

# Chapter 1

## Introduction to the Sociology of Gender

### Chapter Objectives

- Provide an overview of the book's general aims.
- Explain how sociologists approach the study of social life and gender, in particular.
- Define gender and other key terms, and understand the debates over their use.
- Identify the three frameworks sociologists use to examine this concept.
- Provide examples of the ways that gender shapes individuals, social interaction, and institutions.
- Explain the importance of considering gender from a cross-national and comparative perspective.

## *Introduction*

*Last summer at a family gathering, my mother asked what I would be working on during my sabbatical. "Gender," I responded. "You mean gender bias?" she asked helpfully. "No, gender," I said. There ensued an awkward silence, then my sixteen-year-old nephew quipped, "There are men and there are women. What more is there to say? Short book."*

From "Confounding Gender" by Mary Hawkesworth

## **Introduction**

I identify with the narrator in this story. Like her, I have often found myself having to explain my interest in the topic of gender. Many people share – at least implicitly, anyway – the teenage nephew's belief that gender is something unproblematic, self-evident, and uncontested. Is there anything more to say?

My belief that there is, indeed, more to say on the topic of gender is the motivation for this book. In it, I hope to achieve two goals: First, I aim to convince readers that understanding gender requires us to go beyond the obvious and to reconsider issues we may think are self-evident and already well understood. Challenging the taken-for-granted is one essential component of the sociological perspective. In fact, sociologists argue that what people view as unproblematic and accept as "the way things are" may be most in need of close, systematic scrutiny. A second goal of the book is to demonstrate the ways that gender matters in social life. Though complex and ever-changing, the social world is ordered and, at some level, knowable. As a principle of social relations and organization, gender is one of the forces that contribute to this patterning of social life. By understanding gender, we understand more about the social world.

Meeting these goals is more challenging than ever before. Virtually all of the social sciences have produced a staggering amount of empirical research on gender. Further, gender research has proliferated across the globe, and the ability of scholars to communicate with and learn from one another across geographical and disciplinary boundaries has expanded exponentially. This multi-

plidity of views and perspectives does not have to result in chaos and confusion, however. The field's conceptual and theoretical diversity can be a source of enrichment rather than fragmentation. In order to receive the benefits of this diversity, however, students of gender must be skilled at communicating across perspectives, identifying points of overlap, convergence, and opposition. Demonstrating how this can be accomplished while, at the same time, doing justice to the range and variety of the ever-expanding theory and research on gender presents challenges I hope to meet in the following pages.

## Sociological Vantage Points

There are many ways to gather information and produce knowledge, including knowledge about gender. This book, however, is premised on my belief that sociology (and the social sciences) offers the most useful vantage points from which this topic can be understood. Sociology does not provide the *only* access to the social world, of course. Fiction, music, and art, for example, all may provide people with meaningful insights about their lives. As a scientific discipline, sociology values systematic, theoretically informed analyses of the empirical world. While personal narratives and experiences are undeniably important, relying exclusively on these sources of information may lead to the "fundamental attribution error" – the tendency to explain behavior by invoking personal dispositions while ignoring the roles of social structure and context (Aries 1996; Ross 1977). Only by moving away from the purely subjective can we understand the broader social forces that shape our lives. Sociologists employ a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather the information that informs their empirical claims. They use these methods as means to insure that data are gathered and analyzed systematically, with the aim of explaining and extending knowledge.

Though embracing the assumptions and methods of science as it has traditionally been conceived, sociologists have – out of necessity

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– also broadened these traditions. We recognize that the social world we study is complex and that this demands multiple forms of knowledge-gathering, some of which may be unique to the social (as opposed to the other) sciences. Models of science that work well for those studying the natural or physical world are not always applicable or desirable for studying the social world. As numerous social scientists have pointed out, humans – unlike other species – have tremendous capacities for reflection, creativity, and agency. People are neither programmable machines nor are they prisoners of their instincts. As a result, sociologists must contend with the fact that all people know something of the circumstances in which they act and thereby possess a degree of “sociological competence” (Lemert 1997, p. x). As sociologists, we are at our best when we can communicate with and learn from those we study. The sociological enterprise is further strengthened by its practitioners’ capacities to critically reflect on the circumstances through which their knowledge is produced. The ability to engage in self-reflection and critique one’s assumptions, methods, and conceptual orientations contributes vitally to the growth of sociological knowledge.

