Issues in Interdisciplinarity 2018-19/Disciplinary Categories and Their Effect On Gender Perception

< [Issues in Interdisciplinarity 2018-19](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19)

This article will analyse the categorisation of gender through various disciplines. Exhibiting the relevant issues in each case suggest that the use of interdisciplinarity could help us arrive at more holistic inferences on such a controversial subject.

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# Disciplinary Categories

Disciplinary categories are results of breaking down academia into its constituent subject topics, termed disciplines, based on their content and [research methods](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Research_Methods/Types_of_Research). These disciplines are then assigned to broad categories like [humanities](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Humanities), [social sciences](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Social_sciences), and [natural sciences](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Natural_Science_department). They are devised to organise various fields of knowledge, resulting in many institutions sharing the same system of classification. Consequently, they appear universal and absolute. However, dissent arises not only on the labels of categories, but also their non-mutually exclusive content. For instance, [Economics](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Economics) can be a social science or an empirical science depending on the use of a [qualitative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qualitative_research) or [quantitative approach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantitative_research)[[1]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-1). Fluctuations in disciplinary categories have also been witnessed over time and in different geographical locations, such as the creation of [gender studies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_studies), initially [women’s studies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_studies), as a new discipline in the 20th century [West](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_world)[[2]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-2).

Similar issues of categorisation occur in human identification under the lenses of [gender](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender) and [sexuality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_sexuality).

# Categorising Humans

Upon first interaction with a person, it takes only 600ms to recognise their sex[[3]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-3). The human brain immediately begins categorising the person based on factors like [sex](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex), [race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_(human_categorization)), and [age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ageing)[[4]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-4). However, studies increasingly reveal the ambiguity of boundaries between the elements of these categories[[5]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-5). French sociologist [Christine Delphy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christine_Delphy) observes that most work on gender presupposes that ‘sex precedes gender’[[6]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-6); sex being a biological function and gender a cultural identifier to separate traditional masculinity and femininity. However, an incoherence arises upon viewing the issue from different disciplines, indicating that the categorisation is not as universal as it appears.

# Perception of Gender in Different Disciplines

## Biology

[Biology](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Subject:Biology) denotes the difference in sex as the distribution of XX and XY chromosomes, the possession of either male or female genitalia, and the balance of hormones in our body. [Testosterone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Testosterone) is associated with stereotyped masculinity because it increases competitiveness and aggression whereas [oestrogen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estrogen) is associated with feminine characteristics of increased emotion[[7]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-7). This forms the basis for cultural perceptions of males being better suited to hard labour and females to childbearing and domesticity[[8]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-8). This approach is largely criticised for being too [deterministic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Determinism) in its analysis of gender and/or sex categorisation. Studies have shown that children classify others from their clothes more easily than from their sexual organs[[9]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-9) demonstrating the reliance humans place on gendered archetypes when identifying others[[10]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-10). Hence, this biological classification provides solid grounds for the empirical study of gender and sexuality but is rendered fallible in consideration of the [nature vs. nurture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_versus_nurture) debate by lacking [individualism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individualism).

## Economics and Politics

Historically, capitalism has typically enforced a division of jobs deemed 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Jobs seen as useful for creating revenue and furthering society are considered superior, therefore assigned to men, and paid[[11]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-:0-11), whilst women are expected to perform unpaid domestic tasks[[12]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-12). For example in the 1950s nuclear family concept, men were given high-standing jobs whilst women were left as housewives or under-paid secretaries. [Second-wave feminism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second-wave_feminism) helped to reduce these differences, thus encouraging women to fully enter the workforce.

The economy further enforces this division on a daily basis through mass-media and advertising, supposedly appealing to the artificial stereotypes associated with each gender, like women's beauty products. Whilst this is in attempt to maximise profits through appealing to a specific audience[[13]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-13), the capitalist approach in this sense is argued to hinder approaches to gender equality by inadvertently prescribing gender stereotypes in widespread media.

