



gendering

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**KEY
POINTS**

- Our gender is central to our identities as individuals, and is lived and embodied by each one of us every day of our lives.
- Gender is socially constructed and operates in hierarchies of power.
- The theorizing of gender has a rich history within sociology.
- Men's as well as women's lives are deeply affected by gender; we do femininity and masculinity as an everyday part of who we are.
- Contemporary sociology suggests that we might think of gender as important in our lives without assuming that current gender arrangements are inevitable.
- Sociological studies of gendering can focus on gender as difference, gender as division, and gender as something we 'do'.

Introduction: the importance of gender in sociology

Whether we are men or women, girls or boys, our gender influences many aspects of our lives. Our clothing and leisure activities reflect pervasive ideas about what is appropriate for male or female persons, while gender profoundly affects our experiences of education, employment and the family. Our gender is central to our identities as individuals, and is lived and embodied by each one of us every day of our lives (see Chapter 11, 'Being: Identity'). While our gender does not represent the sum total of our experience, it is always with us, as Don West and Candace Zimmerman have suggested:

 Individuals have many social identities that may be donned or shed, muted, or made more salient, depending on the situation. One may be a friend, professional, citizen, and many other things to many different people or to the same person at different times. But we are always women or men. (1991, p. 26)

The individual, however, is but one focus in the sociology of gender. Who we are as individuals does not fill out the whole story, because gender is not only an individual matter. It is also an integral dynamic of social arrangements and social order. Our sense of ourselves as boys and girls, men and women, develops as we interact with other members of our society. We become who we are, reflect upon our lives, and change over the years, all in the context of our relationships with significant and not-so-significant others and the culture in which we are immersed. In other words, gender involves social processes as well as individual identities.

Culture is expressed through a number of social institutions – large-scale forms of social organization that influence what we do and how we think about our place in society. These include governments and their laws, the family in all its permutations, medicine, religion, literature, the news media, the paid and unpaid work we engage in, the education system in which we learn to think about the world, and the forms of popular culture we enjoy or react against (see, for instance, Chapter 13, ‘Believing: Religion’; Chapter 14, ‘Educating’; Chapter 17, ‘Informing: Media’). As the wider culture and the social circles in which we move change over time, so too do our expectations about society and our relationship to it. Social change is a key concern for sociologists of gender, as it is for sociologists in general. We are interested in how and why gendered activities and expectations have changed in recent decades, for example. Sociologists take a critical stance towards these questions, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, asking why things are the way they are and how they might change under particular circumstances.

By now it will be obvious that there are many interrelated factors involved in a sociological analysis of gender. We are concerned not only with individuals, but also the different institutions and processes through which gender might be reproduced (the family, the media and so on). Gender implicates individuals, groups and larger patterns of

social interaction and behaviour. In order to explore these in more detail, we might break down our analysis of gender into three interrelated approaches: gender as a *difference*, gender as a *division*, and gender as something we *do*.

First, what does it mean to think of boys and girls, men and women as 'different'? A number of ways of conceptualizing difference have been influential in sociology, including the notion of gender 'roles' and the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. Second, gender gains its social importance in part because men and women are distinguished from each other in ways that involve relations of power. These include hierarchical divisions between men and women ('patriarchy'), and between men ('hegemonic masculinity'). Third, although gendered relationships reflect the larger structures and processes of society, as individuals we also 'do' 'femininity' or 'masculinity' (or both) in our everyday lives. The following discussion takes each of these three aspects of gender and explores it in greater detail, while the conclusion briefly considers how we might bring these three approaches together in a multi-faceted sociology of gender.

Gender as a difference

'Men and women are different.' This idea has long held sway within popular understandings of gender and its place in society. But what does it mean, exactly? It would be easy to assume its obviousness if we presume that 'being a man' or 'being a woman' is a stable state determined directly by 'natural' processes. However, sociologists have long struggled with the notion that men and women are members of unchanging and unchangeable 'natural' categories.