There are several, more specific characteristics of sociological knowledge –including knowledge about gender. Most important, this knowledge emanates from diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Because they focus attention on different aspects of the social world and ask different kinds of questions, the interplay of diverse perspectives and methods helps facilitate the production of knowledge. I believe that the most useful sociological knowledge is produced collectively, through dialogue and debate, rather than in self-contained isolation. Sociological knowledge is not complete, seamless, or monolithic, however. Rather, like all knowledge grounded in the practices of science, this knowledge is incomplete, contingent, and often inconsistent.

These disciplinary characteristics have shaped what we know about gender and how we have come to know it. What follows thus draws on these characteristics. In my view, the tools of social science and sociology, in particular – while not flawless or complete – have been and continue to be the most useful in providing people with

the means to challenge the taken-for-granted, understand their own lives and the world around them, and create possibilities for change.

## A Brief History of the Sociological Study of Gender

### Beginnings

I took my first course on gender as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon in 1975. As I recall, the course had only been in existence for a few years prior. “Gender” appeared nowhere in the course title: It was called “the sociology of women.” My experience of being introduced to the study of *gender* through the sociology of *women* was fairly typical for sociology students of my generation. The study of gender in sociology grew out of the second wave of the women’s movement. One expression of this movement in colleges and universities was its critique of academic disciplines, like sociology, for ignoring women. Women were rarely the subjects of research and activities heavily dominated by women (e.g., housework) received little attention. Critics thus claimed that sociology reflected a “male bias,” generating knowledge most applicable to men’s lives rather than to the lives of women and to society defined more broadly. The challenge for sociology at that time was best captured in the question posed by the late sociologist, Jessie Bernard (1973a, p. 781): “Can [sociology] become a science of society rather than a science of male society?”

While the term “gender” gradually began to enter the sociological literature, gender scholars for many years devoted considerably more attention to women – and topics related to femininity – than to men and topics related to masculinity. In addition, much more was written about differences between women and men than was written about *variations among women* and *among men*. Perhaps more fundamental was the persistent, often implicit, assumption that sociology as a discipline could accommodate new knowledge about gender without having to rethink some of its own key assumptions

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about the social world. Each of these tendencies has been challenged in recent years.

### Recent conceptual developments

The sociology of women has given way to a sociology of gender. On one level, this change is reflected in a growing literature on men and masculinity (Connell 1995; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Although men have long been of interest to sociologists, this recent literature focuses on men as gendered rather than generic beings. This development, in turn, has been accompanied by the recognition that gender itself is *relational*: Understanding what women are or can be thus requires attention to what men are or can be.

Another important development involves the growing recognition of variations among men and among women, resulting in increased attention to *masculinities* and *femininities*. The acknowledgment of multiple rather than singular expressions of gender has been accompanied by a recognition that some forms of masculinity or femininity are more socially valued than others. In this view, relations between particular kinds of masculinity (or particular kinds of femininity) are understood as relations of domination and subordination. In addition, this formulation recognizes that “masculinities [and femininities] come into existence at particular times and places and are always subject to change” (Connell 1995, p. 185).

A related development in the sociology of gender is the field’s increased concern with the relations between gender and other bases of distinction and stratification, such as age, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, or nation. This literature challenges the notion that women (or men) represent a homogeneous category, whose members can be automatically assumed to share common interests and experiences. For example, as studies of care work have shown, a global division of women’s labor underlies this industry: Poor women from less affluent countries migrate to the richer West to care for the children and clean the houses of women who are more well-to-do (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). Contained within the global gap between rich and poor is a gap

among women and women's work activities. Though gender, race and ethnicity, and social class are analytically separate, as aspects of lived experience, they are highly intertwined.

Another aspect of gender scholarship is its attempt to transform sociological knowledge. It is insufficient to simply add knowledge about gender to existing sociological literatures. Instead, we should rethink taken-for-granted sociological concepts and ideas, with the aim of refashioning these literatures. Purportedly gender-neutral practices and institutions, such as law, work, and formal organization, have received new scrutiny from scholars interested in gender. These scholars' efforts have helped move the sociology of gender from the margins to the center of sociological thought. In turn, they have contributed to the growing recognition that gender scholarship has something to offer the sociological mainstream.

