

Foundational Definitions

Intersectionality: Perhaps the single most important concept and methodology to understand in this course. When we talk about intersectionality, we are talking about the intersections of our identities via race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity and expression, sexuality, class, religion, (dis)ableness, age, and many other facets that make up our identities. At these intersections we experience ways of being and/or being able to move about the world in ways that may differ from another person whose intersectionality may vary from our own. Intersectionality is important to assess in our selves. By working to understand it we locate the places of privilege and oppression in our lives, which helps us to relate in more humanistic ways with people who may come with different sets of privileges and oppressions. Privileges and oppressions can be and are part of each of us; they are not mutually exclusive.

Sex: Sex is generally understood in our society, and it does vary culturally across the world and even within the U.S., as the biological component that marks people as either male or female, or as either (usually) XX or XY. However, it is important to understand that there are many more combinations than XX and XY or male and female. Intersexed individuals (once referred to by the derogatory term hermaphrodite), for example, have been born in all societies throughout all of time. In some societies they are revered as sacred and normal. In others, such as the U.S., they are seen as “deviant” from the “norm” and are regularly “assigned” a sex surgically shortly after birth. There are many people fighting sex reassignment on the grounds of human rights abuse.

Gender: Gender has to do with “masculinity” and “femininity”, with ways of being “male” or “female” or being “feminine” and “masculine”. These labels, or categories as you will, are societal constructs. They are ways of being, doing, and even performing based on the biological labels assigned to us. We begin to learn the gender rules of society the moment the little blue or pink hat is placed on our head after birth. We learn the hegemonic rules based on the toys we are given, the media we absorb, the books we read, the jobs we occupy, etc. Those of us who defy gender norms often feel the brunt of hegemonic power.

Neither gender identity nor sex is a concrete “natural” fact. They are much more complicated and fluid. People who are intersexed and/or transgendered particularly demonstrate that the binaries between male/female or being a man/woman are much more complex than mainstream society likes to admit. Further we are much more than our sex and gender. Of interest, it is important to know that many cultures, including many Native American groups, recognized or still recognize third and even fourth genders. With the impact of colonialism, Western gender systems were imposed on those who were colonized.

A quote from Estelle Disch in her “General Introduction” to *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Reader* (McGraw-Hill 2006), might be of further interest: “Gender itself is a mystified concept for the many people who see it as biologically determined. Recent scholars in gender studies argue convincingly, however, that there is nothing necessary or predictable about gender. In fact, it is becoming more commonly known that human bodies do not come in just two sexes but rather fall along a continuum between female and male” (Disch 2006:15).

Social Constructionism/Social Construction: Core to this theory is the idea that what may seem “natural” in our daily lives and societies is actually the result of human constructs or inventions used to make sense, or order, or to regulate people and society in general. People learn codes of conduct and societal rules or norms to live by. These norms seem “natural”. When we go against the norms we are often considered “deviant”. In a patriarchal society, women who defy hegemonic norms, for example, face social pressures and even possible punishment for not being “normal”. The “norm” serves the system well and is continually being reinforced and reinvented as people resist it or question it.

The opposite of social constructionism is essentialism. **Essentialism** is the belief or analysis of humans and society as subjects who hold “innate”, “inherent”, or “unchangeable” qualities. For example, when thinking about gender, when men act violently in our society, such actions are often interpreted as “natural” to men’s characters and actual physical being. Social constructionists would argue that the relationship between men and violence is not inherent but is something a patriarchal society is dependent upon, hence, members of such a society are taught and learn to accept that male violence is “natural”. Social constructionists would argue against a “biology is destiny” approach to the human condition. Looking at humans and human cultures cross-culturally and observing the incredible variations and diversity that exist in humanity and over the course of history is supportive of social constructionist perspectives.

Social constructs and the tensions between social constructionism and essentialism is of regular interest to this study; many of the writers we are reading provide us with more detailed definitions. In addition, they expose us to an array of specific topics dealing with social constructionism; the social construction of hegemony, the social construction of race, the social construction of gender, the social construction of identity, the social construction of bodies, etc.

