

# AUTISM AND GENDER IDENTITY

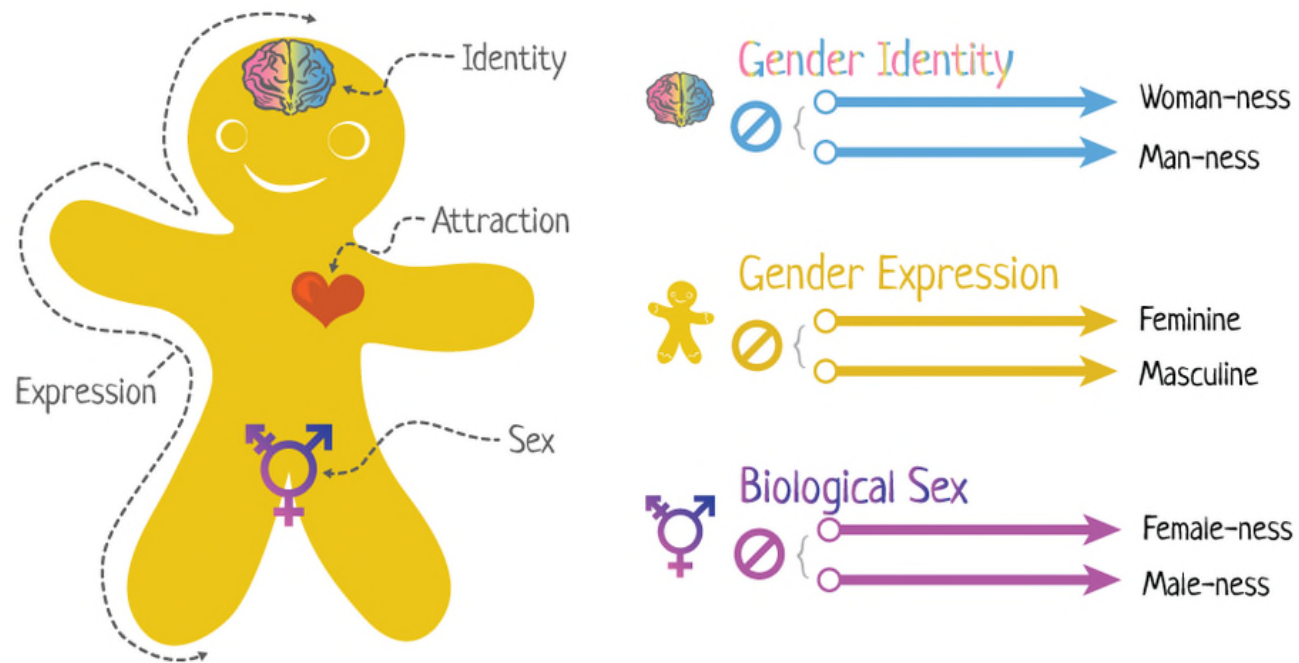
Marianthi Kourti




## ABOUT ME

- I was born and raised in Greece, diagnosed autistic in the UK at the age of 24.
- My background is in Special Education
- Since coming to the UK in 2014, I focused exclusively on autistic adults
- My research and personal journey are closely linked
- I identify as non-binary and I am still figuring out what this means for me

# WHAT IS GENDER IDENTITY?



# WHAT IS GENDER?

- **Biological approach** – a combination of embodied characteristics such as genitalia, chromosomes and primary and secondary gender characteristics 
- **Social constructionist approach** - “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” – Simone de Beauvoir
- **Liberal feminism** – equal opportunities and votes for women
- **Radical feminism** – ‘our personal is political’, ‘our body is a battlefield’
- **Marxist and Socialist feminism** – economic exploitation is key, patriarchy and capitalism intertwined
- **Post-structuralist feminism** – looks into systems of oppression, rejects claims of ‘truth’
- **Intersectional feminism** - gender always intersects with other axes of oppression to create particular social locations; can’t understand power acting through any one of these axes without looking at all of them
- **Queer theory** – Performativity of gender – questions the ‘essential category of a woman’

Side note: Discussions about gender have historically been dominated by theories about the oppression of women

## AUTISM: A MALE CONDITION?

- Historical diagnostic disparities between autistic men and autistic women
- Extreme male brain theory
- Exposure to high levels of testosterone in utero
- High levels of systematising with low levels of empathising
- Stereotypically 'male' interests

Significant lack of:

Autistic-led approaches on gender  
Interdisciplinary approaches on gender

# AUTISM HAS ALWAYS BEEN IDENTIFIED IN VERY SPECIFIC SOCIAL LOCATIONS

So who are the under-identified autistic  
people?