During the Second World War women took up traditionally male jobs, such as factory work, farming and non-combatant military roles, while large numbers of men were engaged in armed combat on the battlefields. In the shadow of these wartime disruptions to the gender order, Czechoslovakian-born author Viola Klein challenged the idea that masculinity and femininity were immutable states of being. Instead, she wrote in her 1946 book *The Feminine Character: History of an Ideology* that they involved *roles*: expectations about which behaviours, aptitudes

and spheres of action were suitable for men and women. Klein argued that gender roles are shaped within human societies:

As people generally tend to live up to what is expected of them, it seems important to expose the particular set of views held in our culture with regard to woman's social role, characteristic traits and psychological attributes. These views [are] transmitted by custom, social attitudes, public opinion ... But this cultural pattern itself is far from static. In our own civilization it has been subjected to radical changes, particularly during the last century. (1946, p. 1)

Thus, the work, emotions, leisure, talk and so on associated with boys and girls, men and women, express the gender roles transmitted through society and acted out by the individuals within it. These mirror broader social changes, and shift over time. Klein quoted various anthropological studies in order to argue that roles and expectations differ cross-culturally, too. She argued that while members of some tribal societies expect that men will be domineering hunters, women take a leading role in some other cultures, and in others both sexes play a significant, co-operative role in tasks such as child raising (Klein, 1946, p. 131).

Together with Alva Myrdal, Klein went on to explore changing social expectations about married women's social roles in the post-war years: ought they to remain in the home, or might they enter the paid workforce? Myrdal and Klein (1956) argued the latter, suggesting that an increase in the numbers of married women in paid employment would result in an improved range of options for women and a more productive economy overall.

In the post-war decades men's roles were investigated less than women's, but the lives of men were not totally immune from scrutiny. Helen Hacker (1957) and Ruth Hartley (1959) suggested that social changes led to 'role strain' for men. Women were entering the paid workforce in increasing numbers, and some men took this as a challenge to the male 'breadwinner' ideal (see Chapter 18, 'Relating: Family'). At the same time as the man's erstwhile status as the sole economic provider was coming under challenge, in the home he was now expected to be more emotive and democratic. Hacker wrote that he had 'lost the security of the old *paterfamilias*, who was the autocrat of the breakfast table, and experiences difficulties in establishing a satisfying new role' (Hacker, 1957, p. 230). Moreover, his

status as a mediator between the community affairs of the outside world and the inner sanctum of the family was eroded by the advent of radio, television and women's social and political organizations. Men's roles, it was suggested, were becoming increasingly uncertain in the face of social change in general and 'women's emancipation' in particular.

Women, it was argued, were also having difficulty adjusting to the 'feminine role' laid out for them, and Betty Friedan explored this problem in the context of suburban life in the United States of America during the 1950s. She suggested that many women felt 'trapped' at home, and experienced feelings of emptiness and a lack of self while tirelessly devoting their time to the care of others. The 'feminine role', Friedan argued, offered too few options for women, and was defined almost exclusively in terms of household matters: 'wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, chauffeur; expert on interior decoration, child care, appliance repair, furniture refinishing, nutrition, and education' (Friedan, 1965, p. 28). During the following decades, sociologists remained critical of the narrowness of the gender roles on offer. Like Friedan, Klein, Hacker and Hartley before them, Fenwick, Novitz and Waghorne (1977, p. 116) argued for the loosening of rigid expectations about women's and men's respective places in society. They noted that those who deviated from traditional sex roles were often seen as unusual at best, or pathologically disordered at worst.

As we can see, some social commentators questioned the rigidity of gender roles by suggesting that society might offer a much wider range of roles to both women and men. Others proposed a separation between 'sex' and 'gender' (Oakley, 1972). In this model, 'sex' referred to those biological characteristics, such as chromosomes (XX or XY), genitalia, breast and beard development, that make us female or male. 'Gender' denoted the roles and appearances we enact in our lives that mark us out as feminine or masculine, girls or boys, women or men. Although we are born with either a male or female sex, it was argued, we have to be 'socialized', trained into either a 'feminine' or 'masculine' gender, as we grow up. Therefore, while our maleness or femaleness were assumed to be biologically fixed, new ways of being men and women remained possible because masculinity and femininity might be reinterpreted and modified.