Hegemony (and internalized hegemony): A term coined by Italian social thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Hegemony basically means that dominant or elite forces, institutions, people, etc. control the knowledge and structure of a society. Gramsci was very concerned with capitalist society and its workings. As such, he was also concerned with class structures and who controls society via class status. He understood capitalist society to hold a culture, a particular class structure, and coercive forces that kept people basically (and these are not his words) in chains. Those at the top dominate and maintain the hegemony; those below service the hegemony. Hegemony is maintained through paradigms and ideologies: through religious, moral, educational, and other institutions that tell us how we “should” live. And while Gramsci was concerned with class issues, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and many other intersections of identity and lived experience are key to understanding and changing hegemonic structures.

Further, individuals who don’t fit the hegemonic norms or ideals and who struggle under particular hegemonic structures sometimes blame themselves for their supposed failings or for being “deviant” in society; this is a form of internalized hegemony. Internalized hegemony can be incredibly destructive and painful. On the other side of the coin, those who are part of the dominant hegemonic order have often been conditioned to believe to either not see their privilege or to deem such privilege as “natural”.

Patriarchy: (Johnson, Allan G.: 2006) Patriarchy is a hegemonic societal system. It is more than an individual or a group of people (i.e. men).

- "In a patriarchal society, '...we are all participating in something larger than ourselves or any collection of us'"

- "Patriarchy's defining elements are its male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered character, but this is just the beginning. At its core, patriarchy is a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film. Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including men, women, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of 'other'" (Johnson 2006:94).

- "Above all, patriarchal culture is about the core value of control and domination in almost every area of human existence. From the expression of emotions to economics to the natural environment, gaining and exercising control is a continuing goal of great importance" (2006:94).

Heteronormativity or Compulsory Heterosexuality: Heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality are intimately related to hegemonic patriarchy. As can be deduced from the terms, they are the status quo or norm of many societies. Heterosexuality is considered the only "natural" sexuality in society that is heteronormative. People who are outside of this norm are classified as "deviant" or "other". Heteronormative societies are maintained through legal systems, education systems, medical knowledge and institutions, government policies, etc. that place great emphasis on two-sex, two-gender, heterosexual social constructs. Heteronormativity is highly dependent on rigid gender roles, and those who conform are able to exercise what is known as heterosexual privilege.

Othering or to "Other": Basically, othering is what takes place when a divide is created between "us" and "them". It is about an "us" maintaining or building an image of "us" against or off of a "them". Stereotypes are the result of othering and are used to support othering. When we "other", we create or work with categories that hold up hegemonic societal systems- thus othering has a great deal to do with inequities in power. Further, othering rationalizes the inequities in power and is intimately tied to race, gender, sexuality, ableness, religion and other identity categories.

Example of Othering: Slavery. During the Atlantic slave trade, Africans were seen as less than human- Other. Stereotypes abounded about Africans with regard to mental, physical, religious, etc. capabilities. Some of the Western science of the time, now referred to as scientific racism, supported and created the stereotypes, and, indeed, became the rationale for enslaving human beings who were seemingly "other" and, hence, "lesser" than those who enslaved them.

While we may not realize it, we "other" often in our daily lives. In the language we use, for instance; we set ourselves apart from "others"- "us/them", "those people, etc. These are binary constructions that work to support a hegemonic, patriarchal system that thrives when people are divided. Further, these binaries simplify a world that is far more complex than man/woman, us/them, black/white, etc. One of the challenges to you will be to consciously think about "othering" and to reflexively work on your own conditioning that often produces the way we "other".

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Colonialism: Colonialism is about physical and cultural domination over "others" in the pursuit of economic and political gain. Key to both colonialism and imperialism are tropes and/or rationales that the colonizer is "naturally" more superior and thus is justified in colonizing a place and people that are somehow deemed lesser than the colonizer. For example, the colonization of most of Africa was supported by scientific and religious theories and ideas that reasoned peoples of Africa were somehow "savage", while Europeans were thought to be "civilized", thus colonialism justified the bringing of "civilization" to Africa; this was very similar to the colonization of American Indians. It is important to know that there are different types of Colonialism

** Colonialism/Imperialism: The simple way to distinguish these two is to think of colonialism as practice and imperialism as the idea driving the practice. Colonialism began as the implanting of settlements on a distant territory. Colonialism in its modern form first began to take shape about 400 years ago, and it changed the economic landscape of the world forever. For one thing, it enabled Europe to get fabulously rich on the trade it produced. The foundations of what we now think of as free-market capitalism were invented during the colonial era, partly to handle trade.

- It's an undecided question in academic circles (amongst historians for instance) as to whether colonialism is important purely for its economic consequences, or whether cultural factors (such as missionary Christianity or a sense of racial superiority) also plays a part.

