CHAPTER 3

Similarity and Difference

The Sociology of Gender Distinctions

CYNTHIA FUCHS EPSTEIN

I. INTRODUCTION

The division of the world into female and male is found in all societies. Views that there are female and male natures, intellects, understandings, and moralities infuse religious and secular paradigms. *No less so* do views of sex differentiation pervade many scientific frameworks. Thus, from the most accepting to those whose mission it is to be critical, females and males are believed to possess distinctive innate and acquired attributes, and they are seen as demonstrating different kinds of behavior. Such attitudes and perceptions may be found in all societies and at all class levels. However, those qualities regarded as distinctly male or female may vary considerably from society to society, or group to group. In addition, invidious comparisons between those attributes regarded as female and male are common.

The creation and maintenance of boundaries defining "female" and "male" is part of a larger process whereby groups and categories of people create and perpetuate distinctions defining themselves and identifying "others." Boundaries serve to create and maintain inequalities in many spheres (Lamont & Fournier, 1992), as we see in the near universal subordination of women to men in public life. Thus, boundaries defining female and male (as well as "women" and "men," and "masculine" and "feminine") are widely accepted, although the justifications vary and are debated in religious, secular, and scholarly spheres. The underlying assumptions for the categories are to be found in the everyday experiences of individuals, in popular culture, as well as in academic scholarship.

CYNTHIA FUCHS EPSTEIN • Department of Sociology, Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, New York 10036

Yet despite continuity in acceptance of the categories, today there are serious challenges to "difference" ideologies and frameworks by a substantial number of social scientists who have tested these ideas against people's actual behavior, and by individuals, many of them in social movements, who refute the basis for invidious comparison that accompanies them.

The ideas that are challenged are those that assume men and women act and feel differently with regard to a wide range of behaviors and characteristics [e.g., emotionality, intelligence, conversational style, ambition, abstract thinking, or technical skill (Epstein, 1985)]. No one disputes that males and females possess different reproductive biological organs and secondary sexual characteristics, but there is considerable debate as to whether they have different basic emotional and cognitive attributes as well. This chapter argues that inborn differences, or even early socialization, may account for differences between individuals, but not between the entire categories of male and females. Although certain qualities may cluster among groups of females and males, they are rarely seen exclusively in one or the other. Furthermore, the qualities seen as male or female in one society may be different in another, or vary in different social classes, ethnic groups, or even families. With other social scientists, I note that patterned differences may be identified for females and males, but suggest that they are socially constructed, and occur when females and males are conditioned or persuaded to act differently than each other; the patterns may persist but they could be changed through policy, law, and different opportunity structures. I refer to this as the "minimalist perspective," as juxtaposed to an "essentialist" emphasis on basic gender difference.

It is important to differentiate between *sex* differences, which refer to biological differences, and *gender* differences, which refer to the characteristics men and women (or boys and girls) exhibit (such as young women's choice of school teaching or young men's choice of business administration as occupations) that are socially constructed through socialization, persuasion, social and physical controls in the law, in the workplace, in the community, and in the family. The social construction of gender is achieved by obvious and subtle controls that assign females and males to social roles and social spheres where it is believed they should be. These rules (either set by law or traditions) are supported by values that specify such ideas as "Women's place is in the home taking care of children," or "Real men will fight to protect their family and country." In all societies many people believe that females and males come by their social roles naturally, for example, that women's personalities are very different from men's in that they are naturally nurturant and thereby desire to become mothers and to care for children, and men are naturally aggressive and thus are always anxious to get ahead in business. However, no society leaves the assignment of roles to chance. There is considerable social input into making the roles assigned to women and men seem attractive to the sex to which they apply and unattractive to the sex that is regarded as unsuited to them (Epstein, 1988).

Culture plays an important role in the choice of life options and integrates with economic explanations. Concepts such as "women's work" or "men's work" are powerful in making jobs seem suitable or unsuitable for females and males, and strongly contribute to the "sex labeling" of occupations (Oppenheimer, 1968). In this way, concepts act as symbolic boundaries. Further, structural boundaries reinforce conceptual boundaries, such as rules prohibiting men and women from doing work deemed fit only for the other.[1]

Women are certainly positioned differently than men in most societies. However, the extent of this varies considerably (Chafetz, 1984), and probably results primarily from formal and informal social controls ranging from micro-interactions to formal policies.