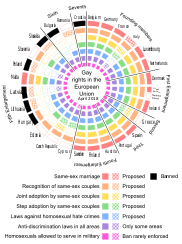
[](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LGBT_rights_in_the_EU.svg)

Figure LGBT rights in the EU

## Law

Many countries have started implementing laws regarding gender allowing citizens freedom of identity regardless of their biological sex. In 2016, Norway permitted anyone to legally change their sex without surgery[[14]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-14) and Canada made denying gender theory illegal[[15]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-15). The UK also adopted the [Gender Recognition Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_Recognition_Act_2004). Nonetheless, most countries still do not accept [non-binary gender](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genderqueer).

Both extremes of legal gender recognition create conflicts in society. Countries not accepting of a third gender, gender reassignment surgeries, or name changes have been attacked by the left wing for their intolerance. Contrastingly, legalising gender changes before surgery is viewed as a security threat towards women due to possible abuse of the system. This occurred in Norway in 2016, when a woman felt uncomfortable when a biological male, legally identifying as female, entered the female bathroom of a gym. The woman talked to the staff about feeling unsafe, and ended up being sued for harassment. The court later ruled against any such claims[[16]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-16)[[17]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-17).

As laws tend to dictate a public paradigm of right vs. wrong, the implementation of legal rulings regarding gender has dramatically helped the normalisation of non-binary gender. Yet, legal proceedings on such a divided issue have simultaneously given rise to further conflicts regarding expansion or retraction of these laws.

## Linguistics

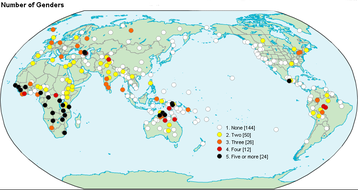
[](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Number_genders.png)In the West, it is common practice to indicate an individual's autonomous identity with the favoured [pronoun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third-person_pronoun) he, she, they, or ze. A topic receiving much controversy is the use of pronouns as enforcing a binary of male and female. To incorrectly identify someone’s gender is construed as offensive. Hence, the use of additional pronouns introduces acceptance into a language. Whilst it may be positive to expand the lexical field of gender, each pronoun carries assumptions of gender norms. Just as ‘he’ implies masculinity, gender neutral pronouns can inadvertently cause associations with [LGBTQ+](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT) stereotypes[[18]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-18).

Figure Number of Genders in Languages of the World

This problem is expanded in [gendered languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_neutrality_in_languages_with_grammatical_gender) where it is necessary to express gender in many aspects such as adjectival agreement in French or the existence of gendered first-person pronouns in Japanese[[19]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-19). Such a range of identifiers can be problematic and cause further discrimination but are crucial for cultural expression. Oppressive regimes often prohibit gender descriptors differing from the traditional heterosexual male and female roles. Therefore, some people only discover their identity upon encountering a word to describe it; for example Jang Yeong-Jin only realised his homosexuality upon leaving North Korea[[20]](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Issues_in_Interdisciplinarity_2018-19/Disciplinary_Categories_and_Their_Effect_On_Gender_Perception#cite_note-20). This demonstrates that linguistics allow for both further expression and stereotyping of gender, inviting debate upon whether it is advantageous to have such a range of identifiers.

# Conclusion

The aforementioned disciplines are a small part of a greater discussion, but they suffice to illustrate the conflicting nature of gender categories. While natural sciences focus on sex and physical features, social sciences discuss the cultural norms attached to gender. Moreover, these terms are often used interchangeably, defined differently by almost all individuals. However conflicting, we still need these categories to follow our innate need to classify and better perceive the world and to accept and recognise the [third gender](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_gender).

Still, we must remember that any definitions are in no way absolute. Any broad topic must be broken down for thorough study, but it is imperative to keep in mind that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, both in academia and gender and sexuality. Thus, one should utilise interdisciplinarity and [systems thinking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_theory), exploring every related discipline, to arrive at solutions that better reflect reality. We must remember the interconnected cause and effect relationship amongst all the elements and the consequences of oversimplifying any processes involved.

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