

Identity and gender

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chapter

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we are going to focus on an important dimension of identity, gender, and look at two significant claims about the way identity is constructed. First, we are going to investigate Kath Woodward's claim in the previous chapter, that gender identities are shaped by many different factors: individual and collective; biological and social. We are going to suggest that gender illuminates the complex multiple origins and practices of identity very clearly, because it allows us to explore our capacity for agency, and the social and biological structures that constrain our freedom to choose our gender identities.

In practice, biological and social differences between women and men are sufficiently important that we often use different words to describe them. This distinction between **sex** and **gender** is sometimes a very useful tool in the social sciences, because it allows us to concentrate on social differences between women and men, without worrying too much about biological differences. The problem with this distinction is that often biological and social influences are very tangled. Woodward's passport example clearly shows this tangling. Official documents do not actually use the word 'gender'; they use the word 'sex' instead, and everyone is categorized as either male or female. Many official documents, such as passports, birth certificates and death certificates, record sex explicitly. Many social scientists prefer to use the term gender to describe this area of difference, as it encompasses cultural and social practices *and* the bodies we inhabit. The use of the word gender suggests interconnections between culture and the body, rather than asserting a distinct separation between sex and gender, which is difficult and unrealistic to sustain.

Our second claim is that the way we construct our identities is strongly influenced by a set of often rather stereotypically **feminine** and **masculine** characteristics and traits that we often associate with gender categories, with women and with men. But women and men are not each made from a single mould. There are many different kinds of women and men, and different traits may apply to some more than to others. Behind the apparent simplicity of two genders, there is a diversity of gender characteristics, and many different influences are at work.

All societies have ways of differentiating between women and men, and between femininity and masculinity. These differences are often expressed through stereotypical language, through words which are associated with women and with men. The activity which follows includes some examples of this kind of language.

ACTIVITY 2.1

Let's look at some of these stereotypical characteristics. Table 2.1 contains 45 different terms which might be used to describe people. Which, if any, of these words would you apply to yourself?

Sex

Sex is a biological classification.

Gender

Gender includes the social attributes associated with being a woman or a man in a particular society.

Feminine and masculine

Terms which are applied to the qualities particular societies associate with women and men.

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Reflect on the terms that you have chosen, and what they say about your identity. Do you think you are typically masculine or feminine?

TABLE 2.1 Some words that could be typical of one gender or another

tall	tender	arrogant
lucky	active	jealous
humane	proud	individualistic
tactful	modest	commanding
athletic	intuitive	unpretentious
weak	kind	passive
benevolent	decisive	conventional
assertive	unfriendly	strong
irresponsible	tidy	co-operative
perceptive	playful	robust
anxious	unemotional	reponsive
gentle	informal	flexible
vulnerable	calm	acute
dignified	vigorous	cheerful
crude	faithful	timid

Your responses will vary according to how you see yourself and the culture you are from. However, as we have seen, how you see yourself is only one part of identity. Now let's look more at the social side of identity, and consider how these different traits might be categorized by society as a whole, so that some are associated with men and others with women.

ACTIVITY 2.2

Look through the list of character descriptions in Table 2.1 again. For each one, write down whether you think it is thought to be typical of men or women in general, or neither, in your culture today.

COMMENT

Table 2.2 shows a gendered categorization of these traits, based on a small survey which we carried out in the UK. This shows how they can be regarded as culturally typical of women and of men in a particular society. Look again at your answers to Activities 2.1 and 2.2 in the light of this possible classification. There is clearly scope for disagreement here. Look specifically for differences between this classification and your answers, and think about why these differences might exist.

TABLE 2.2 Typically feminine and typically masculine characteristics

Feminine characteristics	Masculine characteristics	Neutral characteristics
anxious	active	acute
co-operative	arrogant	benevolent
faithful	assertive	calm
gentle	athletic	cheerful
humane	commanding	conventional
intuitive	crude	dignified
kind	decisive	flexible
passive	individualistic	informal
perceptive	irresponsible	jealous
responsible	proud	lucky
tactful	robust	modest
tender	strong	playful
tidy	tall	unfriendly
timid	unemotional	unpretentious
vulnerable	vigorous	weak

Categorizations like these reveal some aspects of how society and culture describe, and prescribe, gender-appropriate behaviours, qualities, and characteristics. These categories are not only the product of everyday exchanges; they can even be used in psychological testing, to classify and to measure the way we see ourselves.

