

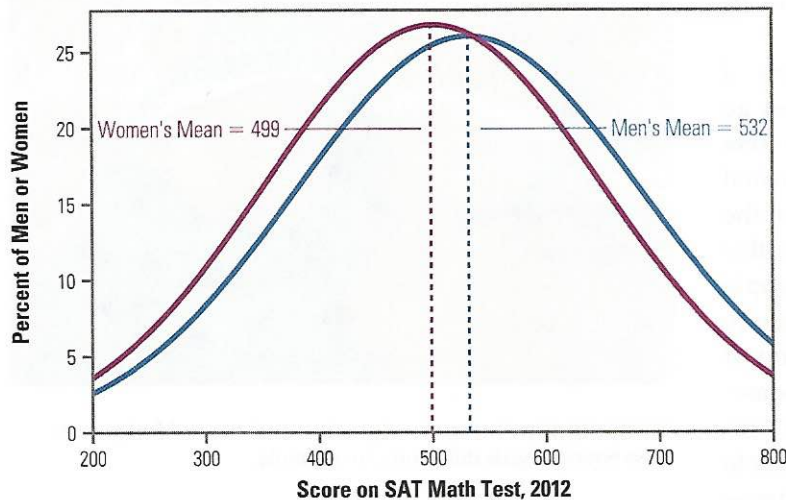


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Figure 12.1 Male and Female Distributions and Means on the SAT Test



SOURCE: Numbers computed and distributions drawn by Paula England from data reported by The College Board (2012).

distribution) is a bit higher than the female mean. But the figures also show how much the two distributions overlap, and that the mean difference looks rather small compared to the amount of overlap. Thus, even on a characteristic where one sex has a higher average, there will be many members of the sex with the higher average who are below the average of the sex with the lower average. This point is critical to keep in mind so as not to exaggerate gender differences.

In the rest of this section, we will explore some of the main factors affecting gender.

Sex Versus Gender: The Social Construction of Gender

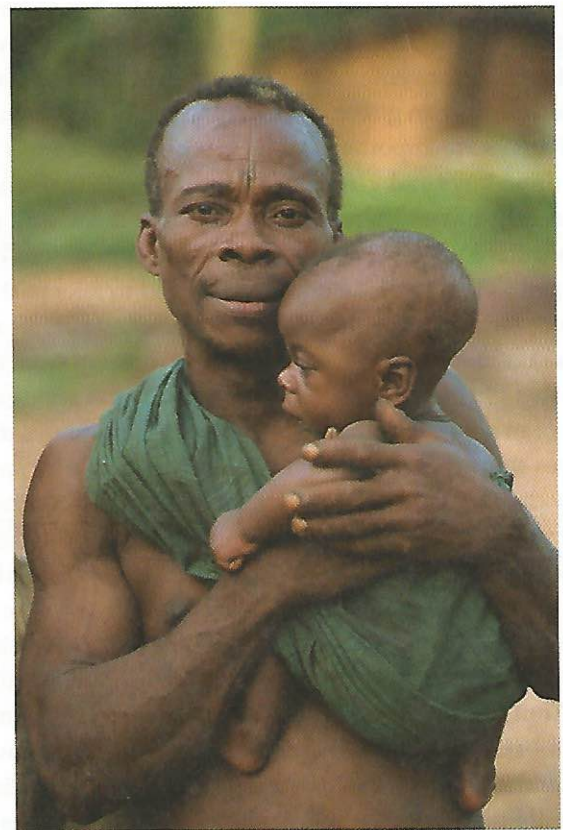
12.1.1: Distinguish the concepts of sex and gender and explain how gender is socially constructed.

When men and women really do differ, what shapes these differences? Many people believe that sex differences in behavior and preferences are “natural,” caused by biological differences such as differences in hormones, anatomy, or brain structure. There is some truth to this. A person’s sex is a biological matter. Humans group into two sexes, where males and females differ in anatomy, chromosomes, and average levels of certain hormones. But it is also true that men and women overlap on many of the defining characteristics, and some people, called **intersex individuals**, are born with some defining anatomical characteristics of each sex.

One example of a biological influence is the evidence that testosterone, a hormone present in both men and women but generally in much greater amounts in men, encourages some kinds of aggressive or dominance-seeking behavior. This suggests that the higher levels of aggressive behavior that we see in men, on average, are caused in part by the fact that men have higher testosterone than

women. Yet causation is not just one-way, from hormone to behavior; changes in the social environment can also change testosterone levels. For example, one study showed that men’s testosterone levels increase before a competitive athletic event, and those of the winners stay elevated afterward, while the testosterone levels of the losers drop afterward (Mazur and Booth 1998). Another biologically based difference is that only women can breastfeed infants. But men participate much more in infant care in some societies than others, showing that society also has an effect.

When sociologists talk about gender, they focus on the ways that social forces create differences between men’s and women’s behavior, preferences, treatment, and opportunities and the characteristics of men and women that reflect these forces. While biology clearly has a role in such differences, research in sociology has shown that social arrangements have powerful effects on differences between men and women. The entire system of social processes that create and sustain gender differences and gender inequality is often referred to as the **social construction of gender**. Societies have a broad gender system that consists of interactions in small groups in which what is expected of a person and is rewarded depends upon his or her sex, and institutions like schools, churches, corporations, or



Fathers of the Aka tribe in West Africa spend more time in close contact with their infant children than in any other society, indicating that society can play a role in influencing sex differences.



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