what you saw in the model your father or mother set out for you, sexual issues may result. You also learned lessons about gender from your peers and from school.

My parents were very protective. Each time I had (and was proud of) an adventurous or challenging experience like playing with older kids, exploring the neighborhood woods or field, my mother would turn out to be panicked for my safety and punish me by restricting my movements even more.

—Vicki, 60

It’s a good thing that I had my best friend’s father as a model: He was a scientist, and a quiet guy, but very kind and loving. I could never measure up to my father’s version of manhood—some beefcake of a guy who only thought about sports and sex.

—Hal, 33

Margaret’s mother found her father kissing another woman when The mother began telling Meg that “All men will en a chance.” Meg has trouble trusting men.

What About Sexual Orientation?

It is important to realize that gender identity is separate from sexual orientation. Your sexual orientation may be heterosexual (attraction to the other sex), homosexual (attraction to your same sex), or bisexual (attraction to both sexes). Despite stereotypes and the fact that a small proportion of homosexual men and women dress and act in opposition to their biological sex, most homosexuals are happy with their gender (Crooks and Baur 1993). In fact, a study by Storms (1980) measured general gender-role attributes and found no significant difference in characteristics of masculinity and femininity among homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual male and female college students.

Sometimes I think about how distant I felt from my Dad, and whether that has any relationship to my homosexuality. I’m not sure they’re related. To me, my sexual orientation seems more like a biological kind of thing, something that existed in me from the very beginning. Having a cruel father didn’t help things, but I don’t think I’d be straight if he had been different.

—Sam, 48

However, there is no guarantee that your gender identity or ideas about your proper gender role will be consistent with your biological sex. Transsexuals, for example, have profound conflicts between their sense of gender identity and their biological sex.

Others of you may simply not buy into societally defined gender roles—for example, that women are less interested in being sexual than men are; that men are active and women passive; or that men are more knowledgeable than women in matters of human sexuality. So although your sense of your gender goes along with your anatomy, you are not willing to follow the “rules” (or myths) that society has set out for how to be a proper boy or girl, or man or woman.

Oedipal stuff wasn’t important. I never could identify with my mother. I didn’t want to be a housewife and a mother, and I never was in love with my father. I identified with my older sister, who was independent, and my first ‘in love’ experience was with a male teacher who was nothing like my father.

—Bettina, 40

My mother was really into this submissive woman kind of model. She was forever telling me things like, "Don't wear your heart on your sleeve." The message I got was that as a girl, I had to let the boys initiate everything. I don't think that I could have been like that even if I wanted to. The funny thing is, I think that the men I have dated have really liked the fact that I ask for what I want.

—Olivia, 30

I find that I am really blocked, now at twenty-three, by being a virgin. Men just aren't supposed to have gotten this far in life without having intercourse and I am just terrified at this point of trying to actually have sex with a girl. She'll be able to tell that I'm a virgin, and I'm afraid I'll die of embarrassment. At this rate, I'll be a virgin when I'm forty!!

—Bryant, 23

Feedback from a parent that you aren't "masculine" or "feminine" enough to please them the way you naturally are will undoubtedly damage your self-esteem and your sexual self-esteem. Your parents' rejection of your gender role identity, and/or sexual orientation may make it seem threatening to get into a sexual relationship with another person in adolescence and adulthood.

Sexual Behavior: How Your "Sex" Affects Your Sex

Your beliefs about what is appropriate behavior for your gender affects many aspects of your sexual experience. Children who learned to feel inadequate as the gender they are, as adults, feel sexual fear, shame, and embarrassment. In some cases, obvious sexual dysfunctions are created.

When Trudy was a girl, her mother dressed her like a boy, and cut her hair in a bowl-cut. She gave Trudy books, but not frilly clothes, barrettes, or jewelry. She dressed her in boy's red plaid shirts and strangers assumed that Trudy was a boy.

When she grew taller, at age ten, her father further undercut her sense of femininity by calling her "mommy long-legs" and teasing her that if she stood sideways, she would be invisible. In addition, Trudy's parents were very prudish about sexual matters.

When Trudy wanted to know what a tampon was, she was reprimanded. Sexual matters were not discussed at all, and when Trudy got her period, there was no discussion about anatomy, biology, relationships, or sexuality. Her mother simply gave her a sanitary belt and told her to stay away from boys and focus on her studies.

Trudy later developed vaginismus—and after entering sex therapy had to reconstruct her sense of her own femininity before she could get control of her vagina back. Trudy's sexual fears, insecurity, and genital pain were directly determined by the way in which her parents failed in the task of her gender socialization, even while they may have meant well.

Donatella, a high-powered lawyer, began sex therapy complaining of being frozen sexually, of having no sexual desire whatsoever. While she had succeeded in breaking her culture's gender roles by becoming a prosperous and well-respected professional, she still felt inferior as a woman. Although she married, she had never enjoyed sex with her husband.

In therapy, as an exercise, she was asked to rent a few movies which she thought might have appealing and intense sexy (though not necessarily sex) scenes. She came in the next week after having viewed two movies and reported that she had a mixed reaction to both of them. Part of her was turned on, but another part was turned off to the fact that "Sexuality in those movies was controlled by the man. He was being selfish and it was his desires that were being acted upon. In one of them, the man spent ninety percent of his energy trying to get sex, *not* trying to get to know the woman."