## PEOPLE WHOSE AUTISTIC PRESENTATION DOES NOT FIT HISTORICAL AUTISM STEREOTYPES

- Individuals who were assigned female at birth (women, trans men, non-binary individuals)
- Individuals who show a more atypical autism profile (including many who are assigned male at birth)
- Black and Ethnic Minority individuals
- These groups may differ significantly at different countries around the world, for various reasons (such as cultural)

## MY MED RESEARCH: RESEARCHING AUTISTIC WOMEN

- I engaged an international sample of 55 individuals from 8 different countries (US, UK, Canada, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Germany)
- I conducted online focus groups on a secret Facebook group, the topics of which were chosen by the participants and were:
  - ✓ School experiences and special interests
  - ✓ Personal and gender identity
  - ✓ Misdiagnoses and comorbid conditions
  - ✓ Emotional regulation and sensory sensitivities
  - ✓ Personal safety



## FINDINGS OF MY MED RESEARCH

### Gender identity

Didn't relate to the stereotypical presentation and activities of the female gender	21
Tomboy	8
Enjoying female and male activities	7
Wanting to be a boy growing up	7
Feeling more like a boy than a girl/Transgender	1
More masculine than their male partner	2
Fluid sense of gender, gender queer, or identifying with the male and female gender	9
Not identifying with any gender	7

### Overall sense of identity

Awareness of being different from others	7
Always knowing that they are different	4
Realised they are different after a certain age	3
Sense of identity revolving around interests or company	8
Confused about identity	2

GENDER IS IN THE EYE OF THE  
BEHOLDER

# INTERPRETATION IS KEY!

**Marianthi 2013:**

*'The findings of this research support the existence of the female autism phenotype and the suggestion that autism presents different in females and explored how autism presents in women and girls.'*

**2013**

**2019**

**Marianthi 2019: 'What are you talking about? They most certainly did not!'**

Source: Kourti, M., & MacLeod, A. (2019). "I Don't Feel Like a Gender, I Feel Like Myself": Autistic Individuals Raised as Girls Exploring Gender Identity. *Autism in Adulthood*, 1(1), 52-59.

**MY PhD RESEARCH: HOW DO  
AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS  
FORM A SENSE OF GENDER  
IDENTITY?**

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

- Exploratory research
- Aim to produce autistic-led theory on autistic gender that shapes future research on autistic gender
- Recruited participants with various gender identities, all of which were assigned female at birth
- Conducted life story interviews focusing on both their experiences and their perceptions on their autistic and gender identity, as well as the impact they had in their lives

## FINDINGS THUS FAR

- Sometimes people's autism and gender identity is central to how they see themselves
- Sometimes it is not!
- People do however seem to need and seek a sense of community and belonging and their various identities seem to play a significant part in that
- People view their autistic and gender identity differently on a personal and on a political level
  - ✓ When talking about their personal lives, they see their identities as a personal challenge that they need to untangle by themselves
  - ✓ When talking about their perceptions of these identities both for themselves and in general, they focus on societal acceptance and societal change

## QUOTES FROM A TRANS MAN:

*'If somebody who registers as male is seen wearing female stuff, they are definitely torn apart. The second I pass as male, I'm going out in a dress just to just to make people not do that because I think that's ridiculous.'*

*'I think it's been an incredible challenge to learn how to navigate my own mind, especially because when you have a lot of overlap of conditions you don't know what's what, so if I'm getting anxiety I don't know if it's the side playoff anxiety that comes with autism, or if it's the B12 deficiency which also causes anxiety or if it's the gender dysphoria and you have to have different coping mechanisms to alleviate different types of anxiety'*

## QUOTES FROM A WOMAN

*'I want to be an alieny, non-gendered androgynous agender asexual... you get it... And I don't want kids, so... I love kids, but I don't want to have any. And what's the point of having all this (pointing at her breasts) if you're not gonna nurse a baby with your boobs, you know? So men can objectify me.'*

*'Now [I am] a proud feminist, I want to empower women and all that, but at the same time I still have those hang ups of not wanting to be one [which come from] the stereotypes [about women and girls] and the sexual abuse.'*



## A SUMMARY OF A NON-BINARY PERSON'S INTERVIEW

Growing up in the '70's and '80's, there were no words for any gender outside the gender binary. When I was growing up, I was very disappointed when I couldn't keep playing football because this wasn't something that girls did. It was a big loss for me, because I wasn't able to pick it up later in life because of disability related health issues.

During my university years, I was feeling very dysphoric with my gender and my body and my partner helped me a lot with that. Eventually I came to accept that just because my body has this shape, it doesn't have to define my gender identity.

In the '90's, I identified as trans of some description, still not quite knowing where I fit in because I wasn't particularly interested in being male. It wasn't until a few years ago that I heard the words non-binary and my gender identity finally clicked.

Gender has been very frustrating for me throughout my life. On the one hand, I was frustrated for being identified as female, on the other I was also frustrated with the stereotypes that came with it.

