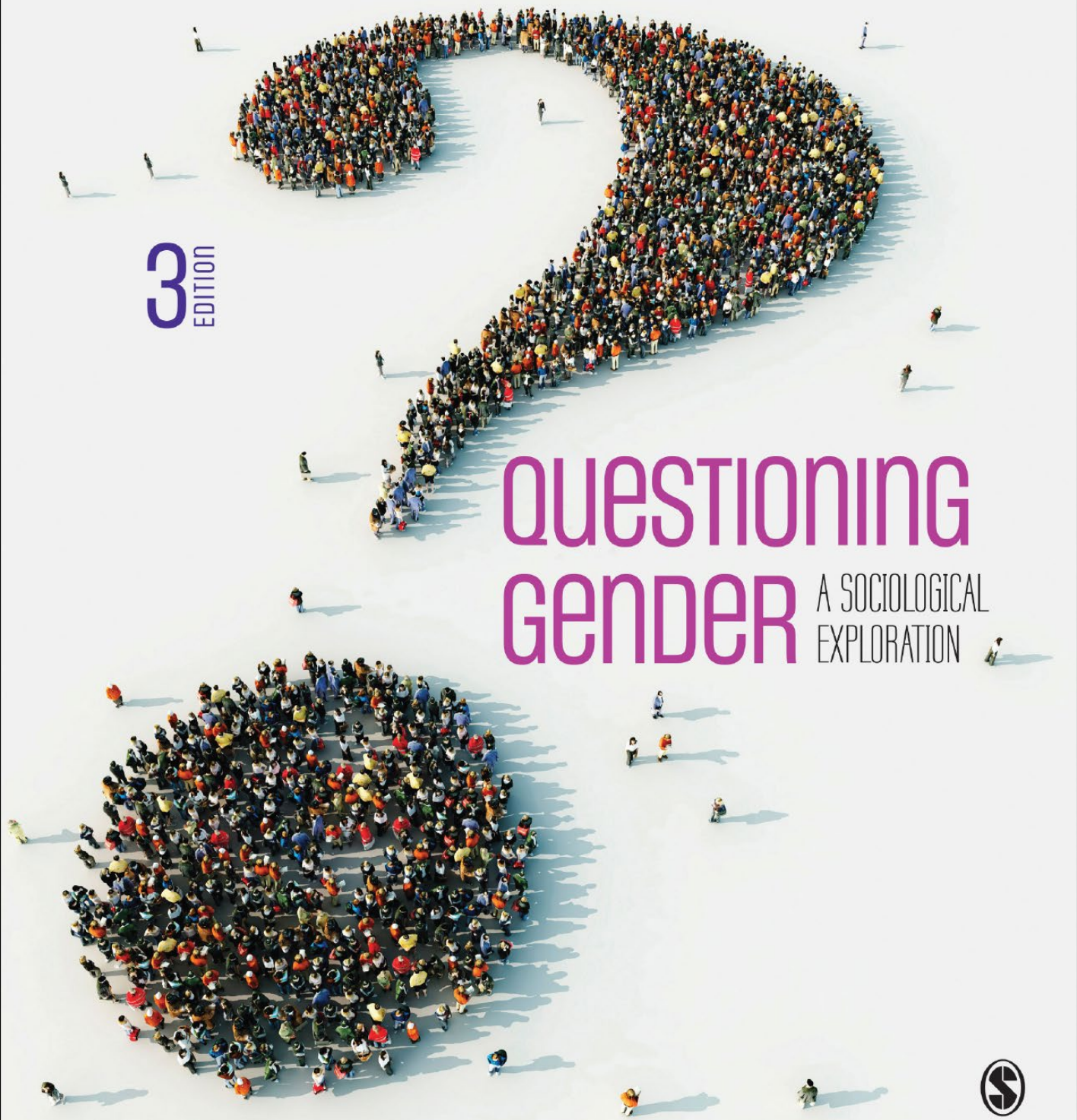
ROBYN RYLE



3 EDITION

Questioning Gender

A Sociological Exploration

3 EDITION

Questioning Gender

SAGE was founded in 1965 by Sara Miller McCune to support the dissemination of usable knowledge by publishing innovative and high-quality research and teaching content. Today, we publish over 900 journals, including those of more than 400 learned societies, more than 800 new books per year, and a growing range of library products including archives, data, case studies, reports, and video. SAGE remains majority-owned by our founder, and after Sara's lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures our continued independence.

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi | Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

3 EDITION

Questioning Gender

A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

ROBYN RYLE
Hanover College

SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryle, Robyn.
Questioning gender : a sociological exploration / Robyn Ryle, Hanover College. — Third Edition.

pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-5063-2547-7 (pbk.)
ISBN 978-1-5063-2546-0 (web pdf)

1. Sex role. 2. Sex (Psychology)—Social aspects. 3. Sex differences (Psychology)—Social aspects. 4. Gender identity. 5. Sex discrimination. I. Title.

HQ1075.R95 2014
305.3—dc23 2013040640

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Acquisitions Editor: Jeff Lasser
Editorial Assistant: Alexandra Croell
Production Editor: Libby Larson
Copy Editor: Rachel Keith
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Theresa Kay
Indexer: Will Ragsdale
Cover Designer: Michael Dubowe
Marketing Manager: Kara Kindstrom

16 17 18 19 20 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Questioning Gender

CONTENTS

SPECIFIC AREAS OF INTEREST

FEMINIST THEORY

INTERSEXUALITY AND TRANSGENDER

THE INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

THE INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

Chapter 4

Pp. 140–149: "The Importance of Peer Groups" to "Learning Gender Never Ends: Secondary Socialization"

THE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

Chapter 2

Pp. 42–53: "Institutional or Structural Approaches" to "Intersectional Feminist Theory"

Chapter 9

Pp. 399–405: "Gendered Organizations" to "Transmen at Work"

Chapter 10

Pp. 419–431: "Behind the Scenes: The Gender of Media Organizations" to "Media Power Theory: We're All Sheep"

Chapter 11

Pp. 500–506: "Institutional Power: Nations and Gender" to "Men and Women in Office"

INTERSECTIONALALITY

Chapter 2

Pp. 49–56: "Intersectional Feminist Theory" to "Putting It All Together: Integrative Theories"

Chapter 4

Pp. 147–151: "Learning to Be American: Socialization Through Immigration" to "What Happens to Gender as We Age?"

Chapter 6

Pp. 223–229: "The Intersectionality of Friendship and Gender" to "Friendship in Global Perspective"

Chapter 7

Pp. 265–270: "Eyelids and Empowerment: Cosmetic Surgery" to "Is Beauty Power?"

Pp. 281–294: "Masculinity, Health, and Race" to "Women, Doctors, Midwives, and Hormones"

Pp. 294–298: "Eugenics, Sterilization, and Population Control" to "Throwing Like a Girl"

Chapter 8

Pp. 318–322: "Race and the Marriage Squeeze" to "Transnational Marriage"

Pp. 343–348: "Gay and Lesbian Households" to "Power and the Household Division of Labor"

Chapter 9

Pp. 371–375: "When Men Can't Work" to "Men in Predominantly Female Occupations"

Chapter 10

Pp. 437–444: "Harems and Terrorists: Depictions of Arabs in the Media" to "Sexuality in the Media"

MASCULINITY

Chapter 5

Pp. 175–180: "Men as Sexual Subjects" to "Women as Sexual Objects"

Pp. 185–189: "Men and Abstinence" to "Women at Female Strip Clubs"

Chapter 7

Pp. 271–294: "Men and Body Image" to "Women, Doctors, Midwives, and Hormones"

Chapter 8

Pp. 337–343: "Transnational Fatherhood" to "The Second Shift"

Chapter 9

Pp. 367–376: "A Man's Job: Masculinity and Work" to "The Glass Ceiling and the Glass Escalator"

Chapter 10

Pp. 438–444: "Beware of Black Men: Race, Gender, and the Local News" to "Sexuality in the Media"

Pp. 451–459: "Masculinity and Video Games: Learning the Three Rs" to "The Battle of the Sexes and the Battle for the Remote Control"

Chapter 11

Pp. 475–496: "Masculinity and Power" to "Coercive Power"

Pp. 500–504: "My Missile's Bigger Than Yours" to "Gender and Political Institutions"

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Chapter 3

Pp. 88–95: "Gender Theories in Global Perspective" to "Ecofeminism and the Environment"

Chapter 4

Pp. 131–136: "The One-Child Policy and Gender in China" to "Doctors Teaching Gender: Intersex Socialization"

Chapter 5

Pp. 170–180: "Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective" to "Measuring Sexuality: What Is Sexual Identity?"

Pp. 181–193: "Sexuality in Islamic Perspectives" to "Violating the Scripts"

Pp. 195–200: "Nationalism and Heteronormativity" to "Red = Top; Black = Bottom"

Chapter 6

Pp. 225–229: "Friendship in Global Perspective" to "Families of Choice"

Pp. 229–237: "The Rules of Attraction" to "Courtship to Dating: A Brief History"

Pp. 241–247: "Romantic Love in Cross-Cultural Perspective" to "The Gender of Love"

Chapter 7

Pp. 262–265: "Exporting the Beauty Myth" to "The Problem With Bodies"

Pp. 280–284: "Dangerous Masculinity in Palestine" to "Masculinity, Health, and Race"

Pp. 290–297: "Menopause in Cross-Cultural Perspective" to "Eugenics, Sterilization, and Population Control"

Chapter 8

Pp. 319–327: "Transnational Marriage" to "Who Does What? The Gendered Division of Labor"

Pp. 333–348: "Separate Spheres in Global Perspective" to "The Division of Household Labor"

Chapter 9

Pp. 362–375: "What Is Work?" to "A Man's Job: Masculinity and Work"

Chapter 10

Pp. 445–456: "Soap Operas, *Telenovelas*, and Feminism" to "Masculinity and Video Games: Learning the Three Rs"

Chapter 11

Pp. 493–500: "Violent Intersections: The Gender of Human Trafficking" to "Gender Rights and Human Rights?"

