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English Composition D

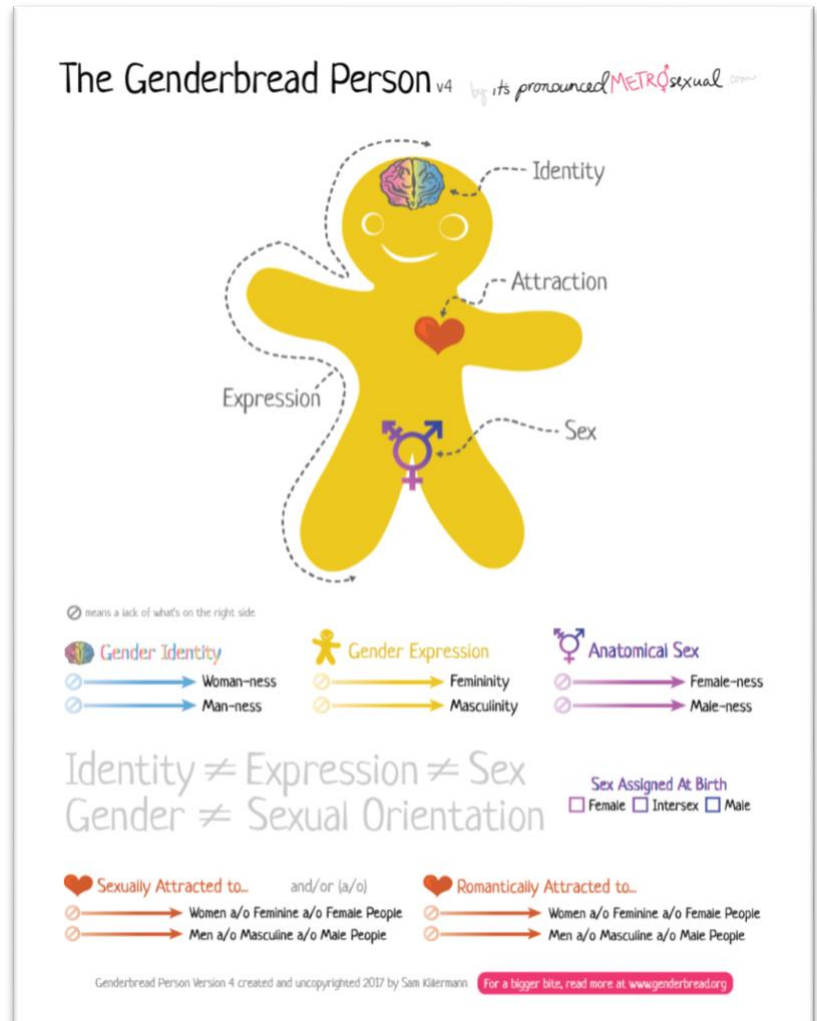
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### Gender Determinism & Sexism

Oral traditions are the oldest known way of human communication, in which information is transmitted orally from one generation to another (Ki-Zerbo, 1990). Multiliteracy is “the ability to identify, interpret, create, and communicate meaning across a variety of visual, oral, corporal, musical and alphabetical forms of communication. Beyond a linguistic notion of literacy, multiliteracy involves an awareness of the social, economic and wider cultural factors that frame communication” (IGI Global). Oral tradition is multiliteracy in action because family members use multiple forms of communication, apart from language, to preserve “information, memories, and knowledge held in common by a group of people” (Henige, 1998). In this manner, parents transmit knowledge to their children according to their worldview and values. This includes ideas about gender roles. In most cultures, a child’s expected course of development is determined by their gender assigned at birth. Eventually, family members enforce gender roles by teaching young children how to behave, think, and communicate. Orally transmitted knowledge about the culturally conceived gender binary not only exacerbates sexism, but it also has detrimental effects on transgender, nonbinary and cisgender people. This paper argues gender determinism is detrimental to the health and happiness of children, and that parents who enforce stereotypical gender roles perpetuate gender inequality.

## PART I

The gender binary is invented and not something that comes from nature. If gender is a culturally defined role then many of cultures, now and in the past, recognized more than two genders. The cultural ideas we ascribe to people with "male" external genitalia and "female" external genitalia are just cultural practices, because in many cultures there are more than two genders. Thus, there are no two biologically distinct things one might call "male" and "female."



If gender is biologically defined then traits such as XX/XY, testes/ovaries, or penis/vagina occur in all different combinations. Someone can be XY but have breasts and a vagina, and someone can be XX but have a penis. Some people have testicles and ovaries. Not to mention people who are XXY, XXX, or just X. Also, the penis and clitoris (which is the developmental equivalent of the penis in people who have vulvas) are not two distinct entities. It is a continuum depending on the size of the phallus, and people exist with penises/clitorises all along the spectrum. Thus there are more than two sexes/genders.

