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Setting The Stage: Gender, Sex, And Sexualities In Psychology

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sychologists' interest in sex and gender was forged in the crucible of societal upheavals. By the end of the 19th century, feminists' demands for suffrage, bodily autonomy, and legal and property rights were vigorously debated across Western Europe and the United States. Members of the fledgling discipline of psychology joined in those debates, offering a wide range of conjectures about women's nature, differences between the sexes, and proper relations between men and women. In the latter decades of the 20th century, feminist movements emerged once again in much of Western Europe and North America. Feminists challenged discriminatory practices enshrined in law, custom, and religion that barred women from public life and subordinated them to men. Feminists in psychology were vigorous supporters of campaigns to end the pathologizing and criminalizing of nonheterosexual people. Feminists also called attention to the gender-based violence, rape, and sexual abuse that were part of the fabric of women's lives. During this era of activism,

vibrant intellectual communities of feminist psychologists took form in many countries (cf. Rutherford, Marecek, & Sheese, 2013). Some of these psychologists sought to understand the social processes and structures that sustained social inequalities; others wanted to understand how best to help women and girls from diverse communities, backgrounds, and classes flourish. Yet others turned their sight on men and boys and the strictures that conventional masculinities imposed on them.

In the decades since feminist psychology took form, there have been dramatic changes in women's legal status, bodily and personal autonomy, freedom of movement, and access to education. In many parts of the world, there have been dramatic—albeit uneven and sometimes unstable—changes in women's participation in the public sphere. Intimate relations have changed as well, including norms and practices regarding patterns of cohabitation, marriage, childcare, and sexual encounters. In some parts of the world (especially in the global North), nonheterosexual sexualities and same-sex relationships are now accorded both social acceptance and legal legitimacy. There is a growing acknowledgment that the gender binary (that is, the two-sex model) does not capture the variety of ways that people experience and express their gender. In many countries, political movements in support of transgender people and people with nonbinary gender identities have gained considerable momentum in assuring full recognition of these identities, as well as equitable treatment of such individuals in the public sphere and in personal life. The contributors to this book take stock of these changes in the social, political, and cultural landscape.

Turning back to the discipline of psychology and its neighboring disciplines, we can trace noteworthy advances in knowledge about human behavior. For example, new technologies in neuroimaging and genetic analysis have yielded substantial evidence for the plasticity of physical systems, as well as an emerging consensus that human brains are not sextyped (cf.; Joel et al., 2015; Rippon, Jordan-Young, Kaiser, & Fine, 2014; Schmitz & Höppner, 2014). Several of the chapters in this book describe these developments and what they portend for future theorizing about gender, sex, and sexualities. At the same time, new concepts and approaches

have made possible new understandings of sex, gender, and sexualities. As you will read in Chapter 2, intersectionality theory has drawn attention to the multiplicity of social identities people hold, and their implications for the way power is distributed in society. Cultural psychologies—which examine the mutual constitution of culture and persons—have given psychologists new means of understanding subjectivity and social life. New research technologies have been devised. The Implicit Association Test (IAT), for example, which promises to tap implicit attitudes, has been harnessed to study prejudice (cf. Chapter 8). There have been advances in statistical procedures for modeling complex social processes, as well as efforts to improve the veracity and replicability of results of experiments. At the same time, an array of qualitative methods has come into use (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Pontoretto, 2017; Magnusson & Marecek, 2017). Some of these methods have been of special interest to feminists. Participatory methods, for example, forge direct links between activism and research. Critical discursive methods, discussed in Chapter 6, give researchers tools for observing cultural resources.

In this chapter, we lay the groundwork to help you navigate the scholarship on gender, sex, and sexualities. We present some central concepts in these fields, as well as tools for thinking about and asking questions about these concepts and their uses. As you will see, researchers have often given different meanings to these concepts, reflecting their different disciplinary backgrounds and different epistemological stances. We present the concepts separately, casting their meanings in stark relief. We adopt this strategy for clarity's sake. In actual practice, you may find that authors splice together various meanings or shift from one usage to another.

We begin with a discussion of *social categories* and *categorization*, and then move to a focus on *sex categories*. Such a discussion is especially relevant now because the customary sex categorizations, in particular, the two-sex model or gender binary, have been called into question by transgender activists, queer theorists, and others who are gender nonconforming. (Chapter 3 takes up nonbinary and transgender identities in detail.) Next we take up three concepts that psychologists employ with great frequency, but with varying and sometimes ambiguous meanings: *gender,*

difference, and *"the social."* We examine the various meanings given to these concepts with the goal of helping you become a more discerning reader of the literature on gender, sex, and sexuality. We end this chapter with a set of questions to guide your reading of books and articles on the psychology of gender, sex, or sexualities.