The sociological literature shows that there are strong disparities between men and women in access to opportunities and resources, for example, more women than men engage in low-prestige and low-paying work (Acker, 1990; Epstein, 1970; Reskin & Hartmann, 1986); women participate less in political decision-making roles (Epstein & Coser, 1981); they assume more responsibilities for the performance of family duties (Hochschild, 1989; Rossi, 1964; Shelton & Daphne, 1996) and charitable work; and women gain less recognition for their contributions to society whether they are paid or nonpaid. Social psychological studies alert us to the connection between social position and the cognitive and personality outcomes that we observe.

Cognitive differences between females and males have been largely disputed by social scientists using new statistical techniques, such as meta-analysis, as I shall show later. Personality differences are more difficult to assess. Males and females do seem to show some differences with regard to certain behaviors, such as aggressiveness, although, as I shall indicate later, such conclusions often are made on the basis of studies with limited generalizability.

Today, social scientists and the lay public are interested in the extent to which sex and gender distinctions are basic (e.g., part of their "essential" nature) because of biology or psychological processes set early in life, or result primarily from structural and cultural boundaries, and are therefore amenable to alteration through changes in law, policy, and opportunity. The essentialist belief in basic sex differences has consequences for women's position in life and has justified men's dominance and women's subordination in most spheres of social life, yet it is unsupported empirically. There are far more variations within each sex with regard to talents, interests, and intelligence than there are between each sex, although it often does not look that way. The small gender differences that show up in tests measuring certain cognitive abilities (including math and verbal skills) are perceived to be representative of the entire population of males or females, rather than the small percentages difference they are, while within-gender differences are minimized or overlooked (Baumeister, 1988; Feingold, 1988; Hyde, 1981, cited in Briton & Hall, 1995). Furthermore, men and women are often forced to display the qualities of behavior, interest, or appearance that a person of their sex is supposed to possess naturally (Goffman, 1977), which may situate them differently (or segregate them) in the family (Goode, 1964) and at work (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). For example, women do smile and laugh more than men according to one study (Hall, 1984), but this may be because women receive positive feedback when they smile, and elicit anger when they do not.

Unlike other categories of people who are regarded as "other," such as people of color, females and males do not live in different residential communities but often cluster in separate domains within them, such as workplaces and places of recreation (Epstein, 1992; Huffman & Velasco, 1997; Bielby & Buron, 1984). Not only is gender segregation often not seen as problematic to men or women, but many people believe that a higher order, a higher morality, the good of society, or the good of each sex is served by such differentiation (e.g., advocates of single-sex schools for girls, and segregated male military schools) (Epstein, 1997; Vojdik, 1997).

Such perspectives often come from a cultural bias toward simple explanations and a bias toward consistency between ideals and behavior. Thus, most people believe there is common agreement with regard to what they mean by "man" or "woman." Yet, as with all broad categories, popular definitions and perceptions may vary considerably.

Interpretations of the "typical" male and female (as is the case with other broadly

defined categories) also vary according to age, class, and the special circumstances of interaction. Assessments of what is typical and appropriate may be perceived differently in different settings. For example, in all-female groups women may act in a bawdy manner without fear of being perceived as unfeminine, although bawdiness is usually regarded as male behavior, as Westwood (1985) illustrates in her study of British hosiery company workers. Yet, in some all-male groups (e.g., in some sports and war), men often demonstrate tender and caring behavior that might be interpreted as unmanly in mixed groups. When atypical gendered behavior becomes public, however, redefinition or reinterpretation about what is "normal" for a particular category of people may occur.

Women are not only different within their gender but they may also manifest different behaviors and traits in their private lives. That is, aspects of the "selves" may include differing and even contradictory components (Crosby, 1987; Haraway, 1991; Nicholson, 1990; Spence, 1984, 1985; Thoits, 1983); or, they may show different personalities in playing different roles. Those scholars who write as if there were a single feminine self assume that women and men play out their roles with reliable consistency, as if they possessed monotone personalities. They, like many laypeople, prefer the idea of a whole person with a body and personality that match. Some believe it to be an indicator of integrity. The notion of oneness not only also fits cultural stereotypes but fits neatly into scientific categories that one can run through a computer or code on a data sheet (such as running "sex" as a variable with the underlying assumption that being male or female accounts for a behavior). Sometimes, of course, roles are consistent, or people may highlight one dimension of their "self" for political or personal purposes (e.g., Hispanic or senior citizen) to differentiate themselves from others. Thus, people may concentrate on the traits that differentiate themselves from others, not those they share, a common problem in the politics of many institutions such as the family and the workplace.

