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Transgender and the Gender Order

The Social Character of Gender in Different Cultures

by Raewyn Connell

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Raewyn Connell

One of the most dramatic proofs of the social character of gender is the fact that different societies recognise different gender categories. There are not only women and men; there may also be third genders, or variations on two that seem to multiply the gender categories in which people can live.

... displays of transgender positions, attempts to tangle the masculine and the feminine, or even to explode right out of the gender system.

This question has intrigued anthropologists, and there is a large ethnographic literature about such groups as the berdache, the "two-souled" people of indigenous cultures in south-western North America, and the travesti of Argentina and Brazil. These groups are all different from each other, and whether the idea of a "third gender" makes sense for any of them is debated.

Certainly all are vulnerable to change.

In contemporary Indonesia, for instance, "banci" communities are distinct from a new sexual category, "gay" men, who have emerged in more affluent social contexts with stronger links to North American gay culture.

Dennis Altman, in an important survey of contemporary sexuality, *Global Sex*, points out that such changes are not necessarily a matter of substituting a "Western" sexuality for a "traditional" sexuality. Globalization involves an enormously complex interaction between sexual customs and gender regimes that are in any case diverse and divided. The result is a spectrum of sexual practices and categories, formed in contexts of cultural disruption and economic inequality.

The gender order of the global metropole, originating in western Europe, serves nowadays mainly as a model of gender dichotomy. The two genders are mostly assumed to be heterosexual, though the gender dichotomy is also maintained in the way Western culture deals with male-to-male or female-to-female sex.

But this gender order does have complications. According to the cultural historian Thomas Laqueur, before the eighteenth-century, European culture did not have a dichotomous model of male and female bodies as natural opposites; rather, the female was seen as a kind of imperfect male. Even within a dichotomous gender symbolism, there are many opportunities for violating the boundaries.

A well-known study by Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*, finds an astonishing range of cross-dressing practices in theatre, the sex industry, film, religion, detective stories, music, and television ... and ranging from Marlene Dietrich's top hat to Boy George's dresses.

The carnival end of this spectrum can be understood as entertainment and relief. It is the serious end of the spectrum that concerns us more. People who somehow live across gender boundaries, who don't just dip in and out, have interested gender theorists as much as "third gender" categories have interested anthropologists.

From the earliest days of scientific research on sexuality and gender, such people have appeared in the literature as a kind of intriguing monster. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, whose disdainful *Psychopathia Sexualis* was both a founding text of medico-legal sexology and a considerable under-the-counter best-seller, collected lurid cases of "mental hermaphroditism".

The genial Havelock Ellis devoted over a hundred pages of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* to "Eonism", his name for thorough-going gender inversion (after a French aristocrat, the Chevalier d'Eon, who had at different times presented as a man and as a woman).

Even the great Sigmund Freud did it; his discussion of the case of Dr. Schreber examines gender-change beliefs as part of an analysis of psychosis.

Transsexuals', as such people came to be called in the 1950s, still appeared to psychiatrists and sociologists as a kind of natural experiment exposing the mechanisms of the gender system. One American transsexual woman, known as Agnes, became the subject of a small academic industry in her own right.

The story of the creation of "transsexualism" as a medical syndrome, the ambiguous role of doctors, and the controversy within the

medical profession, is now well understood. Interested readers can find many of the key documents in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle's admirable *Transgender Studies Reader*. Here I will focus on three issues that have to do with the gender order.

The first is whether transsexual lives really are the natural experiment many researchers have taken them to be. Are West and Zimmerman, authors of a classic paper called "Doing Gender", correct when they say: "Agnes' case makes visible what culture has made invisible - the accomplishment of gender"?

The answer is yes, in the sense that Agnes did study the gender practices of the women around her, and put them into operation. Of course you don't have to be transsexual to make such a study; anthropologists and teenagers do it all the time. To the extent that one's gender position is a matter of how one is recognised in everyday interaction, transsexual lives do dramatise the process - since that recognition is likely to be problematic, needing to be worked at.

