Module 5  Social Issues

Lecture 27  
Gender

Gender Differences

Let us begin by examining the origin of the differences between men and women. Contrasting approaches have been taken to explain the formation of gender identities and the social roles based on those identities. Social influences play an important role in analyzing gender differences. Now, before analyzing these approaches, we need to make important distinction between sex and gender. In general, sociologists use the term sex to refer to the anatomical and physiological differences that define male and female bodies. Gender is linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity; it is not necessarily a direct product of an individual’s biological sex. The distinction between sex and gender is a fundamental one, since many differences between males and females are not biological in origin. Sociological interpretations of gender differences and inequalities have taken contrasting positions on this question of sex and gender. Three broad approaches will be explored below. First we shall look at arguments for a biological basis to behavioral differences between men and women. Next, attention will turn to theories placing central importance on socialization and the learning of gender roles. Finally, we shall consider the ideas of scholars who believe that both gender and sex have no biological basis, but are entirely socially constructed.

Gender and Biology: Natural Difference

How far are differences in the behavior of men and women the result of sex rather than gender? In other words, how much are they the result of biological differences? Some authors hold that aspects of human biology – ranging from hormones to chromosomes to brain size to genetics – are responsible for innate differences in behavior between men and women. These differences, they claim, can be seen in some form across all cultures, implying that natural factors are responsible for the inequalities between genders which characterize most societies. Such researchers are likely to draw attention to the fact, for example, that in almost all cultures, men rather than women take part in hunting and warfare. Surely, they argue, this indicates that men possess biologically based tendencies towards aggression that women lack.

Many researchers are unconvinced by this argument. The level of aggressiveness of males, they say, varies widely between different cultures, and women are expected to be more passive or gentle in some cultures than in others (Elshtain 1987). Theories of natural differences are often grounded in data on animal behavior, which reveals variation over time and place. Moreover, they add, because a trait is more or less universal, it does not follow that it is biological in origin; there may be cultural factors of a general kind that produce such characteristics. For instance, in the majority of cultures, most women spend a significant part of their lives caring for children and could not readily take part in hunting or war. Although the hypothesis that biological factors determine behavior patterns in men and women cannot
be dismissed out of hand, nearly a century of research to identify the physiological origins of such an influence has been unsuccessful. There is no evidence of the mechanisms which would link such biological forces with the complex social behaviors exhibited by human men and women (Connell 1987). Theories which see individuals as complying with some kind of innate predisposition neglect the vital role of social interaction in shaping human behavior.

**Gender Socialization**

Another route to take in understanding the origins of gender differences is the study of gender socialization, the learning of gender roles with the help of social agencies such as the family and the media. Such an approach makes a distinction between biological sex and social gender – an infant is born with the first and develops the second. Through contact with various agencies of socialization, both primary and secondary, children gradually internalize the social norms and expectations which are seen to correspond with their sex. Gender differences are not biologically determined, they are culturally produced. According to this view, gender inequalities result because men and women are socialized into different roles.

Theories of gender socialization have been favored by functionalists who see boys and girls as learning ‘sex roles’ and the male and female identities – masculinity and femininity – which accompany them. They are guided in this process by positive and negative sanctions, socially applied forces which reward or restrain behavior. For example, a small boy could be positively sanctioned in his behavior (‘what a brave boy you are!’), or be the recipient of negative sanction (‘Boys don’t play with dolls’). These positive and negative reinforcements aid boys and girls in learning and conforming to expected sex roles. If an individual develops gender practices which do not correspond with his or her biological sex – that is, they are deviant – the explanation is seen to reside in inadequate or irregular socialization. According to this functionalist view, social agencies contribute to the maintenance of social order by overseeing the smooth gender socialization of new generations. This rigid interpretation of sex roles and socialization has been critiqued on a number of fronts. Many writers argue that gender socialization is not an inherently smooth process, different ‘agencies’ such as the family, schools and peer groups may be at odds with one another. Moreover, socialization theories ignore the ability of individuals to reject, or modify, the society expectations surrounding sex roles. As Comte has argued:

‘Agencies of socialization’ cannot produce mechanical effects in a growing person. What they do is invite the child to participate in social practice on given terms. The invitation may be, and often is coercive – accompanied by heavy pressure to accept and mention of an alternative…Yet children do decline, or more exactly start making their own moves on the terrain of gender. They may refuse heterosexuality….they may set about blending masculine and feminine elements, for example girls insisting on competitive sport at school. They may start a split in their own lives, for example boys dressing in drag when by themselves. They may construct a fantasy life at odds with their actual practice, which is perhaps the commonest move of all’ (Connell 1987).