2. EXPLAINING THE ORIENTATION TOWARD DIFFERENCES

The persistent emphasis on differences between women and men with regard to their basic nature (cognitive and emotional)—whether it comes from scholars who identify themselves as feminists or nonfeminists—may be attributed to various factors: (1) inattention to the evidence that shows similarities rather than differences between the sexes; (2) incomplete and inappropriate models, such as those assuming a sex-differentiated "human nature"; (3) an ideological agenda; (4) confusion between cause and effect, such as regarding sex segregation at work as "natural" rather than the result of biases that force men and women into sex-labeled occupations; and (5) focus on sex as the primary determining variable that explains behavior. Many of these overlap (Epstein, 1991).

It was only in the last 30 years that essentialism was seriously questioned, although as far back as Plato, there have been philosophers who suggested that women might be fit to fill positions held by men (Okin, 1979). The goal of many feminist scholars who became interested in gender studies beginning in the late 1960s was to question assumptions about women's and men's attributes, to actually measure them, and to objectively report observed differences between women and men. Many also wished to uncover inequalities faced by women and men that related to their sex. Many scholars motivated by the women's movement viewed the mission as one oriented to documenting Betty Friedan's (1963) assumption that "Women were really people—no more, no less" (Johnson, 1996).

No one argued then or argues now that women and men experience the same treatment or live the same kinds of lives, although women and men are found to face many of the same privileges and restrictions of their race, ethnicity, education, and class peers.

However, the explanatory frameworks used to account for observed differences and gender inequality have evoked contentious debate. These debates have been engaged in within an historical context in which the reporting of sex differences is often biased in the direction of differences rather than similarities in characteristics and behavior between the sexes. Scholars, as well as journalists, proclaim difference (no matter how small) in ways that imply mutually exclusive qualities between women and men. Sometimes this work suggests support for the perspective that women are inferior to men because they are not capable of engaging in the activities with which men are associated (such as working as engineers and scientists), but more recently it has been used to suggest women's superiority in some attributes such as morality (see Epstein, 1988 for a discussion of this). Further, studies that report support for conventional views of women's personalities and abilities are more often reported by the press (James, 1997), but those indicating positive outcomes of women's unconventional behavior (such as superior mental health of employed women compared to homemakers) have been given short shrift by the media. The journalist and scholar Susan Faludi (1991) reports that the press failed (and continues to fail) to report paradigms and studies showing gender similarity and the positive outcomes of the changing social roles of women and men. Yet, in recent years, "difference" has been accepted by some feminist scholars and used to evaluate women as better than men on issues of "connection" or empathy (Gilligan, 1982), or to suggest that they have alternative modes of understanding (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Tannen 1990). I have detailed the evidence elsewhere (Epstein, 1988) for rejecting the view that women have basically different abilities than men. This view is also supported by comprehensive reviews by Aries (1996), Hyde (1990a), Feingold (1992), and by Tavris (1992), who wisely concluded in her book *The Mismeasure of Woman*, ". . . women are not the better sex, the inferior sex, or the opposite sex." Yet there has been an enormous spillover effect from the work of Gilligan (1982), who suggested that women are predisposed to an ethic of "care," into many fields, including legal studies and educational theory. The idea that women have "different way of knowing" has been developed also by social philosophers, such as(Harding 1986), and by the historian of science Keller (1978) (see also Belenky et al., 1986).

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

The perception of gender distinctions (or gender similarities) is affected by theoretical frameworks and the assumptions inherent in them. Of course, theoretical frameworks affect all human thinking, including the very idea of gender—a theoretical construct. But analysts must be alert to the biases any framework brings to the way we see and understand behavior. Because gender analysis has been drawn from a number of theoretical camps, in the sciences and the humanities, as discussed in Chapter 1, observations of males and females and the conclusions drawn from them are often influenced by the theoretical bias of the researcher. Implicit in any of these gender are assumptions regarding how essential or minimal are gender differences in humans. Some theoretical perspectives have met serious challenge because empirical data do not support them; some

are not tested or even testable; and some seem promising. To illustrate, some of the theories that shape perception of male and female differences are theories of personality (e.g., trait theory, which suggests people have particular stable personality traits); learning and development (e.g., socialization theory, which is oriented to the individual's internalization of qualities such as nurturance because of early experiences); sociobiology (e.g., biological determinism); evolutionary biology (the notion that natural selection accounts for gender differences); social construction (the model that points to the impact of social factors on an individual's behavior and attitudes); and postmodern theories (which offer a model of human nature as one of multiplicity and change). The perspective of this chapter that seems most supported by research is the social constructionist model and part of the postmodern paradigm. I outline some of the arguments below.

