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WHAT IS GENDER AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT IT?

Introducing 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 (or something else entirely, which we'll explore later). This chapter will begin to cast some doubt on whether what we're seeing when people walk by is really gender, and we will, therefore, begin to question whether we're really as good at gender attribution as we might think.

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 invisible 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 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, which states, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Take categories of race as an example. Anthropologists and biologists have definitively shown that there is no biological basis for what we think of as racial categories. Extensive research using DNA from people all over the planet demonstrates that among the small amount of genetic variation that exists in humans as a species, most exists within the groups we commonly refer to as *rac*es.

What this means is that any two people within what we think of as a racial category (white or Caucasian, for example) are as likely to be genetically different from each other as they are from someone in what we think of as a different racial category (Hispanics or Latinos, for example). Genetic variation among humans simply does not map along racial lines, in part because the genes that influence skin color, hair form, and facial features (the traits we generally associate with race) evolved much later in our human history than other characteristics like intelligence, athletic ability, and musical ability (Adelman, 2003).



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?

How does this help us understand the social construction of reality? Over time, people began to believe that things like skin color, hair form, and facial features meant something more than they actually do. The categories of both white and Black were created over a long historical time period and were used to justify a system of exploitation and oppression. Today, many people believe that these categories are real things, based in some underlying biological reality. But historically, the definitions of who is white, Black, Latino, Asian, or Native American in the United States have constantly shifted. From 1790, the first year the United States conducted a census, up to 2000, the way in which race was measured changed every time. Race is just one example of how, through a historical process, people's experiences of the world (seeing different skin colors) were put into categories (Black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American) and treated as real things.

Scientists can demonstrate for you that race has no underlying biological reality, but that doesn't mean race has no impact on the lives of people in the United States and around the world. This is the second part of the Thomas principle—that what we believe is real is real in its consequences. As we will discuss throughout this book, glaring inequalities exist along racial lines. But these inequalities are not a result of any biological explanations but rather caused by the ways in which our belief in racial categories as something real makes them into something that has real consequences. When a teacher assumes that a clock made by an Arab-American student is a bomb because of our association between race and terrorism (a true event that happened to 14-year-old Ahmen Mohamed in Irving, Texas, in 2015), knowing that the category "Arab-American" is socially constructed doesn't do that student much good. In the social world (which is the world we all live in), what we believe matters, and the things we treat as real become, for all intents and purposes, real.

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 will be using 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 will be using 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. In our example from above, does it matter that the young Arab-American clockmaker was a boy? If he had been a girl, would his teacher have been as quick to label him a terrorist? Intersectionality makes us aware that we do not experience all our overlapping identities separately. We are always simultaneously gendered *and* raced, classed, sexualized, embodied, etc. 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; race 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 employ these terms. Sex describes the biological differences between people we call males and people we call females; gender is the social meanings that are layered onto those differences. This neat division leaves sex 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 often 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 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! Who doesn't believe that there are two types of people in the world, males and females? Even a child knows that there are girls and there are boys and that's sex, right? Or is it? If you stood on a busy street, watching people walk by, would you be using sex or gender to categorize people? Genitalia are one of the physical criteria we use to sort people into sex categories. Can you see people's genitalia when they're walking down the street? Perhaps there are some streets where people are walking around naked or with their genitalia exposed, but generally not.

What can we see of sex 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 (think of the bearded lady). In her study of transmen in the workplace, Kristen Schilt found that

facial hair often trumped several other gender clues pointing toward femininity in gender attribution for transmen (Schilt, 2010). 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 the transman as "he." Maybe Adam's apples? Again, not all men have them and not all women lack them. On average, women should be slightly shorter than the men, but again, we will also encounter very short men and very tall women. Schilt would argue that what you're really seeing as you stand on the street 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—are really all there is. Our gender beliefs cause us to believe that there are real categories out there called "female" and "male," but the reality is much more complex. Sex itself is socially constructed, and therefore, it is culture that dictates how we understand sex.

GENDER AND BODIES There are at least four different 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'll 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 four 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% to 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 engaged in physical activity. 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—is imprinted onto the physical bodies of their daughters and sons. Gender shapes sex.

Another biological reality students in my classes will 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). In Chapter 3 we'll discuss some of the implications of the endless search for sex differences, 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, three months of playing the video game *Tetris* among young girls resulted in brains that were heavier and showed enhanced cortical thickness (Haier, Karama, Leyba, & Jung, 2009).

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, muscles, etc. Our social reality is written onto the physical stuff of our biological bodies.