It is important to remember that humans are not passive objects or unquestioning recipients of gender ‘programming’, as some sociologists have suggested. People are active agents who
create and modify roles for themselves. While we should be skeptical of any wholesale adoption of the roles approach, many studies have shown that to some degree gender identities are a result of social influences. Social influences on gender identity flow through many diverse channels; even parents committed to raising their children in a ‘non-sexist’ way find existing patterns of gender learning difficult to combat (Statham 1986). Studies of parent-child interactions, for example, have shown distinct differences in the treatment of boys and girls even when the parents believe their reactions to both are the same. The toys, picture books and television programmes experienced by young children all tend to emphasize differences between male and female attributes. Although the situation is changing somewhat, male characters generally outnumber females in most children’s books, fairytales, television programmes and films. Male characters tend to play more active, adventurous roles, while females are portrayed as passive, expectant and domestically oriented (Weitzman et al. 1972; Zammuner 1987; Davies 1991). Feminist researchers have demonstrated how cultural and media products marketed to young audiences embody traditional attitudes towards genders and towards the sorts of aims and ambitions girls and boys are expected to have. Clearly, gender socialization is very powerful, and challenges to it can be upsetting. Once a gender is ‘assigned’, society expects individuals to act like ‘females’ and ‘males’. It is in the practices of everyday life that these expectations are fulfilled and reproduced (Lorber 1994; Bourdieu 1990).

The Social Construction of Gender and Sex

In recent years, socialization and gender role theories have been criticized by a growing number of sociologists. Rather than seeing sex as biologically determined and gender as culturally learned, they argue that we should view both sex and gender as socially constructed products. Not only is gender a purely social creation that lacks a fixed ‘essence’, but the human body itself is subjected to social forces which shape and alter it in various ways. We can give our bodies meanings which challenge what is usually thought of as ‘natural’. Individuals can choose to construct and reconstruct their bodies as they please – ranging from exercise, dieting, piercing and personal fashion to plastic surgery and sex-change operations. Technology is blurring the boundaries of our physical bodies. Thus, the argument goes, the human body and biology are not ‘givens’, but are subject to human agency and personal choice within different social contexts. According to such perspective, writers who focus on gender roles and role learning implicitly accept that there is a biological basis to gender differences. In the socialization approach, a biological distinction between the sexes provides a framework which becomes ‘culturally elaborated’ in society itself. In contrast to this, theorists who believe in the social construction of sex and gender reject all biological basis for gender differences. Gender identities emerge, they argue, in relation to perceived sex differences in society and turn help to shape those differences. For example, a society in which ideas of masculinity are characterized by physical strength and ‘tough’ attitudes will encourage men to cultivate a specific body image and set of mannerism. In other words, gender identities and sex differences are inextricably linked within individual human bodies (Connell 1987; J. Butler 1999; Scott and Morgan 1993).
Two Theories of Gender Identity

Two of the leading theories to explain the formation of gender identities are concerned with the emotional dynamics between children and their caretakers. According to such views, gender differences are formulated ‘unconsciously’ during the earliest years of life, rather than resulting from a biological predisposition.

