

# The social construction of gender:

Understanding gender binaries and stereotypes



# What is a social construct?

- A social construct is something that doesn't exist in the “natural” world, but is instead an creation of society.
- Cultural practices and societal norms give rise to the existence of social constructs and govern the practices, customs, and rules concerning the way we use/view/understand them. In other words, we all act as if they exist and ARE NATURAL.
- Calling it a social construct does not diminish its power and impact. Its existence is dependent on our culture and our practices.

# Gender varies with cultural change

- As our culture changes, constructs change.
- The idea that gender varies and adapts to conditions and social pressures reinforces the idea that gender is a social construct rather than some sort of “essence” that arises from biology.

# Performing the gender 'script'

- Gender roles can be thought of as a script. We are all born into a system that is already gendered, and our social survival depends on our learning how to perform the script. This is not an individual decision that is ours to make.
- Gender is assigned at birth according to physical sex. Medical professionals look at the baby's genitals and announce "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy!"
- The world begins to socialise the child and teach them the script that goes with the gender they've been assigned (clothes, appropriate colours, hairstyles, accepted behaviours). The idea that gender varies and adapts to conditions and social pressures reinforces the idea that gender is a social construct rather than some sort of "essence" that arises from biology.

# Gender Socialisation

“contemporary media place men and women into clearly defined gender categories & these media messages encourage women and men to conform to “the roles you were born to fill.” But, of course, we are not born that way. Both women and men are socialized - through many sources including media - to perform these roles”

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# Gender binaries

- The gender binary is a term used to describe the idea that there are **only two possible genders, man and woman**, which can be assigned on the basis of genitalia (biology).
- This system often also enforces **masculinity for men** and **femininity for women** through **gender roles** and socially-imposed restrictions to gender expression and sex characteristics.
- Although many people consider the gender binary to be an accurate description of gender, there are many who identify as genders outside of male and female, which are referred to as non-binary. Additional genders have a long history in cultures from the global south. However, in cultures which follow the gender binary, non-binary people are often systematically excluded from society.

# Gender binaries

Binary view of gender



Gender is a continuum, always changing & fluid, not fixed



# What can we gain from the viewpoint that gender is a social construction?

- It reveals that gender roles are not set in stone. Harmful aspects of our construction of gender can and should be discarded.
- It exposes how gender constructs can be used as a tool for oppression.
- This viewpoint puts pressure on the notion that everyone has to fit into some kind of neat binary (or box) or follow some kind of carefully prescribed script.
- It allows every individual to create/make their own identity and locate their own spot on the gender continuum.