In the metaphorical kaleidoscope of this book, gender is the pivotal prism. It is central to the intricate patterning of social life, and encompasses power relations, the division of labor, symbolic forms, and emotional relations (Connell, 2000). The shape and texture of people’s lives are affected in profound ways by the prism of gender as it operates in their social worlds. Indeed, our ways of thinking about and experiencing gender, and the related category of sex, originate in our society.

As we noted in the Introduction, gender is very complex. In part, the complexity of the prism of gender in North American culture derives from the fact that it is characterized by a marked contradiction between people’s beliefs about gender and real behavior. Our real behavior is far more flexible, adaptable, and malleable than our beliefs would have it. To put it another way, contrary to the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, there are no gender certainties or absolutes. Real people behave in feminine, masculine, and nongendered ways as they respond to situational demands and contingencies (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Tavris, 1992).

Two questions are addressed in this chapter to help us think more clearly about the complexity of gender: (1) how does Western culture condition us to think about gender, especially in relation to sex? and (2) how does social scientific research challenge Western beliefs about gender and sex?

Western Beliefs About Gender and Sex

Most people in Western cultures grow up learning that there are two and only two sexes, male and female, and two and only two genders, feminine and masculine (Bem, 1993; Lucal, 2008; Wharton, 2005). We are taught that a real woman is feminine, a real man is masculine, and that any deviation or variation is strange or unnatural. Most people also learn that femininity and masculinity flow from biological sex characteristics (e.g., hormones, secondary sex characteristics, external and internal genitalia). We are taught that testosterone, a beard, big muscles, and a penis make a man, while estrogen, breasts, hairless legs, and a vagina make a woman. Many of us never question what we have learned about sex and gender, so we go through life assuming that gender is a relatively simple matter: a person who wears lipstick, high heel shoes, and a skirt is a feminine female, while a person who plays...
rugby, belches in public, and walks with a swagger is a masculine male (Lorber, 1994; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

The readings we have selected for this chapter reflect a growing body of social scientific research that challenges and alters the Western model of sex and gender. Overall, the readings are critical of the American tendency to explain virtually every human behavior in individual and biological terms. As Jodi O’Brien (1999) points out, Americans tend to assume that answers to the complex workings of social relationships can be found in the bodies and psyches of individuals, rather than in culture or in the interaction between bodies and the environment.

Americans habitually overemphasize biology and underestimate the power of social facts to explain sex and gender (O’Brien, 1999). For instance, Americans tend to equate aggression with biological maleness and vulnerability with femaleness; natural facility in physics with masculinity and natural facility in child care with femininity; lace and ribbons with girlness and rough and tumble play with boyness (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). The notions of natural sex and gender difference, duality, and even opposition and inequality permeate our thinking, color our labeling of people and things in our environment, and affect our practical actions (Bem, 1993; Wharton, 2005).

We refer to the American tendency to assume that biological sex differences cause gender differences as “the pink and blue syndrome.” This syndrome is deeply lodged in our minds and feelings, and reinforced through everyday talk, performance, and experience. It’s everywhere. Any place, object, discourse, or practice can be gendered. Children’s birthday cards come in pink and blue. Authors of popular books assert that men and women are from different planets. People love PMS and alpha male jokes. In “The Pink Dragon Is Female” (see Chapter 5), Adie Nelson’s research reveals that even children’s fantasy costumes tend to be gendered as masculine and feminine. The “pink and blue syndrome” is so embedded within our culture, and consequently within individual patterns of thinking and feeling, that most of us cannot remember when we learned gender stereotypes and expectations or came to think about sex and gender as natural, immutable, and fixed. It all seems so simple and natural. Or is it?

What is gender? What is sex? How are gender and sex related? Why do most people in our society believe in the “pink and blue syndrome”? Why do so many of us attribute one set of talents, temperaments, skills, and behaviors to women and another set to men? These are the kinds of questions social scientists in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines have been asking and researching for almost fifty years. Thanks to decades of good work by an array of scientists, we now understand that gender and sex are not so simple. Social scientists have discovered that the gender landscape is complicated, shifting, and contradictory. Among the beliefs that have been called into question by research are:

- the notion that there are two and only two sexes and, consequently, two and only two genders
- the assumption that men and women are the same everywhere and all the time
- the belief that biological factors cause the “pink and blue syndrome”

**Using Our Sociological Radar**

Before we look at how social scientists answer questions such as “What is gender,” let’s do a little research of our own. Try the following: relax, turn on your sociological radar, and examine yourself and the people you know carefully. Do all the men you know fit the ideal of masculinity all the time, in all relationships, and in all situations? Do all the women in your life consistently behave in stereotypical feminine fashion? Do you always fit into one as opposed to the other culturally approved gender box? Or are most of the people you know capable of “doing” both masculinity and femininity, depending on the interactional context? Our guess is that none of the people we know are aggressive all the time, nurturing all the time, sweet and submissive all the time, or strong and silent all the time. Thankfully,
we are complex and creative. We stretch and grow and develop as we meet the challenges, constraints, and opportunities of different and new situations and life circumstances. Men can do mothering; women can “take care of business.” Real people are not stereotypes.

Yet even in the face of real gender fluidity and complexity, the belief in gender dichotomy and opposition continues to dominate almost every aspect of the social worlds we inhabit. For example, recent research shows that even though men’s and women’s roles have changed and blended, the tendency of Americans to categorize and stereotype people based on the simple male/female dichotomy persists (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Shields, Garner, Di Leone, & Hadley, 2006). As Glick and Fiske (1999) put it, “we typically categorize people by sex effortlessly, even nonconsciously, with diverse and profound effects on social interactions” (p. 368). To reiterate, many Americans perceive humankind as divided into mutually exclusive, nonoverlapping groups: males/masculine/men and females/feminine/women (Bem, 1993; Wharton, 2005). The culturally created image of gender, then, is nonkaleidoscopic: no spontaneity, no ambiguity, no complexity, no diversity, no surprises, no elasticity, and no unfolding growth.

Social Scientific Understandings of Sex and Gender

Modern social science offers us a very different image of gender. It opens the door to the richness and diversity of human experience, and it resists the tendency to reduce human behavior to single factors. Research shows that the behavior of real women and men depends on time and place, and context and situation, not on fixed gender differences (Lorber, 1994; Tavris, 1992; Vespa, 2009). For example, just a few decades ago in the United States, cheerleading was a men’s sport because it was considered too rigorous for women (Dowling, 2000), women were thought to lack the cognitive and emotional “stuff” to pilot flights into space, and medicine and law were viewed as too intellectually demanding for women. As Carol Tavris (1992) says, research demonstrates that perceived gender differences turn out to be a matter of “now you see them, now you don’t” (p. 288).

If we expand our sociological examination of gender to include cultures outside North America, the real-life fluidity of gender comes fully alive. (See Chapter 3 for detailed discussion.) In some cultures (e.g., the Aka hunter-gatherers) fathers as well as mothers suckle infants (Hewlett, 2001). In other cultures, such as the Agta Negritos hunter-gatherers, women as well as men are the hunters (Estioko-Griffin & Griffin, 2001). As Serena Nanda notes in her reading in this chapter, extraordinary gender diversity was expressed in complex sex/gender systems in many precontact Native American societies.

Context, which includes everything in the environment of a person’s life such as work, family, social class, race—and more—is the real source of gender definitions and practices. Gender is flexible, and “in its elasticity it stretches and unfolds in manifold ways” so that depending upon its contexts, including the life progress of individuals, we see it and experience it differently (Sorenson, 2000, p. 203). Most of us “do” both masculinity and femininity, and what we do is situationally dependent and institutionally constrained.

Let’s use sociological radar again and call upon the work of social scientists to help us think more precisely and “objectively” about what gender and sex are. It has become somewhat commonplace to distinguish between gender and sex by viewing sex as a biological fact, meaning that it is noncultural, static, scientifically measurable, and unproblematic, while we see gender as a cultural attribute, a means by which people are taught who they are, how to behave, and what their roles will be (Sorenson, 2000). However, this mode of distinguishing between sex and gender has come under criticism, largely because new studies have begun to reveal the cultural dimensions of sex itself. That is, the physical characteristics of sex cannot be separated from the cultural milieu in which they are labeled and given meaning. For example, Robert Sapolsky’s chapter reading debunks the widely held myth that testosterone causes males to be more aggressive
and domineering than females. He ends his article by stating firmly that “our behavioral biology is usually meaningless outside the context of the social factors and environment in which it occurs.” In other words, the relationship between biology and behavior is reciprocal, both inseparable and intertwined (Yoder, 2003).

Sex, as it turns out, is not a clear-cut matter of DNA, chromosomes, external genitalia, and the like, factors which produce two and only two sexes—females and males. First, there is considerable biological variation. Sex is not fixed in two categories. There is overlap. For example, all humans have estrogen, prolactin, and testosterone, but in varying and changing levels (Abrams, 2002). Think about this. In our society, people tend to associate breasts and related phenomena, such as breast cancer and lactation, with women. However, men have breasts. Indeed, some men have bigger breasts than some women, some men lactate, and some men get breast cancer. Also, in our society, people associate facial hair with men. What’s the real story? All women have facial hair and some have more of it than some men. Indeed, recent hormonal and genetic studies (e.g., Abrams, 2002; Beale, 2001) are revealing that, biologically, women and men are far more similar than distinct.

In fact, variations in and complexities of sex development produce intersexed people whose bodies do not fit the two traditionally understood sex categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Fujimora, 2006). Fujimora (2006) examined recent research on sex genes and concluded that “there is no single pathway through which sex is genetically determined” and that we might consider sex variations, such as intersex, as resulting from “multiple developmental pathways that involve genetic, protein, hormonal, environmental, and other agents, actions, and interactions” (p. 71). Lorber and Moore (2007) argue that intersexed people are akin to multiracial people. They point out that just as scientists have demonstrated through DNA testing that almost all of us are genetically interracial, similarly, “if many people were genetically sex-typed, we’d also find a variety of chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical patterns unrecognized” in our rigid, two sex system (p. 138). Sharon E. Preves’s reading in this chapter offers exciting insights into the meanings and consequences of contemporary and historical responses to individuals who are intersexed.

Biology is complicated business, and that should come as no surprise. The more we learn about biology, the more elusive and complex sex becomes. What seemed so obvious—two, opposite sexes—turns out to be an oversimplification. Humans are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct, nonoverlapping, invariant groups of males and females.

So, again, what is gender? First, gender is not sex. Biological sex characteristics do not cause specific gender behaviors or activities. As discussed earlier, biological sex is virtually meaningless outside the social context in which it develops and is expressed (Yoder, 2003). Second, gender is not an essential identity. It “does not have a locus nor does it take a particular form” (Sorenson, 2000, p. 202). In other words, individuals do not possess a clearly defined gender that is the same everywhere and all the time. At this point, you may be thinking, what in the world are these authors saying? We are saying that gender is a human invention, a means by which people are sorted (in our society, into two genders), a basic aspect of how our society organizes itself and allocates resources (e.g., certain tasks assigned to people called women and other tasks to those termed men), and a fundamental ingredient in how individuals understand themselves and others (“I feel feminine.” “He’s manly.” “You’re androgynous.”).

One of the fascinating aspects of gender is the extent to which it is negotiable and dynamic. In effect, masculinity and femininity exist because people believe that women and men are distinct groups and, most important, because people “do gender,” day in and day out. The chapter reading by Betsy Lucal illustrates vividly how gender is a matter of attribution and enactment. Some social scientists call gender a performance, while others term it a masquerade. The terms “performance” and “masquerade” emphasize that it is through the ways in which we present ourselves in our daily encounters with others that gender is created and recreated.
We even do gender by ourselves and sometimes quite self-consciously. Have you ever tried to make yourself look and act more masculine or feminine? What is involved in “putting on” femininity or masculinity? Consider *transvestism* or cross-gender dressing. “Cross-dressers know that successfully being a man or a woman simply means convincing others that you are what you appear to be” (Kimmel, 2000, p. 104). Think about the emerging communities of *transgender* people who are “challenging, questioning, or changing gender from that assigned at birth to a chosen gender” (Lorber & Moore, 2007, p. 139). Although most people have deeply learned gender and view the gender box they inhabit as natural or normal, intersex and transgender activists attack the boundaries of “normal” by refusing to choose a traditional sex, gender, or sexual identity (Lorber & Moore, 2007). In so doing, cultural definitions of sex and gender are destabilized and expanded.

You may be wondering why we have not used the term *role*, as in *gender role*, to describe “doing gender.” The problem with the concept of roles is that typical social roles, such as those of teacher, student, doctor, or nurse, involve situated positions and identities. However, gender, like race, is a status and identity that cuts across many situations and institutional arenas. In other words, gender does not “appear and disappear from one situation to another” (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, p. 32). People are always doing gender. They rarely let their guard down. In part, this is a consequence of the pressures that other people exert on us to “do gender” no matter the situation in which we find ourselves. Even if an individual would like to “give up gender,” others will define and interact with that individual in gendered terms. If you were a physician, you could “leave your professional role behind you” when you left the hospital or office and went shopping or vacationing. Gender is a different story. Could you leave gender at the office and go shopping or vacationing? What would that look like, and what would it take to make it happen?

So far, we have explored gender as a product of our interactions with others. It is something we do, not something we inherit. Gender is also built into the larger world we inhabit, including its institutions, images and symbols, organizations, and material objects. For example, jobs, wages, and hierarchies of dominance and subordination in workplaces are gendered. Even after decades of substantial increase in women’s workforce participation, occupations continue to be allocated by gender (e.g., secretaries are overwhelmingly women; men dominate construction work) and a wage gap between men and women persists (Bose & Whaley, 2001; Steinberg, 2001; Introduction to this book; Introduction to Chapter 7). In addition, men are still more likely to be bosses and women to be bossed. The symbols and images with which we are surrounded and by which we communicate are another part of our society’s gender story. Our language speaks of difference and opposition in phrases such as “the opposite sex” and the absence of any words, except awkward medical terms (e.g., transsexual) or epithets (e.g., pervert), to refer to sex and gender variants. In addition, the swirl of gendered images in the media is almost overwhelming. Blatant gender stereotypes still dominate TV, film, magazines, and billboards (Lont, 2001). Gender is also articulated, reinforced, and transformed through material objects and locales (Sorenson, 2000). Shoes are gendered, body adornments are gendered, public restrooms are gendered, weapons are gendered, ships are gendered, wrapping paper is gendered, and deodorants are gendered. The list is endless. The point is that these locales and objects are transformed into a medium for gender to operate within (Sorenson, 2000). They make gender seem “real,” and they give it material consequences (Sorenson, 2000, p. 82).

In short, social scientific research underscores the complexity of the prism of gender and demonstrates how gender is constructed at multiple, interacting levels of society. The first reading by Barbara Risman is a detailed examination of the ways in which our gender structure is embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of our society, emphasizing that gender cannot be reduced to one level or dimension: individual, interactional, or institutional. We are literally and figuratively immersed in a gendered
world—a world in which difference, opposition, and inequality are the culturally defined themes. And yet, that world is kaleidoscopic in nature. The lesson of the kaleidoscope is that “nothing in life is immune to change” (Baker, 1999, p. 29). Reality is in flux; you never know what’s coming next. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope reminds us to keep seeking the shifting meanings as well as the recurring patterns of gender (Baker, 1999).

We live in an interesting time of kaleidoscopic change. Old patterns of gender difference and inequality keep reappearing, often in new guises, while new patterns of convergence, equality, and self-realization have emerged. Social science research is vital in helping us to stay focused on understanding the prism of gender as changeable, and responding to its context—as a social dialogue about societal membership and conventions—and “as the outcome of how individuals are made to understand their differences and similarities” (Sorenson, 2000, pp. 203–204). With that focus in mind, we can more clearly and critically explore our gendered society.

**References**


Barbara Risman is a sociologist who has made significant contributions to research and writing on gender in heterosexual American families. In this article she argues that we need to conceptualize gender as a social structure so we can better analyze the ways in which gender is embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of social life. Her article also addresses the value of intersectional analysis while pointing to the importance of examining different structures of inequality, such as race and gender, for potentially different mechanisms that produce those inequalities. Finally, Risman addresses how her theory of gender as social structure might help us to understand how inequality can be transformed to create a more just world.

1. Why does Risman include the individual dimension of social life in her theory of gender as a social structure?
2. How does her work on men and mothering illustrate the value of applying gender as social structure at multiple levels of analysis?
3. Why does Risman caution against research on gender that operates only within an intersectional framework?

