

CULTURAL STUDIES

theory and practice

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SEX, SUBJECTIVITY AND REPRESENTATION

KEY CONCEPTS

Femininity

Feminism

Gender

Identification

Masculinity

Patriarchy

Performativity

Representation

Subject position

Transgender

This chapter is concerned with sex and gender, that is, with the character of women and men in contemporary societies. We shall explore the social construction of sexed subjects with particular reference to questions of cultural representation. The focus is on work influenced by feminism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis since these are the prevailing streams of thought within cultural studies on these questions. We shall also explore the relationship between these constructionist paradigms and research from the biological sciences.

FEMINISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

To discuss questions of sex and gender, it is necessary to engage with a large body of feminist theory. It would be impossible to conceive of a cultural studies that did not do so. However, while feminist thinking permeates cultural studies, not all forms of feminism are to be thought of *as* cultural studies. Nor are all zones of cultural studies concerned with questions of gender (though many feminists might argue that they should be). Consequently, this chapter does not purport to be a history, classification or analysis of the women's

movement *per se*. Rather, it is an exploration of those streams of thought within cultural studies that are concerned with sex, gender and feminism.

Sarah Franklin et al. (1991) have pointed to a number of similarities of concern between cultural studies and feminism. They draw attention to:

- the aspirations of feminism and cultural studies to connect with social and political movements outside of the academy;
- a critical stance *vis-à-vis* more established disciplines such as sociology and English literature;
- a mutual suspicion of, and challenge to, established ideas of ‘certain knowledge’;
- a wish to produce ‘knowledges’ of and by ‘marginalized’ and oppressed groups, with the avowed intention of making a political intervention.

Cultural studies and feminism have shared a substantive interest in issues of power, representation, popular culture, subjectivity, identities and consumption.

Feminism puts questions of sexuality, gender, subjectivity and power at the heart of cultural studies.

Patriarchy, equality and difference

Feminism is a plural field of theory and politics that has competing perspectives and prescriptions for action. In general, feminism asserts that sex is a fundamental and irreducible axis of social organization, which, to date, has subordinated women to men. Thus, feminism is centrally concerned with sex as an organizing principle of social life and one that is thoroughly saturated with power relations. Feminists have argued that the subordination of women occurs across a whole range of social institutions and practices; that is, the subjection of women is understood to be a structural condition. This structural subordination of women has been described by feminists as patriarchy, a concept that has connotations of male-headed family, mastery and superiority.

As a movement, feminism has been concerned with two key issues. First, to win citizen rights such as voting and equality before the law. Second, to influence cultural representations and norms in ways that are beneficial to women. Feminists have constructed a range of analysis and political strategies by which to intervene in social life in pursuit of the interests of women. They have been broadly categorized as:

- liberal feminism;
- difference feminism;
- socialist feminism;

- poststructuralist feminism;
- black feminism;
- postcolonial feminism;
- postfeminism.

These categories are not set in stone and do a disservice to feminism insofar as they erect unhelpful and inflexible divisions. However, as explanatory devices, they do point to variations in the base assumptions and emphasis about what constitutes the interests of women.

Feminist 'waves'

Before outlining the key features of the different categories listed above, it is useful to sketch another more populist approach to dividing different periods of feminism. This is the 'waves' metaphor and it offers a simpler, more chronological way to think about changes in feminist practices over time.

The **first wave** of feminist activism is associated with the suffragette movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many first wave feminists were also involved with the temperance and abolitionist movements. While the suffragettes were seeking equality with men in terms of the right to vote (as per the ideals of liberal feminism), there was also a sense that women were morally superior to men (making it a version of difference feminism).

Second wave feminism is generally thought to extend from the 1960s into the 1990s. This period of feminist history is associated with radical activism such as the theatrical protests at Miss America pageants when make-up, high heels and bras were thrown into rubbish bins in front of reporters. (Contrary to popular mythology, no bras were burned at these events.)

Third wave feminism is regarded as having begun in the mid-1990s, and is associated with the rebellion of younger women against what was perceived as the prescriptive, pushy and 'sex negative' approach of older feminists. The characteristics of third wave feminism (a term sometimes used interchangeably with 'postfeminism') include:

- an emphasis on the differences among women due to race, ethnicity, class, nationality and religion;
- individual and do-it-yourself (DIY) tactics as opposed to collectivist politics;
- fluid and multiple subject positions and identities;
- cyberactivism;
- the reappropriation of derogatory terms such as 'slut' and 'bitch' for liberatory purposes; and
- sex positivity (for a more detailed discussion, see the section on sex positivity below).

The limits of the 'wave' metaphor

The division of feminism into waves has been critiqued for many reasons. Wave theory has been questioned for privileging history at the expense of ideas. Further, it focuses on an extremely limited historical period in an extremely limited set of cultural conditions: that is, the feminist activities of white women in the West over the past one-and-a-half centuries. Linda Nicholson's (2010) case is that the wave metaphor was useful for second wave feminists because it reminded people that the women's rights and liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s were not 'historical aberrations' but were part of a long tradition of activism. Like many other feminist scholars, however, Nicholson believes the wave metaphor has outlived its usefulness and has become historically misleading and unhelpful politically. This is because it suggests that gender activism 'has been for the most part unified around one set of ideas, and that set of ideas can be called feminism' (2010).

A more textured approach is to unpack the various aspects of feminism by focusing on theories and ideas rather than time periods and actions. This enterprise, however, still involves generalizations and simplifications. As such, the following categories should be seen as an introduction to some dominant theoretical streams within feminism rather than an exhaustive list of feminism's constituent theoretical parts.

Liberal and socialist feminism

Liberal feminists regard differences between men and women as socio-economic and cultural constructs rather than the outcome of an eternal biology. They stress the need for equality of opportunity for women in all spheres. This is a goal that, within the liberal democracies of the West, is held to be achievable inside the broad structures of existing legal and economic frameworks (e.g. MacKinnon, 1987, 1991). In contrast, socialist feminists point to the interconnections between class and gender, including the fundamental place of gender inequalities in the reproduction of capitalism. The subordination of women to men is seen as intrinsic to capitalism, so that the full 'liberation' of women would require the overthrow of capitalist organization and social relations. It is argued that women's domestic labour is core to the reproduction of the workforce both physically (feeding, clothing, care, etc.) and culturally (learning appropriate behaviour such as time-keeping, discipline, respect for authority, etc.). Further, women are said to form a supply of cheap and flexible labour for capitalism that is more easily 'returned to the home' when required. Thus, core to socialist feminism is a stress on the 'dual role' (domestic labour and paid labour) of women in the reproduction of capitalism (Oakley, 1974).

Difference feminism

Liberal and socialist feminists stress equality and sameness. However, difference feminism asserts that there are essential distinctions between men and women. These fundamental

and intractable differences are variously interpreted as cultural, psychic and/or biological. In any case, difference is celebrated as representing the creative power of women and the superiority of their values over those of men (Daly, 1987; Rich, 1986). As such, difference feminism has developed a tendency towards separatism.

One criticism of difference feminism, and indeed of the concept of patriarchy, is that the category of woman is treated in an undifferentiated way. 'The trouble with patriarchy', as Sheila Rowbotham (1981) argued, is that it obscures the differences between individual women and their particularities in favour of an all-embracing universal form of oppression. Not only do all women appear to be oppressed in the same way, but also there is a tendency to represent them as helpless and powerless. These are assumptions that are challenged by black feminists, who have argued that a white middle-class movement has overlooked the centrality of race and colonialism.

Black and postcolonial feminism

Black feminists have pointed to the differences between black and white women's experiences, cultural representations and interests (Carby, 1984; hooks, 1992). They have argued that colonialism and racism have structured power relationships between black and white women, defining women as white. Gender intersects with race, ethnicity and nationality to produce different experiences of what it is to be a woman. In a postcolonial context, women carry the double burden of being colonized by imperial powers and subordinated by colonial and native men. Thus, Spivak (1993) holds that the 'subaltern cannot speak'. She is suggesting that for poor women there are no subject positions within the discourse of colonialism which allow them to speak.

Poststructuralist feminism

Feminists influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern thought (Nicholson, 1990; Weedon, 1997) have argued that sex and gender are social and cultural constructions that are not to be explained in terms of biology or to be reduced to functions of capitalism. This anti-essentialist stance suggests that femininity and masculinity are not universal and eternal categories but discursive constructions. That is, femininity and masculinity are ways of describing and disciplining human subjects. As such, poststructuralist feminism is concerned with the cultural construction of subjectivity *per se*, including a range of possible masculinities and femininities. Femininity and masculinity, which are a matter of how men and women are represented, are held to be sites of continual political struggle over meaning.

Given its stress on culture, representation, language, power and conflict, poststructuralist feminism has become a major influence within cultural studies.

Feminist gains

The fundamental argument of feminism is that women are oppressed and subjugated by men as a consequence of being women. A radical feminist version of this position is that *all* women are oppressed by *all* men. Thus, feminism has pointed to structural inequalities in the economy and in the institutions of social and cultural power. Further, it is argued that a wealth of male attitudes and behaviour (for example, contempt, violence and sexual harassment) oppress women. Despite decades of feminist action, many continue to argue that little or nothing has changed for women, even within western culture.

However, Rosalind Coward (1999) has described feminism as ‘a movement blind to its own effectiveness’. She lists the following achievements:

- significant gains for women in the economy;
- an increased visibility for women in the cultural sphere;
- a transformation of knowledge in academia;
- changes in sexual attitudes and behaviour;
- the reform of pay and divorce laws;
- the recognition of male loss and vulnerability;
- the understanding that women can wield sexual and other forms of power.

What is being argued here is not that gender inequality and injustice have been eliminated, rather that the central tenets of feminism have been absorbed into the culture and surpassed. Women are not *necessarily* oppressed by dint of being women, and not all men are oppressors. What is being suggested is constructive dialogue and structural change where necessary, rather than a ‘women vs. men’ approach to understanding gender relations.

Postfeminism

‘Postfeminism’ is a contested term deployed in different ways and with different meanings depending on the context. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with the term ‘third wave feminism’ as described above. Most often, however, it refers to the ‘pastness’ of feminism – ‘whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated’ (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 1).

One version of postfeminism argues – as does Coward (1999) – that the most significant and systematic institutional barriers to women’s participation in politics and culture have been removed in the West. Women are citizens and have equal legal rights with men. The postfeminist woman is said to be able to enjoy cultural life as she chooses. Postfeminists in this sense want to escape the sense that women are passive victims of patriarchy, which they suggest was the inference of feminist campaigning. The performance of

victim identity reinforces the myth that women are the ‘weaker sex’, they say, and risks perpetuating the power dynamic inherent between victim and perpetrator (or victim and voyeur). Catherine Orr (1997) suggests that postfeminism stresses the ability of women to make personal choices. As such, postfeminism advocates a libertarian form of feminism founded on women’s autonomy. Influential postfeminist writing includes Naomi Wolf’s *Fire with Fire* (1994), Rene Denfeld’s *The New Victorians* (1995) and Catharine Lumby’s *Bad Girls* (1997).

One critique of postfeminism is that – like the idea of ‘post-race’ (Chapter 8) – it is rooted in individualism and capitalism. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, for instance, argue that it commodifies feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer:

Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. Assuming full economic freedom for women, postfeminist culture also (even insistently) enacts the possibility that women might *choose* to retreat from the public world of work... As this suggests, postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self. (2007: 2, emphasis in original)

The more things change, the more they stay the same

An obvious critique of the commodity-centric view of postfeminism is that liberation is only available to those who can afford to pay for it. Further, many feminist writers disagree with the broad argument advanced by those postfeminists who suggest feminism’s biggest battles have been won. They point to continued inequality for women in the workplace and the reproduction of cultural representations and practices that exclude or demean women. Changes in digital cultures have also created entirely new domains for and modes of misogynist harassment.

Further, many of the social ills supposedly vanquished by feminism remain as serious problems. The World Health Organization, for instance, estimates that 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (‘Violence against women’, 2014). In the US, an average of three women are killed by a current or former partner every day. The domestic murder rate in South Carolina consistently ranks as among the nation’s worst. Yet while all 46 counties in that state have at least one animal shelter, only 18 have domestic abuse shelters. Continuing the comparison with animal welfare, a man in South Carolina can earn five years in prison for abusing his dog but a maximum of just 30 days in jail for beating his wife or girlfriend on a first offence (Pardue et al., 2014).

It is sobering to learn that the pay gap between women and men in the US has hardly changed in a decade. In 2015, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) published research showing that:

- Among full-time, year-round workers, women are paid 78 per cent of what men are paid.
- The pay gap is worse for women of colour.
- Women face a pay gap in nearly every occupation.
- The pay gap grows with age.
- More education is an effective tool for increasing earnings, but is not an effective tool against the gender pay gap.
- The pay gap also exists among women without children. ('The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap' (Spring 2015)).

Everyday sexism

In addition to these sorts of 'hard' inequities, the banality and everyday nature of sexism suggests that women's experiences in the world remain very different to men's. This, in turn, supports the argument that feminism remains a relevant political project. The Everyday Sexism Project was started in 2012 by the British feminist writer Laura Bates. Its website, Twitter feed and book collate day-to-day instances of sexism to show the falseness of the idea that modern society has achieved gender equality. The project's website also points out that:

- only 22 per cent of members of the UK House of Commons are female;
 - nearly 70 per cent of speaking parts in Hollywood films are taken by men (though female characters are five times more likely to strip down to sexy clothing); and
 - only around 13 per cent of the FTSE 100 corporate board members are female.
- ('The Everyday Sexism Project')

The neologism 'mansplaining' – added to the online *Oxford Dictionaries* alongside 'side boob', 'vape', 'listicle', 'binge-watch' and 'neckbeard' in 2014 – is used to describe a man explaining something to a woman (often her area of expertise) in a manner deemed condescending. Is mansplaining something you have ever: a) done; or b) experienced? In what ways might it constitute a form of 'everyday sexism'?

