

Chapter 12. Gender, Sex, and Sexuality



Figure 12.1. Some children may learn at an early age that their gender does not correspond with their sex. (Photo courtesy of trazomfreak/flickr)

Learning Objectives

12.1. The Difference between Sex and Gender

- Define and differentiate between sex and gender
- Define and discuss what is meant by gender identity
- Understand and discuss the role of homophobia and heterosexism in society
- Distinguish the meanings of transgender, transsexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities

12.2. Sex and Sexuality

- Understand different attitudes associated with sex and sexuality
- Define sexual inequality in various societies
- Discuss theoretical perspectives on sex and sexuality

Adaptations and additions for the New Zealand context by Jaimie Veale, 2016.

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Introduction to Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

When Harry was born, his parents, Steve and Barb, were delighted to add another boy to their family. But as their baby boy began to grow and develop, they noticed that Harry began to express himself in a manner that they viewed as more feminine than masculine. He gravitated toward dolls and other toys that our culture typically associates with girls. But Harry's preference was not simply about liking pink more than blue or flowers more than fire trucks. He even began to draw himself as a girl, complete with a dress and high-heeled shoes. In fact, Harry did not just wish to be a girl; he believed he *was* a girl.

In kindergarten, Harry often got into arguments with classmates because of insisting on being a girl, not a boy. Harry started using the name "Hailey". Steve and Barb met with several psychologists, all of whom told them that Hailey was transgender. But Steve and Barb had a hard time understanding that their five-year-old could have already developed a gender identity that went against society's expectations. Concerned with the social ramifications associated with his child being transgender, Steve hoped this was just a phase. But Barb, and eventually Steve, realised that their child's feelings were genuine and unyielding, and they made the decision to let Harry live as Hailey—a girl. They came to this decision after concluding that the criticism Hailey would endure from peers and other members of society would be less damaging than the confusion Hailey might experience internally if from being forced to live as a boy.

Many transgender children grow up disliking their bodies, and this population can have high rates of mental health problems and suicide (Weiss 2011). Fearful of these outcomes and eager to make their child happy, Steve and Barb now refer to Harry as Hailey and allow *her* to dress and behave in manners that are considered feminine. To a stranger, Hailey is likely to appear just like any other girl and may even be considered *extra girly* due to her love of all things pink. But to those who once knew Hailey as Harry, Hailey is likely to endure more stigma and rejection as the result of being transgender.

Currently, seven-year-old Hailey and her parents are comfortable with her gender status, but Steve and Barb are concerned about what questions and problems might arise as she gets older. "Who's going to love my child?" asks Steve (Ling 2011). This question isn't asked because Hailey is unlovable, but because North American society has yet to fully listen to or understand the personal narratives of the transgender population (Hines and Sanger 2010).

In this chapter, we will discuss the differences between sex and gender, along with issues like gender identity and sexuality. What does it mean to "have" a gender in our society? What does it mean to "have" a sexuality? We will also explore various theoretical perspectives on the subjects of gender and sexuality.

12.1. The Difference between Sex and Gender

When filling out a document such as a job application or school registration form you are often asked to provide your name, address, phone number, birth date, and sex or gender. But have you ever been asked to provide your sex *and* your gender? As with most people, it may not have occurred to you that sex and gender are not the same. However, psychologists and most other social scientists view sex and gender as conceptually distinct. **Sex** refers to physical or physiological differences between males and females, including both primary sex characteristics (the reproductive system) and secondary characteristics such as height and muscularity. **Gender** is a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions associated with being male or female. **Gender identity** is the extent to which one identifies as being a man, woman, or some other gender (Diamond 2002).



Figure 12.2. While the biological differences between males and females are fairly straightforward, the social and cultural aspects of being a man or woman can be complicated. (Photo courtesy of FaceMePLS/flickr)

A person's sex, as determined by their biology, does not always correspond with their gender identity. Therefore, the terms *sex* and *gender* are not interchangeable. A baby boy who is born with male genitalia will be identified as male. The boy may identify with the feminine aspects of the culture. Since the term *sex* refers to biological or physical distinctions, characteristics of sex will not vary significantly between different human societies. For example, most persons of the female sex, in general, regardless of culture, will eventually menstruate and develop breasts that can lactate. Characteristics of gender, on the other hand, may vary greatly between different societies. For example, in New Zealand culture, it is considered feminine (or a trait of the female gender) to wear a dress or skirt. However, in many Pacific Island, Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures, dresses or skirts (often referred to as sarongs, robes, or gowns) can be considered masculine. The kilt worn by a Scottish male does not make him appear feminine in his culture.