How then can we use categorization to explore our two claims – the multiple sources of gender identity and the role of gender stereotypes?

In this chapter, we begin by looking at one theory of identity formation: *self-categorization theory*. Then, in Section 3, we will look at the development of gender identity in children, and in Section 4 we will look at the effects of gender identity on school performance.

SUMMARY

- Gender is a key dimension of identity.
- Gender identity is influenced by individual and collective and social and biological factors.
- Gender identities are often associated with stereotypically feminine and masculine traits.

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2 GENDER IDENTITY AND SELF-CATEGORIZATION

Where does identity, and gender identity in particular, actually come from? We are going to focus on one account of the origins of gender identity by Turner and his colleagues (Turner *et al.*, 1987) called *self-categorization theory*. This explanation is rather like Althusser's concept of *interpellation*, described by Woodward in Chapter 1, Section 4.1.

In Althusser's account of identity, people are interpellated, or hailed, when they see a representation of a category and think, 'yes, that's me'. Look at Figure 1.2 in Section 4.1 of Chapter 1. Quite literally, people were encouraged to *identify* with representations like this. Advertisements do this quite explicitly sometimes, although at other times the process may be more subtle. These representations connect individuals to groups, and by becoming members of groups individuals take on new identities. The word 'identify' is telling: it signifies that the relationship between the individual and the representation has an emotional quality, an 'empathy', as well as a feeling of sameness. This is important to identity; it has a real feeling of personal involvement. Identity matters, at a personal level as well as a social one.

2.1 Explaining identity: self-categorization theory

Turner and his colleagues' theory claims that identity is shaped by self-categorization; by people looking at social categories, and deciding whether or not they are in a category. If they consider themselves a member of a category, that category becomes part of their identity. The explanation given by Turner's self-categorization theory works like this:

- 1 We see people as members of social categories.
- 2 We also see ourselves as members of social categories.
- 3 We take on identities appropriate to the social categories with which we identify.

Identity, then, includes people's notions of who they are, of what kind of people they are, and their relationships with others. It is therefore closely related to the *groups* – the social categories – that they see themselves as belonging to. So, for example, if Chris has an identity as a woman, this means that (a) she sees people divided into gender categories of women and men, and (b) she sees herself more as a member of the category of women.

Turner and his colleagues claim that similarity and difference influence self-categorization, and therefore identity. In effect, people are more likely to

identify with a category they are similar to, compared with a category that is more different. The more different the person in the image is from you, the less likely you are to identify with it. Women would have been more likely to identify with the image in Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1 than men were.

So far, we have said very little about how gender categories actually work. We know that we refer to them using words like 'women' and 'men'. And to some extent we know what is going on inside them: we know there are traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics associated with each category, although these may vary between times and cultures. But to understand Turner's explanation properly, we need to be clearer about how we decide which gender category someone is in? This is central to steps 1 and 2 of Turner's explanation.

Let's look at an example of this happening in practice. What happens when a child is born? What category, *male* or *female*, will be written on their birth certificate? And what factors, biological or social, influence this categorization?

2.2 Gender categories: 'Is it a boy, or is it a girl?'

Lord Melchett The whisper on the underground grapevine, ma'am, is that Lord Blackadder is spending all his time with a young boy in his service.

Queen Elizabeth I Oh. Do you think he'd spend more time with me if I was a boy?

Lord Melchett Surely not, ma'am.

Nursie You almost were a boy, my little cherry pip.

Queen Elizabeth I What?

Nursie Yeah. Out you popped from your mummy's tumkin and everyone shouted, 'It's a boy! It's a boy!' And then someone said 'But it hasn't got a wrinkle!' And then I said, 'A boy without a wrinkle! God be praised – it's a miracle! A boy without a wrinkle!' And then Sir Thomas More pointed out that a boy without a wrinkle is a girl, and everyone was really disappointed.

Lord Melchett Yes, well, you see he was a very perceptive man, Sir Thomas More.