A related theme in gender scholarship is the belief that cross-national, comparative research is essential. Gender has long been of interest to researchers around the world, but the vast majority of studies focus on a single society. There are some good reasons for this. Comparative data are not always easy to come by, and cross-national research can be time-consuming and expensive. However, some of these logistical barriers to cross-national research have been overcome. New technologies have vastly expanded access to information and increased the possibilities for scholarly communication among those in different places on the globe.

This has enabled researchers to learn more about the role of societal-level influences on gender and how aspects of gender uncovered in one societal context may or may not be generalizable to other settings. For example, while studies conducted in Western societies show that acts of physical aggression towards a partner are committed by both men and women, this pattern is not found in all nations (Archer 2006). Cross-national research thus is important in helping us avoid the dangers of over-generalization, which occurs when one assumes that conclusions based on one group of women or men can be automatically extended to all women or all men. As we saw earlier, a similar kind of critique was what led sociologists to examine women in their own right in the first place.

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The internationalization of gender scholarship has also helped facilitate new research agendas. A particular focus has been the ways that gender shapes and is shaped by macro-societal trends, processes, and institutions, such as globalization, migration, and state policies (O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999).

Nevertheless, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Cross-national research on gender has taught us much about the ways that gender operates differently across societies and revealed the implications of those differences for women's and men's lives. Ironically, however, looking across boundaries in this way has also reinforced scholars' view that gender's role in social organization is fundamental: "In virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes" (Harding 1986, p. 18).

In considering the history of gender scholarship, one final point to keep in mind is the relationship between how social scientists think about gender and events in the larger society. Gender scholarship emerged during the women's movement, a time when middle-class women in the West were responding to growing educational and economic opportunities. Trends in gender scholarship in the current era are similarly linked to the social forces that are shaping the twenty-first century, such as globalization, neoliberalism, and the explosive growth of new modes and technologies of communication.

## **Defining Gender**

Following Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999, p. 192), I view **gender** as a "system of social practices"; this system creates and maintains gender distinctions and it "organizes relations of inequality on the basis of [these distinctions]." In this view, gender involves the creation of both differences *and* inequalities. But which social practices are most important in creating gender distinctions and inequalities, and how do these practices operate? The book's primary aim is to examine alternative answers to these questions. In the process, stu-

dents will be introduced to the range and diversity of sociological understandings of gender.

Three features of this definition are important to keep in mind. First, gender is as much a process as a fixed state. This implies that gender is being continually produced and reproduced. Stated differently, we could say that gender is enacted or “done,” not merely expressed. Understanding the mechanisms through which this occurs thus is an important objective. Second, gender is not simply a characteristic of individuals but occurs at all levels of the social structure. This is contained in the idea of gender as a “system” of practices that are far-reaching, interlocked, and exist independently of individuals. Gender is a multilevel phenomenon (Risman 1998). This insight enables us to explore how social processes, such as interaction, and social institutions, such as work, embody and reproduce gender. Third, this definition of gender refers to its importance in organizing relations of inequality. Whether gender differentiation must necessarily lead to gender inequality is a subject of debate that we will take up in the next chapter. For now, however, the important point is that, as a principle of social organization, gender is one critical dimension upon which social resources are distributed.

Gender is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “sex.” In fact, there is no firm consensus on the appropriate use of these two terms among gender scholars. Some reject the term “sex” altogether and refer only to “gender.” Others use them synonymously, while still others employ both concepts and recognize a clear distinction between them. These differences in usage are not merely semantic, but reflect more fundamental differences in perspective and theoretical orientation. Understanding the sociological meaning of sex and its relationship to gender thus is our next order of business in this chapter.

## Sex and sex category

In conversation people often refer to men or women as the “opposite sex.” The term “opposite sex” implies that men and women belong to completely separate categories. Are women and men truly

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opposites? In fact, human males and females share many characteristics, especially biological characteristics. For example, both normally have 23 pairs of chromosomes and they are warm-blooded: In other respects, however, male and female bodies differ. These distinguishing characteristics, which include chromosomal differences, external and internal sexual structures, hormonal production, and other physiological differences, and secondary sex characteristics, signify **sex**.

