

‘Gender’ and ‘sex’

Before one can explore the link between gender and sexualities, it is important to take a step back and find a way of engaging with the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in English.

In the year 2009, discourses about “*gender equality*” have become a familiar part of political discussions, conversations within media-based popular culture, and everyday interactions between people. Attitudes towards these discourses vary greatly, but whereas 20 years ago, a distinction between the terms “sex” and “gender” would not have been part of general knowledge in many contexts, nowadays it is not unusual to find such a distinction well ingrained into “*common sense*” discussion.

On the other hand, it is also possible to find many who still believe that ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are two words for the same thing. English is - in fact - the only language in the world known to have embedded these two terms so deeply into its 21st century vocabulary (globalized through the way in which the legacy of colonial policies on language and education have been re-expressed in post-colonial contexts through the power of the media, the internet, and globalized economic and political communication structures). Most other languages express the body’s relationship with biology, reproduction, and culture through one word: *isini* (isiXhosa), *ubulili* (isiNdebele), *boeng* (seSotho), *geslag* (Afrikaans). Depending on the context, and the speakers, such terms may refer to the biological capacity of (for example) a dog (“*male*” or “*female*”) and/or the social role of the animal within the pack. In English, however, it’s become familiar to see the term “sex” as referring to biological capacities and “gender” referring to the culturally constructed roles, identities, and symbolic locations of people as “*men*” or “*women*” within specific geographical, social, and historical contexts.

How do we understand the development of the distinction between the words ‘sex’ and ‘gender’? Is it useful? What are its historical and political roots?

One place to begin developing a response to these questions is to note the long and very powerful discourse within Northern¹ knowledges which conflates social meaning with the biology of the (individual) body. As early as the 4th century BC, Aristotle, in “Generation of Animals” (tr. A.L. Peck) writes that males and females differ both in *logos* (“the power of faculty possessed by the one differs from that possessed by the other) and in “*bodily sense*”. He theorizes that the powers of generation (reproduction) reside most powerfully with the male, whose semen and its

fertility is evidence of well-regulated bodily warmth, through which blood is reconstituted as semen: *“does the female discharge semen as the male does...or is there no discharge from the female? And if there is none then does the female contribute nothing whatever to generation, merely providing a place where generation can happen; or does it contribute something else, and if so, how and in what manner does it so?”* Aristotle goes on to conclude that in fact menstrual fluid is the “weaker” version of semen, the product of a body whose heat is inadequate: *“That which by nature has a smaller share of heat is weaker and the female answers to this description....females are weaker and colder in their nature; and we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity, though one that occurs in the ordinary course of nature”*.

An article in *Indwe*, the magazine of South African Airways Express (February, 2005), is called *“What Women Want”*, and begins, *“Evolutionary psychology tells us that women choose a mate primarily based on his potential to provide for her and her offspring. This is not as superficial as it sounds. After all, the investment in reproduction involves a tremendous amount of time and effort, and hampers her ability to provide for herself during that time. If she and her offspring are then to be among the surviving fit, they will need the assistance of the best provider around”*.

Over two thousand years separate these texts, but they share an underlying assumption: i.e., the best explanations for human behaviour come from analysis of the (individual) human body. This assumption underlies the work of scientists known as *“sociobiologists”*. These are Northern researchers whose interests are rooted in the idea that physical/biological human capacities predict, determine, and explain, social formations and human behaviours. Some of the roots of this work come with E.O. Wilson, a Harvard entomologist, whose work in the late 70s and early 80s claimed the *“naturalness”* of male dominance among human societies as the inevitable, and logical, outcome of genetically based systems designed to maximize the reproduction of the species.

Before exploring the ideas of sociobiologists concerning *“male-ness”* and *“female-ness”* further, it is important to note that the ideas of late c20 sociobiologists who worked with *“sex”* are complemented by scientific work conducted over centuries concerning the relationship between the body and class, the body and race, the body and homosexuality. From the late c17th to the mid-late c19, European scientists attempted to catalogue human beings along a hierarchical continuum towards *“civilized”* man, where physical attributes (height, skin colour, hair texture, physiognomy, bodily shape) were used to ascertain degrees of racial *“superiority”*. This work had a strong relationship to simultaneous English explorations concerning the intelligence, *“brutality”*,

and manual dexterity of poor and destitute people, in London and other cities in which the processes of urbanization under industrialization had brought wealthy and starving together within the demographics of the urban environment. The scientific legitimacy of “*reading*” the body through contextually credible tools (in the mid-19th century, the width of the brow; in the mid-20th century, the notion of cognitive “*IQ’s*”) is deeply rooted within Northern philosophy, and carries both scientific and popular power.