SOCIAL CATEGORIES AND CATEGORIZATION

The term *social category* refers to a group of people who have a certain characteristic in common. People, of course, are members of several such groups. For example, a woman is a member of the category "women" and she is also a member of a certain social class, a certain ethnic group, a certain age group, and so on. Many such categorizations have cultural, social, and political significance. In many cases, membership in a social category also functions as a marker of social status; that is, membership in that category confers a particular location and ranking in the larger social structure. Social categories play an important part both in social life and in personal identity. We therefore discuss categories and categorizations in some detail.

People use categories to know about the world. They use their knowledge about the characteristics of categories to decide which things are similar and which things are not. In everyday life such *categorization* is usually easy and uncontroversial. Note, however, that even when category membership seems uncontroversial and easy to decide (as, for example, membership in the categories "plants" and "animals"), the origin of the categories themselves may be controversial. This is especially true of categories that societies use to group and rank people (like "women," "men," "gay," or "straight"). Debates about the origins of categories have a lengthy history in philosophy (Hacking, 1994); these debates have also influenced psychologists' studies of gender, sex, and sexuality. (Chapter 14 discusses additional aspects of categories and categorizations.)

Of interest here are two starkly different positions on the origin and nature of categories. One position holds that category systems are based in

the world as it is in itself. Plato's phrase "carving nature at its joints" nicely captures this point of view. It would follow from this position that human categories represent universal divisions that exist independently of culture and society, analogous to the division between the category "plants" and the category "animals." On this view, the categories precede, and are discovered by, the knower. This is the commonsense view of many human categories—for example, the category "men" and the category "women" seem to capture a universal, enduring distinction among humans. Some may also regard racial categories (such as White, Asian, or Black) to be universal, enduring, and natural divisions of the human species, although the historical record does not support such beliefs. For those who regard certain human categories as universal, an important task is to identify, describe, and catalogue the distinctive properties of these categories. Often this involves comparing members of different categories in order to ascertain which properties are distinctive, as well as to ascertain which properties do not distinguish between the categories.

The second position regarding the origin and nature of social categories holds that many or even most human categories are human-made. Human-made categories are contingent; that is, they are products of people's efforts to understand the world. On this view, the categories are created by knowers. Such creations are inevitably laced with presuppositions that are part of the time and place in which a person lives. One should not expect such categories to be universally held or to be unchanging. Nor should one assume that distinctions between such categories would be universally upheld. In this view of categories, the meanings given to categories are a matter of social negotiation.

Consider, for example, the category attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Most of us would agree that ADHD is a human-made category. It is of recent vintage, its definition (i.e., the "official" diagnostic criteria specified in diagnostic manuals) continually shifts, and it continues to spark a good deal of public controversy. Note that when we say that the *category* ADHD is human-made and contingent, we are not concerned with whether there are people who regulate attention and activity in a way that makes it difficult to function in some environments. Nor are we

concerned with whether such difficulties might originate in brain function. Those concerns are different matters. We are instead referring to the set of meanings conferred on those difficulties by invoking the *category* ADHD. These meanings include, for instance, labeling the difficulties as a form of psychiatric illness and viewing the difficulties as requiring special educational accommodations and practices.

If a category is seen as human-made, it makes little sense to try to discover its fundamental or inherent properties. It should come as no surprise to find that many human-made categories have changed their meanings throughout history, and that some have disappeared entirely. Consider, for example, the categories "hysteria," "latch-key children," and "frigid women," all of which were in common use in the United States until about 40 years ago. Furthermore, if human categories are produced and upheld through social negotiations, then questions arise about which members of society have the power to define categories and to set the boundaries between them. By and large, people in positions of power and high status have been most successful in this boundary setting.

Sex Categories

What kind of categories are human sex categories? Are sex categories (such as "men," "women," "transgender," and "intersex") universal categories that preexist people's efforts to make sense of the world? Or are they human-made categories that are contingent on time and place and wrought in the crucible of social interactions? The everyday view is that the sex categories "women" and "men" are natural and preexisting categories. In recent times, however, reports from non-Western societies, as well as the growing visibility of other sex categories in Western high-income societies, have challenged that view.