The claim that sex marks a distinction between two physically and genetically discrete categories of people is called **sexual dimorphism**. Many view sexual dimorphism in humans as a biological fact; they believe that sexual differentiation creates two “structurally distinguishable” categories of humans (Breedlove 1994, p. 390). Others are more skeptical, arguing that social rather than biological forces produce two sexes in humans. This disagreement, which I will return to below, is an important area of debate among gender scholars.

In addition to the concept of sex, sociologists also use terms such as **sex assignment** or **sex category**. These concepts describe the processes through which social meanings are attached to biological sex. Sex assignment refers to the process – occurring at birth or even prenatally – by which people are identified as male or female (their sex category). Sex assignment is guided, at least in part, by socially agreed upon criteria for identifying sex, such as external genitalia. In most cases, sex assignment is a straightforward matter. Yet, this is not always the case. Researchers estimate that in as many as 2 percent of all live births, infants cannot be easily categorized as male and female (Blackless et al. 2000). In these cases, the sex chromosomes, external genitalia, and/or the internal reproductive system do not fit the standard for males or females. These individuals are called **intersexuals**.

### Lessons from the intersexed

Intersexuals have been a subject of fascination and debate throughout recorded history (Kessler 1998). More than any other group,

however, the medical profession has defined the issue of intersexuality and societal responses to it. Not surprisingly, as medical technology has become more sophisticated, intersexuality has come to be defined as a condition requiring medical intervention – as a “correctable birth defect” (Kessler 1998, p. 5). In these cases, doctors perform complicated surgery designed to provide an infant with “normal” genitals – that is, with genitals that match a particular sex category.

In recent years, some intersexuals have begun to speak out against this practice of surgically altering children born with ambiguous genitalia. In 1992, Cheryl Chase, an intersex woman, founded an organization called the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA). This group’s primary goal is to reduce, if not eliminate, genital surgery on intersex infants. Instead, members of INSA believe that surgery should be a choice made when the intersexed person is old enough to give informed consent. In 1996, members of INSA demonstrated at the American Academy of Pediatrics annual meeting in Boston, advocating “an avoidance of unnecessary genital surgery, family counseling with regard to the child’s future medical needs and options, complete disclosure of medical files, referral of the adolescent to peer support, and the fully informed consent of the intersexual youth to any or all medical procedures” (Turner 1999, p. 457). INSA also advocates for people’s right to remain intersexed and to gain social acceptance for this status. Members of the ISNA thus reject the belief that everyone must fall into one of two sex categories, and they envision a society where genital variation is accepted.

INSA’s goals may sound unrealistic. The fact that it is difficult to imagine a world where genitals no longer anchor people’s understanding of male and female underscores the close ties between genitals and gender in people’s taken-for-granted reality. This taken-for-granted reality represents the “natural attitude” toward gender; it comprises a set of beliefs that on the surface appear “obvious” and thus not open to examination or questioning. Among these “unquestionable axioms” are: “the beliefs that there are two and only two genders; gender is invariant; genitals are the essential

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signs of gender; the male/female dichotomy is natural; being masculine or feminine is not a matter of choice; all individuals can (and must) be classified as masculine or feminine" (Hawkesworth 1997, p. 649; see also Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 2000). By raising the possibility that genitals are not definitive evidence of one's maleness or femaleness, intersexuals are challenging "the natural attitude."

### Sex or gender?

INSA and research on intersexuals have helped reveal the social processes that shape assignment to (and, in the case of many intersexuals) construction of a sex category. These efforts can be seen as part of a broader attempt to understand the links between sex and gender. Most now agree that the biological or genetic aspects of maleness and femaleness cannot be understood as fully separate and distinct from the social processes and practices that give meaning to these characteristics. As Hoyenga and Hoyenga (1993, p. 6) explain, "We are the products of both our biologies and our past and present environments, simultaneously and inseparably; we are bodies as well as minds at one and the same time."

This view – that biology and society interact to shape human behavior – may not seem controversial, but researchers disagree over exactly how this interaction should be understood. Is sex the biological and genetic substrate from which gender distinctions emerge, or do gender distinctions lead us to perceive two, easily distinguishable sexes? Is sexual dimorphism itself a social construction?