Pp. 497–517: "Hijab and Ethnocentrism" to "Institutional Power: Nations and Gender"

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

NEW TO THE THIRD EDITION

The following features are new to the third edition:

What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change

Lists of websites in selected chapters provide resources for students interested in pursuing or researching social change and activism on gender topics.

New Theory Tables

New tables have been included to help students organize and make sense of gender theories.

More Data Tables and Graphics

More tables and graphics have been included, demonstrating the latest research and statistics on gender.

Updated Cultural Artifact Boxes

Cultural Artifact boxes have been brought up to date with more contemporary material.

Updated Discussions of Doing Gender, Undoing Gender, and Redoing Gender

Chapter 2 includes updated discussions of doing gender and possibilities for undoing or redoing gender.

More Discussion of Hegemonic Masculinity as a Theoretical Approach

The overview of gender theories in Chapter 2 now includes deeper discussion of hegemonic masculinity.

Updated Discussion of Gender and Development (GAD) Theory

Gender and development (GAD) theory is now included in the discussion of theories outside sociology in Chapter 3.

Expansion of Categories of Sexual Identity

Chapter 5 on sexuality now includes a discussion of asexuality as a category of sexual identity and its gender implications.

More Up-to-Date Research on LGBT Families

Chapter 8 includes more up-to-date research on gay and lesbian families.

Discussion of the Bechdel Test and Popular Culture

Chapter 10 includes a discussion of gender, film, and the Bechdel test.

Discussion of Slash Fan Fiction

Chapter 10 includes a discussion of the gender implications of slash fan fiction based off the newest Star Wars movie and globally in China.

Discussion of Street Harassment

Chapter 11 includes a discussion of the gendered effects of street harassment.

ABOUT *QUESTIONING GENDER*

Questioning Gender: A Sociological Exploration is an un-textbook. If textbooks are presumed to be the place you go to get all the answers, this book is an un-textbook in that our goal is to raise as many questions as we can about gender. We explore possible answers to those questions, but our main objective is to start a conversation that will help you to question some of the prevailing assumptions you might have about gender. This book is just the beginning of that conversation, and it is designed to serve as a resource for discussion inside and outside the classroom. *Questioning Gender* is based on the premise that a good conversation about gender will help you to connect all the complicated scholarship that has been conducted on gender to a thorough investigation of the role of gender in your own life, and for that reason, you'll find this book packed to the brim with questions. Each chapter title is a question, there are question boxes are inserted in each chapter, questions are included at the end of each Cultural Artifact to help you think about the prevalence of gender in our everyday lives, and Big Questions are provided at the end of each chapter to help you make connections. This un-textbook uses a wide range of theories from within and without sociology, assuming that theories are useful for the ways in which they can suggest new questions or focus the questions you already have. Then, for a wide range of topics related to gender, including socialization, sexuality, friendship and dating, bodies, marriage and families, work, and media and politics, we use a historical and cross-cultural perspective to question the things we might think we know about gender. In this book, we'll unpack many of the truths we take for granted about our social lives related to gender, turning basic concepts like sex, marriage, love, and friendship into moving targets with many potential meanings depending on who you are and when and where you happened to be born. We place the experiences of people who are usually at the margin of gender conversations (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender; women and men of color; women and men of the global South; and poor and working-class women and men) at the center of our conversations because their experiences throw open the door on a whole new set of questions that need to be asked about gender. As I tell the students in my own gender course, if you finish this book with more questions about gender than you started with, our goal will have been accomplished and you'll be well on your way to a lifetime conversation about what gender is and what it means in your own life.

The primary course this text is aimed at is sociology of gender. It would be ideal for upper-class undergraduate students (juniors and seniors), although it is cast at a level that would make it accessible to lower-class undergraduates as well. The text is firmly grounded

within a sociological approach to gender, with a focus on sociological theories related to gender and research within social science disciplines. However, it is impossible to discuss gender in a contemporary context without also addressing theories from outside sociology, such as feminist theories and queer theory. Because of this interdisciplinary approach, *Questioning Gender* would be appropriate for introductory courses in women's studies and gender studies as well. This text is best suited for courses that seek to use the social construction of gender in a global and historical perspective to challenge students' preconceptions about gender and to demonstrate how gender as a system creates and reinforces inequality.

UNIQUE APPROACHES

There are several unique approaches in *Questioning Gender* that set it apart from other gender textbooks. First, *Questioning Gender* takes a **global approach** to gender. In an increasingly global world, it is difficult to justify an approach to gender issues that focuses solely on the United States or the developed world. Examining gender in a global context also helps to demonstrate the social construction of gender and the persistence of gender inequality around the world. For some of the same reasons, *Questioning Gender* also uses an **intersectional approach**. Since women of color first brought attention to the ways in which gender intersects with race and ethnicity, those who study gender have become increasingly concerned with how to discuss gender while grounding it firmly within the complex web of identities such as race, class, sexuality, disability, religious background, and so on. Gender does not exist in a vacuum, and an intersectional approach helps to demonstrate that there is no "normal" experience of what it means to be gendered. *Questioning Gender* is also unique in incorporating **the perspective of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals as well as queer theory** throughout the textbook. As it is the goal of many instructors to help students understand the social construction of gender, focusing on transgender concerns helps to blur the boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine, and homosexual and heterosexual, previously perceived as rigid. Queer theory questions all categories of difference, and the experiences and perspectives of transgender individuals provide a vantage point for students to see beyond our dimorphic gender constructions. *Questioning Gender* also assumes that questions related to gender must be answered through a consideration of both women and men and, therefore, includes the growing scholarship on **the study of men and masculinity**. All of these unique approaches to gender in *Questioning Gender* help to create a textbook that resists the tendency to normalize certain understandings of gender while marginalizing others. For example, many textbooks in gender segregate discussions of gender in global perspective into one

chapter or into certain sections of the chapter. In this book, global experiences of gender are incorporated throughout the text, decentering the idea of a Western, predominant idea of what it means to be a man or a woman. In addition, rather than segregating a discussion of transgender issues into a chapter on sexuality or biology, *Questioning Gender* integrates these concerns throughout in discussions about a wide variety of topics, including socialization, work, and dating.

The final distinctive approach in *Questioning Gender* is **the integration of theoretical perspectives throughout the text**. Many textbooks cover theory in the first few chapters and then move on to a topical focus on gender. In this book, theory is covered in early chapters, but it is then discussed throughout the book as each theory applies to different topics. This use of theory throughout the text is highlighted for students and instructors through Theory Alerts. This approach reminds students of the importance of theory to our understanding of gender, and it models for them how different theories might be applied to different topics related to gender. Other key features of the text, as defined in the next section, such as Cultural Artifacts, question boxes, and Big Questions, all incorporate theory. In this way, *Questioning Gender* seeks to put theory at the center of discussions of gender rather than at the periphery.

KEY FEATURES OF THE TEXT

Question Boxes

Distributed throughout each chapter in *Questioning Gender* are question boxes. Question boxes contain discussion questions that push students to explore or further test the theories and concepts being discussed. These boxes are integrated with the material to which they relate and are specific to that material. Question boxes serve as starting points for students and instructors in beginning their discussions and explorations of gender in their own lives. So, for example, in a discussion of research on heteronormativity in high schools in Chapter 5, a question box asks students, "Can you think of other examples of heteronormativity on your college or university campus, or other ways in which practices and values reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is normal and right?" Question boxes can be used by students to enhance their experience of reading the text or by instructors in the classroom to generate discussion or as prompts for free-writes, short response papers, or journals.

Cultural Artifacts

Also distributed throughout the text are Cultural Artifact boxes. The premise of using cultural artifacts is adapted from an assignment I use in my own classroom in which students have to bring in some artifact related to gender to share with the class once over the course

of the semester. These gender artifacts are anything they observe that is related to gender and have included television commercials, YouTube clips, magazine articles, print advertisements, comic strips, viral e-mails, conversations, sports equipment (men's and women's basketballs), and personal hygiene products (men's and women's shampoo, deodorant, razors). Cultural Artifact boxes attempt to accomplish the same goal as this class assignment in encouraging students to begin to see gender all around them in their daily lives. Cultural Artifact boxes include references to films, television shows, music, websites, and video games as they help to illustrate key concepts discussed in the text. This feature helps students to make connections between sociological theories and concepts related to gender and the everyday world around them; this allows them to consider how gender matters on a day-to-day basis in their lives.

