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GENDER

Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun

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"Gender is the backcloth against which our daily lives are played out. It suffuses our existence so that, like breathing, it becomes invisible to us because of its familiarity."

(Burr, 1998: 2)

Imagine the following scenario: You are a man walking down the street wearing lipstick, heels and a skirt. People look at you -- some casting sidelong glances, others openly staring -- attempting to make sense of the "social aberration" they see before them. They may well decide that you are (a) a transgender person who (perhaps deliberately) didn't get it quite "right"; (b) a gay man heading for a drag club; or (c) a straight man in fancy dress for a stag night. Gender limits how we view the world and people in it and what we can do with our lives. It is not considered "normal" for men to routinely wear what are perceived as "women's" clothing or makeup -- there has to be some sort of explanation for it. In order to acceptably engage in such "gender-bending" behavior, you are seen as either a special category of person (e.g., gay, transgender) or in an exceptional context which allows or demands deviations from "the norm" (e.g., a stag night).

This chapter introduces a critical psychology of gender. We aim to provide you with tools for critically analyzing the construction of gender in mainstream psychology and in everyday life. First we demonstrate why gender is a critical social issue and discuss what we mean by gender. Next we illustrate some of the core assumptions underpinning mainstream psychological approaches, using the example of Victoria's research on lesbian-mother families. We then consider assumptions about gender in the wider culture, using the example of Virginia's research on dictionary definitions of female and male genitalia. Finally, we outline features of a critical psychology of gender. However, we do not want to suggest simply that "critical is good, mainstream is bad." Some mainstream psychological work has been very important. More to the point, few examples of critical psychological work on gender have made practical

contributions to social change. We end by considering whether critical psychologists *can* make effective interventions into our two-sexed, two-gendered world, and describe one positive example.

GENDER AS A CRITICAL SOCIAL ISSUE

Gender is a hugely important, influential and complex categorization system which has profound consequences on the lives of everyone -- those who always notice it, because they do not fit within its remits, and those who virtually never notice it, because they do. Think back to the last time you completed a form asking for personal details (e.g., for medical reasons or insurance). Chances are you were expected to mark either "male" *or* "female. Many of you, like us, marked one box without any thought. In contrast, some of you may have agonized over which box to tick, perhaps wishing for another option, as neither option allowed you to be true to how you see yourself. The forced choice was yet another instance reminding you that you do not "fit" within this either/or categorization system.

Gender is a critical social issue because it is associated with various social inequalities, exclusions, and the experience of abuse. Ideas about *gender-appropriate* behavior structure people's most mundane practices, such as whether you use public toilets with urinals or without, whether you bare your chest or not at the local swimming pool, whether you buy perfume or aftershave, and whether you button your shirts from the left or right. Gender is a strong indicator of how your behavior is judged, and how much your time and work are valued. In the Western world, despite legislative reforms,

gender-based pay inequality remains. Women in heterosexual families still overwhelmingly perform the majority of domestic and parenting work. Although some men participate more in domestic labor and childcare, these men typically see themselves, and are seen by others, as "helping out." In most cases, even when women and men perform equal amounts of domestic labor, women retain the overall responsibility for deciding what tasks need to be performed (Dryden, 1999). The point is that although there has been significant social change in the last 30 years, and despite protests that "things are equal now," women and men's lives continue to be shaped by rather different expectations and opportunities.

Another example of gender's influence is that our sex/gender is crucial in determining the likelihood that we will enact, or experience, violence. Women are far more likely than men to be subject to sexual violence, and to physical violence within the context of heterosexual relationships. While many men experience physical and sexual violence, it results typically from other men. People who transgress gender norms, such as people who are transgender, are also highly likely to experience a wide range of victimization, ranging from harassment on the street to sexual assault (Hill and Willoughby, 2005). However, gender norms don't simply marginalize certain groups (e.g., women; people who are transgendered); they also privilege certain groups (e.g., men; people who conform to gender norms).

These gender dimensions of privilege and marginalization intersect with other dimensions of privilege. Gender influences, and is shaped by, other social categories associated with inequality and exclusion, such as race, culture, class, and sexuality.

Within this framework (referred to as *intersectionality*), the experience and impact of gender is mediated by these (and vice versa), but the effects are not simply additive. The intersectional dimensions work more like the ingredients that make bread than the different layers of a ham, cheese and relish sandwich. It is not possible to remove one ingredient from bread dough and still successfully make the bread. Neither is it possible to point to the effect of just one ingredient and say "there, right there, that's the yeast" or "there's the salt." If one component is removed, the resulting bread is fundamentally different. In contrast, if one component of sandwich filling is removed (ham, cheese, or relish), the others remain the same, unaffected, but the overall filling of the sandwich would be less. This demonstrates the second point: gender + race + sexuality does not simply equal more oppression than just gender + sexuality; and you cannot easily point to, or remove, the effect of one from the overall experience. Multiple social categories work in concert (and sometimes in opposition) to shape each other, and how we can live in, and experience, the world.