The two positions in this discussion represent fairly distinct conceptions of the body (Connell 1995) and hence a disagreement over the *degree to which they see sex as socially constructed*. At one end of the spectrum are those who believe that gender is not grounded in any biological or genetic reality (Lorber 1994). In this view, the body "is a more or less neutral surface or landscape on which a social symbolism is imprinted" (Connell 1995, p. 46). Accordingly, sexual dimorphism, from this perspective, is less an objective reality than

a socially constructed distinction. In Kessler and McKenna's (1978, p. 163) words, "Scientists construct dimorphism where there is continuity. ... Biological, psychological, and social differences do not lead to our seeing two genders. Our seeing of two genders leads to the 'discovery' of biological, psychological, and social differences." In other words, first we have social understandings of what men and women are, or should be, and then we perceive sex differences.

Kessler and McKenna (1978) suggest that, while assignment to a sex category occurs first at birth (or perhaps even prenatally), people continue to categorize one another as males or females throughout life. This continual process of categorization (or, in their words, "attribution") is the means through which gender distinctions emerge and are reproduced. As these authors explain, however, adults typically lack the kind of information about others' bodies that is used to assign sex category at birth. In particular, since clothing usually hides people's genitals from the views of others, people rely on other "markers" to assign a sex category. These markers may include physical characteristics, such as hair, body type, or voice, or they may include aspects of dress, mannerisms or behavior. What count as markers of sex category depend heavily on cultural circumstances and thus vary widely across time, place, and social group. Assignment to sex categories thus relies heavily on social criteria. As views on what are acceptable ways to express oneself as a male or female change, so too do markers of sex category.

These processes are further complicated by Kessler and McKenna's observation that, regardless of what criteria are invoked to assign sex category, there is none that works in every circumstance to distinguish males from females:

If we ask by what criteria a person might classify someone as being either male or female, the answers appear so self-evident as to make the question trivial. But consider a list of items that differentiate males from females. There are none that always and without exception are true of only one gender. No behavioral characteristic (e.g.,

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crying or physical aggression) is always present or never present for one gender. Neither can physical characteristics –either visible (e.g., beards), unexposed (e.g., genitals), or normally unexamined (e.g., gonads) – always differentiate the genders. (Kessler and McKenna 1978, pp. 1–2)

What are the implications of these claims? Most important is the view that sex distinctions are not based on any fully “objective” characteristics of human beings; rather, they are themselves social constructions. Further, this implies that it is impossible to conceive of sex apart from gender. Rather than sex being the basis for gender distinctions, as some claim, this view argues that gender is the basis for distinctions based on sex.

From this perspective, the fact that most people *believe* in the existence of two, objectively identifiable and, hence, “real” sex categories is what requires explanation. Researchers like Kessler and McKenna want to explain how sex distinctions take on their self-evident quality and why belief in these distinctions is so “incurable,” as they put it, and thus resistant to change (Garfinkel 1967, pp. 122–8).

Kessler and McKenna’s perspective may be difficult to grasp, since a belief in objectively real sex categories is a widely shared view in Western thought. Ironically, however, the very taken-for-grantedness of this belief fuels Kessler and McKenna’s interest in understanding how such a widely shared view emerges in daily life. If gender meanings have their roots in the social world, as this position implies, then social, rather than biological or genetic, processes are the key to understanding gender. These social processes might include individually focused practices, such as socialization (discussed in the next chapter) or they could include social practices operating at other levels of analysis, such as those occurring within groups or organizations. These latter sources of gender will be discussed in Parts II and III.

On the other side of this debate are sociologists who emphasize the ways in which biology sets limits on what societal influences can achieve (Rossi 1977; Udry 2000). Sometimes referred to as **bio-**

**social** perspectives, these views treat sex as objectively, identifiable “real” distinctions between males and females that are rooted in human physiology, anatomy, and genetics. These distinctions become the raw material from which gender is constructed. Sociologists who embrace this view would not necessarily deny that assignment to sex categories reflects socially agreed-upon rules, nor would they deny that gender shapes what counts as a marker of sex category. However, these sociologists draw a clear distinction between sex and gender, arguing that sex limits the construction of gender.

I present these views to show that differences in how sociologists define sex and gender reflect more than debates over terminology. Underlying these disagreements are fundamental differences in the kinds of questions researchers ask and the kinds of knowledge they hope to gain. For example, the biosocial perspective is most strongly identified with research seeking to identify biological, genetic, or evolutionary contributions to male and female behaviors and characteristics. We will discuss this research later in this chapter. Those agreeing with Kessler and McKenna, on the other hand, take a different view. While recognizing biological influences on the physical body, Kessler and McKenna object to the notion that biology is the “bedrock” of gender (Kessler and McKenna 2000, p. 69). From their view, adherents to a biosocial perspective take for granted precisely what is most in need of explanation: people’s belief in the existence of two, discrete sex categories.

