Learning Gender

Our typical in-class exercise while teaching a unit on the social construction of gender is to ask how many women students identified as "tomboys" when they were growing up. A sea of hands usually results as women remember their early years as girls resisting traditional notions of femininity. When male students are asked whether they had been called "sissies" as young boys, usually the whole group laughs as one lone male sheepishly raises his hand and remarks that he's always been a sissy. Why is it so easy to say you were a tomboy and so difficult to admit to being a sissy? This has a lot to do with the meanings associated with masculinity and femininity and the ways these are ranked in society. In this chapter we focus specifically on gender and sexism, keeping in mind two important points: first, how gender is constructed through intersection with other differences among women like race, ethnicity, and class, and second, how sexism as a system of oppression is related to other systems of inequality and privilege.

BIOLOGY AND CULTURE

In Chapter 1 we explained gender as the way society creates, patterns, and rewards our understandings of femininity and masculinity, or the process by which certain behaviors and performances are ascribed to women and men. Gender, in other words, can be understood as the social organization of sexual difference. Although biological distinctions create female and male humans, society interprets these differences and gives us "feminine" and "masculine" people. These adjectives are intentionally placed in quotation marks to emphasize that notions of femininity and masculinity are socially constructed—created by social processes that reflect the various workings of power in society. Therefore gender is culturally and historically changeable. There is nothing essential, intrinsic, or static about femininity or masculinity; rather, they are social categories that might mean different things in different societies and in different historical periods. Society shapes notions of femininity and masculinity through the subtle interactions between nature and nurture.

However, the relationship between biology (female/male) and culture (feminine/masculine) is more complicated than the assertion that sex is a biological fact and gender is the societal interpretation of that fact. First, there is greater gender diversity in nature
LEARNING ACTIVITY Tomboys and Sissies

Take an informal poll on your campus. Ask the women if they ever wanted to be a boy when they were growing up. Note their reaction to the question. Then ask why or why not. Also ask the women if they were considered tomboys growing up and how they felt about it if they were. Record responses and observations in a research journal.

Ask men on your campus if they ever wanted to be a girl when they were growing up. Again, note their reaction to the question. Ask why or why not. Then ask if they were considered sissies growing up and, if so, how they felt about it. Record responses and observations.

Once you’ve completed your poll, compare and contrast the responses you received from women and men. What do you notice? Why do you think responses may have been the way they were? What do responses suggest about gender in American society?

than once thought. As Joan Roughgarden suggests in Evolution’s Rainbow (2004), many species are not just female or male, but can be both female and male at the same time, or be one or the other at different times. As discussed below, this ambiguity relates to humans too. Some children are born without distinct sex characteristics and are assigned one at birth. The classic reading by Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes, Revisited,” critiques the traditional binaries we call female and male. Second, while biology may imply some basic physiological facts, culture gives meaning to these in such a way that we must question whether biology can exist except within the society that gives it meaning in the first place. This implies that sex, in terms of raw male or female, is already gendered by the culture within which these physiological facts of biology exist. In other words, although many people make a distinction between biological sex (female/male) and learned gender (feminine/masculine), it is really impossible to speak of a fixed biological sex category outside of the sense that a culture makes of that category.

An example that highlights how biology is connected to culture concerns the processes by which ambiguous sex characteristics in children are handled. When “intersex” children (those with reproductive or sexual anatomies that do not seem to fit the typical definitions of “female” or “male”) are born, families and health professionals often make an immediate sex determination. Hormone therapy and surgeries may follow to make such a child fit the constructed binary categories (male/female) our society has created, and gender is taught in accordance with this decision. In other words, physicians and others use gendered norms to construct the sexed bodies of ambiguous-sexed infants. This is an example of the way a breakdown in taken-for-granted tight connections between natural biology and learned gender is interpreted as a medical and social emergency. Indeed, anthropologists have questioned this connection and used, for example, the Native American “berdache” status that entailed varying gender identities with behaviors encompassing social and economic roles, religious specialization, and temperament, to demonstrate the range of gender identity on the American continent. As already mentioned, Anne Fausto-Sterling’s reading, “The Five Sexes, Revisited,” questions the tidy organization of
human sex into the two categories female and male, emphasizing that sex is not as easy as
 genetics and genitalia and arguing for theories that allow for human variation.

