CREATING A WORLD OF DICHOTOMY

Categorizing Sex and Gendering Cultural Messages

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The third reading in this introductory section is by Sara L. Crawley, Lara J. Foley, and Constance L. Shehan, all sociologists who study gender. This excerpt is taken from their 2008 book, *Gendering Bodies*, and it provides a thorough overview of the concepts of and explanations for sex and gender. Sociologists often distinguish between sex (biological attributes of femaleness and maleness) and gender (the social and cultural meanings of femininity and masculinity). The authors’ work here is primarily concerned with how cultural messages about gender often determine the gendered experiences of bodies, and thus the social (cultural) becomes intertwined with the physical world and gets demarcated on our bodies.

With the courage to confront, understand, and redefine our incorrigible propositions, we can begin to discover new scientific knowledge and to construct new realities in everyday life (Kessler and McKenna 1978:167).

In U.S. culture, we commonly assume that our physiological bodies (in particular notions of femaleness or maleness and presumptions about physical size, strength, and reproductive capacities) determine our social roles. Here we argue that this is a premature conclusion. There is no necessary relationship between one’s capacity to produce ova or sperm (or lack of capacity to produce either) and acting “ladylike” or “manly.” We too commonly assume that social expectations come from bodily necessity. In our everyday lives we are so practiced

at conforming the uses of our bodies to gendered expectations that we assume our comfort with those practices comes from nature. In this reading, we wish to reverse the casual direction and turn that commonsense argument on its head. We argue that cultural messages that form our expectations and "rules" about gender determine the gendered experiences of our bodies—our embodied knowledge, and that these messages and our resulting gendered practices help to shape our physical bodies as well. Thus, social messages and physical ("natural") bodies are inextricably inseparable. There is no physical body separate from social practices (which originate from gendered messages). There is no social experience separable from physical bodies. The imprint of physical propensities and social experiences exists in each person. In essence, the social world and the physical world co-construct gendered bodies.

GENDER DOES NOT EXIST, BUT IT IS REAL

Gender is a bit of a conundrum. On the one hand, social constructionism suggests that the differences between women and men that we identify as significant (i.e., femininity and masculinity) are products of the social world, not nature. So, like laws, U.S. currency, and the Western calendar, gender is a system of organizing that Western cultures have devised to organize and make sense of our lives. (All cultures use gender as an organizing system but may not all use the system in exactly the same ways.) Importantly, because gender is "done" by us rather than innate within us, we can decide whether and how to allow the organization of gender to affect us in the future, if we choose to be attentive to its effects. Social constructionism stands in sharp contrast to the essentialist notion of biological determinism. Essentialism is the notion that there is an enduring truth to be found if only we look hard enough. For example, to believe that a real difference between women and men resides in the body is an essentialist belief. This belief is the basis of evolutionary theory or biological determinism—the notion that women and men have been bred to be different animals, adapting to evolutionary functional necessities. Social constructionism is the response to evolutionary theory that argues that what we understand as "appropriately" feminine and masculine are social evaluations, not physical necessities, and are based on social organization, not physiological adaptation. Clearly, we lean much more strongly in the direction of social constructionism.

On the other hand, gender inequality exists (as do inequalities based on race, class, sexuality, age, and ability, among others). That is, there are a number of very measurable, and hence seemingly real, social disadvantages experienced by people who are not members of the dominant group (e.g., income and wealth inequality, unequal access to jobs, unequal representation in politics, etc.). Hence, even though socially constructed phenomena are not "real" in terms of being an innate part of our bodies, they are real in their effects on our lives and life chances (and in many ways their effects may leave a mark on our bodies as well).

So, while it seems clear that gender is socially constructed, it seems equally clear that the effects of gender are quite real. As a result, we argue that gender does not exist (in nature) but it is real (in terms of real consequences, including various structural inequalities, physical violence, etc.). In this way, we can remain attentive to both the theoretical perspectives that understand gender as constructed, as well as the material effects that the system of gender has on the lives of real people. In other words, we see both the theoretical relevance of gender theory and the practical application of gendered experiences in the lives of actual people.

A social constructionist perspective on social problems argues that people live in two worlds simultaneously (and inseparably): the physical world and the symbolic world (Loseke 1999). We only know the physical world through the interpretations that we make of it, and conversely, there is no world of meaning outside of our physical place in the world—in the body.