---

**Gender as a Social Structure**

**Theory Wrestling With Activism**

**Barbara J. Risman**

In this article, I briefly summarize my argument that gender should be conceptualized as a social structure (Risman 1998) and extend it with an attempt to classify the mechanisms that help produce gendered outcomes within each dimension of the social structure.

I then provide evidence from my own and others’ research to support the usefulness of this theoretical schema. Finally, using gender structure as a starting point, I engage in conversation with ideas currently emerging about intersectionality and wrestle with how we might use theory in the service of social change.

**Gender as Social Structure**

With this theory of *gender as a social structure*, I offer a conceptual framework, a scheme to organize the confusing, almost limitless, ways in which gender has come to be defined in contemporary social science. Four distinct social scientific theoretical traditions have developed to explain gender. The first tradition focuses on how individual sex differences originate, whether biological (Udry 2000) or social in origin (Bem 1993). The second tradition . . . emerged as a reaction to the first and focuses on how the social structure (as opposed to biology or individual learning) creates gendered behavior. The third tradition, also a reaction to the individualist thinking of the first, emphasizes social interaction and accountability to others’ expectations, with a focus on how “doing gender” creates and reproduces inequality (West and Zimmerman 1987). The sex-differences literature, the doing gender interactional analyses, and the structural perspectives have been portrayed as incompatible in my own early writings as well as in that of others (Epstein 1988; Kanter 1977; Ferree 1990; Risman 1987; Risman and Schwartz 1989). England and Browne (1992) argued persuasively that this incompatibility is an illusion: All structural theories must make assumptions about individuals, and individualist theories must make presumptions about external social control. While we do gender in every social interaction, it seems naive to ignore the gendered selves and cognitive schemas that children develop as they become cultural natives in a patriarchal world (Bem 1993). The more recent integrative approaches (Connell 2002; Lorber 1994; Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 1999; Risman 1998) treat gender as a socially constructed stratification system. This article fits squarely in the current integrative tradition.

Lorber (1994) argued that gender is an institution that is embedded in all the social processes of everyday life and social organizations. She further argued that gender difference is primarily a means to justify sexual stratification. Gender is so endemic because unless we see difference, we cannot justify inequality. I share this presumption that the creation of difference is the very foundation on which inequality rests.

I build on this notion of gender as an institution but find the institutional language distracting. The word “institution” is too commonly used to refer to particular aspects of society, for example, the family as an institution or corporations as institutions. My notion of gender structure meets the criteria offered by Martin (forthcoming) . . . While the language we use may differ, our goals are complementary, as we seek to situate gender as embedded not only in individuals but throughout social life (Patricia Martin, personal communication).

I prefer to define gender as a social structure because this brings gender to the same analytic plane as politics and economics, where the focus has long been on political and economic structures. While the language of structure suits my purposes, it is not ideal because despite ubiquitous usage in sociological discourse, no definition of the term “structure” is widely shared. Smelser (1988) suggested that all structuralists share the presumption that social structures exist outside individual desires or motives and that social structures at least partially explain human action. Beyond that, consensus dissipates. Blau (1977) focused solely on the constraint collective life imposes on the individual. Structure must be conceptualized, in his view, as a force opposing individual motivation. Structural concepts must be observable, external to the individual, and independent of individual motivation. This definition of “structure” imposes a clear dualism between structure and action, with structure as constraint and action as choice.

Constraint is, of course, an important function of structure, but to focus only on structure as
constraint minimizes its importance. Not only are women and men coerced into differential social roles; they often choose their gendered paths. A social structural analysis must help us understand how and why actors choose one alternative over another. A structural theory of action (e.g., Burt 1982) suggests that actors compare themselves and their options to those in structurally similar positions. From this viewpoint, actors are purposive, rationally seeking to maximize their self-perceived well-being under social-structural constraints. As Burt (1982) suggested, one can assume that actors choose the best alternatives without presuming they have either enough information to do it well or the options available to make choices that effectively serve their own interests. For example, married women may choose to do considerably more than their equitable share of child care rather than have their children do without whatever “good enough” parenting means to them if they see no likely alternative that the children’s father will pick up the slack.

While actions are a function of interests, the ability to choose is patterned by the social structure. Burt (1982) suggested that norms develop when actors occupy similar network positions in the social structure and evaluate their own options vis-à-vis the alternatives of similarly situated others. From such comparisons, both norms and feelings of relative deprivation or advantage evolve. The social structure as the context of daily life creates action indirectly by shaping actors’ perceptions of their interests and directly by constraining choice. Notice the phrase “similarly situated others” above. As long as women and men see themselves as different kinds of people, then women will be unlikely to compare their life options to those of men. Therein lies the power of gender. In a world where sexual anatomy is used to dichotomize human beings into types, the differentiation itself diffuses both claims to and expectations for gender equality. The social structure is not experienced as oppressive if men and women do not see themselves as similarly situated.

While structural perspectives have been applied to gender in the past (Epstein 1988; Kanter 1977), there has been a fundamental flaw in these applications. Generic structural theories applied to gender presume that if women and men were to experience identical structural conditions and role expectations, empirically observable gender differences would disappear. But this ignores not only internalized gender at the individual level . . . but the cultural interactional expectations that remain attached to women and men because of their gender category. A structural perspective on gender is accurate only if we realize that gender itself is a structure deeply embedded in society.

Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory adds considerably more depth to this analysis of gender as a social structure with his emphasis on the recursive relationship between social structure and individuals. That is, social structures shape individuals, but simultaneously, individuals shape the social structure. Giddens embraced the transformative power of human action. He insisted that any structural theory must be concerned with reflexivity and actors’ interpretations of their own lives. Social structures not only act on people; people act on social structures. Indeed, social structures are created not by mysterious forces but by human action. When people act on structure, they do so for their own reasons. We must, therefore, be concerned with why actors choose their acts. Giddens insisted that concern with meaning must go beyond the verbal justification easily available from actors because so much of social life is routine and so taken for granted that actors will not articulate, or even consider, why they act.

This nonreflexive habituated action is what I refer to as the cultural component of the social structure: The taken for granted or cognitive image rules that belong to the situational context (not only or necessarily to the actor’s personality). The cultural component of the social structure includes the interactional expectations that each of us meet in every social encounter. My aims are to bring women and men back into a structural theory where gender is the structure under analysis and to identify when behavior is habit (an enactment of taken for granted gendered cultural norms) and when we do gender consciously, with intent, rebellion, or even with
irony. When are we doing gender and re-creating inequality without intent? And what happens to interactional dynamics and male-dominated institutions when we rebel? Can we refuse to do gender or is rebellion simply doing gender differently, forging alternative masculinities and femininities?

Connell (1987) applied Giddens’s (1984) concern with social structure as both constraint and created by action in his treatise on gender and power (see particularly chapter 5). In his analysis, structure constrains action, yet “since human action involves free invention . . . and is reflexive, practice can be turned against what constrains it; so structure can deliberately be the object of practice” (Connell 1987, 95). Action may turn against structure but can never escape it.

A theory of gender as a social structure must integrate this notion of causality as recursive with attention to gender consequences at multiple levels of analysis. Gender is deeply embedded as a basis for stratification not just in our personalities, our cultural rules, or institutions but in all these, and in complicated ways. The gender structure differentiates opportunities and constraints based on sex category and thus has consequences on three dimensions: (1) At the individual level, for the development of gendered selves; (2) during interaction as men and women face different cultural expectations even when they fill the identical structural positions; and (3) in institutional domains where explicit regulations regarding resource distribution and material goods are gender specific.

Advantages to Gender Structure Theory

This schema advances our understanding of gender in several ways. First, this theoretical model imposes some order on the encyclopedic research findings that have developed to explain gender inequality. Thinking of each research question as one piece of a jigsaw puzzle, being able to identify how one set of findings coordinates with others even when the dependent variables or contexts of interest are distinct, furthers our ability to build a cumulative science. Gender as a social structure is enormously complex. Full attention to the web of interconnection between gendered selves, the cultural expectations that help explain interactional patterns, and institutional regulations allows each research tradition to explore the growth of their own trees while remaining cognizant of the forest.

A second contribution of this approach is that it leaves behind the modernist warfare version of science, wherein theories are pitted against one another, with a winner and a loser in every contest. In the past, much energy . . . was devoted to testing which theory best explained gender inequality and by implication to discounting every alternative possibility.1 Theory building that depends on theory slaying presumes parsimony is always desirable, as if this complicated world of ours were best described with simplistic monocausal explanations. While parsimony and theory testing were the model for the twentieth-century science, a more postmodern science should attempt to find complicated and integrative theories (Collins 1998). The conceptualization of gender as a social structure is my contribution to complicating, but hopefully enriching, social theory about gender.

A third benefit to this multidimensional structural model is that it allows us to seriously investigate the direction and strength of causal relationships between gendered phenomena on each dimension. We can try to identify the site where change occurs and at which level of analysis the ability of agentic women and men seem able at this, historical moment, to effectively reject habitualized gender routines. For example, we can empirically investigate the relationship between gendered selves and doing gender without accepting simplistic unidirectional arguments for inequality presumed to be either about identities or cultural ideology. It is quite possible, indeed likely, that socialized femininity does help explain why we do gender, but doing gender to meet others’ expectations, surely, over time, helps construct our gendered selves. Furthermore, gendered institutions depend on our willingness to do gender, and when we rebel, we can sometimes change the institutions themselves. I have

---

12 • PART I: PRISMS
used the language of dimensions interchangeably with the language of levels because when we think of gender as a social structure, we must move away from privileging any particular dimension as higher than another. How social change occurs is an empirical question, not an a priori theoretical assumption. It may be that individuals struggling to change their own identities (as in consciousness-raising groups of the early second-wave women’s movement) eventually bring their new selves to social interaction and create new cultural expectations. For example, as women come to see themselves (or are socialized to see themselves) as sexual actors, the expectations that men must work to provide orgasms for their female partners becomes part of the cultural norm. But this is surely not the only way social change can happen. When social movement activists name as inequality what has heretofore been considered natural (e.g., women’s segregation into low-paying jobs), they can create organizational changes such as career ladders between women’s quasi-administrative jobs and actual management, opening up opportunities that otherwise would have remained closed, thus creating change on the institutional dimension. Girls raised in the next generation, who know opportunities exist in these workplaces, may have an altered sense of possibilities and therefore of themselves. We need, however, to also study change and equality when it occurs rather than only documenting inequality.

Perhaps the most important feature of this conceptual schema is its dynamism. No one dimension determines the other. Change is fluid and reverberates throughout the structure dynamically. Changes in individual identities and moral accountability may change interactional expectations, but the opposite is possible as well. Change cultural expectations, and individual identities are shaped differently. Institutional changes must result from individuals or group action, yet such change is difficult, as institutions exist across time and space. Once institutional changes occur, they reverberate at the level of cultural expectations and perhaps even on identities. And the cycle of change continues. No mechanistic predictions are possible because human beings sometimes reject the structure itself and, by doing so, change it.

Social Processes Located by Dimension in the Gender Structure

When we conceptualize gender as a social structure, we can begin to identify under what conditions and how gender inequality is being produced within each dimension. The “how” is important because without knowing the mechanisms, we cannot intervene. If indeed gender inequality in the division of household labor at this historical moment were primarily explained (and I do not suggest that it is) by gendered selves, then we would do well to consider the most effective socialization mechanisms to create fewer gender-schematic children and resocialization for adults. If, however, the gendered division of household labor is primarily constrained today by cultural expectations and moral accountability, it is those cultural images we must work to alter. But then again, if the reason many men do not equitably do their share of family labor is that men’s jobs are organized so they cannot succeed at work and do their share at home, it is the contemporary American workplace that must change (Williams 2000). We may never find a universal theoretical explanation for the gendered division of household labor because universal social laws may be an illusion of twentieth-century empiricism. But in any given moment for any particular setting, the causal processes should be identifiable empirically. Gender complexity goes beyond historical specificity, as the particular causal processes that constrain men and women to do gender may be strong in one institutional setting (e.g., at home) and weaker in another (e.g., at work).

The forces that create gender traditionalism for men and women may vary across space as well as time. Conceptualizing gender as a social structure contributes to a more postmodern, contextually specific social science. We can use this schema to begin to organize thinking about the causal processes that are most likely to be effective on
each dimension. When we are concerned with the means by which individuals come to have a preference to do gender, we should focus on how identities are constructed through early childhood development, explicit socialization, modeling, and adult experiences, paying close attention to the internalization of social mores. To the extent that women and men choose to do gender-typical behavior cross-situationally and over time, we must focus on such individual explanations. Indeed, much attention has already been given to gender socialization and the individualist presumptions for gender. The earliest and perhaps most commonly referred to explanations in popular culture depend on sex-role training, teaching boys and girls their culturally appropriate roles. But when trying to understand gender on the interactional/cultural dimension, the means by which status differences shape expectations and the ways in which in-group and out-group membership influences behavior need to be at the center of attention. Too little attention has been paid to how inequality is shaped by such cultural expectations during interaction. I return to this in the section below. On the institutional dimension, we look to law, organizational practices, and formal regulations that distinguish by sex category. Much progress has been made in the post–civil rights era with rewriting formal laws and organizational practices to ensure gender neutrality. Unfortunately, we have often found that despite changes in gender socialization and gender neutrality on the institutional dimension, gender stratification remains.

What I have attempted to do here is to offer a conceptual organizing scheme for the study of gender that can help us to understand gender in all its complexity and try to isolate the social processes that create gender in each dimension. Table 1.1 provides a schematic outline of this argument.

Cultural Expectations During Interaction and the Stalled Revolution

In *Gender Vertigo* (Risman 1998), I suggested that at this moment in history, gender inequality between partners in American heterosexual couples could be attributed particularly to the interactional expectations at the cultural level: the differential expectations attached to being a mother and father, a husband and wife. Here, I extend this argument in two ways. First, I propose that the stalled gender revolution in other settings can similarly be traced to the interactional/cultural dimension of the social structure. Even when women and men with feminist identities work in organizations with formally gender-neutral rules, gender inequality is reproduced during everyday interaction. The cultural expectations attached to our sex category, simply being identified as a woman or man, has remained relatively impervious to the feminist forces that

| Table 1.1 Dimensions of Gender Structure, by Illustrative Social Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of the Gender Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of selves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. These are examples of social processes that may help explain the gender structure on each dimension. They are meant to be illustrative and not a complete list of all possible social processes or causal mechanisms.
have problematized sexist socialization practices and legal discrimination. I discuss some of those processes that can help explain why social interaction continues to reproduce inequality, even in settings that seem ripe for social change.

Contemporary social psychological writings offer us a glimpse of possibilities for understanding how inequality is reconstituted in daily interaction. Ridgeway and her colleagues (Ridgeway 1991, 1997, 2001; Ridgeway and Correll 2000; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999) showed that the status expectations attached to gender and race categories are cross-situational. These expectations can be thought of as one of the engines that re-create inequality even in new settings where there is no other reason to expect male privilege to otherwise emerge. In a sexist and racist society, women and all persons of color are expected to have less to contribute to task performances than are white men, unless they have some other externally validated source of prestige. Status expectations create a cognitive bias toward privileging those of already high status. What produces status distinction, however, is culturally and historically variable. Thus, cognitive bias is one of the causal mechanisms that help to explain the reproduction of gender and race inequality in everyday life. It may also be an important explanation for the reproduction of class and heterosexist inequality in everyday life as well, but that is an empirical question.

Schwalbe and his colleagues (2000, 419) suggested that there are other “generic interactive processes through which inequalities are created and reproduced in everyday life.” Some of these processes include othering, subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance, and emotion management. Schwalbe and his colleagues suggested that subordinates’ adaptation plays an essential role in their own disadvantage. Subordinate adaptation helps to explain women’s strategy to adapt to the gender structure. Perhaps the most common adaptation of women to subordination is “trading power for patronage” (Schwalbe et al. 2000, 426). Women, as wives and daughters, often derive significant compensatory benefits from relationships with the men in their families. Stombler and Martin (1994) similarly showed how little sisters in a fraternity trade affiliation for secondary status. In yet another setting, elite country clubs, Sherwood (2004) showed how women accept subordinate status as “B” members of clubs, in exchange for men’s approval, and how when a few wives challenge men’s privilege, they are threatened with social ostracism, as are their husbands. Women often gain the economic benefits of patronage for themselves and their children in exchange for their subordinate status.