Street harassment

The feminist group Hollaback! has highlighted the problem of street harassment by using a hidden camera to film the actress Shoshana B. Roberts as she walks around New York in jeans and a T-shirt for ten hours. The clip shows Roberts being subjected to more than 100 catcalls, whistles and other forms of harassment over the course of the day. At one point, a

man walks alongside her – extremely closely – for five minutes. The video achieved viral status on YouTube where it has been viewed more than 41 million times.

Men who wolf-whistle at or comment audibly on women in the street may feel these actions do not constitute a serious problem. Hollaback!, however, contends that street harassment – a term used to include yelling, stalking, groping, public masturbation and assault – is endemic in public spaces around the world:

At its core is a power dynamic that constantly reminds historically subordinated groups (women and LGBTQ folks, for example) of their vulnerability to assault in public spaces... It is an expression of the interlocking and overlapping oppressions we face and it functions as a means to silence our voices and 'keep us in our place'. ('About', n.d.)

Ironically, within a day of the Hollaback! video being posted online, Roberts was subjected to a deluge of cyberhate include rape and death threats. As Kelsey McKinney observes, 'If the video reminded us that women are constantly made to feel unsafe when they leave the house, the response is a reminder that women are constantly made to feel unsafe when they simply turn on their computer' (2014).

EXERCISE



- Make a list of some significant social and cultural gains that women have made over the last 40 years.
- Make a list of the areas in which women are still disadvantaged in our culture.
- Compare your lists and discuss the degree to which feminism has been successful in promoting the interests of women.

SEX, GENDER AND IDENTITY

In popular discourse, the term 'sex' is used in relation to biological markers. 'Gender', on the other hand, refers to the way people identify themselves away from physical characteristics. As we will see, poststructuralist feminists and other writers reject the sex-gender split. For the time being, however, we will focus on popular understandings of these terms. Four key beliefs underpin many common-sensical assumptions about sex and gender:

- Sex is binary (that is, you must be either a female or a male – there are simply no other possibilities).
- Sex determines gender (in other words, if you are born with a vagina you are female, and if you are born with a penis you are male).

- Sex determines behaviour (for example, if you are female you are hard-wired to have qualities such as empathy and good communication skills, whereas if you are male you are hard-wired for strength and independence).
- Sex determines sexual preference (that is, females are sexually attracted to males, while males are attracted to females).

The work of queer theorists and activists (see the ‘Queer Theory’ section below) has helped shift thinking around this last point. Legal reform in relation to marriage equality around the world reflects the fact that increasingly large numbers of people regard same-sex attraction as a normal part of the spectrum of human sexuality rather than an aberration. The other three beliefs listed above, however, still circulate as ‘common sense’ in many contexts. However, new discoveries in science alongside theory from fields such as cultural studies and gender studies are unsettling the certainty attached to these received wisdoms about sex, gender identity and gender roles.

The next part of this chapter surveys recent findings from science with regard to sex and gender. This shows that many so-called biological ‘facts’ about women and men are not supported by empirical evidence. Indeed, many of the classic differences between women and men are exaggerated or non-existent. As we will see, there is good evidence that the vast bulk of so-called ‘female’ and ‘male’ behaviours are not innate but are learned. In other words, they have come about as a result of social and cultural factors.

As such, cultural studies plays a critical role in unpacking how and why our understandings about sex and gender remain so rigidly shaped by stereotypes. Many writers discussed in this chapter argue for the complete plasticity of sex and gender. That is, any influence of biology is rejected in favour of understanding femininity and masculinity as cultural constructions. Increased attention is also being given to considerations of ‘transgender’ – a term denoting ‘a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of “man” and “woman”’ (Hines, 2010: 1).

Sex, science and culture

The late 20th century saw an explosion of scientific research suggesting significant genetic and neurological differences between men and women. This was used as the basis for claims rooted in the ‘men are from Mars, women are from Venus’ metaphor. The latter was popularized by the American self-help author John Gray (1992) whose work has since been roundly ridiculed.

Research findings during this era related to language ability, spatial judgement, aggression, sex drive and the ability to focus on tasks (Hoyenga and Hoyenga, 1993; Moir and Moir, 1998). Other studies suggested that hormones shape our brain structure so that men and women have different patterns of brain activity (Christen, 1991; Moir and Jessel, 1991; Moir and Moir, 1998). It was also argued that the brains of the two sexes are organized in distinct ways that give rise to differences in a range of abilities. Thus, women were said to have more of their brains dedicated to verbal matters and item memory while men were said to possess greater spatial and mathematical abilities (Kimura, 1996).

Many aspects of this research have since been critiqued (Hyde, 2005; Jones, 2008; McCredie, 2011; Rogers, 2001). The argument is that the 1990s period of science exaggerated difference, underplayed similarity and glossed over the complex ways that brains, hormones, genes and culture actually work.

Breaking down the binary

The use of 'female' and 'male' as *the* organising principle for categorizing humans may seem like a natural approach. Yet recent advances in the science of sex show that, even at the biological level, a surprising number of people do not fit neatly into the category of 'female' or 'male'. Estimates about the exact number of people in the world whose bodies are not clearly one thing or another vary. This is partly because of disputes about what should be included in the term 'intersex'. That said, the Intersex Society of North America estimates that about one in 2,000 children is born with genitals 'that are pretty confusing to all the adults in the room'. This makes intersex more common than better known conditions such as cystic fibrosis ('MYTH #10: Intersex is extremely rare').

Medical decision-making around anatomically ambiguous genitals has historically been extremely phallogentric. As Jane McCredie explains:

It was pretty much standard practice until at least the 1970s to turn intersex babies whose penises were deemed inadequate into girls, removing or downsizing the organ and providing female hormones in the apparent belief that nobody could be a man without a fully fledged phallus. (2011: 71)

Such decisions relied on the belief that babies were blank slates when it came to gender identity. This did not turn out to be the case and led to a number of cases in which 'expert' medical decisions made about children's gender had catastrophic mental health consequences for the individuals involved (McCredie, 2011: 72). Increased awareness of and activism around intersex issues has resulted in warnings against carrying out genital 'normalization' surgery on infants. Instead, it is recommended that a gender is assigned to these babies and any surgery which is not necessary for a child's physical health is delayed until they are able to make such decisions for themselves.

Gender division and culture

The World Health Organization notes that there exist a number of cultures in which sex and gender are not always neatly divided along binary lines. It lists the Berdache in North America, the fa'afafine in the Pacific, and the kathoey in Thailand as examples of gender categories that differ from the traditional western division of people into males and females. Further, it notes that in some North American native communities, gender is seen more in terms of a continuum than categories, with special acknowledgement of 'two-spirited' people who encompass both masculine and feminine qualities and characteristics ('Gender and Genetics').

Sex, gender and language

As we will see, many theorists argue that both gender and biological sex are social constructs. While this may seem like a radical proposition, consider the way language continually forces people into categories. An example is the absence of personal pronouns available in English for those who do not wish to be referred to as either a 'she' or a 'he'. This contrasts with the Yoruba people of West Africa who define individuals more by age than by sex. Yoruba pronouns do not indicate sex but people's relative ages – along the lines of 'older one' or 'younger one' (McCredie, 2011: 115)

A third gender

In 2014, Australia's highest court effectively recognized a third gender when Norrie May-Welby, a Sydney artist and activist, won the right to have 'hir' gender formalized as 'non-specific'. May-Welby – who uses the gender-neutral terms 'zie' for 'he/she' and 'hir' for 'his/her' – was born male and had male-to-female gender realignment surgery but chose not to undergo hormone therapy. Zie now has 'a body that cannot easily be classified as one thing or the other' but which zie enjoys: 'flat-chested and lean but with "female plumbing"' (McCredie, 2011: 176). During the legal case, lawyers for the New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages argued that it would cause 'unacceptable confusion' if state legislation were to recognize more than two genders. Australia's High Court rejected this argument (Davidson, 2014).

Sex and spectrums

One alternative to relying on the simple binary of 'female' and 'male' is to imagine a biological spectrum with 'extreme female' at one end and 'extreme male' at the other. Yet, as McCredie points out in her comprehensive survey of sex-related science (2011), even this is a gross simplification. Reproductive anatomy is just one measure used by biological scientists to describe a person's sex. Chromosomes, hormones and brain structures are also relevant. Further, all these markers exist in varying degrees, and interact with social roles and expectations, as well as with sexual orientation. As such, there exists not just one but a whole series of spectrums.

For most of us, these spectrums line up in a more or less orderly fashion in that our chromosomes match our anatomy, our sense of ourselves and the way we are perceived by others:

But there is no necessary relationship between an individual's position on any one spectrum – anatomy, say – and where they sit on any of the others. The myriad intersections of these related, but not identical, scales produce a dizzying array of possible human beings: from the macho straight male, to the ultra-feminine lesbian, from the bearded woman, to the gay man who started life in a female body. (McCredie, 2011: 11–12)

Many patterns of gendered behaviour assumed to be ‘natural’ are better explained by sociocultural factors.

Testosterone

Testosterone is both chastised and celebrated for supposedly driving a host of human attributes and actions. These include aggression, risk-taking and sexual potency. The endocrinologist and hormone researcher Jeffrey Zajaz, however, says the evidence linking testosterone and aggression is weak. For instance, if you are a female-to-male transgender individual, you would not become aggressive after being given testosterone. You would, however, in Zajaz’s words, ‘masculinise nicely’:

If you have baldness in your family, your hair would fall out, your body shape would become male, your breasts would atrophy, but not disappear, you would grow a beard and you would grow body hair. Now, would you become an aggressive individual? Not unless your personality was an aggressive personality. (Lewis and Zajac, 2013)

Sex and the brain

Structural differences between the two sexes have been identified in every area of the brain. That said, there is disagreement about the causes and effects of these anatomical variations. This is partly because brains are complex and two people may achieve the same end result via very different neural activity and pathways (McCredie, 2011: 79–81).

In his book *The Essential Difference* (2003), the English neurologist Simon Baron-Cohen argues that female brains are predominantly hard-wired for empathy while male brains are predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems. His argument is that this state of affairs has come about as a result of the interplay of genes, hormones and evolutionary psychology.

The Australian neuroscientist Lesley J. Rogers, however, takes issue with Baron-Cohen’s work. While she does not contest that sex differences in brain function exist, she says the causes of these differences are open to question – as are their sizes and impact on everyday life (2003). Baron-Cohen’s claim is that human sex differences are determined genetically because of: the age at which these differences first appear; the lack of apparent variation across cultures; and the existence of sex differences in animals. Rogers challenges each of these contentions. She points out that:

- Girls and boys are treated differently from the day of birth. It has been observed, for example, that nursing staff and parents interact with newborn babies in subtly different ways. Also, studies to determine sex differences in early life have involved testing infants at one to three years of age, giving ‘ample time for cultural influence’ (Rogers, 2003).

- Sex role differences in varying cultures may still be explained by culture rather than genetic determinism. Rogers cites variations which throw the argument for genetic causation into doubt. An example is a 1966 study showing that Eskimo women are superior to Eskimo men in spatial ability.

There is evidence animals also learn rather than inherit sex-typical behaviour. For instance, in her book *Sexing the Brain*, Rogers outlines the importance of early experience for the development of sex differences in rats (2001).

So are there ANY differences between females and males?

Yes, but not many, according to the psychologist Janet Shibley Hyde (2005). Her 'gender similarities hypothesis' argues that the tendency for researchers to focus on differences between the sexes has meant that substantial similarities have been overlooked. Hyde's extensive statistical synthesis of existing research on psychological and other gender differences reveals that – despite all the hype about sex-based differences – females and males are similar on most psychological variables. Her analysis shows that:

- Nearly 80 per cent of the 'classic' gender differences are actually small or close to zero. These include mathematics performance, verbal ability, self-disclosure, ability to process facial expressions, helpfulness, leadership, activeness, interrupting and moral reasoning.
- Only a few differences belong in the moderate or very large range. The areas in which there are the largest gender differences include throwing velocity and distance, and masturbation frequency. The gender difference in terms of aggression was only moderate in magnitude.

In conclusion, Hyde calls for researchers as well as broader society to consider the costs of continuing to over-inflate claims of gender differences:

Arguably, they cause harm in numerous realms, including women's opportunities in the workplace, couple conflict and communication, and analyses of self-esteem problems among adolescents. Most important, these claims are not consistent with the scientific data. (2005: 590)

As we will see in the section on eating disorders below, erroneous assumptions about the psychological profiles of males can also hurt boys and men.

Reconciling nature and nurture

In summary, we know there are differences between women and men, but we do not always understand: a) what causes these differences; and b) the extent of their influence in terms

of behaviour. It is likely that many differences are learned and shaped by culture rather than being something we are born with. In either case, nature and nurture are constantly interacting and affecting each other to the point where distinctions between biological sex and socially constructed gender become almost impossible to fathom.

As such, setting up issues relating to nature and culture as opposing binaries is not a useful way to approach the subject of sex and gender. It is also worth remembering that:

- cultural difference operates ‘on top of’ genetic similarity and difference;
- biological predispositions have different outcomes in divergent contexts;
- human culture and human biology have co-evolved and are indivisible (see Chapter 4);
- the language of biology and the language of culture have different purposes and achieve different outcomes.