We see gender and embodied knowledge (knowledge of self and others via experiences of one’s body) in the same way. Gender exists in both the world of
language, images, and interactions (which always have significance attached) and the physical practices and experiences of the body (Paechter 2003, 2006). Every use of the body has meaning. Every meaning and interpretation is experienced through the body. Hence, each body is an ever-developing process that begins with a physiological basis but on which constant social intervention makes its mark (Shilling 1993; Turner 1996). Therefore, we will never ask the question: Is it nature or nurture? We always understand gendered experiences as a combination of both physiological experience and social interpretation.

Nonetheless, we suggest that the physical effects of social practices are far more flexible than has been popularly imagined. The sizes and shapes of bodies are a result of social practices (e.g., nutrition, dieting, fitness, surgical alteration, contraceptive practices, female and male circumcision), just as social practices are designed to meet physical needs (e.g., food preparation and distribution, creating and obtaining shelter, sanitary practices) (Cashmore 2005; Connell 2002; Lorber 1994). Therefore, we are attentive to cultural messages and social practices. Like Lorber (1994), we see gender as something that most of us first believe to be true of bodies and that we then find selectively in the world of social practice. Lorber writes, “Gendered people do not emerge from physiology or hormones but from the exigencies of social order, from the need for reliable division of the work of food production and the social (not physical) reproduction of new members” (19).

In other words, although our physiological bodies emerge from nature, gender—as a part of social organization—defines what is “appropriate” in the uses of our bodies. Lorber continues, “I am not saying that physical differences between male and female bodies don’t exist, but that these differences are socially meaningless until social practices transform them into social facts” (18).

To suggest that gender is a social construction is to argue that there are “rules” (which originate in cultural messages) of appropriate behavior for women and men, and that those rules do not inhere in nature (that is, they do not originate from within our bodies), but they are mandated by social participation. In other words, “we” made them up—what we consider appropriate comes from the social world. Much like laws, the “rules” of gender have developed over time through social participation. While these rules of behavior are based on expectations about bodies (femaleness or maleness), they rarely have to do with bodily capacities. For example, it is traditional for men to open doors for women. However, there is no physiological reason for this expectation. Women and men both have hands with opposable thumbs such that door opening is generally not problematic (unless a particular person has a physical difference, such as being wheelchair bound). Genitalia are not commonly used in the opening of doors. Hence, there is no necessary reason to expect that maleness or femaleness renders one a better door opener. Nonetheless, the tradition of door opening is based on a social expectation about female and male bodies. This example demonstrates how the “rules” of appropriate gender behavior are more about gender performance than physiological necessity. They are more about what we expect of female or male people than about what female or male bodies require or can accomplish physically.

To suggest that gender—the rules of “appropriate” participation—is socially constructed is not to suggest that gender expectations are not serious. Gender is serious business. If you have broken the rules, you will know about it. Your peers, mentors, families, friends, authority figures, and sometimes even strangers will indicate it to you with more or less formalized types of sanctions: perhaps by giving you a nasty look, making an unpleasant remark, or beating you up or arresting you. Oftentimes if you have broken the rules, you will feel it intuitively or viscerally; even without comment or response from another person (because these rules are so practiced you already know what response to expect).

Additionally, recognizing gender as a social construction does not suggest that physiology and the social world are fully separable. Indeed, the overarching argument throughout this book is that, while gender is socially constructed, it is so “real,” serious, and pervasive as to change the way in which
we experience our bodies and the ways we use our bodies—over time resulting in changes to physical capacities (e.g., strength, size, proportion).

But to further shore up our argument, we can demonstrate that gender is socially constructed because gender expectations change over time and across cultures. While some gendered system has always historically existed in the United States, what is considered appropriately masculine or feminine has changed considerably over just the past 50 years. For example, Feinberg (1996) reports that in the 1950s in Albany, New York, a person could have been arrested for dressing inappropriately for one’s gender (sometimes called cross-dressing). The law required each person to be wearing at least three pieces of gender-appropriate clothing. Feinberg reports that this law was primarily applied to arrest people who attended lesbian and gay bars, above all drag queens and butch women, who she reports were regularly beaten and raped by the police. Given that cross-dressing performances, such as drag queen and drag king performances, are common in most major cities today, and that celebrities such as David Bowie, RuPaul, Boy George, k.d. lang, Dennis Rodman, Ellen DeGeneres, and Marilyn Manson, among others, have become famous while gender bending (nonconforming in terms of styles of dress and fashion) since the 1950s example above, we can say that expectations about gender performances have changed and are changing. Similarly, the once common notion of the stay-at-home mom as the core of the (white) nuclear family (as seen in the television shows Leave It to Beaver and Father Knows Best) has shifted considerably out of economic necessity in the twenty-first century to the extent that it is much more likely today than in the past to expect mothers to work (Coontz 1992). In actuality, throughout U.S. history, the notion of a stay-at-home mom was only reserved for economically privileged, mostly white families. Women of color, especially immigrant women, have always been expected to work, even in extremely arduous jobs—such as domestic labor and immigrant farming.