One can hardly analyze the cultural expectations and interactive processes that construct gender inequality without attention to the actions of members of the dominant group. We must pay close attention to what men do to preserve their power and privilege. Schwalbe et al. (2000) suggested that one process involved is when superordinate groups effectively “other” those who they want to define as subordinate, creating devalued statuses and expectations for them. Men effectively do this in subversive ways through “politeness” norms, which construct women as “others” in need of special favors, such as protection. By opening doors and walking closer to the dirty street, men construct women as an “other” category, different and less than independent autonomous men. The cultural significance attached to male bodies signifies the capacity to dominate, to control, and to elicit deference, and such expectations are perhaps at the core of what it means for men to do gender (Michael Schwalbe, personal communication).

These are only some of the processes that might be identified for understanding how we create gender inequality based on embodied cultural expectations. None are determinative causal predictors, but instead, these are possible leads to reasonable and testable hypotheses about the production of gender. In the next section of this article, I provide empirical illustrations of this conceptual scheme of gender as a social structure.

Empirical Illustrations

I begin with an example from my own work of how conceptualizing gender as a social structure
helps to organize the findings and even push forward an understanding of the resistance toward an egalitarian division of family work among contemporary American heterosexual couples. This is an area of research that incorporates a concern with nurturing children, housework, and emotional labor. My own question, from as early as graduate school, was whether men could mother well enough that those who care about children’s well-being would want them to do so.

To ask the question, Can men mother, presuming that gender itself is a social structure leads us to look at all the ways that gender constrains men’s mothering and under what conditions those change. Indeed, one of my most surprising, and unanticipated, findings was that single fathers who were primary caretakers came to describe themselves more often than other men with adjectives such as “nurturant,” “warm,” and “child oriented,” those adjectives we social scientists use to measure femininity. Single fathers’ identities changed based on their experiences as primary parents. In my research, men whose wives worked full-time did not, apparently, do enough mothering to have such experiences influence their own sense of selves. Most married fathers hoard the opportunity for leisure that frees them from the responsibilities of parenting that might create such identity change. My questions became more complicated but more useful when I conceptualized gender as a social structure. When and under what conditions do gendered selves matter? When do interactional expectations have the power to overcome previous internalized predispositions? What must change at the institutional level to allow for expectations to change at the interactional level? Does enough change on the interactional dimension shift the moral accountability that then leads to collective action in social organizations? Could feminist parents organize and create a social movement that forces workplaces to presume that valuable workers also have family responsibilities?

These questions led me to try to identify the conditions that enable women and men to actually succeed in creating egalitarian relationships. My next research project was an in-depth interview and qualitative study of heterosexual couples raising children who equally shared the work of earning a living and the family labor of child care, homemaking, and emotion work. The first interesting piece of data was how hard it was to find such people in the end of the twentieth century, even when recruiting at daycare centers, parent-teacher associations, university venues, and feminist newsletters (all in the southeastern United States). Three out of four volunteer couples failed the quite generous criteria for inclusion: Working approximately the same number of hours in the labor force (within five hours per week), sharing the household labor and child care tasks within a 60/40 split, and both partners’ describing the relationship as equitable. There are clearly fewer couples who live equal lives than those who wish fervently that they did so.

What I did find from intensive interviews and home observations with 20 such couples was that the conditions that enabled their success spread across each dimension of the gender structure. Although I would have predicted otherwise (having once been committed to a purely structural theory of human behavior), selves and personalities matter. The women in my sample were strong, directive women married to relatively laid-back men. Given the overwhelming gendered expectations for men’s privilege in heterosexual marriage, this should have been expected, but to someone with my theoretical background, it was not. Less surprising to me, the women in these couples also had at least the income and career status of their partners and often bettered them. But this is not usually enough to dent men’s privilege, or we would have far more egalitarian marriages by now. In addition, these couples were ideologically committed to equality and to sharing. They often tried explicitly to create social relationships with others who held similar values, for example, by joining liberal churches to meet like-minded others. Atypical gendered selves and shared feminist-inspired cultural expectations were important conditions for equality, but they were not enough. Men’s workplace flexibility mattered as well. Nearly every father in this
sample was employed in a job with flexible working hours. Many women worked in jobs with flexibility as well, but not as uniformly as their male partners. These were privileged, educated workers for whom workplace flexibility was sometimes simply luck (e.g., a father who lost a corporate job and decided to sell real estate) but more often was a conscious choice (e.g., clinical psychologists choosing to teach at a small college to have more control over working hours despite decreased earning power). Thus, these couples experienced enabling contexts at the level of their individual selves, feminist ideology to help shape the cultural expectations in their most immediate environments (within the dyad and among at least some friends), and the privilege within the economy to have or find flexible jobs. By attending to each dimension of the gender structure, I amassed a more effective explanation for their ability to negotiate fair relationships than I could have without attention to selves, couple interaction, and their workplaces. The implications for feminist social change are direct: We cannot simply attend to socializing children differently, nor creating moral accountability for men to share family work, nor fighting for flexible, family-friendly workplaces. We must attend to all simultaneously.

Gender structures are even more complicated than my discussion suggests thus far because how gender identities are constructed on the individual and cultural dimensions vary tremendously over time and space. Even within contemporary American society, gender structures vary by community, social class, ethnicity, and race.

**Gender Structure and Intersectionality**

Perhaps the most important development in feminist thought in the last part of the twentieth century was the increasing concern with intersectionality (Andersen and Collins 1994; Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill 1994; Collins 1990). Women of color had been writing about intersectionality from nearly the start of the second wave of feminist scholarship. It was, however, not until several decades into the women’s movement when they were heard and moved from margin closer to center (Myers et al. 1998). There is now considerable consensus growing that one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone.

I concur with this consensus that gender must be understood within the context of the intersecting domains of inequality. The balkanization of research and theory into specializations of race or ethnicity or gender or stratification has undermined a sophisticated analysis of inequality (but see Reskin 2002; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Tilly 1999). I do not agree, however, with an operational strategy for scholarship that suggests the appropriate analytic solution is to only work within an intersectionality framework. While various axes of domination are always intersecting, the systems of inequality are not necessarily produced or re-created with identical social processes. The historical and current mechanisms that support gender inequality may or may not be those that are most significant for other kinds of oppression; whether this is the case is an empirical question. To focus all investigations into the complexity or subjective experience of interlocking oppressions would have us lose access to how the mechanisms for different kinds of inequality are produced. Feminist scholarship needs a both/and strategy (Collins 1998). We cannot study gender in isolation from other inequalities, nor can we only study inequalities’ intersection and ignore the historical and contextual specificity that distinguishes the mechanisms that produce inequality by different categorical divisions, whether gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, or class.

Calhoun (2000) exemplifies this both/and strategy in her argument that heterosexism cannot simply be understood as gender oppression and merged into feminist theory. She argued that we must study heterosexism as a separate system of oppression. While it is clearly the case that gender subordination and heterosexism support
one another, and a gendered analysis of homophobia is critical, the two oppressions should not be conflated. Calhoun . . . suggested . . . that challenging men’s dominance is a necessary condition of ending the subordination of lesbians and gay men but not a sufficient condition to end such oppression. It is important for analytic clarity, and therefore to the scholarly contribution to social change, to identify causal mechanisms for heterosexism and gender oppression distinctly.

My argument is that race, gender, and sexuality are as equally fundamental to human societies as the economy and the polity. Those inequalities that are fundamentally embedded throughout social life, at the level of individual identities, cultural expectations embedded into interaction, and institutional opportunities and constraints are best conceptualized as structures: The gender structure, the race structure, the class structure, and the sexuality structure. This does not imply that the social forces that produced, nor the causal mechanisms at work in the daily reproduction of inequality within each structure, are of similar strength or type at any given historical moment. For example, gender and race structures extend considerably further into everyday life in the contemporary American context, at home and at work, than does the political structure. I propose this structural language as a tool to help disentangle the means by which inequalities are constructed, recreated, and—it is hoped—transformed or deconstructed. The model for how gender structure works, with consequences for individuals, interactions/cultural expectations, and institutions, can be generalized to the study of other equally embedded inequalities such as race and sexuality. Each structure of inequality exists on its own yet coexists with every other structure of inequality. The subjective experience of actual human beings is always of intersecting inequalities, but the historical construction and contemporary reproduction of inequality on each axis may be distinct. Oppressions can be loosely or tightly coupled, can have both common and distinct generative mechanisms.

**Theory Wrestling With Activism**

Within any structure of inequality, perhaps the most important question a critical scholar must ask is, What mechanisms are currently constructing inequality, and how can these be transformed to create a more just world? If as critical scholars, we forget to keep our eye on social transformation, we may slip without intention into the implicitly value-free role of social scientists who study gender merely to satisfy intellectual curiosity (Risman 2003). The central questions for feminists must include a focus on social transformation, reducing inequality, and improving the status of women. A concern with social change brings us to the thorny and as yet too little explored issue of agency. When do subordinate groups collectively organize to challenge their oppression? When do superordinate groups mobilize to resist? How do we know agency when we see it, and how can we support feminist versions of it?

Feminist scholarship must seek to understand how and why gender gets done, consciously or not, to help those who hope to stop doing it. I end by focusing our attention on what I see as the next frontier for feminist change agents: A focus on the processes that might spur change at the interaction or cultural dimension of the gender structure. We have begun to socialize our children differently, and while identities are hardly postgender, the sexism inherent in gender socialization is now widely recognized. Similarly, the organizational rules and institutional laws have by now often been rewritten to be gender neutral, at least in some nations. While gender-neutral laws in a gender-stratified society may have short-term negative consequences (e.g., displaced homemakers who never imagined having to support themselves after marriage), we can hardly retreat from equity in the law or organizations. It is the interactional and cultural dimension of gender that have yet to be tackled with a social change agenda.

Cognitive bias is one of the mechanisms by which inequality is re-created in everyday life. There are, however, documented mechanisms for decreasing the salience of such bias
(Bielby 2000; Reskin 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2000). When we consciously manipulate the status expectations attached to those in subordinate groups, by highlighting their legitimate expertise beyond the others in the immediate social setting, we can begin to challenge the non-conscious hierarchy that often goes unnoticed. Similarly, although many subordinates adapt to their situation by trading power for patronage, when they refuse to do so, interaction no longer flows smoothly, and change may result. Surely, when wives refuse to trade power for patronage, they can rock the boat as well as the cradle.

These are only a few examples of interactive processes that can help to explain the reproduction of inequality and to envision strategies for disrupting inequality. We need to understand when and how inequality is constructed and reproduced to deconstruct it. I have argued before (Risman 1998) that because the gender structure so defines the category woman as subordinate, the deconstruction of the category itself is the best, indeed the only sure way, to end gender subordination. There is no reason, except the transitional vertigo that will accompany the process to dismantle it, that a utopian vision of a just world involves any gender structure at all. Why should we need to elaborate on the biological distinction between the sexes? We must accommodate reproductive differences for the process of biological replacement, but there is no a priori reason we should accept any other role differentiation simply based on biological sex category.

Feminist scholarship always wrestles with the questions of how one can use the knowledge we create in the interest of social transformation. As feminist scholars, we must talk beyond our own borders. This kind of theoretical work becomes meaningful if we can eventually take it public. Feminist sociology must be public sociology (Burawoy forthcoming). We must eventually take what we have learned from our theories and research beyond professional journals to our students and to those activists who seek to disrupt and so transform gender relations. We must consider how the knowledge we create can help those who desire a more egalitarian social world to refuse to do gender at all, or to do it with rebellious reflexiveness to help transform the world around them. For those without a sociological perspective, social change through socialization and through legislation is the easiest to envision. We need to shine a spotlight on the dimension of cultural interactional expectations as it is here that work needs to begin.

In conclusion, I have made the argument that we need to conceptualize gender as a social structure, and by doing so, we can analyze the ways in which gender is embedded at the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of our society. This situates gender at the same level of significance as the economy and the polity. In addition, this framework helps us to disentangle the relative strength of a variety of causal mechanisms for explaining any given outcome without dismissing the possible relevance of other processes that are situated at different dimensions of analysis. Once we have a conceptual tool to organize the encyclopedic research on gender, we can systematically build on our knowledge and progress to understanding the strength and direction of causal processes within a complicated multidimensional recursive theory. I have also argued that our concern with intersectionality must continue to be paramount but that different structures of inequality have different infrastructure and perhaps different influential causal mechanisms at any given historical moment. Therefore, we need to follow a both/and strategy, to understand gender structure, race structure, and other structures of inequality as they currently operate, while also systematically paying attention to how these axes of domination intersect. Finally, I have suggested that we pay more attention to doing research and writing theory with explicit attention to how our work can come to be “fighting words” (Collins 1998) to help transform as well as inform society. If we can identify the mechanisms that create gender, perhaps we can offer alternatives to them and so use our scholarly work to contribute to envisioning a feminist utopia.
1. See Scott (1997) for a critique of feminists who adopt a strategy where theories have to be simplified, compared, and defeated. She too suggested a model where feminists build on the complexity of each others’ ideas.

2. I thank my colleague Donald Tomaskovic-Devey for suggesting the visual representation of these ideas as well as his usual advice on my ideas as they develop.

3. One can certainly imagine a case where political structures extend far into everyday life, a nation in the midst of civil war or in the grips of a fascist state. One can also envision a case when race retreats to the personal dimension, as when the Irish became white in twentieth-century America.

REFERENCES


Martin, Patricia. Forthcoming. Gender as a social institution. Social Forces.


Introduction to Reading 2

Sociologist Betsy Lucal describes the rigidity of the American binary gender system and the consequences for people who do not fit by analyzing the challenges she faces in the course of her daily experience of negotiating the boundaries of our gendered society. Since her physical appearance does not clearly define her as a woman, she must navigate a world in which some people interact with her as though she is a man. Through analysis of her own story, Lucal demonstrates how gender is something we do, rather than something we are.

1. Why does Lucal argue that we cannot escape “doing gender”?

2. How does Lucal negotiate “not fitting” into the American two-and-only-two gender structure?

3. Have you ever experienced a mismatch between your gender-identity and the gender that others perceive you to be? If so, how did you feel and respond?
I understood the concept of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) long before I became a sociologist. I have been living with the consequences of inappropriate “gender display” (Goffman 1976; West and Zimmerman 1987) for as long as I can remember. My daily experiences are a testament to the rigidity of gender in our society, to the real implications of “two and only two” when it comes to sex and gender categories (Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978). Each day, I experience the consequences that our gender system has for my identity and interactions. I am a woman who has been called “Sir” so many times that I no longer even hesitate to assume that it is being directed at me. I am a woman whose use of public rest rooms regularly causes reactions ranging from confused stares to confrontations over what a man is doing in the women’s room. I regularly enact a variety of practices either to minimize the need for others to know my gender or to deal with their misattributions.

I am the embodiment of Lorber’s (1994) ostensibly paradoxical assertion that the “gender bending” I engage in actually might serve to preserve and perpetuate gender categories. As a feminist who sees gender rebellion as a significant part of her contribution to the dismantling of sexism, I find this possibility disheartening.

In this article, I examine how my experiences both support and contradict Lorber’s (1994) argument using my own experiences to illustrate and reflect on the social construction of gender. My analysis offers a discussion of the consequences of gender for people who do not follow the rules as well as an examination of the possible implications of the existence of people like me for the gender system itself. Ultimately, I show how life on the boundaries of gender affects me and how my life, and the lives of others who make similar decisions about their participation in the gender system, has the potential to subvert gender.

Because this article analyzes my experiences as a woman who often is mistaken for a man, my focus is on the social construction of gender for women. My assumption is that, given the gendered nature of the gendering process itself, men’s experiences of this phenomenon might well be different from women’s.

The Social Construction of Gender

It is now widely accepted that gender is a social construction, that sex and gender are distinct, and that gender is something all of us “do.” This conceptualization of gender can be traced to Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological study of “Agnes.” In this analysis, Garfinkel examined the issues facing a male who wished to pass as, and eventually become, a woman. Unlike individuals who perform gender in culturally expected ways, Agnes could not take her gender for granted and always was in danger of failing to pass as a woman (Zimmerman 1992).

This approach was extended by Kessler and McKenna (1978) and codified in the classic “Doing Gender” by West and Zimmerman (1987). The social constructionist approach has been developed most notably by Lorber (1994, 1996). Similar theoretical strains have developed outside of sociology, such as work by Butler (1990) and Weston (1996). . . .

Given our cultural rules for identifying gender (i.e., that there are only two and that masculinity
is assumed in the absence of evidence to the contrary), a person who does not do gender appropriately is placed not into a third category but rather into the one with which her or his gender display seems most closely to fit; that is, if a man appears to be a woman, then he will be categorized as “woman,” not as something else. Even if a person does not want to do gender or would like to do a gender other than the two recognized by our society, other people will, in effect, do gender for that person by placing her or him in one and only one of the two available categories. We cannot escape doing gender or, more specifically, doing one of two genders. (There are exceptions in limited contexts such as people doing “drag” [Butler 1990; Lorber 1994].)

