

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT GENDER?

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WHAT IS GENDER AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT IT?

Introducing Gender

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Describe what it means to “see gender.”
- 1.2 Identify approaches to considering the difference between sex and gender.
- 1.3 Understand arguments behind social constructionist views of gender.
- 1.4 Explain why it is important to study gender.

What do students expect when they sit down on the first day in a class on sociology and gender? What notions do they already have about what gender is and how it matters? How important do they believe gender is to their own lives? What are the stories they tell themselves about gender? These are questions I often ask *myself* about gender, and let me just say at the outset, I certainly don't claim to have all the answers. Learning about gender inevitably involves learning about yourself and your own life. When we combine gender and sociology, it also involves learning about the importance of social forces as they relate to gender. When you begin to think seriously about the impact of gender on your life and the larger world, it becomes difficult not to see gender everywhere you look. You can decide for yourself whether that's a good or a bad thing, but I believe that being aware of the ways in which gender permeates our lives can give us invaluable insight into the world.

SWIMMING WITH THE FISHES: LEARNING TO SEE GENDER

Part of what we will be doing throughout this book is learning to see gender in the world around us. That might seem like a fairly stupid goal at first; most of us believe that we can see gender in the world. Let's imagine we're standing on a busy sidewalk in a city somewhere. As the people walk by, we believe we can identify the gender of most of them with a fairly high degree of certainty. Every now and then, someone might walk by who gives us pause, but by and large, we believe that we're pretty good at **gender attribution**, or reading the many different cues people present in order to decide whether someone is a woman or a man (even though limiting ourselves to these two categories could leave out a lot of people, as we'll discuss later). This chapter will begin to cast some doubt on whether what we're seeing when people walk by is really gender, as well as how useful it is to put people into gender categories in the first place.

But we'll also begin to extend exactly what we mean by *seeing gender*. Seeing gender the way we'll talk about it involves more than just identifying the gender of the people around us. It means beginning to reveal the ways in which gender works, which are not always apparent on the surface of our lives. This is what Judith Lorber (1994) means when she describes gender as being like water to fish. For many people who study this topic, gender is the substance that's all around us and inside us but that we largely take for granted. Learning to see gender means developing a special kind of vision.

Gender, the Binary, and the Social Construction of Reality

One particularly useful tool that sociologists have to help us develop this kind of gender vision is called *the social construction of reality*. If you've taken sociology classes before, there's a strong chance you've heard of this concept. The social construction of reality describes the historical process by which our experiences of the world are put into categories and treated as real things (Roy, 2001). What does this mean in relation to gender?

Probably the best way to help us understand the social construction of reality as it relates to gender is to use the **Thomas principle**, from W. I. and Dorothy Thomas (1928), which states, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 572).

Take the gender binary, for example. In many places, like the United States, people believe that there are two and only two types of people in the world—women and men. This belief in two discrete categories that describe the gender of everyone is what we call the **gender binary**. Many people believe the binary is natural and universal. There have always been two types of people—males and females—and there always will be.

In reality, a binary gender system is just one among many possible ways of organizing gender categories. For example, in Anglo-European societies up until roughly the 17th century, a one-gender system was dominant. Experts believed that instead of two inherently different types of people—women and men—there was one type of person—men—and then lesser versions of that person. In this hierarchy, men were at the pinnacle, with groups like women, slaves, eunuchs, and dwarves below them.

For the Ancient Greeks and other cultures where the one-gender system was dominant, women were merely lesser versions of men. This cultural belief affected how they understood anatomical differences. Under a one-gender system, the penis and the vagina are not different organs. Rather, a vagina is a penis turned inward. Both women and men have paired reproductive glands located in their lower abdomen. We call these ovaries in women and gonads in men. The Greeks labeled them the same organ with slight variations and called both of them gonads. The one-gender system demonstrates how a society's beliefs about what gender is and how it works affects how they see real physical differences.