INTERSEX AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEX A second source of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach comes from the existence of intersex and 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 ambiguous 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 the 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 conditions that cause ambiguity in regard to sex category as being **intersex**. Intersex conditions are estimated to occur at a rate of 1.7% of all births, making intersexuality more common than albinism (being born albino or lacking skin pigmentation). In a city of 300,000 people, 5,100 of them would have varying stages of intersexual development, meaning that there's a chance someone walking down your city sidewalk might in fact have both a penis and a vagina. Now, how would you decide their sex?

We could say that although we can't necessarily see sex 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 conditions of intersexuality 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 post-puberty, 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 To the complications that intersex conditions bring to the idea of sex category, you might also add the complexities of the transgender community as a third body 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, Holcomb, & Wentling, 2008). Transgender can include individuals who seek surgery to change their underlying anatomy but can also include individuals who wish to live as a different gender than that which lines up with their biological sex category. Children as young as four and five years old express that their biological sex category does not match their internal sense of who they are. Transgender individuals have existed throughout human history and across different cultures. How do we fit this reality into a biosocial approach, where sex category is supposed to provide a real limit on the ways in which gender is expressed?

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Think of a behavioral trait that is generally associated with one sex or the other (crying, fighting, looking pretty, nurturing, etc.). 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?

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 source of evidence. Today, in Anglo-European societies, we believe there are two sexes. But as we will discuss in Chapter 5, the ancient Greeks believed in a one-sex model (Roy, 2001). Females were not a completely different sex than males, but they were an inferior version of males in a hierarchy that included the gods and other kinds of people (slaves, dwarves, eunuchs, etc.). This particular gender system (a set of cultural beliefs) shaped the ways in which the Greeks saw biological reality. The Greeks saw the vagina and the penis as the same organ; in women this organ was internal (vagina), whereas in men it was external (penis). Similarly, the Greeks saw ovaries and testes as the same organ in males and females. The same biological reality was used to justify a completely different understanding of sex.

Strong social constructionists also point to a wide range of cultures that have a third sex category, or a space within their particular conceptualization for people who are considered neither male nor female. These include the hijras in India, the two-spirits in Native American cultures, the kathoey of Thailand, and the sworn virgins of the Balkans (Nanda, 2000). If different societies construct different kinds of sex categories, not all of which are based on a dimorphic system (only males and females),

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 that 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 that the dimorphic system does not accurately describe reality where sex and gender are concerned

then surely sex categories are socially constructed. Gender, in the form of cultural meanings, therefore produces our notions of sex, rather than the other way around.

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'll assume a strong social constructionist perspective. This means that most of the time we'll talk about gender rather than sex categories, assuming that both are socially constructed. We'll talk about women and men rather than females and males.



Which of these two perspectives makes more sense to you? Which is easier to understand? Which do you think is the more commonly held perspective?

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 repeated cases of people who have both. Because we believe that one's biological

sex category should match up with the gender one expresses, 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. Can we ever perceive that biological reality free from the particular set of blinders that our cultural beliefs give us? Maybe not, but we can at least begin to think about exactly what those cultural beliefs are.

Some Notes About Vocabulary

Language is an important component that shapes our social construction of reality, and so it matters for our conversations about gender. Historically, masculine pronouns were used in much writing because “men” was perceived as a universal category. So “mankind,” at least in theory, refers to both women and men. In this book, I use masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably.

In English, *sex* can mean both the biological categories of males and females as well as engaging in some kind of sexual act (a subject we will return to in Chapter 5). Because of this confusion, it’s sometimes easier to use the term *sex category* to distinguish between these two meanings of the word. You will see these two terms used interchangeably throughout this book.

We already introduced the concept of transgender, but you’ll also encounter the word *cisgender* in this book. Cisgender refers to people whose sex category and gender identity match up. If your gender assignment at birth was female and you choose to live as a woman, you’re cisgender.

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’ll 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 is 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, gays, lesbians, transgenders, 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 should not teach us what it means to be different from some unspoken norm (straight, white women and 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 will 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 (which we will discuss in Chapter 3).

We will be emphasizing 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 may be socially constructed, but it is also a system of inequality; understanding gender in this light is the third goal we will be pursuing. What we believe about gender has real consequences for the lives of women and men 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 will 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 different 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 will be seeking to do in this book.

Terms

biosocial approach	6	intersex	9
cultural genitalia	7	sexual dimorphism	6
gender assignment	6	strong social constructionist approach	7
gender attribution	3	Thomas principle	3
intersectionality	5	transgender	9

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