One of the most salient examples of the orientation toward a "difference" or "essentialist" view is the sociobiological approach. As in the case of race (Gould, 1981), social scientists have often sought to support claims to women's inferiority (Fausto-Sterling, 1985) or "otherness" with regard to cognitive and emotional factors (Sherman & Beck, 1979). For example, recently biological determinants of sex differences, particularly brain studies (see Fausto-Sterling, 1997), have been referred to for the purpose of showing the source of reported differences ranging from test scores in mathematics to "women's ways of leading." Rosener (personal communication) claims that biology is part of the explanation for the different leadership styles she argues women demonstrate (1995). Yet, as Tavris (1992) points out, citing the work of Hyde and Linn (1988) and other scientists, there are virtually no differences in the attributes that brain differences are supposed to explain, and more importantly, the brain studies themselves have been criticized for their method: some are done on rats; some are done with mentally ill or otherwise aberrant subjects; all use tiny samples; and few highlight the overlaps between the sexes (Fausto-Sterling, 1997). Furthermore, general tests of intelligence have never found differences between the sexes on measures of I.Q. (Hyde, 1990a).

Holding that women and men act differently because they use basically different reproductive strategies has many challengers among both social and physical scientists. For example, Stephen Jay Gould (1997), a paleontologist who is well known for his critique of biases within science regarding race, disputes the idea that the causes of behavior such as occupational choice may be traced to reproductive strategies of a species. Donna Haraway (1989), a philosopher of science, also offers a useful illustration of the pitfalls of these adaptions. She has shown that when feminist sociobiologists use evolutionary models to explain present-day differentiation of duties and responsibilities, as well as other behavior, they are exercising the same biases as antifeminist male anthropologists. Building on Haraway, one can identify feminist scholars whose essentialist models are derived from male scholars with biased outlooks regarding sex differentiation, such as can be found in the work of anthropologist Sandra Hrdy (1977), whose work builds on that of E. O. Wilson, the sociobiologist.

The difference or essentialist model is less prevalent among the postmodern theorists. They reject absolute categories and reject dichotomous thinking, such as that which places "male" and "female" into mutually exclusive categories. Their perspective orients the scholar to recognizing the differences between people within groups, and their multiplicity of experience and character. However, they reject the methods of science and thus confirmation or disconfirmation by the use of research. The paradigm that emphasizes the "social construction" of human behavior incorporates the benefits of the postmodern

approach and allows for support or rejection of hypotheses about sex difference and similarity through observation of actual behavior in the empirical world.

2.2 Methodological Problems

Because scholarship on difference is framed by researchers and theorists in many fields and orientations, outcomes of this research are not consistent. However, "findings" are often cited across fields without attention to the methodology that produced them. Not only do some scholars use different standards of proof, but many also deny that proof is even obtainable; yet nevertheless they make claims for basic differences. For example, many scholars from the humanities look for "evidence" in support of their theories from personal experience or the narratives of individuals, and some use novels or myths as "evidence." The theories of humanists have been adopted by a number of social scientists with an essentialist orientation. Many psychologists use laboratory experiments with college students and generalize to the entire category of male or female, but their findings may not be applicable to males and females who are older or who have not gone to college. Similarly, experiments with rats may not apply at all to the human experience with its heavy overlay and interaction with culture.

Although always suggestive, for generalizability the findings of all studies should be approached with caution, especially with regard to their claims. Personal experiences may be unreliable because they may be recalled in a way that fits a normative picture. The use of objective techniques (however much they fall short of an objective ideal), such as the use of sampling with control groups, reveals much more similarity than difference between men and women.

As noted previously, similarities between the sexes with regard to cognitive and emotional qualities have been shown by analyzing clusters of studies and assessing their relative merit. Most of these (but not all; see Eagly 1996) show not only extensive between-sex overlap but that differences once found at the ends of distributions have been decreasing with time. The changes are probably due to changes in social conditions (Feingold, 1992), such as the opening of training and job opportunities for women in fields from which they were largely excluded in the past. In fact, it may be that claims of large-scale differences between females and males in the past have had the social consequence of contribution to whatever differences can still be identified through tests, observations, and other indicators because of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1957).