The existence of gender variant categories in many cultures also demonstrates how the binary is socially constructed. **Gender variant categories** are systems that institutionalize social roles and identities that extend beyond a binary, allowing for the existence of more than two gender categories. Many Native American tribes include a two-spirit role, in which a child who was assigned male or female at birth can live as a different gender. Two-spirits become not quite women and not quite men. They are a third option for fitting into the gender system. Similar gender categories exist around the world and demonstrate that a two-gender system isn't the only option.

These are just several ways that demonstrate that the binary is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a biological reality, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have real consequences, often life-or-death consequences. Because people in the United States believe in the binary, they attempt to enforce it by preventing transgender people from using bathrooms that match their gender identity or from getting access to gender-affirming medical care or from playing sports as their gender identity. Categories, like the binary, that are socially constructed must be maintained and patrolled so that people can go on believing that they are real. This is part of what's at stake in the battles over the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-nonconforming people. Their existence threatens the strength of the binary.

THINK ABOUT IT

Does thinking of a category as based in biology change the discrimination people in that category face? Are people less likely to be prejudiced against a certain group if they believe the identity is biological and, therefore, out of our control? Has this been true for social categories in the past?

Once we understand the ways in which the world around us is socially constructed, we can begin to untangle the complex ways in which our understanding of the world is shaped by our particular social constructions. Understanding the social construction of gender helps us to see the water in which we're swimming as well as to understand why we didn't notice it in the first place.

In this book, we use two specific methods to see the social constructions around us. The first, which we've already considered in our discussion of race, is a *historical* approach. Part of what makes things seem real is the sense that this is how they always have been and how they always will be. A historical approach helps us see that this is very often not the case.

The second approach that helps us reveal social constructions is *cross-cultural*. If something that you very much believe is real in your particular culture is perceived as ridiculously impossible in another culture, what exactly is real? Cross-culturally, racial categories become even more complicated. In many Latin American countries, members of the same family can be categorized in different racial groups based on their skin color; this means that your sibling may be considered white while you are considered Black. Many people around the world find that their racial category changes as they move from place to place and country to country. What does this say about the reality of these categories? Throughout this book, we use both the historical approach and the cross-cultural approach to help us see the ways in which gender is also socially constructed.

Gender and Intersectionality

There's another perspective that draws our attention to the variations in experiences of gender, this time across intersecting categories such as race, social class, sexuality, age, and disability. It's called **intersectionality**, and it's both a theoretical orientation and a frame for activism. We'll discuss intersectionality in more depth in Chapter 2, but for now, it's important to understand

the way intersectionality draws our attention to variations and contradictions in the way people in different social categories experience gender. An intersectional approach pushes us to avoid blanket statements about all men or all women in favor of asking questions about *which* women or *which* men? When we talk about the privileges men have as a group, does that include all men or mostly white, cisgender, straight, middle-class men? How would the experiences of an Asian American transgender man be different? Intersectionality makes us aware that we do not experience all our overlapping identities separately. We are always simultaneously gendered *and* raced, classed, sexualized, and embodied. To understand how gender works, we must understand it in its full complexity, as it intersects with other identities.

SEX OR GENDER: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

By now, you might have noticed an important relationship between biology and our perceptions of reality; the binary is perceived as something that's real because many people believe in its biological truth. This is true in many parts of the world where science forms a dominant way of thinking about the world. If something is rooted in our biology, it can be empirically and objectively observed and must, therefore, be real. Later, we'll explore the way in which even our trust in science is gendered and has gender implications.

Biological explanations of gender differences are often called on to establish their reality, and this brings us to our first point of vocabulary, the difference between *sex* and *gender*.

When I ask students in my sociology of gender class early in the semester what the difference is between sex and gender, they usually agree that sex describes the biological differences between women and men while gender pertains to the social differences. Although not everyone follows this general usage, this is a fairly accurate description of how social scientists have employed these terms.

Sex has been used to describe the biological differences between people we call males and people we call females; gender is the social meanings layered onto those differences. This neat division leaves sex category up to those concerned with biology and gender up to those interested in the social world. For much of the history of the study of gender in the Anglo-European world, this was a standard way of understanding sex and gender, and it was called a biosocial approach.