In the nineteenth century, during the U.S. transition to capitalist industrialism, an ideology referred to as the cult of true womanhood (Welter 1978) emerged. It reflected the movement of economic work out of the home and into separate workplaces. The division between public and private worlds prescribed a division of labor by gender, with men following production out of the home and women remaining in the home to tend to reproductive issues. The home became the proper sphere for women’s interests and influence. This gendered division of labor was accompanied by new beliefs about women’s “natural superiority” as caregivers and moral custodians of the home. This ideology of women’s true place, although aspired to by families of all social classes, was not easily attainable. Many families depended on the paid labor of women and could not afford to have them sitting “idle” at home. Thus, the cult of true womanhood functioned as a class ideology. It was a way for white, middle-class families to distinguish themselves from people of color and working-class white people. However, even for white middle-class wives, the cult of true womanhood restricted life options to home and family. So, notions of appropriate femininity (including expectations of physical strength of female bodies) have always been a matter of context and have shifted across time and social strata.

Further, notions of appropriate behavior for female and male people differ considerably across cultures and religious traditions. With the renewed sensationalism in the U.S. media during the Second Gulf War about Muslim women in Iraq and Afghanistan wearing burqas, and the various interpretations of this practice, it is clear that clothing imperatives differ greatly between the United States and other countries. Beyond mere clothing imperatives, other cultures allow for gender switching or gender ambiguity in ways to which U.S. culture provides no recognizable parallels. For example, Brown (1997) writes about the existence of “Two Spirit People” among some Native American cultures who he argues occupy six different gender positions, some of which are not analogous to any gender position in Western cultures. Additionally, Young (2000) writes about “women who become men” in rural Albania—female-bodied people who become “sworn virgins” and legitimately live their lives and dress as men in Albanian culture. Again,
this form of gender switching has no legitimated and recognized parallel in the United States. So, while we regularly take current-day notions of masculinity and femininity as normative—a given—in our everyday lives, it need not be so.

Why Only Two? Understanding Dualisms and Typifications

Before understanding how gender works, we need to first examine two important attributes about Western thought—dualistic thinking and typification. Both dualistic thinking and typification create the categorization system that allows us to believe in the naturalness of femaleness and maleness.

In Western cultures, we tend to practice dualistic thinking (Bordo 1986; Jay 1981; Sprague 1997). In other words, we tend to think in terms of two options (i.e., either/or). That is, we utilize the most simple category system—one or the other. Common sense tells us there are “two sides to every argument” or “two sides of a coin.” Of course, we could think of coins as continuous circles or arguments as having an unlimited number of complex sides (? 27?). But we commonly refer to most issues in terms of simple dualisms or binaries. Some examples are as follows: right/wrong, white/black, man/woman, straight/gay, citizen/alien, rational/emotional, abstract/concrete, public/private, up/down, high/low, divine/mortal, capitalist/worker, masculine/feminine. Not only do we conceptualize in terms of dualisms, but we imagine them as polar opposites—mutually exclusive categories with no gray area in between.

While this practice may seem innocent enough, there are at least two particular problems with dualistic thinking. First, thinking in terms of two and only two possible options masks the complexity of the world. Imagine trying to describe all the variety of flowers in terms of one type or the other. Can you describe trees in terms of two options? Let’s assume all trees can be described as deciduous (those that shed their leaves once a year) or evergreens. If someone giving you directions were to tell you to turn left at the deciduous tree, would you have any idea to which tree they were referring? Categorizing in terms of twos greatly reduces the variability with which we can describe the world—and falsely so. It too narrowly focuses our attention to very limited criteria. Not only can we not describe wide variety, but we are continually focused on the simple categories created.

The second problem with dualisms is that we rarely create equal and opposite options within our dualisms. We tend to think hierarchically. That is, we rank the options. Rational is imagined as better than emotional. Even space is understood hierarchically—up is better than down; high is better than low. Of course, in many ways this is nonsensical. Exactly how up is “up” enough? If high is better than low, how do we know how high is high? Is four feet off the ground “high” or “low”? Is it “high” if the other option is two feet off the ground? Or is it that high is good but higher is always better? Clearly the ideas of high and low are relative and never provide enough information to fully understand a complex situation. Nonetheless, we use this dualism to be somehow informative.