Freud’s theory of gender development

Perhaps the most influential – and controversial – theory of the emergence of gender identity is that of Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, the learning of gender differences in infants and young children is centered on the presence or absence of the penis. ‘I have a penis’ is equivalent to ‘I am a boy’, while ‘I am a girl’ is equivalent to ‘I lack a penis’. Freud is careful to say that it is not just the anatomical distinctions that matter here; the presence or absence of the penis is symbolic of masculinity and femininity. At around the age of four or five, the theory goes, a boy feels threatened by the discipline and autonomy his father demand of him, fantasizing that the father wishes to remove his penis. Partly consciously, but mostly on an unconscious level, the boy recognizes the father as a rival for the affection of his mother. In repressing erotic feelings towards the mother and accepting the father superior being, the boy identifies with the father and becomes aware of his male identity. The boy gives up his love for his mother out of an unconscious fear of castration by his father. Girls, on the other hand, supposedly suffer from ‘penis envy’ because they do not possess the visible organ that distinguishes boys. The mother becomes devalued in the little girl’s eyes, because she is also seen to lack a penis and to be unable to provide one. When the girl identifies with the mother, she takes over the submissive attitude involved in the recognition of being ‘second best’. Once this phase is over, the child has learned to repress erotic feelings. The period from about five years old to puberty, according to Freud, is one of latency – sexual activities termed to be suspended until the biological change involved in puberty reactivate erotic desires in a direct way. The latency period, covering an early and middle years of school, is the time when same-sex peer groups are most important in the child’s life. Major objection have been raised against Freud’s views, particularly by feminists, but also by many authors (Mitchell 1973; Cowa 1984). First, Freud seems to identify gender too closely with genital awareness; other, many subtle factors are surely involved. Second, theory seems to depend on the notion that if penis is superior to the vagina, which is thought of as just a lack of the male organ. Yet what should not the female genitals be considered superior to those of the male? Third, Freud traced the father as the primary disciplining against whereas in many cultures the mother plays a more significant part in the imposition discipline. Fourth, Freud believes that gender learning is concentrated at the age of four or five. Later authors have emphasized the importance of earlier learning, beginning in infants.

Chodorow’s Theory of Gender Development

While many writers have made use of Freud’s approach in studying gender development they have usually modified it in major respects. An example is the sociologist Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1988). Chodorow argues that learning to feel male or female derives from the infant’s attachment to its parents from an early age. She places much more emphasis than Freud does on the importance of mother, since she is easily the most dominant influence in early life.
This attachment has to be broken at some point in order to achieve a separate sense of self – the child is required to become less closely dependent. Chodorow argue that the breaking process occurs in a different way for boys and girls. Girls remain closer to mother – able, for example, to go on hugging and kissing her and imitating what she does. Because there is no sharp break from the mother, the girl, and later the adult woman, develops a sense of self that is more likely to managed with or dependent on another’s: first her mother, later a man. In Chodorow’s view, this tends to produce characteristics of sensitivity and emotional compassion in women. Boys gain a sense of self via more radical rejection of their original closeness to the mother, forging their understanding of masculinity from what is not feminine. They learn not to be ‘sissies’ or ‘mummy’s boys’. As a result, boys are relatively unskilled in relating closely to others’ they develop more analytical ways of looking at the world. They take a more active view of their lives, emphasizing achievement, but they have repressed their ability to understand their own feelings and those of others. To some extent, Chodorow reverses Freud’s emphasis. Masculinity rather than femininity, is defined by a loss, the forfeiting of continuing close attachment to the mother. Male identity is formed through separation; thus men later in life unconsciously feel that their identity is endangered if they become involved in close emotional relationships with others. Women, on the other hand, feel that the absence of a close relation to another person threatens their self esteem. These patterns are passed from generation to generation, because of the primary role women play in early socialization of children. Women express and define themselves mainly in terms of relationships. Men have repressed these needs, and adopt a more manipulative stance towards the world. Chodorow’s work has met with various criticisms. Janet Sayers, for example, has suggested that Chodorow does not explain the struggle of women, particularly in current times, to become autonomous, independent beings (Sayers 1986). Chodorow has also been criticized for her narrow conception of the family, one based on a white, middle class model. What happens, for example, in one parent households or families where children are cared for by more than one adult? These criticisms don’t undermine Chodorow’s idea, which remain important. Her idea teach a good deal about the nature of femininity, and they help us to understand the origins of what has been called male inexpressiveness – the difficulty men have in reveling their feelings to others.

