

The politics of 'sex-ing' - creating 'males' and 'females'

As already discussed, "sex" is seen by sociobiologists as a way of predicting behaviour, at a number of levels, and babies get 'sexed' at birth, or sometimes, through amniocentesis, before birth. In order to take the term "sex" seriously, we need to acknowledge that 'sex'-ing the body involves (a) chromosomes (b) hormones (c) muscle-fat ratios (d) primary and secondary reproductive capacities and organs (e) anatomical ratios (f) excretory organs (g) genetic material. This meant that far from being a simple process, 'sex'-ing was a very complex biochemical process, which took place throughout a person's life.

It is possible to explore the meaning of 'sexing' by looking at debates about different elements in the process of 'sexing'. There are many debates, for example, on the influence of testosterone, or on whether or not 'female brains' are better at multi-tasking (or worse at mathematics). There are powerful Northern writers here (see articles by Anne Fausto-Sterling) and it could take us years to sort out the different debates, and weigh up the strengths and limitations of different research projects involved in this highly-funded area. One way forward is to note that when it comes to arguments about the influence of testosterone on masculinity, or the influence of having a womb on femininity and womanhood, there are two broad positions:

1. Socio-biologists:

Broadly, as argued earlier, sociologists believe that social behaviours and organization can be explained by biologically-based drives, especially drives towards '*survival of the fittest*'

They may use arguments about:

- Ideas about "sex" as "God-given"/"natural"
- "Universal" models of human behaviour
- Comparisons between humans and animals
- Evolution of human beings from "primitive" to "modern" to explain why contemporary human beings behave as they do

2. Constructionists

Constructionists differ from sociologists because they believe that human behaviours and organizations are caused by environments, interactions, and contexts

They use arguments about:

- Change across time and place
- Variety and diversity
- Power as a political concept
- Multi-determinism

Ideas about 'sex' which generalize about men and women's abilities, purely on the basis on their 'sex' may ignore important similarities between 'men' and 'women' More importantly, 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

In addition, theories about male and female "sex"-related behaviour are often used more as political statements than as biological ones. Despite the complexity of the term "sex" and the number of debates there are about the different influences of 'sex'-elements (hormones, reproduction organs, chromosomes, etc) most of our cultures treat 'sex'-ing in a very simple way. If we think of 'sex'-ing as a line:



then, our cultures suggest that there are only TWO "sexes" – typical 'male', and typical 'female'. There is no tolerance for any other categorization - 'sex'-ing is dichotomous, or binary (meaning divides people into two primary groups).

It is difficult to estimate how many babies are born, not with bodies that are easily coded as "male" or "female", but as intersexed.

Intersexed means that there is some degree of "sex"-ambiguity about the body, which can be caused by a number of medical syndromes. One of the most common is called adrenal hyperplasia, where a foetus whose development is expected along female lines receives

substances similar to male hormones from over-active adrenal glands. This causes the elongation of the clitoris, but not (usually) the development of a scrotal sac. In the 80's, it was estimated that one in two thousand births in the U.S. showed marked intersexuality, and more recent studies have suggested that as many as one in a hundred births could involve some form of "*sex-ambiguity*", not necessarily visible at birth.

The response of most doctors, and parents, to an intersexed baby has usually been a primarily medical one. The baby is seen as "*deformed*", and corrective surgery as early as possible (followed by hormone supplements, or replacements) has been the norm. The fact that surgery - and other medical interventions – is an option when it comes to "*sex-assignment*", for adults as well as for intersexed small children/babies, means that in the late twentieth century, legal and ethical issues have been raised about the human and civil rights of people who either choose, or are forced, to undergo surgery as a route towards "*becoming gendered*."

In 2003, a Bill was introduced into the South African National Assembly, the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Bill (23rd July, 2003). The aim of the Bill was to offer legal routes to identity for those who had undergone surgical/medical interventions which changed their bodies from one "*sex*" to "*another*". Someone whose birth certificate identified him as "*male*" needed to have a route towards identification as a "*legal female*" - without this s/he would face endless legal discrimination, practically blocking access to employment, citizenship, travel documents, and so on.

The first paragraph of the Bill states:

To provide for the alteration of the sex description of certain individuals in certain circumstances; and to amend the Births and Deaths Registration Act, 1992, as a consequence; and to provide for matters incidental thereto.