## PART II

Transgender and nonbinary people are often estranged from family and have high levels of minority stress due to the gender binary, which leads to disproportionately high rates of trauma, mental illness, substance use, poverty, and disease. For example, children may be mocked or punished if they explore and define their own identities. These children can grow up with feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and depression. According to a study conducted by the Journal of LGBT Youth, transgender individuals, when compared to the cisgender respondents, reported significantly higher family rejection, lower social support, higher loneliness, higher depression, lower protective factors, and higher negative risk factors related to suicidal behavior, and were less certain in avoiding sexual risk behaviors (Yadegarfar, Meinhold-Bergmann, et al. 2014).

## PART III

The gender binary also affects cis people because it forces them into constrained roles. This idea is transmitted to children early in life. As anecdotal evidence, Kincaid presents a story about practices that a young child is expected to learn and perform in order to become a Jamaican woman.

Be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot (Kincaid, 2003).

The author provides a clear example of how children are confined by their assigned gender.

Across platforms, women have to endure gender inequality. Due to the gender binary, women are seen as inferior, have reduced economic opportunities, perform most of the unpaid emotional labor, are the main victims of rape, are hypersexualized, and deal with impossible beauty

standards (Ross-Reed). Therefore, women are treated as inferiors and have restricted choices about their life, future, and body. As long as society is divided by an imaginary line separating men and women, many fields like politics, economics, sports, academia, films, etc. will remain permeated by men's views and rules. The podcast episode, "Economics, Sexism, Data<sup>1</sup>" explains how an undergraduate research study found that economists are sexist.

One way to stop sexism is by fighting the idea that there are only two genders, and that every person is one or the other. If children are allowed to explore their gender and behave in the way most comfortable for them, then the gender inequality gap can be breached. In *how teaching children about gender could help reduce sexism*, Favid states gender inequality is caused by the idea that there are two separate and distinct genders because it leads to the assumption that men and women have different skills (1). Although people perceived as male benefit most from the patriarchy, the gender binary also affects them because of toxic masculinity. Toxic Masculinity refers to the socialization of men to be difficult or unable to express themselves emotionally in non-violent ways. This leads to disconnection in family, society, and self (Ross-Reed).

#### PART IV

Smith argues sexism starts from a young age because children are treated according to the gender assigned at birth (2). "The root of the misconception, the sexism, starts the day parents bring their child home" (Smith, 2). From the very start of their lives, babies who are assigned female at birth are raised and treated drastically different than males. Berg explains that children do not have a play preference until their parents teach them to play with more gender-specific items. This evidence indicates that gender roles are created by society, and perpetuated by the

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to podcast using the hyperlink

parent's teachings (35). In many cultures, families punish women while praising men for certain stereotypical behaviors. It is a popular belief that children "naturally gravitate toward stereotypical [behaviors]" (Berg 35), but this is a misconception. Evidence shows that "[children] will play with anything...until age three...[when] parents push children into more gender-specific items" (Berg 35). As time goes by, children choose toys, clothes, sports, and activities that fit into the gender-specific categories learned from their parents.

Smith also explains different ways in which parents enforce cisgender behaviors. Primarily, focusing on reinforcement and punishment, and mirroring as crucial ways in which children learn from family members (Smith, 2). Parents who use these methods to teach stereotypical gender preferences to their children, affect their development in negative ways. Through reinforcement and punishment children learn what is appropriate for their own gender and the opposite gender. If a child acts a certain way and is punished, then they will be deterred from the behavior and their brain will register as wrong. On the other hand, positive reinforcement occurs when a behavior that is associated with praise leads to repetition. Unfortunately, studies have found that often times when children, who are boxed in the gender binary, perform the same action or behave in the same way, one gender is praised and the other is punished (Smith, 4). The second major way a child learns is through mirroring, or watching what others-mainly the adults in their life-do and mirroring that behavior (Smith, 5). Thus, it is through family that "many [children] first experience gender because societal differences between girls and boys are transferred through early teachings by family members...[they] dress them in gender-'appropriate' colors, give them different toys, and decorate their bedrooms in different ways that tend to facilitate and enforce cisgender behaviors" (Shaw, 444).

## Conclusion

The gender binary harms everyone by limiting their individual expression and liberties. Over time, these limitations on liberty and safety drastically impact the individual's physical and mental health. Parents should reflect on their teaching practices, and stop enforcing stereotypical gender roles on their children. In doing so, children will learn that all genders are equal and each individual has complete autonomy over their bodies and future. Eliminating the gender binary is an essential step towards the abolishment of sexism.

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