Encyclopedia of Social Theory

Gender

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Simone de Beauvoir claimed, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Corresponding to this, one is not born, but rather becomes, a man. Beauvoir's claim is important because it is among the first statements in modern feminism to draw attention to “woman” as a social, rather than natural, category of being.

In the broadest sense, gender has been employed by social theorists to denote a distinction between the biological categories of female and male and the socially constructed categories of woman and man (or girl and boy). In this juxtaposition, while sex is assumed to represent a biological difference, gender is used to define those socially constructed feminine and masculine modes of behavior considered normal and natural for females and males. Thus, gender varies dramatically across societies and throughout human history.

The analysis of gender involves studying the normative conduct associated with males and females, the relative valuations of masculinity and femininity, and the social processes whereby males and females learn normative behaviors. Gender constructions thus relegate female and male bodies to discrete and often intensely regulated masculine and feminine types. Indeed, feminist studies have exposed the typically rigid constructions of masculinity and femininity. For example, within the United States, especially in studies focused on the white middle class, research has revealed that femininity demands that girls and women be passive, caring, sensitive, and gentle. Conversely, masculinity demands that boys and men be aggressive, individualistic, and rational. The bodies of females and males exhibit femininity and masculinity through both actions and culturally appropriate clothing and adornment. Gender is revealed to involve the management of situated conduct in adherence with normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Gender is thus seen as a highly significant dimension for understanding how the body becomes a social fact.

Interactionists such as Candace West and Don Zimmerman argue that males and females actively *do* gender. From their perspective, gender is a set of complex activities that, when routinely accomplished, are cast and experienced as expressions of masculine and feminine *natures*. Yet, while social theorists treat gender as a social construction, studies reveal that gender is *experienced* by many people in everyday

life as natural and essential, not as put on or performed. Gender theorists have tried to understand how and why gender is experienced as natural. Their attention focuses on socialization practices. For instance, research has revealed that in the United States, at birth, a male baby is immediately referred to as a boy or girl, wrapped in a gender-coded blanket, given a name that is gendered, and described using gender-specific language such as “handsome and smart,” or “sweet and fragile.” All of these activities seem natural, and insofar as they are done over and over again, the “boying of the boy” and “the girling of the girl” are normalized and naturalized.

In addition to studying the socially produced differences between masculinity and femininity, sociologists also study how these differences are linked to inequality, power, and domination. Feminist sociologists are interested in revealing whether, why, and how feminine qualities, practices, and accomplishments are socially and historically subjugated or valued, celebrated or negated. R. W. Connell has argued that while there is no single form of masculinity or femininity, there are culturally dominant normalizations of gendered identity that he characterizes as hegemonic. Significant work among feminist sociologists has revealed the ways in which gender constructions relegate women into subordinate and unequal social relations with men, thereby instantiating the belief that men “naturally” possess a superior nature in comparison with females. Masculine bias has been exposed in dominant ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting. Dorothy E. Smith has been particularly concerned with the consequences of women's intellectual subjugation. She points out that women have been systematically excluded from doing the intellectual work of society. For example, most sociology and history are constructed from the standpoint of men and are largely about men. There are relatively few women poets, and the records kept of those few are haphazard. In comparison with how men's intellectual history is recorded and taught, relatively little is known about women visionaries, thinkers, and political organizers. By examining gender relations, feminist sociologists, activists, and writers produce strategies to challenge the negative conceptions and invisibility of women's intellectual accomplishments.

Approaches to understanding the connections between gender and sex, gender differences and gender inequality, vary widely. Gender has been studied as a central problematic within various branches of feminist social theory, including liberal feminism, radical feminism, existential **[p. 305 ↓]** feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, and queer theory. In addition, gender has been studied

as a significant feature of area studies such as the sociology of the family, work, politics, race, and class relations. Approaches to gender in liberal feminism, radical feminism, and postmodern feminism is the focus here.