In many societies, sex category is one of the prime social categories used for describing people; sorting and ranking people according to their sex category has long been a linchpin of social organization. This is true in society at large, as well as in intimate relations such as marriages and

families. Most Western high-income countries have firmly held in place a two-sex model based on the categories "men" and "women" (i.e., the gender binary). This model has been institutionalized in law and religion, and sex categorization has formed one of the major axes of privilege and hierarchy in formal social structures as well as in everyday interactions.

Even though the gender binary may seem natural and universal to some people, anthropologists and historians have amply documented that such a two-sex model is not a universal way of categorizing humans. Furthermore, many societies do not assign members to sex categories on the basis of genital anatomy or reproductive function. (Chapter 3 describes several such instances.) In addition, societies throughout South and Southeast Asia have long recognized more than two sex categories (Blackwood, 2005; Morris, 1995). Against this background, and in the light of existing chromosomal variations, the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) has suggested that a five-sex model more adequately captures human variation than a two-sex (or binary) model.

At present in Western European and North American societies, the two-sex model is being challenged on various fronts. As you will read in Chapter 3, the two-sex model does not capture current social realities in these societies. In addition, some neuroscientists have argued that although human reproductive anatomy and genitalia typically fit the two-sex model, the human brain does not (Joel et al., 2015).

Considering the varied ways in which human sex categories have been defined, given meaning, and even enumerated across societies, it is difficult to hold that sex categories are strictly natural categories that "carve nature at its joints." A view of sex categories as human-made categories opens the way to a number of questions for psychological investigation. If the number and meanings of human sex categories are matters of social negotiation, what do those negotiations consist of? How do children and adults in a particular society make gender attributions? How do parents of gender-nonconforming children (for example, a child whose preferred self-presentation is as a member of a sex category other than the one assigned at birth) help their children move through a social world that is still largely organized according to a two-sex model? And, if the

sex category system were expanded to encompass more than two sexes, would this change the existing patterns of inequality between women and men?

Gender

The word *gender* has become commonplace in everyday talk as well as in academic and professional psychology. Given how often and how casually people use the word, you might think that its meaning was unambiguous. However, this is far from the case. For instance, you will hear the word *gender* used as a synonym for "sex category" (as in "a person's gender" or "male gender"). Alternately, you might hear it used as an adjective that means "specific to a sex category" (as in "gender differences," "gendered behavior"). Some scholars use the word *gender* to refer to a social status that is an integral part of the social order. And "gender" is sometimes used as a stand-in for "women" (as in "gendercide" or "Gender Center" [to mean "Women's Center"]).

Looking at the psychological literature on gender and sexuality, we find that even among experts, there is no consensus about how to define gender. Think about the following statements, all taken from recent textbooks on the psychology of gender:

" . . . gender [refers to] behaviors and attitudes that relate to (but are not entirely congruent with) biological sex."
" . . . gender is a classification system that influences access to power and resources."
" . . . gender is the backcloth against which our daily lives are played out."
" . . . gender refers to being a boy/man or a girl/woman in a cultural context."
" . . . gender refers to the traits and behaviors considered characteristic of and appropriate to members of each [sex] category."
" . . . gender affects people's social lives."

Does it matter that experts in the field put forward so many incompatible meanings of the term *gender*? Yes, it does. Different ways of defining gender turn researchers' attention toward different topics and questions. Just as important, any definition deflects researchers' attention away from some questions and topics. Furthermore, differing ways of thinking about gender have different practical implications. For example, different meanings of gender are conducive to different mental health interventions and to different social change programs. The experts' statements that you have just read raise several questions:

- What are the implications of thinking of gender as something that resides "inside" the person (e.g., as traits, dispositions, behaviors, hormones, or brain structures)?
- Does it make sense to think of gender as if it were a force that has the power to exert "effects" on people?
- What are the implications of thinking of gender as "outside" a person (e.g., as a societal "classification system" or "an integral part of the social order")?
- Should "gender" be used as a catch-all term for every aspect of human psychology that is related to sex category?

We do not propose to tell you what the correct meaning of gender ought to be. Instead, we focus on two meanings of gender. The first takes gender to refer to traits and characteristics that reside "inside" an individual. The second shifts the locus of gender to the social context, effectively placing it "outside" the individual.

Let us begin to clarify these two meanings with an illustration: For the past several decades, epidemiological studies in Western Europe and North America have shown that, by and large, women experience clinical depression and subclinical depressive symptoms at a rate that is roughly two and half times higher than men's. (There are, of course, within-group variations for both sex categories.) Women's elevated risk of depression has been a matter of great interest to mental health professionals for many years, and several explanations have been proposed.