The dichotomous view of gender (the notion that one is either male or female) is specific to certain cultures and is not universal. In North America, the term *two-spirit* is used to describe indigenous people with diverse gender and sexualities. Some of these individuals occasionally or permanently dressed and lived as the opposite gender (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997). *Fa'afafine*, which translates as "the way of the woman", is a term used to describe Samoan individuals who are biologically male but embody both masculine and feminine traits. *Fa'afafine* are considered an important part of Samoan culture. Similar Māori identities include *takatāpui*, meaning devoted partner of the same sex, *whakawahine*, for those assigned male at birth but identify as women, and *tangata ira tane*, for those assigned female at birth but identify as men.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional and sexual attraction to a particular sex (male or female). Sexual orientation is typically divided into four categories: *heterosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of the opposite sex; *homosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of one's own sex; *bisexuality*, the attraction to individuals of either sex; and *asexuality*, no attraction to either sex. Heterosexuals and homosexuals may also be referred to informally as "straight" and "gay", respectively. New Zealand a heteronormative society, meaning it supports heterosexuality as the norm. Consider that homosexuals are often asked, "When did you know you were gay?" but heterosexuals are rarely asked, "When did you know that you were straight?" (Ryle 2011).



Figure 12.3. George Catlin (1796-1872), *Dance to the Berdache*. Catlin's sketch depicts a ceremonial dance among the Sac and Fox Nation to celebrate the two-spirit person. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

Individuals are often aware of their sexual orientation between middle childhood and early adolescence (American Psychological Association 2008). They do not have to participate in sexual activity to be aware of these emotional, romantic, and physical attractions; people can be celibate and still recognise their sexual orientation. Homosexual women (referred to as lesbians), homosexual men (also referred to as gay men), and bisexual men and women may all have very different experiences of discovering and accepting their sexual orientation. At the point of puberty, some may be able to *come out* (that is to openly disclose) their sexual orientations while others may be unready or unwilling to come out until later in life, if at all, due to our society's current norms (APA 2008).

Alfred Kinsey was among the first to conceptualise sexuality as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy of gay or straight. To classify this continuum of heterosexuality and homosexuality, Kinsey created a six-point rating scale that ranges from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual (see Figure 12.4). In his 1948 work *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey writes, "Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats ... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects" (Kinsey et al 1948).

Later scholarship by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expanded on Kinsey's notions. She coined the term "homosocial" to oppose "homosexual", describing non-sexual same-sex relations. Sedgwick recognised that in North American culture, males are subject to a clear divide between the two sides of this continuum, whereas females enjoy more fluidity. This can be illustrated by the way women can openly express homosocial feelings (nonsexual regard for people of the same sex) through hugging, hand holding, and physical closeness. In contrast, men are more likely to refrain from these expressions since they violate the heteronormative expectation. While women experience a more flexible norming of variations of behaviour that spans the heterosocial-homosocial spectrum, male behaviour is subject to strong social sanction if it veers into homosocial territory because of societal homophobia (Sedgwick 1985).