Source: Elton and Curtis, 1998, pp.123–4

In the days of Queen Elizabeth I, practically the only significant factor which decided at birth whether the child was a girl or boy was the appearance of their genitalia – in effect, whether or not they had a 'wrinkle'. In this respect little has changed since then. Children are put into one of two categories

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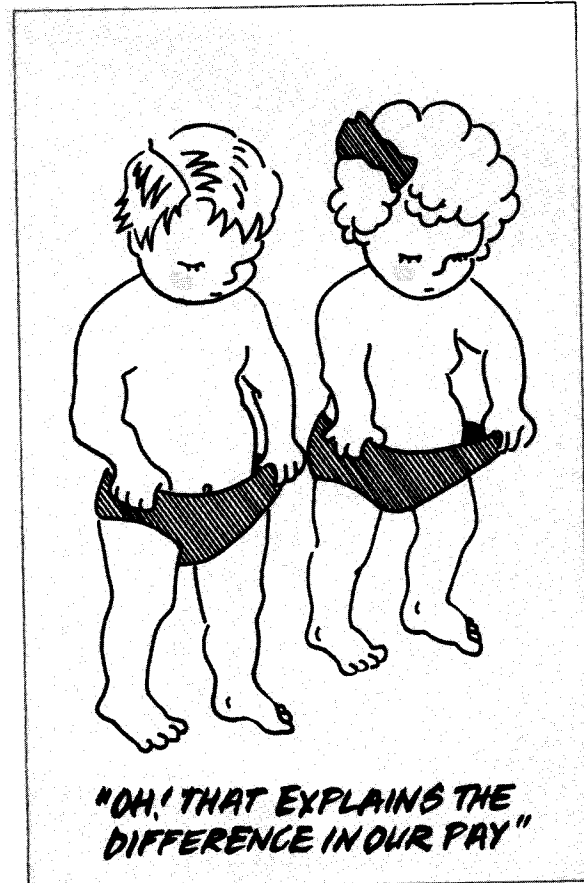
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according to these physical characteristics at birth. But is this really enough to define someone's gender? For Freud, as discussed in Chapter 1, Section 3.3, it was certainly very important. A child's psycho-sexual development depends on identifying with others of the same sex – and in this, Freud's explanation of gender relates to a child's self-categorization. And Freud, like Sir Thomas More, thought that girls' gender was significantly formed by the *absence* of a penis. This is illustrative of unequal power relations between the genders; the anatomical evidence is being used to reinforce a distinction that matters to society.

There is another problem with using anatomical evidence to define gender. In society, we usually wear clothes that hide a lot of our bodies. While for the most part we do not reveal our genitalia to people we meet casually, we usually have little problem deciding whether they are men or women. Because people usually wear clothes which present gender cues, social evidence is complicated by bodily evidence. Furthermore, because of the clothes, we can't usually see the anatomical evidence to help us tell the difference between women and men. So are there any other, more reliable, sources of evidence that we could use instead, to tell the difference between the gender categories?

A second possible way to tell the difference between men and women is to use genetic evidence. Inside every cell in the human body is a number of long strings of the chemical DNA, called chromosomes. Of these, two, called the X and Y chromosomes, are called sex chromosomes. Generally speaking, humans either have two X chromosomes (and develop physically as women) or one X and one Y chromosome (and develop physically as men). So instead of checking for physical differences, we could use the genetic difference between women and men to define sex.

But there are problems with using genetic evidence to decide who should go into which category, just as there was with the bodily anatomical evidence. This time, it is the occasionally blurred boundary between the categories that shows the problem most clearly. Very rarely, people have more than two sex chromosomes; for example, people may have two Xs and one Y. But because females usually have two Xs, and males an X and a Y, these genetic intermediates could be categorized either way. Physically, too, they may have a mixture of bodily characteristics that makes categorization less certain than usual.



