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READING 2

Beyond the Binaries: Depolarizing the Categories of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender

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. . . Most research designs in sociology assume that each person has one sex, one sexuality, and one gender, which are congruent with each other and fixed for life. Sex and gender are used interchangeably, and sex sometimes means sexuality, sometimes physiology or biology, and sometimes social status. The social construction of bodies is examined only when the focus is medicine, sports, or procreation (Butler 1993). Variations in gender displays are ignored: A woman is assumed to be a feminine female; a man a masculine male. Heterosexuality is the uninterrogated norm against which variations are deviance (Ingraham 1994). These research variables—"sex" polarized as "females" and "males," "sexuality" polarized as "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals," and "gender" polarized as "women" and "men"—reflect unnuanced series that conventionalize bodies, sexuality, and social location (Young 1994). Such designs cannot include the experiences of hermaphrodites, pseudohermaphrodites, transsexuals, transvestites, bisexuals, third genders, and gender rebels as lovers, friends, parents, workers, and sports participants. Even if the research sample is restricted to putative "normals," the use of unexamined categories of sex, sexuality, and gender will miss complex combinations of status and identity, as well as differently gendered sexual continuities and discontinuities (Chodorow 1994, 1995).

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Postmodern feminists and queer theorists have been interrogating bodies, desires, and genders, but sociologists have not, despite the availability of concepts from labeling theory and symbolic interaction: "The idea that sexuality is socially constructed was promoted by interpretive sociologists and feminist theorists at least two decades before queer theory emerged on the intellectual scene" (Stein and Plummer 1994, p. 183).¹ Current debates over the global assumptions of only two gender categories have led to the insistence that they must be nuanced to include race and class, but they have not gone much beyond that (Collins 1990; Spelman 1988; Staples 1982). Similarly, the addition of sexual orientation has expanded gendered sexual statuses only to four: heterosexual women and men, gays, and lesbians.

Deconstructing sex, sexuality, and gender reveals many possible categories embedded in social experiences and social practices, as does the deconstruction of race and class. As queer theorists have found, multiple categories disturb the neat polarity of familiar opposites that assume one dominant and one subordinate group, one normal and one deviant identity, one hegemonic status and one "other" (Martin 1994; Namaste 1994). But in sociology, as Barrie Thorne (1993) comments in her work on children,

The literature moves in a circle, carting in cultural assumptions about the nature of masculinity (bonded, hierarchical, competitive, "tough"), then highlighting behavior that fits those parameters and obscuring the varied styles and range of interactions among boys as a whole. (p. 100)

Behavior that is gender-appropriate is considered normal; anything else (girls insulting, threatening, and physically fighting boys and other girls) is considered "gender deviance" (Thorne 1993, pp. 101–3). The juxtaposition both assumes and reproduces seemingly clear and stable contrasts. Deconstructing those contrasts reveals that the "normal" and the "deviant" are both the product of deliberate social practices and cultural discourses. Of all the so-

cial sciences, sociology is in the best position to analyze those practices and discourses, rather than taking their outcome for granted.

But as long as sociological research uses only the conventional dichotomies of females and males, homosexuals and heterosexuals, women and men, it will take the "normal" for granted by masking the extent of subversive characteristics and behavior. Treating deviant cases as markers of the boundaries of the "normal" implies that the "normal" (e.g., heterosexuality) does not have to be explained as equally the result of processes of socialization and social control (Ingraham 1994). Such research colludes in the muffling and suppressing of behavior that may be widespread, such as heterosexual men who frequently cross-dress, which, if not bracketed off as "deviant," could subvert conventional discourses on gender and sexuality (Stein and Plummer 1994).

Our commonsense knowledge of the real world tells us that behavior is situational and that sexual and gender statuses combined with race and social class produce many identities in one individual (West and Fenstermaker 1995). This individual heterogeneity is nonetheless overridden by the major constructs (race, class, gender) that order and stratify informal groups, formal organizations, social institutions, and social interaction. By accepting these constructs as given, by not unpacking them, sociologists collude in the relations of ruling (Smith 1990a, 1990b).