The language of biology enables us to make limited behavioural and bodily predictions. At the same time, what it means to be gendered remains a cultural question. On the one hand, there is a small degree of predictability of a range of male and female capabilities and behaviour that derives from genetics; on the other hand, there are also clear indications that masculinity and femininity are changeable. We can make a distinction between identity as a social construction, a representation with which we emotionally identify, and those human capacities and behaviours that correlate highly with certain biochemical structures of the brain. The language of culture helps to re-cast the way we talk about and perform ‘sex’ and ‘gender’.

Questions of culture and language remain of central significance in understanding sex and gender.

At stake are the cultural questions ‘What is a woman?’ and ‘What is a man?’

EXERCISE



Make two lists under the following headings:

- How to identify a man
- How to identify a woman

‘Score’ each item 1–10 for the degree to which the characteristic is changeable, where 1 equals the most plastic and 10 the least. Discuss your work with others in a group.

Women's difference

Returning to feminist theory, we can see that an essentialist answer to the question 'What is a woman?' takes the category 'woman' to be a reflection of an underlying identity based on either biology or culture. Thus, Andrée Collard and Joyce Contrucci's (1988) ecofeminist *Rape of the Wild* relies on biological essentialism. They argue that all women are linked by childbearing bodies and innate ties to the natural earth that support egalitarian, nurturance-based values – likewise Adrienne Rich (1986), who celebrates women's difference from men and locates its source in motherhood. This is condemned in its historical modes of oppression but celebrated for its female power and potentialities.

Most of the arguments that celebrate women-cultures are linguistic and cultural rather than biological. Elizabeth Grosz (1995), for example, argues that 'difference feminism' has been misunderstood as essentialist and that difference from a pre-given norm is not a kind of metaphysical 'pure difference'. Difference feminism in this case is based on signifiers of the female body. For example, Mary Daly's (1987) *Gyn/Ecology* links women to nature, stresses the material and psychological oppression of women, and celebrates a separate woman-culture. Much of her argument revolves around the *language* used to describe women and its power over them rather than 'natural' difference.

A clearly culturally founded argument for women's difference comes from Carol Gilligan (1982). In her study of moral reasoning she argues that while men are concerned with an 'ethic of justice', women are more centred on an 'ethics of care'. Women, it is argued, develop for cultural reasons 'a different voice' from men, a voice that stresses context-specific forms of argument in contrast to the more abstract thinking of men. Gilligan argues that western cultural norms have validated men's understanding of morality and ethics at the expense of women's, which has been cast as deficient. Gilligan's critics see in her work essentialist claims about universal patterns of moral development.

Irigaray and womanspeak

A psychoanalytically inspired philosophical route to understanding difference comes from Luce Irigaray, who theorizes a presymbolic 'space' or 'experience' for women that is unavailable to men. This domain is constituted by a feminine *jouissance* or sexual pleasure, play and joy, which is outside of intelligibility. Irigaray (1985a, 1985b) has been at the forefront of attempts to write the unwritable, to inscribe the feminine through *écriture féminine* (woman's writing; a term coined by Helene Cixous) and *le parler femme* (womanspeak).

Irigaray speculates on what she understands to be the 'Otherness' of the feminine. This she seeks to ground in the female body. In particular, she turns to the mother-daughter relationship of the pre-Oedipal imaginary as the source of a feminine that cannot be symbolized (because it precedes entry into the symbolic order and the Law of the Father – see Chapters 1 and 7). For Irigaray, woman is outside the specular (visual) economy of the Oedipal moment and thus outside of representation (i.e. of the symbolic order). Given that the symbolic lacks a grammar that could articulate the mother-daughter relationship, the feminine, according to Irigaray, can return only in its regulated form as man's 'Other'.

Irigaray proceeds by way of deconstructing western philosophy. This is a philosophy that she reads as guaranteeing the masculine order and its claims to self-origination and unified agency – that is, western philosophy is said to be phallogocentric. Irigaray explores the feminine as the constitutive exclusion of philosophy. That is, ‘woman’ is not an essence *per se* but rather that which is excluded. Here the feminine is understood to be the unthinkable and the unrepresentable (other than as a negative of phallogocentric discourse).

In trying to read philosophical texts for their absences, Irigaray is faced with the problem of trying to critique philosophy for its exclusions while using the very language of that philosophy. Her strategy is to ‘mime’ the discourse of philosophy, that is, to cite it and talk its language but in ways that question the capacity of philosophy to ground its own claims. Womanspeak mimes phallogocentrism only to expose what is covered over (Irigaray, 1985b).

KEY THINKERS

Luce Irigaray (1932–)

Irigaray was born and educated in Belgium, though she has spent a considerable period of her working life in France. She is currently Director of Research in Philosophy at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. She engages in philosophy, linguistics, and psychoanalysis to explore the operations of patriarchy and the exclusions of women. Irigaray proceeds by way of deconstructing western philosophy which she critiques for its exclusions while ‘miming’ the discourse of philosophy; that is, she talks its language but in ways that question the capacity of philosophy to ground its own claims. Her style varies from the lyrical and poetic to the political and didactic.

Reading: Irigaray, L. (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. C. Porter and C. Burke. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (First published in French in 1977.)

For Irigaray’s supporters, she represents a bold attempt to assert the specificity of the feminine but for her detractors she posits an essentialism that mirrors patriarchal discourse itself.

The social construction of sex and gender

Unlike Irigaray, Linda Alcoff regards any emphasis on a special and benign female character as mistaken, which she argues ‘is in danger of solidifying an important bulwark for sexist oppression: the belief in innate “womanhood” to which we must all adhere lest we be deemed either inferior or not “true” women’ (Alcoff, 1989: 104).

Equality, rather than difference, is also stressed in the work of Catharine MacKinnon (1987, 1991), who castigates the idea of a woman-culture as ‘making quilts’. She argues that women’s subordination is a matter of social power founded on men’s dominance of institutionalized heterosexuality. Though not all men have equal power and not all women are subject to the same forms of oppression, her summation of feminist arguments stresses equality: ‘We’re as good as you. Anything you can do, we can do. Just get out of the way’ (MacKinnon, 1987: 32).

Joan Scott has argued that the equality–difference debate relies on a false binary since it is possible for equality and difference to co-exist: ‘Equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality’ (Scott, 1990: 137–8). That is, sameness is not the only ground for claims to equality and difference is the condition for all identities.

A good deal of sociological, cultural and feminist writing, including MacKinnon’s, has sought to challenge biological determinism through the conceptual division between sex and gender. Sex is taken to be the biology of the body, while gender refers to the cultural assumptions and practices that govern the social construction of men and women. Subsequently, it is the social, cultural and political discourses and practices of gender that are said to lie at the root of women’s subordination. However, the sex–gender distinction is itself the subject of criticism.

Since gender is a cultural construct, it is said to be malleable in a way that aspects of biology may not be.

Sex as a discursive construct

The distinction between sex as biology and gender as a cultural construction is broken down on the grounds that there is in principle no access to biological ‘truths’ that lie outside of cultural discourses. Thus, there can be no biological ‘sex’ that is not also cultural. Sexed bodies are always already represented as the production of regulatory discourses (see Butler’s arguments later in the chapter). In this view, the body does not disappear:

Rather, it becomes a variable rather than a constant, no longer able to ground claims about the male/female distinction across large sweeps of history but still there as always a potentially important element in how the male/female distinction gets played out in any specific society. (Nicholson, 1995: 43–4)

For poststructuralists, the cultural variations that exist between women (and between men) suggest that there is no universal cross-cultural category of ‘woman’ (or ‘man’) that is shared by all. Rather, there are multiple modes of femininity (and masculinity) which are enacted not only by different women, but also, potentially, by the same woman under different circumstances. The claim is that sex and gender are infinitely malleable in principle, even though in practice they are moulded and regulated into specific forms under particular historical and cultural conditions.

SEXED SUBJECTS

Within cultural studies the argument that femininity and masculinity are malleable social constructions has taken its inspiration either from the work of Foucault (Weedon, 1997) or from psychoanalysis. We shall trace these apparently contradictory arguments (Foucault was opposed to psychoanalysis), culminating in Butler's attempt to unite them.

Foucault: subjectivity and sexuality

For Foucault, subjectivity is a discursive production. That is, discourse (as regulated ways of speaking/practice) offers speaking persons subject positions from which to make sense of the world. In doing so, discourse also 'subjects' speakers to the rules and discipline of those discourses. A subject position is that perspective or set of regulated discursive meanings from which discourse makes sense. To speak is to take up a subject position and to be subjected to the regulatory power of that discourse.

Foucault propounds an anti-essentialist argument in which there are no universal ahistorical subjectivities. To be a man or a woman is not the outcome of biological determinism or universal cognitive structures and cultural patterns. Gender is historically and culturally specific, subject to radical discontinuities over time and across space. This does not mean that one can simply pick and choose genders or that gender is a matter of random chance. Rather, we are gendered through the power of regulated and regulatory discourses.

Sex and the discursive construction of the body

The body and sexuality are major themes in Foucault's work. He argued that sexuality was a focal point for the exercise of power and the production of subjectivity in western societies. Subjectivity is coterminous with sexuality since subjects are constituted through the production of sex and the control of the body. Foucault is concerned with 'the overall "discursive fact", the way in which sex is "put into discourse"' (Foucault, 1979: 11). He suggests that discourses of polymorphous sexualities have proliferated and been disseminated through:

- medicine;
- the church;
- psychoanalysis;
- education programmes;
- demography.

The proliferating discourses of sexuality *produce* particular subjectivities by bringing them into view via the discourses of, for example, medicine. These discourses analyze, classify

and regulate sexuality in ways that produce sexed subjects and construct sexuality as the cornerstone of subjectivity. For example, he argues that from the early 18th century onwards, women's bodies were subject to the discourses of modern science. These discourses produced women as hysterical and nervous subjects while reducing them to their reproductive system. Foucault goes on to argue that the confessional has become a modern mode of subjection. We might see TV talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as contemporary gendered examples.

Nevertheless, according to Foucault, wherever discursive power operates, so also does resistance become possible, not least through the production of 'reverse discourses'. For example, medics and clerics put the idea of homosexuality into discourse in order to condemn it. However, the very discursive production of a homosexual subject position allowed homosexuals to be heard and to claim rights.

The feminist critique of Foucault

Foucault has been subject to feminist criticism for neglecting 'to examine the gendered character of many disciplinary techniques' (McNay, 1992: 11). It is argued (Bartky cited in McNay, 1992) that Foucault treats bodies as gender-neutral with little specificity beyond a male norm. He does not, for example, explore how men and women are related differently to the disciplinary institutions he describes.

While these criticisms have force, Lois McNay (1992) tempers them by pointing out the dangers of positing a completely different history and experience of repression for women. Male and female bodies have been worked on in historically specific ways. However, this should not lead us, she argues, to propose an eternal and essential opposition between the sexes.

Foucault's description of subjects as 'docile bodies', whereby subjects are the 'effect' of discourse, has been of concern to feminists because it appears to rob subjects of the agency required for an emancipatory project. However, it is arguable that Foucault's later work which centred on 'techniques of the self' does reintroduce agency and the possibility of resistance and change. Foucault is led to consider how 'man [*sic*] proposes to think his own nature when he perceives himself to be mad; when he considers himself to be ill; when he conceives of himself as a living, speaking, labouring being' (1987: 6–7). This concern with self-production as a discursive practice is centred on the question of ethics as a mode of 'care of the self'.

Ethics and agency

According to Foucault, morality is concerned with systems of injunction and interdiction constructed in relation to formalized codes. Ethics are concerned with practical advice as to how one should concern oneself with oneself in everyday life (Foucault, 1979, 1984b, 1986). While morality operates through a set of imposed rules and prohibitions, ethics is concerned with the actual practices of subjects in relation to the rules that

are recommended to them. These rules are enacted with varying degrees of compliance and creativity.

Foucault explores the space between a system of laws and an individual's ethical practices that permit a degree of freedom to subjects in forming their individual behaviour. In particular, he points to an ethics of self-mastery and 'stylization' that is drawn from the character of relationships themselves rather than from external rules of prohibition. Thus does Foucault attribute a degree of individual autonomy and independence to subjects, even while pointing to the indissociability of subjectivity from social and cultural constraints. McNay argues that this more dynamic conception of the self enables the exploration of a variety of sexualities and suggests a route for feminist political activity: 'Foucault's idea of practices of the self parallels developments in feminist analysis of women's oppression that seek to avoid positing women as powerless victims of patriarchal structures of domination' (McNay, 1992: 66).

Psychoanalysis, feminism and sexed subjectivity

Regulating sexuality

Amongst Freud's oft-quoted sayings are two apparently contradictory phrases whose interrogation may help us to grasp the implications of psychoanalysis for questions of sexual identity. On the one hand, Freud suggests that 'anatomy is destiny', while, on the other, he describes human sexuality as involving 'polymorphous perversity', that is, the capability to take any number of forms.

According to Freud, the libido or sexual drive does not have any pre-given fixed aim or object. Rather, through fantasy, any object, which includes persons or parts of bodies, can be the target of desire. An almost infinite number of sexual objects and practices are within the domain of human sexuality. Subsequently, Freud's work is concerned to document and explain the *regulation* and repression of this 'polymorphous perversity'. This ordering is achieved through the resolution (or not) of the Oedipus complex, so that heterosexual gendered relationships become the norm.

