

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 19  
**Constructing Identity: Gender and gender roles**  
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- Sex and gender
- **Sex:** biological (morphological) categories
  - **morphological:** having to do with form, in this case, anatomy
  - based on two suites of physical characteristics associated with producing gametes (eggs or sperm)
  - most humans are born with primarily one suite or the other
  - a small percentage are born with an indeterminate or ambiguous mixture of characteristics
    - but nevertheless, quite a few people born in every major city, every year
    - individuals with indeterminate physical sexual characteristics are called **intersex** individuals
  - estimates of the frequency of intersex births depends on exactly what is included in the definition
  - By a strict medical definition:
    - about 1 in 5000 (0.018%) are born with an ambiguous mixture of characteristics
      - either they cannot be classified as male or female based on physical traits
      - or their physical traits do not match the sex implied by their sex chromosomes (XX=female, XY=male)
    - Figures from Sax, Leonard (2002) *Journal of Sex Research*. 39(3):174-178.
  - By a looser definition that includes additional conditions that some clinicians do not consider to be ambiguous sex
    - about 1 in 60 (1.7%) or 1 in 100 (1.0%), suggested by Anne Fausto-Sterling in a literature review, and widely cited
    - she finds that 1 or 2 births per 1000 are surgically altered to resemble common male or female genital forms
    - source: Blackless, Melanie, Anthony Charuvastra, Amanda Derryck, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Karl Lauzanne, and Ellen Lee (2000) How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis. *American Journal of Human Biology* 12:151-166.
  - our reading by Robbins (2006) cites a much higher frequency of indeterminate sex
    - he says about 4% are born with ambiguous characteristics (Robbins 2006:202)
    - this appears to be an error
  - point: regardless of the exact frequency of intersex births, the common notion of just two unambiguous physical sexes is not really correct
    - and we have not even gotten to behavior yet!
    - the idea of just two physical sexes is a cultural construct
      - not quite arbitrary, because it is based on what is common
      - but it does arbitrarily ignore a lot of uncommon, but very real individuals
- **Gender:** social categories
  - two or more social identities or roles partially associated with sex
  - always includes male and female; in some societies one or more additional categories (**third genders**)

- **Sexual orientation:** categorizes an individual's sexual attraction to, and activities with, others
  - heterosexuality
  - homosexuality
  - bisexuality
  - asexuality
  - in most variants of current US culture, a person's sexual orientation is thought to be permanent, inherent, something one is either born with or acquires early in life and cannot really change
    - this is (you guessed it) an arbitrary cultural construct
  - In many societies, a person's sexual orientation is expected to change with age and circumstances
- Gender categories are social constructs
  - they vary from one culture to another
  - do not necessarily correspond to sexual orientation
  - in other words, the meaning, values, roles, and even sexual orientations of "males" and "females" differ in different cultures
  - "male" in Brazil
    - requires inserting role in sex; sex of partner does not matter
    - masculine identity regularly includes sex with men
      - who are looked down on as not being properly male
    - according to a recent journalist's account (Labi 2006, in The Atlantic), roughly the same rule applies in Saudi Arabia
      - "male" gender identity involves sex with females and/or sex with males in the "top" position
      - men who have sex in the "bottom" position are looked down on as not properly male
      - since Islam greatly restricts men's access to women, "top" sex with men is considered a normal and common alternative for men
  - "male" among Azande (Sudan)
    - young men marry adult warriors
      - act domestically and sexually as women
    - once warriors themselves, they adopt masculine roles and marry young men
    - retiring from warrior status, older men marry women and have kids
  - "male" among the Etoro of Papua New Guinea
    - boys are expected to acquire semen from older men through oral sex
      - this is encouraged and has no cultural restrictions
      - but they must not expend their own semen with anyone else
    - once initiated into manhood, young men marry women
      - but sex with their wives is considered an unfortunate, dangerous necessity
      - that can only be done away from settlement
      - and even then is restricted to certain seasons of the year
    - older men must provide semen to boys
    - this makes sense in light of their understanding of birth, growth, and health
      - men are believed to have a limited amount of semen