For example, let's look at gender and sexuality. We use the term *sexuality* in this chapter instead of a more traditional concept like sexual orientation or sexual identity because it fits with a critical psychology that acknowledges several things: Sexuality is broader than just *who* one has sex with; it is socially shaped and produced (it doesn't just reside within individuals); and it is characterized often by fluidity and change. Gender and sexuality are closely associated categories. Lesbian women who defy normative expectations about sexuality are often seen as gender "inverts," as butch or masculine. Early sexuality theorists portrayed lesbians as male souls trapped in female bodies and wrote of lesbians' fondness for male clothing and traditionally masculine

activities (Clarke, in press). More broadly, a gendered ideology of passivity and activity pervades Western societies' notions of sex and sexuality: Men, masculinity, and male sexuality embody activity; women, femininity, and female sexuality embody passivity. The point we emphasize is that for the individual, gender is never independent of other social identities.

WHAT IS GENDER?

At this point, you may be asking "what do they mean by gender'? This is the million dollar question! There are multiple ways of theorizing gender in psychology, many of them contradictory. Most psychological research is concerned with gender on two interrelated levels. First, at the social level, gender is a social categorization system, which simultaneously informs individuals about the importance of gender and its origin and provides us with information about appropriate ways to live as gendered people. Second, at the individual level, there is the personal experience and expression of gender -- people's sense of themselves as gendered beings, the way they enact their lives in a gendered fashion. Cutting across these different levels are three main models of the origin and meaning of gender. We outline these models here, and then discuss some in more detail in subsequent sections.

Gender as nature. Here, gender is used to refer to the *sex* of our body and/or to masculine/feminine personality traits. This is a biologically-based explanation, where our personalities, desires, needs, abilities, beliefs and so on result from hormones, genes or some other biological factor. Prior to the 1970s, this was the dominant

framework for thinking about gender, but it still frequently appears in various guises, especially in the field of evolutionary psychology. In complete contradiction to its initial meaning, the term "gender" has come to be used as a stand-in for the term "sex," to refer to the biological body -- as in the question "which gender are you, male or female?" This is an *essentialist* view of gender, meaning that gender is a fixed and stable feature of the person or their personality -- their nature -- from birth to death, and does not change depending on context or situation. Gender is *what you are.*

Gender as nurture. Here, gender typically refers to masculine or feminine (or androgynous) personality traits. Gender is a cultural overlay of sex -- what culture adds to a biological bedrock. Gender is seen as something individuals learn at an early age, from the social environments we grow up in and from the ideas about gender available in our culture. Children learn the range of culturally-appropriate and inappropriate desires, practices, beliefs and feelings to match their sexed body, which then become internalized as a stable part of that person. It is impossible not to have gender. This use of gender was first theorized in the 1970s, and was a radical idea at the time, because it separated *gender* (socially learned) from *sex* (biology), and demonstrated no necessary relationship between the two. It is still the dominant model of gender in feminist psychology, and some mainstream and critical psychology. Again, this is an *essentialist* view of gender, as learned gender is seen to be stable and relatively impervious to the influence of immediate context. Gender is *what you have.*

Gender as social construct. This is the most challenging way gender is theorized, and the basis of much of the critical psychology work around gender we discuss further

below. It refers to a complex set of ideas about gender which question the core assumptions of both nature and nurture frameworks. The social constructionist approach moves away from any idea of gender as a natural phenomenon. Instead, gender is seen to be a social construction, particular to a specific sociocultural historical period, a result of shared cultural knowledge and language use (Bohan, 1997) rather than of internal psychological or biological processes. Two key components of social constructionist accounts of gender are worth noting: *anti-essentialism* and *social categorization*. Anti-essentialism means that gender is not seen as a stable, permanent feature of individuals, as something that resides *within* individuals as part of either biology or personality. Instead, gender is theorized as an *unnatural* social categorization system, which prioritizes, and emphasizes, gender difference. Categories of masculinity and femininity are not seen as naturally resulting from biological difference between "male" and "female" bodies, but as social products, resulting from society. Some social constructionists see the idea that there are two types of sexed bodies, and two types of gendered people who are different from each other, as a powerful ideology that shapes reality rather than one that simply reflects reality. In this sense, we believe there are two sexes because the world around us continually reflects this idea and tells us it is so (and we in turn participate in reproducing this idea). Within this approach, gender is *what you do*, rather than something you *have* or *are*. Individuals *do* -- "act out" -- gender in our lives and interactions. However, we still "perceive ourselves as *intrinsically* gendered because gender so thoroughly infuses our experience" (Bohan, 1997: 40, emphasis added) through the power of social norms.