As researchers, as theorists, and as activists, sociologists have to go beyond paying lip service to the diversity of bodies, sexualities, genders, and racial-ethnic and class positions. We have to think not only about how these characteristics variously intermingle in individuals and therefore in groups but what the extent of variation is *within these categories*. For example, using conventional categories, where would we place the competitive runner in woman's competitions who has XY chromosomes and normal female genitalia (Grady 1992)? Or the lesbian transsexual (Bolin 1988)? Or the woman or man who has long-term relationships with both women and

men (Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994)? Or the wealthy female husband in an African society and her wife (Amadiume 1987)? These are not odd cases that can be bracketed off in a footnote (Terry 1991). As did the concept of conflicting latent statuses (e.g., black woman surgeon), they call our attention to the rich data about social processes and their outcomes that lie beneath neat comparisons of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, men and women.

DECONSTRUCTING SEX, SEXUALITY, AND GENDER

In rethinking gender categories, it is important to split what is usually conflated as sex/gender or sex/sexuality/gender into three conceptually distinct categories: sex (or biology, physiology), sexuality (desire, sexual preference, sexual orientation), and gender (a social status, sometimes with sexual identity). Each is socially constructed but in different ways. Gender is an overarching category—a major social status that organizes almost all areas of social life. Therefore bodies and sexuality are gendered; biology, physiology, and sexuality, in contrast, do not add up to gender, which is a social institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself (Lorber 1994).

For an individual, the components of gender are the sex category assigned at birth on the basis of the appearance of the genitalia; gender identity; gendered sexual orientation; marital and procreative status; a gendered personality structure; gender beliefs and attitudes; gender displays; and work and family roles. All these social components are supposed to be consistent and congruent with perceived physiology. The actual combination of genes and genitalia; prenatal, adolescent, and adult hormonal input; and procreative capacity may or may not be congruous with each other and with the components of

gender and sexuality, and the components may also not line up neatly on only one side of the binary divide.

Deconstructing Sex

Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993) says that “no classification scheme could more than suggest the variety of sexual anatomy encountered in clinical practice” (p. 22), or seen on a nudists’ beach. Male and female genitalia develop from the same fetal tissue, and so, because of various genetic and hormonal inputs, at least 1 in 1,000 infants is born with ambiguous genitalia, and perhaps more (Fausto-Sterling 1993). The “mix” varies; there are

the so-called true hermaphrodites . . . , who possess one testis and one ovary . . . ; the male pseudohermaphrodites . . . , who have testes and some aspects of the female genitalia but no ovaries; and the female pseudohermaphrodites . . . , who have ovaries and some aspects of the male genitalia but lack testes. Each of these categories is in itself complex; the percentage of male and female characteristics . . . can vary enormously among members of the same subgroup. (Fausto-Sterling 1993, p. 21)

Because of the need for official categorization in bureaucratically organized societies, these infants must legally be labeled “boy” or “girl” soon after birth, yet they are subject to rather arbitrary sex assignment (Epstein 1990). Suzanne Kessler (1990) interviewed six medical specialists in pediatric intersexuality and found that whether an infant with XY chromosomes and anomalous genitalia was categorized as a boy or a girl depended on the size of the penis. If the penis was very small, the child was categorized as a girl, and sex-change surgery was used to make an artificial vagina.

An anomaly common enough to be found in several feminine-looking women at every major international sports competition is the existence of XY chromosomes that have not produced male anatomy or physiology because of other genetic input (Grady 1992). Now that hormones have proved unreliable, sports authorities nonetheless

continue to find ways of separating “women” from “men.” From the point of view of the sociological researcher, the interesting questions are why certain sports competitions are gender-neutral and others are not, how different kinds of sports construct different kinds of women’s and men’s bodies, and how varieties of masculinities and femininities are constructed through sports competitions (Hargreaves 1986; Messner 1992; Messner and Sabo 1994).

As for hormones, recent research suggests that testosterone and other androgens are as important to normal development in females as in males, and that in both, testosterone is converted to estrogen in the brain.² Paradoxically, maximum androgen levels seem to coincide with high estrogen levels and ovulation, leading one researcher to comment: “The borders between classic maleness and femaleness are much grayer than people realized. . . . We’re mixed bags, all of us” (quoted in Angier 1994).