2.3. Meaningful Differences

The magnitude of difference in behaviors preferences of men and women is also important to consider when establishing how meaningful a quality might be in differentiating the sexes. Usually, large differences would be the measure of meaningful sex variation. However, studies might show *statistically* significant differences when the actual differences might be quite tiny, and thus *socially* insignificant. Thus, the purpose of the inquiry ought to determine social and not merely statistical "significance." As an example, politicians are usually concerned with otherwise insignificant differences between groups because a tiny difference can determine the results of an election. From a social science

point of view, it is the case that between-sex differences are far smaller than within-sex differences. For example, in the 1996 congressional race, 55% of women voted for Democrats compared to 46% of men, according to a New *York Times* poll (*New York Times*, November 7, 1996)—the notable "gender gap." The focus is on the 9% who voted differently and not the 91% who voted the same. In the 1992 Presidential race the disparity between males and females was even less—6%. As Hout and his colleagues point out (Hout, Brooks, & Manza, 1995), class differences in voting patterns are twice as large as gender difference.

Most reporting that refers to "women" and "men" as unitary collectivities does not make note of the spread of preferences or capacities found within each category and is usually based on very small percentage differences. The reporting indicates an ignorance of how to interpret a statistical distribution. It refers to categories as if they were mutually exclusive, such as "black" and "white." As in the case of sex, in defining a racial category, many of the same kinds of conceptualizations are understood to be real representations that are in fact not descriptive of individuals within a group (e.g., racial laws in some states classified individuals as black when they had one-sixteenth black "blood," and could have more easily described such an individual as "white.") Similarly, using small differences to distinguish "male" or "female" behavior (often not more than a two or three percentage point difference) or any observed characteristic is enough to convince people that a particular man or woman can be located at the end of the distribution where those small differences lie (Sherif, 1979).

The problem of the method used to assess difference is great, as can be illustrated through examination of the research in two areas, leadership and aggression.

It is widely believed that women and men have different styles of leadership (Rosener, 1995), although subordinates of women leaders (Aries, 1996. p. 67) and colleagues (Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Nieva & Gutek, 1982; Powell, 1988) indicate that they exhibit the same range of behaviors as men. However, some studies show differences whereas other studies show great similarities in the behavior of women and men. Some studies also indicate that individuals' reports on their own behavior is inconsistent with the reports of observers. For example, in one study women reported that they demonstrated less dominant and competitive behavior than men, but the researcher observed no difference (Snodgrass & Rosenthal, 1984). Other studies found no gender differences in dominance and competitive behavior (Chanin & Schneer, 1984; Rahim, 1983). In another study (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993) experienced managers of both sexes failed to reveal differences in self-reported conflict management style. However, *self-reports* about preferred conflict management style are poor predictors of actual behaviors (Baril, Korabik, Watson, Grencavage, & Gutkowski, 1990; Bass, 1990; Korabik et al., 1993). It is interesting that among 374 studies of leadership styles, only 37 were observation studies and the rest were self reports (Aries, 1996).

Even when the management styles of women and men are similar, there may be a perception, and consequent evaluation of that style based on gender. For example, the study of gender differences in management style and leadership effectiveness by Korabik et al. (1993) revealed that although there were no gender differences in their management styles, male and female supervisors were evaluated differently.

Thus we see that although some men and women leaders report similar styles, others do not. Moreover, in many cases individuals report behaviors that conform to stereotypes for their sex, although observers report that they behave quite differently than their self-descriptions suggest. Because there is widespread belief in difference, many books and

conferences are devoted to women's presumed different styles (see Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Harding, 1986; Keller, 1978; Rosener, 1995; Smith, 1990; Tannen, 1990). Furthermore, male superiors believe women behave differently and thus offer them jobs in human resources and exclude them from staff jobs that would give them the experience to rise in a corporation (Kanter, 1977).