A Biosocial Approach

A **biosocial approach** to the study of gender acknowledges that much of what we experience regarding gender is socially constructed. There are differences in how gender as a social category is constructed across historical time periods and across different places. However, from the biosocial perspective, there are real limits to that social construction because of the biological reality of male and female bodies. One way to understand this perspective is to say that biosocialists believe in **sexual dimorphism**. Sexual dimorphism is the claim that sex marks a distinction between two physically and genetically discrete categories of people.

If you subscribe to sexual dimorphism, you believe that we can use certain characteristics to sort people objectively into two categories called male and female. Discrete here means that you can only be one or the other (male or female) and not both at the same time. This sorting usually happens when you're born and someone, usually a doctor, decides whether you're a girl or a boy. This process is called **gender assignment**. Biosocialists do not believe that our sex category is the only thing that determines how we interact with the world; gender is constructed onto the differences we call sex. But they do believe that there are two kinds of people in the world—females and males.

At this point, you might be thinking to yourself, *Well, duh! Everyone knows there are two types of people in the world—women and men!* Or maybe you're thinking, *That's stupid! What about transgender and nonbinary people? Where do they fit in?* The belief in sexual dimorphism is being chipped away at in today's society, but still, many people believe that sex category is a real thing and that sorting people into two categories is a simple, straightforward thing. But is it?

What can we see of sex category in our everyday lives? We can see the shape of people's bodies and their faces. If someone has breasts, does that mean the person is a woman? Is that a criterion we could use? Yes, except that some men have breasts (or there would have been no need for Kramer, a character on the hit sitcom *Seinfeld*, to invent the “bro,” a bra for men), and some women do not. What about facial hair? We can certainly see facial hair. And yet, again, some men do not have facial hair, and some women do. In her study of trans men in the workplace, Kristen Schilt (2010) found that facial hair often trumped several other gender clues pointing toward femininity in gender attribution for trans men. That is, even if someone could see a feminine name and the presence of breasts, the presence of facial hair meant they'd still refer to that person as *he*.

What about an Adam's apple? That could be a gender indicator. Again, not all men have them, and not all women lack them. On average, women should be slightly shorter than men, but we also encounter very short men and very tall women. Schilt would argue that what we're really seeing when we look for sex category is **cultural genitalia**, or the outward performance of gender that we then assume to match up with biological genitalia.

A Strong Social Constructionist Approach

Unlike a biosocial approach, the **strong social constructionist approach** argues that both sex and gender are socially constructed. In fact, you might argue from this perspective that gender—social meanings—is really all there is. Our gender beliefs cause us to think there are real categories out there called “female” and “male,” but the reality is much more complex. Sex category itself is socially constructed, and therefore, it is culture that dictates how we understand sex.

Gender and Bodies

There are at least four areas of evidence in support of this perspective. The *first type* of evidence points our attention to the ways in which biological differences can be influenced by social reality. This helps us see how the social can influence the biological. For example, one biological difference between women and men is that, on average, men have 20% to 30% greater bone mass and strength than women (Wade & Ferree, 2015). Keep in mind that, as we discuss more in Chapter

3, average differences mean that there's still a great deal of overlap. Some women have greater bone mass and strength than some men, and some men have lesser bone mass and strength than some women. Differences in the average population emerge only after puberty and become more pronounced when women lose bone mass after menopause (Avdagić et al., 2009). This biological reality explains why women over the age of 50 are 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with osteoporosis than men of the same age (International Osteoporosis Foundation, 2015).

But studies suggest that somewhere between 10% and 50% of the differences in bone mass can be due to lifestyle choices such as diet, physical activity, and smoking rather than genetics (Office of the Surgeon General, 2004). In fact, one study shows that among Orthodox Jewish adolescent boys, the development of bone mass proceeds very differently. In these communities, boys spend a great deal of their childhoods engaged in the intensive study of religious documents. This means they spend much less time being physically active. As a result, their bones fail to grow as strong as the bones of their sisters, who are freed by this particular set of gender norms to spend more time running, jumping, and playing.

