

Gender Studies

Social Construction of Gender

1. Historicizing Constructionism

a. What does it mean to historicize constructivism?

Historicizing means when one presents something as a product of historical development. Constructionism means that we view the world through certain self made constructs¹(or ideas about reality).

Historicizing Constructionism hence means that over the course of history certain ideas have been constructed about gender. These ideas have been enforced and reinforced throughout time. So in today's world they are not presented as constructs but as essential truths which have been established through historical development of man.

b. What is social constructionism?

It means that our realities are based on our experiences and interactions with other people. We experience the world through our own opinions. These opinions are constructed through a number of things such as culture, mores, tradition, beliefs and values.² So one person might consider a dishwasher a necessity and the other might consider it a luxury. This will be discussed in subsection 3 when we consider whether sex is socially constructed or not.

¹ These are our ideas or modes of what is real

² These are collectively called a social agreement

2. Problematizing the category of “Sex”: Queer Theory

Queer theory developed in mid 1980s. The term was coined by **Teresa de Lauretis**.

1. Historical and a mostly political Context:

In the late 1970s and 1980s problems regarding the recognition of homosexuality led to widespread activism. The Gay Liberation Front was born in 1970 in Britain and it, along with other campaigns such as Campaign for Homosexual Equality, began to work for law reform.

Public policies in the mid 1980's were selectively blind to the plight of gay men who had contracted AIDS. It is estimated that 20,000 men died by 1987. This led to setting up of in-formal and non governmental health centres by civilians. Like the women of the second wave, these gay individuals were incensed by the casual attitude shown by the government.

In such an atmosphere the idea of fluidity of gender was created. It led to the idea that gay individuals were no different than others and that their sexuality did not mean something was wrong with them. It was rather the heterosexual men and women who were acting according to social constructs.

2. What is queer theory?

It is a set of ideas based around the fact that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. It suggests that it is meaningless to talk in general about 'women' or any other group, as identities consist of many different elements. It is wrong to think that people can be seen collectively on the basis of one shared characteristic such as men, gay, lesbian. Queer theory proposes that we should deliberately challenge all notions of fixed identity, in unconventional ways. It denies that heterosexuality is normal or 'natural'. Embodied in popular culture by Madonna.

Criticisms:

- i. For most people, their sexual identity isn't fluid, it's constant.
- ii. Queer theory focuses on cultural texts³ (rather than real life) where it is easier to find sexual or gender ambiguities.
- iii. Discrimination at home and at work, for everyday gay people, are forgotten about in this approach as it reduces everyone to the same fluid identity.
- iv. By celebrating difference, queer politics makes the 'gay' or 'lesbian' identity all too important. Other identities such as heterosexuality or asexuality are ignored.
- v. Queer theory celebrates pleasure and therefore puts too much emphasis on sex.

3. Judith Butler's Gender performativity theory.

Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990) made a profound contribution to the field. She argued that gender is socially constructed. So male and female behaviors are constructed and reinforced by media and culture⁴. Gender performativity theory also suggests that sexuality is not assigned to one orientation or preference. Sexual identity is fluid, a person can be heterosexual at one time and bisexual at another.

- **Key Aspects of Butler's theory:**

- Our identity is not fixed (male, female, heterosexual)

³ These are objects that reveal cultural meanings. Examples can be movies, songs, performers (such as Madonna and David Bowie) and their personalities.

⁴ We can see examples where gender is seen to be socially constructed. Drag queens or the trend of househusbands (men who stay at home to take care of their children) shows that gender is socially constructed. Another example is that of Captain Jack Sparrow who uses make up and ses feminine gestures. These cause *Gender Trouble* by showing people not acting in accordance with their assigned gender roles.