Importantly, regardless of your framework, gender is something that *all* people experience. However, women are most frequently seen to have or embody gender -- men just "are." This reflects a long history in psychology where men are presented as normal and women as "different" from men, and their difference is in need of an explanation (Tavris, 1993). The term gender can be used as more acceptable shorthand for "women" -- e.g., "gender issues" studied within a university are typically "women's issues." From the social constructionist viewpoint, men and women are just as "gendered" as each other, because the social categorization system affects us all. Even if we resist it and do gender differently (e.g., we become what Kate Bornstein [1994] refers to as a "gender outlaw"), we are still engaged in "doing gender." Thus, while men as a group are often privileged over women as a group by gendered constructions and practices, individual men are just as constrained by constructions of gender as women are. For example, traditional constructions of masculinity around rationality, individualism and aggressiveness (and femininity around emotionality, relationality and submissiveness) have reinforced strongly gendered divisions of labor where top-paying jobs "requiring" "masculine" qualities are seen as unsuited to women -- thus privileging men as a group. However, at the same time, these constructions of masculinity can be bad for men individually. For example, they can result in a "stoicism" which sees men not seeking help for health problems.

Gender in Feminist Psychology

In mainstream psychological research, gender is a hugely important category, even if it is not a focus of research. Psychological researchers will nearly always report the sex of

their participants, assuming this to be relevant, regardless of whether gender is a key

theoretical consideration. More explicitly, the broad framework of "sex differences" is

pervasive in psychology. Psychologists have searched for evidence of sex differences

in everything from mathematical ability, to olfactory perception, to spatial abilities, to

brain organization, to … the list goes on (e.g., Geary, 1998)! But this framework is

highly contentious, and has been questioned right from the start (Thompson Woolley,

1910).

Within feminist psychology -- which has been defined as "psychological theory and

practice which is explicitly informed by the political goals of the feminist movement"

(Wilkinson, 1997a: 247) -- there are different perspectives on a sex-difference

approach. Although many contemporary feminist psychologists view sex differences

research as meaningful and useful, others have critiqued it, and questioned whether

psychologists *should* study sex differences (e.g., Kitzinger, 1994). Ideas about gender

also shape which topics and methods psychologists see as important. Mainstream

psychology has been referred to as "malestream" psychology because it ignored

women, failed to address topics of relevance to women's lives, and offered an

androcentric (male-centred) perspective on psychological life. In the late 1960s, Naomi

Weisstein damned psychology's analysis of women, declaring that "psychology has

nothing to say about what women are really like, what they need and what they want,

… because psychology does not know" (1993: 197).

Feminist psychologists swept into the discipline with a radical, new agenda, re-

examining classic psychological models to demonstrate gender bias (such as

Kohlberg's moral development scale -- see Gilligan, 1982), and studying topics previously ignored. It wasn't until feminists started researching topics like rape and sexual assault that these topics were taken seriously as an important focus for research. There is still relatively little non-feminist psychological research on topics such as emotion, marriage and motherhood because these are seen as "women's issues" (Dryden, 1999). Similarly, feminist researchers were instrumental in developing the use of qualitative methods in (and beyond) psychology, methods that some mainstream psychologists still devalue as unscientific and subjective.

GENDER IN MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGY: THE PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN IN LESBIAN-MOTHER FAMILIES

In this section, we identify and explore problematic assumptions underpinning mainstream psychological approaches to gender, using Victoria's research on lesbian-mother families (Clarke, in press, 2007). Research on lesbian mothers, which began in the early 1970s, falls under the banner of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) psychology, often considered part of the broad domain of critical psychology (see Clarke and Peel, 2007). LGBTQ psychology initially emerged as a protest against the privileging of heterosexuality (sometimes referred to as heterosexism or heteronormativity) in mainstream psychology. It is focused on understanding the lives of LGBTQ people and the phenomena of non-normative sexualities and genders, and on countering prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people. It is both a scholarly enterprise and a practical, politically-oriented project.

The early 1970s, a time of significant social change, witnessed the emergence of the women's and the gay liberation movements. These political movements had a profound impact on many people and were a key factor in some people exploring their sexuality and "coming out" as lesbian or gay. Many of the women who came out as lesbian were heterosexually married and had children. In custody cases involving lesbian mothers, judges reversed their usual practice (based on gendered assumptions) of placing the child with the mother, and tended to give custody to the father (Harne and the Rights of Women, 1997). They often placed severe restrictions on lesbian mothers' contact with their children: Some were instructed not to discuss their lesbianism with the child or to allow a woman partner *any* contact. Judges and others had significant concerns about how children would develop in lesbian households, specifically about children's gender and sexual identities. Judges were clearly influenced both by psychological constructions of lesbianism, which had pathologized it, and by popular nurture theories of gender, which theorized two appropriately gendered, and opposite sexed, parents as necessary role models for "normal" gender and sexual identity development.