A focus on gender assignment, identity, and expression involves three ways to under-
stand the forces shaping gender and how we experience and express gender as individuals. 
Gender assignment is usually given to us at birth and determined by our physical body-
type to be male or female. This assignment is decided by doctors and parents as the first 
classification an individual receives. Corresponding gender performances (behavior, dress,
activities that one may participate in, etc.) are usually enforced based on the individual's 
gender assignment at birth. Gender identity concerns how one feels internally about one's 
own gender. This is a gendered sense of self that comes from within and may or may not 
match one's assigned gender at birth. The ways we present ourselves to the world are our 
expression of gender. Our gender expression is not always the same as our gender iden-
tity and may or may not match our assigned gender at birth. Still, gender is a pervasive 
theme in people's lives, shaping social life and informing attitudes, behavior, and the indi-
vidual's sense of self. It is always experienced, however, in intersection with other identi-
ties. As emphasized in Chapter 2, a person's sense of self is multifaceted and shaped by 
multiple (and sometimes conflicting) social patterns and practices. In other words, expe-
riences of gender differ by race, class, age, and other factors. For example, due to his-
torical and cultural reasons, many African American women have not internalized the 
association of femininity with passivity and dependency characteristic of white feminini-
ties. The reading by Isis Settles, Jennifer Pratt-Hyatt, and NiCole Buchanan titled 
"Through the Lens of Race" illustrates the ways experiences of gender differ. This article 
discusses how differences in black and white women's perceptions of womanhood reflect 
socio-historical factors and experiences of gender discrimination, as well as stereotypes 
and gender norms. The pervasiveness of gender is a focus of Judith Lorber's article "The 
Social Construction of Gender." She explains gender as a process that involves multiple 
patterns of interaction created and re-created constantly in human interaction. Lorber 
also makes the important point that because gender is so central in shaping our lives, 
much of what is gendered we do not even recognize; it's made normal and ordinary and
occurs on a subconscious level. In other words, the differences between “femininity” (passive, dependent, intuitive, emotional) and “masculinity” (strong, independent, in control, out of touch emotionally) are made to seem natural and inevitable despite the fact that gender is a social script that individuals learn. Cordelia Fine also addresses this “naturalizing” of gender in the reading “Unraveling Hardwiring,” an excerpt from her book *The Delusions of Gender* that focuses on research in gendered brain chemistry. She disputes the belief that gendered traits are “hardwired” into the brain and critiques the “biology is destiny” argument that claims innate psychological differences between the minds of women and men.

In reality, gender is a practice in which all people engage; it is something we perform over and over in our daily lives. In this sense, gender is something that we “do” rather than “have.” Through a process of gender socialization, we are taught and learn the appropriate thinking and behaviors associated with being a boy or girl in any given society. However, there are some people who consider themselves transgender or who claim a gender identity or expression different from the one assigned at their birth by their family and community. Identifying oneself as transgender involves resisting the social construction of gender into two distinct binary categories, masculinity and femininity, and working to break down these polarized categories that in most cultures are set in opposition to each other. Transgender people push at the boundaries of gender and help reveal its constructed nature by refusing to identify in any distinct category. The term cisgender means someone who is comfortable in the gender they were assigned at birth or where there is conformity between gender assignment, identity, and expression. The reading by Debra Rosenberg, “(Rethinking) Gender,” discusses transgender issues. In addition, “Trans Identities and Contingent Masculinities: Being Tomboys in Everyday Practice” by Evelyn Blackwood discusses female-bodied individuals in Indonesia who perform masculinity but whose identity as men is complex.

Being transgender illustrates the ways a person’s gender identity might not match the assigned gender identity given at birth based upon physical or genetic sex characteristics. The term transgender is often used interchangeably with the term transsexual (and simply labeled trans). Some scholars are more likely to describe transsexuals as transgendered people who believe they are born with the bodies of the wrong sex and who desire chemical or surgical altering in the form of hormone therapies or sex reassignment surgeries. They transition from female to male (FtM, F2M, or “transman”) and male to female (MtF, M2F, or “transwoman”). As a category, transgender overlaps with cross-dressing, the practice of wearing the clothes of the opposite sex, or the sex different from that to which a person was assigned in childhood. Cross-dressing is different from fetishistic travestism, which involves occasional wearing of the other sex’s clothes for sexual self-arousal or pleasure. In addition, the category of transgendered cross-dressers does not necessarily include impersonators who look upon dressing as solely connected to their livelihood or actors undertaking roles. Similarly, drag performances that involve makeup and clothing worn on special occasions for theatrical or comedic purposes are not necessarily transgender behavior, although within the genre of drag there are gender illusionists who do pass as another gender and are very active in the transgender community. Drag queens are men doing female impersonation and drag kings are women doing male impersonation.

