



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help

Chapter

2 Thinking (through) gender

Part 1

- * Read and Annotate!
- * Be prepared to Discuss!

In order to begin to understand masculinity, we need to frame it within a more general understanding of gender, otherwise we are left simply with a shopping list of features, characteristics, and behaviors. Alternatively, we find ourselves looking at a kind of do-it-yourself kit for constructing a predetermined notion of "man," or a self-help book offering us ways to become more recognizably and acceptably masculine. The title of this chapter is intended to suggest several possible simultaneous meanings and strategies.

"Thinking gender" suggests something along the lines of "having gender in mind," but also "a notion of gender that is self-conscious and self-reflexive." In addition, "Thinking through gender" implies first a careful consideration of both the idea of gender and how gender operates socially and culturally. Second, "thinking through gender" suggests that gender provides a lens or lattice by means of which we both perceive and think about the world, and through which we interact with it. Third, "thinking through gender" invites us to transcend gendered ways of thinking – to think *beyond* gender as familiar, comfortable, and, for the most part, invisible because it is simply a part of the way things just *are*.

Gender, sex, and sexuality

We begin with the term "gender" itself. Although this word occurs fairly regularly in everyday usage (for example, it is to be found frequently in official and semi-official questionnaires), its exact sense and implications are not always well understood. "Sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably, although, as we shall see, there are key meanings that distinguish each from the other. Furthermore, particular formations of "gender" are thought to flow automatically from "sex." That is, there is an assumption that the body is an irreducible physical, material fact, so that its anatomical configuration (as male or female) necessarily entails the behaviors appropriate to a particular configuration, namely, masculine or feminine behaviors.

We need instead to think of gender not as a freestanding concept, but rather as related in a complex way to two other key concepts: sex and sexuality. One way

of thinking of the relationship between sex and gender is to consider the relationship between raw material and process. For a long time, we have generally understood that we may be born with differing genital configurations (namely, male or female) and with different reproductive capacities and functions. However, we also subscribe to a two-sex notion of the human body, which is called *dimorphism*: having two forms, one for boys/boys and one for girls/women. Put another way, we learn through our culture the gestures and attitudes that the culture considers appropriate through learning these that we become social products. The raw fact of our individual anatomical sex is a social product (behaving as a man or a woman is a social product of a man and the manner and degree to which we conform to them we understand as *masculinity*; the same for femininity). The third factor is the compliance with them, we think of as *gender*.

One way of understanding this is to think of gender as an idea that is overdetermined, and indeed overwhelming. Although we commonly think of "male" and "female" as the anatomical bedrock on which gender is founded, it is difficult to separate anatomical sex from gender. (This is an idea we will return to later.) Butler's notion of gender performativity suggests that gender is in a sense ambiguous. They each encode both anatomical sex difference; the second, they each encode the social constructions of each sex (namely, its gender) and the third, they encode a particular sex measures up to and meets expectations.

However, we should note that there is a third factor in this equation: the morphology of sex (male or female) and the social categories that we call gender (masculinity or femininity). These three factors resonate the feminine, just as a woman may be seen as feminine. The culture ensures through a number of mechanisms that we subscribe to such a connection. These include the ridiculing of other possibilities, and the ridiculing, humiliation, and punishment of those who do not comply with those cultural norms. In order to survive and function in the world, we must make as seamless the connection between anatomical sex and gender. In order to impose gender, we make simple equations: sex = anatomical sex; gender = woman = femininity; male body = man = masculinity. These assumptions (for the most part, they are not conscious) then become *naturalized*. That is, they appear to be the natural, normal, things, logical, necessary, and the way things are, for everyone.

So, when we encounter any disruption to these naturalized assumptions and equivalences, we may tend to react very strongly.

contempt, or violence, among other responses. This is the case not only often with women whose behavior is perceived to be "mannish" or with men who seem to be effeminate, but also with individuals whose bodily morphology may not easily fit into the two-sex, two-gender system that has developed in most Western societies. For example, the hermaphrodite, now usually called an *intersex* person, is someone born either with indeterminate sexual characteristics (for instance, a rudimentary penis or vagina) or with ambiguous ones (both a penis and a vagina, although commonly one may be less developed than the other). Such an individual is not easily classified within the existing sex/gender system. Accordingly, then, infants who are identified as hermaphrodite or intersex are often subjected to surgical "correction" or "gender reassignment," their sex often determined by parental choice as well as the reliance on the judgment and experience of the medical team in attendance. This, in turn, often means a compliance with cultural assumptions about what constitutes "boyness" or "girleness," which refers us back, in a loop, to cultural notions of masculinity and femininity.