Big Questions

At the end of each chapter are Big Questions. Big Questions accomplish one of three goals. First, some Big Questions get students to apply concepts and theories to a broader set of issues or questions than those discussed in that particular chapter. These questions often take the form of "what if" questions, and they ask students to expand in directions only hinted at in the chapter. On a smaller scale, some Big Questions ask students to think about integrating concepts and ideas within the chapter. An example might be looking at how two different theories discussed in the chapter fit together, or how a theory applied to one particular topic in the chapter might work when applied to a different topic. Finally, some Big Questions encourage students to make connections between concepts, theories, or topics discussed in that particular chapter with those discussed in other chapters in the book. All of these different types of questions encourage students to think of the "big picture" as it relates to gender and address some of the larger themes identified in the book. They encourage students and instructors to use the book interactively by making their own connections between different concepts and ideas within the book as well as by expanding beyond the topics covered in the book. Big Questions may be used as the basis for longer, critical thinking essays; as essay examination questions; or as prompts for small-group discussions or debate exercises.

Gender Exercises

Gender Exercises are more interactive than Big Questions and encourage students to embark on their own projects of gender inquiry. Gender Exercises suggest ways in which students could use social science techniques like interviews, observation, surveys, and existing statistics to investigate gender for themselves. They also introduce exercises that help students apply theory to a particular situation from their own lives or popular culture to understand that theory better. In Chapter 7 on gender and bodies, a Gender Exercise asks students to visit a local art museum or look at images of art online and think about how male and female bodies are depicted. Gender Exercises could be used by students and instructors as

the basis for research projects or research exercises. These exercises help encourage students to become active learners and to engage in social science research techniques.

What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change

Students reading about gender inequality and other ways in which the gender system lets us down are sometimes impatient for ways in which they can take action to make things better. They ask, "What can I do?" New to the third edition are lists of websites at the ends of most chapters that provide a starting point for students interested in exploring social change. These organizations are both national and global. All are dedicated to addressing a wide variety of social problems related to gender. In Chapter 7, students can explore the wide variety of initiatives pursued by the National Women's Health Network. OutRight Action International, one of the organizations listed in Chapter 5, advocates LGBT rights on a global scale. For instructors, these lists provide a potential starting point for more in-depth research projects about gender issues as well as for the inclusion of service learning activities.

Terms and Suggested Readings

Important terms and concepts are highlighted and included in a list of terms at the end of each chapter. This feature helps students and instructors to organize information presented in the chapter with the ultimate goal of learning how to apply these terms and concepts to other gender issues and situations. Each chapter also includes a list of suggested readings organized by different topics covered in that chapter. This can serve as a resource for students and instructors interested in finding out more about some of the issues discussed in the chapters and as a good starting place for student research papers.

ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

Part I: What Are the Important Questions to Ask About Gender?

These first three chapters set up the basic foundations for an exploration of gender. They introduce the main goals in learning about gender, the basic theories that help us to understand gender, and the ways in which those theories will be used throughout the text. Chapter 1 introduces and defines basic concepts in the exploration of gender and discusses why the study of gender is a worthwhile pursuit. Chapter 2 explores the feminist background of many gender theories and outlines sociological theories of gender. In Chapter 3, we explore gender theories from disciplines outside sociology, including psychology, queer theory, development theory, and ecofeminist theories of gender.

Part II: How Are Our Lives Filled With Gender?

This section focuses on everyday aspects of gender through a more interactional, micro-level approach to issues. In this part of the book, students will begin to consider the

ways in which gender matters in their day-to-day lives, and how that impact is socially constructed historically and globally. In Chapter 4, we explore questions related to socialization and theories that explain how we learn to be gendered. The gender of sexuality is explored in Chapter 5, where we look at the complicated ways in which sexuality and gender intersect. Chapter 6 explores the gender of friendship in dating, including the different ways in which attraction works on a global scale and how the gender of friendship has changed over time. In Chapter 7, we look at the gender of bodies, including issues of body image and health.

Part III: How Is Gender an Important Part of the Way Our Society Works?

This portion of *Questioning Gender* moves toward a focus on how gender permeates various institutions in society. Working at the institutional, macro level, these chapters are more concerned with how gender operates as a system of power and reinforces inequality. In Chapter 8, we examine the important intersections between gender, marriage, and families, taking a historical look at how marriage as an institution has changed over time and how this has affected ideas about gender. Chapter 9 looks at how the institution of the workplace has gendered implications, including a consideration of sex segregation and the gender wage gap. The unique intersections between gender and the media as an institution are examined in Chapter 10. Finally, Chapter 11 explores gender in the realm of states and governments through a consideration of the politics of gender.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Like many other authors, I chose to capitalize "Black" but not "white" in this textbook. Being Black in America constitutes an ethnic group, similar in its sense of belonging and group cohesion to Irish Americans, Arab Americans, and many other groups. Being white in the United States generally does not carry with it this sense of ethnic identity and belonging, although ethnic identities such as Polish, Italian, or German might. Although both categories are socially constructed and have no underlying scientific basis, I chose to mark this distinction in how the categories are experienced.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing and revising a textbook are activities that truly take a village, in the sense of a supportive community of individuals. I owe thanks to all of my colleagues in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Hanover College for supporting me in the extra effort required in writing a textbook, and to the Faculty Development Committee at Hanover

for granting me two leaves to work on the book. Kelly Joyce and Heather Loehr of the Hanover College library provided invaluable research expertise in finding statistics related to gender. Jessica Journey and Jessica Caldwell spent many hours with JSTOR and interlibrary loan gathering research articles. Fahima Eissar helped assemble the glossary for the second edition. My dear friends and fellow co-conspirators from graduate school at Indiana University—Katy Hadley, Jeni Loftus, Sandi Nenga, and Carla Shirley—may not have read any drafts of the chapters, but they surely helped to keep me sane in the life of academia during the long process of writing the book.

Many thanks go to the team at SAGE for their help with editing and marketing.

I could not have completed this book without the support, love, encouragement, and patience of my husband, Jeff, and my daughter, Grace. Thanks to both of you for listening with great patience to me recount the latest incredibly fascinating things I'd discovered related to gender.

My final thanks are to all the students at Hanover College over the years who served as guinea pigs in the long process of figuring out how to teach a good course on the sociology of gender. I learned how to teach about gender from learning with you and could not have had the courage to put one word on the page without the memories of our shared laughter and exploration, and I could not have sustained myself over the long haul without the hope that I could pass along to others some of the joy of learning together that we experienced.

PART I

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT GENDER?

1

WHAT IS GENDER AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT IT?

Introducing Gender

What do students expect when they sit down on the first day in a class on sociology and gender? What notions do they already have about what gender is and how it matters? How important do they believe gender is to their own lives? What are the stories they tell themselves about gender? These are questions I often ask *myself* about gender, and let me just say at the outset, I certainly don't claim to have all the answers. Learning about gender inevitably involves learning about yourself and your own life. When we combine gender and sociology, it also involves learning about the importance of social forces as they relate to gender. When you begin to think seriously about the impact of gender on your life and the larger world, it becomes difficult not to see gender everywhere you look. You can decide for yourself whether that's a good or a bad thing, but I believe that being aware of the ways in which gender permeates our lives can give us invaluable insight into the world.

SWIMMING WITH THE FISHES: LEARNING TO SEE GENDER

Part of what we will be doing throughout this book is learning to see gender in the world around us. That might seem like a fairly stupid goal at first; most of us believe that we can see gender in the world. Let's imagine we're standing on a busy sidewalk in a city

somewhere. As the people walk by, we believe we can identify the gender of most of them with a fairly high degree of certainty. Every now and then someone might walk by who gives us pause, but by and large, we believe that we're pretty good at **gender attribution**, or reading the many different cues people present in order to decide whether someone is a woman or a man (or something else entirely, which we'll explore later). This chapter will begin to cast some doubt on whether what we're seeing when people walk by is really gender, and we will, therefore, begin to question whether we're really as good at gender attribution as we might think.

But we'll also begin to extend exactly what we mean by *seeing gender.* Seeing gender the way we'll talk about it involves more than just identifying the gender of the people around us. It means beginning to reveal the invisible ways in which gender works, which are not always apparent on the surface of our lives. This is what Judith Lorber (1994) means when she describes gender as being like water to fish. For many people who study this topic, gender is the substance that's all around us and inside us but that we largely take for granted. Learning to see gender means developing a special kind of vision.

Gender and the Social Construction of Reality

One particularly useful tool that sociologists have to help us develop this kind of gender vision is called *the social construction of reality.* If you've taken sociology classes before, there's a strong chance you've heard of this concept. The social construction of reality describes the historical process by which our experiences of the world are put into categories and treated as real things (Roy, 2001). What does this mean in relation to gender? Probably the best way to help us understand the social construction of reality as it relates to gender is to use the **Thomas principle**, from W. I. and Dorothy Thomas, which states, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Take categories of race as an example. Anthropologists and biologists have definitively shown that there is no biological basis for what we think of as racial categories. Extensive research using DNA from people all over the planet demonstrates that among the small amount of genetic variation that exists in humans as a species, most exists within the groups we commonly refer to as *races.*

What this means is that any two people within what we think of as a racial category (white or Caucasian, for example) are as likely to be genetically different from each other as they are from someone in what we think of as a different racial category (Hispanics or Latinos, for example). Genetic variation among humans simply does not map along racial lines, in part because the genes that influence skin color, hair form, and facial features (the traits we generally associate with race) evolved much later in our human history than other characteristics like intelligence, athletic ability, and musical ability (Adelman, 2003).