As a concept, transgender is different from androgyny, although in practice, one performance of a transgendered identity might be androgyny. Androgyny can be defined as a lack of gender differentiation or a balanced mixture of recognizable feminine and masculine traits. It is an example of transgender behavior because it attempts to break down the
binary categories of femininity and masculinity. It is interesting to note that contemporary ideas about androgyny tend to privilege the "andro" (masculine) more than the "gyny" (feminine), with the presentation of androgyny looking a lot more like masculinity than femininity. The trappings of femininity seem to be the first things that are shed when a body tries to redo itself as androgynous. This is related to androcentrism and the ways masculinity more closely approximates our understanding of (nongendered) "human."

Transgender does not imply any specific form of sexual identity: Transgender people may identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual. It is important not to confuse gender and sexuality here: Transgender identities are about gender performance and might involve any sexual identity. It can be confusing, however, because on many campuses there are LGBTQ (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans/Queer) alliances or centers where resources for transgender students are incorporated into a coalition about sexual rights. In addition, the new term genderqueer has combined alternative gender identities and sexualities, although you might see it used to imply someone who is transgendered without concern for sexual identity. Generally, genderqueer describes a person who is a nonconformist in challenging existing constructions and identities. You might also see it used to describe a social movement resisting the traditional categories of gender. Use of the term queer and other issues associated with sexual identity are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. In other words, although genderqueer focuses on the integration of gender and sexual identities and therefore is a useful concept in terms of individual empowerment, social commentary, and political change, again, it is important to understand that, conceptually, these identities (gender and sexuality) are distinct from each other. Gender performances are associated with meanings about femininity and masculinity (this chapter), while sexuality concerns sexual desire, feelings, and practices (discussed in the next chapter). A person could potentially combine any combination of gendered performances with sexual identities.

We actively learn the skills and practices of gender, accepting, rejecting, and negotiating them until most of us become very accomplished in our various performances. For example, in terms of gender socialization into traditional binaries of femininity and masculinity, the way girls throw a ball is often the object of derision. Throwing the way boys do, however, is actually an act that is learned, then performed again and again until it becomes a skill valued in organized sports. Girls can learn to throw like boys if they are taught. Men are not necessarily better athletes than women; rather, sports as an institution has developed to reflect the particular athletic competencies of men. For example, if long-distance swimming or balance beam (activities where women generally outperform men) were popular national sports, then we might think differently about the athletic capabilities of women and men. Sporting activities where upper-body strength is a plus and where women perform less well than men are most valued in the United States. In addition to sports, there are many other major U.S. institutions that support gendered practices. You need only go to a toy store and cruise the very different girls' and boys' aisles to witness the social construction of gender in contemporary U.S. society. What does it mean to get a child-size ironing board instead of a toy gun, and what kinds of behaviors and future roles do these toys help create and justify? Increasingly, and at earlier ages, children are preoccupied with video and cell phone games and computerized activities that also teach lessons about gender.

This discussion of gender identities and practices does not imply that all men in contemporary North American society are ambitious and independent and all women domestic and emotional. However, this discussion clarifies the social norms or shared
LEARNING ACTIVITY  Speaking of Women and Men

Think about the adjectives we typically use to describe women and men and list these words in the columns below. A couple of examples are provided to get you started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOMEN</th>
<th>MEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do you notice about the words we use to describe women and men? How does our language reinforce stereotypical notions about women and men?

Think about the words we use to designate women and list these names in the columns below. Also, try to find parallel names for women and men. And think about the profanities we use as well. Again, a couple of examples are provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOMEN</th>
<th>MEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slut</td>
<td>Stud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do you notice here about the terms we use to name women and men? What is the significance of the words for which you could not identify parallels?