To take another example, the condition in males known as androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) may cause the body to fail either to trip the necessary hormonal signals at puberty or to respond to those signals as the hormones flood the body. Those males with AIS may find that their voices do not break at puberty; one or both of their testes may fail to descend from the body into the scrotal sac; they may not develop facial or body hair; they may develop female-looking breasts; and so on. The condition is usually treated with injections of androgens (male hormones), especially testosterone. The point to grasp here is that *our two-sex, two-gender system does not allow for such individuals*, any more than it accommodates the intersex individual: indeed, *these identities disrupt the system itself*. Defined as anomalies and therefore as "abnormal" or "unnatural," their very anomalousness serves to confirm the authority of the two-sex, two-gender system in place.

To our understanding of that system we must add another component: sexuality. Just as the words "man" or "woman" embrace both the genital and reproductive configuration of individuals as well as the set of behaviors and attitudes expected of either sex, so "sexuality" as a term is ambiguous. It too covers a range of possible meanings. Chief among these are sexual orientation and sexual behavior. The latter in turn includes such factors as the degree of sexual activity in an individual's life, and the sexual practices that an individual finds erotically arousing as well as emotionally and psychologically satisfying.

Of the various possibilities available to men and women in the culture, the overriding assumption about sexual orientation is that it is, or should be, heterosexual, namely, oriented toward the opposite sex. The poet Adrienne Rich has called this "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1993: 227–54). After all, male and female genitals are formed as anatomically complementary with each other. Moreover, there is both an instinctual and a cultural need to propagate young, in order to ensure the future of the family, the community (or nation), and, beyond both of these, the species. Thus, not only is heterosexuality "natural," in the sense

of being the means, shared by most living creatures, but it also structures social and cultural relations.

The fact that women are the child-bearers and child-rearers has traditionally been in addition to other roles which include that of homemaker. However, Rubin notes:

Although every society has some sexual division of labor, the assignment of any particular task to one sex or the other is not universal. In some groups, agriculture is the work of men; in others, of women. Women carry the heavy burdens of agriculture in some societies; men are even examples of female hunters and gatherers, and women of child-care tasks.

Thus, from the perspective of the cultural anthropologist, Rubin calls it "obligatory heterosexuality"; see, for example, the heterosexuality of the Inuit, whose sexual orientations, inclinations, and sexual practices are shaped by the culture. Yet, as Rubin observes,

Hunger is hunger, but what counts is what is obtained. ... Sex is sex, but what counts is what is obtained. Every society arranges its sexual arrangements by which the biological function of reproduction is shaped by human, social interests in a particular manner, no matter how bizarre some of these interests may be.

She earlier defines "sex/gender system" as "the way in which human society transforms biological sex into gender, and in which these transformed sexual needs are met." The relationship, therefore, between sex and gender is one, and, moreover, varies from culture to culture, according to the culture and social needs of each.

We should, therefore, be cautious about the term "norm." It refers to the attitudes, practices, inclinations, and sexualities of most members of the culture; a norm is a standard of behavior that the *normal* tends to become the *normative* standard. However, a norm is not necessarily self-evident. Because the culture uses threats and punishments to be meted out to those who are not normal, as people in the culture move toward the consequences of noncompliance.

Activity 2.1

- Think about some instances in your own life, whether gained through observation, direct experience, the reading of books or the viewing of movies and TV, in which you have been able to detect a difference between normality and normativity.
 - On what criterion (or criteria) of behavior did the distinction depend (for example, a norm of gender behavior or sexual practice)?

Essentialist versus constructionist views

We need, therefore, to be careful about assuming a simple relationship between the human sex–gender–sexuality triad and the sex–sexuality dyad of other creatures in our world. In the first place, gender appears to be chiefly a social and cultural phenomenon, in so far as it is not governed simply by instinct, implanted by the process of evolution. Gender requirements and assigned behaviors differ not only across cultures, but may also change across historical periods within a single culture.