Like most sociologists, I believe that the biological and the social worlds are interdependent and mutually influential. The biological or genetic aspects of maleness and femaleness cannot be understood as fully separate and distinct from the social processes and practices that give meaning to these characteristics. It is thus impossible to neatly separate the realm of sex from that of gender when we are trying to explain any aspect of social life. This view thus is somewhere between Kessler and McKenna’s and the biosocial account. Accordingly, I will use the term “gender,” rather than “sex” or “sex category,” most often throughout the book. When

discussing a particular theory or body of work that uses sex instead of gender, however, I will adopt the terminology used by the proponents of that perspective.

## **Three Frameworks for Understanding Gender**

Three broad frameworks will be used to organize the material presented in this book. These frameworks correspond generally to where the “sociological action” is with respect to the social practices that produce gender: For some, this action resides in individuals – their personalities, traits, emotions, etc. This “individualist” approach will be highlighted in Part I, but will appear in other chapters as well. The social practice most closely associated with this framework is socialization, the subject of Chapters 2 and 3. For others, gender is created through social interaction and is inherently contextual in its impact. This implies that gender cannot be reduced to an identity or set of personality traits. Still others argue that gender is embedded in the structures and practices of organizations and social institutions, which appear on the surface to be gender-neutral. I refer to these latter two approaches as “contextual,” as they locate the forces producing gender outside the person. These approaches will be highlighted in Chapter 4 and discussed throughout Parts II and III.

Each framework focuses attention on different aspects of the social world. As a result, each asks different kinds of questions and draws different kinds of conclusions. I envision these frameworks as being somewhat like lenses in that each brings certain issues into sharp focus, while others remain outside the field of vision and are ignored or overlooked. A particular framework thus may enable its users to perceive something they may not have noticed using another framework. At the same time as frameworks enable perception, however, they also limit what is seen by excluding other issues from view.

The fact that all frameworks are necessarily partial and selective is the basis for gender scholars’ growing awareness that one alone

is insufficient for understanding a topic as complex as gender. Fundamentally, gender is a multilevel system whose effects can be seen at all levels of social life. This does not mean that the frameworks we will be using fit together like pieces of a single puzzle, with the truth revealed in the whole. As we will see, pieces of one framework may be compatible with pieces of another, though this is not necessarily the case. Moving between frameworks or combining them in creative ways requires intellectual effort. What we can do here is examine the different angles of vision sociologists have used to address gender, explore the knowledge each has produced and the questions each leaves unanswered, and develop ways to navigate between perspectives.

The three frameworks for understanding gender to be used in this book include: individualist, interactional, and institutional approaches. While each framework contains within it a range of viewpoints, I believe that the differences between frameworks are more salient than differences among perspectives within each framework. For example, although each framework contains some more recent and some more classic perspectives on gender, the frameworks generally tended to emerge at different historical moments. As such, some have been used more extensively than others. Individualist approaches to gender have been used extensively by gender scholars throughout the social sciences and have most in common with lay understandings of gender. Included among individualist perspectives are theories drawn from psychology as well as from sociology. More recently, many theorists and researchers have moved toward a more relational understanding of gender, turning their attention to social interaction and social relations. Interactionists tend to draw on perspectives like ethnomethodology that focus on social situations. Gendered institutions is the most recent framework to emerge and thus is somewhat less theoretically developed than the others. Those with an institutional orientation often draw from more “macro-structural” sociological traditions and have been increasingly interested in relating gender to large-scale patterns, such as welfare states.

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Is one perspective more “true” than another? While specific claims made by proponents of each perspective may be empirically tested and more (or less) supported by the evidence, the perspectives themselves cannot be judged as “true” or “false.” Rather, as perspectives on a multilevel phenomenon, they should be viewed as providing guidelines for analysis and investigation. Perspectives tell us what we should most carefully attend to and what we can downplay or ignore. The perspectives covered in this chapter emphasize different domains of social life and each alerts students of gender to the ways that gender operates in that domain. Throughout the book I will refer to these perspectives as they become relevant when we discuss particular aspects of gender. Some perspectives will be more relevant for some issues than others. Sometimes more than one perspective will be relevant. I believe that one perspective alone is insufficient to cover contemporary gender scholarship.