How do you think language plays a role in shaping the ways we think about and “do” gender?

values associated with the two kinds of human beings our society has created. Gender norms provide the standards or parameters through which thoughts and behaviors are molded. If we create a continuum with “feminine” on one end and “masculine” on the other, we tend to find mostly women on one end and mostly men on the other, and a mixture in between. This means that women and men learn the practices of gender, internalize the norms associated with masculinity and femininity, are rewarded for appropriate behaviors and sanctioned for inappropriate behaviors, and learn to perform the ones that are expected of them.
It is important to emphasize that gender is embedded in culture and that what it might mean to be "feminine" or "masculine" in one culture is different from meanings in another culture. This means that people growing up in different societies in different parts of the world at different historical moments will learn different notions of gender as they intersect with other identities. As the boxed insert in this chapter called "Rites of Passage" suggests, gender performances vary around the world. In addition, contemporary life in the early twenty-first century, which involves global systems of production, consumption, and communication, means that patterns of gender in the United States are exported worldwide and are increasingly linked to patterns of global economic restructuring. This encourages us to consider the ways the social and economic dynamics of globalization (including economic and political expansion, militarism and colonial conquest and settlement, disruption/appropriation of indigenous peoples and resources, exportation of ideas through world markets, etc.) have shaped global gender arrangements and transformed gender relations between people based on these politics. Whatever our global locations, it is important to consider the ways we interact with globalized cultures and particularly the ways in which products of world media feature in our lives and shape our ideas about femininity and masculinity.

It is also interesting to consider the ways the Internet and other virtual technologies have facilitated transgendered identities through a disruption of the expected relationship between self and body ("feminine" identity/"female" body). These technologies remove physical, bodily cues and potentially allow "gender swapping," or the creation of identities
In 1966 the European Athletics Championships in Budapest required the first sex testing of women athletes. Earlier, charges had been leveled suggesting that some women competitors were really men. In 1966 the first sex test was a visual examination of the naked athletes. Later, this test was replaced by a test that detected the athletes’ chromosomal pattern (XX for female and XY for male).

In 1967 Polish sprinter Ewa Klobukowska failed the sex test and was banned from competition. Later, doctors found that she had a condition that once identified would have allowed her to compete.

In 1985 Spanish hurdler Maria Patino expected to compete in the World University Games in Kobe, Japan. Patino had lived her entire life as a woman, and her body type and sex characteristics were typically female. Unfortunately, for Patino, however, her sex test revealed that she did not have two X chromosomes. She was barred from the competition. A few months later, she competed in Spain and won her event. Following her win, however, she was kicked off the Spanish national team, stripped of her titles, and banned from all future competition. Her fight to be reinstated by the International Amateur Athletics Federation took 2½ years.

While our society generally operates under the assumption that people are either male or female, variations from typical biological patterns are common. Some form of intersexuality may occur in as many as 1 in 100 births. Generally, 1 in 400 female athletes will fail the sex test. For many years, women athletes engaged in activism to stop the sex test. Finally, the test was suspended for the 2000 Olympics, although the Olympic Committee reserved the right to reinstate the test at any point in the future.

In 2009 18-year-old South African runner Caster Semenya was subjected to nearly a year of gender scrutiny after she blew away her competitors in the 800-meter race at the world track and field championships in Berlin. Eventually, she was cleared to run as a woman but only after a barrage of psychological, gynecological, and endocrine tests and negative comments about her gender and appearance.

Notice that sex testing has been used only for female athletes. Why do you suppose this is true? How does the existence of people who do not fit neatly into one or the other of the biological categories of male and female disrupt notions of fixed sexes and fixed genders?

that attempt to avoid the binaries of “femininity” and “masculinity” (see box below, “Gender Swapping on the Web”). This supports the postmodern view of gender as performative and identity as multiple and fluid.

**MASCULINITY**

In mainstream contemporary North American society, masculinity has been constructed from the classical traits of intelligence, courage, and honesty, with the addition of two other key dimensions. One of these dimensions revolves around potent sexuality and an affinity for violence: the machismo element. *Machismo* involves breaking rules, sexual potency
Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson

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contextualized in the blending of sex and violence, and contempt for women (misogyny). To be a man is to not be a woman. Weakness, softness, and vulnerability are to be avoided at all costs. David Wexler makes this case in the reading “Shame-O-Phobia.” He writes that boys are socialized into contemporary masculinity through shaming practices that ridicule expressions of femininity. Because shame makes boys feel incompetent and unloved, they go on to fear shame and avoid it as they grow older; a process he names “shame-o-phobia” that results in re-creating negative aspects of contemporary masculinity.