Application for alteration of sex description

1. (1) Any person whose sex organs have been altered by surgical or medical treatment or by evolvment through natural development resulting in a sex change may apply to the Director General of the National Department of Home Affairs for the alteration of the sex description on his or her birth register

As Sally Gross's submission on the Bill points out, this Bill can apply only to two categories of people - those who have undergone surgical "*sex-reassignment*" or those with a very rare form of intersexuality, where sex organs which appear female at the time of birth become more male with puberty. Sally Gross was born and raised in a Jewish family in Wynberg, in Cape Town, as a boy, named Selwyn. He began studying to become a rabbi, but a combination of factors led him towards the Catholic Church instead – he (then) found the attitude of many Jewish communities in South Africa to be complicit with apartheid policies (which he loathed) and he was also attracted by the figure of Jesus. Political activities forced him to leave South Africa in 1977, and he became ordained as a priest in England, continuing to work as an active member of the ANC. As the political climate began to change in South Africa, he recognized that it was critical for him to face his own life-issues - the complexity of his Jewish/Catholic roots and the issue of his body and gender. Selwyn was intersexed, and had lived up until then knowing - of course - about his body, and feeling "*not quite right*". He didn't feel "*like a girl in a boy's body*" - it was more complex than that. After consultation with a number of people, it became clear that as far as "sex" went, his body was as "*more female*" hormonally as it was "*male*", and after much intense thought, prayer, and discussion, Selwyn made the choice to live life as a "*woman*" - without any surgical or medical "sex"-treatment, but in recognition that the gender identity of a woman probably fitted her sense of her identity and spiritual work best.

This choice had a huge impact on her life: she was stripped of her ordination, and cut off from her connections with the Church. As 1991 arrived, with the unbanning of the ANC, Sally (then) decided to return to South Africa, but needed a passport which reflected her lived gender-identity (her old passport described her as a male). It took an enormous struggle to get this, and much harassment from official bodies. In an interview with the Natal Witness, she says, "the experience of finding myself denied personality and humanity in law was the biggest challenge of my identity that I've ever encountered" (Feb 25, 2000).

Sally Gross is currently the director of ISOSA (Intersex People of South Africa), and a strong advocate of legal, educational and medical approaches to intersexuality which recognize the "sex"-diversity of human beings, and offer everyone a route into "*becoming gendered*" which is respectful of individual and cultural processes. She doesn't advocate that intersexed people (or anyone else) try to live without gender, or within a "*third gender*" (a neither male nor female space, a space not defined by "sex"-determination). She believes this would be too difficult "*in a society like ours... in a gender-stereotyped society such as ours, there needs to be a best guess as to the optimal gender of rearing as male or female and a consistency about that in the early*

years. That said, it must be realized that even the most conscientious best guess could prove to be the wrong one and there must be an open-ness to the child's wish to change this".

It would be critical to explore in depth the experiences of both trans-sexed (transgendered) people and intersexed peoples, from all racial, cultural and class contexts, in order to understand more fully how the sex/gender binary ("male" or "female") has operated. See the website www.genderdynamix.co.za, where more information about transgender and intersexed people in African contexts, is available. The reality of intersexuality, and of the enormous political, social, and emotional challenges faced by intersexed people, speaks about the power of the idea that people "come" in only two sexes, and that each sex must be "mapped" naturally into its own gendered narrative. And Sally's life story suggests that while it is possible to live as a successful man and a successful women, within an intersexed body (neither typically 'male' nor typically 'female'), this disturbs other people's norms about 'sex' and 'gender.'

Coming back to 'sex' and 'gender'

This brings us back to 'gender'. If we are saying we cannot conflate it with 'sex', what concepts are useful to define it? This is the point at which we can return to the fact that 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. Amina Mama puts it this way, *"It became clear that what men and women do is not so much determined by God or by biology, as socially constructed, according to the prevailing cultures and exigencies of a given context or location. It became scientifically necessary to distinguish between biology (sexual organs and secondary sexual characteristics" and sociology (gender roles and gender relations) with the former being more predetermined, and the latter more open to change, and therefore able to vary from one culture to another, and over time"*.

In order to understand gender, then, it is useful to accept that one should:

- look very carefully and deeply at the context, in order to see how and where "gendering" matters to the people in it
- explore gender as a process, both at a socio-cultural level and at an individual one

Before we move into a model which can help teaching contemporary connections between sex, gender, and sexuality, let us first address briefly the concept raised by Sally Gross, the idea of a 'third gender'. What is a Third Gender?