From a societal point of view, the variety of combinations of genes, genitalia, and hormonal input can be rendered invisible by the surgical and hormonal construction of maleness and femaleness (Epstein 1990). But this variety, this continuum of physiological sex cannot be ignored. Sociologists may not want to explore the varieties of biological and physiological sexes or the psychology of the hermaphrodite, pseudohermaphrodite, or transsexual, but the rationales given for the categorization of the ambiguous as either female or male shed a great deal of light on the practices that maintain the illusion of clear-cut sex differences. Without such critical exploration, sex differences are easily invoked as the “natural causes” of what is actually socially constructed.

Deconstructing Sexuality

Categories of sexuality—conventionally, homosexual and heterosexual—also mask diversity that can be crucial for generating accurate data. Sexuality is physically sexed because female and male anatomies and orgasmic experiences

differ. It is gendered because sexual scripts differ for women and for men whether they are heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, or transvestite. Linking the experience of physical sex and gendered social prescriptions for sexual feelings, fantasies, and actions are individual bodies, desires, and patterns of sexual behavior, which coalesce into gendered sexual identities. These identities, however various and individualized, are categorized and socially patterned into gendered sexual statuses. There are certainly more than two gendered sexual statuses: “If one uses the criteria of linguistic markers alone, it suggests that people in most English-speaking countries . . . recognize four genders: woman, lesbian (or gay female), man and gay male” (Jacobs and Roberts 1989, p. 439). But there is not the variety we might find if we looked at what is actually out there.³

Studies of bisexuality have shown that the conventional sexual categories are hard to document empirically. At what point does sexual desire become sexual preference, and what turns sexual preference into a sexual identity or social status? What sexual behavior identifies a “pure” heterosexual or a “pure” homosexual? Additionally, a sexual preference involves desired and actual sexual attraction, emotions, and fantasies, not just behavior. A sexual identity involves self-identification, a lifestyle, and social recognition of the status (Klein, Sepekoff, and Wolf 1985).

Sexual identities (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) are responses not just to psychic constructs but also to social and cultural strictures and pressures from family and friends. Because Western culture constructs sexuality dichotomously, many people whose sexual experiences are bisexual are forced to choose between a heterosexual and homosexual identity as their “real” identity (Blumstein and Schwartz 1976a, 1976b; Garber 1995; Rust 1992, 1993, forthcoming; Valverde 1985, pp. 109–20). Rust’s research on bisexual and lesbian sexual identity found that 90 percent of the 323 self-identified lesbians who answered her questionnaire had

had heterosexual experiences, 43 percent after coming out as lesbians (1992, 1993). They discounted these experiences, however; what counted for these lesbians was their current relationships. The forty-two women who identified themselves as bisexual, in contrast, put more emphasis on their sexual attraction to both women and men. Assuming that all self-identified homosexual men and lesbians have exclusively same-sex partners not only renders invisible the complexities of sexuality but can also have disastrous health outcomes, as has been found in the spread of HIV and AIDS among women (Goldstein 1995).

The interplay of gender and sexuality needs to be explored as well. One study found that heterosexual men labeled sexual provocativeness toward them by gay men sexual harassment, but heterosexual women did not feel the same about lesbians' coming on to them (Giuffre and Williams 1994). The straight men felt their masculinity was threatened by the gay men's overtures; the straight women did not feel that a lesbian's interest in them impugned their heterosexuality.

Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) found five types of bisexuals among the 49 men, 44 women, and 11 transsexuals they interviewed in 1983 (pp. 46–8). In their research, gender was as salient a factor as sexuality. On the basis of sexual feelings, sexual behaviors, and romantic feelings, they estimated that only 2 percent of the self-identified bisexual men in their research and 17 percent of the self-identified bisexual women were equally sexually and romantically attracted to and involved with women and men, but about a third of both genders were around the midpoint of their scale. About 45 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women leaned toward heterosexuality, and 15 percent of each gender leaned toward homosexuality. About 10 percent of each were varied in their feelings and behavior.

Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) found that although gender was irrelevant to choice of

partner among bisexuals, sexual scripting was not only gendered, but quite conventional, with both women and men saying that women partners were more emotionally attuned and men partners were more physically sexual (pp. 49–58). Paradoxically, they say,

In a group that often sets itself against societal norms, we were surprised to discover that bisexual respondents organized their sexual preferences along the lines of traditional gender stereotypes. As with heterosexuals and homosexuals, gender is the building material from which they put together their sexuality. Unlike these groups, however, the edifice built is not restricted to one gender. (p. 57)

The meaning of gender and sexuality to self-identified homosexuals cannot be taken for granted by researchers. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that some homosexuals want to cross into the other gender's social space (e.g., gay drag queens and butch lesbians), whereas for others (e.g., macho gay men and lesbian separatists) “. . . it is instead the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender, people grouped under the single most determinative diacritical mark of social organization, people whose economic, institutional, emotional, physical needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire” (1990, p. 87).

Paula Rust (forthcoming), in her research on varieties of sexuality, found that her respondents spoke of being attracted to another person because of particular personality characteristics, ways of behaving, interests, intellect, looks, style. What heterosexuals do—choose among many possible members of the opposite sex—is true of gays and lesbians for same-sex partners, and bisexuals for either sex. The physical sex, sexual orientation, masculinity, femininity, and gender markers are just the beginning set of parameters, and they might differ for a quick sexual encounter, a romantic liaison, a long-term relationship. Rather than compare on categories of gender or sexuality, researchers might want to compare on types of relationships.

Deconstructing Gender

Gendered behavior is constantly normalized by processes that minimize or counteract contradictions to the expected. Competitive women body-builders downplay their size, use makeup, wear their hair long and blond, and emphasize femininity in posing by using "dance, grace and creativity"; otherwise, they don't win competitions (Mansfield and McGinn, 1993):

There are a wide variety of styles of dress and personal presentation available to Western women of the late twentieth century to the extent that the notion of female-to-male cross-dressing has become almost meaningless. However, in the same way as it is necessary for the extreme gender markers of the hyper-feminine to be adopted by the male cross-dressers in order to make it clear that they wish to be recognized as "women," so too is it necessary for women body-builders. . . . It seems that the female muscled body is so dangerous that the proclamation of gender must be made very loudly indeed. (p. 64)

Iris Marion Young (1994) argues that gender, race, and class are *series*—comparatively passive social collectives grouped by their similar tasks, ends, or social conditioning. These locations in social structures may or may not become sources of self-identification, significant action by others, or political action. When and how they do is an area for research. For example, U.S. lesbians first identified with homosexual men in their resistance to sexual discrimination, but after experiencing the same gender discrimination as did women in the civil rights and draft-resistance movements, they turned to the feminist movement, where, unhappily, they experienced hostility to their sexuality from many heterosexual women. Subsequently, some lesbian feminists have created an oppositional, woman-identified, separatist movement that identifies heterosexuality as the main source of the oppression of women (Taylor and Rupp 1993).

David Collinson and Jeff Hearn (1994) argue that men in management exhibit multiple mas-

culinities: aggressive authoritarianism, benevolent paternalism, competitive entrepreneurialism, buddy-buddy informalism, and individualist careerism. These multiple masculinities among men managers have different effects on relationships with men colleagues, women colleagues, as well as on sponsor-protégé interactions. Collinson and Hearn call for a simultaneous emphasis on unities and differences among men. Cynthia Cockburn similarly says about women, "We can be both the same as you *and* different from you, at various times and in various ways" (1991, p. 10).

Igor Kopytoff (1990), raising the question of why it seems to be easier for women in traditional societies than in Westernized societies to claim positions of political power and rule as heads of state, uses a concept of core or existential gender identities. He argues that in Africa and many other traditional societies the core of womanhood (or immanent or existential being as a woman) is childbearing—but all the rest is praxis and negotiable, transferable. Because women do not have to bring up their children to be women in traditional societies, just birth them, he argues that they are free to take on other time-consuming roles. In the West, in contrast, since the nineteenth century, being a "real" woman means one must be married with children, and must bring them up personally, while also keeping an impeccable house and attractive appearance, and looking after a husband's sexual and emotional needs. "Once existentially complete, she can then turn to other occupations," but will rarely have the time to assume a position of leadership (p. 93).