- Our identity is made up of a pile of (social and cultural) things which we have previously expressed, or which have been said about us. IT is made of certain expectations from us.
- There is not really an 'inner self'.
- Gender, like other aspects of identity, is a performance. If you perform the requirements of one gender than you are assigned that gender
- People can therefore change if they perform the characteristics of another gender. (If a heterosexual female starts performing activities and adopts characteristics of a heterosexual male then her identity changes.)
- The binary⁵ divide between masculinity and femininity is a social construct built on the binary divide between men and women – which is also a social construction.
- We should challenge the traditional views of masculinity, femininity and sexuality by causing gender trouble

4. Critics:

- i. Judith Butler's followers ignore real-life oppression and instead support their optimistic worldview by gazing at gender-blending movies and photography.

3. Is “Sex” socially determined, too?

4.

S/No	Sex	Gender
1.	Sex is defined as the biological	gender is the fashion in which society

⁵ It is the classification of gender in to two opposite and distinct forms of masculine and feminine.

	differences between men and women	highlights the sexual differences among both species
2.	Anatomical characteristics are considered. They have the following six components; chromosome make-up, external genitalia, internal genitalia, gonads hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics. The addition of all of these qualities forms the basis of which sex category most people fall under; female or male	masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, related roles and responsibility, etc are considered.
3.	Refers to male or female	Refers to Masculinity and femininity
4.	It is a universal term	It is variable it changes under the influence of time, geographical and socio-cultural settings

Is Sex also socially determined?

It can be said that to an extent sex is also socially constructed. It is true that the distinctions between the sexes depend on 6 anatomical features, however let's look at all these in detail.

1. Chromosome make-up: XY (M) OR XX (F) (XXY Chromosomal variations = Klinefelter Syndrome, XO Chromosomal variations = Turner Syndrome)
2. External genitals: Penis(M) OR Vagina (F) (Some people are born with ambiguous genitalia and they are classified as intersex)
3. Internal genitalia: testes(M) OR Ovaries (F) (Internal genitalia of certain individuals may not match their internal genitalia)
4. Gonads
5. Hormonal states [estrogen (F) and Testosterone (M)]
6. Secondary sex characteristics

Who determines when the size of the genitalia is sufficient for male? Not every genitalia is of the same size. When is a male genitalia small enough to be categorised as a female genitalia?⁶

5. Masculinities and Femininity

⁶ Phall-o-meters are used to classify children with ambiguous genitalia. Doctors make decisions regarding such children and whether they should be classified as male or female. So sex is also socially determined in such instances.

Instrumental/Masculine traits	Expressive/ Feminine traits
Competent	Empathetic
Rational	Sensitive
Assertive	Passive
Independent	Dependent
Aggressive	Submissive
Strong-Headed	Caring
Dominant	Emotional
Active	Passive
Tough	Gentle
Kind	Cruel
Verbal	Analytical
Tactful	Blunt

Ideas about masculinity and femininity are socially constructed. They vary across different cultures and societies as well as history.⁷ Femininity and masculinity are based upon, amongst other things, the social roles that women and men are expected to perform in their lives.

6. Nature versus Culture: A Debate in Gender Development

Nature vs Culture debate is a debate on what influences our gender. Do we identify as females because it has been re-inforced by our culture or because it is part of our biology?

Research at the Johns Hopkins Children Center has shown that gender identity is almost entirely based on nature and is almost exclusively predetermined before the

⁷ Did you know President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wore frocks till he was six? It was a generally accepted practice in those days to dress boys in female clothes.

birth of the baby. Two studies conducted by William Reiner, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and urologist, have confirmed that the amount of exposure to male hormones and androgens in utero almost exclusively decides whether the child identifies as masculine or feminine.

Reiner followed 14 children whose testicles and male hormone levels were completely normal at birth, but who were born without a penis – 12 of the children were surgically reconstructed to appear female. Today, all 12 of the children raised as females are strongly male atypical in their behaviors, attitudes, friends and play. This re-iterates that perhaps gender may not totally be culturally constructed and certain aspects are a result of nature.

However we can also argue that traits of masculinity or femininity may rest on cultural factors.

Other natural differences between binary genders are;

- Females attain puberty earlier than males
- There is difference in bone development and structure between both
- There is research to suggest that males are better math and females are better at multitasking and speaking.