Ironically, although this distinction between sex and gender has gradually become influential outside of sociology, it has lost its appeal

within the discipline (Delphy, 1993). Why is this? There are three main reasons. First, the biological distinctions denoted by the term ‘sex’ are not always as clear-cut as we might think. Chromosomal patterns are sometimes more complex than a simple XY or XX; some people have genitalia that look ambiguous and do not allow an easy classification into either a male or a female category. It has been argued that such ‘intersexed’ individuals demonstrate how the process of assigning a sex to a body is actually a social rather than a biological one (Kessler, 1998). If it is not always clear whether an individual can be classified as ‘male’ or ‘female’, then how enduring is such a distinction? The social character of this attribution process becomes clear when such classifications are not obvious and decisions need to be made.

Second, our bodies are always experienced in social contexts, and so their biological properties can be constrained and modified through social norms surrounding food, comportment and exercise (Guillaumin, 1993). Therefore, bodies are fundamentally affected by the societies in which they are maintained and transformed. For example, through athletics training women’s and men’s bodies can become capable of feats of strength, agility and endurance that could not be achieved without that training. What training is available to whom is, in turn, a product of expectations about what is socially acceptable for which bodies: often men rather than women have been seen as the ‘proper’ recipients of heavy training regimes. As Alison Jaggar (1992, p. 84) suggests, the rate ‘at which women’s athletic records are being broken and the speed at which women’s bodies have changed even over the last decade shows that in the past, social norms have limited the way in which women fulfilled their genetic potential, so that we have no idea of the extent of that potential’. The distinction between biological ‘sex’ and social ‘gender’ starts to lose its grip once we recognize the very real impact of social and technological forces upon basic biological capabilities.

Third, the ways we understand biology – and therefore ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ themselves – are deeply affected by social presumptions (see Chapter 10, ‘Sexualizing’). Scientific knowledge is itself gendered, and powerful ideas from our culture are smuggled consciously or unconsciously into investigations of the biological body (Bleier, 1984). For example, the way many biologists describe the process of conception owes

much to gendered assumptions that maleness is active and conquering, but that femaleness is languid and passive. In many medical textbooks, for instance,

The egg is seen as large and passive. It ‘is swept’ or ‘drifts’ along the fallopian tube ... [the sperm in contrast are] ‘streamlined’ and invariably active ... they have a ‘velocity’ that is often remarked upon ... they need ‘energy’ and ‘fuel’ so that with a ‘whiplash movement and strong lurches’, they can ‘burrow through the egg coat’ and ‘penetrate’ it. [Some writers] liken the egg’s role to that of Sleeping Beauty: ‘a dormant bride awaiting her mate’s magic kiss, which instills the spirit that brings her to life’. (Martin, 1991, pp. 489, 490)

In this discussion of such representations of human conception, Emily Martin makes the point that although bodies and bodily processes are undoubtedly ‘real’ in one way, they come to make sense to us only when we interpret them. In doing so, she argues, we take up what we think we already know about masculinity and femininity. This, in turn, affects how we think about bodily processes.

In summary, decisions about what biology ‘is’, and where it stops and ‘society’ starts, are themselves affected by social beliefs and norms. Where we draw the line between the two depends on the frameworks of knowledge that guide us in our attempt, because what we ‘see’ is conditioned by what we expect to see. This is important for a discussion of sex and gender, because it means that judgements about which attributes ‘belong’ with (biological) sex and which ‘belong’ with (social) gender depend upon the ways knowledge is socially constructed. Therefore, it is difficult to separate biology from society. In this sense, the sex/gender distinction over-simplifies complex social – and hence political – processes. So, how else might we think of gender ‘difference’?

Gender as a division

To summarize so far, most sociologists agree that ‘differences’ between men and women are not ‘natural’, and that the precise character of these varies across time and between cultures and contexts. This is not to say that

we must dispense entirely with the notion of difference. Instead, we can understand it as a sociological reality in the sense that social inequalities divide men from women and men from each other, and constitute them as ‘different’ in the process. Although there is nothing immutable or eternal about these divisions, in their current form they play a significant part in the lives of actual women and men. Difference, then, is not a matter of inherent distinctions between people. Instead, ‘men’ and ‘women’ owe their very existence to the social hierarchies in which they are located.