Anatomy is argued to be destiny not because of genetic determination but because bodily differences are signifiers of sexual and social differentiation.

Anatomy is destiny because it is hard to escape the regulatory scripts that surround the signifiers of bodily difference.

It is quite clear that, as years of feminist writing have argued, bodies do matter. That said, it is important to think carefully about how much we make bodies matter, and how (or if) this 'mattering' should be enforced. As we will see in the section below on transphobia, some feminists are attempting to police who can and cannot call themselves female in ways which arguably enact exactly the same sorts of biology-based discrimination to which feminists have so long objected.

Chodorow: masculinity and femininity

According to Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989), Freud demonstrates that:

- there is nothing inevitable about our sexual object choices and identifications;
- sexual identity is formed through a developmental process in the context of our first relationships;
- our sexualities are regulated in ways that are particularly costly for women.

For Chodorow, the theory of the Oedipus complex is a demonstration of the reproduction of male dominance and male contempt for women. She argues that, in the context of patriarchy, mothers treat boys as independent and outgoing persons; conversely, girls are loved more narcissistically as being like the mother. Boys' separation involves identification with the father and the symbolic Phallus as the domain of social status, power and independence. A form of masculinity is produced that stresses externally oriented activity. This comes at the price of covering over an emotional dependence on women and weaker skills of emotional communication. In contrast, girls have acquired a greater surety with the communicative skills of intimacy through an introjection of, and identification with, aspects of their mothers' narratives. The traditional cost for girls is a greater difficulty with externally-oriented autonomy.

Chodorow argues that these sexed subjectivities are not universals of the human condition. Indeed, psychoanalysis shows us that the formation of sexual love objects and of the relations between men and women is formed in the context of historically specific family configurations. Over time, new forms of subject and new forms of masculinity and femininity could be forged.

Phallogentric psychoanalysis

For cultural studies there remains the vexed question of the phallogentric (i.e. male-centred) character of psychoanalysis. Freud's assertion that women would 'naturally' see their genitals as inferior is highly problematic. This is also the case for the claim that genital heterosexual activity that stresses masculine power and feminine passivity is the normal form of sexuality. Further, in Lacan's reworking of Freud, the Oedipal moment marks the formation of the subject in the symbolic order and into the Law of the Father. That is, the power of the phallus is understood to be necessary to the very existence of subjects. Here the symbolic phallus:

- acts as the 'transcendental signifier' of the power of the symbolic order;
- serves to split the subject from desire for the mother, thus enabling subject formation;
- marks the necessary interruption of the mother-child dyad and the subject's entry into the symbolic (without which there is only psychosis);
- allows the subject to experience itself as a unity by covering over a sense of lack.

For some critics (Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b), the centrality of the phallus to Lacan's argument renders 'woman' an adjunct term. By contrast, for Juliet Mitchell (1974) and Chodorow (1978, 1989), Freud's patriarchal assumptions are an expression of his value system and not inherent to psychoanalysis *per se*. Psychoanalysis could be cleansed of these assumptions and the historical specificity of its categories recognized and reworked. For them, psychoanalysis offers a deconstruction of the very formation of gendered identity in the psychic and symbolic domains of patriarchal societies.

Julia Kristeva: the semiotic and the symbolic

Julia Kristeva is the Lacanian-influenced psychoanalyst who has attracted the most attention within feminist cultural studies (see Kristeva, 1986c). This is for a number of reasons:

- Kristeva's work is centrally concerned with signs/semiotics; that is, with the symbolic order of culture.
- Her work is organized around questions of subjectivity and identity.
- She is a practising psychoanalyst.
- Her work explores the way that psychic forces are intertwined with cultural texts

KEY THINKERS

Julia Kristeva (1941–)

Kristeva was born in Bulgaria and schooled in Marxism and Russian formalism. She emigrated to France where she initially studied with Roland Barthes and wrote for the avant-garde journal *Tel Quel*. Working as a professor at both the universities of Paris and Columbia (New York), she developed a critique of structuralism and a methodology she calls 'semanalysis'. Through this she seeks to explore signification and 'set categories and concepts ablaze' as part of transgressing the dominant symbolic order. A practising psychoanalyst, her work is particularly concerned with gender and subjectivity.

Reading: Kristeva, J. (1986) 'Revolution in Poetic Language', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi. Oxford: Blackwell.

Kristeva distinguishes between the 'semiotic chora', which is presymbolic, and the 'thetic' or symbolic sphere. For Kristeva, subjects are 'always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic' (Kristeva, 1986a: 93). What she calls the 'subject-in-process' is an interplay between the semiotic and

the symbolic. Language is the symbolic (thetic) mechanism by which the body can signify itself (as a signified ego). This involves the regulation of the (presymbolic) semiotic by the symbolic. Nevertheless, the semiotic returns in the symbolic order as a transgression of it and appears, for example, in certain kinds of (modernist) literary and artistic practice through the rhythms, breaks and absences in texts. This presymbolic 'feminine' is not the preserve of women *per se*, for Kristeva holds a firmly anti-essentialist view of sexual identity.

Deconstructing sexual identity Kristeva has argued that 'To believe that one "is a woman" is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that one "is a man"' (cited in Moi, 1985: 163). We may identify with gendered identities but one cannot be a woman in an essentialist ontological sense. Sexual identities as opposites can only come into being after entry into the symbolic order. That is, sexual identity is not an essence but a matter of representation.

According to Kristeva, a small child faces the choice of mother-identification, and subsequent marginality within the symbolic order, or father-identification, giving access to symbolic dominance but wiping out the plenitude of pre-Oedipal mother-identification. These choices face both male and female infants. Consequently, degrees of masculinity and femininity are said to exist in biological men and women. Femininity is a condition or subject position of marginality that some men, for example avant-garde artists, can also occupy. Indeed, it is the patriarchal symbolic order that tries to fix all women as feminine and all men as masculine, rendering women as the 'second sex'. Kristeva advocates a position in which the dichotomy man/woman belongs to metaphysics.

Kristeva is suggesting that the struggle over sexual identities takes place within each individual. Rather than a conflict between two essentialist and opposing male-female masses, sexual identity concerns the balance of masculinity and femininity within specific men and women. This struggle, she suggests, could result in the deconstruction of sexual and gendered identities understood in terms of marginality within the symbolic order. This argument stresses the singularity and multiplicity of persons, as well as the relativity of symbolic and biological existence.

'The time has perhaps come to emphasize the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations'. (Kristeva, 1986b: 193)

Kristeva maintains not only that women occupy a range of subject positions but also that a new symbolic space and subject position are opening up for them. In particular, she suggests that a new space is now available for women to intermingle motherhood (and difference) with the politics of equality and the symbolic order.

Judith Butler: between Foucault and psychoanalysis

Kristeva's attempt to deconstruct sexual identity is one shared by Judith Butler who works with and between the work of Foucault and psychoanalysis. She accepts the Foucauldian

argument that discourse operates as a normative regulatory power that produces the subjects it controls. However, she also suggests a return to psychoanalysis in order to pursue 'the question of how certain regulatory norms form a "sexed" subject in terms that establish the indistinguishability of psychic and bodily formation' (Butler, 1993: 22). Butler deploys psychoanalysis to discuss how regulatory norms are invested with psychic power through processes of identification.

In Foucauldian fashion, Butler argues that discourse defines, constructs and produces bodies as objects of knowledge. Discourse is the means by which we understand what bodies are.

The category of 'sex' is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a 'regulatory ideal'. In this sense, then, 'sex' not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. Thus, 'sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. (Butler, 1993: 1–2)

The discourses of sex are ones that, through repetition of the acts they guide, bring sex into view as a necessary norm. Sex is a construction, but an indispensable one that forms subjects and governs the materialization of bodies.

The performativity of sex

Butler conceives of sex and gender in terms of citational performativity, with the performative being 'that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names' (Butler, 1993: 13). This is achieved through a citation and reiteration of the norms or conventions of the 'law' (in its symbolic, Lacanian sense). A performative in speech act theory is a statement that puts into effect the relation that it names, for example, within a marriage ceremony 'I pronounce you ...'. Butler's take on 'performativity' is not as the act by which a subject brings into being which she or he names but rather 'as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (1993: 2).

For Butler, 'sex' is produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms understood as a performativity that is always derivative. The 'assumption' of sex, which is not a singular act or event but an iterable practice, is secured through being repeatedly performed. Thus, the statement 'It's a girl' initiates a process by which 'girling' is compelled.

This is a 'girl', however, who is compelled to 'cite' the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible

citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (Butler, 1993: 232)

Performativity is not a singular act for it is constituted by the reiteration of a set of norms. Nor should it be understood as a performance given by a self-conscious, intentional actor. Rather, the performance of sex is compelled by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality that reiterates itself through the forcible production of 'sex'. Indeed, the very idea of an intentional sexed actor is a discursive production of performativity itself: 'Gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect that very subject it appears to express' (Butler, 1991: 24).

Identification and abjection

Butler combines this reworking of discourse and speech act theory with psychoanalysis. This leads her to argue that the 'assumption' (taking on) of sex involves an identification with the normative phantasm (idealization) of 'sex'. Sex is a symbolic subject position assumed under threat of punishment (e.g. of symbolic castration or abjection).

The symbolic is a series of normative injunctions that secure the borders of sex (what shall constitute a sex) through the threat of psychosis and abjection (an exclusion, a throwing out, a rejection). For Butler, identification is understood as a kind of affiliation and expression of an emotional tie with an idealized fantasized object (person, body part) or normative ideal. It is grounded in fantasy, projection and idealization.

Identification constitutes an exclusionary matrix by which the processes of subject formation simultaneously produce a constitutive outside. That is, an identification with one set of norms, say heterosexuality, repudiates another, say homosexuality. Indeed, Butler's work is particularly concerned with the abjection of gay and lesbian sexuality by the heterosexual 'imperative'. She is also at pains to argue that identifications are never complete or whole. The identification is with a fantasy or idealization. Consequently, it can never be coterminous with 'real' bodies or gendered practices; there is always a gap or a slipping away of identification. For Butler psychoanalysis highlights the very *instability* of identity.

Drag: recasting the symbolic

Some feminists, for example Irigaray and to some extent Kristeva, regard the resistance to heterosexual masculine hegemony as rooted in the presymbolic 'imaginary', a zone said to exist before the acquisition of language. By contrast, Butler argues for the necessity of recasting the symbolic itself as that set of regulatory norms that govern sex. Though the symbolic regulates identificatory practices, this process is never complete. It involves only *partial* identifications. Consequently, Butler is able to theorize a space for change in which the very notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' can be rethought.

Butler argues that drag can destabilize and recast gender norms through a re-signification of the ideals of gender (Butler, 1990). Through a miming of gender norms, drag can be

subversive to the extent that it reflects on the performative character of gender. Drag suggests that all gender is performativity and as such destabilizes the claims of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity as the origin that is imitated. That is, hegemonic heterosexuality is itself an imitative performance which is forced to repeat its own idealizations. That it must reiterate itself suggests that heterosexuality is beset by anxieties that it can never fully overcome. The need for reiteration underlines the very insecurity of heterosexual identifications and gender positions. However, Butler's arguments are indicative of only one possible subversive activity, for, as she points out, drag is at best always ambivalent and can be itself a reiteration and affirmation of the Law of the Father and heterosexuality.

The term 'drag' is usually associated with men and male homosexuality, yet it has become increasingly popular for women to explore similar performances as 'drag kings'. The queer and gender theorist Jack (formerly Judith) Halberstam (1998) argues that there are crucial differences between men performing femininity and women performing masculinity. For example, the stakes in each are different, the performances look different, and there are distinct differences between the relations between masculinity and performance, and femininity and performance. Halberstam's case is that drag 'kinging' provides 'a rare opportunity for the wholesale parody of, particularly, white masculinity' (1998: 238–9)

DRAG KINGING



© Photographer: Lauren Horwood (2015) laurenhorwood.com

- What are the features of this image of the Australian writer and activist Tara Moss that suggest that we are looking at: (a) a woman; and (b) a man?
- Do you agree with Judith Butler that drag illustrates the performativity of sex?

The discipline and the fiction of identity

Ambivalence pervades Butler's discussion of identity categories *per se* and the notion of 'queer' in particular. The word 'queer' has been rearticulated and resignified by ACT-UP, Queer Nation and other communities of queer politics to deflect its injurious effects and turn it into an expression of resistance. However, Butler argues that identity categories of this type cannot be rearticulated (redefined) in any way. Nor can the effects of rearticulation be controlled, since they are always open to further resignifications.

Thus, the use of the term 'queer' as an affirmative has proved politically useful. However, it continues to echo its past pejorative usage. Further, Butler argues that we need to be attentive to the exclusions and abjections that *any* identity category enacts. This includes the notion of 'queer', which arguably establishes a false unity between gay men and gay women that may not resonate within all communities.

For Butler, all identity categories are necessary fictions which, though we continue to use them, should simultaneously be interrogated.

Queer theory

Along with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, 1990, 1993), Butler is considered a pioneer of the poststructuralist field of queer theory. The latter developed in the humanities in the early 1990s. It was particularly influenced by Foucault's writing on sexuality and the way meaning is given to the body via discourse (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2006: 128–32). Queer theory posits 'a critical re-thinking or "querying" of the ideological, psychological, and bodily economics which shape sexual identity, gender and desire' (Greet, 2000: 413).