It is, therefore, unsurprising to find so rich a body of “*knowledge*” concerning the relationship between “*sex*”, and the social meanings of living as a “*man*” or as a “*woman*”. These knowledges tend to draw on the following assumptions:

- Biological capacity determines the shape of social systems, which always involve hierarchies
- Biological capacity determines individuals’ roles within such systems
- Evolution can be plotted along a continuum, which moves towards the best possible adaptation to survival
- This continuum links primates to human hunter-gatherer communities to “contemporary” human beings, allowing “*readings*” of behaviour across time and place
- Universalism is a goal, and an assumption, of scientific enquiry

Many feminist writers suggest that when it comes to thinking about relationships between “*men*” and “*women*” in human societies, sociobiological perspectives should be challenged. The dominant arguments are:

- Using animal behaviour as an explanatory source for human behaviour is, overall, a flawed approach (why? (1) even among primates, widely held to be “*humans’ closest relative*”, there are major differences between species when it comes to “*male*” and “*female*” behaviours (2) even among primate studies, there are debates about the influence of environment and culture on behaviour (3) there is a logical flaw in the argument - if primate behaviour is understood as belonging to “*earlier, less well adapted*” engagement with species survival, it is illogical to locate explanations for “*more sophisticated*” species’ behaviour (i.e. human behaviour) there (4) sociobiologists’ interests in “*sex*” dominance seems political, rather than objective - forms of animal behaviour unconnected with sex differences - such as eating - are not invoked as “*natural*” explanations for human behaviours (5) often, animal behaviours are described

in terms already “*coded*” for human behaviour - baboons are described as “*keeping harems*”, mallard ducks are described as “*raping*”. This is an anthropomorphic approach - seeing the animal society through the lens of a human, patriarchal, system)

- Research not on behaviour but on brain function and differentiation has long attempted to link intelligence, emotional patternings, and cognitive abilities to brain size, brain lateralization, and neural path construction. To this day, there are powerful debates in the field. Some researchers argue that sex hormones and brain lateralization patterns do impact on “*men’s*” cognitive tendencies as opposed to “*women’s*”. Others disagree, citing evidence of vast diversities among people; still others interpret patterns of dichotomous brain functioning as indicating “*women’s superior functioning*”. Epstein points to the array of arguments in the field and suggest that the intensity of the debate alone means that there is no undisputed evidence for connections between the structure of the brain and human being’s “*sex-based*” capacities
- Research on neuroendocrinological differentiation is similarly full of debate.
- Some anthropologists turn to exploration of hunter-gatherer societies for explanations of male-dominance in human societies. Epstein argues that (a) this involves certain assumptions about the hierarchical value of hunting, assumptions not borne out by recent research (b) new approaches to archaeology suggest that women, as much as men, shape their communities (c) like all human societies, hunter-gatherer societies may share some features but are fundamentally diverse, according to cosmological systems, environmental context , engagements with hostile or invasive forces It is possible to conclude that while the science of biology does carry enormous explanatory power when it comes to predictions about illness, genetically-based aptitudes for certain skills or abilities, and offers complex and vital information concerning human functioning, biological models are inadequate frameworks for analysis of the relationship between “*sex*” and “*gender*”. The realities of biological capacities do demand exploration, but such exploration needs to be alert to the following three principles:
 - The human body is, in itself, a complex, and diversified entity. It is, moreover, deeply engaged with other “*human bodies*” in its relationship to survival, and to human community.
 - Human societies may share features - it is, however, imperative to begin with the recognition of social diversity, moving towards statements about “*universal*”

human traits or tendencies only with the utmost care and from a basis of deep, contextually specific, historical information

- Theories about male and female “sex“-related behaviour are often deployed as political discourse.

This is the point at which we can return to the beginning - the distinction between “sex” and “gender” was formulated in order to challenge ideas that located male dominance in biological foundations, and which saw certain sex-roles as inevitable. Given the wide variation in “men’s” and “women’s” behaviours, roles, and power across time and place, the idea of separating “sex” from “gender” was proposed, in the 1970’s, as a way of examining societies through a focus on construction.

There is pragmatic power to this “sex”/“gender” distinction. There are also, however, some complications. The “*biological*” body remains enormously influential and demands exploration - some of the most urgent issues facing gender researchers involve motherhood, the politics of insemination and fertility, the meaning of adolescence, maturity, and ageing, and of course - death. The current HIV pandemic is an example of an area in which the biological body, the cultural/social body, and the community body all coalesce to create desperate, gendered, dilemmas and tensions for millions of people.