CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES IN EDUCATION

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LM Learning Matters
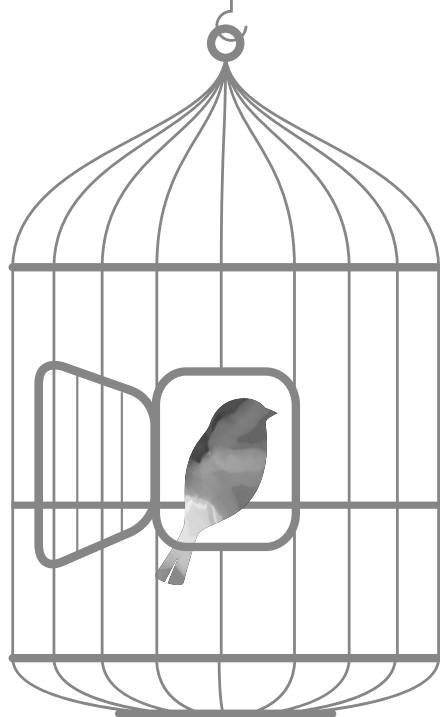
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THE FORMATION OF GENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

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KEYWORDS

- SEX-BASED DIFFERENCES
- SEX
- INTERSEX
- GENDER
- SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY
- SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY
- SOCIALISATION
- GENDER IDENTITY
- GENDER STEREOTYPE DEFINITION
- GENDER STEREOTYPE FORMATION

THIS CHAPTER

- defines and explores terms of reference, including sex, gender and gender stereotypes;
- explores key theories that explain the development of a gendered self;
- examines when gender stereotypes form and how they shape our experience in life.

INTRODUCTION

> *Men really DO have bigger brains: the amazing image that reveals just how male and female brains are wired differently.*

This is the title of an article published in the *Daily Mail* (Prigg, 2014). There are many more articles like this that illustrate just how much attention is given to differences between the sexes. Think for a moment about how many times you have heard phrases such as 'battle of the sexes' or 'the opposite sex', or even 'men are from Mars and women are from Venus' – a throwback to the relationships book by John Gray (1992). Have you ever commented or heard someone else refer to girls/women as more patient, considerate, empathetic or considerate to the needs of others than boys/men? Or have you heard or joked yourself that women are better at multitasking than men? Or perhaps you have heard someone grumble about 'women drivers'! You will have seen many examples that relate to children in education and in everyday life (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1   Gender stereotypes

Girls	Boys
Pink	Blue
Dolls	Lego
Playing house	Playing outdoors
Princesses	Superheroes
Caring	Tough
Quiet	Loud
Gentle	Rough

At the root of these stereotypes is the idea that girls/women and boys/men possess innate characteristics that stem from their biological make-up and distinguish them not only as different, but as complete opposites. The idea that people can be divided into two discrete groups – females and males, each group with characteristics that go beyond physical differences – has been the subject of a great deal of debate. Some people question the extent to which females and males are different, while others argue that any differences which do exist stem from cultural influences, and they are not biologically determined. We will explore these debates and binary assumptions surrounding gender in more detail in this chapter, then in Chapter 3 we will turn to non-binary gender and explore the experience of transgender children and young people.

Your personal experiences will have a strong influence on how you make sense of this topic, so we have included questions to help you reflect on your own experiences, values and ideas throughout the chapter. To get started, pause now to reflect on your own views on sex differences.

REFLECTION

- In what ways do you think females and males are different?
- Apply the differences you have identified into categories (e.g. physical differences, personality differences, cognitive differences).
- In your view, are these differences natural or innate – something we are born with – or do you believe there might be social or cultural reasons for these differences?

You can return to your answers to these questions after reading this chapter to see if your views have changed in any way, or perhaps your ideas will be confirmed!

WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH?