It is no coincidence that the symbol of male ♂ represents Mars, the Roman god of war. A second dimension of masculinity is the provider role, composed of ambition, confidence, competence, and strength. Early research by Deborah David and Robert Brannon characterized four dictates of masculinity that encompass these key dimensions. The dictates include (1) “no sissy stuff,” the rejection of femininity; (2) the “big wheel,” ambition and the pursuit of success, fame, and wealth; (3) the “sturdy oak,” confidence, competence, stoicism, and toughness; and (4) “give ’em hell,” the machismo element. Although these scripts dictate masculinity in a broad sense, there are societal demands that construct masculinity differently for different kinds of men. Of course, again masculinity is also experienced through intersections with other identities. Middle-class masculinities, for example, put emphasis on the big-wheel dimension, the dictates of white masculinity often involve the sturdy oak, and men of color often become associated with the machismo element (with the exception of Asian American men, who are sometimes feminized, when they are not being portrayed as karate warriors).

The last decades have seen changes in the social construction of contemporary masculinity. Although the machismo element is still acted out by countless teenage boys and men, it is also avoided by many men who genuinely do not want to be constrained by its demands. Often these men have realized that moving away from the machismo does not necessarily imply a loss of power. In fact, it seems contemporary women may prefer men who are a little more sensitive and vulnerable. In part, these changes have come about as a result of the focus on gender provided by the women's movement and as a result of the

Rites of Passage

In almost every culture, adolescents participate in some rite of passage to mark entry into adulthood. Quite often, these rites reinforce gender distinctions. Most rites of passage share four basic elements: (1) separation from society, (2) preparation or instruction from an elder, (3) transition, and (4) welcoming back into society with acknowledgment of changed status.* Notice in the following examples how gender is reinforced through rites of passage:

- Among the Okrika of Africa, girls participate in the trio, a rite that begins in the "fatting rooms" where the girls are fed rich foods to cause the body to "come out." The girls learn traditional songs from the elderly women, and these songs are used to free the girls from their romantic attachments to water spirits so they can become marriageable and receive mortal suitors. On the final day of their initiation, the water spirits are expected to try to seize the girls, but the Osokolo (a male) strikes the girls with sticks and drives them back to the village, ensuring their safety and future fertility.*

- The Tukuna of the Amazon initiate girls into womanhood at the onset of menstruation through the Festa das Mocas Novas. For several weeks, the girl lives in seclusion in a chamber in her family's home. The Tukuna believe that during this time, the girl is in the underworld and in increasing danger from demons, the Noo. Near the end of the initiation period, the girl is painted with black genipa dye for 2 days to protect her from the Noo, while guests arrive, some wearing masks to become incarnations of the Noo. On the third day, she leaves the chamber to dance with her family until dawn. The shaman gives her a fire-brand to throw at the Noo to break the Noo's power and allow her to enter into womanhood.*

- In Ohafia in Nigeria, a father provides his son with a bow and arrows around age 7 or 8. The boy practices shooting at targets until he develops the skill to kill a small bird. When this task is accomplished, the boy ties the dead bird to the end of his bow and marches through his village singing that his peers who have not yet killed their first bird are cowards. His father, then, dresses him in finery and takes him to visit, often for the first time, his maternal family. His new social role distinguishes him from the "cowards" and marks his entrance into manhood.†

What are some rites of passage in the United States? How do these rites reinforce gender? How might rites of passage be developed that acknowledge entrance into adulthood without reinforcing gender distinctions?

† www.siu.edu/~anthro/mccoll/children.html.
Many movies offer gender-bending performances. Choose one or more of the following movies to watch. During the movie, record your observations about how the various characters learn and perform gender. Also note the ways race intersects with gender in these performances. How does sexual identity get expressed in the performance of gender?

- Victor/Victoria
- Tootsie
- Mrs. Doubtfire
- To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar
- The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert
- Switch
- The Birdcage
- Orlando
- Shakespeare in Love
- Boys Don't Cry
- Big Momma's House
- Sorority Boys
- Nutty Professor
- Nutty Professor II: The Klumps
- Connie and Carla
- White Chicks
- Yentl
- The Associate
- Transamerica

work of such organizations as the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). As feminist writer and activist Gloria Steinem once said, gender is a prison for both women and men. The difference, she said, is that for men it's a prison with wall-to-wall carpeting and someone to bring you coffee. As illustrated in the reading by Wexler on contemporary masculinities, understanding the limitations associated with masculine social scripts has encouraged many men to transform these scripts into more productive ways of living. Many pro-feminist men and men's organizations have been at the forefront of this work.