One key term used in feminist sociology to describe gender inequality is ‘patriarchy’. Traditionally used to refer to the rule of older male heads of households over women and younger men, in recent decades the term has been employed within sociology to describe how men of any age establish and maintain dominance over women. Some have suggested that the term implies a lack of historical change in gender relations and leads to an over-simplified analysis of social inequality (for example, Pollert, 1996). However, Walby (1990) has reworked the concept of patriarchy by suggesting that it can be divided into six related ‘structures’: paid employment, household production, culture, sexuality, violence and the state. This is a useful approach, because it allows us to examine gender inequality systematically and manageably.

In terms of paid employment, Walby (1986) argues that women, particularly those who are married, have historically been excluded from paid work on the grounds that men should be their household’s breadwinner. In recent decades, the situation has become more complex. In general, men tend to be clustered in the jobs which are highest paying and those that offer the best prospects for autonomy and promotion (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). Even in those areas of the labour force where women predominate, such as in service work, men earn the highest wages and occupy the most senior positions.

Pay differentials may exist even where men and women carry out exactly the same tasks. In her study of British telephonists, Janet Siltanen (1994) found that the members of the predominantly male night shift were paid at a higher rate than women who answered the phones during the daytime. She suggests that men have not infrequently sought to maintain gendered wage differentials, supporting equal pay only if it looks as though large numbers of women might enter the workplace and threaten to replace the

more highly paid male workers. Within many multinational corporations in newly developing countries, labour forces tend to be highly segregated by gender. Women are seen as a source of low-cost labour, particularly in the garment industry, as Juanita Elias (2004) demonstrates in her study of clothing workers in Malaysia who make items for the British market.

Sociologists of work argue that inequality is demonstrated not only by wage levels, but also by how work is valued more generally. For example, caring and customer service work tends to be carried out mostly by women and is generally afforded negligible social status and lower wages than those sectors of the labour force that employ predominantly male workers. It has also been argued that because status is gendered, in industries where large numbers of women workers displace male workers, the status of the jobs starts to decline (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993, p. 10). As we can see, questions of inequality in the workplace are a matter of complex social processes, rather than the result of particular individuals' traditional attitudes to men's and women's social roles.

Women also carry out more unpaid labour than men, especially in the household. Even where all adult members of a household work for pay outside the home, women do most of the housework as well. This situation is known as the 'double burden' (see Chapter 18, 'Relating: Family'). The fact that many women spend a lot of time outside the paid labour force dramatically affects their total income across the time span. Brian Roper (2005) has suggested that some of these inequalities are closely related to the way capitalism works: if women carry out child care and household labour for free, wages paid to male employees can be lower than they would be if all domestic labour had to be purchased on the open market. So, the capitalist economic system has a vested interest in devaluing – or not valuing – women's unpaid work (Waring, 1988).

Walby suggests that men are privileged over women in respect of other social structures. Our culture encodes a diverse set of patriarchal practices: men's contributions to literature and art are often valued over women's, and men occupy dominant positions within religion and the news media. A further example involves the sexualization of women in advertising and computer animation, where they frequently appear in submissive poses that men very rarely adopt. Within the realm of sexual relations, a 'sexual double standard' allows men more sexual activity than women

without being subject to the kinds of social judgements made of their female counterparts. In popular writings on sex – such as John Gray's 'Mars and Venus' series – men are frequently portrayed as active desirers and orchestrators, while women appear as passive and awaiting direction (Potts, 2002). This type of division between actively desiring men and sexually passive women is also frequently encoded in new cultural forms such as cyber-pornography (Streitmatter, 2004, p. 218). Such beliefs about female sexual passivity can, as a set of British studies on young people's sexuality concluded (Holland et al., 1992), sometimes make it difficult for women to negotiate safe and pleasurable sex in relationships with men.