Aggression has been identified as a trait found to occur more in males than in females (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). It is important to examine this concept because aggression is supposed to account for the domination of men in the power structure of society and in their relations with women.[2] Yet the very term "aggression" refers to a loose collection of behaviors and attitudes that are often unrelated to one another [as a review by Brinkerhof and Booth (1984) points out]. Predation, initiative, competition, dominance, territorial behavior, and hostility are among the behaviors considered in studies of aggression. A comprehensive review of hundreds of experimental studies on adult female and male aggression by Frodi, Macaulay, and Thome (1977) shows that it is difficult to make a clear assessment of differences on all these dimensions. First, the studies are not all comparative and over half are studies of men only. Many studies tend to be of children or college students; however, it has been found that differences noted between boys and girls, especially preschoolers, tend to become small by adulthood (Hyde, 1990a). An overview (McKenna & Kessler, 1974) shows that of more than 80 general and theoretical discussions of aggression in books and journals, references to studies do not specify the magnitude of differences and whether they are large enough to warrant characterizing women as less aggressive than men. Using a meta-analysis, Eagly (1987), has shown that aggressive and nonaggressive behaviors are tied to social roles (see also Hyde, 1990); men are required to show aggression, when, for example, they work as soldiers or even bonds tradesmen, but women are required *not* to be aggressive as teachers or nurses. Nonetheless, men working as social workers are required to be nonaggressive and women firefighters are supposed to charge into dangerous situations. Other studies show that women are often the same or harsher than men with regard to verbal aggression or hostility (Epstein, 1988).

2.4. Choice of Indicators

"Male" and "female" or "masculine" and "feminine" are general concepts. How they are defined, however, varies in different groups and different cultures. Definitions of male and female often follow stereotypes and may not accurately reflect the actual behavior of men and women or the range of behaviors exhibited by each sex. For example, women are regarded as emotional and men as unemotional in American society, yet the opposite is true in Iran (Epstein, 1970). Probably both sexes, in all societies, manifest "emotion" publicly according to the norms that encourage or discourage such behavior and may not reflect their internal states.

"Male" and "female" are usually based on a composite of factors that seem to go together. For example, women are believed to be nurturant, self-sacrificing, and sociable. There is an underlying assumption that these are stable characteristics and consistent across situations. Many researchers assume stability when they study people at a particular point in time. This constitutes a bias in perspective that reflects the fact that individuals may vary over the course of a day, or a lifetime. It fails to recognize that individuals are complicated, and their behaviors are not necessarily consistent.

2.5. Attributes as Interactional

Most behavior identified as male and female is seen in interactional settings (Deaux & Major, 1987; Ridgeway, 1997). Individuals in interaction may put pressure on each other to conform to an expected behavior that is in line with a stereotype. For example, in my research on women in the legal profession, some women attorneys reported that male judges ordered them to smile. Of course, they had to respond to the order. This shows how the status and rank of the person with whom a female or male is interacting will cause adjustments in behavior. Females and males may therefore act quite differently when alone; with an age peer; or with a person who is older, with more power, and in a normatively defined role relationship. How "female" or "male" one is may very much depend on one's interactional partner. Thus, research centered on single events rarely captures the complexity created by the feedback effects of individuals in social settings.

2.6. Inattention to Variables Other than Sex

Power, age, social status, and ethnicity all structure how gender-related behaviors play out, and how they also vary in particular situations and historical periods. Therefore, researchers need to go beyond identifying the sex of a person and note the other characteristics that may account for his or her behavior. For, women who hold positions of authority are usually more assertive than women in powerless jobs. This is not because they become "like men," but because the positions require assertiveness and women learn to act in that manner. Similarly, men in subordinate positions are not "like women" when they defer to a boss; they are playing their role according to the rules. Characteristics thought of as "male" or "female" are also embedded in a life cycle and time framework. In any concrete situation in which maleness and femaleness are being assessed or observed, females and males of particular ages are being observed. Yet women and men often exhibit very different characteristics at young, middle, and older ages, women often gaining in authority, and men often demonstrating more nurturing qualities after retirement or during child rearing years if they take on child care responsibility (Brody, 1997).

  The issue of the life course is of great interest because, as noted previously, many studies that define male and female behavior are based on studies conducted in schools or laboratory settings (using school-aged children or young adults). Yet youngsters may change their "character" either through maturity, developmental changes, socialization, or acquisition of different roles.

2.7. Impact of Social Change on Gendered Behavior

Many views about females and males are tied to particular time periods. Tastes change in popular culture and with them, men's and women's behavior. Some practices change because legal changes open women's options. Other practices change because social conditions permit or repress certain kinds of activity. This phenomenon is too extensive to document in this chapter, but a few examples illustrate the social construction of what are believed to be immutable sex-related behaviors.