This intellectual movement occurred alongside the aforementioned activist appropriation of the word 'queer' – a term previously used in a pejorative and homophobic manner. Deploying the word 'queer' in everyday contexts is seen as offering a way to bypass the gay/straight binary and to play with identity in a fluid rather than fixed manner. It is also regarded by some as being more inclusive than terms such as 'gay' or 'lesbian'. More recently, the term 'queer' has been used to evoke an intersectional political activist position rather than solely a sexual preference.

Alphabet soup

Attempts to maximize linguistic inclusivity when referring to what used to be called the 'gay rights' movement have led to some odd results. One example is the unpronounceable

abbreviation LGBTQQIAAPP. This stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, allies, polyamorous and pansexual. Less unwieldy suggestions include Gender and Sexual Minorities (GSM), Gender and Sexual Diversities (GSD) and QUMUNITY (a combination of 'queer' and 'community'). Ron Suresha, meanwhile, calls on the GSD (his preferred term) community to harness its vast creative power and devise something 'fresher, tastier, and more nourishing than last century's canned alphabet soup' (2013). The term Butler prefers is 'sexual minorities' because it is not identity-based:

it isn't that we're struggling for people who are gay or lesbian or transgendered; we're struggling for all kinds of people who for whatever reason are not immediately captured or legitimated by the available norms and who live with the threat of violence or the threat of unemployment or the threat of dispossession of some kind by virtue of their aberrant relation to the norm. What worries me is that many mainstream gay organizations have become very identity-based; coming out has become a very big thing because that's the moment of rendering visible your identity. The problem is that among that kind of bourgeois politics... there are a lot of folks who aren't going to be able to stand up and say they are X or Y, or who might even say they are X or Y and their assertion would be disputed. So, for instance, this woman who is anatomically male in part – or who may be mixed; she has breast implants, so perhaps she is in transition – could get up and say that she's a woman, but that is going to be a really rough speech act for a lot of people to accept. There will be some who say, 'No, you are not.' It would be profoundly infelicitous. (cited in Olson and Worsham, 2000: 754)

Butler's point refers to the various challenges facing the world's increasingly visible trans community – the subject dealt with in the next section.

'The transgender tipping point'

This was the headline on a 2014 *TIME* magazine cover featuring the transgender actress Laverne Cox – the first transgender black woman to have a leading role in a mainstream US television programme (*Orange is the New Black*). *TIME* had previously been the target of a social media campaign criticizing it for omitting Cox from its annual list of the 100 most influential people. In its 'transgender tipping point' article, the American magazine declares that the battle for transgender rights is the 'next civil rights frontier' (Steinmetz, 2014).

The piece prompted international media discussion and debate about the increasing visibility of people identifying as trans, as well as the high levels of verbal and physical violence experienced by this vulnerable section of the population. Celebrity transgender role models (such as Cox) combined with the networking power of the internet were identified as key factors in helping trans people to 'come out' and to find and support one another.

Another significant moment in transgender-related representations came in 2015 in the form of the BBC Two programme *Transgender Kids* by the quirky documentary-maker Louis Theroux. *Transgender Kids* provides a sympathetic portrayal of children and teens who feel like they are girls trapped in the bodies of boys or vice versa. Theroux's focus is on the child and adolescent gender centre at the University of California in San Francisco, where a

group of medical professionals help trans children via psychological counselling, hormone blockers and discussions about the pros and cons of the possibility of future sex reassignment surgery. When asked about the 'risks' of patients changing their minds further down the track, one professional at the centre reframes this not as a 'risk' but as a 'possibility'. Her point is that the real risks in such scenarios relate to the high rates of suicide and suicide attempts by trans teenagers who are not supported in their gender identities and choices.

Further evidence supporting *TIME*'s tipping point thesis has been the number of media commentators speaking out on trans issues. Noting statistics suggesting that between 0.1 and 5 per cent of the world's population are trans, intersex or 'genderqueer' (a term used for all identities other than 'female' or 'male'), Laurie Penny's observation is that:

Whichever way you slice it, that's millions of human beings. As a species, we have come up with space travel, antibiotics, so it seems rather archaic that so much of our culture, from money and fashion, love and family is still ordered around the idea that people come in two kinds based roughly on the contents of their underpants. (2014)

Trans author Julia Serano, meanwhile, comments that:

The truth is that trans people exist and our lives are fairly mundane. In the U.S., the number of transsexuals is roughly equivalent to the number of Certified Public Accountants. Nobody views accountants as exotic or scandalous! (cited in Penny, 2014)

As we will see, 'the transgender tipping point' has also proved to be a lightning rod for old, intra-feminist disagreements about essentialism and the nature of womanhood.

Terms in transition

The umbrella terms 'transgender' and 'trans' are more inclusive than the old-fashioned word 'transsexual'. These new words are used to refer to those people who seek gender-reassignment surgery (what used to be called a 'sex change') as well as those who take hormones, or who simply identify with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. They replace expressions such as 'tranny' which are regarded by many as antiquated and offensive. Michelle Goldberg's observation is that the elasticity of the term 'transgender' is forcing a rethink of what sex and gender mean: 'at least in progressive circles, what's determinative isn't people's chromosomes or their genitals or the way that they were brought up but how they see themselves' (2014).

Transphobic feminists?

Certain sectors of radical feminism have a long history of opposing the idea that transgender women are 'real' women. The argument is that women who were born men cannot understand the suffering of the sisterhood and are still men, regardless of any hormones or surgery they have undertaken. Feminists who hold this view insist that transgender women should not be allowed to use women's public bathrooms or to participate in women-only events.



'Laverne Cox at San Francisco Trans March 2015' by Funcrunch – Own work. Licenced under CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons – https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laverne_Cox_at_San_Francisco_Trans_March_2015.jpg#/media/File:Laverne_Cox_at_San_Francisco_Trans_March_2015.jpg

While this dispute dates back to the 1970s, it has been reignited since 2014 in response to the increasing visibility of transgender celebrities and activists.

The feminist academic Sheila Jeffreys is one of the most controversial and vocal critics of transgenderism. In her 2014 book, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*, she cites cases of transgendered individuals who have changed their minds as being 'radically destabilising to the transgender project' (2014: 59). For Jeffreys:

- gender-realignment surgery is a form of mutilation;
- female-to-male transitions represent an attempt by women to raise their status in a sexist system; and
- men who choose to transition to women are doing so because of sexual fetishism.

Jeffreys insists on using the pronouns which align with people's biology at birth. Her claim is that men who use feminine pronouns are concealing 'the masculine privilege bestowed upon them by virtue of having been placed in and brought up in the male sex caste' (2014: 9). Jeffreys, along with other high profile feminists with similar views, have been accused of 'transphobia' and of being part of a hate group. This is partly because of comments such as the following from the feminist writer Julie Burchill:

To have your cock cut off and then plead special privileges as women – above natural-born women, who don't know the meaning of suffering, apparently – is a bit like the old definition of chutzpah: the boy who killed his parents and then asked the jury for clemency on the grounds he was an orphan. (2013)

Trans activists have responded by devising the pejorative term Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism (TERF), and lobbying to stop 'TERFs' gaining access to venues for meetings and speaking engagements.

In different ways, sectors of both radical feminism and trans activism appeal to an essentialist idea of gender. The former conjures an 'essence-based binary sex rubicon' which defines everyone and which 'cannot be honourably crossed' (C. Williams, 2014). The latter argues that it is the sense of sexed embodiment that is essential. Butler's thoughts on this issue are illuminating – and humane. She says that:

we may not need the language of innateness or genetics to understand that we are all ethically bound to recognize another person's declared or enacted sense of sex and/or gender. We do not have to agree upon the 'origins' of that sense of self to agree that it is ethically obligatory to support and recognize sexed and gendered modes of being that are crucial to a person's well-being. (cited in C. Williams, 2014)

Many trans people find themselves unwelcome in either the women's or the men's restrooms. How can this experience be used as a metaphor for the relationship between trans people and: 1) 'mainstream' culture; and 2) established political movements such as feminism and gay rights?

EXERCISE



Find a partner and choose three of the following terms to research. Discuss some of the reasons language is regarded as being so important when it comes to gender and identity.

Faux queen

Androgyne

Cisgender

Genderfluid

Other-gendered

Bigender

Trigender

Pangender

Gender non-conforming

Questioning

Sapiosexual

Trans* (with the asterisk included in the term)

MEN AND MASCULINITY

Most of this chapter is centred on women and the pertinent debates within feminism and cultural studies. However, reflection upon the social construction of gender must apply to men as well as women. As Giddens writes:

In Western culture at least, today is the first period in which men are finding themselves to be men, that is, as possessing a problematic ‘masculinity’. In previous times, men have assumed that their activities constituted ‘history’, whereas women existed almost out of time, doing the same as they always had done. (Giddens, 1992: 59)

Since what it is to be male varies across time and space so ‘masculinity’ can be understood as a cultural construct.

In particular, we must speak of masculinities rather than a masculinity since not all men are the same (Connell, 1995).

The sense that masculinity is not an unchanging given of nature has sparked a growing research interest into men and masculinity (e.g. Biddulph, 1994; Connell, 1995; Connell et al., 1982; Farrell, 1993; Johnson and Meinhof, 1997; Nixon, 1997; Pfeil, 1995; Seidler, 1989). The central areas of interest have been:

- cultural representations of men and masculinity;
- the character of men’s lives as they experience them;
- the problems that men face in contemporary culture.

In general terms, traditional masculinity has encompassed the values of strength, power, stoicism, action, control, independence, self-sufficiency, male camaraderie/mateship and work, amongst others. Devalued were relationships, verbal ability, domestic life, tenderness, communication, women and children.

EXERCISE



- Describe and discuss examples of the kinds of men who embody the traditional values of masculinity as named above.
- What kinds of masculinities are represented in contemporary culture that are at odds with these traditional forms?

Since the Enlightenment, men have been associated with metaphors of reason, control and distance (Seidler, 1989). In particular, the association of rationality with masculinity involves the self-discipline of, and distance from, the feminized language of emotions.

The modernist division of labour gave men the role of providing the wages of survival and women the domestic duties of child-rearing and housekeeping. Consequently, the language of modernity stresses the gulf between the feminine-coded private world and the masculine-coded public. In the latter, men have been acculturated to seek esteem through public performance and the recognition of achievement. This can take many forms, from violence through sport to educational qualifications and occupational status. It also lends itself to hyper-individualism, competitiveness and separation from the relational, for it is 'I' who must perform and 'I' who will take the glittering prize. Performance orientation of this kind – from work to sexuality – may manifest in grandiosity, on the one hand, and deep feelings of inadequacy and depression, on the other.

These traditional values of masculinity may no longer be serving men well. Some of the problems men face can be understood as an outcome of the incompatibility between ascendant notions of masculinity and that which is required to live contentedly in the contemporary social world.

MODERN YOUNG MAN



© Photographer: Dreamstime Agency | Agency: Dreamstime.com

(Continued)

(Continued)

- What do you think this image is trying to say about modern young men?
- To what extent is this a representation of unconventional masculinity?
- To what extent does it also reproduce conventional masculinity?

Problematic masculinity

For Warren Farrell (1993), men are the ‘disposable gender’; they die in war and kill themselves more often than women. Of course, men also commit over 90 per cent of convicted acts of violence and comprise over 90 per cent of the inmates of jails (Biddulph, 1994). Regardless, according to Steve Biddulph, there are very few happy men.

Biddulph argues that the central problems of men’s lives, as he sees it – loneliness, compulsive competition and lifelong emotional timidity – are rooted in the adoption of impossible images of masculinity that men try, but fail, to live up to. These idealized images are formed in the absence of a loving father to act as a living male role model.

These arguments are echoed by John Lee, whose central claim is that ‘our fathers were not there for us emotionally, physically, or spiritually – or at all’ (Lee, 1991: xv). Without the guidance and training that a loving father can give, he says, men don’t learn enough of the skills required for living, including the ability to give and receive.

The roots of male addiction

Terrence Real (1998) argues that 48 per cent of men in the USA are at some point in their lives implicated in depression, suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence and crime. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that, from 2011 to 2012, almost three times as many men than women over 18 consumed alcohol in quantities that posed a health risk over their lifetime (29 per cent compared to 10 per cent respectively). The proportion of men drinking at risky levels was significantly higher than women in all age groups to 65 years and over (‘Consumption of alcohol’, 2013).

Psychotherapeutic work (e.g. McLean et al., 1996; Rowe, 1997) suggests that low self-esteem (itself an outcome of family life), along with the self-perceived failure to meet cultural expectations of achievement, lies at the root of depression and drug abuse amongst men. For Real (1998), men’s violence, sex addiction, gambling, alcohol and drug abuse are a form of self-medication; that is, an attempted defence (achieved through ‘merging’ or self-elevation) against a covert depression stemming from shame and ‘toxic’ family relationships. Addiction and other forms of compulsive behaviour, including the ‘workaholism’ of high achievers, offer a source of comfort and a defence against anxiety. Thus, Giddens argues that addictions – as compulsive behaviour – are narcotic-like ‘time-outs’ that blunt the pain and anxiety of other needs or longings that cannot be directly controlled.

Men's apparent predilection for addiction and self-destruction in the 21st century needs to be understood within the context of modern life and its increasing stress on the self-regulation of emotions. According to Giddens (1992), men's predominance in the public domain and their association with 'reason' have been accomplished at a cost of their exclusion from the 'transformation of intimacy'. Intimacy is largely a matter of emotional communication. The difficulties some men have talking about relationships, which requires emotional security and language skills, are rooted in a culturally constructed and historically specific form of masculinity.