How does this help us understand the social construction of reality? Over time, people began to believe that things like skin color, hair form, and facial features meant something more than they actually do. The categories of both white and Black were created over a long historical time period and were used to justify a system of exploitation and oppression. Today, many people believe that these categories are real things, based in some underlying biological reality. But historically, the definitions of who is white, Black, Latino, Asian, or Native American in the United States have constantly shifted. From 1790, the first year the United States conducted a census, up to 2000, the way in which race was measured changed every time. Race is just one example of how, through a historical process, people's experiences of the world (seeing different skin colors) were put into categories (Black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American) and treated as real things.

?

Does thinking of a category as based in biology change the discrimination people in that category face? Are people less likely to be prejudiced against a certain group if they believe the identity is biological and, therefore, out of our control? Has this been true for social categories in the past?

Scientists can demonstrate for you that race has no underlying biological reality, but that doesn't mean race has no impact on the lives of people in the United States and around the world. This is the second part of the Thomas principle—that what we believe is real is real in its consequences. As we will discuss throughout this book, glaring inequalities exist along racial lines. But these inequalities are not a result of any biological explanations but rather caused by the ways in which our belief in racial categories as something real makes them into something that has real consequences. When a teacher assumes that a clock made by an Arab-American student is a bomb because of our association between race and terrorism (a true event that happened to 14-year-old Ahmen Mohamed in Irving, Texas, in 2015), knowing that the category "Arab-American" is socially constructed doesn't do that student much good. In the social world (which is the world we all live in), what we believe matters, and the things we treat as real become, for all intents and purposes, real.

Once we understand the ways in which the world around us is socially constructed, we can begin to untangle the complex ways in which our understanding of the world is shaped by our particular social constructions. Understanding the social construction of gender helps us to see the water in which we're swimming, as well as to understand why we didn't notice it in the first place. In this book, we will be using two specific methods to see the social constructions around us. The first, which we've already considered in our discussion of race, is a *historical* approach. Part of what makes things seem real is the sense that this is how they always have been and how they always will be. A historical approach helps us see that this is very often not the case.

The second approach that helps us reveal social constructions is *cross-cultural*. If something that you very much believe is real in your particular culture is perceived as ridiculously

impossible in another culture, what exactly is real? Cross-culturally, racial categories become even more complicated. In many Latin American countries, members of the same family can be categorized in different racial groups based on their skin color; this means that your sibling may be considered white while you are considered Black. Many people around the world find that their racial category changes as they move from place to place and country to country. What does this say about the reality of these categories? Throughout this book, we will be using both the historical approach and the cross-cultural approach to help us see the ways in which gender is also socially constructed.

Gender and Intersectionality

There's another perspective that draws our attention to the variations in experiences of gender, this time across intersecting categories such as race, social class, sexuality, age, and disability. It's called **intersectionality**, and it's both a theoretical orientation and a frame for activism. We'll discuss intersectionality in more depth in Chapter 2, but for now, it's important to understand the way intersectionality draws our attention to variations and contradictions in the way people in different social categories experience gender. In our example from above, does it matter that the young Arab-American clockmaker was a boy? If he had been a girl, would his teacher have been as quick to label him a terrorist? Intersectionality makes us aware that we do not experience all our overlapping identities separately. We are always simultaneously gendered *and* raced, classed, sexualized, embodied, etc. To understand how gender works, we must understand it in its full complexity, as it intersects with other identities.

SEX OR GENDER: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

By now you might have noticed an important relationship between biology and our perceptions of reality; race is perceived as something that's real because many people believe in its biological truth. This is true in many parts of the world where science forms a dominant way of thinking about the world. If something is rooted in our biology, it can be empirically and objectively observed and must, therefore, be real. Later, we'll explore the way in which even our trust in science is gendered and has gender implications.

Biological explanations of gender differences are often called on to establish their reality, and this brings us to our first point of vocabulary, the difference between *sex* and *gender*. When I ask students in my sociology of gender class early in the semester what the difference is between sex and gender, they usually agree that sex describes the biological differences between women and men while gender pertains to the social differences.

Although not everyone follows this general usage, this is a fairly accurate description of how social scientists employ these terms. Sex describes the biological differences between people we call males and people we call females; gender is the social meanings that are layered onto those differences. This neat division leaves sex up to those concerned with biology and gender up to those interested in the social world. For much of the history of the study of gender in the Anglo-European world, this was a standard way of understanding sex and gender, and it was often called a biosocial approach.

A Biosocial Approach

A **biosocial approach** to the study of gender acknowledges that much of what we experience regarding gender is socially constructed. There are differences in how gender as a social category is constructed across historical time periods and across different places. However, from the biosocial perspective, there are real limits to that social construction because of the biological reality of male and female bodies. One way to understand this perspective is to say that biosocialists believe in **sexual dimorphism**. Sexual dimorphism is the claim that sex marks a distinction between two physically and genetically discrete categories of people. If you subscribe to sexual dimorphism, you believe that we can use certain characteristics to sort people objectively into two categories called male and female. Discrete here means that you can only be one or the other (male or female) and not both at the same time. This sorting usually happens when you're born and someone, usually a doctor, decides whether you're a girl or a boy. This process is called **gender assignment**. Biosocialists do not believe that our sex is the only thing that determines how we interact with the world; gender is constructed onto the differences we call sex. But they do believe that there are two kinds of people in the world—females and males.

At this point, you might be thinking to yourself, well, duh! Who doesn't believe that there are two types of people in the world, males and females? Even a child knows that there are girls and there are boys and that's sex, right? Or is it? If you stood on a busy street, watching people walk by, would you be using sex or gender to categorize people? Genitalia are one of the physical criteria we use to sort people into sex categories. Can you see people's genitalia when they're walking down the street? Perhaps there are some streets where people are walking around naked or with their genitalia exposed, but generally not.

What can we see of sex in our everyday lives? We can see the shape of people's bodies and their faces. If someone has breasts, does that mean the person is a woman? Is that a criterion we could use? Yes, except that some men have breasts (or there would have been no need for Kramer, a character on the hit sitcom *Seinfeld*, to invent the "bro," a bra for men) and some women do not. What about facial hair? We can certainly see facial hair. And yet, again, some men do not have facial hair, and some women do (think of the bearded lady). In her study of transmen in the workplace, Kristen Schilt found that

facial hair often trumped several other gender clues pointing toward femininity in gender attribution for transmen (Schilt, 2010). That is, even if someone could see a feminine name and the presence of breasts, the presence of facial hair meant they'd still refer to the transman as "he." Maybe Adam's apples? Again, not all men have them and not all women lack them. On average, women should be slightly shorter than the men, but again, we will also encounter very short men and very tall women. Schilt would argue that what you're really seeing as you stand on the street is **cultural genitalia**, or the outward performance of gender that we then assume to match up with biological genitalia.

A Strong Social Constructionist Approach

Unlike a biosocial approach, the **strong social constructionist approach** argues that both sex *and* gender are socially constructed. In fact, you might argue from this perspective that gender—social meanings—are really all there is. Our gender beliefs cause us to believe that there are real categories out there called "female" and "male," but the reality is much more complex. Sex itself is socially constructed, and therefore, it is culture that dictates how we understand sex.

GENDER AND BODIES There are at least four different areas of evidence in support of this perspective. The first type of evidence points our attention to the ways in which biological differences can be influenced by social reality. This helps us see how the social can influence the biological. For example, one biological difference between women and men is that, on average, men have 20% to 30% greater bone mass and strength than women (Wade & Ferree, 2015). Keep in mind that, as we'll discuss more in Chapter 3, average differences mean that there's still a great deal of overlap. Some women have greater bone mass and strength than some men, and some men have lesser bone mass and strength than some women. Differences in the average population emerge only after puberty and become more pronounced when women lose bone mass after menopause (Avdagić et al., 2009). This biological reality explains why women over the age of 50 are four times more likely to be diagnosed with osteoporosis than men of the same age (International Osteoporosis Foundation, 2015).

But studies suggest that somewhere between 10% to 50% of the differences in bone mass can be due to lifestyle choices such as diet, physical activity, and smoking rather than genetics (Office of the Surgeon General, 2004). In fact, one study shows that among Orthodox Jewish adolescent boys, the development of bone mass proceeds very differently. In these communities, boys spend a great deal of their childhoods engaged in the intensive study of religious documents. This means they spend much less time engaged in physical activity. As a result, their bones fail to grow as strong as the bones of their sisters, who are freed by this particular set of gender norms to spend more time running, jumping, and playing. In this community, socially constructed ideas about gender—that boys

should spend much of their time studying religious texts while girls should spend less time in such activities—has an effect on the physical bodies of girls and boys, and, eventually, women and men. The beliefs of the Orthodox Jewish community—their social reality—is imprinted onto the physical bodies of their daughters and sons. Gender shapes sex.

Another biological reality students in my classes will often point to is research on brain differences between women and men. Women, they might point out, have smaller brains, different brain composition, and different brain function (Halpern, 2012). In Chapter 3 we'll discuss some of the implications of the endless search for sex differences, but it's important to note here that it's increasingly difficult to tell if these differences are genetic or shaped by our environments, including our social environment. New findings suggest that our brains have a great deal of plasticity, or ability to change and respond to the environment. This plasticity includes changes in the structure and function of our brains. Studies show that it might be easier than we previously thought to alter brain function. In one study, three months of playing the video game *Tetris* among young girls resulted in brains that were heavier and showed enhanced cortical thickness (Haier, Karama, Leyba, & Jung, 2009).