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One solution to this problem is to define the categories more precisely. For example, Connell (1987) gives the example of the International Olympic Committee which decided simply to *define* all people with an intermediate pattern of chromosomes as men, so regardless of physical appearance they would not be allowed to participate in women's events. To categorize people at the Olympic Games, genetic tests are used, rather than physical checks. But this definition was made by a committee to maintain the status of the Games. The decision to use genetic evidence to define the categorization was made by a controlling social group. This has created problems for the individuals concerned, who suddenly find themselves re-categorized. Once again, biology does not give us a complete explanation of gender difference. Neither bodily nor genetic differences work all the time. Is there anywhere else we can look for a more certain account of the gender difference?

Another possibility is to argue that the difference between boys and girls is socially constructed. One hint of this is in the birth certificate itself. After birth, it is the birth certificate itself that defines sex, at least in the UK. Although the sex written on the certificate is based on biological evidence about our bodies at birth, and this evidence is assessed by a (presumably expert) doctor before being written into the formal certificate, the birth certificate then takes on a life of its own. It is this document that counts for

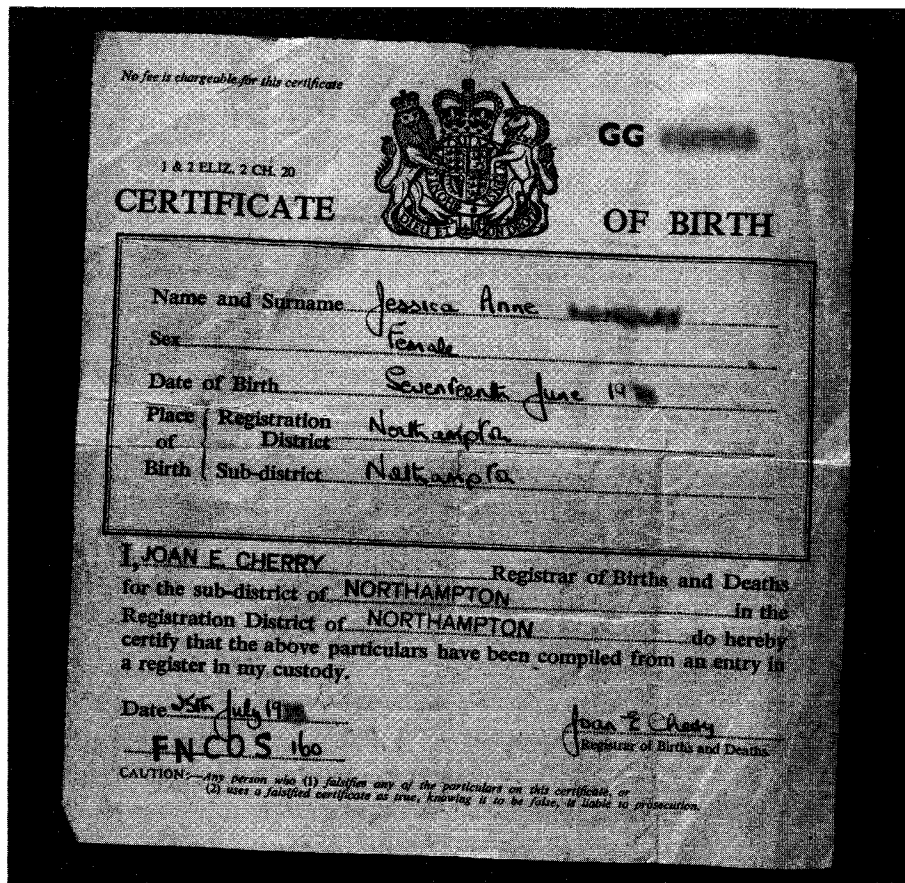


FIGURE 2.1 Official proof that we exist?

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So wherever we look we find that social and biological influences are tangled. At the bodily level, and at the genetic level, there are social influences at work, and at the social level there are biological influences at work. Many factors contribute to defining gender: the way we dress and cut our hair, the genetic information inside our cells, and the form of our bodies. No single set of these defines, unambiguously, whether we are men or women.