Sex-based differences

Research can help to establish the facts so that we can make informed judgements. Let's look at some of the evidence from three studies based on medical research, neuroscience and biobehavioural studies into sex-based differences (Blair, 2007; Ruigrok et al., 2014; Nostro et al., 2017). These studies show:

- Females have two X chromosomes but no Y chromosome. Males have one Y chromosome and one X chromosome. Some genes on the Y chromosome have no counterpart on X chromosomes. By contrast, in some cases, genes on the X chromosome can be found at higher levels in females than males.
- There are many differences relating to physiology and pathophysiology, meaning the physiological processes associated with disease or injury, such as the cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and immune systems, as well as the cellular mechanisms of sex steroid hormone actions on non-reproductive tissues.
- Receptors for sex steroid hormones (androgens, oestrogens and progestins) are present in many tissues that do not have a reproductive function, such as the heart, bone, skeletal muscle, vasculature, liver, immune system and brain.
- The male heart has a significantly greater left ventricular mass and chamber size than females.
- Males tend to have a larger skeletal and muscular structure and are, on average, larger than females.
- Females tend to have a wider pelvis for giving birth.
- Males have larger overall brain volumes than females, and differences have also been found in regions of the brain.

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- Some of these differences are associated with different mental health conditions. Differences in the amygdala, hippocampus and insula are areas implicated in sex-biased neuropsychiatric conditions.
- Female brains are nearly four years younger than males, in terms of how they age.
- Tests to assess whether differences in grey matter volume relate to personality traits have found no significant correlations between personality scales. However, significant associations have been found for neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness in males, which may be due to interplays between hormones or differences in brain organisation.

As these examples from studies of sex-based differences show, there are many physiological differences between females and males that have important implications for understanding health conditions and healthcare (Blair, 2007). However, this does not tell us that men are from Mars and women are from Venus! Personality–brain relationships remain unknown (Nostro et al., 2017), and there is no evidence that brain size or structure is linked in any way to brain function (Ruigrok et al., 2014).

REFLECTION

- List some differences that you have observed between different males that you know.
- Now repeat this exercise, focusing this time on females that you know.
- Consider what these females and males have in common.
- Refer to your previous reflections to see if your views have changed in any way.
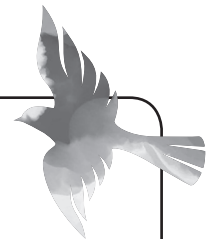
One of the problems of focusing on biological differences is that insufficient attention is paid to what we have in common. Many people argue that the distinction made between females and males polarises relations between women and men in ways that subordinates or marginalises women by assigning them an inferior status (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004). One way to overcome this is to deconstruct sex-based differences, to examine what men and women have in common as opposed to ways that they might be different. Another way is to view masculinities and femininities as a continuum rather than in bipolar ways.

Thus far, we have only considered two sex categories – females and males – when in fact some people are classed as having intersex traits. This means they are born with physical or biological characteristics that do not fit with traditional definitions of female or male. It is difficult to know how many people are born intersex in the UK because under the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, the

law in England, Wales and Northern Ireland requires the sex of a baby to be given on the birth certificate as female or male. Births are normally registered within 42 days, but the guidance for an intersex child is that registration is deferred until medical investigations are complete. Even though this may take longer than usual, there is still no intersex category of registration, so the child is assigned a sex based on medical advice. Because of this, published records on the proportion of the population that is born intersex are difficult to find in the UK. However, one UK charity estimates around 150 children born in the UK each year undergo tests into their sexual assignment (DSD Families, 2019). The Intersex Initiative in the US estimates that 1 in 2,000 children are born visibly intersex (Intersex Initiative, 2008). Reports from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights estimate that between 0.05 and 1.7 per cent of the population is born with intersex traits (OHCHR, n.d.).

Research with intersex persons plays a crucial role in understanding gender identity formation. One study of 24 intersex people found that with two partial exceptions, the sex given at birth corresponded to the gender identity of the participants. The author of the study concluded that gender identity is not determined prenatally by biology, but learnt postnatally through socialisation into the sex we are assigned at birth (Lev-Ran, 1974). The author appears to be overly ambitious with their claims, since recent work suggests that children with intersex traits suffer from shame, stigma, abuse and many human rights violations (OHCHR, n.d.).

WHAT IS GENDER?