Supported by activists, "radical" psychologists worked to intervene positively into the lesbian-mother custody crisis. Their approach was to scientifically test the assumptions held by judges and others. Using quasi-experimental models, psychologists compared children of lesbian mothers to children of divorced heterosexual mothers as the control group. Most research focused on comparisons of children's gender and sexual identity development. A good outcome consisted of children in lesbian-mother families appearing to be no different from children in heterosexual-mother families and of

children conforming to normative expectations about gender and sexuality. Let's

consider a classic example of this sort of research.

The highly regarded developmental psychologist Susan Golombok conducted one of

the first and most influential comparative studies of children in lesbian-mother and

single heterosexual-mother families (Golombok et al., 1983). A key assumption was

that children possess a fixed and internal gender identity that directs their gender-role

behavior. Golombok et al. constructed two gender-role scales that measured the

frequency children engaged in a selection of "traditionally masculine and feminine

activities" (1983: 555) (e.g., playing imaginary games such as cops and robbers or tea

parties, and playing with mechanical toys or dolls). They treated gender-role behavior

as something that could be measured directly (e.g., through observing children

playing). Gender identity was regarded as a psychological construct, inside children's

minds, and so not directly measurable. Instead, it was measured indirectly, using

observations of sex-role behavior, and through asking questions about gender identity.

Golombok et al. reported no evidence of inappropriate gender identity for any of the

children, that all were glad to be the sex that they were, and none preferred to be the

"opposite" sex. They also reported that in both types of families, boys showed gender-

role behavior "that would ordinarily be regarded as characteristically masculine, and

the girls behaviour of a feminine type" (1983: 562). Finally, they reported that most

pre-pubertal children conformed to the "typical" pattern of having friends of their own

sex; the pattern of romantic crushes and friendships in the pubertal and post-pubertal

adolescents was also regarded as typical (heterosexual or no interests "in either direction").

Before we examine some of the problematic assumptions about gender that underpin these examples (you may have an idea already of what some of these might be), it is important to acknowledge the major contributions made by these and other studies to changing the political context in which lesbian mothers sought custody of their children. In Britain and other western countries, the courts' attitude to lesbian mothers has changed significantly since the early 1970s, and there is much greater acceptance of lesbian families. Lesbian mothers are now highly unlikely to lose custody of their children purely because of their lesbianism.

We highlight three overlapping problems with this type of research (Golombok et al.'s 1983 study was not unique in the approach it took!) from a feminist and a queer critical psychology standpoint, and discuss critical psychology approaches to these issues: (1) the binary construction of sex/gender, with sex belonging to the biological realm and gender the psychological and cultural realm; (2) the reification of gender -- the treatment of an idea as a real or living thing; and (3) the regulatory role of psychology in upholding normative conceptions of gender and gendered beings. Here, we are defining a *feminist* critical psychology approach as one in which assumptions, categories and implications of gender are interrogated within psychology and the wider society. A *queer* critical psychology goes further -- it seeks not just to interrogate or reveal but to dismantle the normative gender and sexuality categories within, and beyond, the discipline

Binary Construction

The first problem is that this research assumes sex and gender occupy different (complementary) realms, with a clear and appropriate mapping of gender to sex. Sex is treated as a natural (biological) fact, as is the notion that there are (only) two sexes (Garfinkel, 1967). Gender is psychological, but develops within certain cultural parameters. It is similarly dichotomized, and appropriately associated with only one sexed body. The assumption in Golombok et al.'s (1983) and other early lesbian parenting research -- which was radical at the time -- is that when children are born, they are (or should be) male or female. Gender (identity and role-behavior) develops shortly thereafter, with sexuality emerging later. All are binaries: male *or* female; masculine *or* feminine; heterosexual *or* homosexual. Ideally, sex and gender match up, and heterosexuality follows. If this matching does not occur, the assumption is that there is something "wrong" with the child, the environment, or the mother -- but not with the model.

This structure is problematic for anyone who is perceived as not fitting the model, such as lesbian mothers. Their gender role behavior (and sexuality) is viewed as suspect, and likely to adversely impact the gender or sexuality of their children (i.e., they might be lesbian or gay, or not appropriately masculine or feminine). Hopefully one of the key points you will take away from this chapter is that people who attempt to resist or to refuse the either/or possibilities of sex/gender and sexuality and become "outlaws"

from hierarchical binary constructions, or who occupy the female, feminine, homosexual side of the binary, are subjected to often-severe social marginalization.

Reification of Gender

Reification means treating something that is essentially abstract as a living or real thing. What we know as gender is *abstract*. It is a construct that psychologists use to theorize and explain patterned differences and experiences, which they then treat as real, reflecting some underlying thing. This "thing" gender is treated as a thing that exists inside us, something we possess that shapes our actions and interactions with others and our identity. Gender is also treated as something that can be measured through behaviors and practices (such as playing cops and robbers, or playing tea parties); these are taken to be outward "expressions" of our inner gender identity, which should match our sex.