Walby's two remaining structures of patriarchy are violence and the state. Violence may take the form of domestic beatings, rape, sexual harassment or sexual assault. Feminist sociologists regard male violence as a systemic social problem, not merely something carried out by a few psychologically maladjusted men. They argue that violence requires a certain social legitimacy in order to take hold (Hamner and Maynard, 1987). Even when not directly exercised, the threat of violence may cause women to practise self-surveillance and alter their conduct and patterns of movement. Most sociologists argue that the state holds a monopoly over legitimate coercion. It is gendered in its structure: for the most part men hold positions of authority, and women in powerful government positions are exceptions rather than the rule. In addition, the state's actions have effects that are differentiated by gender. For instance, cutbacks to social welfare programmes disproportionately disadvantage women, who do most of the unpaid caring for others and must pick up the burden, even when their own incomes are reduced (Else, 1996).

Although men are generally advantaged in relation to women, they too must negotiate prevailing forms of masculinity and the social expectations that accompany these. R. W. Connell (1987) coined the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to describe the form of masculinity that occupies a dominant position in society, and affects the lives of individual men and women. The term 'hegemony' is Antonio Gramsci's, and refers to the process by which people are ruled by consent rather than brute force. Therefore, Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity relies on a broad social consensus about which forms of masculinity are the most socially desirable.

What is hegemonic, however, changes over time. Connell has

suggested that traditional masculinities based on a hard day's labour and physical confrontations with others have largely been replaced by newly hegemonic forms. The growth of capitalist enterprise and the legal and regulatory apparatuses that accompany them have created new masculinities, such as the competitive businessman and the bureaucrat. Connell argues that today's hegemonic masculinity is more technocratic than confrontationist, and is defined by rationality and expertise rather than physical force (Connell, 1993). This often involves a formality of both attire and human relationships, and the close control of one's emotions and actions (Whitehead, 1999). The emphasis on physicality has not entirely disappeared, as the kudos still granted to rough and risky male sports attests.

As this discussion demonstrates, hegemonic masculinity is not a static or unchanging phenomenon. Instead, it is a variable 'state of play' that might be contested or challenged by other forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987, p. 184). For instance, family-centred masculinities may sometimes dilute the competitive, technocratic forms, especially when men make conscious decisions to prioritize domestic responsibilities over career advancement (Whitehead, 1999). To give a second example, gay masculinities offer to rework male identity by challenging the prevailing assumption that a man's masculinity depends upon his involvement in sexual relationships with women (Nardi, 2000). Differences of class, ethnicity and ability also mean that men's experiences vary. A number of authors have explored the complex ways in which black masculinities relate to white masculinities as well as to white and black femininities. Allen (1999) argues that in education, for instance, black men in the USA tend to be marginalized within the education system and elsewhere relative to white men. Respondents to his study on higher education reported 'unfavourable campus racial climates characterized by serious racial conflict, racial separation, and low sensitivity to Blacks' concerns' (Allen, 1999, p. 206). This said, black and white women have differently gendered experiences, and Carbado (1999) adds that black women's disadvantage tends to attract less critical attention than black men's.

Ironically, hegemonic masculine ideals (the sporting hero or the corporate raider, for instance) do not necessarily reflect the lives of the majority of men, even many of those who aspire to them. For instance,

not every man can represent his country on the international sporting stage. Also, although a certain stoicism remains an ideal masculine trait, it sometimes masks feelings of fear, insecurity and uncertainty. Clearly, the relationship between wider social processes and individual men's – as well as women's – lives are relatively complex.

Gender as 'doing'

When we analyse gender as a social division we work on a large scale, examining social processes and power relations in the widest sense. However, our discussion of hegemonic masculinity indicates that what is going on at the individual level is also important. Therefore, some sociologists focus upon exploring how we produce and express gender in everyday life. Two related schools of thought have been influential here: ethno-methodology, the study of the methods people use to carry out their everyday lives; and symbolic interactionism, the examination of the ways social relationships influence the meanings we make of the world around us. Both of these approaches suggest that our sense of who we 'are' is primarily the result of what we 'do' within our social settings.