Some men have responded to the limitations of masculinity and the advances of women brought about by feminism by focusing on themselves as victims, as demonstrated by the mytho-poetic men's movement, which encourages men to bond and reclaim their power. While this may empower individual men, private solutions to social problems do little to transform patriarchal social structures. Other men more overtly express their desire to take back the power they believe they have lost as a result of changes in contemporary notions of femininity and the gains of the women's movement. These include the Promise Keepers, a group of Christian-affiliated men who want to return men to their rightful place in the family and community through a strong re-assertion of traditional gender roles. They believe that men are to rule and women are to serve within the traditional family system.
Gloria Steinem didn’t set out to become one of the key spokespersons for feminism. Growing up in poverty and with a mentally ill mother, Steinem often found herself in the role of her mother’s caretaker. Despite the difficulties at home, she succeeded at school and was eventually accepted to Smith College, where her interest in women’s rights began to take hold. After graduating from Smith, Steinem received a fellowship to do graduate studies at the University of Delhi and University of Calcutta, India. While in India, she did some work as a freelance writer and, upon returning to the United States, began a career in journalism.

As a woman in journalism, Steinem was rarely given serious assignments. Her most famous article resulted from a 1963 undercover assignment as a Playboy Bunny. Steinem saw the article as an opportunity to expose sexual harassment, but following its publication she had a difficult time being taken seriously as a journalist, despite the excellent reviews the article received.

She finally got her chance for key political assignments in 1968 when she came on board New York Magazine as a contributing editor. One assignment sent her to cover a radical feminist meeting, and following that meeting she moved to the center of the women’s movement, cofounding the National Women’s Political Caucus and the Women’s Action Alliance.

In 1972 she co-founded Ms. magazine. Although Steinem believed there should be a feminist magazine, she had not intended to start it herself. Originally, she had thought she’d turn over the editorship once the magazine got on its feet. But with the success of Ms., Steinem became one of the nation’s most visible and important proponents of feminism.

The first issue of Ms. featured Wonder Woman on the cover, and its entire first printing of 300,000 copies sold out in 8 days. Steinem remained editor for 15 years and is still involved with the magazine today.

**Femininity**

Adjectives associated with traditional notions of femininity in contemporary mainstream North American society include soft, passive, domestic, nurturing, emotional, dependent, sensitive, as well as delicate, intuitive, fastidious, needy, fearful, and so forth. These are the qualities that have kept women in positions of subordination and encouraged them to do the domestic and emotional work of society. Again, no surprise that the symbol of female ♀ represents Venus, the goddess of love. “Doing gender” in terms of femininity involves speaking, walking, looking, and acting in certain ways: in feminine ways. The performative quality involved in being a drag queen (a man who is acting out normative femininity) highlights and reveals the taken-for-granted (at least by women) affectations of femininity.
LEARNING ACTIVITY  Gender Swapping on the Web

The virtual world of the Internet has provided a fascinating environment in which people often play with gender, although, given the social relations of power in contemporary society, this virtual world can also be a place where individuals use gender as a source of power over, or harassment against, other people. Still, in many text-based virtual environments, Web users are able to take on another gender. Men create “feminine” identities for themselves, and women create “masculine” identities for themselves. As Web users engage in this process of gender swapping, they are able to explore the ways that human interactions are structured by gender and to experience in some ways what life is like as another gender.

Create a virtual identity for yourself as another gender and join a chat room or game on the Web as that person. How does it feel to experience the world as another gender? Do you notice ways you act or are treated differently as this gender? What do your experiences suggest to you about how gender structures the ways humans interact with one another?

Men, by far, gender swap on the Web more than women. Why do you think this is true? Do you think gender swapping on the Web has the potential to challenge gender stereotypes? Or do you think it reinforces them? How might the technology of the Internet be used to challenge the limitations of gender? How might the technology of the Internet be used to reinforce male dominance?