The crucial question . . . is this: granted that most and perhaps all societies posit that being a woman is an existential identity with a set of features immanent in it, how many such immanent features are there and what are they? Or, to put it most simply, the problem of women's roles is not whether a society recognizes women as being different from men (they invariably do) but how it organizes other things around the difference. (p. 91)

USEFUL METHODOLOGIES

The sociologists' task should be to deconstruct the conventional categories of sex, sexuality, and gender and build new complex, cross-cutting constructs into research designs. There are several ways to rethink the conventional "manageable units" that laypeople construct (Rodkin 1993, p. 635). We can deconstruct the commonly used categories to tease out components; we can add categories; we can also reconstruct categories entirely. That is, we can take a critical stance toward the conventional categories without abandoning them entirely, examining the social construction and meanings of sex, sexuality, and gender, as has already been done for race, ethnicity, and social class. We can adapt categories to particular research questions, cross-cutting sex, sexuality, and gender the way race, ethnicity, and social class have been used as cross-cutting categories. Or, we can do research that predicts behavior from processes and social location without the overlay of status categories, examining what people do to and with whom and how these processes construct, maintain, or subvert statuses, identities, and institutional rules and social structures. None of these new approaches discards familiar sociological tools, but all of them demand thoughtful examination of the familiar binaries.

Sociology has several methodologies that do not rely on polarized categories. Among them are analysis of positions in a social network (Knoke and Kuklinski 1982), examination of the clustering of attitudinal perspectives through Q-sorting (Stephenson 1953), letting patterns emerge from the data as recommended by grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Straus and Corbin, 1990), and the critical deconstruction of social texts (Reinharz 1992, pp. 145–63). The familiar categories can be used in the next level of analysis to see whether the emergent network positions, attitude clusters, typical behavior, and subtexts are characteristic of those of different genders, races, ethnic groups, and classes, and they can be taken to a third level describing how they relate to power and resource

control. Or they can be dropped entirely in favor of category names more descriptive of empirical content. Using grounded theory to analyze the varieties of behavior of male cross-dressers, Richard Ekins (1993) distinguished patterns related to sex ("body femaling"), sexuality ("erotic femaling"), and role behavior ("gender femaling").

Letting patterns emerge from the data, the methodology long recommended by ethnomethodologists and other qualitative researchers, permits the analysis of processes within structures (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987). As Marilyn Frye notes, "Pattern discovery and invention requires encounters with difference, with variety. . . . Discovering patterns requires novel acts of attention" (1990, p. 180). These patterns can also be used for quantitative comparisons, as Mary Clare Lennon and Sarah Rosenfeld (1994) did in their statistical analysis built on Arlie Hochschild's (1989) interview data on the extent of housework done by husbands and wives where the woman was the greater earner. Organizing data without reliance on the conventional dichotomous categories does not confine researchers to single-case analysis or a limited number of in-depth interviews; quantitative methods will still be applicable.

The common practice of comparing females and males, women and men, or homosexuals and heterosexuals frequently produces data that are so mixed that it takes another level of analysis to sort out meaningful categories for comparison. It would be better to start with categories derived from data analysis of all subjects and see the extent to which they attach to the conventional global categories of sex, sexuality, and gender, or better yet, to one or more of the components. However, in order to do this second level of analysis, the sample groups have to be heterogenous on the conventional categories in the first place. Thus, the familiar categories do not have to be dispensed with entirely, but their use in analysis can be bracketed until after other differentiating variables are revealed.