People who follow the norms of gender can take their genders for granted. Kessler and McKenna asserted, “Few people besides transsexuals think of their gender as anything other than ‘naturally’ obvious”; they believe that the risks of not being taken for the gender intended “are minimal for nontranssexuals” (1978, 126). However, such an assertion overlooks the experiences of people such as those women Devor (1989) calls “gender blenders” and those people Lorber (1994) refers to as “gender benders.” As West and Zimmerman (1987) pointed out, we all are held accountable for, and might be called on to account for, our genders.

People who, for whatever reasons, do not adhere to the rules, risk gender misattribution and any interactional consequences that might result from this misidentification. What are the consequences of misattribution for social interaction? When must misattribution be minimized? What will one do to minimize such mistakes? In this article, I explore these and related questions using my biography.

For me, the social processes and structures of gender mean that, in the context of our culture, my appearance will be read as masculine. Given the common conflation of sex and gender, I will be assumed to be a male. Because of the two-and-only-two genders rule, I will be classified, perhaps more often than not, as a man—not as an atypical woman, not as a genderless person. I must be one gender or the other; I cannot be neither, nor can I be both. This norm has a variety of mundane and serious consequences for my everyday existence. Like Myhre (1995), I have found that the choice not to participate in femininity is not one made frivolously.

My experiences as a woman who does not do femininity illustrate a paradox of our two-and-only-two gender system. Lorber argued that “bending gender rules and passing between genders does not erode but rather preserves gender boundaries” (1994, 21). Although people who engage in these behaviors and appearances do “demonstrate the social constructedness of sex, sexuality, and gender” (Lorber 1994, 96), they do not actually disrupt gender. Devor made a similar point: “When gender blending females refused to mark themselves by publicly displaying sufficient femininity to be recognized as women, they were in no way challenging patriarchal gender assumptions” (1989, 142). As the following discussion shows, I have found that my own experiences both support and challenge this argument. Before detailing these experiences, I explain my use of my self as data.

**My Self as Data**

This analysis is based on my experiences as a person whose appearance and gender/sex are not, in the eyes of many people, congruent. How did my experiences become my data? I began my research “unwittingly” (Krieger 1991). This article is a product of “opportunistic research” in that I am using my “unique biography, life experiences, and/or situational familiarity to understand and explain social life” (Riemer 1988, 121; see also Riemer 1977). It is an analysis of “unplanned personal experience” that is, experiences that were not part of a research project but instead are part of my daily encounters (Reinharz 1992).

This work also is, at least to some extent, an example of Richardson’s (1994) notion of writing as a method of inquiry. As a sociologist who specializes in gender, the more I learned, the
more I realized that my life could serve as a case study. As I examined my experiences, I found out things—about my experiences and about theory—that I did not know when I started (Richardson 1994).

It also is useful, I think, to consider my analysis an application of Mills’s (1959) “sociological imagination.” Mills (1959) and Berger (1963) wrote about the importance of seeing the general in the particular. This means that general social patterns can be discerned in the behaviors of particular individuals. In this article, I am examining portions of my biography, situated in U.S. society during the 1990s, to understand the “personal troubles” my gender produces in the context of a two-and-only-two gender system. I am not attempting to generalize my experiences; rather, I am trying to use them to examine and reflect on the processes and structure of gender in our society.

Because my analysis is based on my memories and perceptions of events, it is limited by my ability to recall events and by my interpretation of those events. However, I am not claiming that my experiences provide the truth about gender and how it works. I am claiming that the biography of a person who lives on the margins of our gender system can provide theoretical insights into the processes and social structure of gender. Therefore, after describing my experiences, I examine how they illustrate and extend, as well as contradict, other work on the social construction of gender.

GENDERED ME

Each day, I negotiate the boundaries of gender. Each day, I face the possibility that someone will attribute the “wrong” gender to me based on my physical appearance. I am six feet tall and large-boned. I have had short hair for most of my life. For the past several years, I have worn a crew cut or flat top. I do not shave or otherwise remove hair from my body (e.g., no eyebrow plucking). I do not wear dresses, skirts, high heels, or makeup. My only jewelry is a class ring, a “men’s” watch (my wrists are too large for a “women’s” watch), two small earrings (gold hoops, both in my left ear), and (occasionally) a necklace. I wear jeans or shorts, T-shirts, sweaters, polo/golf shirts, button-down collar shirts, and tennis shoes or boots. The jeans are “women’s” (I do have hips) but do not look particularly “feminine.” The rest of the outer garments are from men’s departments. I prefer baggy clothes, so the fact that I have “womanly” breasts often is not obvious (I do not wear a bra).

Sometimes, I wear a baseball cap or some other type of hat. I also am white and relatively young (30 years old).4 My gender display—what others interpret as my presented identity—regularly leads to the misattribution of my gender. An incongruity exists between my gender self-identity and the gender that others perceive. In my encounters with people I do not know, I sometimes conclude, based on our interactions, that they think I am a man. This does not mean that other people do not think I am a man, just that I have no way of knowing what they think without interacting with them.

Living With It

I have no illusions or delusions about my appearance. I know that my appearance is likely to be read as “masculine” (and male) and that how I see myself is socially irrelevant. Given our two-and-only-two gender structure, I must live with the consequences of my appearance. These consequences fall into two categories: issues of identity and issues of interaction.

My most common experience is being called “Sir” or being referred to by some other masculine linguistic marker (e.g., “he,” “man”). This has happened for years, for as long as I can remember, when having encounters with people I do not know.3 Once, in fact, the same worker at a fast-food restaurant called me “Ma’am” when she took my order and “Sir” when she gave it to me.

Using my credit cards sometimes is a challenge. Some clerks subtly indicate their disbelief, looking from the card to me and back at the card and checking my signature carefully. Others
challenge my use of the card, asking whose it is or demanding identification. One cashier asked to see my driver’s license and then asked me whether I was the son of the cardholder. Another clerk told me that my signature on the receipt “had better match” the one on the card. Presumably, this was her way of letting me know that she was not convinced it was my credit card.

My identity as a woman also is called into question when I try to use women-only spaces. Encounters in public rest rooms are an adventure. I have been told countless times that “This is the ladies’ room.” Other women say nothing to me, but their stares and conversations with others let me know what they think. I will hear them say, for example, “There was a man in there.” I also get stares when I enter a locker room. However, it seems that women are less concerned about my presence, there, perhaps because, given that it is a space for changing clothes, showering, and so forth, they will be able to make sure that I am really a woman. Dressing rooms in department stores also are problematic spaces. I remember shopping with my sister once and being offered a chair outside the room when I began to accompany her into the dressing room. Women who believe that I am a man do not want me in women-only spaces. For example, one woman would not enter the rest room until I came out, and others have told me that I am in the wrong place. They also might not want to encounter me while they are alone. For example, seeing me walking at night when they are alone might be scary.4

I, on the other hand, am not afraid to walk alone, day or night. I do not worry that I will be subjected to the public harassment that many women endure (Gardner 1995). I am not a clear target for a potential rapist. I rely on the fact that a potential attacker would not want to attack a big man by mistake. This is not to say that men never are attacked, just that they are not viewed, and often do not view themselves, as being vulnerable to attack.

Being perceived as a man has made me privy to male-male interactional styles of which most women are not aware. I found out, quite by accident, that many men greet, or acknowledge, people (mostly other men) who make eye contact with them with a single nod. For example, I found that when I walked down the halls of my brother’s all-male dormitory making eye contact, men nodded their greetings at me. Oddly enough, these same men did not greet my brother.

I had to tell him about making eye contact and nodding as a greeting ritual. Apparently, in this case I was doing masculinity better than he was! I also believe that I am treated differently, for example, in auto parts stores (staffed almost exclusively by men in most cases) because of the assumption that I am a man. Workers there assume that I know what I need and that my questions are legitimate requests for information.

I suspect that I am treated more fairly than a feminine-appearing woman would be. I have not been able to test this proposition. However, Devor’s participants did report “being treated more respectfully” (1989, 132) in such situations. There is, however, a negative side to being assumed to be a man by other men. Once, a friend and I were driving in her car when a man failed to stop at an intersection and nearly crashed into us. As we drove away, I mouthed “stop sign” to him. When we both stopped our cars at the next intersection, he got out of his car and came up to the passenger side of the car, where I was sitting. He yelled obscenities at us and pounded and spit on the car window. Luckily, the windows were closed. I do not think he would have done that if he thought I was a woman. This was the first time I realized that one of the implications of being seen as a man was that I might be called on to defend myself from physical aggression from other men who felt challenged by me. This was a sobering and somewhat frightening thought.

Recently, I was verbally accosted by an older man who did not like where I had parked my car. As I walked down the street to work, he shouted that I should park at the university rather than on a side street nearby. I responded that it was a public street and that I could park there if I chose. He continued to yell, but the only thing I caught was the last part of what he said: “Your
tires are going to get cut!” Based on my appearance that day—I was dressed casually and carrying a backpack, and I had my hat on backward—I believe he thought that I was a young male student rather than a female professor. I do not think he would have yelled at a person he thought to be a woman—and perhaps especially not a woman professor.

Given the presumption of heterosexuality that is part of our system of gender, my interactions with women who assume that I am a man also can be viewed from that perspective. For example, once my brother and I were shopping when we were “hit on” by two young women. The encounter ended before I realized what had happened. It was only when we walked away that I told him that I was pretty certain that they had thought both of us were men. A more common experience is realizing that when I am seen in public with one of my women friends, we are likely to be read as a heterosexual dyad. It is likely that if I were to walk through a shopping mall holding hands with a woman, no one would look twice, not because of their open-mindedness toward lesbian couples but rather because of their assumption that I was the male half of a straight couple. Recently, when walking through a mall with a friend and her infant, my observations of others’ responses to us led me to believe that many of them assumed that we were a family on an outing, that is, that I was her partner and the father of the child.

Dealing With It

Although I now accept that being mistaken for a man will be a part of my life so long as I choose not to participate in femininity, there have been times when I consciously have tried to appear more feminine. I did this for a while when I was an undergraduate and again recently when I was on the academic job market. The first time, I let my hair grow nearly down to my shoulders and had it permed. I also grew long fingernails and wore nail polish. Much to my chagrin, even then one of my professors, who did not know my name, insistently referred to me in his kinship examples as “the son.” Perhaps my first act on the way to my current stance was to point out to this man, politely and after class, that I was a woman.

More recently, I again let my hair grow out for several months, although I did not alter other aspects of my appearance. Once my hair was about two and a half inches long (from its original quarter inch), I realized, based on my encounters with strangers, that I had more or less passed back into the category of “woman.” Then, when I returned to wearing a flat top, people again responded to me as if I were a man.

Because of my appearance, much of my negotiation of interactions with strangers involves attempts to anticipate their reactions to me. I need to assess whether they will be likely to assume that I am a man and whether that actually matters in the context of our encounters. Many times, my gender really is irrelevant, and it is just annoying to be misidentified. Other times, particularly when my appearance is coupled with something that identifies me by name (e.g., a check or credit card) without a photo, I might need to do something to ensure that my identity is not questioned. As a result of my experiences, I have developed some techniques to deal with gender misattribution.

In general, in unfamiliar public places, I avoid using the rest room because I know that it is a place where there is a high likelihood of misattribution and where misattribution is socially important. If I must use a public rest room, I try to make myself look as nonthreatening as possible. I do not wear a hat, and I try to rearrange my clothing to make my breasts more obvious. Here, I am trying to use my secondary sex characteristics to make my gender more obvious rather than the usual use of gender to make sex obvious. While in the rest room, I never make eye contact, and I get in and out as quickly as possible. Going in with a woman friend also is helpful; her presence legitimizes my own. People are less likely to think I am entering a space where I do not belong when I am with someone who looks like she does belong.5

To those women who verbally challenge my presence in the rest room, I reply, “I know,” usually in an annoyed tone. When they stare or talk about me to the women they are with, I simply
get out as quickly as possible. In general, I do not wait for someone I am with because there is too much chance of an unpleasant encounter.

I stopped trying on clothes before purchasing them a few years ago because my presence in the changing areas was met with stares and whispers. Exceptions are stores where the dressing rooms are completely private, where there are individual stalls rather than a room with stalls separated by curtains, or where business is slow and no one else is trying on clothes. If I am trying on a garment clearly intended for a woman, then I usually can do so without hassle. I guess the attendants assume that I must be a woman if I have, for example, a woman’s bathing suit in my hand. But usually, I think it is easier for me to try the clothes on at home and return them, if necessary, rather than risk creating a scene. Similarly, when I am with another woman who is trying on clothes, I just wait outside.

My strategy with credit cards and checks is to anticipate wariness on a clerk’s part. When I sense that there is some doubt or when they challenge me, I say, “It’s my card.” I generally respond courteously to requests for photo ID, realizing that these might be routine checks because of concerns about increasingly widespread fraud. But for the clerk who asked for ID and still did not think it was my card, I had a stronger reaction. When she said that she was sorry for embarrassing me, I told her that I was not embarrassed but that she should be. I also am particularly careful to make sure that my signature is consistent with the back of the card. Faced with such situations, I feel somewhat nervous about signing my name—which, of course, makes me worry that my signature will look different from how it should.

Another strategy I have been experimenting with is wearing nail polish in the dark bright colors currently fashionable. I try to do this when I travel by plane. Given more stringent travel regulations, one always must present a photo ID. But my experiences have shown that my driver’s license is not necessarily convincing. Nail polish might be. I also flash my polished nails when I enter airport rest rooms, hoping that they will provide a clue that I am indeed in the right place.

There are other cases in which the issues are less those of identity than of all the norms of interaction that, in our society, are gendered. My most common response to misattribution actually is to appear to ignore it, that is, to go on with the interaction as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Unless I feel that there is a good reason to establish my correct gender, I assume the identity others impose on me for the sake of smooth interaction. For example, if someone is selling me a movie ticket, then there is no reason to make sure that the person has accurately discerned my gender. Similarly, if it is clear that the person using “Sir” is talking to me, then I simply respond as appropriate. I accept the designation because it is irrelevant to the situation. It takes enough effort to be alert for misattributions and to decide which of them matter; responding to each one would take more energy than it is worth.

Sometimes, if our interaction involves conversation, my first verbal response is enough to let the other person know that I am actually a woman and not a man. My voice apparently is “feminine” enough to shift people’s attributions to the other category. I know when this has happened by the apologies that usually accompany the mistake. I usually respond to the apologies by saying something like “No problem” and/or “It happens all the time.” Sometimes, a misattributor will offer an account for the mistake, for example, saying that it was my hair or that they were not being very observant.

These experiences with gender and misattribution provide some theoretical insights into contemporary Western understandings of gender and into the social structure of gender in contemporary society. Although there are a number of ways in which my experiences confirm the work of others, there also are some ways in which my experiences suggest other interpretations and conclusions.

**What Does It Mean?**

Gender is pervasive in our society. I cannot choose not to participate in it. Even if I try not to do gender, other people will do it for me. That is,
given our two-and-only-two rule, they must attribute one of two genders to me. Still, although I cannot choose not to participate in gender, I can choose not to participate in femininity (as I have), at least with respect to physical appearance. That is where the problems begin. Without the decorations of femininity, I do not look like a woman. That is, I do not look like what many people’s commonsense understanding of gender tells them a woman looks like. How I see myself, even how I might wish others would see me, is socially irrelevant. It is the gender that I appear to be (my “perceived gender”) that is most relevant to my social identity and interactions with others. The major consequence of this fact is that I must be continually aware of which gender I “give off” as well as which gender I “give” (Goffman 1959).

Because my gender self-identity is “not displayed obviously, immediately, and consistently” (Devor 1989, 58), I am somewhat of a failure in social terms with respect to gender. Causing people to be uncertain or wrong about one’s gender is a violation of taken-for-granted rules that leads to embarrassment and discomfort; it means that something has gone wrong with the interaction (Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978). This means that my nonresponse to misattribution is the more socially appropriate response; I am allowing others to maintain face (Goffman 1959, 1967). By not calling attention to their mistakes, I uphold their images of themselves as competent social actors. I also maintain my own image as competent by letting them assume that I am the gender I appear to them to be.