If we look beyond Western cultures, we find that other cultures may have more complex sex/gender systems. For example, some Native American peoples structure into their sex/gender system a third gender, the so-called *berdache* or Two-Spirit person, that is, someone anatomically of one sex who identifies with the other gender. Many Native Americans object to the term “berdache,” used widely in anthropological work on North American indigenous peoples (see, for example, Greenberg, 1988: 40–56). The term originates in a Spanish word that suggests male effeminacy and/or sexual submissiveness. For the cultures concerned, “Two-Spirit individual” is the preferred term, and does not necessarily define the individual so described by sexual orientation or role (Stryker, 2004). Although Two-Spirit persons may have sometimes been made objects of ridicule or contempt (often ritualized) within their particular cultures, at the same time they have also been regarded as revered shaman figures who have escaped the division into one sex or another, or who have embodied both sexes in the one body and identity. Likewise, in Greco-Roman culture, hermaphrodites may have been reviled by those around them, but they also inspired awe because of the twinned sex identities that they literally embodied.

A still more nuanced gender-system exists in Sulawesi, in the Indonesian archipelago, where among the Bugis people there are “three sexes (female, male, intersex), four genders (women, men, calabai [false woman], and calatai [false man], and a fifth meta-gender group, the bissu [literally ‘transvestite priest,’ but in fact hermaphroditic]” (Graham, 2001). In addition, such complexity implies an equal richness in cultural notions of and possibilities for sexual orientation and activity, whereas historically in most Western cultures heterosexuality has

been the only officially sanctioned e innate and the inevitable result of ana considered among Native Americans a impossible.

Theories of gender and gender behav and the observed behavior of animals essentialist theorizations. That is, they is reproduced genetically. Such theor important and influential idea of the ev and anthropological findings; and they that man is the hunter whereas woman often ruthless cut-and-thrust of modern ancestors did on the African savanna in are founded on the idea that our collect way people lived in those days are ha instance, aggressive or violent male be bodily factors as the larger, more musc powerful male hormone testosterone, a and clan or primitive community from i

Essentialist theories of gender also o animals in terms of social and sexual gathered from experiments with anima natural habitats may be applied to huma responses, or ways of behaving. The arg animals overlooks or willfully ignores s identical kinds of society. For example, racy, as a way of organizing society, ha as diverse as, say, ants and wolves, whe preserve the notion of democracy or to according to the lights of democracy as a be organized.

Perhaps the paradigmatic case is that o the condemnation of homosexuality (esp cultures has been justified by reference to scriptural text of those cultures. Althou New Testaments speak disapprovingly o the key passages are generally taken to 18:22 states, in the King James Version (as with womankind: it is abomination,” a also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a w abomination: they shall surely be put to The Hebrew *to’evah* is here translated transgression but something that both c God, whereas the rendering “sin” in mor anodyne, and suggests an offence to G

Hebrew word “does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft (discussed elsewhere in Leviticus), but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation, both of which are prohibited in these same chapters.” He infers from this that “Leviticus 18 is specifically designed to distinguish the Jews from the pagans among whom they had been living, or would live” Boswell goes on to argue that the injunction against male homosexuality was therefore intended to preserve the ritual cleanliness of the Jews as a people, rather than being simply a moral condemnation of sexual transgression (Boswell, 1980: 100–101).

Nevertheless, by the Middle Ages, homosexuality came to be understood as *peccatum contra naturam*: the (not merely a) sin against nature (Boswell, 1980: 103, note 42), a sense perpetuated by the King James English translation of the Bible, the standard in English-speaking cultures for several centuries. However, Boswell cautions us to treat the notion of “nature” with care, because the term is a philosophical as well as semantic minefield. It may refer, among other things, to that which is the essence of something, and hence characteristic of it. It may signify a generalization for the “observable universe”; or for that which “does or would occur without human intervention” (Boswell, 1980: 11). Boswell notes that the condemnation of homosexuality as unproductive and therefore unnatural is selective:

Nonreproductivity can in any case hardly be imagined to have induced intolerance of gay people in ancient societies which idealized celibacy or in modern ones which consider masturbation perfectly 'natural,' since both of these practices have reproductive consequences identical with those of homosexual activity. This objection is clearly a justification rather than a cause of prejudice.

(Boswell, 1980: 12)

He also points out that the assumption that homosexual behavior is absent among animals

is demonstrably false: homosexual behavior, sometimes involving pair-bonding, has been observed among many animal species in the wild as well as in captivity. This has been recognized since the time of Aristotle and, incredible as it seems, has been accepted by people who *still* objected to homosexual behavior as unknown to other animals.

