

Is sex to gender as nature to culture?

## ATTENDENCE

last time, introduced gender as an analytical concept  
social roles, activities; aesthetic appearances; stereotypical characteristics,  
cultural  
meanings associated with being men and women

even if sex difference seen as given in nature, gender is culturally variable and  
historically changing

concept of “gender” was meant to stress social/cultural origins of gender inequality

This alignment of sex/gender with nature/culture gets us into loops about what counts as  
nature and what’s culture, and about what “nature” and “culture” *mean*.

The so-called “culture wars” often have to do with arguments about “nature”, what’s  
“natural” behavior — and therefore something that should be accepted, not judged (we’ll  
discuss arguments about sexual identity, gay marriage). OR, “natural” behavior could be  
subject to medical “treatment.”

want to avoid the “naturalistic fallacy” — that what’s natural is good, or inevitable (this  
is a cultural belief)

readings for today are both by biologists who challenge our assumptions about the  
“nature” of women and men

Let’s FIRST go through their arguments

SECOND assess the analytic limitations of sex/gender as theoretical framework

FINALLY ask where that leaves us, terms of how to think about what gender is, or might  
be

Ruth HUBBARD (Harvard professor emerita) begins article, “On Women’s Biology” by  
arguing that women’s physique, in contrast to men’s, is a social construct and a political  
concept, not a scientific one.” What does she mean?

biology is “socially constructed” (doesn’t exist ‘in nature’ as such, in and of itself)

Rather,

- 1) biology is perceived, interpreted, described through cultural lenses
- 2) culture also actually shapes biology

dialectical relationship nature/culture, can’t cleanly separate them  
becoming more obvious: GM foods, IVF

examples: !Kung menstruation patterns

do not menstruate until 18 yo (high activity levels, diet); get pregnant, breastfeed

intensively for 2-3 years; repeat cycle until menopause at late 30s/early 40s  
so: shorter reproductive span, 4-5 kids w/out contraception, few menstruations

in US, girls who are athletes delay or stop having period  
generally speaking onset becoming younger, high fat diet but also, perhaps, due in part to  
growth hormones in meat, milk

what does it *mean* to say that women's biology is "socially constructed"?  
not that it isn't "real" — have real effect, creates real muscles, etc.  
indeed, Hubbard wants us to attend to the material effects of cultural ideas of  
gender

but biology is not destiny (contra Freud, who said "anatomy is destiny")  
**biology and society, nature and culture continuously reshape one another**

think about how women's bodies have changed through time, varied according to  
other social categories

a lot of *work* goes into producing gendered bodies — effort to tame unruly secondary sex  
characteristics — plucking, shaving, dying hair; voice training

"we need have no ideological investment in whether women and men exhibit biological  
differences, aside from the obvious ones involved with procreation. .. we cannot know  
whether such biological differences exist because biology and society (or environment)  
are interdependent and cannot be sorted out" (128).

Q: what did you think of her arguments? about men's and women's relative strength,  
height differences — search for "natural" limits?

socially sanctioned childhood activities create gendered bodies — AND the marked  
categories of the "tomboy" (girls who like sports) and the "bookworm"(boys who don't)

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we focus on the uneven ends, rather than the overlap

"We need to pay attention to the obvious contradictions between stereotypic descriptions  
of women's biology and the realities of women's lives" (127)

examples?

"Sex differences are interesting in sexist societies that value one group more highly than  
the other" (129).

and it's amazing how durable are commitments to biologically based difference

— beyond procreative roles

bottom line: biology is not a stable thing in itself; it doesn't ground culture. Therefore sex difference cannot really ground gender (if it provides justification, this connection itself is not inevitable).

BUT, for now, we DO have ideological investment biological difference -- why?  
“biological differences b/w women and men are used to *rationalize* the stratification of the labor force by sex; they do not explain it” (124)

## NATURALIZATION

**Anne Fausto-Sterling**, biologist at Brown University

in “The Five Sexes” she argues that humans do not all fall naturally into neat binary categories of male/female

F-S says that there are not simply two sexes. Why?

sex is not just one thing; there are many different variables that go into making it:

GENES: X and Y chromosomes

HORMONES: estrogen, androgens

GONADS: ovaries, testes

GENITAL: clitoris, penis

SECONDARY: hair, breasts; (BEHAVIOR, gendered)

(note that sexual orientation —orientation of sexual desire— is yet another matter)

These don't always line up in individuals; there is a spectrum.

estimated 1 in 2,000 babies born with ambiguous genitalia, making it difficult for doctors to pronounce automatically “it's a girl” or “it's a boy”

So *here*, Fausto-Sterling suggests “at least” a five-sex model, naming three intersexed categories:

*herms*: so-called true hermaphrodites, who possess one testis and one ovary in same organ

*merms*: male pseudohermaphrodites, XYs who have testes and vagina and clitoris (do not menstruate)

*ferms*: female pseudohermaphrodites, XXs who have ovaries and aspects of male genitals

—  
clitoris and penis similar organ

(note, however, that even these more complex binary correspondences only work if one ‘sex’ is taken as the model for the other; where, for example, is the vagina in this model?)

in a later article, she says 5 sexes aren't enough — new classifications based also on hormones rather than anatomy of gonads and genitalia (problems of classification)

#### HANDOUT 1

and note that one of these conditions, Progestin-induced androgenization, is *iatrogenic*, meaning induced by medical treatment of the body

Intersex could be culturally valued, it HAS been valued historically (and is, elsewhere, other cultures, as we'll see), but it isn't (here). Doctors think they're doing a favor to children and parents in modifying intersexed individuals.

medical and legal institutions have worked to preserve appearance of dual system

well intentioned, about “fitting in” — but *this* is a concern b/c modern “Western culture is deeply committed to the idea that there are only two sexes.”

commitment to unambiguous binary gender difference AND  
HETEROSEXUALITY

these are *institutionally* fundamental to western societies

organizes inheritance, who can marry whom, paternity, hereditary titles, eligibility for professions, draft registration (earlier, voting rights), anti-sodomy laws

sports: Olympics, between 1968-2000 female athletes had to prove they're female; chromosome tests, DNA – dozens have failed (excuses made for pulling out)

majority disorders XY but androgen deficiency – no advantage

“if the state and the legal system have an interest in maintaining a two-party sexual system, they are in defiance of nature” (21)

if we *didn't* suppress these differences, what might that mean for society?

we'll read later about the Intersex Society of America, against sex reassignment surgery, also *Middlesex* (protagonist has androgen insensitivity w/ 5-alpha reductase deficiency)

SO, what are the analytical limitations of sex/gender formulation?

1) binary sex difference isn't natural either — sex is not a natural, binary, clearly dimorphic category of difference — rather, we force a range of natural differences into binary categories and take pains to stage dimorphism (tall women not pairing up with short men)

i.e., binary “sex” difference is not given in “nature” — so it cannot be a natural underpinning for gender or anything else

**we read gender *onto* sex, not *from* sex**

2) experientially, gender (being a man or woman) isn't reducible to sex difference — not enough to talk categorically about “women” on one hand and “men” on the other

what it means to be a woman or a man — even to have a “male” or “female” body — has to do with various historical, cultural and social factors

corset wearing upper-class woman prohibited from working and her domestic servant — different bodies, different strength, different health

class, occupation, race, ethnicity, religion (attitudes toward sensuality)

AGE — physical/cultural/emotional manifestations of masculinity/femininity different when 14 than when 24, 54, 74

**be aware of the force of binarisms, but also the work that goes into appearance of binarisms**

readings for Wed — if gender isn't just rooted in biology, how do we get it? gender acquisition through cultural means

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