Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 15
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 (either ova (eggs) or sperm)
    – most humans are born with primarily one suite or the other
    – a small percentage are born as **intersex** individuals: with an indeterminate or ambiguous mixture of characteristics
    – estimates of the frequency of intersex births depends on exactly what is included in the definition
      – estimates based on different definitions range from 1 in 5000 to 1 in 60
      – 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
          – (this practice is increasingly questioned, and its frequency is probably declining)
        – 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 (2009) cites a much higher frequency of intersex births
      – he says about 4% (Robbins 2009:212)
      – 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
    – quite a few intersex people born in every major city, every year
    – and we have not even gotten to culture and behavior yet!
  – the idea that there are only 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
  – Four basic sexual orientations
    – heterosexuality
    – homosexuality
    – bisexuality
    – asexuality
  – How common is each of these?
    – surprisingly hard to measure
      – What behavior counts? One event? Some minimum number or frequency? How do we count someone whose sexual behavior changes over time?
      – obvious problems with incomplete reporting
    – heterosexuality is obviously necessary for reproduction
      – recognized in all societies, even those few that discourage it
      – generally, but not always, the most common sexual orientation
    – homosexuality is recognized and not rare in almost two thirds of the societies in one famous cross-cultural study
      – study of 76 societies by Ford and Beach (1951)
      – homosexual activity was absent, rare, or secret in 37% of the 76 societies
      – homosexual activity was a recognized aspect of almost two thirds of the societies studied
      – that does not say how many people were homosexual in each culture, or what the rules and values about it were,
        – just that homosexuality was recognized as a relatively standard orientation in most cultures – it is present and known in most cultures
    – in the US, estimates of the frequency of homosexual orientation vary
      – Kinsey research eventually estimated around 10% of US males
        – this work was pioneering, but the sample was probably not representative of the whole population
      – more recent estimates are somewhat lower, but still many percent among men
      – percentages for women are even more problematic
    – bisexuality is hotly debated
      – some studies in the US suggest that there may not be *any* people who are consistently attracted to both sexes
        – making bisexuality a behavior, but not an orientation
        – this is hard to square with extensive examples of flexible sexual behavior in other cultures, though
      – currently no good estimates for frequency in the US
    – asexuality has been only minimally studied
      – best data is probably a study in England that found about 1% of the population to be asexual (not attracted to either sex at all)

- ideas about sexual orientation are culturally constructed and at least somewhat arbitrary. For example…
  - 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
  - in many other cultures (Azande, Etoro, Classical Greek, etc.)
    - a person's sexual orientation is expected to change with age and circumstances
- Gender categories (male, female, 3rd genders) are arbitrary social constructs
  - meanings that people place on behavior connected to sex
  - 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 reading discusses the process or methods of constructing gender in our society
        – parents and others give children gender-appropriate…
            – names
            – clothes
            – toys and other goods
        – parents use different linguistic styles with boys and girls
            – 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: gender identities are actually constructed, built, created in a process you can clearly see happening
        – these gender roles 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
            – usually not very specifically defined
            – individuals do what they do, and others accept this variation
        – Generally involves some female work, dress, and/or 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
        – May or may not involve feminine dress, marriage as a wife, etc.
        – An accepted, normal, but flexible and uncommon role
        – Respected and considered useful to the group
            – because they are between or alongside the common categories, berdaches are often considered well suited to liminal (between-statuses) roles

- shamans (who move between the real and supernatural, life and death, human and animal, etc.)
- mediators and diplomats (move between enemy groups, speak for warriors without being one, etc.)
- handlers of dangerous, liminal tasks like disposing of the dead (dead bodies are both the person, and not the person – they straddle the line between life and death)
- Typically self-selected, and publicly recognized in ritual
- much as the transition from childhood to adult male or adult female status is
- Example: a famous Zuni berdache (*lhamana*) named Weiwha (1849-1896)
- Example: current US culture has multiple third genders
- remember, gender refers to social identity and role, not just sexual activity
- at least gay and lesbian
- many argue that American culture has additional third genders
- bisexual, transvestite, transgender, intersexual, etc.
- can you see reasons why each of these categories might or might not be considered distinct genders?
- Even the concept of gender categories itself is culturally constructed
- US culture generally emphasizes conformity and norms more than many other cultures do
- we tend to insist on classifying people into pre-defined categories
- we routinely demand that people categorize themselves, or be categorized
- we tend to be uncomfortable with people to do not conform to some existing category
- or even don't believe that that is possible
- "Is celebrity X gay, or not?" "Is Tiger Woods black, or not?"
- contrast to some Native American cultures, such as the Diné (Navaho)
- who tend to see individuals more as unique and less as members of a category
- their gender (and other) categories tend to be more flexible and broad
- defining and fitting people into named categories is just not very important to them
- "Person X is what he is. That is just how he 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
- covers a wide range of behaviors, from women wearing a head scarf to not being allowed out of the house
- **Hijab**: literally means barrier; used as the term for acceptably modest clothing
- this is one aspect of the broader concept of purdah
- hijab denotes 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
- Purposes

- indicates identity as a Muslim, piety, respectability
- maintains modesty, same as US women not going topless
- warns others to treat her with respect
- in some cases, indicates a degree of wealth and independence
- protection outside - from sun, dirt, and men
- anonymity in public (reduces questions about what a respectable woman was out doing)
- protects men from sights that could cause them to become impassioned and misbehave
- 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
- expression of male power over women?
- Revival of popularity of hijab in recent decades: two theories
  - men asserting their male identity (as having power over women)
    - because their male identity 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
  - France, 2004: 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
    - this tension continues… 2008 incidents where a Paris swimming pool barred a woman wearing a "burkini" (loose, body-covering swimsuit), and a bank would not admit a woman with a headscarf…
  - England, 2004: allowed wearing hijab in public schools
    - to permit free exercise of religion

- England, 2006: had its own hijab fuss
  - 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
- Australia, 2006
  - 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)
- Belgium, Yesterday, March 31, 2010: "A Belgian parliamentary committee has voted to ban face-covering Islamic veils from being worn in public"
  - "…must be approved by parliament for it to become law…Such a vote could be held within weeks…would be enforced by fines or even prison"
  - "France is also considering restricting face-covering veils."
  - (BBC News *Belgian committee votes for full Islamic veil ban*, 31 March 2010)
- 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 what about the claim that hijab (or other aspects of female gender roles) oppresses women?
    - first: are these claims correct?
    - if so, should we condone Muslims practicing that aspect of their faith?
      - should we be ethical relativists? Where is the line?