Some of the explanations rest on a conception of gender as character-
istics "inside" individuals. They have attributed women's elevated risk of
depression to enduring characteristics or dispositions that are sex specific.
Sigmund Freud, for example, argued that women's depression was an inev-
itable part of female nature—namely, a disguised manifestation of wom-
en's despair over lacking a phallus. Other theories have attributed women's
depression to dysfunctional habits of thought, such as self-blaming attri-
butional style or rumination, or to dysfunctional patterns of interacting
with others, such as self-silencing. Yet other explanations have tied the
increase in girls' depression during adolescence to poor body image and
acceptance of traditional stereotypes of feminine behavior. All of these
explanations have in common a focus on "the inside," that is, on disposi-
tions or characteristics that are thought to be prevalent among women.

Other explanations for women's elevated risk of depression rest on a
conception of gender as a principle by which society is organized and by
which power and privilege are distributed to its members. Some explana-
tions of this type have linked depression to the heavy burdens of caring
for others that women often shoulder and the limited care and support
that women often receive from others. Other explanations have linked
women's depression to stressors connected to gendered power relations.
These include various forms of sexual and relationship violence; work-
place harassment and discrimination; the paucity of social and economic
supports for single mothers; and the social isolation often experienced by
mothers of newborns. Other explanations have related elevated rates of
depression and suicidal thoughts reported by lesbian and bisexual women
to experiences such as taunting, bullying, teasing, ostracism from one's
family, and homophobic physical violence. These explanations all focus
attention on the "outside," that is, the social and cultural context. The
lenses afforded by both these types of explanations are useful, but they
point in different directions. Consider, for example, the kinds of preven-
tion programs or therapeutic interventions that follow from each.

Let us look more closely at these two ways of thinking about gender.
We begin with a brief detour into etymology in order to examine the his-
tory of the word *gender.* "Gender" originates from the Latin word *genus,*

which means "kind, sort, or class"; the word has been and still is used for this purpose by grammarians. In its grammatical meaning, gender does not refer to sex categories, but to the patterns for declining nouns that are found in many languages. The English language stopped declining nouns many hundred years ago, and, as you know, grammatical gender is not a feature of modern English. In recent times, English speakers have instead come to use the word *gender* as a synonym for "sex category" (as in "Indicate your gender: male or female").

In the 1970s, feminist theorists in the English-speaking world expanded upon the English-language use of the word *gender*. They kept the reference to sex category, but they gave the word an additional meaning. This additional meaning is what is of interest here. Terms such as the *sex/gender system* (Rubin, 1975) and the *gender order* indexed institutionalized relations of power and privilege that are organized around distinctions between sex categories. These definitions served to make gender a feature of the sociopolitical structure and of societal hierarchies in which sex categories serve as the markers of status and position. More recently, intersectionality theorists (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) have pointed out that social categories are intertwined, such that systems of stratification and privilege cannot meaningfully be analyzed one by one. (Chapter 2 discusses intersectionality theory in detail.)

In psychology, the term *gender* and its meaning have a somewhat different history. When gender entered the vocabulary of psychology at the end of the 1970s, the urgent agenda for feminists in psychology was to challenge beliefs regarding women's nature. These beliefs—often enshrined by the psychological theories of the time—held women to be intellectually inferior to men; destined by nature for marriage and motherhood; incapable of leadership; naturally passive; and so on. Feminists strove to insert the term *gender* into psychology's vocabulary in order to disrupt such assertions about women's nature (Crawford & Fox, 2007). They defined gender as the "nonphysiological components of sex" (Unger, 1979, p. 1086). This definition indicated a sharp demarcation between socially based characteristics and physiologically based ones. Unger's definition further specified that gender referred to "traits and behaviors" characteristic of the

members of each sex category (p. 1093). This formulation—unlike those of Rubin and Crenshaw—had a distinctly individualist cast; that is, by defining gender as "traits," "dispositions," and "characteristics," it placed gender firmly "inside" the individual.

Placing gender on the "inside" of the individual is still quite common in psychology. However, over the past 30 years, many feminist psychologists have moved toward thinking of gender as "outside" the individual (Magnusson & Marecek, 2012). That is, their work addresses aspects of the gender order and the fundamentally social quality of the distinctions that are drawn between the sexes. Several chapters that you will read take this approach, especially Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6. At the same time, current research in developmental psychobiology, neuroscience, and behavioral genetics has cast serious doubt on the idea of a dichotomy between "physiological" and "nonphysiological" that was the original rationale for introducing the term *gender* in psychology.

REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANINGS OF *GENDER*

What should a student make of the multiple meanings and complicated history of the term *gender*? Perhaps the most important lesson is that when you read psychological literature that uses the word *gender*, you must ask yourself what the writer means by the word. Meanings of the word have shifted since it was taken into use by psychologists nearly 40 years ago. Writers may not signal to readers which meaning of gender they are invoking in a particular argument. Also, it is not unusual that writers invoke several different meanings in a single article (or even perhaps in a single paragraph) without alerting their readers. There are also lessons for your own writing. You would do well to steer clear of misuses of the word *gender*, such as "gendercide" or referring to the "gender" of animals. We also recommend that you avoid using "gender" as a euphemism for "women" and vague poetic expressions, such as "gender is a backcloth." In any case, whenever you use the word *gender*, you must specify what you mean by it. In many instances, the term *sex category* might be a more appropriate choice because it does not carry implications regarding the origins of the differences between the categories.

Differences

Differences between sex categories are common topics of conversation. Think about the times you heard someone exclaim, "Men are all alike!" or "That's just like a woman!" Such claims about the way that men and women "just are" imply that all men or all women are the same and at the same time that all the members of one sex category are different from all the members of another. Such talk is sometimes followed by an assertion that a purported difference is grounds for treating the sex categories unequally.

Let us look at a historical example, namely, the prolonged struggles during the 19th century in Western Europe and North America over whether women should be allowed to vote in political elections. In the debates, assertions about women's difference from men loomed large as reasons for denying women the vote. For example, women were said to be too emotional or too ignorant. In the same period, similar assertions of differences between social categories were advanced to argue against granting the vote to working-class people and, in the United States, to African Americans. The comparisons that were drawn in these suffrage debates were loaded, taking certain characteristics of the dominant group (usually White, middle- or upper-class men) as the norm. This automatically ranked those in social categories that deviated in any way (whether relevant or not) from the dominant group as being of lower worth.

Traces of this pattern of reasoning appear when people in a less valued social category (such as "women") are compared to people in a more highly valued social category (such as "men"). It is still not uncommon to regard certain characteristics of the members of the more highly valued category as the norm, again regardless of whether those characteristics are relevant for the issue at hand. Members of the less valued category must demonstrate those characteristics when, for instance, competing for a job. Furthermore, assertions can still be heard that virtually any difference from the valued social category constitutes a valid reason to oppose the equal treatment of members of the less-valued category. Such arguments, if drawn to their logical conclusion, would mean that in order to deserve

equal treatment, people in the disfavored category would have to become identical in practically all respects to people in the highly valued category.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the debates about the sameness or differentness (and implicitly thereby the value) of the categories "men" and "women" have roiled the discipline of psychology since its very beginning in the late 19th century. In the debates about female suffrage, psychologists were sometimes called upon to pronounce authoritatively on "woman's nature" and what "woman's difference from man" implied for women's proper place in society and public life. For the most part, psychologists in that era shared the beliefs about women's inferiority that permeated Western European and North American societies (Richards, 2010).

Researchers who study differences between the two sex categories typically compare two groups that are each composed of members of one sex category. Finding a statistically significant difference between the two groups, however, is not the end of the study. The crucial step is to interpret such differences. Since the inception of psychology, there has been continual debate about how to interpret observed differences. In what follows, we describe three ways of interpreting observed differences between sex categories. In debates, these ways, in the stark form that we describe them, are often set against one another, although in actual practice, researchers sometimes combine them to yield more complex understandings. We end this section by taking up some of the logical and methodological complexities of carrying out studies comparing men and women and interpreting the results.

SEEING OBSERVED PSYCHOLOGICAL SEX DIFFERENCES AS CAUSED BY INHERENT PHYSIOLOGICALLY BASED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEX CATEGORIES

In one view of "difference," an *observed* difference (in some aspect of behavior) between a group of men and a group of women is interpreted as caused by some inherent—that is, inborn and permanent—physiological difference. Suppose a researcher compares how a group of men and a group of women perform on a cognitive task, and the data indicate a difference

in performance between the two groups. A researcher taking this view will assume that the cause of the observed difference is some inherent physiologically based characteristic shared by members of one category but not the other. Throughout the history of psychology, researchers have posited such possible causal characteristics in many sites, such as men's and women's sexual organs; their levels of certain hormones; sex-specific genetic make-up; and the development of certain brain structures.