Learn more: The following books offer in-depth exploration of these issues. What do these authors suggest about the nature of gender on the Web?


Yet, femininity, like masculinity, varies across cultures and intersects with other identities. As already discussed, African American women may not identify with some aspects of femininity more readily associated with white femininity such as passivity. Asian American women, on the other hand, often have to deal with societal stereotypes that construct femininity very much in terms of passivity and dependence: the "exotic gardenia" or "oriental chick" described in Nellie Wong’s poem "When I Was Growing Up."

A key aspect of femininity is its bifurcation or channeling into two opposite aspects. These aspects involve the chaste, domestic, caring mother or madonna and the sexy, seducing, fun-loving playmate or whore (sometimes known in popular mythology as women you marry and women with whom you have sex). These polar opposites cause tension as women navigate the implications of these aspects of femininity in their everyday lives. This
LEARNING ACTIVITY  Walk like a Man, Sit like a Lady

One of the ways we perform gender is by the way we use our bodies. Very early, children learn to act their gender in the ways they sit, walk, and talk.

Try this observation research:

• Observe a group of schoolchildren playing. Make notes about what you observe concerning how girls and boys act, particularly how they use their bodies in their play and communication.
• Find a place where you can watch people sitting or walking. A public park or mall may offer an excellent vantage point. Record your observations about the ways women and men walk and sit.

Also try this experiment: Ask a friend of the opposite sex to participate in an experiment with you. Take turns teaching each other to sit and to walk like the other sex. After practicing your newfound gender behaviors, write your reflections about the experience.

is an example of the double bind that Marilyn Frye wrote about in her article “Oppression” included in Chapter 2. A woman often discovers that neither sexual activity nor sexual inactivity is quite right. If she is too sexually active, she will be censured for being too loose, the whore; if she refrains from sexual activity, she might similarly be censured for being a prude or frigid. Notice there are many slang words for both kinds of women: those who have too much sex and those who do not have enough. This is the double bind: You’re damned if you do and potentially damned if you don’t. These contradictions and mixed messages serve to keep women in line.

Unlike contemporary masculinity, which is exhibiting very small steps into the realms of the feminine, femininity has boldly moved into areas that were traditionally off-limits. Today’s ideal woman (perhaps from a woman’s point of view) is definitely more androgynous than the ideal woman of the past. The contemporary ideal woman might be someone who is smart, competent, and independent; beautiful, thin, athletic, and sexy; yet also loving, sensitive, competent domestically, and emotionally healthy. Note how this image has integrated characteristics of masculinity with traditional feminine qualities at the same time that it has retained much of the feminine social script. The contemporary ideal woman is strong, assertive, active, and independent rather than passive, delicate, and dependent. The assumption is that she is out in the public world rather than confined to the home. She has not completely shed her domestic, nurturing, and caring dimension, however, or her intuitive, emotional, and sensitive aspects. These attributes are important in her success as a loving and capable partner to a man, as indeed are her physical attributes concerning looks and body size.

To be a modern woman today (we might even say a “liberated woman”) is to be able to do everything: the superwoman. It is important to ask who is benefiting from this new social script. Women work in the public world (often in jobs that pay less, thus helping employers and the economic system) and yet still are expected to do the domestic and emotional work of home and family as well as stay fit and “beautiful.” In many
ways, contemporary femininity tends to serve both the capitalist economic system and individual men better than the traditional, dependent, domestic model.

**GENDER RANKING**

Gender encompasses not only the socially constructed, intersecting differences prescribed for different kinds of human beings but also the values associated with these differences. Recall the sissy/tomboy exercise at the beginning of this chapter. Those traits assigned as feminine are less valued than those considered masculine, illustrating why men tend to have more problems emulating femininity and trans people moving into femininity are viewed with somewhat more hostility than those transitioning toward masculine identities. It is okay to emulate the masculine and act like a boy, but it may not be okay to emulate the feminine. This is *gender ranking* (the valuing of one gender over another), which sets the stage for sexism. Judith Lorber writes, “When genders are ranked, the devalued genders have less power, prestige, and economic rewards than the valued genders.” Just as white is valued above brown or black, and young (though not too young) above old, and heterosexual above homosexual, masculinity tends to be ranked higher than femininity. To be masculine is to have privileges vis-à-vis gender systems; to be feminine means to identify with members of a target group. As already discussed, the social system here that discriminates and privileges on the basis of gender is sexism, although any one person experiencing entitlements or obstacles associated with sexism may also experience entitlements and/or obstacles associated with other intersecting differences or identities. Sexism works by viewing the differences between women and men as important for determining access to social, economic, and political resources. As defined in Chapter 2, sexism is the system that discriminates and privileges on the basis of gender and that results in gender stratification. Given the ranking of gender in our society, sexism works to privilege men and limit women. In other words, men receive entitlements and privilege in a society that ranks masculinity over femininity even while they may be limited by virtue of other intersecting identities such as race or social class.