The social constructionist model of gender as *something that we do*, outlined earlier, is the preferred model of many critical psychologists, ourselves included, and within that model, gender is not reified. The cultural/queer theorist Judith Butler has famously argued that gender is *performative*: "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender… identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990: 25). In simple terms, this means that practices like mainly girls playing tea parties, or mainly boys playing cops and robbers, create the reality of gender. By engaging in these practices moment-by-moment, day after day, we produce and reproduce a *gendered reality* and, along with it, the illusion of a stable inner gender

identity (which is reified in research like that conducted by Golombok et al., 1983). Butler uses the notion of performativity rather than performance because the latter suggests that there is an inner *gendered* being directing the outward enactment of gender. In Butler's model, the gendered subject is produced in and through the performativity of gender, and there is no inner essence of gender.

But this does not mean that gender can be anything we want it to be! When teaching social constructionism, students often ask us some version of the following question: "If things are socially constructed does that mean they are not real?" This is an interesting and important question. Our socially constructed realities are intensely powerful. The effects of language can feel as real as the sun on our skin or the wind in our hair. Our gender enactments are regulated by powerful social norms that are reinforced every time gender is done in a normative fashion; there are sanctions for not doing gender in normative ways: from stares (recall the example that we started the chapter with) to violence; from psychiatric diagnoses and treatment to unemployment and poverty. We have already mentioned the violence done to people who are transgendered as an instance of the policing of gender norms. Some feminist theorists have argued that the social construction of the category "lesbian" by early male theorists of sexuality was an integral part of attempts to police women's gender behavior at a time when there was a strong feminist movement. The image of the doomed, barren and mannish lesbian was used to encourage female conformity to heterosexual gender norms, meaning heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood.

We almost all live our lives as if gender were "real." Even fully paid-up members of the social constructionist club like ourselves both do gender in relatively normative ways. It is very difficult to resist or refuse gender. Attempts to do gender differently may not be read in the way they are intended precisely because of what the sociologist Garfinkel (1967) called the "natural attitude" to gender -- a set of social facts (shared beliefs) about gender, including the "fact" that there are two and only two genders. People's perception of the world is filtered through this natural attitude. And gender infuses our language completely. Try telling a friend about your last night out without using any gender pronouns to describe the people you were with -- it's very difficult! "Gender outlaws" have developed words such as "hir" and "ze" to make it easier to talk about people who attempt to live outside of a binary sex/gender system (e.g., Bornstein, 1998). Others, like Bornstein, often pass as female (or male), even if not identifying as such.

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity also challenges the notion that gender flows from sex (see our first point of critique) by highlighting discontinuities between sex, gender and sexuality and arguing that *sex* is just as socially constructed as gender -- there is no naturally *sexed* body. This is a radical idea! Butler argues that gender does not flow from a *natural* sex difference in biological bodies, but, because gender is such a pervasive framework, we read the body as sexed (see also Laqueur [1990] for an interesting account of "making" sexed bodies). In these accounts, gender is conceptually prior to sex. Some feminist theorists use the concept of "sex/gender" to signal that both concepts are socially constructed (rather than biologically or socially derived facts) and that, in some models of gender at least, it is not possible to

conceptually separate "sex" and "gender": Each is implicated in the construction of the other (Kessler and McKenna, 1985).

Psychology's Regulatory Role

Finally, mainstream psychology has played a regulatory role, policing normative conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality, through research such as Golombok et al.'s (1983). Golombok et al. define gender-role behaviors as those *regarded by the culture* as masculine or feminine. Although they acknowledge the existence of cultural norms around gender, they do not offer any critique of these norms. They do not question the many assumptions implicit in concerns about children's psychosexual development in lesbian families: that heterosexuality is the norm; that (most) heterosexual people are appropriately gendered; and that lesbians' gender identities and sexualities are potentially suspect. Rather, by investigating the concerns that arise from these and other assumptions, they treat such assumptions as legitimate. This implicitly reinforces the framework that leads to the perceived problems. So although their research is beneficial in that it shows "good" psychological development within these frameworks, on another level it is problematic. It participates in the policing of damaging gender norms and of a binary model of sex/gender, where sex is treated as a natural fact and gender as a psychological/cultural one.

So, even mainstream psychological research that is critically engaged and politically motivated, that seeks to challenge problematic practices in relation to gender and sexuality (such as the denial of child custody to lesbian mothers purely on the basis of

their lesbianism), and which can and does lead to social change, also comes at a cost. In this instance, the cost is the reinforcement of problematic assumptions about gender and the perpetuation of a binary sex/gender system -- the very conditions which lead to the suggestion that lesbian mothers might not be "fit" parents. How would a critical psychology approach be different? As an academic and political project, critical psychology should be engaged in the task of working outside, and critiquing, the normative frameworks of gender (and sexuality) which make these debates and practices seem reasonable and sensible, which make them *possible*, as we have done briefly here.