But the answer is no, in the stronger sense that West and Zimmerman mean "accomplishment". In their analysis, gender is made performatively, in the "doing" that allows other people to assign one to a gender category. The whole point of Agnes' dilemma was that she was already a woman. She was a young woman with some serious problems, including the fact that she had a penis, and that was why she went to the doctors and asked for surgery. It was an intolerable contradiction that had driven her to start making a bodily transition. (Which she did, famously, by finding an illicit source of oestrogen while still going through puberty.)

This leads immediately to the second question: how "fluid" is gender? With the rise of performative theories of gender since the 1990s, there has been great interest in shifts, transitions, variations in gender and violations of norms. If normative gender is brought into being performatively, i.e. by "doing", then by changing the performative actions, we should be able to create non-normative gender.

Hence the many displays of transgender positions, attempts to tangle the masculine and the feminine, or even to explode right out of the gender system.

Hence the fascination in modern cultural studies with body modifications of various kinds. Are not transsexual women and men, reversing their original gender assignment, undertaking severe body changes, the most striking possible demonstration of the fluidity of gender?

Again, the answer is yes in one sense and no in another. Transsexual lives, and the professional and public debates that have swirled around them, are indeed a site of complexity in the gender order. The medical researchers spent a lot of time trying to classify transvestites, pseudo-transsexuals, true transsexuals, homosexuals, effeminate men, masculine women, and sub-categories of each; and none of these efforts ever produced a stable classification.

A well-informed (though anti-transition) psychiatrist, Colette Chiland, has commented that in this field there is not even a spectrum of gender positions. There is a "magma", a molten mass like the core of a volcano.

But in another sense, the transsexual "cases" that Chiland herself talks about are a dramatic proof of the lack of fluidity, the stability, indeed the intransigence of gender.

One of the most striking features of the autobiographies that transsexual women and men have written, and the life-history interviews they have given, is the repeated declaration that in a strong sense, they have always been like this. This is abundantly clear in the best social-scientific study of gender transition, Henry Rubin's *Self Made Men*.

The gender project, to use a theoretical term, is consistent over a lifetime - however "wrong" in terms of conventional social embodiment it may be. Transsexual women too have struggled to find language adequate to explain the experience of contradictory embodiment, "the female part of me locked up in a prison of flesh and blood", as Katherine Cummings put it in Katherine's Diary - and to express the "radical need" to which this contradiction gives rise.

What does change, in the turns and twists in transsexual lives, is how one deals with this intractable problem, this impossible embodiment. Women and men undertaking gender transitions, if they are very lucky will find great support, but if they are not lucky will face ostracism, loss of jobs, and family hostility, as well as major difficulties in sexual relations.

Many younger transsexual women have to support themselves by sex work. There is a certain clientele of straight men who are excited by transitioning bodies. But this does not mean they respect them. Roberta Perkins's book *The Drag Queen Scene*, one of the great pioneering works of social science in this field, presents the voices of transsexual women in Sydney. Her interviewees include Naomi, a stripper who remarked "I think men have a definite dislike for women in general, that's why women are raped and bashed, and strippers are up there to provide an outlet for this dislike by the yelling of profanities at them. Transsexuals are lower down than women according to men, and look how many men sexually abuse transsexuals."

This brings me to the third issue: politics. There have been in the past sharp differences over the significance of transsexual experience for gender politics, some commentators seeing gender conservatism and some seeing gender revolution. Both positions have been argued for the last forty years.

In a very strange development, "transsexuals" have recently been re-defined as a de-gendered identity group whose human rights need to be claimed. Transsexual men and women are blended into one "T" in an amazing new acronym L.G.B.T.I.Q., which lists "sexual minorities" in need of rights protection. Units about these groups have been added to gender studies programs in universities, and declarations about them are made in policy statements about discrimination.

In the United States especially, the term "transgender community" came into use in the 1990s, as if a stable group had been formed which could follow the familiar American model of identity politics. Alternatively it could be regarded as the site of queerness, specifically of gender refusal. It was almost as if an attempt were being made to create a third-gender or a vanguard non-gender category in the

heart of the city. I hope the people involved in this brave project do find, or make, a liveable space. It may be helpful to keep the term "transgender" for this project, and the group that forms around it.