Liberal Feminism

Classical liberal thought holds a conception of human nature that articulates the distinctness of human beings in the capacity for rational thought. Rational thought was considered a characteristic of men's nature, while women were seen as naturally emotional and incapable of rational thought. A woman's ovaries, uterus, and capacity for reproduction were seen as peculiarities of females that naturally limited her rational capacities. In contrast, men were seen as worldly, open, and capable of higher cultural production. Observed differences between men's and women's emotional and intellectual lives supported this claim.

Beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, however, this view was challenged among liberal thinkers advocating social change and sex equality. Wollstonecraft observed that women in her society lack virtue, rationality, and full personhood; women overindulged in idle activities. Although Wollstonecraft does not describe the social distinction between males and females as “gender” roles, she nevertheless saw men's and women's differences as socially constructed. She believed that men would develop similar inferior natures if they were relegated to the domestic sphere and denied opportunities to enhance their capacity for rational thought through education and work outside the home.

Arguing that the basic capacity for rational thought is natural to all human beings, liberal feminists locate the cause of observed differences between men and women not in differences in their natural capacities for rational thought but rather in women's comparatively limited social opportunities for developing their capacities for rational thought. In other words, liberal feminists believe that women have the same capacities as males for rational thought, but biological reproduction and corresponding sex-specific roles limit their opportunities. Liberal feminists assume that the sexual division of labor is a natural effect of women bearing children; men and women have different social roles to perform as a consequence of their different reproductive roles. Masculine

and feminine genders thus correspond with this sexual division of labor; women's different gender identity is grounded in biological reproduction and in the mundane and repetitious acts of housework and mothering. With control of reproduction, however, the classic liberal assumption that biology is destiny is undermined. Men and women need no longer be confined to sex-specific roles and narrow gender identities. Liberal feminists recognize that women can develop and possess the same qualities seen as inherent to men if they are allowed the opportunity to become educated on an equal basis with men and are able to work outside the home. Liberal feminists have advocated social change in women's educational, political, occupational, and economic opportunities. They argue that as more women enter the public spheres of education and work, and thereby become the social equal of men, the status of women would simultaneously rise.

One major assumption of liberal feminism is that the masculine qualities possessed by men are superior and therefore more desirable than the feminine qualities possessed by women. In addition to this, liberal feminists largely assumed that reproduction was an impediment to equality, and that only through reproductive control could women achieve equality. Significantly, women were conceptualized as having similar desires, essences, and mental capacities as men. These are issues radical feminists would challenge.

Radical Feminism

Like liberal feminist theorists, radical theorists employ gender to differentiate the qualities of males and females that are biologically determined from those that are socially constructed. They also theorize that natural sexual differences are directly linked to normative gender practices. But unlike liberal feminists, radical feminists challenge the notion of women's biological inferiority, the assumed superiority and desirability of masculine traits, and the notion that equality can or should be achieved by opening maledefined opportunities to women.

Radical feminists argue that there are essential, natural differences between males and females, but that these differences in and of themselves do not render women inferior to men. Nor are the activities that women perform in and of themselves less desirable or important in comparison with those of men. Radical feminists understand

women as not only different but oppressed, as kept in a subservient place, pushed down within patriarchal power structures. Women's oppression is understood as a complex matrix of female subordination and misogynist constructions of the qualities possessed by women. Patriarchal domination is linked to strict adherence to gender roles in which masculinity is expressed through male bodies as powerful, rational, and dominant. Conversely, expressed femininity demands that women adhere to passive, gentle, emotional, and communal practices. While masculine rationality, authority, individualism, and power are rewarded in a patriarchal capitalist society, the different feminine qualities possessed by women are devalued and used to justify their subordination and degradation. Binary gender differences are problematic insofar as the feminine qualities seen as biologically natural **[p. 306 ↓]** to females are degraded, devalued, and expressed as inferior while masculine qualities seen as biologically natural to males are esteemed, valued, and expressed as superior.

