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Ways to Think about Gender

Sex versus Gender

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When we think about sex, we often first think about male/female sex differences: are men different from women, and if so, what causes the difference?

One of the most important points articulated by the wave of feminism that arose in the U.S. in the 1960s is that sex is different from gender. Sex is different from gender in that "sex"

refers to a biological label ascribed on the basis of genitalia: the labels for sex available in common use are male, female, and intersex. "Gender" on the other hand, refers to a set of behaviours and characteristics assigned to each sex. "Sex" is felt by most people to be a stable category — since the vast majority of people fall, at least in external appearance - into either the male or female group. But "gender" is what we could call a social or a cultural construct that is, every society seems to assign different characteristics to each sex, and what any society believes to be "masculine" and "feminine" may change over time.

Sex is felt by most people to be a stable category, but gender is a social or a cultural construct with every society assigning different characteristics to each sex.

Taking this basic distinction as our starting point we can explore more fully the consequences of the labels we currently have at our disposal.

Sex

When we think about sex, we often first think about male/female sex differences: are men different from women, and if so, what causes the difference? Currently, to put matters in simple terms, there are two main schools of thought on this: those who believe that biological differences between the sexes are crucial, and those who see them as less important.

The position one takes here is important because it decides whether one believes that sex can actually be split apart from gender and discussed separately. The terms in current use for these two ways of looking at the situation are essentialism and social construction; these terms correspond roughly to the "nature versus nurture" debate, or to biological versus social determinism.

The essentialist position tends to see the sexed body as crucial, and gender characteristics as innate - as "essentially" part of the biological body rather than separate from it.

The social constructionist position tends to see biological sex differences as less important, and gender behaviours as characteristics that are learned in a particular social environment.

To put it concretely, an essentialist might argue that "aggression" is a gender behaviour that cannot be split apart from biological sex, because it is caused by the physical makeup of males; a social constructionist might argue in return that the evidence on hormonal aggression is inconclusive, that this gender characteristic should be discussed separately from sex because our society socialises males to be more aggressive. (It should be noted that these positions indicate opposite ends of a spectrum; there are complex ways of thinking about gender that consider both biological and environmental factors.)

Arguments about biology versus social environment are important when we consider differences between the sexes. We might want to start out by wondering why the idea of sex differences arouses such passions in most people, and why the belief that any meaningful differences exist is such a bedrock principle in our society.

If we see differences when we look at men and women in our society, we need to ask what the differences are, and if they are innate or learned. Current popular opinion, as seen in newspaper articles and on television, often asserts that male and female genes, brains, and hormones are different and account for perceived differences between men and women — for example, it is often claimed that teenage boys are better at math than girls.

Scientists split on whether such differences are, first of all, statistically meaningful, and if they are, whether they are caused by environment or by biology. As Anne Fausto-Sterling shows in her book *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*,

however, supposedly neutral "scientific" assertions are often based on deeply held cultural beliefs. Fausto-Sterling shows in her book that most of what we think we know "scientifically" about sex and sex difference is, in fact, a hypothesis built on inadequate research and cultural biases.

One thing that Fausto-Sterling argues is that biological sex is not such a stable category as we have been led to suppose.

Most of us tend to think that sex is a simple chromosomal difference: people with XX chromosomes are female, those with XY are male. Yet Fausto-Sterling shows that the XX and XY chromosomes by themselves are not enough to make a simple dividing line between men and women; there are XY females and XX males. As she argues, sex is a more complex matter involving gonads and hormones as well as chromosomes, and there may be more different combinations (beyond simple male/female) than people have been willing to recognise.

In debates about sex then, we could say that the essentialist position does not try to separate sex from gender, but sees gender as flowing naturally from sex. The social constructionist position sees gender characteristics as something learned from or imposed by the social environment in all its complexity.

The social construction versus essentialism debate rages in sexuality issues just as it does in differences between the sexes. Recently, there has been some research that claims to find differences between the brains of gay men and straight men (see LeVay; DeCecco).

This kind of research fits into the essentialist, or biologically determined, end of the spectrum: it appears to conclude that homosexuality has a biological basis.

The social constructionist position, on the other hand, would see homosexuality as a predilection that developed in conjunction with environmental factors, rather than being based in biology. This position would also make it easier to explain why some people's gender characteristics do not "fit" their biological sex, whether or not they were homosexual. A social constructionist could argue that someone who was biologically male, yet had what our society would call "effeminate" characteristics, has simply learned his gender behaviour somewhat differently from what our society usually tries to impose. The social constructionist position makes it easy to concentrate on what the society tries to impose as "normal" gender, rather than labelling the person "deviant".