Gender expectations fall into Western practices of thinking dualistically (Bem 1993; Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1996). We think in terms of masculine = male and feminine = female. We often think this is linked to expectations of “natural” reproduction. Interestingly, we do not categorize based on actual reproductive capacity—those who can reproduce (the fertiles) and those who cannot (the nonfertiles) (Kessler and McKenna 1978). Perhaps we avoid this dualism because it is not readily apparent upon sight exactly who falls into each group. After all, the nonfertiles would be comprised of the very young (not yet fertile) and the old (beyond fertile age), as well as some younger adults who simply will never be fertile. Similarly, the gender binary is based on presumptions about the clothed, visible body—presumptions about genitalia and reproductive capacity (Kessler 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987). . .
think in terms of what is typical. So while desks can come in a variety of styles comprised of a variety of materials, when one thinks of “desk,” one has a mental picture of the thing that is typical of desk. Indeed, language is categorical. You do not have to be thinking of a particular desk (your desk, for example) to imagine “desk” as a type of thing that is used in typical ways. The word d–e–s–k is a marker for that typical thing into which a wide variety of actual objects fall. Typifications are abstract notions that group physical objects into manageable categories (Zerubavel 1996). If you could not typify, you would have to figure out each object that you encounter as if it were new to you each time you encounter it. For Schutz, typifications are useful and necessary. Without the ability to typify, language itself would not exist. So typifications are very efficient and useful in the development of language.

Of course, people are objects about which typifications can be applied. When applied to people, typifications may be thought of by the more familiar term stereotypes. Stereotyping is the use of commonsense (often discriminatory) assumptions about groups of people to make predictions about characteristics of an individual. Indeed, as physical objects, people are readily stereotyped based on visual cues of the physical body.

There are some qualities of typifications that make it problematic to apply them to people. First, typifications are acquired in the everyday world of interaction. That is, they develop through our interactions into what we call common sense—the collections of our experiences within a culture. In other words, our typifications are not based on scientific measurement and testing, but rather on acting and interacting within our culture, specifically that part of our culture that is most familiar to us. So what you believe is true or typical is based only on the biases of your own cultural experiences.

Also, the existing category system blinds us to other possibilities. Once we have developed notions of the typical, we focus our attention on the typical, not the aberration, often even when the aberration is common. That is, rather than upset our category system, we simply call that thing that doesn’t fit “atypical” (“Oh, that’s not typical!”) and dismiss it. . .

**Heteronormativity and the Gender Box Structure**

Our binary notions of “typical” bodies suggest our rules for interaction have a basis in the “natural” body. True to our Western intellectual origins, these so-called “natural” bodies are also understood in hierarchical ways. We see male bodies (and hence men) as strong, tall, powerful, and aggressive; and female bodies (and hence women) as small, petite, elegant, and in need of protection. In our culture, the male body is understood as physically better than the female body—that is, we see males as “naturally physically superior” to females. This means that we as a culture do not understand the ability to give birth to human life as strength or an indicator of any sort of physical superiority; it is attributed to the “weak” female body.

Notice that all this discussion relies on typifications—generalized ideas about everyone falling into the groups “women” and “men.” Whereas we know that not all men are stronger than all women and that not all men are taller than all women, we typify “women” as small and “men” as tall and ignore any evidence to the contrary. If we notice the differences, we have to amend our categories, and that is often too challenging.

**Heteronormativity** is the belief that institutionalized heterosexuality should be the standard for legitimate intimate relationships (Ingraham 1996:169). Within the heteronormative paradigm, sex, gender, and sexual orientation are ideologically fused and are assumed to be based on innate characteristics of the body, rather than social prescriptions (Butler 1990; Kessler 1998; Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1996; West and Zimmerman 1987). That is, they are presumed to be “natural” and reliant on whether one has a penis or a vagina (which has historically been understood as lack of a penis [de Beauvoir 1952; Kessler 1998]). So in practice, when we see a person (or even imagine the sight of someone, for example, when interacting virtually via the Internet), we first attribute biological sex (femaleness or maleness) to that person, then implicitly apply expectations for gendered behavior (modes of dress, uses of the body) and heterosexual practices.
(coupling with an “opposite” partner). That is, we typify each person or “place them in a box”—the female box or the male box (Figure 3.1).