## SO WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF ALL THIS?

- Gendered narratives affect people's perceptions of their own, and other people's, genders
- Perceptions of one's gender identity depend both on one's own perception about themselves, as well as other people's perceptions about them
- For some participants this sense of identity was very fluid, both on a personal and on a political level
- Being raised as a female seems to have an affect on people's experiences, regardless of gender
- People tend to feel more validated in alternative communities (e.g. home-ed)
- The conceptual separation between gender identity and gendered stereotypes seems to be muddy

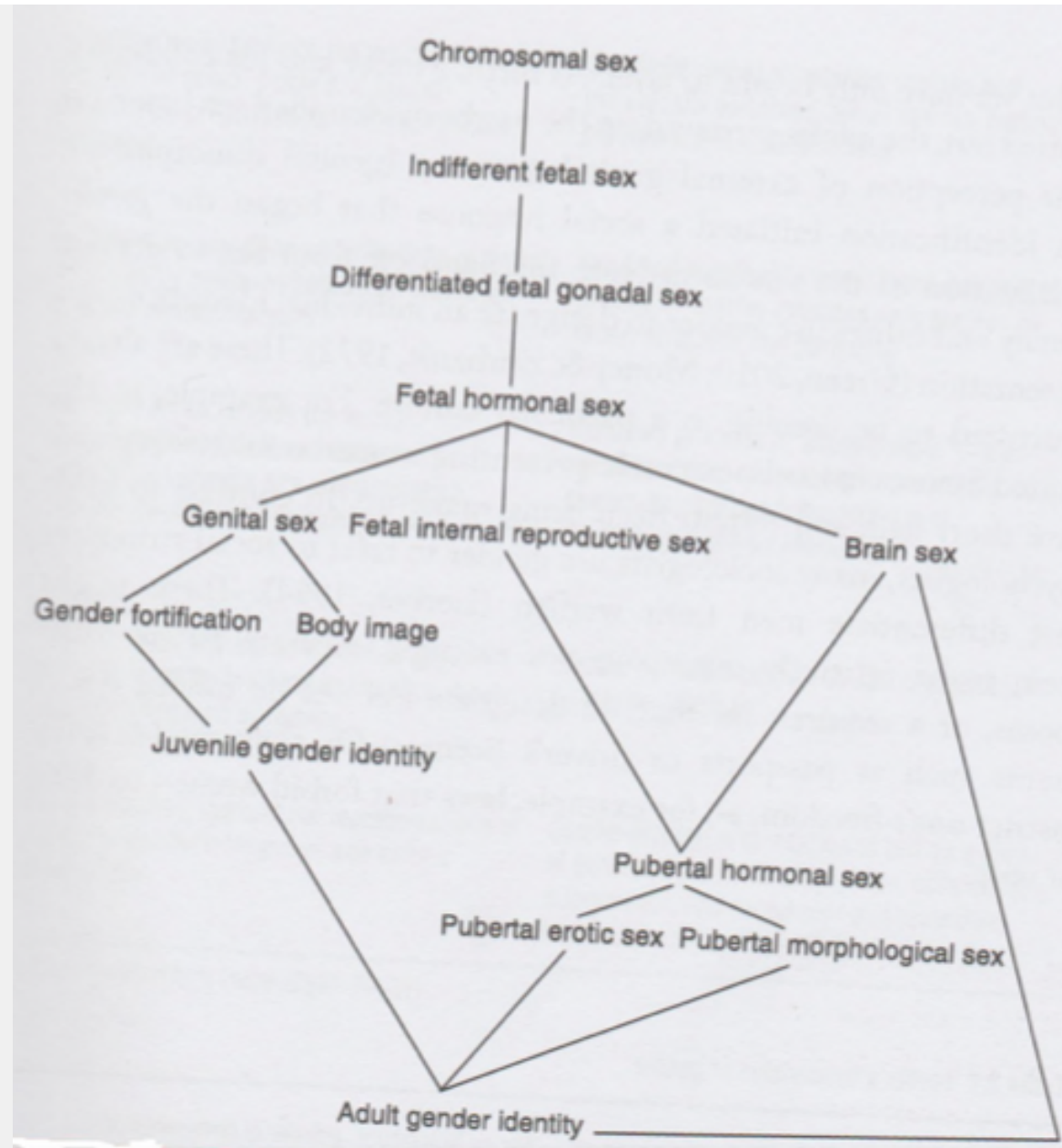
## HOW DO THESE FINDINGS LINK TO AN AUTISTIC IDENTITY

- In some ways they don't; many of these findings are not separate from their wider context within feminist and gender studies
- In many ways they do; they show which narratives these autistic people used to interpret their experiences
- Interestingly, participants didn't make many links between their autistic and gender identity (other than societal acceptance for both)
- Discussing their autistic identity relied much more on collective narratives (autism discourses such as 'this is an autistic thing'), compared to discussing gender identity, which was generally much more personal

## CONCLUSIONS

- Identity creation is complex; people's identities are affected by a variety of factors, including those the researcher is not interested in!
- Identity creation is ongoing; it is constantly changing throughout one's life
- Identity creation depends on a variety of coexisting narratives
- Identity research has to honour the participants' agency, therefore
- Prioritising the autistic individuals' perspectives with an inductive approach is far more rich and lucrative than trying to prove or disprove existing theories

**THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!**



Fausto-Sterling,  
2012