But I still have discreditable stigma; I carry a stigma (Goffman 1963). Because I have failed to participate appropriately in the creation of meaning with respect to gender (Devor 1989), I can be called on to account for my appearance. If discredited, I show myself to be an incompetent social actor. I am the one not following the rules, and I will pay the price for not providing people with the appropriate cues for placing me in the gender category to which I really belong.

I do think that it is, in many cases, safer to be read as a man than as some sort of deviant woman. “Man” is an acceptable category; it fits properly into people’s gender worldview. Passing as a man often is “the path of least resistance” (Devor 1989; Johnson 1997). For example, in situations where gender does not matter, letting people take me as a man is easier than correcting them.

Conversely, as Butler noted, “We regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (1990, 140). Feinberg maintained, “Masculine girls and women face terrible condemnation and brutality—including sexual violence—for crossing the boundary of what is ‘acceptable’ female expression” (1996, 114). People are more likely to harass me when they perceive me to be a woman who looks like a man. For example, when a group of teenagers realized that I was not a man because one of their mothers identified me correctly, they began to make derogatory comments when I passed them. One asked, for example, “Does she have a penis?”

Because of the assumption that a “masculine” woman is a lesbian, there is the risk of homophobic reactions (Gardner 1995; Lucal 1997). Perhaps surprisingly, I find that I am much more likely to be taken for a man than for a lesbian, at least based on my interactions with people and their reactions to me. This might be because people are less likely to reveal that they have taken me for a lesbian because it is less relevant to an encounter or because they believe this would be unacceptable. But I think it is more likely a product of the strength of our two-and-only-two system. I give enough masculine cues that I am seen not as a deviant woman but rather as a man, at least in most cases. The problem seems not to be that people are uncertain about my gender, which might lead them to conclude that I was a lesbian once they realized I was a woman. Rather, I seem to fit easily into a gender category—just not the one with which I identify. In fact, because men represent the dominant gender in our society, being mistaken for a man can protect me from other types of gendered harassment. Because men can move around in public spaces safely (at least relative to women), a “masculine” woman also can enjoy this freedom (Devor 1989).
On the other hand, my use of particular spaces—those designated as for women only—may be challenged. Feinberg provided an intriguing analysis of the public rest room experience. She characterized women’s reactions to a masculine person in a public rest room as “an example of genderphobia” (1996, 117), viewing such women as policing gender boundaries rather than believing that there really is a man in the women’s rest room. She argued that women who truly believed that there was a man in their midst would react differently. Although this is an interesting perspective on her experiences, my experiences do not lead to the same conclusion.  

Enough people have said to me that “This is the ladies’ room” or have said to their companions that “There was a man in there” that I take their reactions at face value. Still, if the two-and-only-two gender system is to be maintained, participants must be involved in policing the categories and their attendant identities and spaces. Even if policing boundaries is not explicitly intended, boundary maintenance is the effect of such responses to people’s gender displays.  

Boundaries and margins are an important component of both my experiences of gender and our theoretical understanding of gendering processes. I am in effect both woman and not woman. As a woman who often is a social man but who also is a woman living in a patriarchal society, I am in a unique position to see and act.  

I sometimes receive privileges usually limited to men, and I sometimes am oppressed by my status as a deviant woman. I am, in a sense, an outsider within (Collins 1991). Positioned on the boundaries of gender categories, I have developed a consciousness that I hope will prove transformative (Anzaldua 1987). In fact, one of the reasons why I decided to continue my non-participation in femininity was that my sociological training suggested that this could be one of my contributions to the eventual dismantling of patriarchal gender constructs. It would be my way of making the personal political. I accepted being taken for a man as the price I would pay to help subvert patriarchy. I believed that all of the inconveniences I was enduring meant that I actually was doing something to bring down the gender structures that entangled all of us.  

Then, I read Lorber’s (1994) Paradoxes of Gender and found out, much to my dismay, that I might not actually be challenging gender after all. Because of the way in which doing gender works in our two-and-only-two system, gender displays are simply read as evidence of one of the two categories. Therefore, gender bending, blending, and passing between the categories do not question the categories themselves. If one’s social gender and personal (true) gender do not correspond, then this is irrelevant unless someone notices the lack of congruence.  

This reality brings me to a paradox of my experiences. First, not only do others assume that I am one gender or the other, but I also insist that I really am a member of one of the two gender categories. That is, I am female; I self-identify as a woman. I do not claim to be some other gender or to have no gender at all. I simply place myself in the wrong category according to stereotypes and cultural standards; the gender I present, or that some people perceive me to be presenting, is inconsistent with the gender with which I identify myself as well as with the gender I could be “proven” to be. Socially, I display the wrong gender; personally, I identify as the proper gender.  

Second, although I ultimately would like to see the destruction of our current gender structure, I am not to the point of personally abandoning gender. Right now, I do not want people to see me as genderless as much as I want them to see me as a woman. That is, I would like to expand the category of “woman” to include people like me. I, too, am deeply embedded in our gender system, even though I do not play by many of its rules. For me, as for most people in our society, gender is a substantial part of my personal identity (Howard and Hollander 1997). Socially, the problem is that I do not present a gender display that is consistently read as feminine. In fact, I consciously do not participate in the trappings of femininity. However, I do identify myself as a woman, not as a man or as someone outside of the two-and-only-two categories.
Yet, I do believe, as Lorber (1994) does, that the purpose of gender, as it currently is constructed, is to oppress women. Lorber analyzed gender as a “process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities” that ends up putting women in a devalued and oppressed position (1994, 32). As Martin put it, “Bodies that clearly delineate gender status facilitate the maintenance of the gender hierarchy” (1998, 495).

For society, gender means difference (Lorber 1994). The erosion of the boundaries would problematize that structure. Therefore, for gender to operate as it currently does, the category “woman” is expanded to include people like me. The maintenance of the gender structure is dependent on the creation of a few categories that are mutually exclusive, the members of which are as different as possible (Lorber 1994). It is the clarity of the boundaries between the categories that allows gender to be used to assign rights and responsibilities as well as resources and rewards.

It is that part of gender—that it is used for—that is most problematic. Indeed, is it not patriarchal—or, even more specifically, heteropatriarchal—constructions of gender that are actually the problem? It is not the differences between men and women, or the categories themselves, so much as the meanings ascribed to the categories and, even more important, the hierarchical nature of gender under patriarchy that is the problem (Johnson 1997). Therefore, I am rebelling not against my femaleness or even my womanhood; instead, I am protesting contemporary constructions of femininity and, at least indirectly, masculinity under patriarchy. We do not, in fact, know what gender would look like if it were not constructed around heterosexuality in the context of patriarchy. Although it is possible that the end of patriarchy would mean the end of gender, it is at least conceivable that something like what we now call gender could exist in a postpatriarchal future. The two-and-only-two categorization might well disappear, there being no hierarchy for it to justify. But I do not think that we should make the assumption that gender and patriarchy are synonymous.

Theoretically, this analysis points to some similarities and differences between the work of Lorber (1994) and the works of Butler (1990), Goffman (1976, 1977), and West and Zimmerman (1987). Lorber (1994) conceptualized gender as social structure, whereas the others focused more on the interactive and processual nature of gender. Butler (1990) and Goffman (1976, 1977) view gender as a performance, and West and Zimmerman (1987) examined it as something all of us do. One result of this difference in approach is that in Lorber’s (1994) work, gender comes across as something that we are caught in something that, despite any attempts to the contrary, we cannot break out of. This conclusion is particularly apparent in Lorber’s argument that gender rebellion, in the context of our two-and-only-two system, ends up supporting what it purports to subvert. Yet, my own experiences suggest an alternative possibility that is more in line with the view of gender offered by West and Zimmerman (1987): If gender is a product of interaction, and if it is produced in a particular context, then it can be changed if we change our performances. However, the effects of a performance linger, and gender ends up being institutionalized. It is institutionalized, in our society, in a way that perpetuates inequality, as Lorber’s (1994) work shows. So, it seems that a combination of these two approaches is needed.

In fact, Lorber’s (1994) work seems to suggest that effective gender rebellion requires a more blatant approach—bearded men in dresses, perhaps, or more active responses to misattribution. For example, if I corrected every person who called me “Sir,” and if I insisted on my right to be addressed appropriately and granted access to women-only spaces, then perhaps I could start to break down gender norms. If I asserted my right to use public facilities without being harassed, and if I challenged each person who gave me “the look,” then perhaps I would be contributing to the demise of gender as we know it. It seems that the key would be to provide visible evidence of the nonmutual exclusivity of the categories. Would this break down the patriarchal components of gender? Perhaps it would, but it also would be exhausting.

Perhaps there is another possibility. In a recent book, The Gender Knot, Johnson (1997) argued that when it comes to gender and patriarchy,
most of us follow the paths of least resistance; we “go along to get along,” allowing our actions to be shaped by the gender system. Collectively, our actions help patriarchy maintain and perpetuate a system of oppression and privilege. Thus, by withdrawing our support from this system by choosing paths of greater resistance, we can start to chip away at it. Many people participate in gender because they cannot imagine any alternatives. In my classroom, and in my interactions and encounters with strangers, my presence can make it difficult for people not to see that there are other paths. In other words, following from West and Zimmerman (1987), I can subvert gender by doing it differently.

For example, I think it is true that my existence does not have an effect on strangers who assume that I am a man and never learn otherwise. For them, I do uphold the two-and-only-two system. But there are other cases in which my existence can have an effect. For example, when people initially take me for a man but then find out that I actually am a woman, at least for that moment, the naturalness of gender may be called into question. In these cases, my presence can provoke a “category crisis” (Garber 1992, 16) because it challenges the sex/gender binary system.

The subversive potential of my gender might be strongest in my classrooms. When I teach about the sociology of gender, my students can see me as the embodiment of the social construction of gender. Not all of my students have transformative experiences as a result of taking a course with me; there is the chance that some of them see me as a “freak” or as an exception. Still, after listening to stories about my experiences with gender and reading literature on the subject, many students begin to see how and why gender is a social product. I can disentangle sex, gender, and sexuality in the contemporary United States for them. Students can begin to see the connection between biographical experiences and the structure of society. As one of my students noted, I clearly live the material I am teaching. If that helps me to get my point across, then perhaps I am subverting the binary gender system after all. Although my gendered presence and my way of doing gender might make others—and sometimes even me—uncomfortable, no one ever said that dismantling patriarchy was going to be easy.

Notes

1. Ethnomethodology has been described as “the study of commonsense practical reasoning” (Collins 1988, 274). It examines how people make sense of their everyday experiences. Ethnomethodology is particularly useful in studying gender because it helps to uncover the assumptions on which our understandings of sex and gender are based.

2. I obviously have left much out by not examining my gendered experiences in the context of race, age, class, sexuality, region, and so forth. Such a project clearly is more complex. As Weston pointed out gender presentations are complicated by other statuses of their presenters: “What it takes to kick a person over into another gendered category can differ with race, class, religion, and time” (1996, 168). Furthermore, I am well aware that my whiteness allows me to assume that my experiences are simply a product of gender (see, e.g., hooks 1981; Lucal 1996; Spelman 1988; West and Fenstermaker 1995). For now, suffice it to say that it is my privileged position on some of these axes and my more disadvantaged position on others that combine to delineate my overall experience.

3. In fact, such experiences are not always limited to encounters with strangers. My grandmother, who does not see me often, twice has mistaken me for either my brother-in-law or some unknown man.

4. My experiences in rest rooms and other public spaces might be very different if I were, say, African American rather than white. Given the stereotypes of African American men, I think that white women would react very differently to encountering me (see, e.g., Staples [1986] 1993).

5. I also have noticed that there are certain types of rest rooms in which I will not be verbally challenged; the higher the social status of the place, the less likely I will be harassed. For example, when I go to the theater, I might get stared at, but my presence never has been challenged.

6. An anonymous reviewer offered one possible explanation for this. Women see women’s rest rooms as their space; they feel safe, and even empowered, there. Instead of fearing men in such space, they might
instead pose a threat to any man who might intrude. Their invulnerability in this situation is, of course, not physically based but rather socially constructed. I thank the reviewer for this suggestion.

REFERENCES

Zimmerman, D. H. 1992. They were all doing gender, but they weren’t all passing: Comment on Rogers. Gender & Society 6:192–98.
Sharon Preves, a sociologist, has done ground-breaking research on what it is like to live in contemporary America with an intersexed body that doesn’t conform to “standard” medical definitions of male and female. She recruited subjects for her study by contacting established intersex support groups in the United States and Canada, yet finding willing interviewees was difficult because intersexuality is largely invisible and intersexed people generally don’t self-identify as intersexed. Despite this challenge, Preves interviewed thirty-seven intersexed adults in a private, face-to-face format, largely in participants’ homes. Her book, from which this excerpt is taken, is built upon her subjects’ personal narratives.

1. Why does the author state that “bodies that are considered normal or abnormal are not inherently this way”?

2. Why is intersexuality a social, not medical, problem?

3. What themes are shared between this reading and the piece by Lucal?

---

Beyond Pink and Blue

Sharon E. Preves

Recently I participated in a cultural diversity fieldtrip with twenty-two second graders in St. Paul, Minnesota. When I arrived at their school, the kids were squirrely with anticipation. They were a colorful and varied bunch—some were tall and thin, others short and stout. Moreover, they were from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and spoke nearly a half dozen native languages. When it was time to begin our community walking tour, the teachers attempted to bring the busy group to order quickly. How did they go about doing so? They told the children to form two lines: one for girls and the other for boys. The children did so seamlessly because they had been asked to line up in this manner countless number of times before. Within moments, the children were quiet and attentive. I was struck then, as I had been many times before, by how often and in the most basic ways societies are organized by a distinction between sexes. Even with children of every shape and color, the gender divide worked as a sure way to bring order to chaos. “Girls in one line, boys in the other.” But sometimes the choice between the lines—and sexes—isn’t so easy.

Which line would you join? Think about it seriously for a minute. How do you know whether to line up with the girls or the boys? For that matter, what sex or gender are you and how did you become the gender you are? Moreover, how do you know what sex and gender you are? Who decides? These questions may seem ridiculous. You may be saying to yourself, “Of course I know what gender I am; forget this book.” But really stop to think about how you know what sex you are and how you acquired your gender. Most of us have been taught that sex is anatomical and gender is social. What’s more, many of
us have never had the occasion to explore our gender or sexual identities, because neither has given us cause for reflection. Much like Caucasians who say they “have none” when asked to explore their racial identity, many women and men find it difficult to be reflective about how they know and “do” gender.¹

This article explores what happens to people who, from the time of their birth or early adolescence, inhabit bodies whose very anatomy does not afford them an easy choice between the gender lines.² Every day babies are born with bodies that are deemed sexually ambiguous, and with regularity they are surgically altered to reflect the sexual anatomy associated with “standard” female or male sex assignment. There are numerous ways to respond to this plurality of physical type, including no response at all. Because sex and gender operate as inflexible and central organizing principles of daily existence in this culture, such indifference is rare if not nonexistent. Instead, interference with sex and gender norms are cast as a major disturbance to social order, and people go to remarkable lengths to eradicate threats to the norm, even though they occur with great regularity.

Recent estimates indicate that approximately one or two in every two thousand infants are born with anatomy that some people regard as sexually ambiguous. These frequency estimates vary widely and are, at best, inconclusive. Those I provide here are based on an exhaustive review of recent medical literature.³ This review suggests that approximately one or two per two thousand children are born with bodies considered appropriate for genital reconstruction surgery because they do not conform to socially accepted norms of sexual anatomy. Moreover, nearly 2 percent are born with chromosome, gonad, genital, or hormone features that could be considered “intersexed”; that is, children born with ambiguous genitalia, sexual organs, or sex chromosomes. Additional estimates report the frequency of this sexual variance as comprising approximately 1 to 4 percent of all births.⁴

These estimates differ so much because definitions of sexual ambiguity vary tremendously.⁵ This is largely because distinctions between female and male bodies are actually on more of a continuum rather than a dichotomy. The criteria for what counts as female or male, or sexually ambiguous for that matter, are human standards. That is, bodies that are considered normal or abnormal are not inherently that way. They are, rather, classified as aberrant or customary by social agreement.⁶ We have, as humans, created categories for bodies that fit the norm and those that don’t, as well as a systematic method of surgically attempting to correct or erase sexual variation. That we have done so is evidence of the regularity with which sexual variation occurs.

Melanie Blackless and colleagues suggest that the total frequency of nongenital sexual variation (cases of intersexed chromosomes or internal sexual organs) is much higher than one in two thousand.⁷ They conclude that using a more inclusive definition of sexual ambiguity would yield frequency estimates closer to one or two per one hundred births, bringing us back to the 1 to 2 percent range.