For centuries, the existence of people who did not fit the sex/gender categories male and female have been known but typically dismissed from reports of certain non-Western societies, while in the Western European tradition they have been marginalized, stigmatized and persecuted... (very little) attention has been devoted to the deeper question of whether two sexes or genders are in the nature of beings, be they defined as biological or social... with humans in particular, as one looks across time and space, in history and in culture, we should perhaps ask: Is sexual dimorphism inevitable in human affairs¹ (from *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, edited by Gilbert Herdt, Zone Books, New York, 1996, p 11)

The Gilbert Herdt collection of essays explores a wide diversity of experiences, in different countries, and contexts, in which people have lived in ways that challenge binary sex/gender systems. One of these essays is called, "*How to become a berdache: toward a unified analysis of gender diversity*", by Will Roscoe.

This essay is dense, and well worth reading carefully. It begins with a discussion of the colonial sources on the diverse people encountered by Europeans in the c17th and c18th centuries in the country now known as the United States of America. These sources include writings by the Spanish, the French, and the English and - despite the complexity of drawing upon these sources as "*factually reliable*" - bear witness to the presence of people called berdaches by Spanish explorers and traders, among many different First Nation Peoples. The essay is very careful to position the colonial writing as a mirror reflecting more about the writers than about the people "*written-about*", and is also careful to note that there was a vast diversity (in terms of political systems, economic systems, and cosmological frameworks) among the different First Nation Peoples encountered, and "*described*". The recurring phenomenon of the "*berdache*" however signals the fact that among these Nations, there were arrangements of "*sex*"/gender liaisons unfamiliar to the European mind, and inexplicable except as "*effeminate boys*", "*hermaphrodites*," "*boys that abandon themselves ... and are employed in all the diverse handiworks of women*".

The essay describes some of these arrangements. Within the Navaho nation, Roscoe explains that, for centuries, society encompassed three gender possibilities. The third "*category*" was described, in Navaho, as nadleehe - a human being defined by a term that means "*one who changes continuously*" - the suggestion is not that the person "*crossed genders*" but that they lived in fluidity between "*outer and inner dimensions of male and female form - a third process*

rather than a third category” (Roscoe, p 356). The biological form of the person was irrelevant; what mattered was their role within Navajo society, predominantly determined by their spiritual power and status, and their engagement with areas of work considered to be the province of both Navajo “*men*” and Navaho “*women*” (such as becoming medical experts within Navaho cosmology and practices - a role assigned to “*men*” and supervision of agricultural and domestic work - a role assigned to “*women*”). Roscoe draws on 1930’s quotations from Navajo elders to illustrate the status of the nadleehe:

If there were no nadle, the country would change. They are responsible for all the wealth in the country. If there were no more left, the horses, sheep and Navaho would all go. They are leaders like President Roosevelt (Roscoe, p 355).

In terms of dress, nadleehe are described as wearing “*men’s*” clothing, “*women’s*” clothing, or clothing associated with neither form of gendering. Most information about them seems to concentrate on biologically male people, but Roscoe suggests that there is evidence that there were as many nadleehe with biologically female forms as there were with male forms. The key issue is, however, the fundamental irrelevance of biology to determination of gender identities. These were perceived more as spiritual categories, linked to particular cosmological meanings and the labour associated with those meanings, than as “*performances*” or “*roles*” determined by biology. Reproduction, for example, certainly held a central space within Navajo society, but the “*work*” of reproduction was understood much more as a connection to spiritual and cosmological realities than as a way of organizing biological bodies into a hierarchical “*man*”/“*woman*” system of signification.

Roscoe is careful to introduce history into the picture - pointing out that the long history of the Navaho nation (from their arrival within what are now the South-Eastern areas of the United States in late prehistoric times to their defeat, as a nation, in 1863 by the American military and the beginning of the “*reservation period*”) needs studying in order to understand how people, economic opportunities, gender and cosmologies interacted to create and maintain space for “*third gender*” processes. The article goes on to look at berdache figures within other First Nation societies, raising questions about the way in which gender assignments occurred at a child’s birth, the status and power of such people (a status which declined as military colonialism destroyed First Nation peoples and autonomies in the c19th), connections between berdache figures and men and women within each Nation, sexual and reproductive practices, and the difficulty of “*reading*” gender-ing through the mix of colonial accounts, myth and cosmology, and

the oral histories of early twentieth century (diverse) First Nation peoples. Roscoe concludes that “*berdache status was not a niche for occasional...variation in sexuality and gender, nor was it an accidental by-product of unresolved social contradictions... in the ...view (of the people), berdaches occupied a distinct and autonomous social status on a par with men and women. Like male and female genders, the berdache gender entailed a pattern of differences encompassing behaviour, temperament, social and economic roles and religious specialization - all the dimensions of a gender category, with the exception of the attribution of physical differences*” (p 370)