In this community, socially constructed ideas about gender—that boys should spend much of their time studying religious texts while girls should spend less time in such activities—has an effect on the physical bodies of girls and boys and, eventually, women and men. The beliefs of the Orthodox Jewish community—their social reality—are imprinted onto the physical bodies of their daughters and sons. Gender shapes sex.

Another biological reality students in my classes often point to is research on brain differences between women and men. Women, they might point out, have smaller brains, different brain composition, and different brain function (Halpern, 2012). It is true that there are some differences in the brains of women and men, but it's important to note here that it's increasingly difficult to tell if these differences are genetic or shaped by our environments, including our social environment.

New findings suggest that our brains have a great deal of plasticity, or ability to change and respond to the environment. This plasticity includes changes in the structure and function of our brains. Studies show that it might be easier than we previously thought to alter brain function. In one study, 3 months of playing the video game *Tetris* among young girls resulted in brains that were heavier and showed enhanced cortical thickness (Haier et al., 2009).

The same complexity applies to hormones, which are often believed to be a biological identifier of sex category. New research tells us that the production and presence of hormones are influenced by social interaction. Men's testosterone levels decrease if they are in close relationships with women and are actively involved with their children (Alvergne et al., 2009; Booth et al., 2006; Gettler et al., 2011; Mazur & Booth, 1998; Storey et al., 2000; van Anders & Watson, 2007). In societies in which it's normal for fathers to be involved parents, men's average testosterone levels are lower than in societies where it's not normal (Muller et al., 2009). Position in a hierarchy can affect testosterone levels as well. Being suddenly positioned below others in a hierarchy, as at the beginning of boot camp, is correlated with a drop in testosterone that can last for several weeks (Kreuz & Rose, 1972; Thompson et al., 1990). This research suggests that the relationship between the social world and our biological bodies is much more complicated and interactive than any simplistic description.

Studies like these suggest that we need a more complex way of thinking about the relationship between the social and the biological. This new model would acknowledge that though our underlying biology is important and can't be discounted, the interaction between our bodies and the social environment does not flow in one causal direction. As strong social constructionists argue, our social beliefs can have a crucial impact on bodies—our bones, brains, and muscles, for example. Our social reality is written onto the physical stuff of our biological bodies.

Intersex and the Social Construction of Sex

A *second type* of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach comes from the experiences of intersex individuals. If we accept the claims of sexual dimorphism, we should be able to come up with some universal criteria for sorting everyone into a sex category. But strong social constructionists point to the ways in which not everyone fits so easily into categories of male and female or man and woman. If we start by defining men as people with penises and women as people with vaginas, we'll quickly discover that some people have both. Where do they fit?

People born with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) have XX chromosomes but masculinization of the genitalia. As infants, these babies have what appears to be a penis as well as a vagina. Individuals born with androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) have XY chromosomes but feminized genitalia, which often means they have a vagina as well as testes (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

As we will read in Chapter 4, these infants are unlikely to make it into adulthood with their genitalia intact because doctors in the United States usually perform surgery on intersex infants to create a consistent sex category for them. Thus, the infant with CAH is likely to have their penis removed, whereas the infant with AIS is likely to be raised as a girl despite the presence of testes and the development of masculine secondary sex characteristics at puberty.

Gender scholars identify individuals who have any of a wide number of variations of genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes that are outside the typical male/female binary as intersex. Intersex variations are estimated to occur at a rate of 1.7% of all births, making intersex infants more common than albinism (being born albino or lacking skin pigmentation). In a city of 300,000 people, 5,100 of them would have intersex variations.

We could say that although we can't necessarily see sex category with the naked eye, we live in the 21st century; there are other ways to determine sex. There are internal sex organs. Today, medical doctors generally use the presence or absence of a penis to initially assign gender. In the past, doctors went by internal organs and emphasized the presence or absence of a uterus, because without a uterus, a woman could not reproduce.

But intersex variations deal with both internal and external genitalia. Some intersex individuals have both an ovary and a testis, one on each side of their body. In other individuals, the ovary and testis grow together, forming an ovo-testis. The presence or absence of internal sex organs is also an imperfect method of determining sex category.

