

The Cultural Construction of Gender

Lecture 18

The dichotomy that makes the study of gender possible:

SEX/BIOLOGICAL
(sexual differentiation)

vs.

**GENDER/CULTURAL
CONSTRUCTION**
(creative invention)

- Gender= the cultural construction of male and female
- Biology provides the raw materials of sex differences but is not an absolute determinant in defining gender roles.
- Children learn gender identity and roles through socialization.

Anthropology is in a unique position

- Because cross-cultural - looks globally at similarities and differences
- If found in every culture (and primates) = biology
- If different in various cultures = culture

Terms

- **SEXUAL DIMORPHISM**
- - differences in form or structure between males and females
- **GENDER ROLES**
- - normative behavior assigned to each sex
- **GENDER IDENTITY**
- – appearance and social roles
(psychological aspect) (ex. Brown student)

- **GENDER IDEALS**
- – cultural (and biological) differences in ideas about masculinity and femininity
- **SEXUAL IDENTITY**
- – biological sex
- **SEXUAL ORIENTATION**
- – sexual preference - 4 types?
- (Bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual, asexual)

- **GENDER STEREOTYPES**

- - preconceived ideas about the characteristics or behavior of each gender

- **GENDER STRATIFICATION**

- - Unequal distribution of rewards (socially valued resources, power, prestige, and personal freedom) between men and women, reflecting their different positions in a social hierarchy.

In every culture humans are sexually the same:

- Male
- Female
- Both - as in the case of **intersex** individuals

Intersex

- True hermaphrodite (one ovary and one testicle OR ovotestes)
- chromosomes XX, XY, XX/XY or XO
- causes ?
- might father children or give birth
- EX. German sprinter XXY

- Female Pseudo
- XX and normal female organs - genitalia masculinized
- causes - bodies produce too much testosterone or drugs

- Male pseudo
- XY
- testes usually in abdominal cavity
- external genitalia feminine or amb
- Causes - body does not respond to androgen being produced
- EX. Caster Semenya

Biology same worldwide **BUT**
great variety in definitions of
masculinity and femininity.

WHY?

- Cultural differences - Ideas about how/why
Men and Women are different
- Baby's sex determines: how think of baby,
characteristics see, expectations & how
treat

Traditional Western ideas about men and women based on 2 basic principles:

- That men and women are **VERY different**.
- That men are **superior** to women

Examples of Conventional Western views:

- Aristotle (330 BC) Influenced Western thinkers for centuries
- Freud
- Henry Higgins
- My dad

WHY?

belief in large **biological**
differences

- false ideas about biology
- Anatomical and functional differences in reproduction = physical, intellectual and emotional differences

Ideas have changed over time:

- Historically Western thought - large differences and due entirely to **biology**
- 1970s (Margaret Mead) differences due entirely to **culture** – no biological diffs
- 1980s/90s Gilligan – gendered personalities (large differences/biology)
- **Current** – (Chase, Trauter) **both** culture and biology + **agency**; more similarities than differences

How are Men and Women different Biologically (3 ways)?

- Anatomical & physical differences
- Hormone differences
- Brain structure

- I - Anatomical & physical differences (musculature, height, metabolic rate, lung volume, heart size, red blood cells & clotting factors (M) = recover from wounds v.s. white blood cells & antibodies (W) = less death from diseases.

- 2 - Hormone differences (in utero and again at adolescence)
- (hormones imp!) (Heidi Krieger)
- Behavioral differences

Biology

- Anatomical, physical differences(musculature)
- Hormone differences (infancy and again at adolescence)
- Brain structure (due to hormones) (later)

but ...

- men same everywhere (testosterone, brains) - diff. amount aggression & violence
- women same everywhere (hormones, brains, biological imperatives) - diff. degrees of passivity

Why cross-cultural differences ?

- CULTURE !!!

M. Mead

- *Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) (7 years after Samoa)
- Sex differences are “not something deeply biological.”

Examined 3 societies in **New Guinea:**

- Arapesh
- Mundugamor
- Tchambuli

Arapesh

- **both** men and women gentle, passive and emotionally warm

Mundugamor

- **Both** men and women aggressive and violent

Tchambuli

- Men and women very different (opposite of Western view)

Concludes:

- “‘genders’ are cultural creations to which each generation, male and female is trained to conform.”

Mead

- findings controversial
- but ideas important - formed the foundation of gender studies in the 70s

study of gender starts -1970s

- universal subordination of women. WHY?
- Androcentrism in anthropology (started to include women)
- ex. *Women, Culture and Society* (1974)
Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere
(Brown)

Brown tenured faculty:

- 1976 - (total 346)
- M 334;W 12
- 2009 - (total 486)
- M 352;W 134

1980s

- ?s of universal subordination of women criticized as based on Western ideas and categories - no longer the central focus

2014

- The cultural construction of male and female and how this **varies** from culture to culture
- Differences **within** particular cultures

Gender Ideals

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graph TD; A[Gender Ideals] --> B[Biological (universal)]; A --> C[Cultural (variations)]; B --> D[Reproductive success and survival of offspring]; C --> E[often about wealth];
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Biological
(universal)

Reproductive success and
survival of offspring

Cultural
(variations)

often about
wealth

MATE VALUE ?

- physical attractiveness (worldwide most imp.)
- For males “toughness,” athletic ability and \$ are also valued
- Intelligence is also valued for both sexes in some cultures such as Europe, China and Japan but NOT the U.S.

“Opposite-Sex Ideal in the U.S.A. and
Mexico as Perceived by
YoungAdolescents” (1990)

The **biological** aspect of gender ideals:

- biologically programmed to find best genetic match
- youth spent finding “how high you can shoot”
- ideals based on reproductive success and survival of offspring

What is important?

- In women:
- indicators of youth, health and good genes & reproductive success
- In Men:
- health, good genes and ability to provide

- In general men prefer more feminine women and women prefer more masculine men
- *The science of sexual attraction*

Faces

- The golden ratio
- More feminine more attractive, more masculine more attractive
- Symmetry = health
- Women's faces change during ovulation

Assignment:

- Chase, Chapter 7