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Gender

While the word **gender** is not new, it has only recently become the focus of heated debate both within and outside the academy. It has since its early days been a polysemous word, but one of its newest definitions puts *gender* under the spotlight. This definition, relating gender to social identity, conflicts with the older definition relating it to biology. It is this conflict that makes gender such an important contemporary keyword.

The *OED* states that **gender** is derived from the same French roots as *genre*, marking it as a classificatory word. This use of *genre* is current from circa 1125 in Old French, and could be used in a wide variety of human classification, including sex, race, or as a whole in *genre humain* – mankind. This definition can still be seen in English in *genre*, but it is obsolete in **gender** after 1660. **Gender**'s first meaning in English dates back to circa 1398 with the definition of a class of things or beings as having something in common. The connection to the current use of **gender** is clear. Either in its biological or social definitions, it is still being used as a classificatory word to describe a group that has something in common.

Gender has several definitions that are not contentious, mostly related to grammatical gender, the class of nouns or pronouns distinguished by inflections that they and their syntactically associated words are required to have. This definition can be found from 1390, and is still in use today. It has the same classificatory nature as the other definitions of **gender,** and traces back to the same roots. However, the use of **gender** in the grammatical sense is not widely discussed outside of language classes.

It is the third definition in the *OED* that is contested, and under this entry both sides of the argument are listed as sub-definitions of the same main category. Interestingly, the two definitions are mutually exclusive. The first defines **gender** as 'males or females viewed as a group, or the quality of belonging to one of those groups'. The emphasis in this definition is on the biological aspect, and it links the reader to the entry for *sex* as a related word. It is the older of the two definitions. It has been in use since 1474, and was extended from the grammatical definition of *gender* to replace *sex*, as *sex* became strongly associated with sexual intercourse. We can see an example of this from historian Natalie Davis (1975) who states, 'Our goal is

to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past.' Here **gender** is explicitly equated with *sex* and biology.

The second sub-definition is categorised as social/psychological: 'the state of being male or female as defined by social expectations as separate from biological ones' (*OED*). In the very definition, it states that this is intended to be separate from biology, making the two definitions mutually exclusive. Yet both definitions are completely acceptable in society as a whole, and it is often the context of the conversation that clarifies the meaning. This situation can be explained by the very recent emergence of the second definition, which is a post-Second World War phenomenon. It has only been in use since 1945. The *American Journal of Psychology* (1950) states that Margaret Mead's *Male and Female* 'informs the reader upon "gender" as well as upon "sex", upon masculine and feminine roles as well as upon male and female and their reproductive functions', clearly and explicitly separating the biological and social definitions of the word.

Language users do seem to be shifting toward this second definition. For example, a 2016 article from a British consultancy, the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, states: 'According to the World Development Report (WDR) 2012, gender is defined as socially constructed norms and ideologies which determine the behaviour and actions of men and women.' This illustrates the socially governed definition, and that it is widely used in modern sources. However, this newer definition has not been around very long, which makes it difficult to determine if either definition is really dominant.

What is particularly interesting about this conflict is that it is not a result of unconscious language change. The social definition was brought about and reinforced as a fully conscious effort to make English reflect that how a person self-identifies in relation to social factors can be completely separate from biological sex. Other results of the same idea shift include the widening use of gender-neutral third-person pronouns in the singular; for example 'they' instead of either 'he' or 'she'. These usages are even more recent than that of **gender** to reflect social roles, and they indicate that the English language is undergoing a thorough reworking regarding how to represent sexual difference. The social definition of **gender** is the predominant definition in social media and other outlets where this concept has had a considerable impact. Over time, it may be that this definition will edge out the biological definition completely. For now, the conflict itself is clear in the use of the word, in articles such as 'How Changeable is Gender?' in the *New York Times*, 2016. The article states that 'The prevailing narrative seems to be that gender is a social construct and that people can move between

genders to arrive at their true identity,' thus identifying with the social definition. Yet it goes on to say, 'The fact that some transgender individuals use hormone treatment and surgery to switch gender speaks to the inescapable biology at the heart of gender identity.' This article illustrates the ongoing conflict between the two definitions, and the attitudes of people who prefer the biological definition.

A 2016 article in the *Guardian* titled 'The Gender-Fluid Generation' illustrates the other view. It notes that 'half the US millennials surveyed by Fusion agree gender isn't limited to male and female'. Since the biological definition of **gender** in the *OED* explicitly refers to 'males or females', this quote shows the need for an expanded or altered definition, and this need is where the social definition comes in.

Another way to look at the development of these differentiated definitions is by looking at collocations for **gender**. According to the Corpus of Contemporary American English, one of the most common and oldest collocations is **gender difference** (1892). This collocation was common before the social definition of **gender**, which is reflected in the fact that the phrase **gender difference** refers to the biological definition. Later, collocations like **gender confusion** (1965) appear. This phrase still refers to the biological definition, but it illustrates the need for a different definition, since the confusion comes from social factors.

It is only more recently that we see collocations referring to the social definition; **Gender identity**, for example, which is now as frequent a collocation as **gender difference.** The desire for a person to define their own gender identity, separately from their biology, is what makes the social definition of **gender** a necessity, and the reason it has grown so rapidly in popularity and use. The contention comes from people who want to keep using the biological definition of the word, and the increasingly outdated idea that social identity cannot be separated from biological sex. As the idea of identity develops, the use of the social definition over the biological one is growing.