GENDER IN THE WIDER CULTURE: DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF GENITAL PARTS

In this section we use Virginia's analysis of English language and medical dictionary definitions of female and male genital terms (see Braun and Kitzinger, 2001) to illustrate the ways in which supposedly neutral cultural texts like dictionaries, as well as the supposedly acultural biological body, are permeated with gendered discourses. We use this as a starting point to further outline features of a critical psychology of gender which draws on social constructionist ideas (e.g., Burr, 2003; Gergen and Davis, 1997). The questions constructionists ask relate to what the effects of different gendered constructions are and whose interests they serve.

Dictionaries are not value-neutral. As an authoritative source on words and meaning they lend authority to the values they reflect. Genital definitions, thus, provide a

particular version of what genitals are and what they are used for (see Braun and

Kitzinger, 2001). For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED; online) defines

clitoris, *penis* and *vagina* like this:

- Clitoris: A homologue of the male penis, present, as a rudimentary organ, in the

  females of many of the higher vertebrata.

- Penis: Anat. and Zool. The male genital organ used (usually) for copulation and

  for the emission or dispersal of sperm, in mammals containing erectile tissue

  and serving also for the elimination of urine.

- Vagina: 1. Anat. and Med. a. The membranous canal leading from the vulva to

  the uterus in women and female mammals. (OED Online, accessed 2

  November, 2007)

These definitions do not provide a neutral factual account of anatomy. Instead, they are

infused with gendered sexual assumptions:

- Only male genitals are used in sex. If you looked up "copulation," you would

  discover this only refers to *heterosexual* sex (and only sex intended for

  procreation); the OED defines it, zoologically, as "the union of the sexes in the

  act of generation."

- Only male genitals have any sort of "function" in the body -- female genitals are

  just there.

- The clitoris is like a much lesser version of the penis -- rudimentary, according to the OED, means "undeveloped, immature, imperfect." This does not sound good!

- The vagina's location is the most important thing about it, but location isn't relevant for penis or clitoris.

- The vagina is an (open) space for other things to pass through -- but the passage is directed *inward*. With a leap, this suggests penile penetration is the vagina's purpose.

- The penis is, the clitoris is sort of, but the vagina is not, an organ. What is an organ? It is "a part of an animal … that serves a particular physiological function" (OED). Hmmm.

What gendered assumptions are evident here? First, the penis appears as the primary referent, about which we learn the most, and in relation to which the clitoris is defined (as inferior). This illustrates the longstanding tradition of viewing the male body as norm, a point which ties back to the idea that people often equate gender with women. Second, gendered assumptions of masculine sexual *activity* and female sexual *passivity* are also evident in a sexualizing of the male body and a de-sexualizing of the female. This is particularly notable in relation to the clitoris definition; as the only organ whose sole function is sexual pleasure, the failure to mention this seems astounding! Is it that this function is obvious? That argument does not hold when we consider the penis definition, however, or, for instance, the definition of "anus," which includes the "ejection" of "the excrements" (OED). Passivity is also encoded in the definition of vagina -- a "canal" is a passive space through which things pass, rather than an active

organ that allows or inhibits passage. These tell us that female bodies are not coded as sexual bodies. Dictionary definitions appear still to "encode the dominant ideology of gender" (Willinsky, 1987: 147), with masculinity and femininity written on to anatomy. This illustrates Judith Butler's (1990) argument, discussed earlier, that gender is conceptually primary and shapes how we see the sexed body.

This discussion illustrates a key social constructionist argument: Language is not neutral, but ideological, filled with assumptions. It does not reflect the truth, but rather constructs truths. The traditional view of language in most mainstream psychology (also our commonsense one) is that language is a neutral vehicle for transmitting ideas and information. The contrasting view, often related to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (the theory that language precedes cognition/thought rather than following it), is that language *enables* thought. The theory that language does not simply *reflect* reality, but is involved in the *creation* of reality, is fundamental to social constructionism. The idea is this: We know what we know, we think what we think, and we see and experience the world in the ways we do, because the communities we exist within share linguistic traditions and practices (Davis and Gergen, 1997). Within linguistic communities, there is a *patterned*, rather than random, nature to language and thought (e.g., masculinity active, femininity passive); some social constructionists use the term *discourse* to refer to this patterning. Discourse here refers to a linguistic organizing framework for giving *particular* meaning to an object or concept (Gavey, 1989), which then precludes other possible meanings. Language and discourse make available to us certain ways of understanding the world (truths); we reproduce those ideas when we speak or otherwise

express them. Truth is not fixed and stable; truth can change (such as the idea that lesbian mothers were pathological).

No account is neutral. Language constructs the objects to which it refers in ways which foreground certain meanings and hide or deny others. Particular constructions of gender (e.g., gender difference, and gender as linked to sexed bodies) support the view of men's and women's genitalia *as different* (and as a key sign of who we are, as gendered people). This view of genitalia as different, and linked to identity, similarly reinforces the binary construction of gender based around a "two sex" model (Laqueur, 1990).