  As noted earlier, aggression is taken to be a defining characteristic of males and not females, yet its expression changes in form and incidence in different time periods. Norms

regarding the appropriateness of women expressing aggression also change in societies (Zuckerman, Cole, & Bruer, 1991). Many feminist historians have documented women's assertiveness in labor union activity at certain points and places in history (Costello, 1991; Turbin, 1992; Vallas, 1993), yet traditionally public collective action was associated with men and not women.

Interest in and use of guns may be a good indicator of aggression and assertiveness. The use of firearms has been considered a natural prerogative of men, and people look to its sources in the play behavior of boys who often "turn" objects into guns and play "cops and robbers." This is used as an example of men's "natural" aggression and women's "natural" passivity. Nonetheless, girls and women now are more interested in guns than in the past. A significant number take target practice and they comprise 15% to 20% of the National Rifle Association membership (Epstein, 1995a). That organization even elected its first woman president in 1995 (*Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 1995). In Israel, women, who are conscripted into the army, commonly train with guns (unless they are religiously orthodox, in which case they are not required to join the army).

In the United States, women and men choose to go to medical and law schools in almost equal numbers (Epstein, 1993), a radical change from the time when it was believed that women did not enjoy the conflict of the courtroom (Epstein, 1993) or the challenge of the operating room (Lorber, 1984). In 1963 women constituted only 3.8% of entering classes in professional schools (Epstein, 1981) and it was believed that women had no interest in medicine or the law. Today, they constitute more than 40% of students in these professional schools.

Conversations between men and women have received much attention recently, partly because of Deborah Tannen's (1990) popular book, *You Just Don't Understand*, which was on the best seller lists for many weeks. This book implies that basic differences lead to a "two worlds" approach to gender interaction. However, studies of speech show that men's and women's voices are influenced by social expectations and social control. For example, a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that "elevator girls" in Japan who had been required to speak in a high-pitched voice deemed essentially feminine are now permitted to speak in a more natural, lower-moderated tone.

2.8. The Multiple Attributes of Men and Women

In associating various qualities with men or women, little attention is given to how much of the attribute they display. Yet people may display normative attributes for their sex in situations that demand it and not in situations in which they are not subject to controls. Furthermore, they may internalize some of the characteristics in greater or lesser amounts. It is entirely possible for a person to feel or be a little nurturant or very nurturant; one can be aggressive occasionally or very often and one may alternate such qualities in one's various social roles, or even within the same role. For example, some mothers may be loving toward their children, looking out for their interests, yet harsh and punitive in their use of corporal punishment, depending on the cultural practices of their group [as shown in the research of Waters (1994) concerning Jamaican culture].

People also exhibit certain attributes depending on the situation in which they are located and the person(s) with whom they are interacting. Organizational settings may also elicit certain traits and behaviors in people who behave differently elsewhere. In a study based on the performance evaluations of managers, researchers attempted to assess

whether person-related variables or situation-related variables were related to judgments about managers (Giannantonio, Olian, & Carroll, 1995). The findings showed that although subjects' ratings were affected by the manager's communication or leadership style, they were not affected by the manager's gender.

2.9. Inappropriate "Halo Effects" of Gender Practices

Noting differences (however measured) in one sphere is used to suggest comparable differences in another, even though they may be irrelevant. Here the issue of *causality* is seriously questionable. The following illustrations point out the illogical and contradictory nature of several widely held "common sense" and scholarly assertions about the cause of gender differences in some kinds of behavior.

Many women and men explain women's low representation in the ranks of management as associated with their lack of experience in playing team sports. This comes from a romantic notion about the ennobling nature of team sports and an ideal of cooperation that is associated with them. Probably a more meaningful correlate is the fact that men in power tend to network with male friends they may have made while engaging in sports. In this example, the key variable is networking, not sports participation. Yet other scholars claim that women practice connection and are not as individualistic as men, resulting in men becoming leaders because they are more individualistic (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982), an explanation that contradicts the supposed benefits of team sports.

Some explanations of the reason that clerical roles are overwhelmingly filled by women is that they are regarded as able to endure monotony because of the repetitious tasks they perform in the home and because of their docility. Yet their sewing ability is not regarded as useful in potential roles as surgeons, as it might well be if there were a more compelling logic to these associations.