(Boswell, 1980: 12; original emphasis)

Boswell argues further that this assumption

is predicated on another assumption – that uniquely human behavior is not “natural” – which is fundamentally unsupportable in almost any context, biological or philosophical. Many animals in fact engage in behavior which is unique to their species, but no one imagines that such behavior

is "unnatural"; on the contrary, it is species in question and is useful to take from other types of organisms. If male homosexual desires and behavior, thus, are not natural, it is not because they are unnatural." Most of the admiration that humans have for their own species is unique to humans: this is a fact that no one imagines that human society is unknown among other animals.

Essentialist theorizations of sex and gender have contributed a good deal to our understandings and concepts, and the behaviors to which they lead, because of their scientific nature, grounded knowledge, chiefly the idea that the world and its phenomena can be weighed, quantified, and analyzed according to specific procedures. However, as we have seen, focusing on "nature" and same-sex behaviors, the approaches may highlight weaknesses or blind spots.

Moreover, essentialist arguments can be used to argue against feminism and the increasing number of women, and essentialist arguments from verbal and physical on homosexual men and women. The problem with essentialist theory is that, effectively, it is static. If it were true that today we are still governed by the same scripts by which our remotest ancestors survived, the containment, rather than the change and evolution of human behaviors deemed antisocial – although how these behaviors becomes problematic, if they are indeed that way.

Constructionist (or constructivist) theory holds that, rather than structuring social relations, society develops. Whereas essentialist theorists and relate it to both physiological factors and species development, constructionist theorists cultural influences that operate in and around whatever its evolutionary history. Those influences enter into the world. Consequently, we must, find a way to accommodate ourselves to them and how they affect the world that they create. In other words, we cannot assume that the world is predetermined for us by a vast, complex and irresistible array of forces, pressures, and problems.

Thus, even before an infant is born, one can know is its sex. Once this has been determined, starts up, setting in place patterns of expectation.

such apparently innocuous items as the kinds of color deemed appropriate for the baby's clothing, the sorts of toys that it will be given to play with, and the like. Even when the child has parents who are sensitive to issues of gender and who seek to neutralize conventional expectations of boys and girls, social and cultural influences still play a powerful role, through playgroups, friendships, schooling, television programs, advertising, and so on. Later, of course, the individual who was the child might decide to contest the way in which she or he has been gendered. However, that contestation is not an absolutely new formation. It is, rather, a reaction to and a resistance of a structure of gender that was always-already in place and that has already situated and formed the individual in important and indelible ways.

Nevertheless, constructionist theories do make space for such re-formations of gender to occur, unlike essentialist theories, which tend to see gender as embedded in the body and as in effect immutable. Moreover, because constructionism addresses social histories and configurations as well as cultural practices, its theorizations of gender and sexuality, and the relation between them, are more fluid. Put another way, essentialist theory seeks to fix sex, gender, and sexuality as both unchanging and universal, whereas constructionist theory perceives these as historically and culturally specific.

However, this does not mean that constructionist theory bypasses or ignores questions of the body and its workings; to do so would be foolhardy, because, for example, it is clear that biochemical functions such as the production of hormones *can* affect behavior. Rather, constructionism seeks to understand how the culture makes meaning of such behavior and how it valorizes (gives value to) it. For instance, rather than simply accepting that male aggression or violence is inevitable because of the presence of high levels of testosterone in the male body, constructionist theorists ask such questions as: "What value or values in this culture, at this time, are attributed to male aggression and violence?" "Is it possible that male aggression and violence are socially and culturally encouraged, and if so, in what ways, and toward what ends?" "Is aggressive and violent male behavior always produced simply by hormonal influences, or can those influences be triggered by social situations and circumstances?"

Activity 2.2

- Explore and examine the articles and the advertisements in women's or men's magazines:
 - Can you identify any elements of these that can be categorized as generated by either an essentialist or a constructionist understanding of gender?
 - How does such identification affect your understanding of the "gender project" of the publication in question?

The essentialist/constructionist debate as the opposition between nature and nurture, that the issues are more complex than a simple choice between nature and nurture. Upbringing. However, these two extremes have been looked or neglected in a consideration of the debate, and explained by different kinds of theories, in terms of a tension chiefly between the two extremes, *discursive*.

Theories of ideology and of discourse are versions of the same thing. Both kinds of theory attribute social and historical forces as the causes, rather than ascribing these to individual choice, or to forces external to the social. Both are concerned with how we act and why we understand in particular ways, our relations with others in that world; and how language, knowledge, and power. However, they do so in significantly different ways, and they have been powerfully influential in contemporary theory and dynamics, power and its distribution, and gender: much feminist theory, for example, and Foucauldian thought.