Imperialism: Imperialism is about empire building. It does not have to include occupation of a particular country or piece of land, though it often does. Imperialism is about gaining access to the resources and the labors of "others", thus it is fundamentally economic in nature. In relatively recent history, imperialism manifests itself in policies that aim to garner control of "other" places and peoples for the benefit of capitalistic enterprises. US Imperialism is something in the current moment that is often debated and critiqued. The US does not refer to itself as an Imperial power, but many of the actions it takes toward "other" countries and peoples, instituted in policies and political and economic beliefs, are argued to be imperialistic in nature.

Cultural Imperialism: Relatedly, cultural imperialism has been defined as "the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture." Another well-known author, Herbert Schiller, defines cultural imperialism as "The sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system, and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed

into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote, the values and structures of the dominant center of the system". Thus, cultural imperialism involves much more than simple consumer goods; it involves the dissemination of ostensibly American principles, such as freedom and democracy. Though this process might sound appealing on the surface, it masks a frightening truth: many cultures around the world are gradually disappearing due to the overwhelming influence of corporate and cultural America.

Globalization: Globalization is not a new phenomenon, but it is and has been gaining momentum in recent decades. In academia and popular media, globalization is regularly celebrated as the answer to the world's problems, or it is critiqued as the cause of many of the world's problems. It is basically the increasing interconnections globally between multinational corporations and between people and cultures via increased communication and media technologies. It is most visibly seen as the global flow of capital across borders. It is characterized by free trade, privatization, and capitalism. For a great many people globally, there is a big disconnect between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. **Hegemony** is implicated when talking about globalization.

Feminism(s): hooks (1992) defines feminism as "a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression" (113). "The struggle," she explains, "is not defined as a conflict between women and men. It is defined by resistance to a politic of patriarchal domination that is perpetuated and maintained by nearly everyone in our culture" (ibid.).

Biological Sex: The physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness or femaleness with which a person is born. Some people are born distinctly male, some female, and some are intersexed (see definition below).

Gender Identity: A person's sense of self as male or female, masculine or feminine, neither, or both.

Gender Expression: The external representation of one's gender identity expressed in behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, or body characteristics.

Sexual Orientation: The part of one's identity that defines to whom a person is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted. This may include attractions to people of the same sex or gender (gay or lesbian), different sex or gender (heterosexual), or any sex or gender (bisexual). Many people also choose not to label their sexual orientation.

Homophobia: The hatred, fear, and prejudice against people who love and sexually desire other people of the same sex, who are perceived as such, or who step outside traditional gender roles. It is also the fear of one's own same-sex feelings of attraction. Homophobic behavior includes comments and jokes, discrimination, and violence.

Heterosexism: The societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, and acceptable sexual orientation. It is a system of advantages bestowed on heterosexuals that excludes the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

Ally: People who confront homophobia, heterosexism, and heterosexual privilege in themselves and in others out of their own self-interest, a concern for the well being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and a belief that heterosexism is a social justice issue.

Biphobia: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of bisexual people.

Bisexual: A person who forms his or her primary loving and sexual relationships with people regardless of that person's sex and/or gender.

Crossdresser: A person who occasionally dresses in clothing and takes on mannerisms deemed to be appropriate for the opposite sex. The majority of crossdressers are straight men who adopt a feminine gender expression.

Drag Queen/Drag King: A person who crossdresses as a means of performance or entertainment. *Drag often refers to dressing for functional purposes such as entertainment/performance or social gatherings.*

Gay: A person who forms his or her primary loving and sexual relationships with other individuals of the same sex (can be used to refer to both men and women or just men).

Lesbian: A woman who forms her primary loving and sexual relationships with other women.

Intersexed: A person who has a biological anatomy that mixes male and female characteristics or that differs from standard male or female. Approximately 1 in 100 people are born with a body that differs from standard male or female. Approximately 1 in 1,000 people receive surgery to "normalize" genital appearance.

Transgender: In its broadest meaning, this term encompasses anyone whose identity, behavior, and anatomy falls outside of stereotypical gender norms or expectations. It includes crossdressers, drag queens and drag kings, transsexuals, and intersexed individuals.

Transsexual: A person born into one sex and gender but identifies as the other sex and gender. This person may or may not choose to have full sex reassignment surgery. There are female to male (FTM) and male to female (MTF) transsexuals.