**Perspectives on Gender Inequality**

Gender is a socially created concept which attributes differing social roles and identities to men and women. Yet gender differences are rarely neutral – in almost all societies, gender is a significant form of social stratification. Gender is a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances individuals and groups face, and strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions from the household to the state. Although the roles of men and women vary from culture to culture, there is no known instance of a society in which females are more powerful than males. Men’s roles are generally more highly valued and rewarded than women’s roles: in almost every culture, women bear the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, while men have traditionally borne responsibility for providing the family livelihood. The prevailing division of labor between the sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal positions in terms of power, prestige and wealth. Despite the advances that women have made in countries around the world, gender differences continue to serve as the basis for social inequalities. Investigating and accounting for gender inequality has become a central concern of sociologists. Many theoretical perspectives have
been advanced to explain men’s enduring dominance over women – in the realm of economics, politics, the family and elsewhere. In this section we shall review the main theoretical approaches to explaining the nature of gender inequality at the level of society.

**Functionalist Approaches**

Functionalist and functionalist-inspired perspectives on gender seek to show that gender differences contribute to social stability and integration. While such views once commanded great support, they have been heavily criticized for neglecting social tensions at the expense of consensus and for promulgating a conservative view of the social world. Division of labor between men and women is biologically based and they perform those tasks for which they are biologically best suited. Thus, the anthropologist George Murdock saw it as both practical and convenient that women should concentrate on domestic and family responsibilities while men work outside the home. On the basis of a cross-cultural study of more than 200 societies, Murdock concluded that the sexual division of labor is present in all cultures (1949). While this is not the result of biological ‘programming’, it is the most logical basis for the organization of society. Talcott Parsons, a leading functionalist thinker, concerned himself with the role of the family in industrial societies (Parson and Bales 1956). He was particularly interested in the socialization of children and believed the stable, supportive families are the key to successful socialization. In Parson’s view, the family operates most efficiently with a clear cut division of labor in which females act in expressive roles, providing care and security to children offering them emotional support. Men, on the other hand should perform instrumental roles – namely, being the bread winner in the family. Because of the stressful nature of this role, women’s expressive and nurturing tendencies should also been used to stabilize and comfort men. This complementary division of labor, springing from a biological distinction between the sexes, would ensure the solidarity of family. Another functionalist perspective on childrearing was advanced by John Bowlby (1953), who argued that mother is crucial to the primary socialization of children. If another is absent or if child is separated from the mother at a young age – a state referred to and maternal deprivation – the child runs a high risk of being inadequately socialized. This can lead to serious social and psychopathic tendencies. Bowlby argued that a child’s well-being and mental health can be best guaranteed through a close, personal and continuous relationship with its mother. He did concede that an absent mother can be replaced by a ‘mother-substitute’, but suggested that such a substitute should also be woman – leaving little doubt about his view that the mothering role is distinctly female one. Bowlby’s maternal deprivation thesis has been used by some to argue that working mothers are neglectful of their children.

**Feminist Approaches**

The feminist movement has given rise to a large body of theory which attempts to explain gender inequalities and set forth agendas for overcoming those inequalities. Feminist theories in relation to gender inequality contrast markedly with one another. While feminist writers are all concerned with women’s unequal position in society, their explanation for it vary substantially. Competing school of feminism have sought to explain gender inequalities through a variety of deeply embedded social processes, such as sexism, patriarchy, capitalism and racism.
Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism looks for explanations of gender inequalities in social and cultural attitudes. Unlike radical feminists, liberal feminists do not see women’s subordination as part of a large system or structure. Instead, they draw attention to many separate factors which contribute to inequalities between men and women. For example, liberal feminists are concerned with sexism and discrimination against women in workplaces, educational institutions, and the media. They tend to focus their energies on establishing and protecting equal opportunities for women through legislation and other democratic means. Legal advances such as Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act were actively supported by liberal feminists, who argued that enshrining equality in law is important to eliminating discrimination against women. Liberal feminists seek to work through existing systems to bring about reforms in a gradual way. In this respect, they are more moderate in their aims and methods than radical feminists, who call for an overthrow of the existing system. While liberal feminists have contributed greatly to the advancement of women over the past century, critics charge that they are unsuccessful in dealing with the root cause of gender inequality and do not acknowledge the systematic nature of women’s oppression in society. By focusing on the independent deprivations which women suffer—sexism, discrimination, the ‘glass ceiling’, unequal pay—liberal feminists draw only a partial picture of gender inequality. Radical feminists accuse liberal feminists of encouraging women to accept an unequal society and its competitive character.

