

Study on gender: Who counts as a man and who counts as a woman

October 28 2013

Gender is no longer determined solely by biological factors, according to a new study by a Grand Valley State University researcher whose article, "Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System," was recently published in *Gender & Society*.

Laurel Westbrook, assistant professor of sociology at Grand Valley State, and Kristen Schilt, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, examined various case studies and found that [biological factors](#), such as genitals and chromosomes, used to be the ultimate determiner of [gender](#), but that is slowly changing.

"We explore the criteria for determining who is a 'man' and who is a 'woman' in sex-segregated spaces," said Westbrook. "We are at an interesting point in the history of gender, where people are torn between valuing self-identity and believing that biology determines gender. Our study explores that change in the gender system."

Westbrook examined case studies involving public debates over the expansion of transgender employment rights, policies determining eligibility of transgender people for competitive sports, and proposals to remove the genital surgery requirement for a change of sex marker on birth certificates.

"Transgender equality has never been more visible as a key issue than it is today, and with the development of every new trans-supportive law or

policy, there typically follows an outbreak of criticism," said Westbrook. "In our analysis, we find that these moments, which we term 'gender panics,' are the result of a clash between two competing cultural ideas about gender identity: a belief that gender is determined by biology versus a belief that a person's self-identity in terms of gender should be validated. These gender panics frequently result in a reshaping of the language of such policies so that they require extensive bodily changes before transgender individuals have access to particular rights."

These gender panics reveal the criteria for who counts as a woman and a man in our society, said Westbrook. The study shows that the criteria for determining gender—the practice of placing others in gender categories—are not the same across all social spaces. While self-identity is sufficient in many circumstances, such as the workplace, people are more likely to believe that biology determines gender in sex-segregated spaces.

"In the controversies we examined, it is access to bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams at the center of gender panics," said Westbrook. "Moreover, not all sex-segregated spaces are policed equally. Because of beliefs that women are inherently vulnerable, particularly to unwanted heterosexual advances, it is women's spaces at the center of these debates. Thus, with these controversies, much of the discussion is about a fear of 'male' bodies in 'women's' spaces."

Westbrook said as a result of these fears, transgender rights policies are often discarded or altered in ways that force transgender people to conform to normative ideas of gendered bodies in order to access public facilities and activities that fit their identities.

Provided by Grand Valley State University

Citation: Study on gender: Who counts as a man and who counts as a woman (2013, October 28)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-10-gender-woman.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.