Two points are particularly pertinent in this figure. First, notice that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are fused and assumed to be attached to biological bodies. So, if we believe we know the sex of the person, we also believe we know the gender and sexual orientation of the person. Second, notice that there is a space between the boxes where presumably no one can exist. That is, this is an instance of Western dualistic thought that provides for two and only two options that are understood as mutually exclusive (not overlapping). In other words, we understand all people to fit in either one box or the other. Anyone not fitting in these boxes is understood as “unnatural,” “not normal,” aberrant, an outlier. And so we “throw them out”—place them outside the realm of our acknowledgment or understanding. Like all dualisms, this box structure is far too narrowly focused to accurately and colorfully describe the human diversity that we know to exist.

We know people who do not fit our typifications; we just choose not to figure them into our categories. And, like all dualisms, we implicitly create a hierarchy in which to have a penis (be masculine, be the “active” sexual participant) is understood as better than to have no penis (be feminine, be the “passive” sexual recipient).

... We argue that the gender box structure is both unnecessary and inaccurate in understanding and describing human experience. Far greater diversity of humanity exists than is imagined and described by heteronormative paradigms. We provide an alternative theory of how gender works shortly.

Are all girls feminine and all boys masculine? ... In your everyday experience of the world, you are likely to say no. Each of us knows people who do not readily fit the prescriptions of femininity or masculinity, whether by conscious or seemingly unconscious choice. We know men who enjoy cooking and women who are Marines, and so forth. In fact, not all people who may be considered normatively masculine or feminine engage in masculine or feminine activities all the time. For example, if a woman is good at ice hockey, does that make her masculine? If a man is changing a diaper, does that make him feminine? Perhaps you might say, “It’s not fair to question someone’s identity just because they are good at sports or because they care for their children!” But isn’t that how we
assign those identities in the first place? If a man is good at sports, we see him as masculine. If a woman is good at sports, we see her as “pretty good for a girl.” Or perhaps we even question whether she is a real girl by suggesting she is lesbian. If a woman is changing a diaper, we assume she is enacting her nurturing “nature.” If a man is changing a diaper, we avoid seeing him as feminine; rather we say he’s a good dad even though nurturing activities are supposed to be related to femininity. Hence, we fall back into the box structure typifications. Yet we know many female-bodied people who are good athletes and male-bodied people who care for children. What we argue, then, is that via the gender box structure, we understand activities as gendered and then we encourage or discourage people with certain presumed genitalia to or from participating. We think of sports as typically masculine and cooking as typically feminine and then typify people who do them. Anyone can play ice hockey. Anyone can cook. Yet we make significance out of who does what, when, and how. More importantly, there is a performance style to playing sports and cooking that suggests a “realness” to our understandings of gender assignments.

We use typifications to think about sexuality also. Is it true that all people are heterosexual? No, quite a large number of people identify as homosexual, some of whom have received a good bit of celebrity in the last 10 years via television and popular culture. It is very likely that you know someone who does not identify as heterosexual. Is it true that all people are either heterosexual or homosexual (another Western binary)? No, there are people who identify as bisexual. Does bisexuality mean always preferring women and men at all times? Does it imply serial monogamy (my current partner is x but future partners could be x or y)? Does it mean sexually voracious—or wanting sex all the time with any willing partner? Bisexuality is often understood as a problematic category because it does not easily align with binary notions of homo or hetero and confuses the “naturalness” of binary biological sex urges, and hence becomes politically confusing to those who prefer neat categories (Rust 1995). Do you believe that someone can have attractions to females and males throughout their entire lives? Many people report just that.

Additionally, do people always identify in one of those categories for their entire lives? What is the defining characteristic of someone’s “real” sexual orientation? Sexual practices? Whom they desire? How they choose to self-identify? This, in fact, is the classic question in studies of sexual orientation opened by Kinsey’s (1948, 1953) famous studies in which he asserted that a great deal of the U.S. population could be labeled bisexual based on reports of his participants of same-sex sexual practices, desires, or identities. If sexual orientation is an essentially true characteristic about people, how do we determine the “true” orientation of each of us?

Let’s assume sexuality is based on with whom you have had sexual contact. If a female-bodied person currently identifies as lesbian but had sex with men until age 30, is she lesbian or bisexual? If a person has never had sex with anyone (i.e., the person is a “virgin”), can they have a sexual orientation? Perhaps sexuality is based on how people identify themselves. If a man identifies as heterosexual but occasionally has sex with men, is he straight or gay? This scenario is apparently much more common than common-sense knowledge would have predicted, or Kinsey’s study (1948) would not have caused such lengthy discussion both in and out of the academy. If you said he’s gay, then you’ve admitted that your definition of someone’s sexuality is as salient as that person’s definition. In other words, identity is co-constructed between a person and the social context in which others label that person. If someone identifies as heterosexual and engages in a three-some with both a male and female partner, is that person bisexual by definition? If you answered no to this and “gay” to the previous question, you have just contradicted your own theory of sexuality.