In our culture now, only two sexes are recognised: male and female. Our whole lives are predicated on fitting neatly into one of those categories: in this country, you can't open a bank account or fill out any government form without checking that little box — "M" or "F"? And what happens if your physical appearance doesn't match the box you've checked?

In the recent film *To Wong Foo*, three drag queens stopped by a state trooper on a lonely road late at night were terrified: they "passed" as women, but one glance at a driver's license would destroy the illusion. And even in that feel-good movie, the implications were clear — if your gender presentation doesn't match your biological sex, you can expect to be the target of violence.

Gender

One of the easiest ways to understand that "gender" is not something absolute, but is a shifting set of characteristics, is to compare the ways men and women behave in different cultures.

One can also compare the same culture at different periods in history; for example, in Restoration England during the 1660s and '70s, aristocratic men wore long wigs, makeup, bright clothes, and beautiful fabrics — all things that today would be seen as "effeminate", although they were considered perfectly "masculine" at the time.

In different cultures or at different times, it is considered acceptable for men to cry, for women to do heavy labour, etc. Class and race are also intricately interwoven with ideas about gender, as Sojourner Truth pointed out a hundred years ago in *Ain't I a Woman?* As an African-American woman who had been born into slavery, Truth was well aware that being female did not stop anyone from insisting that she perform "unfeminine" labour.

One way to think about how gender works in our current society is clothes: when we buy clothes or pull them out of our closets, we are constantly aware that clothes mark gender distinctions between men and women. Clothes are strictly segregated, into different stores or into different departments of large department stores.

Those lines of segregation have blurred a little since the 1960s, since everyone can now buy the same blue jeans and sweatpants. But every time the line blurs, it gets reinscribed: jean companies have come out with more and more types of jeans cut especially for women, and "feminised" versions of sweat suits were quickly introduced.

Try an experiment: look around and examine the clothes of men and of women. Do they often wear the same items of clothing (jeans, sweatshirts, t-shirt, etc.)? If the item is the same, are there any differences between the ones that men wear and those that women wear (in colour, cut, etc.)? Or do men and women wear the same article of clothing in a different way — close-fitting rather than loose-fitting, sleeves rolled up or down, buttons done up or left open, etc.?

We all use clothes to say a lot about ourselves: we can telegraph facts about how much money we have, how conservative or liberal we are, about race, about our professions and jobs, about whether we are sexually available and whom we wish to attract. But in all of these cases, the way we use clothes is defined by gender.

Another way to think about gender difference is self-presentation. Can you identify someone as male or female as they walk down the street and before you can see their faces? If so, what are the clues: style of walking, clothes, stance, etc.? Are these things — the way we stand, walk, raise or lower our voices etc. - biological, or were they taught to us as children?

The external characteristics of gender are easy to recognise, once one starts to think about them — in fact, they are so obvious that we often think of them as "common sense". But the internal emotional and psychological characteristics that are assigned to each sex are harder to pinpoint.

We can start to think about these by asking ourselves what generalisations we make about men and women in our own culture, broadly speaking. For example, when we turn on the television to watch the news, we expect to see pretty, smiling female news anchors, and authoritative, businesslike male anchors — often not very good looking.

If we look at our mothers and fathers and the families we know, we can see that in our culture women are still expected to raise the children, while men are still expected to earn money for the family; women still earn less money than men for doing the same jobs.

We see that men are still looked to for authority, for making decisions, for being strong; we think of women as nurturing, warm, motherly, and emotional — perhaps less logical than men. Although we can all think of exceptions to these stereotypes, they still seem to hold true in a broad way.

The question we need to ask is, are men and women naturally and inherently that way? Or does each sex behave that way because we are brought up to do so?

Splitting sex from gender is one way to address another fundamental question: what happens when a person's biological sex and his or her gender characteristics do not seem to match

This question brings another factor into the discussion — sexual orientation. The debate about differences between the sexes often gets confused with arguments about sexuality because "correct" gender behaviour includes an enforcement of heterosexuality.

A woman is seen as appropriately feminine when her behaviour complements the appropriate masculinity of her mate; we live in a culture that socialises us into heterosexuality as well as into gender roles. This is what Adrienne Rich has called "compulsory heterosexuality": to be properly female or properly male is, in our society, to be heterosexual.

(One critic, Monique Wittig, takes this further and says that lesbians are not women, since the way our society defines "Woman" is as heterosexual and in a particular social relationship with males.)

If someone's gender characteristics do not seem "appropriate" for their assigned sex, they are often assumed to be homosexual even when that is not the case. In the same way, when both women and men transgress the rule of heterosexuality (that is, if they are homosexual), they are often seen as transgressing the rules of gender as well: lesbians are often perceived as "mannish" and gay men as "effeminate".