Radical Feminism

At the heart of radical feminism is the belief that men are responsible for and benefit from the exploitation of women. The analysis of patriarchy—the system domination of females by males—is of central concern to this branch of feminism. Patriarchy is viewed as a universal phenomenon that has existed across time and cultures. Radical feminists often concentrate on the family as one of the primary sources of women’s oppression in society. They argue that men exploit women by relying on the free domestic labor that women provide in the home. As a group, men also deny women access to positions of power and influence in society. Radical feminists differ in their interpretations of the basis of patriarchy, but most agree that it involves the appropriation of women’s bodies and sexuality in some form. Shulamith Firestone (1971), an early radical feminist writer, argues that men control women’s roles in reproduction and child rearing. Because women are biologically able to give birth to children, they become dependent materially on men for protection and livelihood. This ‘biological inequality’ is socially organized in the nuclear family. Firestone speaks of a ‘sex class’ to describe women’s social position and argues that women can be emancipated only through the abolition of the family and the power relations which characterize it. Other radical feminists point to male violence against women as central to male supremacy. According to such a view, domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment are all part of the systematic oppression of women, rather than isolated cases with their own psychological or criminal roots. Even interaction in daily life—such as non-verbal communication, patterns of listening and interrupting and women’s sense of comfort in public—contribute to gender inequality. Moreover, the argument goes, popular conception of beauty and sexuality are imposed by men on women in order to produce a certain type of femininity. For example, social and cultural norms emphasizing a slim body and a caring, nurturing attitude towards men help to
perpetuate women’s subordination. The ‘objectification’ of women through the media, fashion and advertising turns women into sexual objects whose main role is to please and entertain women. Radical feminist do not believe that women can be liberated from sexual oppression through reforms or gradual change. Because patriarchy is a systematic phenomenon, they argue, gender equality can only be attained by overthrowing the patriarchal order. The use of patriarchy as a concept for explaining gender inequality has been popular with many feminist theorists. In asserting that ‘the personal is political’, radical feminists have drawn wide spread attention to the many linked dimensions of women’s oppression. Their emphasis on male violence and the objectification of women has brought these issues into the heart of mainstream debates about women’s subordination. Many objects can be raised, however, to radical feminist views. The main one, perhaps, is that the concept of patriarchy as it has been used is inadequate as a general explanation of women’s oppression. Radical feminists have tended to claim that patriarchy has existed throughout history and across cultures – that it is a universal phenomenon. Critics argue, however, that such conceptions of patriarchy do not leave room for historical or cultural variations. It also ignores the important influence that race, class or ethnicity may have on the nature of women’s subordination. In other words, it is not possible to see patriarchy as a universal phenomenon; doing so risk biological reductionism – attributing all these complexities of gender inequality to a simple distinction between men and women. Recently, an important reconceptualization of patriarchy has been advanced by Sylvia Walby. Walby argues that the notion of patriarchy remains a valuable and useful explanatory tool, providing that it is used in certain ways.

