



4-22-2013

Choosing Sides: The Gender Dilemma

Center for Public Service
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge>

 Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Center for Public Service, "Choosing Sides: The Gender Dilemma" (2013). *SURGE*. 158.
<http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/158>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/158>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Choosing Sides: The Gender Dilemma

Abstract

“You can’t check a box between male and female; you are either a boy or a girl.”

My professor makes this statement often. It is pretty easy to see why he would use gender in this example: he is trying to give us a simple, understandable explanation of a binary. When explaining the binary, he just wants to show that it is a two-option classification: from his experience, male and female fits. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, gender, sexual binary, LGBTQA

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

CHOOSING SIDES: THE GENDER DILEMMA

April 22, 2013

“You can’t check a box between male and female; you are either a boy or a girl.”

My professor makes this statement often. It is pretty easy to see why he would use gender in this example: he is trying to give us a simple, understandable explanation of a binary. When explaining the binary, he just wants to show that it is a two-option classification: from his experience, male and female fits.



The truth of it is, my professor isn’t even close to being the only person who makes this kind of assumption. We all do it from time to time because strict notions of gender have been constructed and reinforced by society. First, we need to understand the difference between sex and gender. Sex is the physical aspect of one’s identification (yet, even that’s hard to put into the “male-female” binary with the discussion of [intersex identification](#)). Gender can be harder to define, as we’ve seen in [recent debates](#). It’s how you identify, whether or not that lines up with your sex assignment at birth.

Gender isn’t a binary; it’s not quite as cut and dry as “either being male or female.” It’s constructed subtly from when we’re babies and the nurses in the hospital stick little pink or blue caps on our heads. The teaching continues when we’re told to line up as “boys” and “girls” in the kindergarten. It’s perpetuated throughout our lives when we’re told to check a box on every form we’ve ever filled out, and our options are simple: male or female. Because it’s so deeply integrated to our day-to-day, it’s really easy to internalize the idea that it should be an either-or issue. Individuals, like my professor, who fit neatly into a prescribed gender have never had to question the binary because the system worked for them. There is a certain amount of privilege associated with conforming to the norm. I, like my professor, can look at the signs on the bathroom doors and know immediately which one to enter. I won’t be chastised by my peers if I choose to dress a certain way because my dress conforms to society’s view of what my gender should be.

Maybe to combat this idea of a gender binary we need a bit of [scholarly advice](#). Or a thought provoking [blog post](#). Or maybe we just need to [see it to believe it](#). But how can this issue be so hard for us to tackle when kids [get it so](#)

[easily](#)? Okay, that little kid is pretty cute, but she makes a really important point: we need to challenge the gender binary. One of the first steps in confronting this pervasive social construction is to stop labeling gender nonconforming individuals as “other.” It’s unfair to make assumptions about how someone else chooses to identify. I know that I wouldn’t feel particularly comfortable if someone labeled me with a gender that I didn’t identify with. So I shouldn’t do that for other people, either. It’s not always as simple as “him” and “her.” What about transgender individuals? What about intersex individuals? The male/female system ignores all kinds of people. Just because I might fall into the male/female binary system, that doesn’t necessarily give me the right to say that everyone else should conform to it as well.

Maybe sometimes the usage of gender as a binary is an issue of misunderstanding. To combat this we need to work towards re-educating people about what sex and gender really mean. We need to [challenge this system](#) because it’s not as simple as our bathroom labels suggest.

Anonymous Contributors

<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/choosing-sides-the-gender-dilemma/>