SEEING OBSERVED PSYCHOLOGICAL SEX DIFFERENCES AS CAUSED BY INHERENT, PSYCHOLOGICALLY BASED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEX CATEGORIES

Another view of the causes of observed sex differences postulates that observed differences between women and men are caused by differences between the sex categories in some *inherent psychological* characteristic that is the enduring effect of sex-specific childhood socialization. Let us again say that a researcher compares a group of men and a group of women on a cognitive task and that the data indicate a difference between the two groups. A researcher taking this view will interpret this difference to be caused by sex-specific childhood experiences that have shaped girls and boys psychologically. One example of such theorizing is found in psychoanalytic theories, which hold that early childhood experiences inevitably differ for boys and girls and lead to different inherent personality patterns in adult men and women. Another example of such theorizing is found in social learning theories that argue that sex differences in adults are caused by the long-term effects of early experiences in which boys and girls were reinforced for different behaviors.

SEEING OBSERVED SEX DIFFERENCES AS CAUSED BY DIFFERENTIAL OR UNEQUAL TREATMENT

Feminists in psychology have repeatedly challenged assertions that observed differences between men and women should be seen as based in inherent differences between those two sex categories. Instead, they have argued that many observed sex differences are in fact the consequences of ongoing differential treatment of boys and girls, or men and women. An

earlier case in point was that in most Western high-income countries, boys scored consistently higher than girls on mathematics tests. Feminist psychologists argued that these findings could well be the result of unequal access to schooling in mathematics, rather than genetic or brain differences between the two sexes. Changes in mathematics performance in recent decades would seem to have vindicated the feminists' view. Today, with math training for boys and girls roughly comparable, the earlier average differences between boys' and girls' scores on standardized math tests and in mathematics performance in school have dramatically diminished, sometimes to the point of vanishing. In some countries, they have even been reversed (Hyde, Lindberg, Linn, Ellis, & Williams, 2008).

Feminists in psychology have also studied settings in which individuals in a certain social category (for example, a certain sex category) are evaluated like or treated as the stereotype of that category, not as individuals. Recent attention has focused on the experiences of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) professions and female students who aspire to enter such professions. A number of studies have suggested that some members of the scientific community still regard women's scientific capabilities as inferior to those of men; this is especially true for women of color (Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoli, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012).

REFLECTIONS ON STUDYING DIFFERENCES

Methodologists have pointed out several cautions that researchers must exercise when carrying out and interpreting comparisons of different social categories. The first caution applies to any study that explores observed differences between groups, regardless of the specific groups or the probable cause of the difference. This caution is based on the fact that studies that find statistically significant differences between the means of two groups (such as a group of men and a group of women) typically also find substantial overlap between the two groups. Take, for example, a study of performance on a cognitive task (such as a mathematics test). Suppose that a researcher finds a mean difference between the boys and girls in the study. Along with the mean difference, there will also be a good

deal of variation among the girls and among the boys, such that the size of the mean difference between the two groups is only a small fraction of the variation in performance that the boys and girls share. This is a common pattern of findings in sex difference studies. Such findings refute the view that the categories *girls* and *boys* are homogeneous.

A second caution is that if researchers intend to make group comparisons, they must take care to assure that the groups they study are comparable in all respects other than their group membership. Otherwise, a researcher cannot attribute an observed difference between the groups to their category membership.

In sex difference studies, researchers must therefore ensure that the group of men and the group of women are comparable on relevant characteristics. This means that the groups must be selected so that they are equivalent as regards relevant prior experience, as well as educational background, age, social class, and racial or ethnic category. Depending on what is being studied, composing comparable groups of men and women can be very difficult, and sometimes impossible.

A third caution in designing studies of group comparisons is that the indices and tasks to be studied must be equivalent for the groups. For example, the test materials or tasks must be equally familiar to and equally suitable for both groups. The same holds for the content and wording of scale items. For example, response biases such as the social desirability of the scale items must be comparable for the groups under study. With regard to comparing men and women, the more the two sex categories are segregated in daily life and the more they are channeled by society into different roles, the less likely it is that these requirements will be met.

A fourth caution concerns the logic of sex difference studies. To use technical language, sex category is not an independent variable that researchers can manipulate, nor is it an experimental condition to which research participants can be assigned. These limitations mean that sex difference studies are correlational studies, not causal studies. In correlational studies, an association between two variables (in this case, sex category and a pattern of behavior) tells the researcher nothing about causality. This fact presents a knotty problem for researchers who seek to determine whether

psychological differences between men and women are the result of inherent differences. Associations between observed sex differences in behavior and sex differences in a biological structure or function can tell nothing about causation. Put differently: finding a sex difference in behavior and an associated sex difference in a physiological structure or function does not indicate that the latter caused the former.