The 'betrayal' of the modern man

Susan Faludi (1999) describes the 'promise of post-war manhood' and its subsequent 'betrayal'; that is, the loss of the unstated covenant that men had presumed gave them a valued place in the social order. Forged through war and work, the modern man, argues Faludi, was acculturated to value as being *useful* at work, to his family and to the community at large. A man was expected to be in control, the master of his destiny, a person who could make things happen. Further, as a man, he was able to develop and rely on a solidarity with other men.

The Second World War proved to be the 'last gasp' of the useful and dutiful male as the ideal of manhood. The post-war American baby-boomer generation was offered a 'mission to manhood' that revolved around the conquest of space, the defeat of communism, a brotherhood of organizational men and a family to provide for and protect. However, 'the boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing' (Faludi, 1999: 30).

Downsizing, unemployment, the Vietnam and Korean Wars, feminism and a decline in public concern with space travel all undermined the confidence and security of post-war American men. In particular, what Faludi calls 'ornamental culture' signalled the end of a utilitarian role for men. Ornamental culture is a culture of celebrity, image, entertainment and marketing, all underpinned by consumerism. In this context, masculinity becomes a performance game to be won in the marketplace.

In the absence of an alternative vision of manhood that could provide a new sense of meaning and purpose in the world, Faludi documents a series of 'men in trouble':

- shipyard workers who have lost not only their source of income but also their craftsmanship, pride and solidarity;
- corporate executives and middle managers who have watched their consumer dream of the house, the pool, the car and the cosy family threatened by the onset of recession;
- young men – both black and white – who have sought their purpose in celebrity and, failing to find either, turn instead to crime;
- Christian men who have looked to reassert their symbolic status as head of the family, even as their wives pack up and leave;

- disillusioned casualties of the Vietnam War who, expecting to return as heroes, have found themselves to be social pariahs, leaving them wounded once more, even after the bullets have ceased flying.

For Faludi, all these and more appear as the distressed and confused men who inhabit the ghostly landscape of the contemporary USA. In that context, the countercultural model of confrontation that revolved around an enemy that could be ‘identified, contested, and defeated’ may not be the best way forward for men or women, argues Faludi. Instead men need to find new ways of being men or, rather, new ways to be human that bestow masculinity as a side-effect of doing and living in a manner that brings respect, esteem and self-worth.

GENDER, REPRESENTATION AND MEDIA CULTURE

Femininity and masculinity are not essential qualities of embodied subjects but matters of representation. A good deal of feminist writing in the field of culture has been concerned with the representation of gender, and of women in particular. As Mary Evans (1997) comments, first there was a concern to demonstrate that women had played a part in culture, and in literature in particular, in the face of their omission from the canon of good works. This was coterminous with a concern for the kinds of representations of women which had been constructed; that is, ‘the thesis that gender politics were absolutely central to the very project of representation’ (Evans, 1997: 72).

Early feminist studies made the realist epistemological assumption that representation was a direct expression of social reality and/or a potential and actual distortion of that reality. That is, representations of women reflected male attitudes and constituted misrepresentations of ‘real’ women (see Tuchman et al., 1978). This is known as the ‘images of women perspective’. However, later studies informed by poststructuralism regard all representations as cultural constructions and not as reflections of a real world. Consequently, concern centres on how representations signify in the context of social power with what consequences for gender relations. This exploration of woman as a sign (Cowie, 1978) we may call the ‘politics of representation’.

Images of women

The concept of the stereotype occupies a prominent place within the ‘images of women’ perspective. As discussed in Chapter 8, a stereotype involves the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits. Through the operation of power, a stereotype marks the boundaries between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abjected’, ‘us’ and ‘them’.

For cultural studies the key idea here is that the representation of women is a politics where what matters is how women are represented and with what consequences rather than the truth or accuracy of representation.

The bitch, the witch and the matriarch

An early example of the 'images of women' approach is Diana Meehan's (1983) analysis of women on US television. Her study combined a quantitative analysis, which counted the number and kind of representations of women, with a qualitative interpretation of women's roles and power(lessness) within those representations. She suggested that representations on television cast 'good' women as submissive, sensitive and domesticated while 'bad' women are rebellious, independent and selfish. Meehan identifies the following as common stereotypes:

- *the imp*: rebellious, asexual, tomboy;
- *the good wife*: domestic, attractive, home-centred;
- *the harpy*: aggressive, single;
- *the bitch*: sneak, cheat, manipulative;
- *the victim*: passive, suffers violence or accidents;
- *the decoy*: apparently helpless, actually strong;
- *the siren*: sexually lures men to a bad end;
- *the courtesan*: inhabits saloons, cabarets, prostitution;
- *the witch*: extra power, but subordinated to men;
- *the matriarch*: authority of family role, older, desexed.

She concludes that 'American viewers have spent more than three decades watching male heroes and their adventures, muddled visions of boyhood adolescence replete with illusions of women as witches, bitches, mothers andimps' (Meehan, 1983: 131).

Affirmation and denial

US television is not the only villain in the story: Margaret Gallagher's (1983) survey of women in the media suggests a consistent *global* depiction of women as commodified and stereotyped into the binary images of 'good' and 'bad'. For example, Prabha Krishnan and Anita Dighe (1990) argue that affirmation and denial were the two main themes evident in their study of the representation of women on Indian television. The affirmation they describe is of a limited definition of womanhood as passive and subordinate, that is, being tied to housework, husbands and children. The denial is of the creativity, activity and individuality of women, particularly in relation to work and the public sphere.

Krishnan and Dighe (1990) report that men in television fiction were the principal characters in much larger numbers than women (105 men to 55 women). Further, while men were represented in a range of occupations, most women (34) were depicted as housewives. Each of the principal characters was described on the basis of 88 polar opposite personality

attributes, and analysis revealed that the most common characteristics ascribed to men and women were those shown in Table 9.1.

TABLE 9.1 Attributes of masculinity and femininity on Indian television

<i>Male characters</i>	<i>Female characters</i>
self-centred	sacrificing
decisive	dependent
self-confident	anxious to please
seeing a place in the larger world	defining the world through family relations
rational and conniving	emotional and sentimental
dominant	subordinate
paternal	maternal

Source: Krishnan and Dighe, 1990

Women of Bollywood

According to Krishnan and Dighe (1990), the representation of the idealized woman on Indian television is drawn from traditional Hindu sources which also provide the ideal moral universe for popular Hindi films (Mishra, 1985).

The title of the Hindi film *Suhaag* connotes a symbol of marriage, which is the leit motif of a movie which acts as a guide as to what constitutes a virtuous woman (Bahia, 1997; see also Dasgupta and Hedge, 1988, and Rajan, 1991, as sources of the following discussion). This includes the characteristics of chastity, patience and selflessness, which are exemplified by the central character. Thus, 'Maa', abandoned by her villainous husband, nevertheless brings up her sons without straying over traditional boundaries. Throughout the film it is Maa's role to bring up her sons in the correct and respectable way at whatever cost to herself. Despite her husband's lack of acknowledgement of her existence, when he later reappears, Maa subordinates herself to him despite his continual betrayal of her trust. Above all things, she must seek to save her marriage, without which she has no identity.

The Taming of the Shrew

The critique of the cultural representation of women is not confined to popular culture but also includes the 'Arts'. For example, Kathleen McLuskie (1982) discusses how Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* involves the treatment of women as commodities within a pattern of luxury consumption and an aristocratic lifestyle. Shakespeare's work is culturally significant for its place in 'high' culture, which is assured through the education system. McLuskie argues that the whole notion of 'taming' is ideological, as Petruchio tames Kate as he would an animal. All the 'jokes' are at Kate's expense and the play requires Petruchio's systematic destruction of her will through his puns.

Women trying to politely end conversations with men in western art history

The deconstruction and critique of representations of women in 'high' cultural forms can also be found in online feminist humour. Mallory Ortberg is the American author of the book *Texts From Jane Eyre* (2014) and the founder of the women's humour and general interest website The Toast. One of her specialities involves writing captions beneath paintings of women from western art history. She was inspired by the looks on women's faces in artworks with titles such as 'The Conversation', 'Two People Flirting' or 'The Couple':

You're clearly meant to see this as a pleasant interaction, but the look on the woman's face is so clearly, 'Someone, please, for the love of God, get me out of here. I wish I were dead.' I don't want to make sweeping generalisations, but I love the idea that basically for 600 years of Western European art, male artists were thinking, 'That's the look women always have on their face when you talk to them. That's not boredom, that's just their listening face.' (cited in Galo, 2014)



(Continued)

(Continued)

Ortberg's caption for the above – from her popular 'Women Trying To Politely End Conversations With Men In Western Art History' (2015) series – is:

oh, shitting fuck

Cora's already pretended to fall asleep

now all I can use is smile and pull the 'oh, you' elbow to the chest and hope I push him hard enough he gets the picture

'Hahahahaha, oh, you, Jeremy!'

(Ortberg, 2015, punctuation from original)

- Do you find Ortberg's caption funny? Why/why not?
- In your opinion does Ortberg's humour make a serious point?
- What do you notice about the way the female and the male figures are depicted in the rear left of the above image?
- Write your own caption for this painting within a painting.
- How can Ortberg's work be figured: a) as a form of bricolage (Chapter 6); and b) as part of 'remix' culture (Chapters 6 and 13)?

Gendered toys

Despite the many gains of feminism, there is one aspect of contemporary consumer culture whose embodiment of gender discourses is more segregated than ever before: the toy aisles of large department stores. Toys in the 'pink is for girls' aisles often include household appliances, vanity mirrors with make-up, princess and fairy paraphernalia, and dolls – some of which require feeding and nappy changing. Toys in the 'blue is for boys' aisles tend to be stocked with weapons, building equipment and transport units such as cars, buses and trains. Particularly unsettling for feminists is the fact that 'educational' toys are often located in the blue zone.

Defenders of the division of children's play equipment into 'girl' toys and 'boy' toys often say this is simply commerce reflecting the status quo, in that girls prefer dolls and boys prefer guns. What is your opinion? In August 2015, Target announced that it would phase out gender-based signage in some departments in its US stores. The move was greeted by a huge backlash which included accusations that the giant retailer was 'kowtowing to the PC police' (Scott, 2015). What is your view?

EXERCISE



Select a contemporary toy for discussion. In what ways does the toy embody discourses of gender for its consumer:

- as a visual object;
- as an object used to generate play activities for children?

Colour coding

The 'pink is for girls' and 'blue is for boys' mindset is relatively recent. The historian Jo B. Paoletti observes that for centuries all children wore white until the age of six (cited in Maglaty, 2011). Pink, blue and other pastels were adopted as colours for baby clothes from the mid-19th century, although these remained gender neutral until the 1940s. In 1918, meanwhile, the trade publication *Earnshaw's Infants' Department* advised that:

The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger colour, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl. (cited in Maglaty, 2011)

Barbie



© Photographer: Emma A. Jane

Barbie has never been popular with feminists. In scholarship, feminist writers have struggled at length with the tension between the idea that playing with Barbie involves pleasure and choice, and the idea that playing Barbie is a symptom of what Sandra Lee Bartky refers to as ‘internalized oppression’ (2002: 3). (This implies a version of false consciousness in that girls may feel they are ‘choosing’ to play with Barbie whereas they are actually following a stereotyped script.) In the popular media, Barbie has been blamed for a range of social ills, including causing ‘mutilating’ plastic surgery addictions (Hoskins, 2013), as well as contributing to the sexualization of little girls by making ‘overtly sexual ... hooker-style’ clothing seem desirable (Shure, 2013).

In *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein (2011) argues that – despite a slight breast reduction and waist augmentation – the astronaut, surgeon, and president figures from Barbie’s past have been mostly supplanted, largely replaced by fairies, butterflies, ballerinas, mermaids, and princesses in wardrobes of almost exclusively pink and lavender. A visit to Mattel’s Barbie e-store, however, presents a somewhat different picture. In July 2013, Mattel was offering 174 dolls in the Barbie section of its online shop. While some of these were indeed princesses, ballerinas and fantasy figures such as mermaids and fairies, there were also:

- fashion dolls of various complexions;
- sets of friends of various ages;
- child dolls with prepubescent bodies;
- dolls from Barbie (as well as non-Barbie) movies;
- dolls specifically identified as coming from nations other than America; and
- 29 career dolls from the ‘I Can Be’ line, including a zookeeper, a magician, a track champion, and an African-American female president doll called Nikki.

Only four of the figurines on this page were male: a Ken in swimming trunks; a bridegroom Ken; and two doll versions of male characters from the *Twilight* movie franchise (Jane, 2013).

Barbie is usually regarded as being oppressive to girls and women. Yet imagine a version of Mattel’s web page in which the genders were reversed: an online shop offering 170 male dolls (many engaged in rewarding friendships, stimulating careers and/or exciting fantasy adventures), yet only four female dolls (one in a swimsuit, one dressed as a bride, and two in the guise of film celebrities). Would this be oppressive to boys and men?