The term 'gender' is so widely used today that it is easy to think it has always been in common use. In fact, it seems to have first appeared in this context in the 1950s in the work of John Money, a psychologist specialising in sexual identity and the biology of identity (Ehrhardt, 2007). The term 'gender' became more widely used in the 1960s, mostly due to Robert Stoller, who is credited with being the first person to distinguish between sex and gender. The writer and sociologist Ann Oakley drew on Stoller's work in her own account of gender in the 1970s, and her work remains influential today.

Put in its simplest form, Oakley (1972) argued that sex is biological whereas gender is learnt through processes of socialisation. According to Oakley, it is not our biology that determines who we are, how we behave or what we become; it is society that makes girls/women and boys/men as different as they are. Proponents of socialisation theory argue that while sex distinguishes us as women or men, according to the make-up of our chromosomes, reproductive systems, genitalia and other physio-logical features, it is society that creates much greater distinctions between the sexes. It is through socialisation that we learn socially constructed notions of femininity and masculinity. These distinc-tions are reinforced through girls' and boys' toys, books, games and activities, such as dolls, prams and playhouses for girls and action toys for boys. The process of learning social rules and norms that govern appropriate behaviour for a girl or boy begins at birth, and is reinforced through the family, school, peers and the media, as well as religion and the culture of the society in which we grow up. From this perspective, gender is defined as a 'system of social practices' (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999, p192). While there are many different forces of gender socialisation, the family has the most profound and lasting effect (Bradley, 2007). We would like you to consider these ideas as you read the following case study.

CASE STUDY

The beauty queen

I recall becoming acutely aware of my gender at a very young age, around the time when I was 2–3 years old. While I did not spend all of my time thinking that, significant experiences have stayed in my memory. The first was a beauty competition I was entered into when I was around 2 years old. I recall a flurry of activity and preparation leading up to the day, my mum's excitement deliberating over what I should wear and what to do with my unruly hair. Nothing seemed to be more important in the lead-up to the big day!

I recall arriving at the summer fayre where the beauty competition would take place. Pretty stalls lined the green and I distinctly recall there was a donkey derby race taking place. It was a lovely hot sunny day. I was ushered into a marquee full of mothers who were busily dressing their little girls. I sensed their anxiety as they gazed at the other little girls and compared them with their own. Even at that age, the pressure to be beautiful and compete with other little girls on terms of beauty seemed wrong. I don't recall the pageant itself – I was probably too frozen with fear to remember it! What springs up next in my memory is hearing that I had won first prize, and the horrible realisation that I'd be on show again. I wriggled, squirmed and scrunched up my eyes when the trophy was handed over, and photographs were taken with local dignitaries. I felt like a terrible fraud. I hated every moment of it, but Mum was ecstatic all the same.

As this story illustrates, society creates rules and norms that shape what we view as appropriate activity for girls and boys, but this can change over time and space. Today, it is likely that a mother would be criticised for entering her daughter into a beauty competition. Indeed, she would probably struggle to find a beauty competition for children in the UK in the first place, since such events are no longer considered socially acceptable.

REFLECTION

- Pause and reflect on your own experiences growing up. When did you first become aware of your gender? How did that happen, and how did you feel?
- How did your gender shape your experiences growing up? What activities did you do? What toys did you play with? Were you expected to behave in a particular way (e.g. quiet, tough)?
- If you had been born a different sex, do you think your childhood experiences would have been different? If so, in what ways?

THE FORMATION OF THE GENDERED SELF

The question of how and when we form a gendered self has intrigued researchers for many decades, and there is now a large volume of research that can help us to understand aspects of children's thinking, as well as how that relates to their gender development.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory focuses on the context of socialisation. Bandura claimed that people who act as models in a child's environment, such as family, peers, teachers and characters on television, provide examples of behaviour that children observe, encode and may imitate. Although a child may imitate behaviour that is not considered appropriate for their gender, they are more likely to imitate a person with whom they identify who is therefore of the same sex. However, identification is more than a simple process of imitation; it involves the adoption of values, beliefs and behaviours. People in the child's company may respond by rewarding the child (e.g. 'Aren't you a good girl playing quietly with your dolls') or say something to curb unwelcome behaviour (e.g. 'Big boys don't cry'). Thus, responses from others can reinforce gender-appropriate behaviour. Children internalise those responses and behave in ways that earn approval. As part of a cycle of vicarious reinforcement, children learn by observing what happens to other people when they are rewarded or punished for particular behaviour. We would like you to consider these ideas when reading the following case study.