It is as though the desire to keep things simple (men must be masculine, women must be feminine) makes people mix gender issues and sexuality issues into one sticky mess. If one wants to insist that it is masculine to be independent, protective of one's female lover, etc., then one will label a lesbian "mannish". It is easier to assume that "lesbians just want to be men" than to understand how gender characteristics do not necessarily flow "essentially" from biological sex.

The lesbian categories of "butch" and "femme" fit right in the heart of this debate. As a femme lesbian whose lover identifies as butch, I get tired of people who assume that our relationship is just an imitation of a heterosexual one, as if "butch" simply meant wanting to be a man.

Butch and femme identities, in fact, are a way of carving out a new space in the ways we can all think about ourselves. A butch lesbian, for example, might well think of herself as a woman (if indeed that is important), but her gender identity marks out a new space on the spectrum; neither feminine nor masculine as our society currently defines those terms.

The grey Area: What is not explained by these labels

By now, we have a clear sense of what is meant by sex and gender but not of how these apply to people's lives.

For someone who sees himself as a conventional heterosexual man, these labels may not seem problematic or even interesting; they may simply describe such a person's experience of the world. The same may apply to someone who sees herself as a conventional heterosexual woman — again, the characteristics attributed to men and women in this culture may seem simply to match what she sees in herself and what she perceives as her essential identity.

But what about those who don't fit neatly into these categories? For example, the tomboy girl who grows up feeling strong and physically competent, who does not wish to lower her voice, defer to men, bear and nurture children, or wear skirts? Or the man who gets typed as "effeminate" because of his gestures or stance or way of doing his hair?

We don't have many useful terms to describe people whose personal characteristics simply don't match the gender category that they're supposed to fit in because of their sex.

If your sex is female, but your characteristics are not feminine, there's a dissonance. The same thing applies if your sex is male, but your characteristics are not masculine.

That's where the word transgender comes in: it's a relatively new word that is used to refer to people whose gender presentation does not match their ascribed sex. Transgender is different from transsexual, which refers to people who have chosen to have their biological sex surgically altered from male-to-female or from female-to-male. Since "trans" means "across", transgender means crossing the borders of gender identity.

One assumption that is often made is that anyone who has such a sex/gender dissonance is gay or lesbian. The "unfeminine" woman often gets labelled a dyke, the "effeminate" man is often called a fag.

The assumption seems to be that any deviation from conventional gender characteristics is caused by, or indissolubly linked with, a deviation from heterosexuality. As I indicated above, that assumption is much too simplistic.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The art pieces in the "Genderplex" show all question, from the artist's different perspectives, the way that gender functions in our society now. The purpose of the show is to make people look with new eyes and to think from a fresh viewpoint, about the effects our deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about gender have on our lives.

What aspects of our personalities have we had to repress in order to fit into our ascribed gender category? If gender dissonance causes public disapproval (from our families, friends, co-workers, and from strangers) what sacrifices have we made to avoid that disapproval? What violence or discomfort have we suffered if we have dared to transgress our appropriate gender category?

One of the main questions we need to look at while thinking about gender is, precisely, violence: our society is made so uncomfortable by any dissonance between sex and gender presentation that violence is often the result.

Men and women who don't conform to the gender characteristics ascribed to their sex have to deal with a horrific level of violence. The violence ranges from verbal abuse - screaming epithets at people who are female but "masculine", male but "feminine", to physical violence and murder.

As I understand it, the purpose of Genderplex is to bring up these issues and provoke thought and discussion. The participants in the show began with a series of questions:

- Are there really only two sexes? Two genders?
- How does our society impose and enforce the notion of gender?
- What are the effects of being gendered in this society?
- To what extent can one opt out of the current gender system?
- Is the way gender is currently conceived in the popular domain either adequate or accurate?

What I've tried to do here is clarify the terms behind these questions, so that a useful discussion can follow. The authors whose ideas I've used are listed below.

- Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* New York Routledge, 1994.
- Judith Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination In Inside/Out* ed. Diana Fuss. New York Routledge 1992.
- Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A movement whose time has come* New York World View Forum, 1992.
- Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* New York Harper Perennial.
- Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence in Powers of Desire; The Politics of Sexuality* ed. Ann Snitow et al. New York Monthly Review Press.
- Gayle Rubin, *Thinking Sex: Toward a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality in Pleasure and Danger; Exploring Female Sexuality* ed. Carole Vance. London: Pandora, 1989
- Diana Saco, *Masculinity as Signs: Post-structuralist Feminist Approaches to the Study of Gender in Men, Masculinity, and the Media* ed. Steve Craig. Newbury Park Ca. Sage, 1992
- Patricia J. Williams, *The Obliging Shell, from The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Monique Wittig, *One is Not Born a Woman: from The Straight Mind and Other Essays* Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. ed. Diana Fuss. New York Routledge 1992.

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