In beginning to explore Donatella's feelings, she voiced a lot of other attitudes about men and about sexuality: "I hate it. I hate it the way men just use women sexually. They just view all women as sexual objects, there to please them.

"You should see the guys in the law office ogle the secretaries. They don't even care what the woman is like as a person—to them she is just a sexual object. It's disgusting."

From there, Donatella went on to talk about her resentments toward her husband, an attorney much older than she.

"He has all the power. What gets done is what is at the top of his priority list. If he wants something, I go along with it. If the kids

or I want something, and he didn't think it up so it's not on his list, he won't go along with it."

As we tried to distill her belief system, it boiled down to these tenets:

- Men have all the power.
- Men make all the decisions.
- Men use women sexually.

Donatella put her sexuality in the same categories: Sexuality was all for her husband's needs. If he wanted to be sexual, he bothered her by touching her. When she objected, he told her that he wanted her to feel good. But her feeling was that "It's all about your needs. You want to make me feel good so you can have sex. But I don't want it."

Donatella was furious: "Women are really submissive, in every relationship I see. Here I killed myself, with loans and studying, to get through law school, and I'm still submissive!"

It seemed to me that these attitudes probably came from earlier days, from before her marriage. What had she seen in her family of origin that made being a woman look so oppressive to her?

Donatella remembered, back from when she was ten or eleven or twelve, that her mother was "always aggravated that my father got to have fun and go out with the guys. She stayed home all day with all those kids, and worked her fingers to the bones cooking and cleaning, making all the meals, laundry, cleaning up. Even in the evenings, she always had babies to take care of. She never stopped, she didn't even take time off to talk to a girlfriend or make herself a cup of coffee.

"And my father was not romantic at all and didn't act appreciative. And when my father did decide that they would go out in the evening occasionally, he'd just tell her that afternoon, 'We're going out tonight,' and leave her scurrying around trying to get all her work done, and trying to fix her hands and her nails, because they were all ruined. She never had any chance to prepare for it or to get ready."

At that point, Donatella said, "I told myself that I never wanted to get married." And Donatella withdrew from men. She didn't date. She threw herself into her studies, to prove to herself that she could be a woman and have power, too. However, in her thirties, she decided that she wanted children, and she did marry.

But Donatella's alienation from her gender role made it feel as if she couldn't "submit" to sex and still feel good about herself. Even if she liked sex, if her husband liked it more, and since all men wanted was sex, than she couldn't let herself like it. Donatella's feelings about her gender caused problems with sexual desire and arousal. Her unwillingness to identify with her mother made it difficult for her to come to terms with her sexuality as a woman.

If you have grown up in a family where you are ashamed of the behavior of your parent of the same sex, but you admire the parent of the opposite sex, you may find it easier to identify with the feelings of your opposite-sex parent, leading to sexual problems.

Gary came into sex therapy for treatment of his erectile dysfunction. He was caught in between two girlfriends, one an old girlfriend from college who really loved him but whom he no longer loved, and a second one, a woman he had met at a computer conference and had exchanged email with, who was much more sophisticated and wild.

As we talked, his conflict became clear. He was terrified of hurting his old girlfriend, with whom he was trying to break up, so he couldn't perform with his new girlfriend.

Gary's father had abandoned Gary's mother when Gary was thirteen, to go off with another woman. Gary was old enough when it happened to have very clear memories of how badly his mother was devastated emotionally. She had cried for months, and he had done everything he could to comfort her. He had taken over as the man of the house. His father had left them badly off financially, too, and Gary had worked hard to bring in more money. He had total contempt for his father, who he rarely saw.

What caused Gary's erectile difficulties? Gender identity issues! When Gary hurt his old girlfriend, leaving her to go off with a new love, he awakened his unpleasant gender identification with his masculine role model, his father. Gary had never put his feelings about his father's behavior into words before. He hadn't realized how negative he felt about being a "man like my father." He needed to verbalize his feelings about his father, and also to redefine masculinity for himself. When he came up with a more caring, sensitive version of masculinity, Gary got his ability to have erections back.

So, as you can see, your feelings about gender are an important component of how comfortable you feel about being sexual with a loved person. Your relationship to your parents, your feelings about how they defined their gender roles, their feedback to you about how well you fulfilled their gender role expectations of you, and your feelings about their relationship to each other have all influenced your sexuality.

EXERCISES

The three major words I could use to describe my mother's relationship to my father are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The three major words I could use to describe my father's relationship to my mother are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Fill in the blanks:

I assume that men will _____

I assume that women will _____

Spend a day turning these expectations on their head. How does the world change if you treat the opposite sex the opposite way?

How have the messages you learned about gender in your family affected your expression of your sexuality?

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being extremely happy and 10 being extremely unhappy, how happy are you with the gender you are?

Why or why not?

In what ways have societal definitions of gender-appropriate sexual roles affected your sexuality negatively? Complete each sentence about society, then complete each sentence about yourself, listing more empowering or less constricting gender role definition.

1. Society says I should be/ do _____

I give myself permission to be/ do _____

2. Society says I should be/ do _____

I give myself permission to be/ do _____

3. Society says I should be/ do _____

I give myself permission to be/ do _____



Chapter 5