

I study gender theory. So should you.
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I used to want to be a physician. I grew up on this dream, and I began my college career with the goal sitting squarely in the forefront of both my mind and my class cart. I was all-in for a degree in biomedical engineering, with ambitions I thought would propel me toward a career that would fulfill the ultimate goals I shared with so many of my pre-med peers: to help people. To do good.

But, as may be no surprise to many of you, taking gen-chem and calculus did not make me feel helpful nor good. The light at the end of the tunnel, the one that signaled my potential to actually make a difference in this world, dwindled quickly. I was doing well in my classes, but as I scrambled to make flashcards before exams and memorize formulas for labs, I found myself—at the ripe age of 18 and in the midst of my freshman year—burning out. It wasn't until I was taking elective courses, ones that talked about gender theory, that I found a spark again, and I knew I had to follow it.

As soon as I made the switch from the College of Engineering to the dauntingly ambiguous world of Arts & Sciences, the interrogations began. I quickly became used to answering questions that dripped with the judgment of people who had become familiar with lists like “Top Paying Majors” or “Career Fields with Highest Employment Rates” and who might as well have equated my forthcoming Women's and Gender Studies diploma to some crayon scribbles on a piece of crinkled cardstock. In other words: *why bother?*

If you're looking for a TLDR; here it is. Gender studies matters. And it matters to everyone.

Everyone has a relationship with gender, whether they think about it or not. Gender, the way people relate to and navigate culturally held notions of masculinity and femininity, is often talked about in conversation with sex assigned at birth, but the two concepts can't be equated. Gender is more than genitals¹; it's the way we're taught to move through space, express our emotions, be interested in certain things, and so much more. I was taught to sit like a lady; my male friends were taught not to cry; I bonded with my mom by learning about makeup. Even as a cisgender person, I have an identity that is shaped every day by gendered ideas. We all do.

Gendered relationships connect us all, and it's this universality that makes the absence of well-informed discourse so troubling. In 2018, for example, the Trump administration proposed a definition of gender as a “biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth.” This proposal, only his latest addition to a litany of assaults against difference, posed a direct threat to trans and intersex people—and it was founded entirely on misconception.

When I first read coverage of President Trump's proposition, I was truly shocked. Not because I found the move out of character but because the publications reporting on the proposition—publications esteemed for their intellectual value and held in high regard by well-educated readers—were lost. “Sex” and “gender” were being used interchangeably, as if the difference wasn't essential to the topic on which was being reported.

¹ And so is sex, for that matter!

This difference is probably the first thing you'll learn if you take an introductory gender studies class. Immediately, you're taught that confusing sex and gender is a fallacy. So why is it, then, that no one, from journalists at the New York Times to the President of the United States, seems to know what they're talking about?

The conflation of sex and gender is dangerous. It diminishes the importance and the wrongness of propositions like President Trump's and disavows people of the power to push back against language-based assaults on identity. We need accurate language to talk about gender without making errors in the basic principles that have brought this conversation to the forefront of public discourse. The words we use are important. The rhetoric we use matters.

So what it comes down to is this: if everyone knew the difference between sex and gender—such a basic principle of gender studies—then the conversation around identity-based protections would likely be totally different. The presidential administration would—hopefully—not be trying to define gender at all, much less confusing it with sex assigned at birth. Instead, in the best case scenario, we would actually begin to talk about gender and other identities in a way that acknowledges and respects the nuances of individual experience. Even the most basic knowledge of gender theory has the potential to deconstruct the rigid, harmful systems that pervade our relationships, our policies, and our world.

Gender studies offers us this framework: one for critical thinking with intersectional approaches that encourage us to see both the unique, complicated nuances and the unifying narratives of individuals and their communities. It's a discipline based on analysis and critique but rooted deeply in acceptance and understanding. Gender studies does give us the language to talk about the difference between sex and gender, but it also pushes us to think about how these labels—and others—have informed our world and each of our own experiences within it; it's about much more than “just” gender. Gender studies teaches us to think—not only about ourselves but about how we might best exist with others.

Studying gender theory has changed my life. Beyond my buying into the feminist movement with a renewed (and now intellectualized) vigor, the way in which I view the world has been shaped by critical thinking skills developed in my gender studies classes. I think on a deeper level than was ever expected of me in my “hard science” courses, and I can both appreciate and critique the world with a perspective founded not only in my own experience but also in a wide foundation of theories developed through experiences far different than mine.

For me, it started in the classroom. My perspective is academic, and I'm thankful for that privilege, but my hope is that one day, these conversations won't have to start there. They'll happen more in homes, between friends, and through media. The resources are available now, but too often they're accessed only by those for whom the intimacy of the subject is accompanied by a risk of personal safety. That has to change. Everyone needs gender studies. More people need to be given the language to talk about sex and gender and identities in a way that disrupts binaries and is inclusive in ways unprecedented in our history. If we can all do this, if we can all think about gender as more than genitals or chromosomes, then the conversation will shift for the better. And if the degree I'm working towards gives me access to knowledge

that can help initiate that conversation, then I'm perfectly fine if I'm not included in the "Top Paying Majors" list this year.