

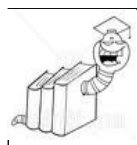
II Gender and Biology

Gender is an analytical concept as there are social roles, certain activities, aesthetic appearance, stereotypical characteristics, and cultural meanings that are associated with being men and women. Even if sex difference is seen as given in nature, gender is culturally variable and historically changing.

SEX/GENDER & NATURE/CULTURE

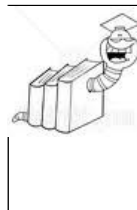
The alignment announced in the title of this sub-unit of sex/gender with nature/culture gets us into loops about what counts as nature and what as culture but first of all about what "culture" and "nature" mean. The so-called "culture-wars" often have to do with arguments about nature and what "natural behaviour" means; that is why we get the idea that culture is something that should be accepted and not judged and that nature is exactly the opposite. If we want to avoid this "naturalistic fallacy" – that what is natural is good or inevitable – we have to keep in mind the fact that all these considerations are actually cultural beliefs.

Let us examine first the arguments of contemporary biologists and see whether our assumptions about the "nature" of women and men are challenged or not. Ruth Hubbard argues in her book *The Politics of Women's Biology* that women's physique, in contrast to men's, is a socio-political construct:

	Women's biology is a social construct and a political concept, not a scientific one, at least in [several] ways. The first can be summed up in Simone de Beauvoir's dictum (1953): 'One isn't born a woman, one becomes a woman'. This does not mean that the environment shapes us, but that the concept, woman (or man), is a socially constructed one that little girls (or boys) try to fit as we grow up. Some of us are better at it than others, but we all try, and our efforts have biological as well as social consequences (...). The concept of women's biology is socially constructed, an political, in a second way because it is not simply women's description of their experience of their biology. We have seen that women's biology has been described by physicians and scientists who, for historical reasons, have been mostly economically privileged, university-educated men with strong personal and political interests in describing women in ways that make it appear 'natural' for us to fulfill roles that are important for their well-being, personally and as a group.¹
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¹ Rutgers University Press, The State University of New Jersey, NJ, 1997, p. 120.

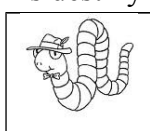
Hubbard does not state that there are no differences between the sexes or that gender issues are imaginary:

	No question, we are biological organisms like other animals, and women and men have different procreative structures and functions. But to try to find the biological basis of our social roles or to sort people by sex when it comes to strength, ability to do math or other intellectual or social attributes is a political exercise, not a scientific one. ²
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Therefore, biology is socially constructed as it does not exist in nature as such, in and of itself. Rather, biology is perceived and interpreted through cultural lenses. Simultaneously, culture actually shapes biology. Hubbard gives an illustrative example for this when discussing the menstruation patterns of the !Kung³ women who are extremely active members of their tribe as they have the task of providing food for their family. Because of the diet and of their dynamic way of life, !Kung women do not menstruate until 18, they breastfeed intensively their children for nearly three years, enter menopause at nearly 40 and, because of this, have a shorter reproductive span. They give birth to 3 or 4 children without using contraceptive methods. In USA and Europe, athlete girls also delay their period but, apart from such cases, women in highly developed countries become sexually active at earlier ages also because of high fat diets.

SEX/GENDER & BIOLOGY

When we say that women's biology is socially constructed we do not mean that it is not real, that it does not have actual effects a.s.o. On the contrary, as we can see in the above-mentioned cases, we attend to material effects of cultural ideas of gender. Yet, biology is not destiny. This contradicts Freud who asserted something similar when he stated that "anatomy is destiny".

	Biology and society, nature and culture continuously reshape one another. Think about how women's bodies have changed through time and varied according to other social categories.
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A lot of work goes into producing gendered bodies, a huge effort to tame unruly secondary sex characteristics: plucking, shaving, dying hair, voice training, etc.

	We need have no ideological investment in whether women and men exhibit biological differences, aside from the obvious ones involved with procreation... we cannot know whether such biological differences exist because biology and society (or environment) are interdependent and cannot be sorted out." ⁴
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² Id., p. 128.

³ !Kung is a group of foragers living in the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa.

⁴ Ibid.

Socially sanctioned childhood activities create gendered bodies and the marked categories of the "tomboy" (girls who like sports) and the "bookworm" (boys who don't).



Think about the Romanian (but not only) practice of dressing little girls in pink and little boys in light blue.

That is why we need to pay attention to the blatant contradictions between stereotypic descriptions of women's biology and the realities of women's and men's biology and of their actual lives.



What do you think of Hubbard's arguments? What do you think about men's and women's relative strength, height differences and generally about this search for 'natural' limits?

Sex differences and the search for limits that are viewed as 'natural' are preponderantly significant in sexist societies that value one group over another and who are willing to perpetuate the biologically-based differences beyond their procreative roles.

NATURALIZATION

In *The Five Sexes*, Anne Fausto-Sterling argues that humans do not all fall naturally into neat binary categories of male/female. Fausto-Sterling says that there are not simply two sexes because sex is not simply one thing. On the contrary, there are many different variables that go into making it:

- GENES: X and Y chromosomes
- HORMONES: estrogen, androgens
- GONADS: ovaries, testes
- GENITAL: clitoris, penis
- SECONDARY TRAITS: hair, breasts, etc.
- BEHAVIOUR: gendered.