Two well-known North American authors developed such ideas in relation to gender: Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. Goffman argued that our sense of ourselves as men or women is heavily influenced by the ways we manage impressions of ourselves to those around us (Goffman, 1969, p. 26). He suggested that we all want to present or perform gender in ways that gain a favourable reception from others. The term 'perform' is quite deliberate, because Goffman used the theatre as a metaphor to explain how we present ourselves to others. Our gender 'performances' involve 'frontstage' and 'backstage' zones, just like in a theatre. Each of us performs publicly, up 'front' and under the scrutiny of others, after we have prepared ourselves and practised our technique out 'back', away from prying eyes. So, while we might 'appear' as an acceptably gendered man or woman out in the street, the pub or the lecture theatre, we first prepare our appearance, emotions and deportment in our own living room and in front of the bathroom mirror (see Chapter 11, 'Being: Identity').

In adopting such an analysis, sociologists manage a delicate balance

between constraint and freedom. On the one hand, we see that the specific ways in which we perform our genders are not fully constrained by societal ideals and directives, so it is possible for us to resist the expectations placed upon us in particular times and places to some extent. On the other hand, this is not a matter of complete freedom. For example, in his work on gender and advertising, Goffman suggested that our gender performances are limited somewhat by the ‘schedules’ society makes available to guide our ‘portrayals of gender’ (Goffman, 1979, p. 8). Put simply, ways of being ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ are made available to us by our cultures, and these are adopted, modified or resisted by each of us as we ‘do’ our gender.

Garfinkel elaborated upon this idea. He suggested that we are expected to adhere to the codes of appearance, activities, talk, dress, attitudes and emotions considered appropriate for our gender (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 123–5). For example, some occupations are coded feminine (nurse, florist) and others masculine (firefighter, construction worker); rules govern what men and women can wear in particular situations; and women are often assumed to be more empathetic and men to be stoic and competitive.

None of this is to say that we all ‘do’ our gender in the same way, nor that we wholeheartedly embrace the social expectations to which we are subjected. Shirley Tate’s (1999) study of female weightlifters, for instance, explores how such ‘body projects’ provide women with ways of reworking conventional notions of femininity. Tate suggests that while weightlifting women are to some degree constrained by the category of ‘feminine woman’, they can do feminine embodiment in new ways that provide a pleasurable and empowering sense of strength and control over their bodies and their lives. Although these women have to carefully tread a line between a socially acceptable muscularity and less accepted notions of ‘butchness’, Tate argues, weight training does provide some possibilities for transgressing prevailing modes of doing gender.

Goffman and Garfinkel both suggest that ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are social accomplishments. By this they mean that people usually strive to present themselves to others as coherently and ‘properly’ gendered. Over time this becomes a matter of routine, and we ‘do’ our masculinity or femininity without consciously thinking about the processes involved (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 181). As a consequence, the deliberate accomplishment of gender disappears from view, and we adopt what Garfinkel calls the



'natural attitude'. Because most in society assume a certain inevitability towards the way the majority of men and women 'do' their gender, those with an idiosyncratic gender presentation are not considered 'real' men or women. They might be thought improper or 'unnatural', and subject to negative comment or even ostracism.

Such widespread assumptions about gendered 'nature' indicate that there is a moral aspect to the way gender is created and presented (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 124). Both Goffman and Garfinkel challenged taken-for-granted ideas about 'naturalness', and developed a sophisticated critique of the very idea that particular ways of doing gender are 'natural'. First, Goffman never adopted a distinction between sex and gender, rejecting the idea that we could easily distinguish between 'biological' and 'social' aspects of maleness and femaleness. Instead, he argued that the division of each individual body into one of two sexes is itself the result of social practices such as naming and talk (one example would be the phrase 'It's a girl!' uttered at birth) (see Chapter 10, 'Sexualizing').

Second, Goffman argued that such naming practices do not reflect any pre-existing 'natural' difference, but produce the very notion that gender differences are somehow biological rather than social in the first place (Goffman, 1977, pp. 319, 324). 'Nature', then, is an idea rather than an absolute. Goffman's writing is interesting in its reversal of the way 'naturalness' and gender are usually thought about. He wanted to consider *how* we come to believe that particular ideas about gender are natural, rather than ask *what 'is'* or *'is not'* natural about men and women as we currently know them.

