

TRANSADVOCATE

Contextualizing the Body: Part II of the ‘Sexing the Body is Gender’ Series

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Abstract

Part II of the ‘Sexing the Body is Gender’ Series: Contextualizing the Body If one is talking about something that has chemistry and mass, one is not talking about the thoughts in one’s head. In this series, I will make this simple distinction knowing that there is robust and nuanced discussion around whether there is a biological predisposition that causes trans people to experience [...]

Article



Part II of the ‘Sexing the Body is Gender’ Series: Contextualizing the Body

If one is talking about something that has chemistry and mass, one is not talking about the thoughts in one’s head. In this series, I will make this simple distinction knowing that there is robust and nuanced discussion around whether there is a biological predisposition that causes trans people to experience our bodies in the way we do. For the purpose of this post, I will make a distinction between that which we take to be the mental functions of the brain and what we generally take to be physically tangible.

With that caveat made, as a simple rule of thumb, the difference between one's sex attributes and one's gender is:

sex attribute = physical phenomena

gender = mental phenomena

Even if we speak of gender as an endophenotype, we are still speaking of gender as an evolutionary process/force and not a substance. In other words, if the environment can shape biology and if biology has anything to do with behavior, then the resulting behavior might be measured and the results categorized. For instance:

Men's and women's opportunities and decisions are in part constrained by social structures, institutions, policies, and norms. Over time, these constraints lead to gender differences in health and behavior that create, sustain, or intensify underlying biological sexual dimorphisms. - OA Genetics 2013 Jul 01;1(1):8.

In this way, one aspect of what we think of as gender can be regarded as an evolutionary force and if we speak of gender as an effect of epigenetics which may trigger genetic predispositions towards being trans, we are still talking about a process or the effect of a process and not any specific substance.



Figure 1. Gender: It's not a substance that lives in your brain.

Gender is not a material produced by our genitals that takes up residence in the brain in that it has no independent existence outside the human mind. In whatever context we choose to discuss gender, we generally recognize that gender isn't material. While physical attributes exist, the conversations we have about those physical states and, specifically, what they mean to the entirety of a human body individually and collectively is gender. Moreover, these conversations are always shaped by

sociohistoric realities.

While most are able to readily accept this simple premise, the logic behind it seems to be lost on TERFs. For TERFs, sexing an entire body as a sex attribute, according to their worldview, isn't gender. Instead, the mental checklists we use to conceptualize a human body as a sex attribute is, apparently, a real substance.

Sex = body contextualization

It is important to note that there is a difference between our (mental) contextualization of a physical phenomena and the physical phenomena itself. For instance, there is a difference between a sound and the mental contextualization of that sound. Contextualization is the process of organizing data as being situationally and functionally interconnected to other concepts. In other words, depending on one's experience, two people may hear the same sound differently. One person may hear the sound of a strange bird chirp while another might hear the resulting chirp of a car alarm becoming armed. In short, a sound is itself different than our understanding of that sound.

With this distinction between a physical phenomena and our mental contextualization of that physical phenomena in mind, recall that sex attributes and gender are different as well. A sex attribute is a physical phenomena while gender is our mental contextualization of that attribute - in all its myriad ways, both complex and nuanced - personally and collectively. The thoughts we have about the body as a binary sex is gender.[1]

The terms we use to collectively group and therefore conceptualize sex are nuanced cultural artifacts. Sexing a body is different than having a body that has some male and/or female sex attributes. A lexical binary body labeling system has no existence independent of the human mind. Yes, sex attributes really do exist; however, gender - the labeling of and inevitable contextualization of sex attributes - exist within the human mind. When we sex a body, we are mentally moving the totality of a human body into an intertextual binary.[2]

Socially, gender is the mental contextualization of a human body as a sex attribute which, consequently, must fit into a binary mold. Subjectively, gender is the sex labels we utilize, the emotional states and contextual memories associated with those labels, our mental embodiment of self as being related to those labels, the way we subjectively experience our body, the way we communicate - express - these understandings, our understanding of the way our society responds to these expressions and our awareness of the normative sex-designated cultural structures that are collectively reinforced. ALL of this (and more) is how we mentally contextualize sex attributes, which is to say, how we do gender.

Guide to the Sexing the Body is Gender Series

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NOTES:

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