Perhaps you imagine that the answer lies in whom the person desires. So, if the male person who occasionally has sex with another man does not express desire for him (“It’s just sex—a way to get off.”), is that not “gay” sex? What if the two men are having sex for the voyeuristic enjoyment of a female person: are all three heterosexual? If a female person has always been married heterosexually but secretly
dreams of sex with women, is she “really” lesbian—even if she only has sex with her heterosexually married partner?

Sexuality is not nearly as clear-cut as we imagine it. Life experiences and sexual histories of individuals are not continuously consistent over time. Sexual practices, identities, and desires often do not align consistently; some people report desire without sexual contact, or contact without desire, or identities that do not match practices (Schwartz and Rutter 1998). Interestingly, in U.S. culture, the notion of sexual orientation is not based strictly on an individual’s characteristics, but on the sex of their partner. Further, this notion of sexuality has not been the definition of appropriate sexuality throughout time or across cultures—that is, it is a socially constructed notion of sexuality (Katz 1995; Rubin 2003; Weeks 2003). Katz (1995) writes that our notion of “heterosexuality” is a modern invention originating in the second half of the nineteenth century. It appeared in the dictionary after the word “homosexual” appeared in the dictionary. Prior to this time frame, various notions of sexuality existed. Of course, same-sex sexual practices have been recorded throughout history, but the ways in which people have understood them have changed considerably. Halperin (1989) writes of Ancient Greek cultures in which sexual prerogative was defined by citizenship (land ownership) such that to be a citizen meant that one could have sexual relations with any noncitizen (female or male). Hence, the notion of “orientation” was nonsensical to Ancient Greeks. Further, in current cultures in other areas of the world, if a man is having anal sex with another man, it does not automatically imply that both men are understood as gay. Almaguer (1993) writes that in some subcultures in northern Mexico, the active partner is *activo* or masculine, and hence not stigmatized; whereas the partner who allows himself to be penetrated is *pasivo* and stigmatized as feminine (essentially made a woman). In the United States, some men secretly engage in sex with other men while considering themselves to be heterosexual (Humphreys 1970; King 2005). The slang term for this practice is “on the down low.” A significant concern about this practice is that many of these men have female partners or wives to whom they do not reveal their (often unprotected) sexual interactions with men, hence risking HIV infection for their unsuspecting female partners (King 2005).

So notions of sexual practices, sexual identities, gendered activities, and gendered participation in the world are much fuzzier than the dichotomous box structure would predict. Although people regularly use these typifications of gender and sexuality, the dichotomous box structure simply does not describe the vast variability of experiences and practices in the world. But what about so-called biological sex? Can that be dichotomous?

**What About Nature?**

Isn’t it true that all people are born unambiguously female or male? No, a significant portion of the human population (estimated at 1.7% of live births) are born *intersexed*—that is, born with various ambiguities of genital appearance or chromosomal or hormonal differences (Blackless et al. 2000; Fausto-Sterling 2005:51). In other words, some people do not fit into the dichotomous standard of femaleness or maleness, based on some genital, chromosomal, or hormonal difference (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kessler 1998). The works of Anne Fausto-Sterling and Suzanne Kessler demonstrate to us how the “problem” of intersexuality is a problem of normative categories, not a problem of bodies or intersexed people themselves.

Kessler documents the process of twentieth-century medical practice in the United States that has come to define genital difference as “abnormal” or even “deviant” and in need of surgical change in *intersexed* children. During the so-called progress of twentieth-century medical science, doctors began making surgical changes to “fix” the genitals of intersexed infants that could not be clearly assigned a sex category. In other words, a sex category (female or male) was chosen for the child and normative-appearing genitals surgically constructed based on the greatest likeness the doctors felt could be achieved (based on medical abilities of the particular time). The medical premise for such changes was that intersexed bodies were “abnormal” or “a mistake” of nature that
medical science proposed to “fix.” Having surgically and hormonally “fixed” these so-called aberrant bodies, doctors were purported to have made these children “normal” so they might fit into the “biological” order of femaleness and maleness. In essence, doctors were purported to make these ambiguous bodies into “normal” women and men (Kessler 1998). . . .