Adventure Time

While many representations of gender in popular culture remain dominated by stereotypes, there are signs of change. The internationally popular Cartoon Network series *Adventure Time*, for example, depicts gender in a number of subversive ways via:

- the inclusion of roughly equal numbers of female and male characters;
- the inclusion of characters who have multiple and/or indeterminate genders;
- the use of gendered design elements such as eyelashes and facial hair to illustrate character traits rather than as blunt, gender-signalling instruments;
- the distribution of traits such as intelligence, courage, loyalty, power lust, sentimentality, selfishness, altruism, artistic temperament, and a 'gross' sense of humour equally among characters regardless of gender;
- the use of characterizations and plot devices which frame gender and identity as being fluid rather than fixed; and
- the inclusion of queer and transgender sub-texts. (Jane, 2015)

Adventure Time features an ensemble cast of eccentric female royals, foremost of whom is the brilliant but flaky Princess Bubblegum. Ruler of the fictional Candy Kingdom, Bubblegum is known for her skills as a leader, a scientist and an inventor. Sub-texts hint that she once had a romantic relationship with another female protagonist, Marceline the Vampire Queen. Far from the limiting stereotypes proliferating in what has been dubbed 'princess culture' (Orenstein, 2011), *Adventure Time's* multitude of princesses are morally ambiguous, eccentric and sometimes physically revolting. In fact, many of the cartoon's female royals – Lumpy Space Princess, for instance – are so surreal they resist gendered readings altogether.

Further, characters such as Bubblegum appear alongside ambiguously gendered characters such as BMO (a walking, talking and skateboarding games console) and Gunter (a 'male' penguin who gives birth to a kitten) as well as a transgender chocolate chip cookie. What is particularly interesting about these characters is that they involve variations from dominant gender-related norms that are not simple inversions of existing gender stereotypes but are instead imaginative reinventions. As such, *Adventure Time's* social androgyny and 'transnormativity' (Jane, 2015) serve as useful models for the more general task of negotiating and disarming stereotypes via the sorts of 'politics of representation' proposed by Hall (1997c: 226).

EXERCISE



Watch an episode of *Adventure Time*.

- In what ways can the program be seen as both doing and undoing gender?
- Why do you think this cartoon – ostensibly made for children – has such a large adult fan base?

EXERCISE



Analyze a set of advertisements or a television drama that constructs femininity and masculinity.

- How are gendered identities achieved?
- What techniques are used?
- What roles are assigned to men and women?

The problem of accuracy

Illuminating though such studies are, the ‘images of women’ approach presents us with an epistemological problem. Namely, it asserts the truth and falsity of representations. For example, Gallagher (1983) describes the worldwide representation of women as demeaning, damaging and *unrealistic*. As Toril Moi comments, an ‘images of women’ approach ‘is equivalent to studying *false* images of women constructed by both sexes because the “image” of women in literature is invariably defined in opposition to the “real person” whom literature somehow never quite manages to convey to the reader’ (Moi, 1985: 44–5). The central problem is that the ‘real’ is always already a representation (Chapter 3).

Consequently, later studies become concerned less with representational adequacy and more with a ‘politics of representation.’ This approach explores the subject positions constructed by representations.

Here the marginality or subordination of women is understood as a constitutive effect of representation realized or resisted by living persons.

Subject positions and the politics of representation

A subject position is that perspective or set of regulated and regulatory discursive meanings from which the text or discourse makes sense. It is that subject with which we must identify in order for the discourse to be meaningful. In identifying with this subject position, the text subjects us to its rules; it seeks to construct us as a certain kind of subject or person. For example, in the context of advertising:

Addressing us in our private personae, ads sell us, as women, not just commodities but also our personal relationships in which we are feminine: how we are/should be/ can be a certain feminine woman, whose attributes in relation to men and the family derive from the use of these commodities. (Winship, 1981: 218)

The slender body

Among the more powerful and enduring representations of women within western culture is that of the 'slender body'. This discourse has become a disciplinary cultural norm (Bordo, 1993). Slenderness and a concern with dieting and self-monitoring are preoccupations of western media culture, with its interest in a 'tighter, smoother, more constrained body profile'. Consequently, advertising targets bulge, fat or flab and the desirability of flat stomachs and cellulite management. As Susan Bordo argues, the slender body is a gendered body for the subject position of the slender body is female (1993). Slenderness is a contemporary ideal for female attractiveness, so that girls and women are culturally more prone to eating disorders than are men.

That said, there is increasing awareness about the number of boys and men suffering from these conditions. According to Australia's National Eating Disorders Collaboration, up to a quarter of people suffering with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa are male, and almost an equal number of males and females suffer from binge eating disorder ('Eating Disorders in Males', n.d.). Further:

- Under-diagnosis and cultural stigma mean the actual proportion of males with eating disorders could be much higher than these statistics indicate.
- Rates of body dissatisfaction in males are rapidly approaching that of females (although for males, body dissatisfaction is more commonly manifested as the pursuit of a muscular, lean physique rather than a lower body weight).
- Risk factors for males include: the idea that men should have only one body type; the tendency for men to want to be 'in control'; and the conflation of having a 'perfect body' with success in other domains such as dating, getting a good job and social desirability. ('Eating Disorders in Males', n.d.)

Paradoxically, advertising culture offers us images of desirable foods while also proposing that we eat low-calorie items and buy exercise equipment. In the face of this contradiction, the capacity for self-control and the containment of fat is posed in moral as well as physical terms. The choice to diet and exercise leading to the production of a firm body is a symbol not only of gendered identity but also of the 'correct' attitude. The failure to exert such control, symbolically manifested in obesity and anorexia, is disciplined through, among other things, television talk shows that feature portrayals of 'eating disorders' or the struggles of the obese to lose weight. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, for example, has placed the presenter's struggle with weight gain at the centre of its strategy to humanize her.

Leaning in to capitalism

Texts construct subject positions about and for women. However, we should not imagine that these representations remain static. Thus Kathryn Woodward (1997) discusses the changing representation of motherhood in contemporary culture. She notes the emergence

of a new representation of the ‘independent mother’ that is not an idealized domesticated figure concerned only with child-care. Rather, this contemporary representation of motherhood is also supportive of autonomy and work for women/mothers. Woodward argues that the pleasures of this subject position lie in the fantasy of being a mother *and* having a career *and* being able to explore one’s individuality *and* look attractive.

Of course, attempting to live out the *reality* of this fantasy can lead not to liberation but to burn out. Consider the controversy attached to influential contemporary movements such as Lean In. The latter was founded by Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook and the author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013). In this book, Sandberg argues that – despite the many gender biases that plague the workforce – women will not achieve power and corporate success if they use these to make excuses. Among other strategies, Sandberg advises women to learn to accept criticism, to see corporate success as a jungle gym rather than a ladder, and not to forgo career advancement too far ahead of starting a family.

Faludi’s criticism of Sandberg’s approach is that it retools feminism as the expression of the self as ‘marketable consumer object, valued by how many times it’s been bought – or, in our electronic age, how many times it’s been clicked on’. As she puts it:

Sandberg’s admirers would say that Lean In is using free-market beliefs to advance the cause of women’s equality. Her detractors would say (and have) that her organization is using the desire for women’s equality to advance the cause of the free market. And they would both be right ... For the last two centuries, feminism, like evangelicalism, has been in a dance with capitalism. (Faludi, 2013)

The American legal scholar Rosa Brooks, meanwhile, writes of having an epiphany while in the middle of marking up a memo on US drone policy while simultaneously ordering a custom-decorated cake for her daughter’s sixth grade musical cast party and planning her remarks for a roundtable on women in national security. Brooks realized she hated Sandberg because attempting to follow her advice and combine parenting and career success had left Brooks full of misery and self doubt. This led to the following plea:

Ladies, if we want to rule the world – or even just gain an equitable share of leadership positions – we need to stop leaning in. It’s killing us. We need to fight for our right to lean back and put our feet up... It’s hard enough managing one 24/7 job. No one can survive two of them. And as long as women are the ones doing more of the housework and childcare, women will be disproportionately hurt when both workplace expectations and parenting expectations require ubiquity. (Brooks, 2014)

There is a playfulness to Brook’s advice to stop leaning in and to start reclining. That said, it underlines two serious social issues: the dangers inherent in the technology-enabled ‘always on’ workplace culture and the fact that – despite massively increased involvement in the workplace – women still carry the vast bulk of the domestic burden, including the care of children, elderly parents and ill or incapacitated family members.

Madonna's performance

Cultural theorists have been interested not only in subject positions that seek to fix the character of sexuality but also in those that destabilize them. Kaplan (1992) explores the ambiguity of Madonna as a text that deconstructs gender norms. Her concern is with a politics of the signifier. That is, with the exploration of sex as an unstable but regulated performance.

For Kaplan, Madonna is able to 'alter gender relations and to destabilize gender altogether' (1992: 273). Thus Madonna's videos:

- seek to empower women by exhorting them to take control of their lives;
- play with the codes of sex and gender to blur the boundaries of masculinity and femininity.

Kaplan argues that Madonna's videos are implicated in the continual shifting of subject positions. This involves the production of stylized and mixed gender signs that question the boundaries of gender constructs. This, she argues, is a politics of representation that centres on sex and gender as unstable 'floating' signifiers.

Kaplan argues that Madonna's video 'Express Yourself' continually shifts the focus of the camera, to adopt a variety of subject-viewer positions. Consequently, the identification is dispersed and becomes multiple. Body boundaries are violated and gender norms crossed. For example, Madonna mimes the male filmmaker Fritz Lang, only to open her jacket to reveal a bra.

Raunch culture

Madonna is a significant point of reference for the postfeminist interest in so-called raunch culture. The porn star Jenna Jameson (whose book *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star* became a bestseller), pop singer Christina Aguilera and Paris Hilton – the heiress famous for being famous – are also seen as influential figures in the profile of raunch culture. Raunch culture is very much a product of the third wave of feminism. It came about as a reaction to the taboos against female sexuality found among both moral conservatives and second wave feminists. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, championing women who worked in the sex industry and reclaiming toxic, age-old accusations such as 'slut' emerged as important political enterprises. Indeed this activism continues in forms such as the international 'Slut Walk' movement.

Critics of raunch culture such as Ariel Levy (2005) argue that it advocates female sexual provocativeness and promiscuousness by deploying references to pornography and by celebrating sexual objectification and physicality. Levy observes that women identifying within this 'culture' speak of their rights to objectify sexuality like a man, including looking at and enacting pornography. These women reject the idea that women should behave as victims and claim the right to do whatever they want to their bodies and to look how they wish to look. This includes the use of plastic surgery should they desire. Levy describes how such women employ discourses of empowerment and it is in this sense that raunch culture

has been celebrated as postfeminist. The argument is that, as women, they no longer have to be concerned about objectification by men *per se*. Rather, they are entitled to rejoice in their own sexuality and to act on it in just as assertive, and even predatory, a way as men.

Women who embrace these outlooks on sex are diametrically opposed to the more traditional feminist case against sexually explicit material such as pornography. Andrea Dworkin (1993) and Catharine MacKinnon (1995), for example, campaigned against pornography as a form of female oppression. Dworkin describes pornography as: 'a process of dehumanization, a concrete means of changing someone into something' (1993: 2). MacKinnon (1995) suggests that pornography acts in objectifying women twice – first when it is made, and second when it is viewed.

Critics of raunch culture link this cultural moment to the sexualization of children and the 'pornification' of popular culture in forms such as dancing classes and exercise sessions involving pole dancing and striptease. Yet while raunch culture's detractors may claim to have young women's best interests at heart, they can be observed engaging in more of the same old 'slut shaming' that young feminists were objecting to in the first instance.

Sex positive feminism

One controversial aspect of both raunch culture and third wave feminism in general is what is known as 'sex positive' feminism. The website *Feministing* provides a useful rundown as to what sex positivism is and what it is not.

Sex positivism encompasses the understanding that:

- freedom of sexuality is something that everyone needs but few people have;
- sexual pleasure is a legitimate part of life worthy of ethical exploration;
- pre-conceived notions and judgements about what kind of sex people should have ought to be rejected;
- sexual consent should be understood;
- honest, non-judgemental and comprehensive sex education should be supported. (Pervocracy cited in B, 2015)

Sex positivism is *not*:

- problematically equating a love of sex with sex-positivity;
- using 'sex-positivity' as a tool to manipulate others into having sex;
- shaming or judging people who are heterosexual, asexual, non-kinky, celibate and so on;
- creating norms about what other people should be doing regarding sex;
- prioritizing one's own personal sexual responses, behaviours and attitudes. (Queen cited in B, S. 2015)

EXERCISE



Organize a class debate about either pornography or 'raunch' culture.

- Do they empower women and men, or do they demean them?
- Design an advertising campaign that undermines classical gender roles.

Lady Gaga

Many of the ideas and themes covered in this chapter converge in the form of Lady Gaga – one of the most successful artists in music history and perhaps the first major star of the digital age (Paglia, 2010). Born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, the American singer and performance artist stumbled upon her stage name as the result of a predictive text glitch involving the Queen song 'Radio Gaga'. Her influences are diverse and include what could be described as 'conceptual fashion'. This, after all, is the celebrity who has worn outfits made of raw meat, plastic bubbles and Kermit the Frog dolls. Indeed her looks are so radically diverse, she can be difficult to recognize from one appearance to the next.

Gaga and Madonna

Gaga's debt to Madonna is widely acknowledged – including by Gaga herself. Both these powerful stars have produced easily digestible pop music while courting controversy by associating themselves with liberal politics and by using their sexuality in provocative and ambiguous ways (Gray II, 2012: 174). As such, Gaga is best framed not in terms of being different to Madonna, but as extending the approaches of The Material Girl. Indeed, it could be said that Gaga out-Madonnas Madonna.