Something else about the gender categories may have struck you. Why are there two categories? Why are there not many more categories to cover the diversity of experience? Why are people not all in one gender category? After all, the differences between men and women are pretty small compared with the similarities between them. This is a tricky issue, which we will come back to in Section 3, but remember what Woodward said in the previous chapter: *identity is marked by difference*. Categories, such as gender categories, can reflect an *unequal* relationship of *us* (those inside the category) and *them* (those outside, in a different category). The differences between us as individuals are reduced compared with the larger differences between *us* and *them*. In other words, without difference, there could not be such a thing as identity; without a *them* there could never be an *us*. Categories, such as the gender categories that we have investigated, are organized into systems which make 'us and them' possible.

2.3 Are we free to change our gender identity?

In current UK law, even if bodily evidence is changed, there is as yet no way for a person's legal sex to be changed accordingly. This is because, in the UK, someone's legal sex is defined by the sex assigned at birth. What is commonly called a 'sex change' operation (more correctly known as 'gender reassignment') does not affect a person's legal sex, and they can still only legally marry someone of the opposite sex to that on their birth certificate. Although someone may adopt a new gender by changing their clothes, their behaviour, and even their body, the birth certificate constrains their use of the new gender. The birth certificate takes the uncertainties of gender, and hides them as far as the law is concerned. In the UK, people are not completely free to choose their gender identity.

There are two stories we can tell about what defines gender categories. According to the first story, there is an *essence* to a category, which things have if they are in the category, and do not have if they are not in the category. Having a penis, or having a Y chromosome, are good examples of this kind of essence to the category 'male'. This story about categories is

Essentialist

This viewpoint regards, say, having a Y chromosome as essential to being a male and reduces gender to one factor. An account of identity in general and gender identity in particular which reduces gender to possession of a single characteristic or essence.

called **essentialist**, because it regards, say, having a Y chromosome, as essential to being male and reduces gender to one factor. All other gender characteristics, such as those categorized as masculine in Table 2.2 above, would simply be consequences of having this essence. However, as we discussed earlier, there do not seem to be any essential characteristics, at either the bodily, genetic, or social level, that unambiguously decide gender category membership.

In the second story, there are no clear criteria as to whether or not something is in the category. Instead, the category is rather fuzzy. Although most of the cases may be really clear, there are a few unclear cases around the edges. This story about categories is non-essentialist, simply because there is no essence to the category; many factors contribute to the gender categories. As we have seen, gender categories seem to be non-essentialist in character.

Essentialist categories claim to be clear and immutable, so they tend to remain fixed. Fuzzy categories, on the other hand, can and do drift a bit, so what it is to be a woman, or man, may vary as times and cultures change.

2.4 Gender stereotypes

Essentialist categories have important consequences. Essences are all or nothing – you are either in the category or outside it, but there is no in-between. With non-essentialist categories, you can be more or less in the category. There is a lot more room for diversity. People can be more or less typical representatives of the gender categories that they belong to. There are many kinds of men and women – typical men and atypical men, and similarly typical women and atypical women, rather than just men and women – although what counts as typical will vary between cultures. Typical men, for example, might have most of the characteristics that we would expect of ‘men in general’. Atypical men have rather fewer of the characteristics we might expect; they might, for example, be bored by sport on television, not have a car to wash on Sunday afternoons, or they might enjoy doing the washing up.

Typicality, as we have cast it, looks a bit like masculinity or femininity. Is this the case? Where do these ‘typical’ features that we associate with gender categories come from? Look back at Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1. This image is interesting because it represents a stereotype of femininity at a particular time. A **stereotype** is a simplified, and possibly exaggerated, representation of the most common typical characteristics associated with a category. Despite the fact that it may be biased, it often, although not always, has a grain of truth (look at your responses to Activities 2.1 and 2.2 if you are not convinced). Stereotypes are usually either positively or negatively biased, although different people may hold very differently valued stereotypes. Positive stereotypes, such as the image of the pregnant woman in the workplace in Figure 1.3 in the previous chapter, often encourage identification. Negative

Stereotype

A simplified representation of the most typical characteristics associated with a category.

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stereotypes, on the other hand, are associated with prejudice. The word 'prejudice' means judging people *before* you have met them, and this is exactly how both positive and negative stereotypes work, although they may continue to influence our perceptions afterwards for good and for ill.