Note that sexual orientation – orientation of sexual desire – is yet another matter. Additionally, these criteria do not help us line up individuals. There is a spectrum of possibilities that arise from combining these characteristics. As estimated, one of 2,000 babies is born with ambiguous genitalia, making it difficult for doctors to pronounce immediately the well-known formulas: "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!". Fausto-Sterling suggests at least a five-sex model, naming three intersex categories:

- *Herms*: the so-called hermaphrodites, who possesses one testis and one ovary within the same organ;
- *Merm*s: male pseudo-hermaphrodites, XYs who have testes and vagina and clitoris (they do not menstruate);
- *Ferm*s: female pseudo-hermaphrodites, XXs who have ovaries and vagina and aspects of male genitals.

Yet, even these more complex binary correspondences only work if one sex is taken as the model for the other. In a later article, Fausto-Sterling says that five sexes are not enough and elaborates new classifications based on hormones rather than anatomy of gonads and genitalia.



Intersex could be culturally valued, too. It has been valued historically and in other cultures, other than European, they still are. In European culture doctors think they are doing a favour to children and parents in modifying intersexed individual at birth. This happens because medical and legal institutions have worked along the centuries to preserve the appearance of the dual sexual system since the western culture has always been deeply committed to the idea that there are only two sexes.

Indeed, western culture has been committed to unambiguous binary gender difference and to heterosexuality. These have become institutionally fundamental to western societies. Heterosexuality organizes inheritance, marriage, paternity, hereditary titles, eligibility for certain professions, draft registration (earlier, even voting rights), etc. Sports are still indebted to this clear-cut duality. Between 1968 – 2000 female athletes who participated in the Olympics had to prove that they were female by means of chromosome and DNA tests. The paradox was that many sportswomen failed the test in spite of their later proved femininity.

Darwin was the one who set the stage for this „scientific” discussion with his two books – *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* – where he introduced many of the basic concepts about animal and human evolution that biologists still use. In 1875 Antoinette Brown Blackwell publishes a book entitled *The Sexes Throughout Nature* where she argues the case for social equality, starting from what she considered to be an undeveloped argument in Darwin’s work, namely the division of work between the sexes:

MALES	FEMALES
- Structure + Size + Strength + Amount of Activity - Rate of Activity + Amount of Circulation - Rate of Circulation	+ Structure - Size - Strength - Amount of Activity + Rate of Activity - Amount of Circulation + Rate of Circulation

- Endurance	+ Endurance
- Products	+ Products
- Direct Nurture	+ Direct Nurture
+ Indirect Nurture	- Indirect Nurture
+ Sexual Love	- Sexual Love
± Parental Love	+ Parental Love
+ Reasoning Powers	- Reasoning Powers
- Direct Insight of Facts	+ Direct Insight of Facts
- Direct Insight of Relations	+ Direct Insight of Relations
+ Thought	± Thought
± Feeling	± Feeling
± Moral Powers	± Moral Powers

TABLE: Brown Blackwell's concept of organic equilibrium between the sexes as presented in *The Sexes Throughout Nature*.⁵

Contemporary feminist critics have chosen to part with such evolutionary biologists and focus instead on the construction of scientific knowledge. All such knowledge, they argue, emerges in a social context that frames the questions posed and answers found. The very language of science hides meanings and affects the cognitive structure of newly produced knowledge. Anne Fausto-Sterling writes in "Feminism and Behavioural Evolution: A Taxonomy" that there are different trends in feminism as related to evolutionary biology and she finds three types of feminisms:

I BIOLOGY CANNOT EXPLAIN HUMAN SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:
TYPE I: Evolutionary biology may be applied to studies of animal behaviours. Special attention must be paid to avoid androcentric applications and correct misconceptions brought on by androcentrism.
TYPE III: Biological claims about social difference are scientifically invalid (Hubbard, Fausto-Sterling et al.)
I BIOLOGY CAN EXPLAIN HUMAN SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:
TYPE II: But evolutionary behavioural biology have ignored female behaviour. Adding accounts of the female to the picture leads to legitimate claims for social equality (Blackwell and some contemporary feminist biologists). Furthermore, evolutionary behavioural biologists have misinterpreted their observations. Only male prejudice can blind one to the fact of female superiority (Gamble and some contemporary eco-feminists)

In a period in which women were not acknowledged to have scientific competence, feminists and evolutionary biologists could only be antagonists. Today, the situation is far more complex. Feminists practice evolutionary biology and in doing so, they have changed the field. Some of these feminists (Type I) are extremely cautious about extrapolating their findings to human populations, whereas others (Type II) feel that this is just the thing to do. In

⁵ G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1875.

this, the latter part company with a third category of feminists (Type III), alarmed at the application of biological theory to the explication of human social differences. Type III feminists, in turn, have developed detailed critiques of the very processes of creating scientific knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

So, what are the analytical limitations of sex/gender formulation?

- ✓ Binary sex difference is not natural either – sex is not a natural, binary, clearly dimorphic category of difference – rather, we force a range of natural differences into binary categories and take pains to stage dimorphism (for instance, if tall women are not pairing with short men, this means that either those women are too tall or that those men are too short!). Binary sex differences are not given in nature, so it can not be a natural underpinning for gender or anything else.
- ✓ Gender (being a man or a woman) is not reducible to sex difference. What it means to be a man or a woman – even to have male or female body characteristics – has to do with various historical, cultural and social factors.



Comment upon Anne Fausto-Sterling's assertion:

"If the state and the legal system have an interest in maintaining a two-party sexual system, they are in defiance of nature."