As a final reflection, given the formidable difficulties in carrying out adequate and interpretable studies of sex differences, it is remarkable that the search for psychological sex differences has continued for over 100 years, whereas similarities between the two sex categories are rarely a topic of interest (Hyde, 2005).

THE "SOCIAL"

Like many other terms that feminist scholars use, the word *social* has several different meanings in social science research. This should not be surprising. Different disciplines in the social sciences, as well as different theoretical traditions in psychology, have focused on different aspects of social life.

Many social psychologists who study gender—especially social psychologists in the United States—have limited their scope of interest in "the social" to how each individual experiences others, for example, the judgments they render about one another and the personal consequences of such judgments. "The social" as a collective force usually is beyond the scope of investigations. This has led to a focus on individual attitudes, beliefs, prejudice, and attributions of causality, rather than on larger societal forces or structures. Psychologists who are interested in gender have, for example, studied prejudicial beliefs and invidious attitudes about members of disfavored social categories (women, LGB individuals, members of non-White ethnic/racial groups, and, more recently, transgendered or gender-nonconforming individuals). Psychology researchers have also asked how research participants regard (and interact with) others who do not conform to societal norms (e.g., scientifically inclined

women or "sissy" boys). They also have examined the psychological consequences of being the object of such invidious distinctions—for example, diminished self-esteem or self-confidence, heightened depressive affect, or diminished well-being. Psychologists have also studied how individuals allocate blame and responsibility for sexual harassment, abuse, and rape. (Chapter 3 discusses research regarding the consequences of prejudicial treatment for LGB, transgendered, and gender-nonconforming individuals, and Chapter 8 describes research about implicit and explicit biases and prejudicial beliefs about women and about members of other disfavored social categories.) As you can see, all these studies focus on individuals—their reactions, judgments, or attributions, beliefs about stereotypes, and so on; there is little attention paid to social structures or to the gender order.

A second aspect of "the social" is society, that is, large-scale and highly organized social groups. Societies are stratified into status groups, with differing amounts of power and privilege available to members of these status groups. Societies are governed by formal institutions but also by shared, often informal, norms. In most societies, sex categorizations form a prominent axis along which people are ordered and social status is assigned, as do racial or ethnic categorizations.

Although few psychologists have studied societal hierarchies and social stratification, some feminist psychologists have addressed questions about how the gender order intersects with class stratification. In Britain, Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) have examined how class position shapes the life trajectories and developmental imperatives of working-class girls. Other British feminist psychologists have also studied class and motherhood (Rickett, 2016). Psychologists interested in intersectionality theory are seeking ways to incorporate axes of social organization such as sex categorization, racial/ethnic categorization, and social class into psychological research.

A third aspect of "the social" has also garnered a good deal of interest among feminist psychologists. This aspect concerns the ways in which day-to-day living is shaped by the cultural context of people's lives. Examples of the topics that have been investigated include the negotiations about

sharing housework and childcare (Magnusson, 2008) and the "cultural scaffolding" that maintains (hetero)sexual coercion and rape (Gavey, 2005). Feminist psychologists have also investigated real-time practices and interactions in societal institutions. Some examples are analyses of courtroom dialogue during rape trials; observations of psychologists' discussions as they certify or deny patients' requests for gender reassignment surgery; and conversations between doctors and their female patients about prescriptions for antidepressant medication. In such studies, researchers have sought insight into the everyday practices and institutional forces that maintain the status quo and hold power differences in place. Many of these researchers have found that the theories and methods of *discursive psychology* offer a useful framework for situating individuals within cultural life and societal structures. We therefore take a moment to introduce feminist discursive psychology.

Feminist Discursive Psychology: From "the Social" to the Sociocultural

Feminist discursive psychologists have taken inspiration from such theoretical frameworks as sociocultural psychology, cultural psychology, and discursive psychology. They share with many feminist psychologists an interest in socially shared views of gender and other social categories. Feminist discursive psychologists diverge, however, from other feminist psychologists in that they do not regard people's views about gender as enduring individual attitudes or opinions. Instead, feminist discursive psychologists conceive of such views as the ways of understanding that are available in a certain social setting and that serve as resources for making sense of the world and oneself. An example would be the notion that there are immutable psychological differences between women and men. In a cultural setting where this is a shared understanding, people will be more prone to take note of differences between men and women and to overlook similarities, and to use it to account for their own behavior and that of others. Feminist discursive psychologists view these shared ways of

understanding as tools that people use in interactions in order to accomplish such goals as portraying themselves in a positive light (Edley, 2001; Magnusson & Marecek, 2012, 2015, 2018). Chapter 6 describes feminist discursive psychology in more detail.