What about hormones, then? What we call sex hormones are not differentiated in children before they reach puberty, and postpuberty, there are wide variations in the presence and absence of sex hormones. Individuals with androgen insensitivity syndrome have testosterone in their bodies, but they cannot metabolize it and, therefore, develop breasts at puberty. Is the presence of testosterone, then, a good measure of who's a man and who's a woman? What about

genetics? As we learn in high school biology, men have XY sex chromosomes while women have XX sex chromosomes. Does modern genetic testing provide a definitive answer to sex category? No. Those born with Turner syndrome lack a second sex chromosome, making them XO, whereas those with Klinefelter's syndrome have two X chromosomes and a Y (XXY). How should we identify the sex of someone who is XXY or XO?

Transgender People and the Social Construction of Sex

To the complications that intersex variations bring to the idea of sex category, you might also add the complexities of the transgender community as a *third type* of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach. **Transgender** is a broad label that includes a wide variety of people who seek to change, cross, or go beyond culturally defined gender categories (Ferber et al., 2008). The term includes many ways to express gender, not all of which line up with the binary sex categories of female and male.

Some transgender individuals seek surgery to change their underlying anatomy. For example, a trans man is someone who was assigned a feminine gender when they were born but whose gender identity is masculine. Other transgender people identify as nonbinary, which means their gender identity is neither masculine nor feminine. Agender individuals have no gender. Children as young as 4 or 5 years old express that the gender they were assigned at birth does not match their internal sense of who they are. People who live outside or beyond the binary have always existed, throughout human history and across cultures. How do we fit this reality into a biosocial approach, in which sex category is supposed to provide a real limit on the ways in which gender is expressed?

Historical and Cross-Cultural Evidence

Strong social constructionists also use the historical and cross-cultural approaches as evidence, pointing to the ways in which sex categories have, in fact, varied across time and place. These examples make up our *fourth type* of evidence. As we've already seen, the ancient Greeks believed in a one-gender model (Roy, 2001). In some cultures, the categories that Anglo-Europeans label "gender" or "sex" may be very different from our own conceptions of what those categories mean, leading some scholars to wonder if gender really exists at all in these places. Increasingly, historical and cross-cultural evidence suggest that the idea of a binary gender system is far from universal. The same biological reality leads to very different cultural conclusions depending on where and when you are.

THINK ABOUT IT

Think of a behavioral trait that is generally associated with one sex or the other (for example, crying, fighting, looking pretty, nurturing). Can you think of examples of females who engage in the behaviors generally associated with males or of males who engage in the behaviors generally associated with females?

Table 1.1 compares the biosocial and strong social constructionist approaches.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Biosocial and Strong Social Constructionist Approaches Compared

Approach	Position on Sexual Dimorphism	View of Relationship Between Sex and Gender	Stance on Intersex and Transgender
Biosocial	There are two distinct, biologically discrete types of people, male and female; sexual dimorphism is true.	Sex partially produces gender and sets real limits on the expression of gender.	Aberrations must be fit into a dimorphic system.
Strong social constructionist	There are not two distinct types of people, male and female; sexual dimorphism is a claim but not the truth.	Gender produces sex; our ideas about gender shape how we make sense of biological reality.	Evidence demonstrates that the dimorphic system does not accurately describe reality where sex and gender are concerned.

Sex or Gender?

The debate between biosocial and strong social constructionist perspectives is ongoing, but it has important implications for how we think about the relationship between sex and gender. From the strong social constructionist perspective, we're always talking about gender because there really is no such thing as sex. This doesn't mean that biology doesn't exist and that people don't have bodies. It also doesn't mean that people don't have differences in their genitalia, DNA, sex hormones, and other biological realities. But for strong social constructionists, these biological differences do not line up with the categories we have created and labeled sex, and the claim that they do is false.

As sociologists who understand the importance of social construction, in this textbook, we assume a strong social constructionist perspective. This means that most of the time, we talk about gender rather than sex categories, assuming that both are socially constructed. We talk about women and men rather than females and males.