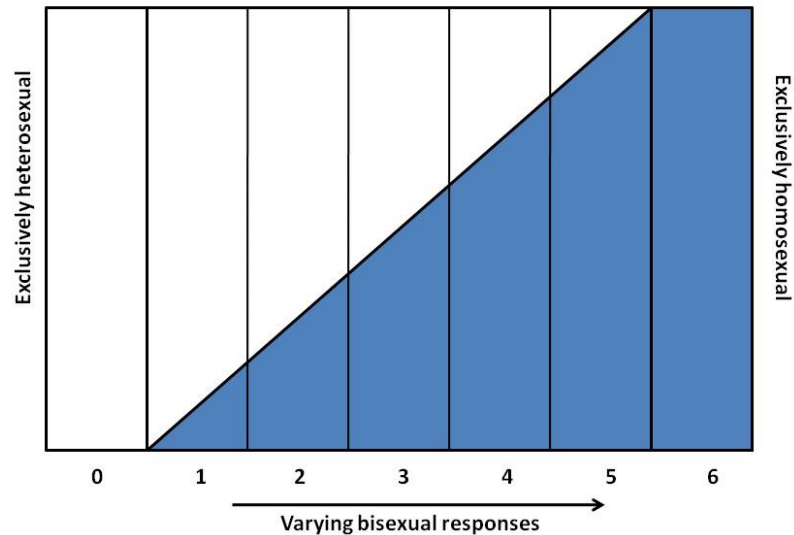


Figure 12.4. The Kinsey scale indicates that sexuality can be measured by more than just heterosexuality and homosexuality.

There is no scientific consensus regarding the exact reasons why an individual holds a gay, straight, or bisexual orientation. There has been research conducted to study the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, but there has been no evidence that links sexual orientation to one factor (APA 2008). Research, however, does present evidence showing that gay people, lesbians and bisexuals are treated differently than straight people in schools, the workplace, and the military. A representative survey of New Zealand high school students in 2012 found that 3.8% reported attraction to the same sex or to both sexes. Same-sex and both-sex attracted students were more likely to report being bullied, physically harmed, and being afraid of being hurt at school.

Much of this discrimination is based on stereotypes, misinformation, and **homophobia**, an extreme or irrational aversion to gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Major policies to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation have not come into effect until the last few years. In 2013 the government legalised same-sex marriage. The New Zealand Human Rights Act was amended in 1993 to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. It still does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity. Advocacy agencies frequently use the acronym LGBTQ, which stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender”, and “queer” or “questioning”.

Gender Roles

As we grow, we learn how to behave from those around us. In this socialisation process, children are introduced to certain roles that are typically linked to their biological sex. The term **gender role** refers to society’s concept of how men and women are expected to act and how they should behave. These roles are based on norms, or standards, created by society. In New Zealand, masculine roles are usually associated with strength, aggression, and dominance, while feminine roles are usually associated with passivity, nurturing, and subordination. Role learning starts with socialisation at birth. Even today, our society is quick to outfit male infants in blue and girls in pink, and the first question that people ask when a baby is born is “is it a boy or is it a girl?”.

One way children learn gender roles is through play. Parents typically supply boys with trucks, toy guns, and superhero paraphernalia, which are active toys that promote motor skills, aggression, and solitary play. Girls are often given dolls and dress-up apparel that foster nurturing, social proximity, and role play. Studies have shown that children will most likely choose to play with “gender appropriate” toys (or same-gender toys) even when cross-

gender toys are available because parents give children positive feedback (in the form of praise, involvement, and physical closeness) for gender normative behaviour (Caldera, Huston, and O'Brien 1998).

The drive to adhere to masculine and feminine gender roles continues later in life. Men tend to outnumber women in professions such as law enforcement, the military, and politics. Women tend to outnumber men in care-related occupations such as child care, health care, and social work. These occupational roles are examples of typical Canadian male and female behaviour, derived from our culture's traditions. Adherence to them demonstrates fulfillment of social expectations but not necessarily personal preference (Diamond 2002).



Figure 12.5. Fathers tend to be more involved when their sons engage in gender appropriate activities such as sports. (Photo courtesy of stephanski/flickr)

Gender Identity

New Zealand society allows for some level of flexibility when it comes to acting out gender roles. To a certain extent, men can assume some feminine roles and women can assume some masculine roles without interfering with their gender identity. *Gender identity* is an individual's self-conception of being a man, woman, or something else based on their association with masculine or feminine gender roles.

Individuals who identify with the role that is the opposite of their biological sex are called **transgender**.

Transgender women, for example, typically have a strong emotional and psychological connection to the feminine aspects of society that they identify their gender as female. The parallel connection to masculinity exists for

transgender men. There is no single, conclusive explanation for why people this diversity in gender identity exists, but there is more evidence for biological factors than for anything else (APA 2008).

Transgender individuals who wish to alter their bodies through medical interventions such as surgery and hormonal therapy—so that their physical being is better aligned with gender identity—are called **transsexuals**. It is important to note that people who cross-dress, or wear clothing that is traditionally assigned to opposite gender, are not necessarily transgender. Cross-dressing is typically a form of self-expression, entertainment, or personal style, not necessarily an expression against one’s assigned gender (APA 2008).