This link with identification is important, as it suggests that stereotypes – particularly positive stereotypes – are linked with identity. In fact, Turner and his colleagues' explanation makes a clear claim: that positive stereotypes are generally linked to, and defined by, the *in-group* (the one you are a member of) and negative stereotypes tend to be linked to, and defined by, the *out-group* (the one which is different, which you are not a member of). Because of this difference between the groups, the positive and negative stereotypes tend to reflect, and even reinforce, Woodward's unequal relationship of *us and them*.

2.5 Masculinities and femininities

Stereotypes do not just shape the way we perceive other people, they also shape the way we behave. People are active players in the development and construction of their own identities. People can, within limits, change themselves to fit their understanding and views of gender. As part of this, people often adopt gender-typical behaviour to form and fit with the identities that they construct. Identity is not just something we achieve, nor something that is just thrust upon us; it has elements of both.

Looking back at Activities 2.1 and 2.2, you should now find that categorization makes more sense of stereotypes. The characteristics in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 are illustrative of the gender stereotypes. But where did these characteristics come from?

We selected these characteristics by running a small experiment. We put together a big pool of possible traits, and presented it to a panel of judges. These judges were asked to rate each characteristic by how strongly gender-linked it was. We treated the judges not as giving a correct categorization, but simply as a window on to one particular culture – in this case, the UK in 1999. Other cultures are rather different, and times change, so there may be some significant differences between different cultures' interpretations of the traits in Table 2.1, and about what is considered gender-appropriate in a culture. Sandra Bem conducted a study in the USA in the 1970s (Bem, 1974). Her findings suggested that there were distinct and recognizable characteristics associated with femininity and masculinity in the USA at the time. There have been some shifts. Today, in the UK, it may be more acceptable for men to exhibit feminine traits, but in other ways not so much has changed.

Something else might have struck you about the character descriptions in Tables 2.1 and 2.2; the descriptions are not equally valued within a culture, although the characteristics that are most valued will vary between cultures.

For example, men are described as individualistic, assertive, and athletic, women as intuitive, perceptive, and tactful. Bem recognized this issue: in her study she interpreted the feminine and masculine, not as opposites, but as different dimensions, as shown in Figure 2.2. Bem considered it possible to be both masculine and feminine at the same time (she called this type of person 'androgynous'), or to be neither masculine nor feminine (she called this 'undifferentiated'). She wanted to abandon the common-sense opposition of feminine and masculine, and offer freedom for a greater diversity of masculinities and femininities, allowing both women and men to be free agents, able to take on the valued characteristics.

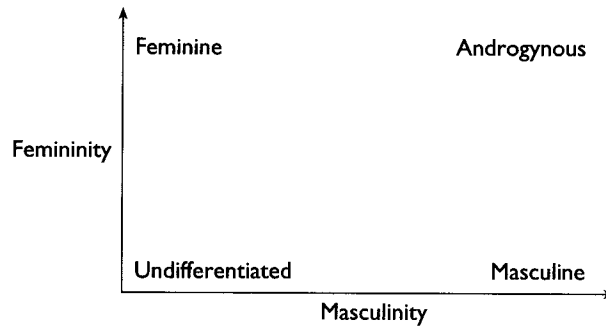


FIGURE 2.2 Dimensions of femininity and masculinity in Bem's Sex Role Inventory

Source: Turner, 1995, Figure 6, p.17

SUMMARY

- Turner and his colleagues use *self-categorization theory* as an account of identity, an account that links with Althusser's notion of interpellation.
- Self-categorization theory suggests that identity is shaped by the categories with which we label ourselves and identify.
- Gender categories show biological, social, and possibly even genetic, factors at work, but no clear single influence dominates.
- Gender categories are also associated with stereotypes, which may be either positive or negative, and which can reinforce the relationship of 'us and them'.

So far, we have looked in considerable detail at adults' gender categories, and at how they might work to shape the construction of our gender identities. In Section 3 we will explore how children construct and take on identities as they develop.

3

In this section we explore childhood gender identities. We have already seen the use of gender categories: simplistic; but we become more developed in our search for a necessary path to gender identity about childhood.

We look at

- At what age children develop gender identities
- At what age children begin to identify themselves as a gender
- Are you a gender expert if so in what way
- How are gender identities constructed

What evidence do we have of children's gender preferences and categorizations?