A WORD ABOUT BIOLOGY AND STRONG SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The idea that sex categories are socially constructed—that there are *not* two kinds of distinguishable male and female bodies in the world—is hard to swallow for some people. Students are often left wondering whether biology exists at all from the strong social constructionist perspective. Are these theorists arguing that there are no such things as penises, vaginas, testes, hormones, or chromosomes? Are they saying that we don't have physical, biological bodies at all?

Most theorists who argue from the strong social constructionist point of view would say that, yes, of course we have physical bodies. The problem is that our categories—male and

female—don't accurately describe the reality of those physical bodies. In fact, many would argue that the diversity in our physical bodies is greater than our categories would lead us to believe. They might go so far as to argue that our belief in how bodies *should* be gets in the way of our perceiving the way bodies *actually are*. Because we believe that everyone should have a penis or a vagina, we tend to ignore the many cases of people who have both. Because we believe that the gender you're assigned at birth should line up with the gender you live, we stigmatize transgender people who violate these norms.

In other words, strong social constructionists believe that our social ideas about what sex categories should look like get in the way of our seeing what the actual biological reality is.

WHY STUDY GENDER?

This question—why study gender—brings us back to some of the questions with which we began this introduction. You may have your own reasons that bring you to this book, but the general answer to this question is that gender matters. Perhaps you've already noticed the ways in which gender matters in your own life. In this book, we push that understanding even further by raising questions about what gender is and how it operates. Our journey can be summarized with three main goals.

First, we'll be building an understanding of the ways in which gender is socially constructed in a global, historical, and intersectional context. One fundamental truth about gender that those who study this topic have arrived at is that gender varies a great deal based on where, when, and who you are. We'll be using all three perspectives to explore those complexities.

Our second goal in this textbook is to debunk any ideas about what is normal and abnormal in regard to gender. We do this through looking at gender globally and by being intersectional—by placing the experiences of people of color, gay and lesbian people, transgender people, and working-class people at the center rather than at the margins of our inquiries. Looking at what it means to be a gay man or a Middle Eastern woman or a nonbinary white person should not teach us what it means to be different from some unspoken norm (straight, white cis women and cis men), but it should help reveal the unique lessons to be learned about gender in the experiences of many different kinds of people.

Because of this goal, the particular language we use to talk about different experiences and places in the world is important. The term *Western* assumes a geographic centering but also an economic and social one. Societies are *Western* if they see Europe as the center of the world, and this terminology derives from colonial philosophy. We generally use the term *Western* or *Anglo-European* when we refer to cultural phenomena. But you will also hear terminology like *developing* and *developed* or *global North* and *global South*, which reflect different ways of understanding global divisions.

We emphasize the social construction of gender, but remember from the Thomas principle that just because something is socially constructed doesn't mean it has no real consequences for people's lives. Gender might be socially constructed, but it is also a system of inequality; understanding gender in this light is the third goal we pursue. What we believe about gender has real consequences for the lives of people around the world. Gender distributes power to people. As

we will explore, it may cut short the lives of many men; cause some women to live with the fear of physical assault; and influence how much pleasure you experience in your sexual life, how much money you make, and how much leisure time you have.

When we begin to see gender around us, we will also begin to see the ways in which gender sometimes works to help some and hurt others. But we argue that as a system that distributes privilege, gender can negatively affect everyone at some point in their lives. For many people who study gender, the answer to the question “Why study gender?” is that understanding gender is the first step toward deciding what needs to be changed and then taking action.

There are a lot of questions about gender to be asked and a lot of answers to be explored. Many answers contradict each other. During one semester of my sociology of gender course, a student complained after class that his head hurt—not because of a hangover or too much yelling but because the class was making him think too much. Can you think too much about gender? Perhaps. Sometimes students are frustrated by the lack of easy answers when it comes to gender, but asking questions seems to be the first step in finding out something that’s truly meaningful to you, and that is what we seek to do in this book.

KEY TERMS

Biosocial approach

Cultural genitalia

Gender assignment

Gender attribution

Gender binary

Gender variant categories

Intersectionality

Sexual dimorphism

Strong social constructionist approach

Thomas principle

Transgender

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