But that is rather different from the process of transition for which the term "transsexual" was coined. The Canadian activist Viviane Namaste in *Invisible Lives* questions transgender discourse. She urges attention to the real-life experiences, subjectivities and struggles of transsexual men and women that are "erased" by queer theory as well as by government agencies. Simply accessing health care and social services, as Namaste's research in Canada shows, can be very difficult for people making transitions.

Gender transition does have a deep connection with the revolutionary potential for change in human life. Therefore being a transsexual woman and a committed feminist is perfectly consistent. In the discussion above I use the term transsexual only as an adjective, not as a noun (except when quoting other views). The basic idea is a process, not a social group or a type of person.

But gender transition only happens through severe contradictions in personal life. These can be unbearable (there is a high rate of suicide among people in this situation). The contradictions are so strong that it commonly absorbs a great deal of energy simply to hold one's life together, at times of transition. The situation can be made even harder, as Namaste says, by denial of recognition from institutions or movements. Somewhere there are links between the potential and the reality; but we don't yet have them. The politics of transsexual lives are still an open issue.

Raewyn Connell

Edited From Wikipedia:  Born in 1944, Raewyn Connell is an Australian Sociologist and Professor at the University of Sydney and is internationally acclaimed for her work on hegemonic masculinity and men's studies. Raewyn is also a transsexual woman, completing her transition late in life and as such, almost all her earlier work was published under the gender-neutral name "R.W. Connell".



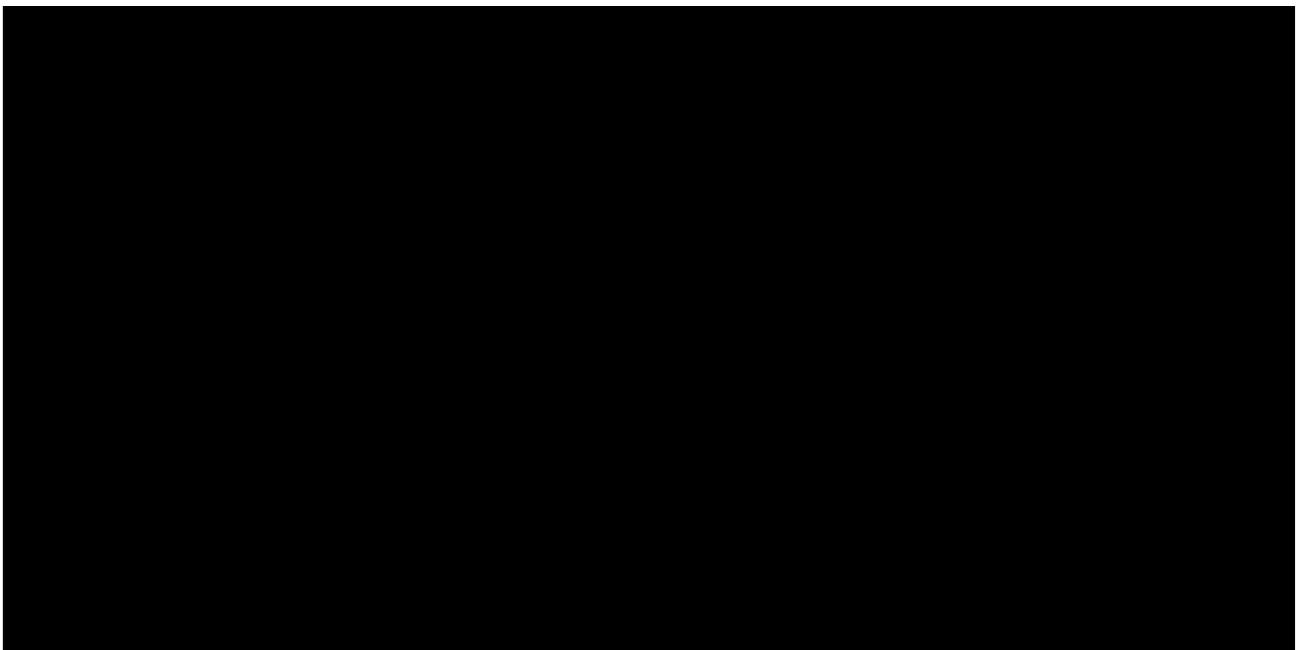
She was educated at Manly and North Sydney High Schools, and has degrees from the University of Melbourne and University of Sydney. She has held jobs at universities in Australia, including being the founding professor of sociology at Macquarie University 1976-1991. In the United States she was visiting professor of Australian studies at Harvard University 1991-1992, and professor of sociology at University of California Santa Cruz 1992-1995. She was a rank-and-file member of the Australian Labor Party (before the party shifted to the right in the early 1980s), and a trade unionist.