## **Gender Matters**

Why study gender? One of this book’s major premises is that gender matters in social life – it is one of the organizing principles of the social world: it organizes our identities and self-concepts, structures our interactions, and is one basis upon which power and resources are allocated. Moreover, gender is a tenacious and pervasive force, its existence extending across space and time. Understanding how and, to some extent, why gender matters are issues to be taken up in the following chapters. To preview this discussion, however, we can draw on the three gender frameworks described above. First, gender matters because it shapes the identities and behavioral dispositions of individuals. Researchers disagree over the means through which these gendered characteristics are acquired and precisely how they become a part of the person, but they agree that gender enters into how people see themselves, the ways they behave, and how they view others. While modern life enables people to have many identities, gender identity may be among

the most influential in shaping the standards people hold for themselves.

Second, gender matters in the ways that it shapes social interaction. Identities, of course, are products of and sustained through interactions with others. Social interaction thus is an important setting in which gender emerges and is enacted. Social interaction also seems to require sex categorization (Ridgeway 1997). That the identification of someone as female or male facilitates social interaction testifies to this category's power in social life.

Finally, gender also organizes social institutions. By "**social institution**," I mean the "rules" that constitute some area of social life (Jepperson 1991). Social institutions include large, formally organized, public sectors of society, such as education, religion, sports, the legal system, and work, and they include the more personal, less formally organized areas of life, such as marriage, parenthood, and family. One trend in recent gender scholarship is attention to large-scale institutional trends and policies, such as globalization, migration, and neoliberalism (e.g., Calás, Smircich, Tienari, and Ellehave 2010; Davids and van Driel 2005). While social institutions may vary in the degree to which they are "gendered," many institutions cannot be understood without attention to the ways they embody and hence reinforce gender meanings.

As this discussion implies, gender gives shape and meaning to individuals, social relations, and institutions. We cannot fully understand the social world without attending to gender. But the flip side is equally true: We cannot understand gender without understanding the social world. As social life unfolds, gender is produced. As gender is produced, social life unfolds.

## **Who is to Blame? Understanding Gender Inequality**

One inadvertent consequence of an individualist view of gender is that women and men are often portrayed as either villains or victims – oppressing, exploiting, or defending against each other. While

inequality does not just happen, how it happens is more complex than this. Just as gender must be viewed as not solely a property of individuals, so, too, gender inequality must be understood as the product of a more complex set of social forces. These may include the actions of individuals, but they are also to be found in the expectations that guide our interactions, the composition of our social groups, and the structures and practices of the institutions that surround us in daily life. These forces are subject to human intervention and change but are not always visible, known, or understood. They are subtle, may be unconscious, and are reproduced often without conscious intent or design. As we learn how gender operates, however, we will be better equipped to challenge it and remake it in ways we desire.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced some of the guiding themes of this book. They include my belief that gender is an important principle of social life and relations, and my contention that sociological vantage points represent the most useful way to understand these issues. Recent developments in this field include greater attention to men and masculinity, attention to variations within and between gender categories, a desire to rethink important sociological concepts and ideas from a gender perspective, and recognition of the value of a cross-national, comparative approach.

In addition, the chapter defined key terms, including gender. I discussed the distinction between sex and gender and introduced several other related concepts, including sexual dimorphism, sex assignment, and sex category. Sociologists disagree over how best to understand the relations between sex and gender, and these disagreements reflect more fundamental differences about the relations between the biological and the social. Finally, I provided an overview of the three frameworks that will be used to organize material in later chapters and discussed why and how gender matters in social life.

## Further Reading

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## Key Terms

Gender  
Sex/sex category/sex assignment  
Sexual dimorphism  
Intersexual  
Biosocial  
Social institution

## Critical Thinking Questions

- 1 Apply the three perspectives on gender to your daily life. Give examples of how gender operates at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels of analysis.
- 2 Instead of referring to women or men as the "opposite sex," try referring to them as the "other gender." Does this change your assumptions about the relationship between these two categories?
- 3 Do you agree with the claim that "sex is socially constructed"? What kinds of evidence can you find that supports your position?