Why does this matter? The theory is that language, discourse and representation have effects: real material effects; personal, experiential effects. Gendered discourse about genitalia provides a context in which individuals whose genitals and gendered identities do not match up are especially likely to experience distress and discrimination. This context also makes practices to change genitals to fit gendered identities seem necessary and desired (e.g., gender reassignment surgery for transgender people or surgery on the genitalia of "intersex" people who are born with genitalia that do not conform to social norms for "male" or "female" bodies). So language and discourse are intimately bound up with personal, social and institutional practices -- they enable and constrain certain gendered identities, certain desires and practices. As another example, in the domain of heterosexual sex, the gendered constructions of passivity (female) and agency (male) make it difficult for women to instigate, or even insist on, condom use (Gavey and McPhillips, 1999).

CAN CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY HELP US TO CHANGE THE "TWO-SEXED, TWO-GENDERED" WORLD?

We hope we have challenged the growing assumption that mainstream psychology is *only* associated with shoring up inequalities and critical psychology is *only* associated with reducing inequalities and creating social change. It is more complicated: Both gender and sexuality are domains in which mainstream psychology has the potential to make a difference. Sue Wilkinson (1997) and Celia Kitzinger (1997) pointed out in the first edition of this book that many feminist and LGBTQ psychologists have been reluctant to wholeheartedly embrace critical psychology because of a concern that critical psychologists cannot (and do not) make meaningful contributions to social change. Thus, feminist and LGBTQ psychologists who prioritize social change over allegiances to particular theoretical or methodological approaches have advocated "using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (Unger, 1996).

While critical psychology challenges frameworks which help construct gender, it does not inevitably or easily lead to meaningful social change. The "high theory" focus of work that deconstructs gender and sexuality categories makes it often inaccessible to a wide audience and lacks obvious application to the issues facing people in the real world. Indeed, the problems critical psychologists often identify and challenge are not typically the problems everyday people identify, or are not couched in the same terms. So *if* social change is a goal (and it is not a goal for all critical psychologists), then the challenge is twofold: (a) How do you make claims about problematic constructions of gender while not reinforcing the idea of gender as essential and inherent? And (b) how

do you make ideas which so profoundly challenge the commonsense accessible and appealing? We continue to grapple with these questions.

However, the task is not impossible! We end with an example of how critical psychology ideas have produced meaningful social change. The *New View Campaign* (www.newviewcampaign.org) aims to challenge the medicalization of sex and associated practices like "disease-mongering" -- "creating" new diseases, with accompanying pharmaceutical "treatments" (see Moynihan and Cassels, 2005). Formed in 2000 by Leonore Tiefer, a leading feminist social constructionist scholar of human sexuality (e.g., Tiefer, 2004), and others, the *New View* emerged in response to an increasingly popular medical model of sexuality and the escalating influence of the pharmaceutical industry in sexuality research, education and treatment. The medical model is problematic because it locates the origin of sexual expression and sexual "problems" in biological bodies, ignoring the influence of the socially gendered constructions of sexuality. This domination of biologically-based sex theorizing fits within the "gender as nature" model discussed earlier.

Based in a constructionist view of sexuality (Tiefer, 2004), the *New View* argues that the meaning and experience of sexuality and gender is constantly being created and contested. It aims to challenge what it sees as particularly problematic constructions around women's (and by extension men's) sexuality, which pathologize women's bodies and sexualities. Gender constructions not only infuse how we can think about and experience sex; things work the other way as well. Discourse around sexual "dysfunction" constructs gendered, sexual bodies and subjects -- you can see this in

relation to Viagra and masculinity (Marshall, 2002). This flips on its head the usual understanding, which is that sex flows from gender; it reiterates Butler's (1990) point about gender as the primary, most important conceptual framework.

Importantly, the New View Campaign emphasizes both critique and alternatives. Interventions utilize the media, education, activism and academic work. The campaign has developed sexuality curriculum resources (Kaschak and Tiefer, 2002; Tiefer et al., 2003) and online continuing education courses for medical professionals (http://www.medscape.com/viewprogram/4705; http://www.medscape.com/viewprogram/5737). Members testified at the 2004 US Food and Drug Administration hearings around Intrinsa, a testosterone patch to treat "low sexual desire" in women, which is often thought of as a "symptom"/outcome of menopause. They opposed approving the drug and critiqued the notion that menopause is a *medical* condition, characterized by hormone deficiency. They questioned the idea (implicit in the diagnostic category "low sexual desire") that we can assess sexual "dysfunction" as the simple result of hormonal deficiencies, and highlighted the importance of social and contextual/relationship influences in sexuality. The *New View* approach suggests assessing if, in what ways, and why, "low sexual desire" is experienced as problematic by a woman, rather than treating it as a dysfunction inherent in her. And if it is problematic, exploring ways to change that (see Kaschak and Tiefer, 2002). Intrinsa was not approved.