CASE STUDY

'Oh no, I'm a tomboy!'

I was around 3 years old, walking down the street one day; the conversation about tomboys started quite casually. Mum explained that tomboys were girls who exhibited the characteristics and behaviours of boys. Tomboys liked playing outdoors and getting dirty, she explained. I was very curious and puzzled about this. I asked lots of questions: How would I know if a girl was a tomboy? Did tomboys have short hair? Did tomboys wear boys' clothes? Why were tomboys bad children? What should I do if I met a tomboy? With each answer, it gradually dawned on me that she was saying I was a tomboy! I loved playing outdoors, digging up earth in the garden, exploring insects and worms, and even collected them in jam jars. In that vivid moment, I realised that I didn't behave in an appropriate manner for a girl. I needed to behave more like a girl!

Although people hold different views on sex and gender, most agree that gender identity is much more complex than it being a reflection of a person's biological sex. The problem for many people is that society places different rules and values on forms of femininity and masculinity. This fosters beliefs about what is appropriate behaviour for females and males, hence the idea that playing in mud is OK for boys, but not for girls, in this case study. However, as this case study also shows, children are not passive recipients of socialisation; they have the cognitive ability to question the forces acting upon them. This brings us to the role of cognition in gender identity formation.

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SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

Although Bandura's social learning theory has been very influential, and is still discussed widely today, critics argue that it places too great an emphasis on the role of the environment and does not adequately acknowledge cognitive processes that are at play. Bandura recognised this himself, and provided a more detailed consideration of cognitive learning processes in his later work, which he renamed social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Another well-known writer on cognitive perspectives is Lawrence Kohlberg. His account provides the foundation on which many other studies are built (Kohlberg, 1966). Kohlberg was interested in the cognitive judgements made by children about their gender identity, and he was particularly influenced by Piaget's (1961) idea that children are active learners, capable of interacting with their environment to construct mental models of the world. According to social cognitive theory, children are not passive recipients of environmental cues; they make their own judgements. Kohlberg applied these ideas to a study of gender identity. He believed that children learn gender roles and come to enact them through their cognitive understanding of the social world in terms of sex-role dimensions. According to Kohlberg, gender identity is a cognitive process, and it is that which influences behaviour, not biological instinct or cultural norms. Although the environment provides many opportunities for a child to learn about gender roles and cultural norms and values, children self-socialise because they actively seek out and organise information and act in accordance with that information. From this perspective, children only adhere to specific gender roles if they have developed an associated gender identity.

WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH?

Key themes from social learning and cognitive perspectives

Perry and Bussey (1979) studied 48 female and 48 male 8–9-year-old children. They found that the children's imitation of adult behaviour was strongly influenced by how strongly they believed the adult displayed behaviours appropriate to the child's sex.
This suggests that children evaluate adult behaviour rather than simply absorbing it. It suggests that there is an interplay between environmental factors and cognitive processes.