More recently, other authors have expanded Goffman's and Garfinkel's ideas about the ways we 'do' gender. In their article titled 'Doing Gender', Don West and Candace Zimmerman (1991) agree that gender can be seen as a routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment, guided by social expectations and notions that particular ways of doing gender are the most 'natural'. They add that though we 'do gender' in the actual presence of others, we are likely to continue with many of the same behaviours even when nobody else is present. This is partly because our modes of talking, walking and acting 'like a woman' or 'like a man' become ingrained, as Garfinkel pointed out, but also because we are always regulating our own behaviour to make sure we are doing our gender correctly. We exercise

surveillance over ourselves in private as well as in public, in order to ensure the consistency of our presentation. After all, when each of us goes out into the world, we must ensure our competence by appearing as a ‘culturally correct’ boy or girl, man or woman. Why is this so? To do gender is to risk being assessed by others of doing it incorrectly, and being called to account. In turn, our adherence to overarching cultural standards of gender competence reinforces the idea that particular modes of gender expression (emotiveness, attentiveness, stoicism, competitiveness, aggression) are somehow ‘natural’ for men or for women.

Ways of ‘doing gender’ have changed over time. Women can now wear trousers and work on construction sites; more men teach in primary schools and push prams along the street than they did 20 or even 10 years ago. Meanwhile, ‘metrosexual’ men look neater and smell sweeter than their predecessors, and women’s rugby or extreme sports are no longer unheard of. Gendered patterns of alcohol consumption are changing as notions of femininity and masculinity change, and members of both genders can adopt a gay, lesbian or polysexual identity more openly than at any time in the past. This is not to say, of course, that there are no longer clear patterns in gendered expectations, or that inequalities have disappeared.

Conclusion

We always live our lives with a sense of ourselves and others as gendered beings, because expressions of gender occupy every corner of our society. They may circulate at the most mundane level of the everyday: how we walk down the street, who drives the car and in what manner, who cooks our dinner, and who cleans up afterwards. Similarly, gendered practices are embedded in less common situations: weddings, televised election campaigns, street marches, music festivals, high school dances, sporting events. Everybody in these places appears to have a gender, and most often behaves in ways that accord with social expectations of that gender.

Our focus on what happens in these situations depends on our particular sociological viewpoint. Some of us focus on the roles that are assumed to characterize men’s and women’s lives; others examine the inequalities that



persist within paid and unpaid work, culture, the state and so on; while others are particularly interested in how we ‘do’ gender in ways that mark us out as credible, competent men and women. Very few of us assume that how we imagine gender now is the same as how it was imagined in the past or will be in the future. For sociologists, gendered performances and relationships vary over time as a response to social contestation and broad economic and cultural changes.

The complexities of gender, as we experience them in our own society at the start of the twenty-first century, demonstrate the usefulness of examining the different aspects of gender together. Men and women are faced with different expectations about gender roles, although we ought not to neglect the relationships between roles and questions of power. In this way, discussions of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity can add useful insights to a gender role analysis. Similarly, as we enact roles we perform our genders in particular ways: gender roles might be seen as things we ‘do’ rather than as an expression of what we ‘are’. In turn, some of these performances accord with dominant relations of power, while other performances resist or contest widespread social expectations. As we consider the complex interrelationships between different aspects of gender, we can also bear in mind gender’s intersection with class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, geographical location and so on.

Without a doubt, gender is complex. Notions that ‘men and women are different’, that ‘gender differences are natural’, or even that ‘everybody knows’ what a man or a woman ‘is’, belie these complexities. Complexity need not be a problem: as sociologists, we can explore the nuances, contradictions and changes in the social organization of gender by breaking it down into its many components. In this way, we can start to think more systematically and critically, and a whole new world opens up to us. The sociological study of gender is as fascinating as it is multi-layered.

Suggestions for further reading

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