3. TOWARD A MORE INFORMED MODEL OF GENDER

3.1. Gender Attributes as a Function of Social Roles

Position in the life course, and the social roles one assumes as a result, are probably the most important factors in determining the behavior of men and women, boys and girls, not their genes or early socialization. Most of the attributes affixed to a particular gender usually refer to attitudes and behaviors that are normatively prescribed and controlled in the context of the social roles people acquire (or have thrust upon them); they may become internalized, but even if they are, they may be activated or deactivated for the moment, or forever. For example, Arlie Hochschild (1983) and other social scientists have pointed to the "emotion work" that women are compelled to do in certain occupational roles, such as showing nurturant behavior and friendliness in their jobs as flight attendants, nurses, and waitresses. Hochschild shows that women often need to be trained to exhibit caring behavior. These behaviors are also reinforced by supervisor and peer social control.

3.2. Social Control

An overview of research on gender distinctions indicates that there has been insufficient attention to the impact of social controls on behavior in the models explaining observed

sex differences. As I pointed out in *Deceptive Distinctions* (1988), when there are no controls enforcing sex-role behavior (or they are loosely applied), individuals fulfill their roles idiosyncratically, or in accordance with a variety of influences, such as their economic interests or education. This reality leads to enormous variation within each sex or gender category. However, controls on behavior—punishments for deviation—may result in patterned behavior that is then regarded as "normal," which means that individuals are unaware of how superficial and variable many attributes associated with each sex are.

4. CONCLUSION

Gender boundaries are maintained by feminists and antifeminists, scholars and laypersons alike. None of us is free from them. It is no wonder that our scholarship is oriented toward finding them. The means of boundary maintenance may appear to be mechanical and physical, but they are always conceptual and symbolic. Boundaries are reinforced in the unnoticed habits and language of everyday life, vigilantly attended to by family and friends, business associates, and colleagues. Control in the way we think is exercised at the micro-level and at the level of the group or society, through symbolic behaviors such as rituals and ceremonies. There is a vast literature in psychology and sociology on the processes by which people are oriented toward classifying themselves and others according to organizing principles such as gender, using such concepts as stereotyping schemata (Deaux & Major, 1987; Bem, 1981; Merton, [1957]) and, in current cultural sociological focus, "habitus" as defined by Bourdieu (1984) and his associates in their work on cultural reproduction. Bourdieu indicates the ways in which dominated groups contribute to their own subordination because of *habitus*, for example, class-differentiated dispositions and categories of perception shaped by conditions of existence.

Entrenched in the dominant symbolic system that contributed to its reproduction are binary oppositions. As I have pointed out previously (1970; 1988), dichotomous thinking plays an important part in the definition of women as "others," as deviants, and in their self-definitions. Although they were not the first to do so, Foucault (1977), Bourdieu (1979), and other European theorists of culture define power as the ability to impose a specific definition of reality that is disadvantageous to others. According to Chafetz (1988), the gender division of labor is the central support mechanism of gender stratification, and the means by which men acquire definitional power. It is this power, she asserts, that enables men to maintain the prevailing gender status quo.

Changing times create changes in people, although not all people are similarly adaptable to change. Over the past two decades many women have changed their destinies by going into work nontraditional for their sex; taking on leadership roles; and developing a level of confidence they never had before. Men, too, have changed, sharing a certain amount of childcare, forming more equalitarian marriages, and interacting with women coworkers more easily in their own work lives.

This demonstrates that men and women are adaptable, but their adaptability is not random. Members of some social groups or categories are permitted more diversity and change. The last few decades have provided the perfect "field experiment" to indicate how variable women and men can be. More dramatically today than at any time in history, American women (and unfortunately to a lesser extent, men) are recognized as publicly and personally complex creatures. The ambivalence that greets these changes

also indicates the extent to which cultural and social controls determine the ability to change and to accept the notion of change in oneself.

Sociological studies of gender should more directly relate to this experience and we should derive our models from it, not from the armchair or the paradigmatic legacies of theorists who had a stake in the status quo. The more one goes into the field to do actual research on women's behavior, the more one finds that the concepts we call male and female—or gender—comprise multiple realities for the individual and for society. Researcher should note that "male" and "female" are concepts, not things. What they are is always in question; they are not steady states. The theory and research methodology that label gender characteristics and define them according to custom without checking them against reality cheats women and men of their right to be evaluated as individuals, with an array of human characteristics.

Acknowledgments

ENDNOTES

[1] For example, studies conducted of "Help Wanted" ads in newspapers listed according to sex, showed that women rarely explored jobs in the "Help Wanted: Male" category and men almost never looked in the "Help Wanted: Female" category (Bem & Bem, 1973).

[2] For a fuller discussion see "It's all in the mind," Chapter 4 in Epstein (1988).

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