

Dear ZCLA Bones Lab participants,

Thank you for the opportunity to work with Zen Center LA and present the workshop "Unpacking Gender" as part of the Bones Lab workshop series. I commend ZCLA for paying attention to gender as it relates to leadership and our everyday lives. From start to finish, I enjoyed the positive energy and trust in the process. Folks' willingness to volunteer their experiences, challenges and questions demonstrated a powerful investment in the work to address gender both individually and collectively. In other words, I felt no "teeth pulling," but I felt a lot of encouragement to dig deeper and unpack more. Moving forward, I encourage the group to stay engaged in dialogue around issues of gender (and other areas of identity). Below, I've included my personal reflection and some follow-up questions from the workshop. I hope it's helpful!

CHECK THE BOX

One purpose of the "check the box" activity was to call attention to the way "sex" and "gender" are used interchangeably although they mean different things (sex-biology/physiology; gender-behavioral/mental). Another purpose was to address how systems (like the State) reinforce gender conformity by limiting the "choice" of one's gender to M or F. As I mentioned in the training, for folks whose sex and gender transcend binaries and boundaries, these questions can be frustrating, tricky and sometimes embarrassing.

As a follow-up activity or discussion, think of all the public spaces that are segregated by sex (visible posted signs with MALE and FEMALE or GENTLEMEN and LADIES or some combination of stick figures in skirt and pants). Now, think about how you determine which space you enter. Do you consider whether people around you might question your decision? What would you say/do if questioned about being in the "wrong bathroom," for example? How do you feel about sex/gender neutral public spaces? What would it take to build healthy communities with safe gender neutral public spaces? How can the ZCLA space make sure it's welcoming, inclusive and safe for all sexes and genders?

Question: As a leader, how do you contribute to creating safe, inclusive, healthy, loving spaces for all sexes and genders?

GUMBY

The Gumby activity helped unpack definitions of sex, gender and sexuality. Using the "blank" green genderless body of Gumby, we looked at assumptions, assignments and our own identities. We also had a chance to break out of the binary and explore fluidity and multiplicity in gender and sexuality. During this activity, I noticed folks wanted to explore the difference between gender identity and gender presentation.

Here's an activity to dig deeper into these two concepts (inspired by all the hair stories we heard during the workshop): Close your eyes and spend some time thinking of all the haircuts/styles/colors you've had over the years. How did other people treat you based on your haircut/style/color? Have you ever been assumed or called the "wrong" gender because of your hairstyle? What has been your reaction when this happens? How would you describe your current haircut/style? Is it masculine or feminine? Does it match your gender identity- how you feel inside? *Of course, there are many reasons (not all choice) folks style their hair but this might help to imagine ways gender presentation and identity do not match up.*

I heard many people making connections between sex, gender and sexuality. I think it's very helpful to think through one's personal journey of development in sex, gender and sexuality. Imagine yourself as a child and continue through till now. Recall different messages you've received over your life about sex, gender and sexuality. When did/didn't you feel validated as a "boy/man" or "girl/woman?" When was the first time you felt approval/disapproval of your sexuality? Notice any changes, shifts or constants in these areas of your identity.

During this exercise, I really appreciated folks' honesty and willingness to offer reflections, experiences, answers and questions. I know we didn't get to all the questions so, please continue to engage each other and others around you! After all, breaking down the categories of sex assignment, gender identity, gender presentation and sexual attraction down can be fun! Share it with

others and you won't believe what you'll learn! For example, it would have been interesting to have a conversation about how our cultural backgrounds influenced our gender formations. Actually, It was very helpful for folks to call my attention to the cultural and linguistic diversity in the room. It reminded me that no group is homogeneous and it's always important to give context and avoid making assumptions.

Questions- How do your perceptions/attitudes/feelings about others' sex, gender and sexuality affect your leadership? How is your leadership affected by other people's perceptions/attitudes/feelings of your sex, gender and sexuality?

SPECTRUMS

I enjoyed working through the spectrum exercises with this group! Thanks to all of the people who "volunteered!" It was interesting to see how color was so easily gendered in our minds. A good majority of folks in both the forming and watching groups quickly formed opinions about where each color should be placed. That is, aside from the yellows. The similarity between the colors and the "gender-neutral-ness" of yellow seemed to frustrate folks so they eventually wound up "stuck" in the middle. I noticed that although it was "easy" to know where to go, both people on the far ends of the spectrum with "boy's blue" and "girl's pink" seemed burdened by the position of being the "most" masculine or feminine color. This makes sense if we think about the pressure of being the ultimate woman or man. It's a difficult burden to carry even if it comes with privilege.

I also enjoyed watching the volunteers change the order of the colors. The difference in perception helped illustrate the unique ways we experience gender, or in this case color as gender. Most of us did not agree with any of the spectrums presented to us. Would we have agreed more often if the exercise was to correspond "male" or "female" to each color? Judging from the placement of the purple from one person to the next, I don't think we'd all agree on every color even if using a binary. So, if we understand each person's experience, expression and understanding of gender to be different but just as valid as our own, we can easily make room for all existing and new genders in this world.

When the activity turned to the people in the group, I felt a number of things shift in the room. It's much easier to talk about the gender or colors or fruits than people. Especially with an audience! But with trust, this activity can help folks openly identify and examine gender dynamics in a group. *As I mentioned during the training, it's helpful to break the spectrum down into 3 small groups of people with "similar" gender identities to have a small group discussion as "X" gender.* Although we didn't break into the small groups, I truly appreciated the spectrum shifting to include all the folks in the group and form a circular gender spectrum. That felt very organic and powerful to me. The energy I experienced in the middle of that space was quite magnificent! Very moving.

DESCRIBING OUR GENDERS

Thanks to Roshi, we used the words from the previous Bones Lab gender brainstorm for the closing exercise describing our individual genders. I hope this exercise gave folks space/time to reflect on their gender formation and how gender has impacted their lives. To use an unpacking analogy, this time reminded me of the moment you come home, dump everything out and look around wondering, "Where to start?" And it was during this time, I felt folks really began to settle, look inward and start unpacking themselves. This was wonderful to see and hear in folks' reflections especially all the references to childhood! Please continue to share these stories with one another (and young people in your life)!

Many, many thanks for including me in the closing piece of the day. I was very moved by each of your reflections and thank you all for being so open and loving. It was a great pleasure working with all of you!

With respect,
riKu