This successful campaign demonstrates the ongoing, and sometimes rapidly changing, construction of the "truth" of sexuality, but it does not rely on essentialist gender or

sexuality categories, or on a supposed biological truth of genitalia or sexed bodies. Instead, it focuses on how pharmaceutical interventions, which claim to *uncover* a true, inner sexuality, are actually involved in the *construction* of that sexuality, and demonstrates how they are informed by particular societal constructions we often see as normal and natural. Crucially, the *New View* demonstrates how the links between knowledge and power work in the interest of certain groups (here, big pharmaceutical companies) at the expense of others. In this way, it is a critical psychology of gender and sexuality in action.

MAIN CHAPTER POINTS

This chapter:

- Highlights the "social fact" that we live in a world saturated by gender.
- Outlines three theories about the origins and meanings of gender: gender as nature, as nurture and as social construct.
- Critiques mainstream psychological assumptions about gender.
- Outlines key features of feminist and queer social constructionist theories of gender.
- Challenges the assumption that mainstream psychology is only associated with shoring up inequalities, and critical psychology is only associated with social change.
- Provides an example of a critical psychology of gender in action.

GLOSSARY

- **Feminist psychology/feminist critical psychology**: informed by the goals of the feminist movement, feminist psychology interrogates the assumptions, categories and implications of gender within psychology and the wider society. Feminist critical psychology marries the political goals of the feminist movement with the particular theoretical and methodological interests of critical psychology.

- **LGBTQ psychology**: a branch of psychology affirmative of LGBTQ identities, it focuses on providing psychological perspectives on the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people, and on challenging both prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people and the societal and psychological privileging of heterosexuality.

- **Gender**: at the social level, gender is a social categorization system, dividing humanity into "male" and "female." At the individual level, gender is the experience and expression of oneself as "female" or "male" (or neither of these).

- **Heteronormativity**: from queer theory, heteronormativity describes the social privileging of heterosexuality and the assumption that heterosexuality is the only natural and normal sexuality.

- **Heterosexual**: people whose sole or primary sexual and emotional attachments are to people of "the other" sex. Many critical psychologists seek to challenge the taken-for-granted status of heterosexuality -- that's why we're including it in this glossary!

- **Heterosexism**: the pervasive assumption of heterosexuality as the normative (or only) sexuality, evident in social institutions and everyday interactions.

- **Normative**: preferred to the term "normal," which implies a moral judgment, critical psychologists often use "normative" and "non-normative" to highlight what is constructed as *normal* and "abnormal" or "different" within dominant social values.

- **Queer**: used in the past as a derogatory term for homosexuals, queer is now used both as a generic term for LGBTQ people and for the particular body of critical theory ("queer theory") that questions the usefulness of identity categories such as "lesbian" and "gay". People who identify as queer often want to signal their allegiance to values associated with queer theory and queer activism.

- **Queer critical psychology**: seeks to interrogate and dismantle the normative gender and sexuality categories within, and beyond, the discipline of psychology.

READING SUGGESTIONS

Tavris (1993) provides a compelling critique of psychology's gender bias against women and is a good place to get a historical sense of feminist critique within the discipline. Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1998) provided a groundbreaking critique of the basic gender-difference framework dominating psychology. For an overview of different theoretical frameworks around gender, try Bohan (1997), and see Burr (2003) for an introduction to social constructionism. Bornstein (1998) provides an entertaining

(non-academic) read which challenges basic assumptions about gender identity; for a more theoretical take, and an accessible introduction to Judith Butler and queer theory, try Sullivan (2003).

INTERNET RESOURCES

- American Psychological Association Division 44 –Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues: http://www.apadivision44.org/

- Press for Change -- campaigning for respect and equality for all trans people: http://www.pfc.org.uk/

- The Intersex Society of North America: http://www.isna.org/

- Vagina Vérité -- a diverse conversation forum and resource site: http://www.vaginaverite.com

- XY: Men, masculinities, and gender politics: http://www.xyonline.net/

QUESTIONS

1. Find a recent example of comparative research on lesbian mother and heterosexual families (e.g., Fulcher et al, 2008) and consider the following questions: Is the study guided by heterosexist assumptions? Does the study reinforce social norms around sex/gender and sexuality?

2. List all the terms and associations you can think of for "lesbian," "gay," and "heterosexual" (e.g., slang terms, stereotypes, famous people, behaviors or practices). What do the terms and associations reveal about cultural attitudes?

3. List the ways gender shapes your daily life. What are some positive and negative aspects of this? Is your experience of gender shaped by your membership in other social categories?

4. How could you challenge gender norms either individually in your daily life or in the form of a group action? What are some barriers to success?

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