Unfortunately, these doctors’ protocols left little concern for the sexual pleasure of the surgically altered children when they reached adulthood or any consideration of the possibility of sexual pleasure outside the penile-vaginal penetrative model. Hence, any loss of sensation from surgical intervention was considered irrelevant to the medical necessity of knowing gender from birth. Additionally, no latitude was given to allowing the child self-definition. It was not until the early 1990s that adult intersexed persons began to advocate for a change to the treatment of intersexed babies, favoring self-elective surgeries later in life (if at all). The Intersex Society of North America,7 an advocacy and information-providing organization originated by Cheryl Chase, emerged in the early 1990s to advocate self-determination to the American Medical Association. Only in very recent years has the medical establishment seemed willing to listen.

In addition to Kessler’s work, there is a large body of literature from transgendered or transsexual people who testify to not fitting into the heteronormative box structure and, hence, the social problematic of the category system itself (Bornstein 1994; Crawley and Broad 2004; Feinberg 1996). Transsexual (a term generally reserved for those who have undertaken some form of surgical alteration of the body) and transgendered (a broader term that denotes anyone who defines themselves as not fitting the requisite body/gender dualism prescribed by heteronormativity) people challenge the preeminence of the body’s determination of the person or psyche. If we take seriously the earnest reports of adult transsexuals and transgendered people that their bodies need to be made to conform to fit their own gender expectations (i.e., making some genital surgical changes such that the body matches the person they wish to display), we must recognize that genitals are not the origin of psyche or self.8 Indeed, the very idea that a person can “change sex” surgically or hormonally (or both) suggests that bodies (and, thus, sex itself) are malleable. If we can surgically change sexes, how fixed or original, then, can biology be? And, how useful is bodily appearance in predicting sex? . . .

Fausto-Sterling (1986, 2000) supports our argument that so-called biological sex is more a continuum than a dichotomy, by recognizing that there remains no accurate, consistent, and reliable measure of so-called biological sex. That’s right, there is nonspecific, distinct measure that will consistently determine maleness or femaleness for all persons. We have already shown that genital appearance is not a useful test. Sex chromosomes come in more interesting combinations than just XX = female and XY = male, with varying results, some of which are not physically transparent. Hormones are the least well understood component of all. While decades of research have assumed that testosterone influences male aggression and estrogen makes people want to cuddle babies, much of this research has not questioned the relationship of hormones to maleness and femaleness. Testosterone and estrogen have been typed as “sex hormones” for little reason, according to Fausto-Sterling (2000), since all bodies possess both kinds of hormones and both function in many ways to affect the body far beyond one’s sex organs. She writes:

Why, then, have hormones always been strongly associated with the idea of sex, when, in fact, “sex hormones” apparently affect organs throughout the entire body and are not specific to either gender? The brain, lungs, bones, blood vessels, intestine, and liver (to give a partial list) all use estrogen to maintain proper growth and development. . . . Researchers accomplished this feat by defining as sex hormones what are, in effect, multi-site chemical growth regulators, thus rendering their far-reaching, non-sexual roles in both male and female development nearly invisible. (147)

Most importantly, Fausto-Sterling offers the critique that scientists’ social presumptions about
bodies originate in the gender box structure that has far too narrowly focused scientific study and, hence, our interpretation of its results. To paraphrase Lorber’s (1993) important article, “Believing Is Seeing,” first we believed in gender, then we found it in bodies (578).

THE GENDER FEEDBACK LOOP

We propose a new diagram that we call the gender feedback loop that we believe describes the lived experience of individuals much better than the heteronormative box structure. Rather than suggest that the human population fits into one of two “natural” boxes, we assert that each person experiences a feedback loop of ideas about bodies and what are deemed appropriate gender expressions that entice each of us to behave as expected. Mapping out her argument for the social embodiment of gender, Connell (2002) agrees with our argument for a gender feedback loop when she writes:

Bodies are both objects of social practice and agents in social practice. The same bodies, at the same time, are both. . . . There is a loop, circuit, linking bodily processes and social structures. In fact, there is a tremendous number of such circuits. They occur in historical time, and change over time. They add up to the historical process in which society is embodied, and bodies are drawn into history. (47)

This loop ultimately confirms itself by encouraging each of us to produce the gender expression expected of us, which we incorrectly read as “only natural.” Throughout this reading we explain the details of our argument, but let us take a moment to summarize the argument here.

