

## Constructing Identity: Sex and gender

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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 babies 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.
    - In one of our readings, Robbins (2009:212) says about 4% of births are intersex
      - this figure is an error, but the idea that they are not as rare as people think is right
    - given that there were 4.1 million births in the US in 2005
      - depending on the definition of intersex, somewhere from 820 to 68,000 intersex babies are born every year in the US
    - 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 are born in every major city, every year
    - the idea that there are only two physical sexes is a cultural construct
      - not completely 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

- genders always include masculine (man) and feminine (woman)
- 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 exactly constitutes sexual attraction or activity?
      - How consistent must that attraction or activity be?
        - One sexual encounter?
        - Some minimum number or frequency?
      - How do we categorize someone whose sexual behavior changes over time?
      - plus the obvious problems with incomplete or inaccurate 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
        - not necessarily condoned, but a recognized category of persons and/or behavior
    - 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
        - heavily biased towards students and whites
        - virtually all of the sample was people who wanted to talk about their sexuality, which was not so common in the 1940s and 1950s, when much of the basic work was done
      - more recent estimates are somewhat lower, but still many percent among men
      - percentages for women are even more problematic
        - ranging from much lower than among males, to much higher
  - 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 consensus estimate for frequency in the US
- asexuality has been only minimally studied
  - one study in England found about 1% of the population to be asexual (not attracted to either sex at all)
- these sexual orientation categories and ideas about them 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
    - so to many Americans, sexual orientation is a permanent, defining part of gender identity
  - in many other cultures (Azande, Etoro, Classical Greek, etc.)
    - a person will have one gender throughout their life (usually male or female),
    - but their sexual orientation would change in culturally determined ways as the person grew up through different stages of life
    - so in many cultures, sexual orientation is not fixed
    - it is part of the definition of gender identity, but typically not the whole story
- Gender categories (male, female, 3<sup>rd</sup> genders) are arbitrary cultural 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
  - “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
  - so women who want sex are hazardous to their husbands' health
  - semen is necessary to nourish a fetus already present in the mother
  - development of boys similarly requires semen
  - 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 items
    - parents use different linguistic styles with boys and girls
      - more diminutives used with girls (“doggie”)
      - more “inner-state” words used with girls (“happy”)
      - more direct prohibitives with boys (“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 are not just “out there”; they are created, to some extent intentionally
- “Third” genders
  - really should be “supernumerary genders”, since this refers to any genders beyond the two most common ones
  - **Berdache** (a French term used by outsiders to describe similar roles in many Native American societies; an etic term)
    - **Nadle** is the Navajo (Diné) term, **lhamana** is the Zuni term, etc.
      - These are emic terms and specific emic concepts of particular Native American cultures
      - Many Native Americans dislike the term berdache, because it is a foreign (etic) concept
      - it implies that all the different roles (as defined by different Native American cultures) that it lumps together are somehow the same
    - 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 roles
    - liminal roles are those that are
      - between two statuses, transitional, intermediate
      - or outside of the dichotomy altogether (neither one nor the other, but something else entirely)
    - 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
  - arguably more: is “transvestite” a different gender from “gay”? etc.
    - these are social categories: preconceived roles with norms of behavior
- 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, distinctly bounded 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 he 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.”
- A different female gender role example
  - Many 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 behavior rules, from women wearing a head scarf to not being allowed out of the house
  - the term is from Urdu (an Afghan language) and/or Hindi (India), but seclusion of women is practiced in many societies
    - not specific to Muslim or Hindu religion
- **Hijab**: literally means barrier; used as the term for acceptably modest clothing
  - this is one aspect of the broader concept of purdah
  - specific to Muslims
  - marks women as devout, respectable Muslims
  - hijab refers to many different garments, depending on region and culture
- 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 temptation by 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?
    - this is an etic view, accepted by only some Muslim women
    - is it objective and valid, or ethnocentric?
- Revival of popularity of hijab in recent decades: two theories
  - Note that your reading by the Ferneas (the same as in Guests of the Sheik) was written in 1986: 25 years ago!
    - they were way ahead of their time in noticing and discussing this
    - typical of anthropologists:
      - because they are immersed in a culture and comparing it to others,
      - anthropologists often pick up ideas and trends long before politicians or the press do
  - Two general theories:

- both see resurgence of hijab as due to modern economic trends in which women increasingly have to work outside the home
- 1: men are increasingly 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
- 2: women are increasingly asserting their female identity as being pious and respectable Muslims
  - despite 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
    - communicating 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, religious expression, and appropriate gender roles
  - both are about culture as adaptation
    - each shows how wearing hijab solves a practical social problem for men or women
  - it is unusual to find an explanation that embodies all three approaches; usually an explanation basically applies just one
- Hijab has recently become even more political
  - face-covering forms of hijab had been banned in Turkey since 1928
    - but recent changes to the laws restore women's freedom to wear them in some places
  - headscarves are banned in French public schools
  - France has just banned wearing the niqab anywhere in public
    - a woman gets a fine if caught in one
  - many other European countries have local bans on some kinds of hijab in certain contexts
    - England, Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Germany
    - plus more that are considering such laws
  - the stated reasons are
    - keeping religion out of secular public schools
    - public safety (terrorism)
    - women's rights
  - Are these the real reasons?
  - do these laws suggest
    - othering?
    - concern with ethnic identity?
    - might a good explanation of these laws have to involve culture as a system?
    - what is the role of cultural relativism here? ethics? morality?
- Point: arbitrary cultural constructs about gender identity are playing a big role in current events, human rights debates, the lives of students and teachers, foreign policy...
  - understanding 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

- So: does hijab oppress women?
  - should we condone Muslims practicing that aspect of their faith and ethnic identity?
  - should we be ethical relativists? Where is the line?