Madonna has been known for engaging in a series of relatively orderly reinventions over the course of her lengthy and on-going career. Gaga, in contrast, presents as being in a near constant state of metamorphosis. She experiments with the grotesque in ways Madonna has not. Politically, there are also differences. Richard J. Gray II, for instance, argues that Lady Gaga's commitment to a range of social issues is more inclusive than Madonna's:

Madonna's empowerment message focused primarily on female empowerment, Gaga's empowerment message extends to all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, or socioeconomic level. (2012: 7)

Gagalogy

Like Madonna, Lady Gaga has inspired a wealth of academic writing. In fact, scholars in this domain have been known to refer to themselves as 'Gagalogs' (Gray II, 2012: 2). Universities offer courses on Lady Gaga which are presented as, among other things, 'monster theory'

(‘Little Monsters’ is the term Gaga uses to describe her fans while *The Fame Monster* is the title of her 2009 EP). Gaga has been analyzed in scholarship from angles including:

- the sociology of fame;
- French visual theory;
- transgression and the grotesque;
- the society of the spectacle and Situationist theory;
- semiotics and the manipulation of signs;
- gender fluidity;
- new forms of feminism.

Is ‘it’ a woman or a man?

Lady Gaga’s playfulness with sex, gender and performance identities has sparked rumours that she is intersex. At one point, an apparently sniffy Christina Aguilera referred to Gaga as an ‘it’ and said she was unsure whether Gaga was female or male. Gaga was not concerned. She replied, ‘look at me: I might as well be a gay man’ (cited in Collins, 2008). At the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards, meanwhile, Lady Gaga arrived in drag as ‘Jo Calderone’. She stayed in character for the entire night, described herself as Gaga’s boyfriend, accepted awards on behalf of Gaga and flirted with Britney Spears (Halberstam, 2012: xi).

Gaga feminism

In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal*, Halberstam makes the case that Lady Gaga exemplifies a new kind of feminism. He argues that ‘gaga feminism’ offers new and different ways of doing sex and gender:

Lady Gaga is, by her own admission, a fame ‘monster’: she is positively Warholesque in her love of attention and absolutely masterful in her use of celebrity, fashion, and gender to craft and transmit multiple messages about new matrices of race, class, gender, and sexuality... just as Andy Warhol was a channel for a set of new relations between culture, visibility, marketability, and queerness, so the genius of gaga allows Lady Gaga to become the vehicle for performing the very particular arrangement of bodies, genders, desires, communication, race, affect, and flow that we might now want to call gaga feminism. (2012: xii)

Halberstam further elaborates on this new kind of feminism as being characterized by excess, an ecstatic embrace of loss of control and a maverick sense of bodily identity. He labels the aesthetic categories attached to gaga feminism as involving punk aesthetics and anarchic feminism.

As a point of interest, Halberstam epitomizes many aspects of gaga feminism himself. Born female, the ‘king of feminism’ has also published as Judith Halberstam but now prefers to be referred to via masculine pronouns. That said, he is relaxed about variations:

some people call me Jack, my sister calls me Jude, people who I've known forever call me Judith – I try not to police any of it. A lot of people call me he, some people call me she, and I let it be a weird mix of things and I'm not trying to control it. (cited in Sexsmith, 2012)

Not so gaga over Gaga

Lady Gaga's critics include the feminist author Camille Paglia, who has attacked the singer for being an 'asexual copycat'. Paglia argues that Gaga is a manufactured personality who claims to speak for the freaks and misfits, yet who enjoyed a comfortable and eventually affluent upbringing. This included attending the same upscale Manhattan private school as Paris and Nicky Hilton:

There is a monumental disconnect between Gaga's melodramatic self-portrayal as a lonely, rebellious, marginalised artist and the powerful corporate apparatus that bank-rolled her makeover and has steamrolled her songs into heavy rotation on radio stations everywhere. (Paglia, 2010)

Paglia also critiques Gaga's attitude to her fans, specifically the way she preaches self-acceptance 'as if they are damaged goods in need of her therapeutic repair'. Their money, meanwhile, ends up lining Gaga's fashionable pockets.

Do you think Paglia's criticisms are valid given that Gaga happily pronounces herself both a 'liar' and a 'fake'? Lady Gaga claims to be able to critique fame while simultaneously engaging in and enjoying it. Do you think this is a conceit? If you had to design a university course focusing on Lady Gaga what would it cover and what would it be called?

GAGA FANDOM

- This Lady Gaga fan enjoys dressing like the singer but rejects the 'Little Monster' label as patronising. What is your opinion of Gaga's use of this term and Gaga's positioning of herself as 'Mother Monster'?
- Do you think the use of the expressions 'fangirl' and 'fanboy' instead of 'fanwoman' and 'fanman' is indicative of a broader tendency to infantilize fans and fan cultures?

(Continued)

(Continued)



© Photographer: Rachel Groom

- Lady Gaga has almost 50 million followers on Twitter and has been heralded for the way she uses social media to forge innovative and unprecedented 'reciprocal bonds' with her fans (Click et al., 2013). What is your view on the potential for authentic and intimate engagement with celebrities via social media?

Gender in cyberspace

The ambiguity of gender identity in virtual reality has led some thinkers to explore the feminist potentials of cyberspace. Sadie Plant (2000), for example, suggests that cyberspace offers the possibility of ending the world view that has supported two thousand years of patriarchy.

Plant points to the fluidity of interlinked networks that evade centralized structures, and to online identities that are shiftable and blurred as aiding a new feminist cyber-awareness.

The invisibility of the body that cyberspace allows enables a fluidity of identity which is useful, she argues, when one's identity – as a woman – is a liability. Further, she suggests that the network thinking style of cyberspace has made the masculine single-mindedness of patriarchy obsolete. Instead, she suggests that a shifting contextual existence, which has always been necessary for women, becomes the norm in cyberculture. Plant is aware that net culture is dominated by men but believes that it still offers possibilities for feminists.

Cyborg manifesto

Plant's case represents a continuation of the hopeful line of argument pioneered by Donna Haraway (1985) in her famous essay 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs'. A cyborg is a hybrid composed of machine and organism and is a feature of both fiction (for example 'The Borg' in *Star Trek*) and social reality (humans who use heart pacemakers). There is also a sense in which by entering into a virtual world generated by a machine, one becomes a cyborg. Haraway describes her essay as an ironic political myth that is faithful to feminism and socialism. The essay celebrates the confusion of boundaries that cyborgs represent and, in particular, the partiality, irony and oppositional perversity she sees in them.

KEY THINKERS

Donna Haraway (1944–)

American feminist Donna Haraway trained as a scientist and her cultural writings reflect her continued concern with the epistemological and social issues raised by science. She rejects the claims of science, and some branches of feminism, to hold the God-like neutral knowledge of a disembodied gaze. She advocates 'partial perspectives' that recognize their inherent limitations and remind us that no single perspective is complete. She rejects the distinction between sex and gender on the grounds that biology is a partial perspective that privileges sexuality. She describes herself in terms of multiple identities that include the cyborg; a position that, she argues, has advantages for women.

Reading: Haraway, D. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cyborgs blur the boundaries between organisms and machines, as well as between humans and other animals, so that the line between culture and nature collapses. When all is artifice, argues Haraway, the position of a universal transcendent knowledge claimed by 'man'

can no longer be sustained. The category 'nature' does not refer to an independent object world but rather is a strategy for maintaining political boundaries. As such, the very concepts of man, woman, black and white are shown to be constructions. There is nothing natural that binds the cultural qualities of 'female' to women or holds women together as a homogeneous group.

Haraway's argument is in accord with the anti-essentialist, poststructuralist feminist theory discussed in this chapter. Cyborg feminist writing then celebrates the hybrid, the marginalized and the partial in ways that undermine the central dogma of phallogentrism (or a privileged male knowledge that reduces and dominates all others as different and inferior).

CYBORG BEAUTY



© Photographer: Jaimie Duplass | Agency: Dreamstime.com

- Describe the key elements of this image. What kind of genre style does it construct?
- Analyze the image as a representation of women.
- Do you think this is what Haraway had in mind?

The idea that cyberspace would free people from gender because they were invisible and able to construct identities at will has been strongly critiqued. Delia Dumitrica and Georgia Gaden (2009) argue that the desire to push gender boundaries on the internet has been hindered by the platform itself and the wider power of patriarchal systems. For example, avatars are constrained by western ideals of beauty (small waists, big breasts for women, wide shoulders and muscles for men), and behaviour coded as masculine or feminine in the culture is carried over into cyber gaming. Even many non-human avatars come in recognizably male or female options.

Hilde G. Corneliussen's (2008) discussion of the game 'World of Warcraft' suggests that a slightly more ambiguous attitude to gender is occurring in cyberspace. She argues that gender representations in the game are diverse, multiple and plural. Although the game contains mostly male heroes, there are important female characters. Women are also included in traditionally masculine positions and there are alternative feminized roles for men. While the marketing and packaging of the game still heavily sexualize female characters, individual players can choose how revealing to make them. Certain skills are female-dominated, such as healing or 'tailoring', but the game offers opportunities for both male and female characters to engage in different skills. Overall she suggests that: 'Gender is present in World of Warcraft in many ways, but it is not necessarily insistent or obvious, and sometimes it is not even meaningful – or at least, it is not given meaning through the game design itself' (Corneliussen, 2008: 81).

Gendered cyberhate

The idea that the internet is predominantly liberating for women has been undermined by stark increases in the volume of gendered hate speech online. In recent years, cyberhate in the form of rape threats and sexualized vitriol has become part of the everyday experience for many female internet users (Jane, 2012; 2016). This is especially true in gamer communities where some commentators have argued that the 'misogynist backlash' is so virulent it constitutes a form of terrorism (Hudson, 2014). (See also Chapter 13.)

What's more, mob attacks online are increasingly spilling into offline domains. This occurs via practices such as 'doxxing' (the publishing of personally identifying information to incite internet antagonists to hunt targets in offline domains) and 'revenge porn' (the uploading of sexually explicit material – usually of a former female partner – without the consent of the pictured subject). Media outlets have also reported an increase in the number of men publishing faux advertisements claiming their ex-partners are soliciting sex. For instance, one US man – since jailed – posted an ad entitled 'Rape Me and My Daughters' which led to more than 50 men arriving at his ex-wife's home (Sandoval, 2013).

The legal scholar Danielle Keats Citron argues that rape threats and gendered doxxing are causing 'profound' harm to women by impeding their full participation in online life, and undermining 'their autonomy, identity, dignity, and well-being' (2009: 411). She provides an extensive survey of the various ways gendered cyberhate, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking are trivialized, ignored, and sometimes mocked by internet users and media

commentators, as well as by those responsible for law enforcement, policy development, and platform management (Citron, 2014).

Feminist digilantism

The inadequate response to gendered cyberharassment from law enforcement bodies, policy-makers, and corporations helps explain why an increasing number of female cyberhate targets are engaging in ‘digilante’ tactics such as ‘calling out’ and/or attempting to ‘name and shame’ their antagonists. These sorts of individual, micropolitical and DIY actions are also characteristic of the third wave of feminism (in contrast to the communal mobilization associated with the second wave of the women’s movement). Yet while these responses are useful for raising awareness about the problem of gendered e-bile, on their own they are unlikely to constitute an adequate intervention into the broader issue of gendered cyberhate. Despite a history of tension between generations of feminists, combating gendered cyberharassment may well require a combination of individualism as well as collectivism – in other words, a hybrid of second and third wave approaches (Jane, 2016).

In late 2014, the Australian gamer journalist Alanah Pearce contacted the mothers of some of the young boys who were sending her rape threats and asked these women to intervene. Her actions received international media coverage and were widely praised as constituting the ‘perfect’ response to the increasing problem of rape threats online. Do you agree?

The question of audiences

The discussion of gender representations above concentrated on forms of textual analysis focusing on the subject positions offered to readers. However, a new range of reception studies has studied the way viewers construct, negotiate and perform a multiplicity of meanings and gendered identities. Rather than regard audiences as reproducing textual subject positions and meanings, we need to consider what concrete people in specific locations actually do with texts. We must be concerned, then, not simply with textual devices that produce a variety of modes of femininity and masculinity, but also with the extent to which textual subject positions are ‘taken up’ by concrete women and men (see Chapter 10).

Deconstruct this: masculinity vs. femininity

- What are the characteristics of masculinity?
- What are the characteristics of femininity?
- How do the characteristics of the one depend on the other?

SUMMARY

Within cultural studies, sex and gender are held to be social constructions that are intrinsically implicated in matters of representation. They are matters of culture rather than of nature. There is a strand of feminist thinking that stresses the essential differences between men and women. However, most cultural studies writers have chosen to explore the idea of the historically specific, unstable, plastic and malleable character of sexual identity. This does not mean that one can simply throw off sexual identities with ease and take on others. While sex can be understood as a social construction it is one that constitutes us through the impositions of power and the identifications of the psyche. That is, social constructions are regulated and have consequences.

Sexual identity is held to be not a universal biological essence but a matter of how femininity and masculinity are spoken about. Thus, both feminism and cultural studies must be concerned with matters of sex and representation. For example, cultural studies has explored the representation of women in popular culture and within literature. It has argued that women across the globe are constituted as the second sex, subordinated to men. That is, women have subject positions constructed for them that place them in the patriarchal work of domesticity and beautification or, increasingly (within the West), of being a mother and having a career and being able to explore one's individuality, while looking attractive. Women in postcolonial societies carry the double burden of having been subordinated by colonialism and native men. Nevertheless, we also noted the possibility of destabilizing representations of sexed bodies.

While texts construct subject positions, it does not follow that all women or men will take up that which is offered. Rather, reception studies have stressed the negotiations between subject and text, including the possibility of a resistance to textual meanings. Indeed, such studies have often celebrated the values and viewing culture of women. This shift from text to audience, from image to talk, is discussed in Chapter 10.