Raewyn first became known for research on large-scale class dynamics and the ways that class and gender hierarchies are re-made in the everyday life of schools. In the late 1980s she developed a social theory of gender relations which emphasised that gender is a large-scale social structure and not just a matter of personal identity. In applied fields she has worked on poverty and education, sexuality and AIDS prevention, and labour movement strategy.

She is best known outside Australia for studies of the social construction of masculinity. She was one of the founders of this research field, and her book *Masculinities*, (published in 1995 and republished in 2005) is the most-cited book in the field. The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" has been particularly influential and has attracted much debate. She has been an advisor to UNESCO and UNO initiatives relating men, boys and masculinities to gender equality and peacemaking.

Connell's sociology emphasises the historical nature of social reality and the transformative character of social practice. Her writing tries to combine empirical detail, structural analysis, critique, and relevance to practice. Much of her empirical work uses biographical (life-history) interviewing, in education, family life and workplaces. She has written or co-written twenty-one books and more than 150 research papers. Her work is translated into sixteen languages.

For more information about Raewyn Connell, including her many thoughts on theory, intellectuals, gender and sexuality, masculinities, class, education and some of her poetry, please visit Raewyn's website.

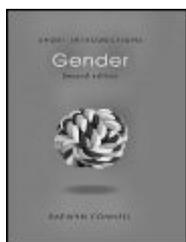


Conversation with author of the book *Masculinities* - Raewyn Connell was one of four speakers on the "Breaking Barriers" plenary at the [Women's Worlds 2011 Conference](#) in Ottawa, Canada. This interview is conducted by Greg Macdougall, video production by Common Cause Media.



Confronting Equality: Gender, Knowledge and Global Change
Author: Raewyn Connell
Published by: Polity (2011)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0745653518.

From Amazon Books: What does social equality mean now, in a world of markets, global power and new forms of knowledge? In this new book, Raewyn Connell combines vivid research with theoretical insight and radical politics to address this question. The focus moves across gender equality struggles, family change, class and education, intellectual workers, and the global dimension of social science, to contemporary theorists of knowledge and global power, and the political dilemmas of today's left. Written with clarity and passion, this book proposes a bold agenda for social science, and shows it in action. Raewyn Connell is known internationally for her powerfully argued and field-defining books *Masculinities*, *Gender and Power*, *Making the Difference*, and *Southern Theory*. This new volume gathers together a broad spectrum of her recent work which distinctively combines close-focus field research and large-scale theory, and brings this to bear on those questions of social justice and struggles for change that have long been at the heart of her writing, and will have wide-ranging implications for the social sciences and social activism in the twenty-first century.



Gender: Short Introductions
Author: Raewyn Connell
Published by: Polity; 2 edition (2009)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0745645681.

From Amazon Books: How can we understand gender in the contemporary world? What differences now exist between women and men? How are masculinities and femininities made? And what is the impact of globalization on gender issues? Raewyn Connell, one of the world's leading scholars in the field, answers these questions and more. In this book she provides a readable introduction to modern gender studies, covering empirical research from all parts of the world in addition to theory and politics. As well as introducing the field, *Gender* provides a powerful contemporary framework for gender analysis with a distinctive global awareness. Highlighting the multi-dimensional character of gender relations, Connell shows how to link personal life with large-scale organizational structures and how gender politics changes its form in changing situations. The second edition of this influential and accessible book brings the review of research up to date and includes new discussions of gender theory in the global periphery, the legacy of colonialism, the intersection of structures, the impact of deconstructionist theory and politics, and understanding transsexual and transgender lives. *Gender* is engaged scholarship that moves from personal experience to global problems and offers a unique perspective on gender issues today.