Radical feminists claim the personal is political, making a direct connection between gendered experience and the sociopolitical structures of capitalist patriarchy. Insofar as authority and superiority are attached to the male body and masculine gender attributes are valued within maledominated structures, radical feminists explain women's experienced oppression as an inherent feature of the interlocking structures of capitalism and patriarchy. Research reveals how men and masculinity express domination, control, power, and authority over all things, including less powerful women. Kate Millet located women's oppression in patriarchal relations between women and men. Significantly, men are dominant in both the public and private spheres. Within the gender binary, men wield power over women as society rewards masculine qualities with economic mobility and social authority. For Millet, women can experience full personhood and social affirmation only by ending the practice of gender segregation in which men ultimately control, define, and dominate women. Hartmann argued that job segregation by sex is the primary mechanism in capitalist society that maintains masculine superiority insofar as it enforces lower wages and unpaid labor for women. Low wages and unpaid labor force and legitimate women to marry for economic survival, thereby ensuring that emotional and interpersonal experiences are tied to capitalist patriarchy. As Catherine MacKinnon argued, heterosexual relations are rooted in inequality and female subordination, making sexuality as we know it an expression of male domination. In order to understand women's oppression, one must acknowledge

the ways in which the objectification of the female body is connected to domination and violence against women.

Significantly, radical feminists treat the valuation of male gender roles as superfluous insofar as women and men have learned to evaluate their collective identities within patriarchal, misogynist frames. Women, they argue, need to reclaim, rename, redefine, and revalue their sexual and gendered identities. By doing so, they will begin to appreciate emotionally and socially the inherent differences between men and women and value self-defined frames of womanhood.

Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminists challenge both liberal and radical constructions of the relationship between biological sex and socially constructed gender. Unlike both radical and liberal feminists, postmodern theorists challenge the notion that an essential difference exists between biological sex and socially constructed gender categories, thus rendering relatively inconsequential questions over whether women and men are essentially the same or different. The problem is this: When social theorists and people in everyday life compare sex with gender, we are not comparing something natural with something social; rather, postmodern theorists claim that we are comparing something social with something else that is social. For postmodernists, embodied traits do not exist independently of observations and interpretations of those traits; they are part of the same social process. The ways in which a society constitutes biological categories and criteria are learned, defined, and enacted by given agents situated in specific sociohistorical settings. For example, Christine Delphy's research exposed the ways in which the “natural appearance” of the body is defined according to socially constructed biological criteria.

Postmodern theorists claim that theoretical explanations of women's oppression are wrongly limited to heterosexual male and female binaries. Moreover, the binary sexual categories of female and male are mediated through gendered language. Butler posits the body as constituted and recognized through language. Insofar as language is a social product, the body is a social construct. Butler asserts that language sustains the body. Only by being interpellated within the terms of language does a certain social

existence of the body become possible (Butler 1997). Nicholson (1992) questions the very distinction between sex and gender, claiming that the body is always interpreted socially; rather than seeing sex as somehow separate from gender, sex is subsumable under gendered interpretations. In this sense, the natural categories of the body are understood as “sedimented acts rather than a predetermined and foreclosed structure, essence, or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (Butler 1988:523). This stance challenges the notion that the body represents a natural entity unaffected by gender. Joan Scott (1988) defines gender as the social organization of sexual differences but further posits that gender is the knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily differences. We cannot see sexual differences except as a function of our knowledge. Knowledge is not pure and cannot be isolated from its implications in a broad range of discursive contexts.

In the most basic sense, postmodern feminists define gender as constructed and instantiated through participation in intensely regulated activities that congeal over time and thereby produce the appearance of naturalized categories of sexual identity. The body, moreover, expresses meaning dramatically. Gender management is performative; men and women actively perform gendered behavior deemed appropriate for a male or female sexual category. Gender is, then, instituted through the stylization of the body. Gender is constituted in the bodily gestures, movements, and enactments that are routinized, sedimented, and rendered mundane. Through this same process, bodily acts constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

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See also

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