

GENDER, SEXUALITY & SOCIETY

What is *GENDER*?

- the characteristics, traits that differentiate men and women — behavioral, aesthetic
- what it takes to be *good at being* a man/woman
- it's a relational category — gender is not a euphemism for “women”
- includes value judgments, positive and negative, associated with masculinity and femininity
- things other than people can be ‘gendered’ — an outfit, a color (blue/pink), a sport

the analytical concept of gender was introduced in the 1970s to indicate the social roles, characteristics, and values *assigned* to males and females in a given society; gender understood as historically and cross-culturally particular

gender is social, not natural, not *fixed* in nature — biological or cosmological

important implication: gender hierarchy, patriarchy, is thus social, not natural — not inevitable

sex/gender system of difference (sex = biology + gender = social norms)
nature/culture

this meaning of gender has entered public, commonplace understanding

in this class, we will use ‘gender’ to mean social, cultural expectations and actions; and ‘sex’ to refer to physiological characteristics

HOWEVER, it's important to note that the *sex/gender system* has been challenged theoretically

we *won't* be talking about gender as *simply* the cultural *elaboration* of fundamental differences, given in nature, between women, as a whole, and men, as a whole

and we'll begin on Monday with a discussion of *why* the sex/gender system, while useful, is inadequate for the task of understanding what it means to be a man/woman

readings for Monday, by biologists, will explain why — come to class with a few sentences, drawing from the articles, with at least 2 arguments about the analytical **limits of the sex/gender system**

NOW let me ask —

What is, or what do we mean by, *SEXUALITY*? (as opposed to sex difference)

sexual **desire**, as an aspect of human nature
(hormones, bodies as well as feelings, thoughts)
sexual **acts**, practices, behavior — what people *do* sexually — within social
relations, relations that may be characterized by hierarchy, inequality
sexual **orientation** — personal identity (gay, straight, bi) based on the gender of
one's generalized object of desire

“sexuality” has to do with all of these, how **desire**, **practice** and **identity** are
bundled together, in various ways

SO, in this course we'll seek to make sense of:

1) variety in what it means to be, to live as, man/woman, historically and cross
culturally

readings will focus largely on the U.S., but will take us around the world

masculinity and femininity — traits, characteristics, objects associated
with men/women — do not *mean* the same thing everywhere, and are not
valued in the same way everywhere

moreover, what it means to be woman/man differs not just based on social,
cultural context, but on one's relative position within society

in U.S., how people experience gender, sexuality is very much informed by
socioeconomic class, race or ethnicity, religion, age

SO, we'll talk about differences w/in as well as b/w cultures, societies

2) variety in sexual desires, practices — and how and why they are socially
accepted

or stigmatized

again, incredibly varied around the world — from sexual modesty of
Muslim women in Middle East to ritualized male homosexuality as part of
initiation ceremony in PNG

3) reproduction of symbolic and structural inequalities between men and women
what is patriarchy? how does it work? is the US still a patriarchal society?

gender is an economic, as well as a social, emotional relationship

4) homophobia and heterosexism — social pressure to conform within binary
systems of identity

5) sexual violence, misogyny (including internalization of psychological
violence)

6) resistance: gender bending: sex change surgery, cross-dressing, hermaphroditism
challenge gender binary m/f? or reinforce it in new ways?

malleability and infinite variety of human behavior — and different ways this behavior is
bundled into a sense of identity, attached to morality, used to legitimate social inequality

this class is cross-listed with anthropology — I'm an anthropologist — and we'll focus
(though not exclusively) on an **anthropological** approach to study of gender and
sexuality.

what is this?

starting point is CULTURE

encompasses both the things people make, do, believe
and is a frame of reference — the conceptual vocabulary through which we perceive
things,
that gives meaning to what we make, do, believe

we don't just HAVE culture (traditions like Mexican quinceñera or male circumcision),
we THINK and DO culture — it's the WAY we give meaning to things

EX: it's not only the Barbie™ Doll that's cultural, but what we do with the Barbie™ Doll
—

dutifully dress it up for a Malibu beach party?
or hack off its hair and stick pins in its eyebrow?

Culture dictates and reproduces social norms. But it also provides opportunities for
subverting, resisting, messing with social norms — especially important to recognize
how this works in terms of gender: dominant cultural norms, expectations are important,
but even more important is how individuals interpret those norms, bend the rules of those
norms, in their everyday life

**gender and sexuality, like culture more generally, are both codified by tradition,
and also improvised in daily life**

SYLLABUS

This is a CI course — communications intensive
expected to come to class, having done the reading, ready to discuss
classes will integrate lecture and discussion, with occasional group activities

3 papers, at least 2 will be re-written with my comments in mind; only second will be
graded

choice of possible paper topics, or some flexibility in answering prompts

writing tutor — handout — meeting required before 1st draft due
the more you work with her, the better your writing will get — may or may not affect grade (which will also be on your critical and creative thinking)

books and other readings on MIT server
includes a novel (*Middlesex* — start reading early) and two ethnographies (anthro research)

READINGS

the class isn't just about women, but, admittedly, most readings attend more to women's experiences

start with general conceptual tools

- 1) talk about relationship b/w gender and labor — economic relationship
- 2) sexuality and different configurations of sex/gender
- 3) reproductive politics — religion, race and nationalism

QUESTIONS?

ATTENDANCE and INTRODUCTIONS (what do you anticipate from class?)

for MONDAY — first readings are on MIT server

bring in 1-2 paragraphs (typed or legibly hand-written) with arguments about the analytical limitations of theorizing gender as the social elaboration of biological sex difference

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