Studies like these suggest that we need a more complex way of thinking about the relationship between the social and the biological. This new model would acknowledge that though our underlying biology is important and can't be discounted, the interaction between our bodies and the social environment does not flow in one causal direction. As strong social constructionists argue, our social beliefs can have a crucial impact on bodies—our bones, brains, muscles, etc. Our social reality is written onto the physical stuff of our biological bodies.

INTERSEX AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEX A second source of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach comes from the existence of intersex and the experiences of intersex individuals. If we accept the claims of sexual dimorphism, we should be able come up with some universal criteria for sorting everyone into a sex category. But strong social constructionists point to the ways in which not everyone fits so easily into categories of male and female or man and woman. If we start by defining men as people with penises and women as people with vaginas, we'll quickly discover that some people have both. Where do they fit?

People born with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) have XX chromosomes but masculinization of the genitalia. As infants, these babies have what appears to be a penis as well as a vagina. Individuals born with androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) have XY chromosomes but feminized genitalia, which often means they have a vagina as well as testes (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). As we will read in Chapter 4, these infants are unlikely to make it into adulthood with their ambiguous genitalia intact because doctors in the United States usually perform surgery on intersex infants to create a consistent sex category for them. Thus, the infant with CAH is likely to have the penis removed, whereas the infant with AIS is likely to be raised as a girl despite the presence of testes and the development of masculine secondary sex characteristics at puberty.

Gender scholars identify individuals who have any of a wide number of conditions that cause ambiguity in regard to sex category as being **intersex**. Intersex conditions are estimated to occur at a rate of 1.7% of all births, making intersexuality more common than albinism (being born albino or lacking skin pigmentation). In a city of 300,000 people, 5,100 of them would have varying stages of intersexual development, meaning that there's a chance someone walking down your city sidewalk might in fact have both a penis and a vagina. Now, how would you decide their sex?

We could say that although we can't necessarily see sex with the naked eye, we live in the 21st century; there are other ways to determine sex. There are internal sex organs. Today, medical doctors generally use the presence or absence of a penis to initially assign gender. In the past, doctors went by internal organs and emphasized the presence or absence of a uterus, because without a uterus a woman could not reproduce. But conditions of intersexuality deal with both internal and external genitalia. Some intersex individuals have both an ovary and a testis, one on each side of their body. In other individuals, the ovary and testis grow together, forming an ovo-testis. The presence or absence of internal sex organs is also an imperfect method of determining sex category.

What about hormones, then? What we call sex hormones are not differentiated in children before they reach puberty, and post-puberty, there are wide variations in the presence and absence of sex hormones. Individuals with androgen insensitivity syndrome have testosterone in their bodies, but they cannot metabolize it and, therefore, develop breasts at puberty. Is the presence of testosterone, then, a good measure of who's a man and who's a woman? What about genetics? As we learn in high school biology, men have XY sex chromosomes while women have XX sex chromosomes. Does modern genetic testing provide a definitive answer to sex category? No. Those born with Turner syndrome lack a second sex chromosome, making them XO, whereas those with Klinefelter's syndrome have two X chromosomes and a Y (XXY). How should we identify the sex of someone who is XXY or XO?

TRANSGENDER To the complications that intersex conditions bring to the idea of sex category, you might also add the complexities of the transgender community as a third body of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach. **Transgender** is a broad label that includes a wide variety of people who seek to change, cross, or go beyond culturally defined gender categories (Ferber, Holcomb, & Wentling, 2008). Transgender can include individuals who seek surgery to change their underlying anatomy but can also include individuals who wish to live as a different gender than that which lines up with their biological sex category. Children as young as four and five years old express that their biological sex category does not match their internal sense of who they are. Transgender individuals have existed throughout human history and across different cultures. How do we fit this reality into a biosocial approach, where sex category is supposed to provide a real limit on the ways in which gender is expressed?

HISTORICAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL EVIDENCE Strong social constructionists also use the historical and cross-cultural approaches as evidence, pointing to the ways in which sex categories have, in fact, varied across time and place. These examples make up our fourth source of evidence. Today, in Anglo-European societies, we believe there are two sexes. But as we will discuss in Chapter 5, the ancient Greeks believed in a one-sex model (Roy, 2001). Females were not a completely different sex than males, but they were an inferior version of males in a hierarchy that included the gods and other kinds of people (slaves, dwarves, eunuchs, etc.). This particular gender system (a set of cultural beliefs) shaped the ways in which the Greeks saw biological reality. The Greeks saw the vagina and the penis as the same organ; in women this organ was internal (vagina), whereas in men it was external (penis). Similarly, the Greeks saw ovaries and testes as the same organ in males and females. The same biological reality was used to justify a completely different understanding of sex.

?

Think of a behavioral trait that is generally associated with one sex or the other (crying, fighting, looking pretty, nurturing, etc.). Can you think of examples of females who engage in the behaviors generally associated with males or of males who engage in the behaviors generally associated with females?

Strong social constructionists also point to a wide range of cultures that have a third sex category, or a space within their particular conceptualization for people who are considered neither male nor female. These include the hijras in India, the two-spirits in Native American cultures, the kathoeys of Thailand, and the sworn virgins of the Balkans (Nanda, 2000). If different societies construct different kinds of sex categories, not all of which are based on a dimorphic system (only males and females),

TABLE 1.1 ■ Biosocial and Strong Social Constructionist Approaches Compared

Approach	Position on sexual dimorphism	View of relationship between sex and gender	Stance on intersex and transgender
Biosocial	There are two distinct, biologically discrete types of people, male and female; sexual dimorphism is true	Sex partially produces gender and sets real limits on the expression of gender	Aberrations that must be fit into a dimorphic system
Strong social constructionist	There are not two distinct types of people, male and female; sexual dimorphism is a claim but not the truth	Gender produces sex; our ideas about gender shape how we make sense of biological reality	Evidence that the dimorphic system does not accurately describe reality where sex and gender are concerned

then surely sex categories are socially constructed. Gender, in the form of cultural meanings, therefore produces our notions of sex, rather than the other way around.

Sex or Gender?

The debate between biosocial and strong social constructionist perspectives is ongoing, but it has important implications for how we think about the relationship between sex and gender. From the strong social constructionist perspective, we're always talking about gender because there really is no such thing as sex. This doesn't mean that biology doesn't exist and that people don't have bodies. It also doesn't mean that people don't have differences in their genitalia, DNA, sex hormones, and other biological realities. But for strong social constructionists, these biological differences do not line up with the categories we have created and labeled sex, and the claim that they do is false.

?

Which of these two perspectives makes more sense to you? Which is easier to understand? Which do you think is the more commonly held perspective?

As sociologists who understand the importance of social construction, in this textbook we'll assume a strong social constructionist perspective. This means that most of the time we'll talk about gender rather than sex categories, assuming that both are socially constructed. We'll talk about women and men rather than females and males.

A WORD ABOUT BIOLOGY AND STRONG SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The idea that sex categories are socially constructed—that there are *not* two kinds of distinguishable male and female bodies in the world—is hard to swallow for some people. Students are often left wondering whether biology exists at all from the strong social constructionist perspective. Are these theorists arguing that there are no such things as penises, vaginas, testes, hormones, or chromosomes? Are they saying that we don't have physical, biological bodies at all?

Most theorists who argue from the strong social constructionist point of view would say that, yes, of course we have physical bodies. The problem is that our categories—male and female—don't accurately describe the reality of those physical bodies. In fact, many would argue that the diversity in our physical bodies is greater than our categories would lead us to believe. They might go so far as to argue that our belief in how bodies *should* be gets in the way of our perceiving the way bodies *actually are.* Because we believe that everyone should have a penis or a vagina, we tend to ignore the repeated cases of people who have both. Because we believe that one's biological

sex category should match up with the gender one expresses, we stigmatize transgender people who violate these norms.

In other words, strong social constructionists believe that our social ideas about what sex categories should look like get in the way of our seeing what the actual biological reality is. Can we ever perceive that biological reality free from the particular set of blinders that our cultural beliefs give us? Maybe not, but we can at least begin to think about exactly what those cultural beliefs are.

Some Notes About Vocabulary

Language is an important component that shapes our social construction of reality, and so it matters for our conversations about gender. Historically, masculine pronouns were used in much writing because "men" was perceived as a universal category. So "mankind," at least in theory, refers to both women and men. In this book, I use masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably.

In English, *sex* can mean both the biological categories of males and females as well as engaging in some kind of sexual act (a subject we will return to in Chapter 5). Because of this confusion, it's sometimes easier to use the term *sex category* to distinguish between these two meanings of the word. You will see these two terms used interchangeably throughout this book.

We already introduced the concept of transgender, but you'll also encounter the word *cisgender* in this book. Cisgender refers to people whose sex category and gender identity match up. If your gender assignment at birth was female and you choose to live as a woman, you're cisgender.

WHY STUDY GENDER?

This question—why study gender—brings us back to some of the questions with which we began this introduction. You may have your own reasons that bring you to this book, but the general answer to this question is that gender matters. Perhaps you've already noticed the ways in which gender matters in your own life. In this book, we'll push that understanding even further by raising questions about what gender is and how it operates. Our journey can be summarized with three main goals. First, we'll be building an understanding of the ways in which gender is socially constructed in a global, historical, and intersectional context. One fundamental truth about gender that those who study this topic have arrived at is that gender varies a great deal based on where, when, and who you are. We'll be using all three perspectives to explore those complexities.