Ideas from social learning and cognitive perspectives were merged in the 1990s into social constructivist approaches. It is thought that female and male children differ in terms of their behaviour, interests and/or values for three key reasons:
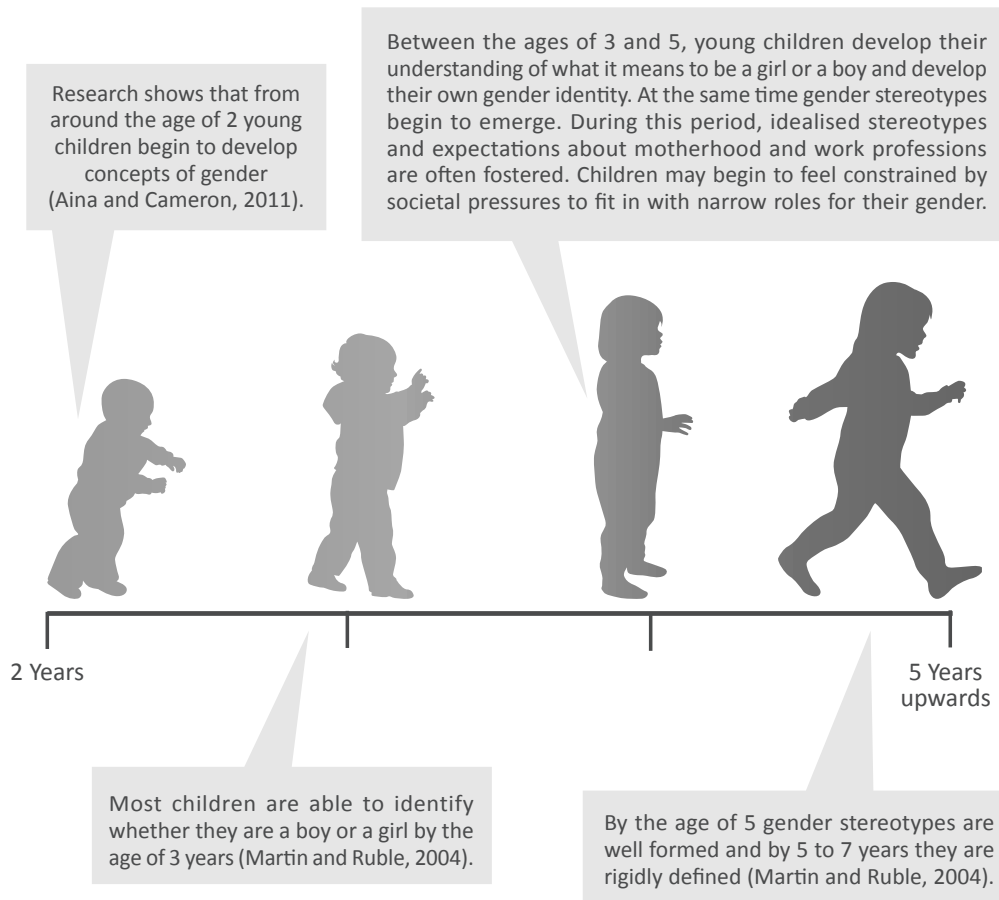
1.   children are shaped by adults;

2.   peers shape each other in accordance with the way they have been socialised;

3.   once children have developed a firm gender identity, they socialise themselves according to stereotypes for their gender.

(Bussey and Bandura, 1999)

Current thinking draws together ideas on gender development to suggest that the degree to which children will differ in the extent to which they align with gender stereotypes will depend on the strength of socialisation pressures, as well as the nature and coherence of gender schemas (cognitive frameworks that help us to organise and interpret information) relating to children's knowledge of characteristics and social expectations stereotypically associated with each sex (Maccoby, 2000).

When do gender stereotypes form?

What do we know from research?

Research shows that from around the age of 2 young children begin to develop concepts of gender (Aina and Cameron, 2011).

Between the ages of 3 and 5, young children develop their understanding of what it means to be a girl or a boy and develop their own gender identity. At the same time gender stereotypes begin to emerge. During this period, idealised stereotypes and expectations about motherhood and work professions are often fostered. Children may begin to feel constrained by societal pressures to fit in with narrow roles for their gender.

2 Years

5 Years upwards

Most children are able to identify whether they are a boy or a girl by the age of 3 years (Martin and Ruble, 2004).

By the age of 5 gender stereotypes are well formed and by 5 to 7 years they are rigidly defined (Martin and Ruble, 2004).

During primary and secondary education negative gender stereotyping can escalate into profound sexism.

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Aina, O.E. and Cameron, P.A. (2011) 'Why does gender matter? Counteracting stereotypes with young children', *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 39(3): 11-20.
Martin, C. and Ruble, D. (2004) 'Children's search for gender cues: cognitive perspectives on gender development', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(2): 67-70.

The research we have explored so far has focused on how children develop a gendered self. Next, we will explore when this takes place in a child's development, as well as the impact of gender stereotypes on children and young people.

WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH?

When do gender stereotypes form?

Kohlberg (1966) suggested that gender identity develops in three stages:

1. *Gender labelling*: Children can label themselves or other people as a girl or boy, mummy or daddy, but this is not stable over time. It can be influenced, for example, by a person's hairstyle or clothing.

2. *Gender stability*: Children form stable ideas about gender. For example, the notion that girls will become mummies and boys will become daddies is now stable over time. It does not change because of a person's physical appearance.

3. *Gender consistency*: Children develop a consistent view of gender that remains fixed over time and in different situations.

WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH?

Phases and ages of gender stereotype formation

- Research shows that from around the age of 2, young children begin to develop concepts of gender (Aina and Cameron, 2011).

- Most children are able to identify whether they are a boy or a girl by the age of 3 (Martin and Ruble, 2004).

- Between the ages of 3 and 5, young children develop their understanding of what it means to be a girl or a boy, as well as developing their own gender identity. At the same time, gender stereotypes begin to emerge. During this period, idealised stereotypes and expectations about motherhood and work professions are often fostered. Children may begin to feel constrained by societal pressures to fit in with narrow roles for their gender (Martin and Ruble, 2010).

- By the age of 5, gender stereotypes are well formed, and by 5–7 they are rigidly defined (Martin and Ruble, 2004).

- During primary and secondary education, negative gender stereotyping can escalate into profound sexism. Evidence of this is seen in research conducted with 1,634 teachers at primary and secondary schools in England and Wales:

  Gender stereotyping is a typical feature of school culture …. Sexual harassment is highly prevalent in schools. It is also gendered, overwhelmingly involving boys targeting girls …. Sexism and sexual harassment in schools has been normalized and is rarely reported …. The use of misogynistic language is commonplace in schools.

  (NEU and UK Feminista, 2017)

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The research report calls for consistent and ongoing action from schools, government and education bodies to tackle problems, and recommends that the Department for Education (DfE) urgently makes tackling sexism and sexual harassment in schools a policy priority. Further, it recommends training for Ofsted inspectors to enable them to take action. This includes inspections of initial teacher training (ITT) providers to assess whether the training course adequately equips trainees with the skills they need, as well as compulsory training for all trainee teachers. We will explore these issues in detail in Chapter 11.

HOW DO GENDER STEREOTYPES SHAPE OUR EXPERIENCES IN LIFE?

Gender stereotypes are a result of deeply rooted attitudes, values, norms and prejudices. Although they are often viewed in relation to girls and women, they shape the experiences of everyone. The gender stereotypes children encounter can profoundly influence:

- expectations of appropriate gender-based behaviour;
- academic preferences;
- perceptions of ability;
- perceptions of status and worth;
- access to equitable educational opportunities;
- interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships;
- physical and psychological wellbeing;
- career choice;
- access to equitable work opportunities and economic wellbeing;
- regard for self and others.

Thus, gender stereotypes can squash talent, limit educational experiences and achievement, and corrode aspirations, which in turn can limit professional opportunities and prospects.

REFLECTION

- What gender stereotypes did you encounter growing up?
- What examples of gender stereotypes have you observed in education or your practice setting?
- How prepared do you feel to tackle gender stereotyping in your work environment?

We don't expect you to have the answers to these questions, but by understanding our own knowledge and confidence gaps we can begin to think about acting to close those gaps.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined when and how gender identity forms and gender stereotypes take root. Some of the terms we have looked at so far include:

- *Sex*: Described in the *Oxford Dictionary* (2019) as 'Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions'.

- *Intersex*: The condition of having both male and female sex organs or other sexual characteristics.

- *Gender*: By contrast, viewed as 'Either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female' (Lexico, 2020). Following Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999), this book defines gender as a 'system of social practices' (p192).

- *Gender identity*: Refers to a person's sense of their own gender, regardless of whether this corresponds to the sex they were given at birth or if they are female or male.

- *Gender stereotypes*: Defined as 'preconceived ideas whereby females and males are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender' (GEC, 2015).

FURTHER READING

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