These differentiating variables are likely to break up and recombine the familiar categories in new ways that go beyond the conventional dichotomies but do not remove the category from our lexicon. As Linda Nicholson (1994) says in "Interpreting *Gender*,"

Thus I am advocating that we think about the meaning of *woman* as illustrating a map of intersecting similarities and differences. Within such a map the body does not disappear but rather becomes a historically specific variable whose meaning and import are recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts. Such a suggestion . . . [assumes] that meaning is found rather than presupposed. (pp. 101–2)

CHALLENGE CATEGORIES, CHALLENGE POWER

. . . The goal of sociological research should similarly be multiple levels of analysis that include the heterogeneity of people's lives, the varied dimensions of status categories, and the power relations between and among them. As Dorothy Smith (1990a) says,

The social scientist must work with the constraint of actuality and is not privileged to draw relations between observables arbitrarily. A theoretical account is not fixed at the outset, but evolves in the course of inquiry dialectically as the social scientist seeks to explicate the properties of organization discovered in the way people order their activities. Hence the structure of a theoretical account is constrained by the relations generated in people's practical activities. (p. 48)

Research using a variety of gendered sexual statuses has already challenged long-accepted theories. Lesbian and homosexual parenting, as well as single-parent households, call into question ideas about parenting and gendered personality development based on heterogendered nuclear families. In psychoanalytic theory, having a woman as a primary parent allows girls to maintain their close bonding and identification with women, but forces boys to differentiate and sepa-

rate in order to establish their masculinity. The personality structure of adult women remains more open than that of men, whose ego boundaries make them less emotional. Women in heterosexual relationships want children to bond with as substitutes for their lack of intense emotional intimacy with their men partners. But there are lesbians who have deep and intense relationships with women who also want children, as do some homosexual men (Lewin 1993). Furthermore, not all full-time mothering is emotionally intense, nor is all intensive mothering done by women. Barbara Risman (1987), in her study of fifty-five men who became single fathers because of their wives' death, desertion, or giving up custody, found that their relationships with their children were as intimate as those of single mothers and mothers in traditional marriages. And Karen Hansen's studies (1992) of nineteenth-century heterosexual men's friendships reveal a world of feeling similar to that described by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) for women.

In work organizations, position in the hierarchy does and does not override a worker's gender. The behavior of men and women doctors sometimes reflects their professional status and sometimes their gender, and it is important to look at both aspects to understand their relationships with patients (Lorber 1985). The men workers in women's occupations and the women workers in men's occupations cannot be lumped in a minority category. The women come up against the glass ceiling that blocks their upward mobility, whereas the men are on what Christine Williams has called a "glass escalator": They are encouraged to compete for managerial and administrative positions (Williams 1989, 1992).

Joey Sprague (1991) found that because material interests reflect positions in the social relations of production and reproduction, as well as more immediate community contexts, political attitudes hew more closely to class, gender role, and affiliation with social movements than to a simple division of men versus women (also see Henderson-King and Stewart 1994).

There are revolutionary possibilities inherent in rethinking the categories of gender, sexuality, and physiological sex. Sociological data that challenge conventional knowledge by reframing the questions could provide legitimacy for new ways of thinking. When one term or category is defined only by its opposite, resistance reaffirms the polarity (Fuss 1991). The margin and the center, the insider and the outsider, the conformist and the deviant are two sides of the same concept. Introducing even one more term, such as bisexuality, forces a rethinking of the oppositeness of heterosexuality and homosexuality. "A critical sexual politics, in other words, struggles to move beyond the confines of an inside/outside model" (Namaste 1994, p. 230). The politics of identity are challenged, but such political stances are already split racially and by social class. Data that undermine the supposed natural dichotomies on which the social orders of most modern societies are still based could radically alter political discourses that valorize biological causes, essential heterosexuality, and traditional gender roles in families and workplaces.

NOTES

1. For widely cited postmodern feminist and queer theorists, see Butler (1990), Flax (1990), Frye (1992), Nicholson (1990), and Sedgwick (1990). The symposium on queer theory and sociology in the July 1994 issue of *Sociological Theory* addresses some of the questions raised in this article.
2. For summaries of recent research on estrogen and testosterone, see Angier (1994, 1995).
3. Grimm (1987, Tables 1-3, pp. 74-6) comes up with 45 different types of erotic and nonerotic, complementary and similar relationships.

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