To put these numbers in perspective, although its occurrence has only recently begun to be openly discussed, physical sexual ambiguity occurs about as often as the well-known conditions of cystic fibrosis and Down syndrome.⁸ Since there are approximately four million babies born annually in the United States, a conservative estimate is that about two to four thousand babies are born per year in this country with features of their anatomy that vary from the physical characteristics typically associated with females and males.⁹ Some are born with genitalia that are difficult to characterize as clearly female or male. Others have sex chromosomes that are neither XX nor XY, but some other combination, such as X, XXY, or chromosomes that vary throughout the cells of their bodies, changing from XX to XY from cell to cell. Still others experience unexpected physical changes at puberty, when their bodies exhibit secondary sex characteristics that are surprisingly “opposite” their sex of assignment. Some forms of sexual ambiguity are inherited genetically, while others are brought on by hormonal activity during
gestation, or by prescription medication women take during pregnancy. Regardless of its particular manifestation or cause, most forms of physical sexual anatomy that vary from the norm are medically classified and treated as forms of intersexuality, or hermaphroditism.

Take Claire’s experience as an example. Claire is a middle-class white woman and mother of two teenage daughters who works as a writer and editor. She was forty-four years old when she conveyed the following story to me during a four-hour interview that took place in her home. Claire underwent a clitorectomy when she was six years old at her parents’ insistence, after clinicians agreed that her clitoris was just “too large” and they had to intervene. The size of her clitoris seemed to cause problems not for young Claire, but for the adults around her. Indeed, there was nothing ambiguous about Claire’s sex before the surgery. She has XX chromosomes, has functioning female reproductive organs, and later in life went through a physically uneventful female puberty. Claire’s experience illustrates that having a large clitoris is perceived as a physical trait dangerous to existing notions of gender and sexuality, despite the sexual pleasure it could have given Claire and her future sexual partners. In fact, doctors classify a large clitoris as a medical condition referred to as “clitoral megaly” or “clitoral hypertrophy.” Conversely, small penises for anatomical boys, are classified as a medical problem called “micropenis.”

Reflecting on the reasons for the clitorectomy she underwent at the age of six, Claire said, “I don’t feel that my sex was ambiguous at all. There was never that question. But I’m sure that [clitorectomies] have been done forever because parents just [don’t] like big clitorises because they look too much like a penis.” Even more alarming are the physical and emotional outcomes of genital surgery that might be experienced by the patient. About the after effects of her surgery, Claire said,

They just took the clitoris out and then whip stitched the hood together, so it’s sort of an odd-looking thing. I don’t know what they were hoping to preserve, although I remember my father thinking that if someone saw me, it would look normal because there’s just a little skin poking out between my lips so it wouldn’t look strange. I remember I was in the hospital for five days. And then it just got better and everything was forgotten, until I finally asked about it when I was twelve. [There was] total and complete silence. You know, it was never, never mentioned. I know you know what that does. I was just in agony trying to figure out who I was. And, you know, why . . . what sex I was. And feeling like a freak, which is a very common story. And then when I was twelve, I asked my father what had been done to me. And his answer was, “Don’t be so self-examining.” And that was it. I never asked again [until I was thirty-five].

During the course of my research I spoke with many other adults across North America who had childhood experiences remarkably similar to Claire’s. Their stories are laden with family and medical secrecy, shame, and social isolation, as well as perseverance and strength of spirit, and eventual pride in their unique bodies and perspectives.

**Personal Narratives**

Being labeled as a misfit, by peers, by family members, or by medical diagnosis and treatment, is no doubt a challenge to one’s identity development and stability. This is especially true for children whose bodies render traditional gender classification ineffective, for there is seemingly no place to belong without being gendered, especially during childhood. Negotiating identity, one’s basic sense of place and self, is a challenge for many of us, and is potentially far more challenging for people whose sex is called into question. The social expectation for gender stability and conformity is prevalent across social spheres. Nearly every aspect of social life is organized by one’s sex assignment—from schooling and relationships, to employment and religion, sports and entertainment,
medicine and law. Because North American cultures are structured by gender, successful participation in society’s organizations and personal relationships requires gender categorization. Many of us negotiate questions of sex and gender with little effort. Others, however, do not have the luxury or ease of fitting neatly into a dual-gendered culture.

In an attempt to understand how intersexuals experience and cope with their marginality in a society that demands sexual conformity, I turned to them directly for answers. In the end, I interviewed thirty-seven individuals throughout North America whose bodies have been characterized by others as intersexed.

**INTERSEX IS A SOCIAL, NOT MEDICAL, PROBLEM**

While being born with indeterminate sexual organs indeed problematizes a binary understanding of sex and gender, several studies show—and there seems to be general consensus (even among the doctors performing the “normalizing” operations)—that most children with ambiguous sexual anatomy do not require medical intervention for their physiological health. Nevertheless, the majority of sexually ambiguous infants are medically assigned a definitive sex, often undergoing repeated genital surgeries and ongoing hormone treatments, to “correct” their variation from the norm.

It is my argument that medical treatments to create genitally *unambiguous* children are not performed entirely or even predominantly for the sake of preventing stigmatization and trauma to the child. Rather, these elaborate, expensive, and risky procedures are performed to maintain social order for the institutions and adults that surround that child. Newborns are completely oblivious to the rigid social conventions to which their families and caregivers adhere. Threats to the duality of sex and gender undermine inflexibly gendered occupational, education, and family structures, as well as heterosexuality itself. After all, if one’s sex is in doubt, how would they identify their sexual orientation, given that heterosexuality, homosexuality, and even bisexuality are all based on a sexual binary? So, when adults encounter a healthy baby with a body that is not easily “sexed,” they may understandably experience an inability to imagine a happy and successful future for that child. They may wonder how the child will fit in at school and with its peers, and how the child will negotiate dating and sexuality, as well as family and a career. But most parents don’t find a real need to address these questions until years after a child’s birth. Furthermore, it is my contention that parents and caregivers of intersexed children don’t need to be so concerned about addressing the “personal troubles” of their children either. Rather, we should all turn our attention to the “public issues” and problems wrought by unwavering, merciless adherence to sex and gender binarism.

That medical sex assignment procedures could be considered cosmetic raises several important questions, including the human influences in constructing definitions of health and pathology. Bodies are classified as healthy or pathological (or as normal and abnormal) through social expectations, human discourse, and human interaction. As a result, what is seen as normal or standard in one culture and time is seen as aberrant and strange in another. Indeed, deviance itself is created socially through human actions, beliefs, and judgments. Consider Gilbert Herdt’s anthropological research in Papua New Guinea. The Sambia males of Papua New Guinea believe that they become masculine by ingesting the semen of adult men. In order to become virile, therefore, Sambian boys perform oral sex on and ingest the semen of adult men. According to Herdt, such activity is considered a standard rite of passage to manhood among the Sambia in Papua New Guinea, much like a bar or bat mitzvah is seen as a customary ritual of young adulthood among Jews.

I offer the above example to illustrate that definitions of normal and abnormal vary tremendously by culture. That said, there is no reason to consider intersex as necessarily problematic in
itself. In fact, since physical sexual ambiguity has been shown to be a cause of health problems in only very rare cases, sexual ambiguity could be considered a social problem, rather than a physical problem. Rare physical problems do occur in cases where eliminating bodily waste, such as urine and feces, is difficult because of internal physiological complications or infrequent cases of salt-wasting congenital adrenal hyperplasia, which is a condition where children have hyperactive adrenal glands and hormone therapy is required to regulate the endocrine system.

Because Western cultures place such strong emphasis on sexual (and other forms of) categorization, intersex ambiguity causes major social disruption and discomfort. If there were less concern about gender, there would be less concern about gender variation. Because intersex is often identified in a medical setting by physicians during childbirth or during a pediatric appointment in later childhood, the social response to intersex “deviance” is largely medical.

**A Brief History of Sexual Ambiguity in Medicine**

According to one theory, sex distinctions were based on a continuum of heat, with males’ bodies being internally hotter than females, thus creating the impetus for external male reproductive organs and colder, internal female organs. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males. In Thomas Laqueur’s analysis, this differential temperature theory actually provided the basis for a one-sex conceptual model, with females being seen as the inverse of males.

In their historical review of medical literature, Myra Hird and Jenz Germon demonstrate that based on this humoral theory, sixteenth-century philosophers and physicians regarded hermaphroditism as evidence of two sexes existing in one body. With the invention of microscopy and surgery on living patients at the beginning of the twentieth century (rather than upon autopsy after death), the notion of anatomical hermaphroditism was transformed. Hird and Germon argue that the newer concept of one “true sex” being hidden by sexually ambiguous anatomy didn’t enter the fray until Klebs’s classification system. Klebs identified five categories of sexual classification: female, male, female pseudohermaphrodite, male pseudohermaphrodite, and true hermaphrodite. Klebs identified people as true hermaphrodites only if they had the very rare combination of ovarian and testicular tissue in the same body. All other cases of hermaphroditism, for example people who had ambiguous genitalia but no combination of gonadal tissue, were identified as pseudohermaphrodites. Klebs’s classification system served to drastically decrease the number of people who were defined as hermaphrodites, and thus reinforced the newly popular thought that there were two and only two sexes: female and male, with a very rare and unusual exception in the case of true hermaphroditism.

Early surgical attempts to regulate the appearance of sexual anatomy, such as lowering abdominal testicles, appeared in the beginning of the nineteenth century. A primary motive for the social insistence upon outward displays of gender clarity was an underlying fear of homosexuality, or “hermaphroditism of the soul,” a threat that was present in the sexually ambiguous (or, quite literally, bisexual) body of the hermaphrodite. By appearing, outwardly, to be of the “other” sex, it was feared hermaphrodites would tempt heterosexual partners into “homosexual” relations.

As Alice Dreger, Myra Hird and Jenz Germon, and others point out, medical methods of response to physical sexual ambiguity have changed yet again in more recent times. Unlike eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical attempts to reveal a “true sex” that is disguised by pseudohermaphroditic (or false) sexual ambiguity, the current medical model relies on making a sex assignment that is most appropriate for heterosexual capacity. Hird and Germon refer to this as the “best sex” mentality in medical sex assignment.
UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Despite the recent mobilization and activism of thousands of intersexuels worldwide, the social focus on gender categorization and genital regularity continues to be strong, in both medical and nonmedical sectors. In order to improve the quality of life not just for those labeled intersexed, but for us all, we must remove or reduce the importance of gender categorization and the need for gender categories, including the category of intersex itself. A more realistic and tangible goal is to respond far less to sexual variance. That is, to focus on the health of children born with genital variation, not on their difference. An outcome of this philosophy would prevent physicians from cutting into the bodies of intersexed patients unless a clear physiological need presents its necessity. Moreover, this philosophy would ask us to hold off on rushing kids into a patient mentality and instead send them to speak with counselors or other kids with divergent sexual anatomy. We should refrain from identifying them as different in any way, unless a child demonstrates a need and a desire for such special attention. Pushing the label of sexual ambiguity, sexual difference, or “sexual problem” onto children through medicalization, or remedicalization via social services, leads to stigmatization of the self. What’s more, there is no inherent need for children to have therapy unless a need presents itself. We shouldn’t restigmatize intersexuels by assuming a need for therapy or “preventative treatment” on the basis of physical variation alone. While these support resources are invaluable for people who have already been adversely affected by negative socialization—and family members and clinicians should be prepared to call on support services if necessary—we shouldn’t assume that genital variation itself creates a pathological need.

Will the category and identity “intersex” disappear altogether if doctors stop treating, studying, and classifying children in this way, or will this category continue to expand further into academic and social realms until its presence is solidified in a way similar to the presence of transgender, gay, or alcoholic identities? Focusing less on articulating the category “intersex” may indeed be a step in the right direction toward the ultimate goal of focusing less on gender and sexual categorization. After all, returning to the elementary school children and the “gender lines” to which they are socialized to adhere, the clear message from my research is to decrease sex and gender categorization rather than to create yet a third rigid sex or gender line for us all to ponder. Instead, we should focus on loving and accepting children as they are, not because of or in spite of their differences, but rather just because they are terrific kids in their own right with or without bodies that vary from some mythical standard.

While my research addresses many questions about the construction and negotiation of contested sex, several important issues related to assessing and revising the treatment of sexual ambiguity remain untouched. Future research in this area should include intensive research on two additional groups: parents of intersex children and clinicians who specialize in intersex management. This research should focus on parents’ and clinicians’ personal and professional experiences with intersexuality and their perspectives on genital variation and the management thereof. Additional research should include observation of family consultations with medical staff and follow-up visits regarding the “sexing” of intersexed infants, in order to offer further insight into the interactional aspect of the social construction of sex and gender. Timely research in this area may provide further empirical data to inform the current debate and potential shift in intersex clinical management.

Despite my systematic analysis of former patients’ experiences with medical sex assignment, the void remains for a rigorous analysis of the experiences of those with variant sexual anatomy who are not associated with intersex support and advocacy organizations and those who did not undergo medical sex assignment. This research is critical because proponents of surgical sex assignment will most likely resist
clinical reform until the experiences of these populations are better understood. Until then, critics of my research and that of others will continue to shrug off the overwhelming dissatisfaction and trauma reported by intersex activists as representative of a disgruntled but vocal minority.

Far more could also be learned about the impact of peer social support as a means of reframing sexual ambiguity in a more positive light. In order to develop effective recommendations for clinical practice as they relate to peer advocacy, further investigation is needed that focuses specifically on the role of social support in coping with difference. Clinical mandates should also be informed by further research on the impact of age-appropriate disclosure of information to intersexuels and their family members. Developing a longitudinal research program with this focus is possible now that some children deemed sexually ambiguous are being raised in a new era of social support and have access to complete and accurate diagnostic information.

Finally, the strategies and efforts of intersex activists warrant further attention, as does the overall concept of the intersex social movement. Due to their prolific appearances in print, film, and radio media, substantive content analysis of their activism efforts is possible. This analysis could inform a more nuanced understanding of models of coming-out and community empowerment rather than assimilation to an existing social norm. This research is now possible because there are already substantial archives related to this area, and because intersex patient, parent, and doctor communication, education, and support networks continue to emerge.

NOTES

2. While there is tremendous cross-cultural variation in responding to physical sexual variation, I explore how North American intersexuels experience and cope with being labeled sexually ambiguous in a culture that demands sexual conformity.


Finally, the strategies and efforts of intersex activists warrant further attention, as does the overall concept of the intersex social movement. Due to their prolific appearances in print, film, and radio media, substantive content analysis of their activism efforts is possible. This analysis could inform a more nuanced understanding of models of coming-out and community empowerment rather than assimilation to an existing social norm. This research is now possible because there are already substantial archives related to this area, and because intersex patient, parent, and doctor communication, education, and support networks continue to emerge.

REFERENCES


Robert Sapolsky is professor of biology and neurology at Stanford University and a research associate with the Institute of Primate Research, National Museum of Kenya. He is the author of The Trouble With Testosterone, Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers, and, most recently, A Primate’s Memoir. Sapolsky has lived as a member of a baboon troop in Kenya, conducting cutting-edge research on these beautiful and complex primates. In this article, he uses his keen wit and scientific understanding to debunk the widely held myth that testosterone causes aggression in males.

1. Why do many Americans want to believe that biological factors, such as hormones, are the basis of gender differences and inequalities?

2. Sapolsky says that hormones have a “permissive effect.” What does “permissive effect” mean in terms of the relationship between testosterone and aggression?

3. How does research on testosterone, male monkeys, and spotted hyenas help one to grasp the role of social factors and environment in behavioral biology?

---

**The Trouble With Testosterone**

Robert Sapolsky

Face it, we all do it. We all believe in certain stereotypes about certain minorities. The stereotypes are typically pejorative and usually false. But every now and then, they are true. I write apologetically as a member of a minority about which the stereotypes are indeed true. I am male. We males account for less than 50 percent of the population, yet we generate an incredibly disproportionate percentage of the violence. Whether it is something as primal as having an ax fight in an Amazonian clearing or as detached as using computer-guided aircraft to strafe a village, something as condemned as assaulting a cripple or as glorified as killing someone wearing the wrong uniform, if it is violent, males excel at it. Why should that be? We all think we know the answer. A dozen millennia ago or so, an adventurous soul managed to lop off a surly bull’s testicles and thus invented behavioral endocrinology. It is unclear from the historical records whether this individual received either a grant or tenure as a result of this experiment, but it certainly generated an influential finding something or other comes out of the testes that helps to make males such aggressive pains in the ass.