In other words, although all women are limited by sexism as a system of power that privileges men over women, the social category “woman,” as you recall from Chapter 2, is hardly homogeneous. Location in different systems of inequality and privilege shapes women’s lives in different ways; they are not affected by gender in the same ways. As Settles et al. discuss in the reading on black and white women’s perceptions of femininity and womanhood, other systems based on class, race, sexual identity, and so forth interact with gender to produce different experiences for individual women. This means that the effects of gender and understandings of both femininity and masculinity are mediated by other systems of power. This is another way that ranking occurs. Forms of gender-based oppression and exploitation depend in part on other social characteristics in people’s lives, and gender practices often enforce other types of inequalities. This reflects the confluence that occurs as gender categories are informed/constructed through social relations of power associated with other identities and accompanying systems of inequality and privilege (like racial identities and racism, sexual identities and heterosexism, and so forth). These identities cannot be separated, and certainly they are lived and performed through a tangle of multiple (and often shifting) identities. In this way, then, ranking occurs both across gender categories (masculinity is valued over femininity) and within
gender categories (for example, as economically privileged women are represented differently than poor women and receive economic and social entitlements, or as abled women live different lives than disabled women, and so forth).

Examples of this latter type of gender ranking also include the ways African American women are often characterized as promiscuous or matriarchal and African American men are described as hyperathletic and sexually potent. Jewish women are painted as materialistic and overbearing, whereas Jewish men are supposedly very ambitious, thrifty, good at business, yet still tied to their mothers' apron strings. Latinas and Chicanas are stereotyped as sexy and fun loving, and, likewise, Latinos and Chicanos are seen as oversexed, romantic, and passionate. Native American women are portrayed as silent and overworked or exotic and romantic, whereas Native American men are stereotyped as aloof mystics, close to nature, or else as "savages" and drunks. Asian Americans generally are often portrayed as smart and good at science and math while Asian American women have also been typed as exotic, passive, and delicate. Such stereotypes keep power systems intact.

Finally, other examples of this gender ranking include the ways certain women (the poor and women of color) were historically regarded as carrying out appropriate womanhood when they fulfilled the domestic labor needs of strangers. Upper-class femininity meant that there were certain jobs these privileged women could not perform. This demonstrates the interaction of gender with class and race systems. Old women endure a certain brand of femininity that tends to be devoid of the playmate role and is heavy on the mother aspect. Sexually active old women are violating the norms of femininity set up for them: This shows the influence of ageism in terms of shaping gender norms. Other stereotypes that reveal the interaction of gender with societal systems of privilege and inequality include disabled women's supposedly low sexual appetite or lesbians' lack of femininity (they are presumed to want to be like men at the same time they are said to hate them).

All these problematic constructions are created against the norm of whiteness and work to maintain the privileges of the mythical norm. This concept is illustrated in Nellie Wong's poem. She longed to be white, something she saw as synonymous with being a desirable woman. Note there are ethnic and regional stereotypes for white women (like the dizzy blonde, Southern belle, sexually liberated Scandinavian, or hot-tempered Irish), even though whites are encouraged not to see white as a racial category. Whiteness is just as racialized as any other racial group. The fact that being white can be claimed the mythical norm strips whiteness from the historical and political roots of its construction as a racial category. As discussed in Chapter 2, this ability for nontarget groups to remain relatively invisible is a key to maintaining their dominance in society.

IDEAS FOR ACTIVISM

- Be a gender traitor for a day. Act/dress in ways that are not generally considered to be appropriate for your gender.
- Develop and perform on campus a street theater piece about gender performance.
- Plan, create, publish, and distribute a zine challenging traditional gender roles.
- Examine how masculinity is valued above femininity on your campus. Write a letter about your findings to your campus newspaper.