Our second goal in this textbook is to debunk any ideas about what is normal and abnormal in regard to gender. We do this through looking at gender globally and by being intersectional—by placing the experiences of people of color, gays, lesbians, transgenders, and working-class people at the center rather than at the margins of our inquiries. Looking at what it means to be a gay man or a Middle Eastern woman should not teach us what it means to be different from some unspoken norm (straight, white women and men), but it should help reveal the unique lessons to be learned about gender in the experiences of many different kinds of people.

Because of this goal, the particular language we use to talk about different experiences and places in the world is important. The term *Western* assumes a geographic centering but also an economic and social one. Societies are Western if they see Europe as the center of the world, and this terminology derives from colonial philosophy. We will generally use the term "Western" or "Anglo-European" when we refer to cultural phenomena. But you will also hear terminology like *developing* and *developed* or *global North* and *global South*, which reflect different ways of understanding global divisions (which we will discuss in Chapter 3).

We will be emphasizing the social construction of gender, but remember from the Thomas principle that just because something is socially constructed doesn't mean it has no real consequences for people's lives. Gender may be socially constructed, but it is also a system of inequality; understanding gender in this light is the third goal we will be pursuing. What we believe about gender has real consequences for the lives of women and men around the world. Gender distributes power to people. As we will explore, it may cut short the lives of many men, cause some women to live with the fear of physical assault, and influence how much pleasure you experience in your sexual life, how much money you make, and how much leisure time you have. When we begin to see gender around us, we will also begin to see the ways in which gender sometimes works to help some and hurt others. But we will argue that as a system that distributes privilege, gender can negatively affect everyone at some point in their lives. For many people who study gender, the answer to the question "Why study gender?" is that understanding gender is the first step toward deciding what needs to be changed and then taking action.

There are a lot of questions about gender to be asked and a lot of different answers to be explored. Many answers contradict each other. During one semester of my sociology of gender course, a student complained after class that his head hurt—not because of a hangover or too much yelling, but because the class was making him think too much. Can you think too much about gender? Perhaps. Sometimes students are frustrated by the lack of easy answers when it comes to gender, but asking questions seems to be the first step in finding out something that's truly meaningful to you, and that is what we will be seeking to do in this book.

Terms

biosocial approach 6

cultural genitalia 7

gender assignment 6

gender attribution 3

intersectionality 5

intersex 9

sexual dimorphism 6

strong social constructionist approach 7

Thomas principle 3

transgender 9

Works Cited

Adelman, L. (Director). (2003). *Race: The power of an illusion* [Motion picture]. United States: California News Reel.

Avdagić, S. C., Barić, I. C., Keser, I., Cecić, I., Šatalić, Z., Bobić, J., & Gomzi, M. (2009). Differences in peak bone density between male and female students. *Archives of Industrial Hygiene and Toxicology, 60*(1), 79–86.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Ferber, A. L., Holcomb, K., & Wentling, T. (2008). *Sex, gender and sexuality: The new basics.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Haier, R. J., Karama, S., Leyba, L., & Jung, R. E. (2009). MRI assessment of cortical thickness and functional activity changes in adolescent girls following three months of practice on a visuo-spatial task. *BMC Research Notes, 2,* 174.

Halpern, D. (2012). *Sex differences in cognitive abilities* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

International Osteoporosis Foundation. (2015, September 17). Facts and statistics [Web page]. Retrieved from http://www.iofbonehealth.org/facts-statistics#category-23

Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Nanda, S. (2000). *Gender diversity: Crosscultural variations.* Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Office of the Surgeon General. (2004). Bone health and osteoporosis: A report of the surgeon general: 6 determinants of bone health [Web article]. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK45503/

Roy, W. G. (2001). *Making societies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Schilt, K. (2010). *Just one of the guys: Transgender and the persistence of gender inequality.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs.* New York, NY: Knopf.

Wade, L., & Ferree, M. M. (2015). *Gender: Ideas, interactions, institutions.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

2

WHAT'S THE "SOCIOLOGY" IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER?

Understanding Sociology and Gender

WHY DO YOU NEED THEORY TO UNDERSTAND GENDER?

Students hear the word *theory,* even as it relates to something as interesting as the study of gender, and have one of several possible reactions. They may become nervous and uneasy at the prospect of trying to grasp seemingly unreachable, complex concepts. They may roll their eyes and sigh loudly while muttering, "What does theory matter to me?" A few students may anticipate with great enthusiasm the intellectual endeavor that learning to understand and apply theory involves. But I suspect those students may be in the minority, and their eagerness may cause more eye rolling and sighing on the part of some of their classmates. Given the difficulty of learning theory and the anxiety it may cause, why is it important to understand theories about gender?

Learning and understanding gender theories becomes a little less scary when you realize that everyone already has some working theory about gender and the way it operates in the world. From the first moment someone said to you as a small child, "That's what girls do and not what boys do," you probably began to develop your own explanation for why that was so. As we get older, our theories about how gender works become more sophisticated. They may be grounded in a sense that we act in gendered ways because of our biology or because that's what everyone around us seems to expect. We may have a working explanation of gender for certain situations (family life and intimate relationships) and a different set of explanations for other contexts (work and school life).

As you learn the theoretical approaches various people have developed in relation to gender, there's a very strong possibility that some of them will sound familiar and that others will make less sense to you. This is likely because some theories match more or less closely the working theory you've already developed about how gender works. Regardless of the specific content of your own theories about gender, we all have a general sense of what gender is and how it works, and at a very basic level, this is what a theory is—a set of statements and propositions that seek to explain or predict a particular aspect of social life (Newman, 2016).

Three Reasons to Learn Gender Theories

If we all already have our own theories about gender, then why is it important to learn theories that have been developed by other people? Why aren't our own personal theories good enough? There are three answers to that question. One answer is that although we all have our own theories about gender, we may have never had the opportunity or inclination to test those theories in a meaningful and rigorous way. You can test your individual theory of gender against your own experiences, but as we've already discussed in Chapter 1, your own experiences are likely to be very different from those of people in other parts of the world and with other identities. For example, your theory may work very well at explaining why a wife in a heterosexual married couple does much of the housework, but can it help explain the division of household labor between married gay or lesbian couples? Your theory may work for some situations in your own life but not for others.

Most of the theories we'll be discussing in the next two chapters have been developed by people who've had the time, opportunity, and inclination to develop their theories and to test their usefulness in a variety of ways, including conducting social research. Ideally, that research tests these theories in a variety of settings and situations, making the explanatory power of the theory that much greater. Throughout the book, you'll see these theories applied to specific situations to explain a wide variety of behaviors.

A second reason theory is important is that it helps us to test the explanatory "wings," so to speak, of our own way of understanding gender. You may have very strong beliefs about your own particular theory of gender. But your ability to defend that belief depends on your being able to demonstrate why your beliefs are right and others are wrong. Learning theory forces you to seriously consider the strengths and weaknesses of your own way of thinking. This happens through gaining a thorough and workable understanding of how other theories work. Why? Because to demonstrate that another theory is wrong, you have to have a pretty good understanding of what it says and how it works. You may read about radical feminism in this chapter and not at all agree with the way in which radical feminists understand gender. But developing your own

explanation for why radical feminism is wrong requires that you further develop your own way of understanding gender in response to their ideas. In other words, it's not enough to simply say someone else's explanation of gender inequality is wrong; you must be able first to demonstrate *how* they're wrong and then to demonstrate how *your* explanation is better. If you think of your own way of understanding gender as a set of wings you've constructed for yourself to navigate through life, learning other theories about gender is like putting those wings through a series of test flights to see whether they really work.

The final reason it's important to learn theories about gender has to do with our own ability to see and understand the world accurately. Can we trust our own vision of the world? Is what we see true or real, and what does it mean to say something is *real*, anyway? Do the beliefs we may already have about gender influence what we see and feel? For example, psychologists identify **confirmation bias** as our tendency to look for information that confirms our preexisting beliefs while ignoring information that contradicts those beliefs. If you believe gay men act more feminine, confirmation bias predicts that you will pay special attention to all the gay men you know or see who act more feminine while ignoring both the gay men who *don't* act feminine and the non-gay men who *do* act feminine. Confirmation bias suggests that our own working theories of gender can serve as blinders, preventing us from seeing and considering certain gendered phenomena in our lives.

Learning about other theories is a way to remove those blinders through focusing our attention on aspects of gender that we might not otherwise have seen or noticed. Along these lines, many sociologists speak of using theory as a kind of lens through which to see the world. Like binoculars, magnifying lenses, microscopes, telescopes, and 3D glasses, these different lenses provide us with different views of the world.

All three of these reasons suggest that learning theories of gender is important because they help us to become better thinkers in general—and especially better thinkers as related to issues of gender in our lives. So let's begin our exploration of theories of gender by looking at feminism and its influence on sociological ways of thinking about gender.

Gender in Sociology Before Feminism

Sociology, like many of the traditional academic disciplines, is a discipline developed primarily by white, upper-class, European, presumably heterosexual men. Early sociologists, such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, developed the foundations of sociological theory as a response to the problems they perceived in their own lifetimes—problems such as industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism. But as feminists would later point out, their view of the world was inevitably shaped by their own positions as white, largely upper-class, heterosexual,

European men. These men assumed that they were describing experiences and concepts that applied to everyone, regardless of their gender, race, class position, or sexuality; but as we will continue to discover in this book, there are problems with assuming any kind of universal experience. Although women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, and later Jane Addams and Jessie Bernard had important influences on sociology and the sociological study of gender, the consideration of gender within sociology was limited for much of its history.