That something or other is testosterone.¹ The hormone binds to specialized receptors in muscles and causes those cells to enlarge. It binds to similar receptors in laryngeal cells and gives rise to operatic basses. It causes other secondary sexual characteristics, makes for relatively unhealthy blood vessels, alters biochemical events in the liver too dizzying to even contemplate, has a profound impact, no doubt, on the workings of cells in big toes. And it seeps into the brain, where it binds to those same “androgen” receptors and influences behavior in a way highly relevant to understanding aggression.

---

¹ From The Trouble With Testosterone and Other Essays on the Biology of the Human Predicament by Robert M. Sapolsky. Copyright © 1997 by Robert M. Sapolsky. Reprinted with the permission of Scribner, a Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.
What evidence links testosterone with aggression? Some pretty obvious stuff. Males tend to have higher testosterone levels in their circulation than do females (one wild exception to that will be discussed later) and to be more aggressive. Times of life when males are swimming in testosterone (for example, after reaching puberty) correspond to when aggression peaks. Among numerous species, testes are mothballed most of the year, kicking into action and pouring out testosterone only during a very circumscribed mating season—precisely the time when male–male aggression soars.

Impressive, but these are only correlative data, testosterone repeatedly being on the scene with no alibi when some aggression has occurred. The proof comes with the knife, the performance of what is euphemistically known as a “subtraction” experiment. Remove the source of testosterone in species after species and levels of aggression typically plummet. Reinstall normal testosterone levels afterward with injections of synthetic testosterone, and aggression returns.

To an endocrinologist, the subtraction and replacement paradigm represents pretty damning proof: this hormone is involved. “Normal testosterone levels appear to be a prerequisite for normative levels of aggressive behavior” is the sort of catchy, hummable phrase that the textbooks would use. That probably explains why you shouldn’t mess with a bull moose during rutting season. But that’s not why a lot of people want to understand this sliver of science. Does the action of this hormone tell us anything about individual differences in levels of aggression, anything about why some males, some human males, are exceptionally violent? Among an array of males—human or otherwise—are the highest testosterone levels found in the most aggressive individuals?

Generate some extreme differences and that is precisely what you see. Castrate some of the well-paid study subjects, inject others with enough testosterone to quadruple the normal human levels, and the high-testosterone males are overwhelmingly likely to be the more aggressive ones. However, that doesn’t tell us much about the real world. Now do something more subtle by studying the normative variability in testosterone—in other words, don’t manipulate anything, just see what everyone’s natural levels are like—and high levels of testosterone and high levels of aggression still tend to go together. This would seem to seal the case—interindividual differences in levels of aggression among normal individuals are probably driven by differences in levels of testosterone. But this turns out to be wrong.

Okay, suppose you note a correlation between levels of aggression and levels of testosterone among these normal males. This could be because (a) testosterone elevates aggression; (b) aggression elevates testosterone secretion; (c) neither causes the other. There’s a huge bias to assume option a, while b is the answer. Study after study has shown that when you examine testosterone levels when males are first placed together in the social group, testosterone levels predict nothing about who is going to be aggressive. The subsequent behavioral differences drive the hormonal changes, rather than the other way around.

Because of a strong bias among certain scientists, it has taken forever to convince them of this point. Behavioral endocrinologists study what behavior and hormones have to do with each other. How do you study behavior? You get yourself a notebook and a stopwatch and a pair of binoculars. How do you measure the hormones? You need a gazillion-dollar machine, you muck around with radiation and chemicals, wear a lab coat, maybe even goggles—the whole nine yards. Which toys would you rather get for Christmas? Which facet of science are you going to believe in more? Because the endocrine aspects of the business are more high-tech, more reductive, there is the bias to think that it is somehow more scientific, more powerful. This is a classic case of what is often called physics envy, the disease among scientists where the behavioral biologists fear their discipline lacks the rigor of physiology, the physiologists wish for the techniques of the biochemists, the biochemists covet the clarity of the answers revealed by the molecular biologists, all the way
down until you get to the physicists, who confer only with God. Hormones seem to many to be more real, more substantive, than the ephemera of behavior, so when a correlation occurs, it must be because hormones regulate behavior, not the other way around.

As I said, it takes a lot of work to cure people of that physics envy, and to see that individual differences in testosterone levels don’t predict subsequent differences in aggressive behavior among individuals. Similarly, fluctuations in testosterone levels within one individual over time do not predict subsequent changes in the levels of aggression in that one individual—get a hiccup in testosterone secretion one afternoon and that’s not when the guy goes postal.

Look at our confusing state: normal levels of testosterone are a prerequisite for normal levels of aggression, yet changing the amount of testosterone in someone’s bloodstream within the normal range doesn’t alter his subsequent levels of aggressive behavior. This is where, like clockwork, the students suddenly start coming to office hours in a panic, asking whether they missed something in their lecture notes.

Yes, it’s going to be on the final, and it’s one of the more subtle points in endocrinology—what is referred to as a hormone having a “permissive effect.” Remove someone’s testes and, as noted, the frequency of aggressive behavior is likely to plummet. Reinstate precastration levels of testosterone by injecting that hormone, and precastration levels of aggression typically return. Fair enough. Now this time, castrate an individual and restore testosterone levels to only 20 percent of normal and . . . amazingly, normal precastration levels of aggression come back. Castrate and now generate twice the testosterone levels from before castration—and the same level of aggressive behavior returns. You need some testosterone around for normal aggressive behavior—zero levels after castration, and down it usually goes; quadruple it (the sort of range generated in weight lifters abusing anabolic steroids), and aggression typically increases. But anywhere from roughly 20 percent of normal to twice normal and it’s all the same; the brain can’t distinguish among this wide range of basically normal values.

We seem to have figured out a couple of things by now. First, knowing the differences in the levels of testosterone in the circulation of a bunch of males will not help you much in figuring out who is going to be aggressive. Second, the subtraction and reinstatement data seem to indicate that, nevertheless, in a broad sort of way, testosterone causes aggressive behavior. But that turns out not to be true either, and the implications of this are lost on most people the first thirty times you tell them about it. Which is why you’d better tell them about it thirty-one times, because it is the most important point of this piece.

Round up some male monkeys. Put them in a group together, and give them plenty of time to sort out where they stand with each other—affiliative friendships, grudges and dislikes. Give them enough time to form a dominance hierarchy, a linear ranking system of numbers 1 through 5. This is the hierarchical sort of system where number 3, for example, can pass his day throwing around his weight with numbers 4 and 5, ripping off their monkey chow, forcing them to relinquish the best spots to sit in, but, at the same time, remembering to deal with numbers 1 and 2 with shit-eating obsequiousness.

Hierarchy in place, it’s time to do your experiment. Take that third-ranking monkey and give him some testosterone. None of this within-the-normal-range stuff. Inject a ton of it into him, way higher than what you normally see in a rhesus monkey; give him enough testosterone to grow antlers and a beard on every neuron in his brain. And, no surprise, when you then check the behavioral data, it turns out that he will probably be participating in more aggressive interactions than before. So even though small fluctuations in the levels of the hormone don’t seem to matter much, testosterone still causes aggression. But that would be wrong. Check out number 3 more closely. Is he now raining aggressive terror on any and all in the group, frothing in an androgenic glaze of indiscriminate violence? Not at all. He’s still judiciously kowtowing to numbers 1 and 2, but has simply become a total bastard to
numbers 4 and 5. This is critical: testosterone isn’t causing aggression, it’s exaggerating the aggression that’s already there.

Another example just to show we’re serious. There’s a part of your brain that probably has lots to do with aggression, a region called the amygdala. Sitting right near it is the Grand Central Station of emotion-related activity in your brain, the hypothalamus. The amygdala communicates with the hypothalamus by way of a cable of neuronal connections called the stria terminalis. No more jargon, I promise. The amygdala has its influence on aggression via that pathway, with bursts of electrical excitation called action potentials that ripple down the stria terminals, putting the hypothalamus in a pissy mood.

Once again, do your hormonal intervention; flood the area with testosterone. You can do that by injecting the hormone into the bloodstream, where it eventually makes its way to this part of the brain. Or you can be elegant and surgically microinject the stuff directly into this brain region. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. The key thing is what doesn’t happen next. Does testosterone now cause there to be action potentials surging down the stria terminalis? Does it turn on that pathway? Not at all. If and only if the amygdala is sending an aggression-provoking volley of action potentials down the stria terminalis, testosterone increases the rate of such action potentials by shortening the resting time between them. It’s not turning on the pathway, it’s exaggerating the preexisting pattern of it, exaggerating the response to environmental triggers of aggression.

This transcends issues of testosterone and aggression. In every generation, it is the duty of behavioral biologists to try to teach this critical point, one that seems a maddening cliché once you get it. You take that hoary old dichotomy between nature and nurture, between biological influences and environmental influences, between intrinsic factors and extrinsic ones, and, the vast majority of the time, regardless of which behavior you are thinking about and what underlying biology you are studying, the dichotomy is a sham. No biology. No environment. Just the interaction between the two.

Do you want to know how important environment and experience are in understanding testosterone and aggression? Look back at how the effects of castration were discussed earlier. There were statements like “Remove the source of testosterone in species after species and levels of aggression typically plummet.” Not “Remove the source . . . and aggression always goes to zero.” On the average it declines, but rarely to zero, and not at all in some individuals. And the more social experience an individual had being aggressive prior to castration, the more likely that behavior persists sans cojones. Social conditioning can more than make up for the hormone.

Another example, one from one of the stranger corners of the animal kingdom: If you want your assumptions about the nature of boy beasts and girl beasts challenged, check out the spotted hyena. These animals are fast becoming the darlings of endocrinologists, sociobiologists, gynecologists, and tabloid writers. Why? Because they have a wild sex-reversal system—females are more muscular and more aggressive than males and are socially dominant over them, rare traits in the mammalian world. And get this: females secrete more of certain testosterone-related hormones than the males do, producing the muscles, the aggression (and, as a reason for much of the gawking interest in these animals, wildly masculinized private parts that make it supremely difficult to tell the sex of a hyena). So this appears to be a strong vote for the causative powers of high androgen levels in aggression and social dominance. But that’s not the whole answer. High up in the hills above the University of California at Berkeley is the world’s largest colony of spotted hyenas, massive bone-crunching beasts who fight with each other for the chance to have their ears scratched by Laurence Frank, the zoologist who brought them over as infants from Kenya. Various scientists are studying their sex-reversal system. The female hyenas are bigger and more muscular than the males and have the same weirdo genitals and elevated androgen
levels that their female cousins do back in the savannah. Everything is in place except . . . the social system is completely different from that in the wild. Despite being stoked on androgens, there is a very significant delay in the time it takes for the females to begin socially dominating the males—they’re growing up without the established social system to learn from.

When people first grasp the extent to which biology has something to do with behavior, even subtle, complex, human behavior, there is often an initial evangelical enthusiasm of the convert, a massive placing of faith in the biological components of the story. And this enthusiasm is typically of a fairly reductive type—because of physics envy, because reductionism is so impressive, because it would be so nice if there were a single gene or hormone or neurotransmitter or part of the brain that was it, the cause, the explanation of everything. And the trouble with testosterone is that people tend to think this way in an arena that really matters.

This is no mere academic concern. We are a fine species with some potential. Yet we are racked by sickening amounts of violence. Unless we are hermits, we feel the threat of it, often as a daily shadow. And regardless of where we hide, should our leaders push the button, we will all be lost in a final global violence. But as we try to understand and wrestle with this feature of our sociality, it is critical to remember the limits of the biology. Testosterone is never going to tell us much about the suburban teenager who, in his after-school chess club, has developed a particularly aggressive style with his bishops. And it certainly isn’t going to tell us much about the teenager in some inner-city hellhole who has taken to mugging people. “Testosterone equals aggression” is inadequate for those who would offer a simple solution to the violent male—just decrease levels of those pesky steroids. And “testosterone equals aggression” is certainly inadequate for those who would offer a simple excuse: Boys will be boys and certain things in nature are inevitable. Violence is more complex than a single hormone. This is endocrinology for the bleeding heart liberal—our behavioral biology is usually meaningless outside the context of the social factors and environment in which it occurs.

**Notes**

1. Testosterone is one of a family of related hormones, collectively known as “androgens” or “anabolic steroids.” They all are secreted from the testes or are the result of a modification of testosterone, they all have a similar chemical structure, and they all do roughly similar things. Nonetheless, androgen mavens spend entire careers studying the important differences in the actions of different androgens. I am going to throw that subtlety to the wind and, for the sake of simplification that will horrify many, will refer throughout to all of these related hormones as “testosterone.”

2. An example of physics envy in action. Recently, a zoologist friend had obtained blood samples from the carnivores that he studies and wanted some hormones in the sample assays in my lab. Although inexperienced with the technique, he offered to help in any way possible. I felt hesitant asking him to do anything tedious but, so long as he had offered, tentatively said, “Well, if you don’t mind some unspeakable drudgery, you could number about a thousand assay vials.” And this scientist, whose superb work has graced the most prestigious science journals in the world, cheerfully answered, “That’s okay, how often do I get to do real science, working with test tubes?”

3. And no one has shown that differences in the size or shape of the amygdala, or differences in the numbers of neurons in it, can begin to predict differences in normal levels of aggression. Same punch line as with testosterone.

**Further Reading**

For a good general review of the subject, see E. Monaghan and S. Glickman, “Hormones and Aggressive Behavior,” in J. Becker, M. Breedlove, and D. Crews, eds., *Behavioral Endocrinology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 261. This also has an overview of the hyena social system, as Glickman heads the study of the Berkeley hyenas.

I have emphasized that while testosterone levels in the normal range do not have much to do with aggression, a massive elevation of exposure, as would be seen in anabolic steroid abusers, does usually increase aggression. For a recent study in which even elevating into that range (approximately five times normal level) still had no effect on mood or behavior, see S. Bhasin, T. Storer, N. Berman, and colleagues, “The Effects of Supraphysiologic Doses of Testosterone on Muscle Size and Strength in Normal Men,” New England Journal of Medicine 335 (1996): 1.

The study showing that raising testosterone levels in the middle-ranking monkey exaggerates preexisting patterns of aggression can be found in A. Dixson and J. Herbert, “Testosterone, Aggressive Behavior and Dominance Rank in Captive Adult Male Talapoin Monkeys (Miopithecus talapoin),” Physiology and Behavior 18 (1977): 539.

For the demonstration that testosterone shortens the resting period between action potentials in neurons, see K. Kendrick and R. Drewert, “Testosterone Reduces Refractory Period of Stria Terminalis Neurons in the Rat Brain,” Science 204 (1979): 877.

Introduction to Reading 5

The anthropologist, Serena Nanda, is widely known for her ethnography of India’s Hijaras, titled Neither Man nor Woman. The article included here is from her more recent book on multiple sex/gender systems around the world. Nanda’s analysis of multiple genders among Native North Americans is rich and detailed. As you read this piece, consider the long-term consequences of the failure of European colonists and early anthropologists to get beyond their ethnocentric assumptions so that they could understand and respect the gender diversity of North American Indian cultures.

1. Why does Serena Nanda use the term gender variants instead of two-spirit and berdache?
2. What was the relationship between sexual orientation and gender status among American Indians whose cultures included more than two sex/gender categories? How about hermaphroditism and gender status?
3. Why was there often an association between spiritual power and gender variance in Native American cultures?
The early encounters between Europeans and Indian societies in the New World, in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, brought together cultures with very different sex/gender systems. The Spanish explorers, coming from a society where sodomy was a heinous crime, were filled with contempt and outrage when they recorded the presence of men in American Indian societies who performed the work of women, dressed like women, and had sexual relations with men (Lang 1996; Roscoe 1995).

Europeans labeled these men “berdache,” a term originally derived from an Arabic word meaning male prostitute. As such, this term is inappropriate and insulting, and I use it here only to indicate the history of European (mis)understanding of American Indian sex/gender diversity. The term berdache focused attention on the sexuality associated with mixed gender roles, which the Europeans identified, incorrectly, with the “unnatural” and sinful practice of sodomy in their own societies. In their ethnocentrism, the early European explorers and colonists were unable to see beyond their own sex/gender systems and thus did not understand the multiple sex/gender systems they encountered in the Americas. They also largely overlooked the specialized and spiritual functions of many of these alternative sex/gender roles and the positive value attached to them in many American Indian societies.