- it is used up in sexual activity
  - when it is gone, they die
  - semen is necessary to nourish a fetus already present in the mother
  - development of boys similarly requires semen
  - so women who want sex are hazardous to their husbands' health
  - boys cannot produce semen on their own
    - they must acquire it from older men
    - and they must not waste any of their own semen, or their growth will be stunted
- Gender categories are socially constructed
  - they are actively created and taught
  - in an observable process of "constructing" individuals' gender identities
  - Robbins 2006 reading discusses the process or methods of constructing gender in our society
    - parents use different linguistic styles with boys and girls
      - the name they give the child
      - more diminutives used with girls (ie. doggie)
      - more "inner-state" words used with girls (ie. happy)
      - more direct prohibitives with boys (ie. "no!")
    - parents and schools teach
      - boys to be aggressive, competitive, and tough
      - girls to be caring and helpful
  - Point: these identities are actually constructed, built, created in an observable process
    - they don't just exist "out there"
- “Third” genders
  - really should be “supernumerary genders”, since this refers to any genders beyond the two most common ones
  - Berdache (French term used for many Native American societies); Nadle is the Navajo (Diné) term
    - Morphological male who does not play male role
    - The term berdache covers a range of different concepts in different Native American cultures
    - Generally involves some female work, dress, and behavior
      - Native American societies tend to see gender as primarily a matter of social roles, with sexual activity being only a small part
    - May or may not involve sex with males
    - A standard, normal, but uncommon role
    - Respected and considered useful to the group
    - Typically self-selected, and publicly recognized in ritual
      - much as the transition from childhood to adult male or adult female status is
- Female gender role example
  - Most variants of Islam see gender identities as explicitly established by Allah (God)
    - the two genders are a fundamental feature of existence
    - adherence to the gender roles is required by God

- (some Christian sects take this position, too)
- In many Muslim societies, modesty is essential to female identity
- **Purdah**: seclusion of women
- **Hijab**: literally means barrier; modest clothing
  - many different garments, depending on region and culture
  - marks women as devout, respectable Muslims
- Hijab is a minor issue to some Muslim women, a big deal to others
- Purpose
  - expression of male power over women?
  - modesty, same as US women not going topless
  - indicates identity as a Muslim, piety, respectability
  - warns others to treat her with respect
  - in some cases, indicates a degree of wealth and independence
  - protection outside - from dirt and men
  - protects men from sights that could cause them to become impassioned and misbehave
  - anonymity in public
  - protects family honor
    - the honor of an entire family is based on the behavior of each member
      - one person's loss of honor affects everyone
    - male honor is based on bravery, piety, and hospitality
      - can be regained if lost
    - female honor is based on chastity outside marriage
      - cannot be regained if lost
- Revival of popularity of hijab: two theories
  - men asserting their male identity (as having power over women), which is threatened by women increasingly going to work and earning money and respect
  - women asserting their female identity (as being pious and respectable), despite their increasingly having to go to work and be exposed to vulgarity, profanity, and disrespect
  - Both illustrate all three of Middleton's approaches to understanding cultural practices
    - both are about communicating meaning
      - specifically, the identity that men and women want others to attribute to them
    - both are about culture as a system of interrelated parts
      - both bring in economic forces and work practices to explain a choice of clothing
    - both are about culture as an adaptation (this may be the weakest of the three)
      - both show how hijab solves a practical social problem that men or women face
    - (it is unusual to find an explanation that embodies all three approaches; usually an explanation basically applies just one)
- Recent conflicts over hijab
  - a bit more than a year ago
    - France: banned wearing obvious religious symbols in public schools
      - mostly aimed at hijab
      - supposedly to encourage equality and solidarity
      - and secularity of schools (separation of government and religion)

- actually also involved increasing tensions between ethnic French and immigrant Muslims, mostly from North Africa
- England: allowed wearing hijab in public schools
  - to permit free exercise of religion
- one year ago in England
  - Jack Straw, leader of House of Commons, ex Foreign Secretary
    - asked that women remove niqab (full face veil) to speak with him
    - said it is a "visible statement of separation and of difference" (BBC News, 5 Oct. 2006)
    - said he feared that "wearing the full veil was bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult". (BBC News, 5 Oct. 2006)
  - Tony Blair, Prime Minister, called Straw "perfectly sensible" on this
  - "Bilingual support worker Aishah Azmi, 24, was asked to remove the veil after pupils found it hard to understand her during English language lessons." (BBC News, 5 Oct. 2006)
    - a court found that the school had "victimized" her and awarded her a fine
    - but did not order that she be re-hired
- one year ago in Australia
  - An extreme example of hijab as protection for women from men, and for men from temptation that they cannot resist
    - Note that this was immediately condemned by many Muslims in Australia and elsewhere
  - "Australia's most senior Muslim cleric ... Sheikh Taj el-Din al-Hilali said women who did not wear a hijab (head dress) were like "uncovered meat".
  - "If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside... and the cats come and eat it... whose fault is it, the cats' or the uncovered meat?" he asked. ...
  - "If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred," he added.
  - Sheikh Hilali also condemned women who swayed suggestively and wore make-up, implying they attracted sexual assault.
  - "Then you get a judge without mercy... and gives you 65 years," he added. (BBC News, 26 Oct. 2006)
- Point: differences in arbitrary cultural constructs of gender are playing a visible role in current events, human rights debates, the lives of students and teachers, foreign policy...
  - understanding these differences and truly grasping that they are arbitrary and socially constructed is helpful in understanding, and maybe resolving, the problems that arise
  - it helps to be a cultural relativist
  - but should one be an ethical relativist, too?