Transgender and transsexual individuals experience discrimination based on their gender identity. People who identify as transgender are twice as likely to experience assault or discrimination as non-transgender (also called cisgender) individuals; they are also one-and-a-half times more likely to experience intimidation (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs 2010).

Making Connections: Psychology in the Real World

What if you had to live as the opposite sex? If you are a man, imagine that you were forced to wear frilly dresses, dainty shoes, and makeup to special occasions, and you were expected to enjoy romantic comedies and glamour reality shows. If you are a woman, imagine that you were forced to wear shapeless clothing, put only minimal effort into your personal appearance, not show emotion, and watch countless hours of sporting events and sports-related commentary. It would be pretty uncomfortable, right? Well, maybe not. Many people enjoy participating in activities that are typically associated with the opposite sex and would not mind if some of the cultural expectations for men and women were loosened.

Now, imagine that when you look at your body in the mirror, you feel disconnected. You feel your genitals are not right, and you feel as though you given in someone else’s body with no chance of having the body that feels right for you. As you get older, you dislike the way your body is changing, and, therefore, you begin to dislike yourself. These elements of disconnect and dysphoria are important to understand when discussing transgender individuals.



Figure 12.6. Chaz Bono is the transgender son of Cher and Sonny Bono. Being transgender is not about clothing or hairstyles; it is about self-perception. (Photo courtesy of Greg Hernandez/flickr)

12.2. Sex and Sexuality

Sexual Attitudes and Practices

In the area of sexuality, sociologists focus their attention on sexual attitudes and practices, not on physiology or anatomy. **Sexuality** is viewed as a person's capacity for sexual feelings. Studying sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of sociology because sexual behaviour is a cultural universal. Throughout time and place, the vast majority of human beings have participated in sexual relationships (Broude 2003). Each society, however, interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways. Many societies around the world have different attitudes about premarital sex, the age of sexual consent, homosexuality, masturbation, and other sexual behaviours that are not consistent with universally cultural norms (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). At the same time, sociologists have learned that certain norms (like disapproval of incest) are shared among most societies. Likewise, societies generally have norms that reinforce their accepted social system of sexuality.

What is considered "normal" in terms of sexual behaviour is based on the mores and values of the society. Societies that value monogamy, for example, would likely oppose extramarital sex. Individuals are socialised to sexual attitudes by their family, education system, peers, media, and religion. Historically, religion has been the greatest influence on sexual behaviour in most societies, but in more recent years, peers and the media have emerged as two of the strongest influences, particularly teens (Potard, Courtois, and Rusch 2008). Let us take a closer look at sexual attitudes around the world.



Figure 12.10. Sexual practices can differ greatly among groups. Recent trends include the finding that married couples have sex more frequently than do singles and that 27 percent of married couples in their 30s have sex at least twice a week (NSSHB 2010). (Photocourtesy of epSos.de/Flickr)

Sexuality around the World

Cross-national research on sexual attitudes in industrialised nations reveals that normative standards differ across the world. For example, several studies have shown that Scandinavian students are more tolerant of premarital sex than are North American students (Grose 2007). A study of 37 countries reported that non-Western societies—like China, Iran, and India—valued chastity highly in a potential mate, while western European countries—such as France, the Netherlands, and Sweden—placed little value on prior sexual experiences (Buss 1989).

Even among Western cultures, attitudes can differ. For example, according to a 33,590-person survey across 24 countries, 89 percent of Swedes responded that there is nothing wrong with premarital sex, while only 42 percent of Irish responded this way. From the same study, 93 percent of Filipinos responded that sex before age 16 is always wrong or almost always wrong, while only 75 percent of Russians responded this way (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). Sexual attitudes can also vary within a country. For instance, 45 percent of Spaniards responded that homosexuality is always wrong, while 42 percent responded that it is never wrong; only 13 percent responded somewhere in the middle (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998).

Of industrialised nations, Sweden is thought to be the most liberal when it comes to attitudes about sex, including sexual practices and sexual openness. The country has very few regulations on sexual images in the media, and sex education, which starts around age six, is a compulsory part of Swedish school curricula. Sweden's permissive approach to sex has helped the country avoid some of the major social problems associated with sex. For example, rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease are among the world's lowest (Grose 2007). It would appear that Sweden is a model for the benefits of sexual freedom and frankness. However, implementing Swedish ideals and policies regarding sexuality in other, more politically conservative, nations would likely be met with resistance.