?

Are there still ways in your society in which men's experiences are assumed to be universal? Can you think of any specific examples of this tendency? How would our thinking be different if we assumed women's experiences were universal? For example, what if giving birth to children was assumed to be a basic, universal experience?

Why, given how great sociology as a discipline is, were sociologists themselves so oblivious to the importance of gender for so long? Here's one possible answer to that question. Like many academic disciplines before the advent of feminism, sociology departments were made up of mostly men, and so they didn't think much about the importance of gender. Before you accept that answer too quickly, take a moment to think fully about the implications of that statement. Is there a particular reason that men would be expected to be less concerned about gender than women? In the way our dimorphic, Anglo-European gender system works, you need women to have men, and that means both men and women have a gender. In sociology departments full of *gendered* men, why did that necessarily mean that they didn't think about the importance of gender?

The answer to that question brings us to a consideration of how power and privilege work in society. The men in the sociology departments were in a privileged position because of their status as men. **Privilege** is a set of mostly unearned rewards and benefits that come with a given status in society. Writer Roxane Gay calls privilege a sort of peculiar benefit (Gay, 2014). As a Black, queer woman and a child of Haitian parents, Gay describes how even though she may lack certain benefits in the United States, she enjoyed many privileges relative to children in Haiti. Everyone has some privilege and everyone lacks some privilege. Privilege, Gay and others tell us, is a complicated thing.

Privilege can take the form of actual rewards, such as the privilege of knowing that as a man, you can generally make much more than most women as a professional athlete. Consider men's professional leagues in the United States. The average NBA player makes $4.9 million, the average MLB player earns $3.8 million, and the average NFL player brings in only $2 million (Badenhausen, 2015). Compare those numbers to the maxium salary for a woman playing in the WNBA, which is $109,500, which means that the average NBA player makes 45 times the earnings of the highest-paid WNBA player. In golf, the top prize money for the PGA, at over $340 million, is five times that of the LPGA, at $61.6 million. For winning the World Cup in 2015, the

U.S. Women's Team took home $2 million. The German men's World Cup champions won $35 million. Surfing, tennis, and marathons are among the few professional sports that have instituted gender equity policies in award money (Women's Sports Foundation, 2015).

Privilege is trickier to identify when it signifies the absence of barriers that exist for less privileged people. When a white, upper-class woman goes to the store to return an item without a receipt, chances are she will not be questioned as to whether she really bought the item at the store or be challenged by the salesperson on her reason for returning the item. Having to convince strangers to trust you is an example of a barrier that is not faced by those in a privileged status to the same degree as it is by less privileged people in society. This kind of privilege has been described as functioning like the wind at your back if you're peddling a bicycle (Wimsatt, 2001). Privilege, like the wind, makes moving through the world that much easier, and you might assume you're moving so quickly because of your own effort—your pedaling. You probably won't realize how helpful the wind at your back was until you find yourself having to bike *into* the wind. It's difficult to realize what that's like until you've had to do it yourself—or maybe until you've talked to someone else who has had to do it.

Where does that leave us with the men in the field of sociology and their lack of concern about gender? Being mostly white, upper-class men allowed these sociologists to bike with the wind, and as far as they knew, everyone else was doing the same thing. Gender didn't seem very important to them in part because its effect on their lives, although still very important, was also less visible. This is, in fact, another form of privilege. Part of the benefit of being in a privileged status is that you don't have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. Do people who live in places that take such things for granted think about how lucky they are to be living in a place where there's access to electricity and clean water? Do people in the United States consider how convenient it is that people around the world know much more about American culture than the average American knows about other cultures? Probably not. Being American or from a place where these things are taken for granted is a privilege, and most people don't spend large chunks of their days thinking about the privileges they *have.*

Male sociologists were privileged by their gender, and that meant they didn't have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. This is one small part of the reason why those male sociologists did not seriously consider gender and an important lesson in the blinding properties of privilege. Privilege, in fact, is one of the reasons we need to be cautious in trusting the reality and objectivity of our own views about gender, and it is therefore another reason learning gender theories can be useful.

?

What are other examples of statuses that come with privilege? Can you think of specific barriers that don't exist for people with those privileges? How does having privilege affect the way you see and understand the world?

FEMINIST THEORIES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING ABOUT GENDER

The "F-Word": A Brief Introduction to Feminism and How It's Been Around Longer Than You Might Think

Across history, cultures, and civilizations, when women have asserted their power and asked for equality, it has almost always been perceived as dangerous. It is important to remember that the various versions of feminism we will discuss are just one manifestation of a long, global history of questioning the gender status quo and advocating the rights of women. Women in Kenya organized to fight the effects of colonial governments on their livelihood in 1948, and women in India were involved in working for their own rights along with their country's independence long before it was achieved in 1947 (Basu, 1995). Neither of these groups of women would have described themselves as feminists, though. Feminism in all its many forms assumes certain models of what it means to be a woman, what the goals of women should be relative to their status, and how to go about achieving those goals. But the feminist model, although it continues to expand and adapt to fit the diverse needs of women and men across the world, is, like sociology, a product of Anglo-European thought.

Globally, women define their own interests and goals very differently, and they sometimes perceive feminism as another attempt by the global North to make the rest of the world into their own image (Basu, 1995). Given this history, we should remember that those particular ideologies we label as feminism do not describe the totality of how women think about or organize in their own interests globally, as we will explore throughout this book. For now, because we're focusing on the relationship between feminism and sociological thought, we'll be talking about feminism and women's movements as they developed mainly in the Anglo-European world.

In the 21st century, calling yourself a feminist may be a bit less stigmatized than it was in the past, as pop icons like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift now label themselves feminists. But polls show that even though most Americans (85%) claim to believe in gender equality, they still don't label themselves feminists. In a recent poll in the United States, only 18% of respondents said they considered themselves feminists (Kliff, 2015). The numbers are better for younger Americans; among millennials, those between the ages of 18 to 25, 35% identify as feminists—47% of women compared to only 22% of men (Gendron, 2015).

Regardless of attitudes toward the label, feminism is integral to any discussion of gender and especially to a sociological exploration of gender. So what exactly is feminism, and why is it seen as so dangerous around the world?

The First Wave of the Feminist Movement

Feminists generally divide their discussion of feminism as a social movement into three different periods. The first wave of feminism coincided with suffrage movements in both Europe and the United States (Taylor, Whittier, & Pelak, 2004). This is different from the history of women's movements in most of the global South simply because nearly all the men and women in these nations were deprived of the right to vote or govern themselves by colonial powers. Women's suffrage, when it came, was often connected to suffrage for native peoples more generally. This first phase in the women's movement in the Anglo-European world is specific to the historical context of existing democracies in which male (and, in the United States, *white* male) citizens had long ago achieved the right to vote.

The early suffragettes were a diverse group in both their backgrounds and their goals, but many of their efforts focused primarily on enfranchisement, or getting women the right to vote. For some women in the movement, this was because they wished to pursue social reform goals that were not necessarily connected to gender, such as the legal prohibition of alcohol. These women saw getting the vote as the first step in this larger project. Other women of the first wave had more radical goals, including sexual freedom and expanding the roles of middle-class women in the workplace.

Gaining an expanded role for women in the workforce was an important goal for white, middle-class women, who largely did *not* do paid work outside the home. Suffragettes such as Sojourner Truth, a former slave who served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, drew attention to the differing experiences among women of the first wave. As a former slave, Sojourner Truth never had the luxury of *not* working, and the kind of work she did was considered "man's work" by many of the white suffragettes—although she was certainly never paid for it. As would be the case throughout the history of the feminist movement, the way women were positioned in society often led to a different outlook on what the main problems faced by women in society were and how to go about fixing those problems. Regardless of these differences, the first-wave movement was successful in gaining the right to vote for women in 1920 in the United States (and in 1928 in England, but not until 1944 in France).

Although there were important links between this first wave of feminism and the second wave that developed during the 1960s, some social movement scholars argue that a period of social movement abeyance characterized the years in between. **Social movement abeyance** is a way to keep the basic ideas of a movement alive during a period of decreased activism, often as a result of increased resistance and hostility to the movement or to a shift in the opportunities that make movements more or less successful. During periods of abeyance, social movements may focus on creating alternative cultures to survive rather than on directly confronting dominant institutions (Taylor et al., 2004). The idea of social

movement abeyance is to keep the core ideas of the movement alive and to maintain a small group of activists who can carry the movement into its next phase.

?

Based on your own knowledge and sense of the current state of the feminist movement, or movements for women's rights more generally, would you say the movement is currently in a state of abeyance? What evidence would you use to support that conclusion? What do you think it would take to see a resurgence in feminism or in social movements that focus on gender issues more generally?

The Second Wave of the Feminist Movement

When most people in the 21st century think of feminism, their frame of reference is the second wave of the feminist movement that began in the 1960s in the global North. This movement was part of a larger, global social movement cycle that included independence movements in the developing world as well as the civil rights movement in the United States. A **social movement cycle** is a period of increasing frequency and intensity in social movement activities that spread throughout various parts of society and globally across countries (Snow & Benford, 1992). During a social movement cycle, many connections are made between different social movements, with one social movement either directly or indirectly influencing the evolution of very different and geographically distinct movements. For example, some women who got their initial social movement experience within the civil rights movement in the United States moved on to the women's movement. In the developing world, women worked within nationalist movements to throw off colonial rule and establish democracies. Although they often included women's rights within those larger agendas, these movements were necessarily different because of the historical context of the postcolonial world.