By the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, some anthropologists included accounts of North American Indian sex/gender diversity in their ethnographies. They attempted to explain the berdache from various functional perspectives, that is, in terms of the contributions these sex/gender roles made to social structure or culture. These accounts, though less contemptuous than earlier ones, nevertheless largely retained the emphasis on berdache sexuality. The berdache was defined as a form of “institutionalized homosexuality,” which served as a social niche for individuals whose personality and sexual orientation did not match the definition of masculinity in their societies, or as a “way out” of the masculine or warrior role for “cowardly” or “failed” men (see Callender and Kochems 1983). Anthropological accounts increasingly paid more attention to the association of the berdache with shamanism and spiritual powers and also noted that mixed gender roles were often central and highly valued in American Indian cultures, rather than marginal and deviant. These accounts were, nevertheless, also ethnocentric in misidentifying indigenous gender diversity with European concepts of homosexuality, transvestism, or hermaphroditism, which continued to distort their indigenous meanings.

In American Indian societies, the European homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy was not culturally relevant and the European labeling of the berdache as homosexuals resulted from their own cultural emphasis on sexuality as a central, even defining, aspect of gender and on sodomy as an abnormal practice and/or a sin. While berdache in many American Indian societies did engage in sexual relations and even married persons of the same sex, this was not central to their alternative gender role. Another overemphasis resulting from European ethnocentrism was the identification of berdache as transvestites. Although berdache often cross-dressed, transvestism was not consistent within or across societies. European descriptions of berdache as...
hermaphrodites were also inaccurate. Considering the variation in alternative sex/gender roles in native North America, a working definition may be useful: the berdache in the anthropological literature refers to people who partly or completely take on aspects of the culturally defined role of the other sex and who are classified neither as women nor men, but as genders of their own (see Callender and Kochems 1983:443). It is important to note here that berdache thus refers to variant gender roles, rather than a complete crossing over to an opposite gender role.

In the past twenty-five years there have been important shifts in perspectives on sex/gender diversity among American Indians and anthropologists, both Indian and non-Indian (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997:Introduction). Most current research rejects institutionalized homosexuality as an adequate explanation of American Indian gender diversity, emphasizing the importance of occupation rather than sexuality as its central feature. Contemporary ethnography views multiple sex/gender roles as a normative part of American Indian sex/gender systems, rather than as a marginal or deviant part (Albers 1989:134; Jacobs et al. 1997; Lang 1998). A new emphasis on the variety of alternative sex/gender roles in North America undercuts the earlier treatment of the berdache as a unitary phenomenon across North (and South) America (Callender and Kochems 1983; Jacobs et al. 1997; Lang 1998; Roscoe and Murray 1998). Current research also emphasizes the integrated and often highly valued position of gender variant persons and the association of sex/gender diversity with spiritual power (Roscoe 1996; Williams 1992).

A change in terminology has also taken place. Berdache generally has been rejected, but there is no unanimous agreement on what should replace it. One widely accepted suggestion is the term two-spirit (Jacobs et al. 1997; Lang 1998), a term coined in 1990 by urban American Indian gays and lesbians. Two-spirit has the advantage of conveying the spiritual nature of gender variance, but the cultural continuity suggested by two-spirit is in fact a subject of debate. Another problem is that two-spirit emphasizes the Euro-American gender construction of only two genders. Thus, I use the more culturally neutral term, variant genders (or gender variants) and specific indigenous terms wherever possible.

**Distribution and Characteristics of Variant Sex/Gender Roles**

Multiple sex/gender systems were found in many, though not all, American Indian societies. Male gender variant roles (variant gender roles assumed by biological males) are documented for 110 to 150 societies. These roles occurred most frequently in the region extending from California to the Mississippi Valley and upper-Great Lakes, the Plains and the Prairies, the Southwest, and to a lesser extent along the Northwest Coast tribes. With few exceptions, gender variance is not historically documented for eastern North America, though it may have existed prior to European invasion and disappeared before it could be recorded historically (Callender and Kochems 1983; Fulton and Anderson 1992).

There were many variations in North American Indian gender diversity. American Indian cultures included three or four genders: men, women, male variants, and female variants (biological females who by engaging in male activities were reclassified as to gender). Gender variant roles differed in the criteria by which they were defined; the degree of their integration into the society; the norms governing their behavior; the way the role was acknowledged publicly or sanctioned; how others were expected to behave toward gender variant persons; the degree to which a gender changer was expected to adopt the role of the opposite sex or was limited in doing so; the power, sacred or secular, that was attributed to them; and the path to recruitment.

In spite of this variety, however, there were also some common or widespread features: transvestism, cross-gender occupation, same sex
(but different gender) sexuality, some culturally normative and acknowledged process for recruitment to the role, special language and ritual roles, and associations with spiritual power.

Transvestism

The degree to which male and female gender variants were permitted to wear the clothing of the other sex varied. Transvestism was often associated with gender variance but was not equally important in all societies. Male gender variants frequently adopted women’s dress and hairstyles partially or completely, and female gender variants partially adopted the clothing of men; sometimes, however, transvestism was prohibited. The choice of clothing was sometimes an individual matter and gender variants might mix their clothing and their accoutrements. For example, a female gender variant might wear a woman’s dress but carry (male) weapons. Dress was also sometimes situationally determined: a male gender variant would have to wear men’s clothing while engaging in warfare but might wear women’s clothes at other times. Similarly, female gender variants might wear women’s clothing when gathering (women’s work), but male clothing when hunting (men’s work) (Callender and Kochems 1983:447). Among the Navajo, a male gender variant, nádleeh, would adopt almost all aspects of a woman’s dress, work, language and behavior; the Mohave male gender variant, called alyha, was at the extreme end of the cross-gender continuum in imitating female physiology as well as transvestism. . . . Repression of visible forms of gender diversity, and ultimately the almost total decline of transvestism, were a direct result of American prohibitions against it.

Occupation

Contemporary analysis emphasizes occupational aspects of American Indian gender variance as a central feature. Most frequently a boy’s interest in the implements and activities of women and a girl’s interest in the tools of male occupations signaled an individual’s wish to undertake a gender variant role (Callender and Kochems 1983:447; Whitehead 1981). In hunting societies, for example, female gender variance was signaled by a girl rejecting the domestic activities associated with women and participating in playing and hunting with boys. In the arctic and subarctic, particularly, this was sometimes encouraged by a girl’s parents if there were not enough boys to provide the family with food (Lang 1998). Male gender variants were frequently considered especially skilled and industrious in women’s crafts and domestic work (though not in agriculture, where this was a man’s task) (Roscoe 1991; 1996). Female gender crossers sometimes won reputations as superior hunters and warriors.

Male gender variants’ households were often more prosperous than others, sometimes because they were hired by whites. In their own societies the excellence of male gender variants’ craftwork was sometimes ascribed to a supernatural sanction for their gender transformation (Callender and Kochems 1983:448). Female gender variants opted out of motherhood, so were not encumbered by caring for children, which may explain their success as hunters or warriors. In some societies, gender variants could engage in both men’s and women’s work, and this, too, accounted for their increased wealth. Another source of income was payment for the special social activities of gender variants due to their intermediate gender status, such as acting as go-betweens in marriage. Through their diverse occupations, then, gender variants were often central rather than marginal in their societies.

Early anthropological explanations of male gender variant roles as a niche for a “failed” or cowardly man who wished to avoid warfare or other aspects of the masculine role are no longer widely accepted. To begin with, masculinity was not associated with warrior status in all American Indian cultures. In some societies, male gender variants were warriors and in many others, men who rejected the warrior role did not become gender variants. Sometimes male gender variants did not go to war because of cultural prohibitions against their using symbols of maleness, for
example, the prohibition against their using the bow among the Illinois. Where male gender variants did not fight, they sometimes had other important roles in warfare, like treating the wounded, carrying supplies for the war party, or directing postbattle ceremonials (Callender and Kochems 1983:449). In a few societies male gender variants became outstanding warriors, such as Finds Them and Kills Them, a Crow Indian who performed daring feats of bravery while fighting with the United States Army against the Crow’s traditional enemies, the Lakota Sioux (Roscoe and Murray 1998:23).

**Gender Variance and Sexuality**

Generally, sexuality was not central in defining gender status among American Indians. But in any case, the assumption by European observers that gender variants were homosexuals meant they did not take much trouble to investigate or record information on this topic. In some American Indian societies same-sex sexual desire/practice did figure significantly in the definition of gender variant roles; in others it did not (Callender and Kochems 1983:449). Some early reports noted specifically that male gender variants lived with and/or had sexual relations with women as well as men; in other societies they were reported as having sexual relations only with men, and in still other societies, of having no sexual relationships at all (Lang 1998:189–95).

The bisexual orientation of some gender variant persons may have been a culturally accepted expression of their gender variance. It may have resulted from an individual’s life experiences, such as the age at which he or she entered the gender variant role, and/or it may have been one aspect of the general freedom of sexual expression in many American Indian societies. While male and female gender variants most frequently had sexual relations with, or married, persons of the same biological sex as themselves, these relationships were not considered homosexual in the contemporary Western understanding of that term. In a multiple gender system the partners would be of the same sex but different genders, and homogender, rather than homosexual, practices bore the brunt of negative cultural sanctions. The sexual partners of gender variants were never considered gender variants themselves.

The Navajo are a good example (Thomas 1997). The Navajo have four genders; in addition to man and woman there are two gender variants: masculine female-bodied nádleeh and feminine male-bodied nádleeh. A sexual relationship between a female nádleeh and a woman or a sexual relationship between a male-bodied nádleeh and a man were not stigmatized because these persons were of different genders, although of the same biological sex. However, a sexual relationship between two women, two men, two female-bodied nádleeh or two male-bodied nádleeh, was considered homosexual, and even incestual, and was strongly disapproved of.

The relation of sexuality to variant sex/gender roles across North America suggests that sexual relations between gender variants and persons of the same biological sex were a result rather than a cause of gender variance. Sexual relationships between a man and a male gender variant were accepted in most American Indian societies, though not in all, and appear to have been negatively sanctioned only when it interfered with child-producing heterosexual marriages. Gender variants’ sexual relationships varied from casual and wide-ranging (Europeans used the term promiscuous), to stable, and sometimes even involved life-long marriages. In some societies, however, male gender variants were not permitted to engage in long-term relationships with men, either in or out of wedlock. In many cases, gender variants were reported as living alone.

There are some practical reasons why a man might desire sexual relations with a (male) gender variant: in some societies taboos on sexual relations with menstruating or pregnant women restricted opportunities for sexual intercourse; in other societies, sexual relations with a gender variant person were exempt from punishment for extramarital affairs; in still other societies, for example, among the Navajo, some gender variants were considered especially lucky and a man
might hope to vicariously partake of this quality by having sexual relations with them (Lang 1998:349).

**Biological Sex and Gender**

Transformations

European observers often confused gender variants with hermaphrodites. Some American Indian societies explicitly distinguished hermaphrodites from gender variants and treated them differently; others assigned gender variant persons and hermaphrodites to the same alternative gender status. With the exception of the Navajo, in most American Indian societies biological sex (or the intersexedness of the hermaphrodite) was not the criterion for a gender variant role, nor were the individuals who occupied gender variant roles anatomically abnormal. The Navajo distinguished between the intersexed and the alternatively gendered, but treated them similarly, though not exactly the same (Thomas 1997; Hill 1935).

And even as the traditional Navajo sex/gender system had biological sex as its starting point, it was only a starting point, and Navajo nádleeh were distinguished by sex-linked behaviors, such as body language, clothing, ceremonial roles, speech style, and work. Feminine, male-bodied nádleeh might engage in women’s activities such as cooking, weaving, household tasks, and making pottery. Masculine, female-bodied nádleeh, unlike other female-bodied persons, avoided childbirth; today they are associated with male occupational roles such as construction or firefighting (although ordinary women also sometimes engage in these occupations). Traditionally, female-bodied nádleeh had specific roles in Navajo ceremonials.

Thus, even where hermaphrodites occupied a special gender variant role, American Indian gender variance was defined more by cultural than biological criteria. In one recorded case of an interview with and physical examination of a gender variant male, the previously mentioned Finds Them and Kills Them, his genitals were found to be completely normal (Roscoe and Murray 1998).

If American Indian gender variants were not generally hermaphrodites, or conceptualized as such, neither were they conceptualized as transsexuals. Gender transformations among gender variants were recognized as only a partial transformation, and the gender variant was not thought of as having become a person of the opposite sex/gender. Rather, gender variant roles were autonomous gender roles that combined the characteristics of men and women and had some unique features of their own. This was sometimes symbolically recognized: among the Zuni a male gender variant was buried in women’s dress but men’s trousers on the men’s side of the graveyard (Parsons quoted in Callender and Kochems 1983:454; Roscoe 1991:124, 145). Male gender variants were neither men—by virtue of their chosen occupations, dress, demeanor, and possibly sexuality—nor women, because of their anatomy and their inability to bear children. Only among the Mohave do we find the extreme imitation of women’s physiological processes related to reproduction and the claims to have female sexual organs—both of which were ridiculed within Mohave society. But even here, where informants reported that female gender variants did not menstruate, this did not make them culturally men. Rather it was the mixed quality of gender variant status that was culturally elaborated in native North America, and this was the source of supernatural powers sometimes attributed to them.

**Sacred Power**

The association between the spiritual power and gender variance occurred in most, if not all, Native American societies. Even where, as previously noted, recruitment to the role was occasioned by a child’s interest in occupational activities of the opposite sex, supernatural sanction, frequently appearing in visions or dreams, was also involved. Where this occurred, as it did mainly in the Prairie and Plains societies, the visions involved female supernatural figures,
often the moon. Among the Omaha, for example, the moon appeared in a dream holding a burden strap—a symbol of female work—in one hand, and a bow—a symbol of male work—in the other. When the male dreamer reached for the bow, the moon forced him to take the burden strap (Whitehead 1981). Among the Mohave, a child’s choice of male or female implements heralding gender variant status was sometimes prefigured by a dream that was believed to come to an embryo in the womb (Devereux 1937).

Sometimes, by virtue of the power associated with their gender ambiguity, gender variants were ritual adepts and curers, or had special ritual functions (Callender and Kochems 1983:453, Lang 1998). Gender variants did not always have important sacred roles in native North America, however. Where feminine qualities were associated with these roles, male gender variants might become spiritual leaders or healers, but where these roles were associated with male qualities they were not entered into by male gender variants. Among the Plains Indians, with their emphasis on the vision as a source of supernatural power, male gender variants were regarded as holy persons, but in California Indian societies, this was not the case and in some American Indian societies gender variants were specifically excluded from religious roles (Lang 1998:167). Sometimes it was the individual personality of the gender variant rather than his/her gender variance itself, that resulted in occupying sacred roles (see Commentary following Callender and Kochems 1983). Nevertheless, the importance of sacred power was so widely associated with sex/gender diversity in native North America that it is generally agreed to be an important explanation of the frequency of gender diversity in this region of the world.

In spite of cultural differences, some significant similarities among American Indian societies are particularly consistent with multigender systems and the positive value placed on sex/gender diversity (Lang 1996). One of these similarities is a cosmology (system of religious beliefs and way of seeing the world) in which transformation and ambiguity are recurring themes. Thus a person who contains both masculine and feminine qualities or one who is transformed from the sex/gender assigned at birth into a different gender in later life manifests some of the many kinds of transformations and ambiguities that are possible, not only for humans, but for animals and objects in the natural environment. Indeed, in many American Indian cultures, sex/gender ambiguity, lack of sexual differentiation, and sex/gender transformations play an important part in the story of creation. American Indian cosmology may not be “the cause” of sex/gender diversity but it certainly (as in India) provides a hospitable context for it (Lang 1996:187). . . .

As a result of Euro-American repression and the growing assimilation of Euro-American sex/gender ideologies, both female and male gender variant roles among American Indians largely disappeared by the 1930s, as the reservation system was well under way. And yet, its echoes may remain. The current academic interest in American Indian multigender roles, and particularly the testimony of contemporary two-spirits, remind us that alternatives are possible and that understanding American Indian sex/gender diversity in the past and present makes a significant contribution to understandings of sex/gender diversity in the larger society.

REFERENCES


---

**Topics for Further Examination**

- Visit the Web site of the Intersex Society of North America (http://www.isna.org) and read the organization’s mission statement and tips for parents. The blog posts are also interesting. In addition, you will find Web sites on male lactation and men breastfeeding to be helpful in expanding your understanding of biological overlap between males and females.
- Locate research on gender-bending in the arts (e.g., performance art, literature, music videos). For example, visit Diane Torr’s Web site (http://www.dianetorr.com).
- Google “doing gender” and explore the many Web sites that discuss the concept and its application.