BEING A DISCERNING READER OF RESEARCH ON GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

We end this chapter by suggesting some strategies for reading that will help you master the literature on gender, sex, and sexuality. This scholarship is complex and growing; few questions can be considered settled, even including what are the best methods of investigation. Moreover, many issues evoke debate not only in the scholarly community but also in the political arena and in popular culture. This state of affairs calls for careful and critical readings of the literature.

Critical reading as a scholar goes beyond reading for the "bare facts"; it requires discernment and engagement with the works that you are reading. If you are reading a research report, you need to think carefully about the methods by which the findings were produced, as well as the logic of the interpretations that the authors make. This is necessary because data rarely, if ever, "speak for themselves." If you are reading a theoretical argument, you need to situate that argument in the context of the author's orienting assumptions and point of view, in order to appraise the evidence that is offered in support of the argument. Also you need to consider what the author regards as alternative or competing arguments. For instance, if the theory is advanced as an improvement over previous theories, what are those previous theories, and are they fairly presented?

In what follows, we suggest some questions that pertain specifically to the psychological literature on gender, sex, and sexuality. We drew up these questions to help our own students become adept readers of the psychological literature. They have found them helpful and we hope you will, too. We encourage you to use these questions both in your own reading and when reading and discussing with others.

Interpreting Group Differences

If a research study reports an observed difference between social catego-
ries (for example, sex categories or categories pertaining to sexualities),
how does the author interpret this difference? Does the author discuss
how differences in past experiences or in current conditions might have
influenced the results? Or does the author attribute the observed differ-
ences to some inherent difference between the categories? On what basis
does the author rule out alternate interpretations?

Homogeneity or Heterogeneity of Social Categories

Does the researcher portray sex categories and other social categories
as if they were homogeneous groups? Does the researcher examine (or
at least discuss) possible differences among members of each category?
(Chapter 14 discusses this matter in more detail.) Given the nature of the
study, which of these approaches seems appropriate?

Familiar or Unfamiliar Research Situations

Have the researchers ascertained that the research situation is equally
familiar and comfortable for participants regardless of their sex category
or other social categorizations? Or are there grounds for concern that the
conditions of the research could disfavor members of some social groups?
What might this imply for the trustworthiness of the results?

Measurement Equivalence

If a researcher has used concepts, scales, or behavioral measures that
were designed for one cultural setting or one social group in a different

setting or with a different social group, what evidence is offered that the meanings in the new setting are equivalent to those in the original setting?

Generalizations

Consider carefully which groups of people researchers have studied, and which groups of people they draw conclusions about. For example, does an author exercise appropriate caution about generalizing from the specific participants who were studied (e.g., female college students) to an entire category (e.g., "women" or "lesbians")? Under what conditions are such broad conclusions warranted?

Universalizing Versus Specifying

Do the researchers use their study of specific situations and specific participants to draw conclusions about universal abilities or characteristics? Do the researchers discuss why such generalizations are warranted? Alternately, do the researchers keep their focus on socially anchored meanings in different social categories or different social and cultural settings?

Locus of Explanation: Inside the Individual or in the Context?

Does the author offer explanations or interpretations of behavior that focus exclusively on causes "inside" the individual? Or do the explanations or interpretations also consider the "outside," that is, the surrounding conditions, especially structural inequalities? Do authors endeavor to show how these might be connected?

Authors' Biases

Can you discern indications of biased or prejudiced views or prereflective understandings on the part of the author? This could include biases against women or against men, biases against nonheterosexual people, or biases against children or adults who do not conform to the gender binary. If you believe that you have detected biased points of view, consider whether those views might have influenced aspects of the research method, the interpretation of the findings, or the practical implications or policy recommendations that the author suggests.

Reflexivity About the Social Context of Research

Do the researchers acknowledge that every research project is carried out in a social, political, historical, and geopolitical context? Do the researchers discuss how the context might have influenced the research questions, the research design, and the research process?

Silences and Exclusions

If you are reading a book or article that does not deal specifically with gender, sex, or sexualities, can you discern instances where the author might have (or even *should* have) brought in such issues? When a book or article ignores these issues, what might be the consequences for the quality of the information or arguments it puts forward?

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