The second wave of feminism, like the first wave, was characterized by diversity in the types of women involved and in the articulation of their goals. To understand this second wave of feminism is to understand that, as with all social movements, there was no one movement, no one group, and often no single, unanimously agreed upon agenda. As we will discuss later, organizations such as NOW (the National Organization for Women) focused on passing legislation in the United States that would have institutionalized the prevention of gender discrimination. One way they tried to accomplish this goal was through passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

Consciousness-raising also became an important part of the movement as feminists focused on finding connections between their personal lives and the politics of gender. For many feminists, the development of their own theories of gender were inextricably grounded in an examination of their own personal lives, and this work was just as important, if not more important, than changing institutions such as the government. Charlotte Bunch epitomized this connection when she wrote in 1968, "There is no private domain of a person's life that is not political and no political issue that is not ultimately personal.

The old barriers have fallen" (Bordo, 2003). From these examinations of the connections between the personal and the political came a focus on issues such as women's rights in the workplace (including the right to be free from sexual harassment), domestic violence, reproductive rights, and sexual violence.

Like the first wave before it, the second wave contained a great deal of diversity in both ideology and identity. Branches of the movement emerging from more leftist organizations formed the basis of what we call *radical feminism* and *socialist feminism.* As the movement evolved, more feminists drew attention to the problems in attempting to organize around or articulate one, unifying experience of being a woman. Lesbian feminists often felt their voices were not heard in the larger movement, and women of color began to feel that many of the goals of the movement centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women. Like all social movements, second-wave feminism struggled with maintaining a common purpose in the face of these conflicting experiences and identities.

The Third Wave of the Feminist Movement

Third-wave feminism was in many ways a response to the contradictions of second-wave feminism. Emerging during the 1980s and 1990s, third-wave feminism encompassed a diverse range of theories and orientations among both academics and activists. The voices of women of color, who were a strong influence in all three waves of the feminist movement, were strongest in the development of third-wave feminism. Women such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Aurora Levins Morales, and Rebecca Walker questioned essentialist tendencies in feminism, or the tendency to assume some universal experience of being a woman. They fought to organize around issues of race, sexual orientation, and social class in addition to gender.

In her collection of third-wave essays, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Rebecca Walker (1995) attempted to articulate a way to be feminist that is inclusive enough to include both men and women, whites and people of color, lesbians, gays and straight people, supermodels like Veronica Webb, and second-wave feminists such as Gloria Steinem. Third-wave feminism was influenced by postmodernism, postcolonialism, the work of Michel Foucault, and, eventually, queer theory.

The third wave is characterized in many ways by coming to terms with and being up front about the many contradictions that always lay beneath the surface of feminism as it developed. For example, postcolonialism influenced feminism in the third wave by drawing attention to the ways in which women had ignored the experiences of women outside the Anglo-European world. This examination raised questions about whether women could claim one global movement, or whether the interests and goals of women in the global North and global South were so different and opposed as to make any

umbrella movement impossible. Third-wave feminism, rather than ignoring or suppressing these types of questions, embraced them as crucial to the next phase of achieving gender equality.

Liberal Feminism

Across the three different waves, two important orientations have emerged in feminism, and the first of those is liberal feminism. Like many gender theories, feminists start with the assumption that gender inequality exists; then they go about explaining that inequality in a variety of different ways. **Liberal feminism** posits that inequality between men and women is rooted in the way existing institutions such as the government treat men and women. When these institutions limit the opportunities for women to compete with men in economic and political arenas, they create inequality. Why should women and men be provided with equal rights? Liberal feminism grounds these claims in a set of basic rights that all humans are entitled to in modern societies. Thus, liberal feminism is part of a larger social movement **master frame of equal rights** that includes the early civil rights movement and some, but not all, versions of the modern women's movement and the gay rights movements (Snow & Benford, 1992). A **master frame** is a method of interpreting the world that identifies a particular problem, suggests a particular cause for that problem, and proposes a way to resolve the problem. The equal rights master frame assumes that diverse groups of individuals in society, such as African Americans, women, and gays and lesbians, are entitled to the same rights as everyone else in society because we are all fundamentally the same. Thus, liberal feminists base their arguments for equality on the *similarities* between men and women; because we are all basically the same, we all deserve the same basic rights.

Like other rights-based movements, the methods liberal feminism prescribes for achieving equality are to gain and ensure those basic rights and give women the opportunity to compete on an equal playing field with men. So, during both the first and second waves of the feminist movement, liberal feminists worked for the right to an education, to own property, to vote, to be employed, and to be free from discrimination in the workplace. The assumption under liberal feminism is that once these barriers to competition are removed, the experiences, views, and attitudes of men and women will converge, or become increasingly similar.

Liberal feminists often pursue changes in legislation, such as Title IX, which made gender discrimination within any educational institution receiving federal financial assistance illegal. These kinds of changes in government policies based on the language of universal rights have had widespread and substantial effects on the lives of men and women across the globe, from increasing the rights of Islamic women when they divorce their husbands in India to partially accounting for the increased participation in organized sports for

women in the United States. Note that both of these examples fall within the frame of equal rights. In India, why should women not be entitled to the same rights to property and compensation after divorce as men? In the United States, why should women be deprived of the same right to participate fully in sports that is provided to men? Although liberal feminism is more strongly associated with the first and second waves of feminism, it is still an important method for understanding gender and a strong basis for organizing movements centered on gender issues.

Radical Feminism

Although threads of liberal feminism ran throughout the first and second waves of the feminist movement, radical feminism is primarily associated with the second and third waves. Radical feminism in its many forms and incarnations starts with the premise that women and men are fundamentally different (Taylor et al., 2004). **Radical feminism** locates this difference in a variety of sources, from their treatment as a "sex class" (Beauvoir, 1952) to early socialization patterns based on women's dominant role in raising children (Chodorow, 1978). According to the radical feminist perspective, gender is a fundamental aspect of the way society functions and serves as an integral tool for distributing power and resources among people and groups. Inequality is not solely a result of women being denied the opportunity to compete but is built into all aspects of society; gender affects our social and personal lives as well as our political and economic institutions. From a radical feminist perspective, men directly benefit from the subordination of women, and men's superior position in many societies is premised on ensuring women's inferiority.

How does this basic understanding of the roots of inequality affect the solutions and actions pursued by radical feminists to decrease gender inequality? For radical feminists, fundamental changes to the basic structure of society are necessary to bring about gender equality. A world in which women are no longer subordinate to men requires all-encompassing changes to the current social order rather than just legal changes that give women increased opportunities.

Important to this goal of restructuring for radical feminists are consciousness-raising activities. These activities are at the core of the popular feminist slogan, "The personal is political." **Consciousness-raising** helps women see the connections between their personal experiences with gender exploitation and a larger sense of the politics and structure of society. For example, consciousness-raising might help a woman to realize that her experience as the victim of sexual harassment is not an isolated, personal incident but a fundamental and inevitable product of the patriarchal way our society is structured; it is not an aberration, but one part of the way in which men maintain control in a society through fear and intimidation. Consciousness-raising helps radical feminists to generate necessary critiques of the way society functions to uncover its gendered implications.

These two feminist approaches just begin to scratch the surface of feminist thinking. As this overview of liberal feminism and radical feminism suggests, it would be a mistake to assume there is one and only one way to be a feminist, just as it would be a mistake to assume there is one and only one way to be a man or a woman. Although these two particular feminist orientations are most important to the development of sociological thought, the wide range of other feminisms is a testament to the great diversity of experiences and perspectives that exist in the world surrounding gender. We could easily include a discussion of socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, lesbian feminism, postcolonial feminism, ecofeminism, and postmodern feminism, to name just a few. If we can define feminism in general as an ideology that seeks to combat gender inequality, there are an infinite variety of ways people have developed to address that central problem. Given this reality, it is more appropriate to talk about feminisms rather than any one correct version of feminism or way of being a feminist.

Men and Feminism

At this point you might ask yourself, "Where were the men while all this was happening?" You might ask whether conversations about feminism are at all compatible with conversations about men, and if so, how? You might be concerned, given the considerable amount of time we've just spent talking about feminism and the assumptions many people have about feminism, that this book is going to be all about how much men suck.

Let's start with the first question: Where were men during these various waves of the feminist movement? The answer is complicated. Some men *were* involved in various places and times in women's movements. In the first-wave feminist movement in the United States, men such as abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Henry Ward Beecher (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) were involved in working for women's suffrage along with the abolition of slavery. Many 19th-century activists saw these issues as deeply connected, although the two issues also sometimes led to divisions within the movement. The National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) emerged with the second wave of the women's movement in the 1970s and focuses on issues such as child custody and ending men's violence (NOMAS, n.d.). Globally, men and women have often worked side by side in movements for national liberation and establishing democracy. In Kenya, women fought alongside men in the Mau Mau war of 1952 for Kenya's independence from colonial control. Women involved in social movements often argue that the accomplishment of their goals would benefit both men and women in society, as we will see later. Although this may be true, most people involved in women's movements are often still women.

Are conversations about feminism compatible with conversations about men? The answer to this second question is a definite yes. As mentioned, feminists argue in various