**Black Feminism**

Do the versions of feminism outlined above apply equally to the experience of both white and non-white women? Many black feminists, and feminists from developing countries, claim they do not. They argue that ethnic divisions among women are not considered by the main feminist schools of thought, which are oriented to the dilemmas of white, predominantly middle-class women living in industrialized societies. It is not valid, they claim, to generalize theories about women’s subordination as a whole from the experience of a specific group of women. Moreover, the very idea that there is a ‘unified’ form of gender oppression that is experienced equally by all women is problematic. Dissatisfaction with existing forms of feminism led to the emergence of a black feminism which concentrates on the particular problems facing black women. In the foreword to her personal memoirs, American black feminist Bell Hooks argues:

Many feminist thinkers writing and talking about girlhood right now like to suggest that black girls have better self-esteem than their white counterparts. The measurement of this difference is often that black girls are more assertive, speak more, appear more confident. Yet in traditional southern-based black life, it was and is expected of girls to be articulate, to hold ourselves with dignity. Our parents and teacher were always urging us to stand up right and speak clearly. These traits were meant to uplift the race. They were not necessarily traits associated with building female self-esteem. An outspoken girl might still feel that she was worthless because her skin was not light enough or her hair the right texture. These are variables that white researchers often do not consider when they measure the self esteem of black females with a yardstick that was designed based on values emerging from white
experience (hooks 1997). Black feminist writings tend to emphasize history – aspects of the past which inform the current problems facing black women. The writings of American black feminists emphasize the influence of the powerful legacy of slavery, segregation and civil rights movement on gender inequalities in the black community. They point out that early black suffragettes supported the campaign for women’s rights, but realized that the question of race could not be ignored: black women have not been central to the women’s liberation movement in part because ‘womanhood’ dominated their identities much less than concepts of race did. Hooks has argued that explanatory frameworks favored by white feminists – for example, the view of the family as a mainstay of patriarchy – may not be applicable in black communities, where the family represents a main point of solidarity against racism. In other words, the oppression of black women may be found in different locations compared with that of white women. Black feminists contend, therefore, that any theory of gender equality which does not take racism into account cannot be expected to explain black women’s oppression adequately. Class dimensions are another factor which cannot be neglected in the case of many black women. Some black feminists have held that the strength of black feminist theory is its focus on the interplay between race, class and gender concerns. Black women are multiple disadvantaged, they argue, on the basis of their color, their sex and their class position. When these three factors interact, they reinforce and intensify one another (Brewer 1993).

**Femininities, Masculinities and Gender Relations**

Considering feminists’ concern with women’s subordination in society, it is perhaps not surprising that most early research on gender concerned itself almost exclusively with women and concepts of femininity. Men and masculinity were regarded as relatively straightforward and unproblematic. Little effort was made to examine masculinity, the experience of being man, or the formation of male identities. Sociologists were more concerned with understanding men’s oppression of women and their role in maintaining patriarchy. Since the late 1980s, however greater attention has been devoted to critical studies of men and masculinity. The fundamental changes affecting the role of women and family patterns in industrialized societies have raised questions about the nature of masculinity and its changing role in society. What does it mean to be a man in late modern society? Is masculinity in crisis? How are the traditional expectations and pressures on men being transformed in a rapidly changing age? In recent years sociologists have become increasingly interested in the positions and experience of men within the larger order that shapes them. This shift within the sociology of gender and sexuality has led to new emphasis on the study of men and masculinity within the overarching context of gender relations, the societally patterned interactions between men and women. Sociologists are interested to grasp how male identities are constructed and what impact socially prescribed roles have on men’s behavior.

**R. W. Connell: The Gender Order**

In Gender and Power (1987) and Masculinities (1995), R. W. Connell sets forth one of the most complete theoretical accounts of gender. His approach has been particularly influential in sociology because he has integrated the concepts of patriarchy and masculinity into an overarching theory of gender relations. According to Connell, masculinities are a critical part of the gender order and cannot be understood separate from it, or from the femininity which
accompany them. Connell is concerned with how the social power held by men creates and sustain gender inequality.

References


**Questions**

1. Can the two terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ be used synonymously? Give reasons for your answer.

2. Explain the process of gender socialization.

3. Explain Freud’s theory of gender development.

4. Explain Chodorow’s theory of gender development.

5. What is the functionalist perspective on gender inequality?

6. Describe the types of feminism.

7. How does ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ contribute to gender relation?