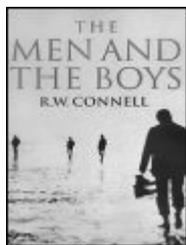


Masculinities
Author: Raewyn Connell
Published by: University of California Press; 2 edition (2005)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0520246980.

From Amazon Books: This is an exciting new edition of R.W. Connell's groundbreaking text, which has become a classic work on the nature and construction of masculine identity. In its first edition, *Masculinities* provided one of the most important voices in feminist scholarship by men. Connell argued that there is no such thing as a single concept of masculinity, but, rather, that many different masculinities exist, each associated with different positions of power. In a world in which gender order continues to extend privilege to men over women, but that also raises difficult issues for men and boys, Connell's account is more pertinent than ever. In the new edition's substantial new introduction and conclusion, Connell discusses the development of masculinity studies in the ten years since the book's initial publication. She explores global gender relations, new theories, and practical uses of masculinity research. Looking to the future, her new concluding chapter addresses the politics of masculinities, and the implications of masculinity research as a way of understanding current world issues. Against the backdrop of an increasingly divided world, one that is presently dominated by neo-conservative politics, Connell's account highlights a series of compelling questions about the future of human society. This second edition of Connell's classic book will be essential reading for students taking courses on masculinities and gender studies and will be of interest to students and scholars across the humanities and social sciences.

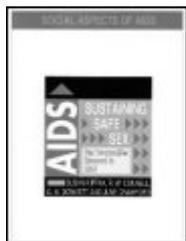
The Men and the Boys
Author: Raewyn Connell
Published by: University of California Press (2001)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0520228696.

From Amazon Books: Questions about men and boys have aroused remarkable media attention and public interest in recent years. But what have we learned about masculinity, and where is our



thinking on the subject headed? In this important book, R.W. Connell continues her pioneering work by taking the next step in understanding the dynamics of contemporary masculinity: incorporating the international dimension. The first sustained discussion of masculinity and globalization, *The*

Men and the Boys links cutting-edge theory with fascinating case studies to point us toward change - in scholarship and public policy as well as in the lives of individual men. This powerful book looks at a range of intriguing and controversial subjects, including the question of sex between men, men's bodies and health, education, the prevention of violence, and much more. It includes the voices of many men, both straight and gay, in a series of vivid life histories that include a compelling account of "iron man" Steve Donoghue and many others who describe coming to terms with their sexuality, their childhoods, and their experiences at school and work. As he reveals the price men and boys across cultures pay for patriarchy, Connell makes a persuasive case for men to change their conduct in order to create a more cooperative and peaceful world.



Sustaining Safe Sex: Gay Communities Respond to AIDS. (Social Aspects of AIDS.)

Author: Raewyn Connell, June Crawford, G.W. Dowsett, Susan Kippax

Published by: Routledge (1993)

I.S.B.N.-13 978-0750701341.

From Google Books:  AIDS. is not simply a concern for scientists, doctors and medical researchers, it has important social dimensions too. These include cultural, individual and media responses to AIDS./AIDS., stigmatization and discrimination, perceptions of risk, and issues to do with counselling, care and health promotion. This new series of books brings together work from many disciplines including psychology, sociology, cultural and media studies, anthropology,

education and history.



Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics

Author: Raewyn Connell

Published by: Stanford University Press (1987)

I.S.B.N.-13 978-0804714303.

From Amazon Books:  This book is an introductory textbook on sexual politics and an original contribution to the reformulation of social and political theory. In a discussion of, among other issues, psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminist theories, the structure of gender relations, and working class feminism, the author has produced a work of synthesis and scholarship which should be of interest to students and professionals in sociology, politics, women's studies and to

anyone interested in the field of sexual politics.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.