Gender identity reflects the intertwined influences of nature and nurture. As social scientists define the concept, gender identity is individuals’ self-definition as female or male, which is based on their biological sex as interpreted within their culture (Eagly and Wood 2013; Wood and Eagly 2015). When people describe who they are, most indicate that being a man or woman or boy or girl is important to their overall identity.

The capacity to create a gendered self-definition and to act on this identity in relating to others has origins in human evolution. The apparent universality and critical functionality of gender identity suggests that it represents a psychological adaptation (Schmitt and Pilcher 2004). These identities help to coordinate reproduction and childcare and are a central facilitator of the cooperative male-female division of labor that organizes human societies. As we shall explain, gender identities largely reflect and support male and female social roles in a culture.

The most basic aspect of gender identity is the existential sense of oneself as female or male, which ordinarily reflects aspects of biological sex (Miller 2015). Sexual development derives from XX or XY chromosomes, which affect development in multiple ways, including the formation of gonads that release prenatal early postnatal hormones (Arnold 2017). At a very early age, children typically react to biological sex by learning that there are two sexes and that they belong to one of these groupings (Martin and Ruble 2010). Children’s biology thus shapes their gender identity at this simple level of sex classification. Furthermore, aspects of this biology, especially early hormones, may directly affect children’s temperamental tendencies, as manifested in, for example, activity level and early toy preferences (Hines 2013).

Awareness of oneself and others as male or female, which emerges by around 18 months of age, further develops as children learn what this classification means in their culture through observation of the behaviors and events linked with each category (Baldwin and Moses 1996). As children observe other boys and girls, they tend to imitate their own sex by, for example, playing with the same toys (e.g., Zosuls et al. 2009).

Humans are highly altricial, and children are extensively socialized. A great deal of this socialization involves gender. Through observation and direct experience, children learn to participate in the collaborative division of labor between the sexes in their society. For example, they may observe female caretakers who provide feeding, dressing, and soothing and male caretakers who engage in energetic and competitive play. This socialization includes role depictions of males and females in story and song, media, and other cultural productions. Children’s gender identities develop accordingly, with, for example, many contemporary little boys choosing firefighter outfits and little girls preferring to be Disney princesses.

As children mature, their direct experiences and observations of the division of labor shape their ideas about the sexes into gender roles, which are consensually shared beliefs about the attributes of women and men (Eagly and Wood 2012). People infer these psychological attributes to explain why women and men
engage in different activities in the division of labor. Observations of the role-based activities of women and men thereby yield expectations about each sex's typical attributes—that is, stereotypes about women and men. These stereotypes broadly reflect the trait dimensions of communion (e.g., warmth, concern for others) and agency (e.g., dominance, competitiveness). Additional stereotype components pertain to physical attributes, activity preferences, and cognitive abilities. In short, the social construction of gender in a society reflects its actual division of labor.

Gender stereotypes function as shared expectations, or norms, that promote conformity in both sexes (Wood and Eagly 2012). People are aware of others’ gender-relevant expectations and by conforming they typically gain social approval, whereas deviating yields social rejection. Thus, other people's expectations are one mechanism by which gender-role norms influence behavior.

Gender stereotypes also form the basis for gender identities, as individuals incorporate the cultural meanings of gender into their own psyches. To the extent that people value their female or male group membership, they tend to self-stereotype by ascribing typical feminine or masculine attributes to themselves. For example, women may regard themselves as caring and compassionate, and men may see themselves as strong and competitive.

People act on their gender identities through self-regulatory processes, by which they control their behavior in line with their identity (Wood et al. 1997; Witt and Wood 2010). Both men and women experience positive affect when acting consistently with their personal gender standards and negative affect when acting in ways that depart from these standards.

The regulation of behaviors by gender identity and gender norms is accompanied by hormonal processes (e.g., Van Anders 2013). Thus, hormonal changes, especially in testosterone, oxytocin, and arginine vasopressin, generally facilitate culturally masculine and feminine behaviors in relevant social contexts. These biological processes stem from selection pressures that shaped the basic perceptual, sensory, and motivational processes that humans share with other animals. Nature and nurture thus work together to facilitate gender role performance.

In our analysis, societies’ division of labor is critical to the content of its gender roles and associated expectations and identities (Eagly and Wood 2012). This division arises because women’s and men's activities are constrained by the interaction between the sexes’ biological attributes and a society’s socioeconomic development and ecology. Specifically, the roles of men and women arise mainly from the confluence of two sources: (1) each sex's unique physical attributes and related behaviors, especially women's reproductive activities in the form of childbearing and nursing infants, and men's greater size, speed, and upper-body strength, and (b) the social, economic, technological, and ecological environments that a society presents at any one point in time.

These physical sex differences enable one sex to perform some activities more easily and efficiently than the other sex. For example, men more efficiently perform activities that are highly strength-intensive. A critical issue for further study is the extent to which the division of labor fashioned within the society's socioeconomic structure reflects biologically influenced psychological sex differences such as perceptual, motor, and spatial aptitudes (Baker and Cornelson, 2016).

As in all societies, a division of labor is evident in today's industrialized societies. The communal activities of women are apparent in their employment in the expanding service, educational, and health-care sectors of economies (e.g., U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). In addition, women still perform the majority of domestic work, even though most women are currently employed, and men increasingly perform some childcare (e.g., Sayer 2016). Although women have entered many higher-status occupations that were once
male-dominated (e.g., professor, physician), representation is low in specific areas. They are underrepresented in things-oriented occupations (e.g., many STEM fields and mechanical and construction trades; Lippa, Preston, and Penner 2014) as well as in subareas of professions regarded as most demanding of agency (e.g., top leadership roles in corporations and government; equity partners in corporate law) or of extremely high intelligence, or “brilliance” (e.g., philosophy and economics; Leslie et al. 2015).

Our analysis illuminates the variability of female and male behavior across contexts—a common finding in psychological research. This variability emerges as women and men regulate their behavior according to gender roles, social expectations, and hormonal processes (Eagly and Wood 2013). Thus, sex and gender effects are not uniform but vary across situations and cultures and across historical time. In particular, large-scale economic, political, and social changes in postindustrial societies have greatly decreased childbearing and have revolutionized paid work so that it typically does not prioritize physical strength. In addition, contemporary conditions favor universalistic, gender-blind treatment of people as employees and citizens (Jackson 1998). Reflecting these trends, the social roles of women and men have become more similar than in the past.

As a result of these many changes in recent years, the gender identities of women and men have partially converged (Donnelly and Twenge 2016), and more people incorporate new, complex forms of gender into their identities. People currently adopt female or male gender identities to varying extents, with this identification ranging from very strong to complete rejection of gender distinctions (genderqueer). Also, even though gender identity usually matches features of biological sex (cisgender), some people identify with the other sex (transgender) and in some cases modify their biological sexual characteristics (transsexual). This blurring of the gender binary is an increasing focus of psychological research, with attention to biological and social causes (Bosky 2014; Reisner et al. 2016). These changes reflect the cascade of intertwined biological and social processes that we have briefly outlined in this essay.

WORKS CITED