Other industrialised nations, including New Zealand, are more restrictive in attitudes about sex when it comes to women and sexuality. It is widely believed that men are more sexual than women are. In fact, there is a popular

notion that men think about sex every seven seconds. Research, however, suggests that men think about sex an average of 19 times per day, compared to 10 times per day for women (Fisher, Moore, and Pittenger 2011).

Belief that men have—or have the right to—more sexual urges than women creates a double standard. Ira Reiss, a pioneer researcher in the field of sexual studies, defined the **double standard** as prohibiting premarital sexual intercourse for women but allowing it for men (Reiss 1960). This standard has evolved into allowing women to engage in premarital sex only within committed love relationships, but allowing men to engage in sexual relationships with as many partners as they wish without condition (Milhausen and Herold 1999). Due to this double standard, a woman is likely to have fewer sexual partners in her life time than a man. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey, the average 35-year-old woman has had three opposite-sex sexual partners while the average 35-year-old man has had twice as many (Centers for Disease Control 2011).

Queer Theory

Queer theory is a perspective that problematises the manner in which we have been taught to think about sexual orientation. By calling their discipline “queer”, queer theorists are rejecting the originally-intended negative effects of labelling; instead, they embrace the word “queer” and have reclaimed it for their own purposes. Queer theorists reject the dominant gender schema and the dichotomisation of sexual orientations into two mutually exclusive outcomes, gay or straight. Rather, the perspective highlights the need for a more flexible and fluid conceptualisation of sexuality—one that allows for change, negotiation, and freedom. The current schema used to classify individuals as either “gay” or “straight” pits one orientation against the other. This mirrors other oppressive schemas in our culture, especially those surrounding gender and ethnicity (black versus white, male versus female).

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued against North American society’s inflexible definition of sexuality—against its reduction to a single factor: the sex of one’s desired partner. Sedgwick identified dozens of other ways in which people’s sexualities were different, such as:

- Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people
- Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others
- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little
- Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they do not do, or do not even want to do
- Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones, others like spontaneous-sounding ones that are nonetheless totally predictable
- Some people, whether gay, straight, or bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality do not (Sedgwick 1990)

In the end, queer theory strives to question the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality, opening the door to new scholarly understanding.

Throughout this chapter, we have examined the complexities of gender, sex, and sexuality. Differentiating between sex, gender, and sexual orientation is an important first step to a deeper understanding and critical analysis of these issues. Understanding the psychology of sex, gender, and sexuality will help to build awareness of the inequalities experienced by subordinate groups such as women, homosexuals, and transgender individuals.

Key Terms

gender identity an individual's sense of being either masculine or feminine **gender role** society's concept of how men and women should behave

homophobia an extreme or irrational aversion to homosexuals

queer theory a scholarly discipline that questions fixed (normative) definitions of gender and sexuality

sex a term that denotes the presence of physical or physiological differences between males and females

sexism the prejudiced belief that one sex should be valued over another

sexual orientation a person's emotional and sexual attraction to a particular sex (male or female)

sexuality a person's capacity for sexual feelings

transgender a term that refers to individuals who identify with the behaviours and characteristics that are different from their birth-assigned sex

transsexuals individuals who alter their bodies through medical interventions such as surgery and hormonal therapy

Section Summary

12.1. The Difference between Sex and Gender

The terms “sex” and “gender” refer to two different identifiers. Sex denotes biological characteristics differentiating males and females, while gender denotes social and cultural characteristics of masculine and feminine behaviour. Sex and gender are not always synchronous. Individuals who strongly identify with the opposing gender are considered transgender.

12.2. Sex and Sexuality

When studying sex and sexuality, sociologists focus their attention on sexual attitudes and practices, not on physiology or anatomy. Norms regarding gender and sexuality vary across cultures. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people still continue to face opposition and discrimination in most major social institutions but discrimination based on sexual orientation is legally prohibited in the New Zealand law.

Further Research

12.1. The Difference between Sex and Gender

For more information on gender identity and advocacy for transgender individuals see the Global Action for Trans Equality website at http://openstaxcollege.org/l/trans_equality.

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