Contemporary theories of ideology, which the nineteenth-century German philosopher (among other intellectual functions) who as their ultimate goal the betterment of society's understanding of the way modern, Western systems work, in order to devise a more effective socioeconomic function. Marx identified the organization of labor, wealth, and social relations that overthrew the entire system was the October Revolution.

Current theories of discourse derive from twentieth-century French philosopher and theorist of history). Compared with Marxist theories of historical materialism, the elaboration of discursive formations seems concerned with the way power circulates and determines our understanding of ourselves. Theorists who advocate a resigned acceptance of its workings stand Foucault's project, which is really to stand upon us, and thereby to encourage us to reflect upon our condition.

The theorizations of both ideology are complex, and a full account of either book. Instead, what is presented below of each, intended as a way of working with masculinity – a sort of “Super-Lite” version. Readers are therefore strongly encouraged

for themselves (see, for instance, “Suggested further reading” at the end of this chapter).

Ideology and gender

“Ideology” is often misunderstood as signifying a system of belief that is outmoded, clumsy, or different from or opposed to one’s own set of beliefs. So, whereas one’s own belief system appears self-evident, natural, and “correct,” in the sense that all right-thinking people would “of course” agree, the belief system of another person (especially someone of a different background, race or ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation) seems wrong-headed, out of touch with reality, deluded, and/or perverse. However, the theorization of ideology argues not only that the ideology and the structure of *any* society or group are closely connected, but also that *it is impossible to escape ideology*. The very ways we observe and understand, think and talk are not only ideologically saturated but also themselves articulate and circulate ideology.

Catherine Belsey, for example, observes that

ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world – real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence and the ways in which people are socially constituted within them. It is not, therefore, to be thought of as a system of ideas in people's heads, nor as the expression of a higher level of real material relationships, but as the necessary condition of action within the social formation.

(Belsey, 1986: 46)

Put otherwise, ideology develops out of the reality of people's relation to the social: to social classes, their dynamics and relationship to one another; structures of employment and labor; patterns of social interaction; and so on. However, at the same time, ideology overlays and masks that relation so that contradictions, inconsistencies, and inequities are smoothed over and naturalized: "Ideology obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence ..." (Belsey, 1986: 46). Thus, the existence of the members of a society is constituted by the structure of the society and the conditions of existence permitted by that structure; but is framed by "a system of representations (discourses, images, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live" (Belsey, 1986: 46).

However, Belsey warns:

It is important to stress ... that ideology is in no sense a set of deliberate distortions foisted upon a helpless working-class by a corrupt and cynical

bourgeoisie (or upon victimized women). If there are groups of sinister men in society, these are not the real makers of history, in that sense, since it exists necessarily.

Ideology, then, emerges out of social structure, but it *disguises* those relations of operation. It becomes naturalized, and in turn becomes a reality of social existence. It "exists in commonplaces, in the language and thought of the people, in the political and religious systems. It is apparent in the way things appear to be understood and accepted. Ideology has always been (Belsey, 1986: 46).

One powerful agent of ideology is advertising, which thereby also maintains production, of course. Ideology by circulating it through the culture, is not merely to inform us about what is on the market, goods or services for sale, but in fact to create a desire for things. Accordingly, therefore, we are made to desire health, our sex appeal, our ability to appear attractive, our fashions, our possession of "labor-saving" devices (such as the washing machine, for example), and so on, so that we focus, not on the actual need for services in terms of actual need or of the cost of them and what it costs us to acquire them, but rather on a desire that is represented to us as real need.

Advertising operates through *interpellation*, a concept developed by twentieth-century French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. According to Althusser, ideology works by interpellating (that is, "calling into being") a "subject" (as opposed to an "individual") that ideology addresses. The "us" (or "me") that ideology addresses is not the same as the "I" that constitutes individual identity or individual than a *subject*, an individual who is constituted by a range of social relations, including class, culture, and gender. Whereas it seems only *individuals* can be autonomous, unique individuals who, positioned freely in and on the world around us, theorize (and, later, also of discourse) by contrast postulating the existence of autonomous agents possessed of free will, who are beyond our control and, indeed, even beyond our imagination. We imagine our own uniqueness and autonomy, but we are constituted by a range of social relations, including class, culture, and gender.

subjectivity isn't a property that we subjects of various agencies. Our individuality is regulated and reproduced as a structure of power that can be subjects of (subjected to) parental authority, compulsion; commercial enterprise/enterprise; and so on.



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help