If this figure looks daunting, it is not surprising. The figure is complex because the operation of gender in our worlds is complex. So here we walk you through the details, adding some crib notes to the figure (see Figure 3.2). The figure begins with gendered messages or ideas from our culture that we “inherit” in a sense from previous generations, so, to some extent, the messages are not something we each invent. The messages are notions about how the world exists and are based in the current historical moment in which we have been using science to understand the world around us for about a couple of hundred years. The messages come to us from our families, churches, schools, peers, and media outlets and tell us that there are only two options for biological sex—male or female—and that sex is determinant of the kind of person we are to be in the world. The messages then are a set of ideas that suggest to us how to think about our “selves”—about what is “appropriately” masculine or feminine. They produce expectations for each of our individual selves, which cause us to engage in body practices or gender performances, both of which shore up our ideas about self and our beliefs in the naturalness of gendered practices.

Of course, you are a thinking person. You do not always do exactly as you are told. The arrows looping back to “messages” and “selves” show us that our interactions help to confirm and sometimes change (although usually very modestly) our ideas about self or the cultural messages themselves. Hence, the entire process is a feedback loop of the interplay of personal thought and social interaction for each person. The oval surrounding the figure suggests that all of these experiences exist in an environment of social conformity in interaction in which we are encouraged by others and the social setting to act in conformist ways. Although we are given these conformist instructions and we may often follow them, we also resist as individuals and as groups. So the experience is not so much a linear one of conforming to fit appropriately into boxes, but rather a swirling, interactive one of gendered messages, self-measurement and assessment, and finding ways for each of us to conform to certain ideals and also to exercise some latitude to become individuals. All this happens in social interaction with others and is constantly changing but continually referring to messages that pre-existed each of us. Hence, the process is complex, ongoing, interactive, and occurring in real time in every social situation.
Discussion Questions

1. How do Crawley, Foley, and Shehan support their claim that we have “embodied knowledge” because the physical experience of our bodies cannot be separated from cultural and social practices?

2. Were gender a “natural” binary system, it would be invariable over time and place, yet it is not. Discuss the significance of this idea as a refutation to the overall argument being made in this reading.

3. How does “dualistic thinking” serve to exclude many elements of sexuality that have in recent decades, to the contrary, become front-and-center talking points in the gay movement?
Notes

1. Here we reference the work of Michel Foucault (1977, 1980). We use the terms messages or cultural messages in much the same way that he uses discourses, or in the way Dorothy Smith (1987) uses the term relations of ruling to imply a discursive form of power as social control.

2. Here, although we are describing closely the important work of Kessler and McKenna (1978), we cite Schutz’s notion of typification, rather than Garfinkel’s notion of attribution as Kessler and McKenna do. We do so consciously. Although we concede that Garfinkel’s (1967) legendary discussion of Agnes was likely the original “queer theory” in that he was the first to take seriously the idea that binary sex (or “sexual status” as he put it) is a socially constructed reality, we feel Schutz’s concept of typification is more accessible to a broader audience than Garfinkel’s attribution and more useful for theorizing how gender works than ethnomethodology’s goal of only describing lived realities.

3. Interestingly, cooking is understood as masculine and appropriate for males if the person who is cooking is paid well for the skill. So, according to the typification, “being a chef” is typically understood as appropriate for men, whom we expect to be highly paid, whereas “cooking” is a feminine thing women do for free on an everyday basis for their families.

4. While Kinsey is often heralded as the father of sexology, the scientific study of human sexuality, other lesser-known writers and scholars were studying these same issues (although perhaps not on such a grand scale) at the same time as Kinsey [see Hohman and Schaffner 1947], and even a decade before Kinsey [see Bromley and Britten 1938].

5. We find it unfortunate that the national discussion of being “on the down low” seems to target primarily black men as those who engage in clandestine sex with other men. As documented famously by Laud Humphreys’ Tea Room Trade in 1970, this practice is neither new nor specific to black men.

6. The term hermaphrodite was formerly used to describe intersexed people but is now considered a derogatory term.

7. See the Intersex Society of North America’s website: www.isna.org.

8. Even among transsexuals, there is disagreement about the degree to which gender is innate. Some transsexuals argue that gender is a very original, if not genetic, component of their personhood, and that therefore gender is more fixed than sex and can be understood in binary ways (Feinberg 1996; Green 2004). There are other transsexuals who argue that gender and sex are historically situated and should not be viewed as inflexible or binary (Bornstein 1994; Rubin 2003; Stone 1991). Often these are diametrically opposed arguments. Nonetheless, most agree that the ability to reconstruct sexual bodies to live as another sex suggests that your genital body at birth does not predict your gender or sexual orientation as the gender box structure would anticipate.