The title of the essay, “*How to Become a Berdache*” shows us some of Roscoe’s key interests in third genders. He is not simply interested in working with complex colonial anthropologies, or “*recovering*” linguistic and social information about First Nation societies. He wants to know about the processes of gendering, in and of themselves. The answer to “*how to become a berdache*” he begins to suggest is a complicated one: at a personal level, an individual “*becomes*” a berdache through multiple routes: the dreaming processes of the Mohave (predicting the meaning of a coming child), the encouragement of a community should a child show signs of “*berdache*” identity (Navajo), individual choice through the lifespan. Fundamentally, though, what makes becoming a berdache possible is a way for thinking about gendering - the society has to work through a “*division of labour and prestige systems organized through gender systems*” in which both men and women have prestigious access to trade, food production, and the essential labour of sustaining a community. Secondly, the society has to believe that anatomical sex is not the be-all and end-all of human destiny, let alone a signifier of prestige or authority. Thirdly, the society has to see anatomical sex itself as unstable - not capable of predicting much about a human being’s life journey. Fourthly, the society has to be philosophically and practically deeply tolerant of individual diversity, and recognize in such diversity the potential for strengthening that society, both economically and critically - spiritually.

Perhaps the most powerful insight of Roscoe’s article lies in his stress on gendering as a process. This is something explored by many other writers, and it is linked to another key question: if gendering is a process, is there variation in the way different societies have valued that process?

In Roscoe’s exploration of First Nation societies, he does not question the relevance of gendering to social organization. Oyeronke Oyewumi, however, in her book *The Invention of Women* suggests that precolonial Yoruba societies did not, in fact, gender people in a way that

carried social signification. She draws on language, cosmological systems, oral histories, and contemporary experiences, to suggest that anatomical sex-assignment just did not translate into the kinds of “gender” meanings assumed to be universal by some Northern theorists of gender. She says that in Western thought, *“gender has been a fundamental organizing principle. Intrinsic to the conceptualization of gender is a dichotomy in which male and female, man and woman, are constantly and binarily ranked, both in relationship to and against each other... it is a duality based on a perception of human sexual dimorphism in which the male implies privilege and the female subordination....the biological determinism in much of Western thought stems from the application of biological explanations in accounting for social hierarchies. This is turn has led to the construction of the social world with biological building blocks”* (Oyewumi, Chapter 2, p33/35)

Her chapter denies that such a way of thinking was part and parcel of “*pre-colonial*” Yoruba society. She looks at the way prestige and status are coded within Yoruba, and concludes that the most important forces within Yoruba society were seniority (age) and rank (lineage/royalty). While gender systems were powerful mythologically, the anatomical sex of a person did not automatically translate into clear-cut locations of labour, authority, or performance for that person — “*women*” and “*men*” were distinct beings, in their relationship to reproduction and labour, but were in no way hierarchically constructed in relation to one another. Political power, she suggests, did not revolve around the notion of a “*male*” superiority or a “*female*” inferiority: these notions, she said, impacted only on Yoruba society through colonial beliefs about the meaning of gender, and its place as a primary way of allocating power.

Some African writers have critiqued Oyewumi, suggesting that she is overstating the irrelevance of “*man-hood*” and “*woman-hood*” to the organization of power in Yoruba history (see Mary Kolawole, on this, if you are interested). But many African writers agree on three of Oyewumi’s ideas:

- It is not useful to simply assume that “*sex*” translates into “*gender*” meanings in the same way, all over the globe.
- Deeply rooted Northern paradigms in which the male “*sex*” is automatically accorded a gender role of privilege are not, historically-speaking, adequate starting points for the historical study of gender-ing all over the world. In many contexts, it will be possible to witness the idea that a “*male-child*” is more socially valuable than a “*female-one*” - but the roots of this idea need exploring

- The process of gender-ing is one of multiple socializing forces, all of which can confer power and privilege on select members of a society. So, for Oyewumi, lineage and seniority were more important vectors of political power than gender; understanding gender therefore requires understanding a society holistically