Gender and Sexism

GENDER THROUGH THE PRISM OF DIFFERENCE

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"Men can't cry." "Women are victims of patriarchal oppression." "After divorce, single mothers are downwardly mobile, often moving into poverty." "Men don't do their share of housework and childcare." "Professional women face barriers such as sexual harassment and a 'glass ceiling' that prevent them from competing equally with men for high-status positions and high salaries." "Heterosexual intercourse is an expression of men's power over women."

Sometimes, the students in our sociology and gender studies courses balk at these kinds of generalizations. And they are right to do so. After all, some men are more emotionally expressive than some women, some women have more power and success than some men, some men do their share—or more—of housework and childcare, and some women experience sex with men as both pleasurable and empowering. Indeed, contemporary gender relations are complex, changing in various directions, and, as such, we need to be wary of simplistic, if handy, slogans that seem to sum up the essence of relations between women and men.

On the other hand, we think it is a tremendous mistake to conclude that "all individuals are totally unique and different" and that therefore all generalizations about social groups are impossible or inherently oppressive. In fact, we are convinced that it is this very complexity, this multifaceted nature of contemporary gender relations that fairly begs for a sociological analysis.
of gender. ... We use the image of “the prism of difference” to illustrate our approach to developing this sociological perspective on contemporary gender relations. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *prism*, in part, as “a homogeneous transparent solid, usually with triangular bases and rectangular sides, used to produce or analyze a continuous spectrum.” Imagine a ray of light—which to the naked eye, appears to be only one color—refracted through a *prism* onto a white wall. To the eye, the result is not an infinite, disorganized scatter of individual colors. Rather, the refracted light displays an order, a structure of relationships among the different colors—a rainbow. Similarly, we propose to use the “prism of difference”... to analyze a continuous spectrum of people. In order to show how gender is organized and experienced differently when refracted through the prism of sexual, racial/ethnic, social class, physical abilities, age, and national citizenship differences.

**EARLY WOMEN’S STUDIES: CATEGORICAL VIEWS OF “WOMEN” AND “MEN”**

... It is possible to make good generalizations about women and men. But these generalizations should be drawn carefully, by always asking the questions “*which women*?” and “*which men*?” Scholars of sex and gender have not always done this. In the 1960s and 1970s, women’s studies focused on the differences between women and men rather than among women and men. The very concept of gender, women’s studies scholars demonstrated, is based on socially defined difference between women and men. From the macro level of social institutions like the economy, politics, and religion, to the micro level of interpersonal relations, distinctions between women and men structure social relations. Making males and females different from one another is the essence of gender. It is also the basis of men’s power and domination. Understanding this was profoundly illuminating. Knowing that difference produced domination enabled women to name, analyze, and set about changing their victimization.

In the 1970s, riding the wave of a resurgent feminist movement, colleges and universities began to develop women’s studies courses that aimed first and foremost to make women’s lives visible. The texts that were developed for these courses tended to stress the things that women shared under patriarchy—having the responsibility for housework and childcare, the experience or fear of men’s sexual violence, a lack of formal or informal access to education, exclusion from high-status professional and managerial jobs, political office, and religious leadership positions (Brownmiller 1975; Kanter 1977).

The study of women in society offered *new ways of seeing the world.* But the 1970s approach was limited in several ways. Thinking of gender primarily
in terms of differences between women and men led scholars to overgeneralize about both. The concept of patriarchy led to a dualistic perspective of male privilege and female subordination. Women and men were cast as opposites. Each was treated as a homogeneous category with common characteristics and experiences. This approach essentialized women and men. Essentialism, simply put, is the notion that women's and men's attributes are categorically different. From this perspective, male control and coercion of women produced conflict between the sexes. The feminist insight originally introduced by Simone de Beauvoir in 1953—that women, as a group, had been socially defined as the "other" and that men had constructed themselves as the subjects of history, while constructing women as their objects—fueled an energizing sense of togetherness among many women. As college students read books like Sisterhood Is Powerful (Morgan 1970), many of them joined organizations that fought, with some success, for equality and justice for women.

THE VOICES OF "OTHER" WOMEN

Although this view of women as an oppressed "other" was empowering for certain groups of women, some women began to claim that the feminist view of universal sisterhood ignored and marginalized their major concerns. It soon became apparent that treating women as a group united in its victimization by patriarchy was biased by too narrow a focus on the experiences and perspectives of women from more privileged social groups. "Gender" was treated as a generic category, uncritically applied to women. Ironically, this analysis, which was meant to unify women, instead produced divisions between and among them. The concerns projected as "universal" were removed from the realities of many women's lives. For example, it became a matter of faith in second-wave feminism that women's liberation would be accomplished by breaking down the "gendered public–domestic split." Indeed, the feminist call for women to move out of the kitchens and into the workplaces resonated in the experiences of many of the college-educated white women who were inspired by Betty Friedan's 1963 book, The Feminine Mystique. But the idea that women's movement into workplaces was itself empowering or liberating seemed absurd or irrelevant to many working-class women and women of color. They were already working for wages, as had many of their mothers and grandmothers, and did not consider access to jobs and public life as "liberating." For many of these women, liberation had more to do with organizing in communities and workplaces—often alongside men—for better schools, better pay, decent benefits, and other policies to benefit their neighborhoods, jobs, and families. The feminism of the 1970s did not seem to address these issues.
As more and more women analyzed their own experiences, they began to address the power relations creating differences among women and the part that privileged women played in the oppression of others. For many women of color, working-class women, lesbians, and women in contexts outside the United States (especially women in non-Western societies), the focus on male domination was a distraction from other oppressions. Their lived experiences could support neither a unitary theory of gender nor an ideology of universal sisterhood. As a result, finding common ground in a universal female victimization was never a priority for many groups of women.

Challenges to gender stereotypes soon emerged. Women of varied races, classes, national origins, and sexualities insisted that the concept of gender be broadened to take their differences into account (Baca Zinn et al. 1986; Hartmann 1976; Rich 1980; Smith 1977). Many women began to argue that their lives are affected by their location in a number of different hierarchies: as African Americans, Latinas, Native Americans, or Asian Americans in the race hierarchy; as young or old in the age hierarchy; as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual in the sexual orientation hierarchy; and as women outside of the Western, industrialized nations, in subordinated geopolitical contexts. These arguments make it clear that women were not victimized by gender alone but by the historical and systemic denial of rights and privileges based on other differences as well.

**MEN AS GENDERED BEINGS**

As the voices of “other” women in the mid- to late 1970s began to challenge and expand the parameters of women’s studies, a new area of scholarly inquiry was beginning to stir—a critical examination of men and masculinity. To be sure, in those early years of gender studies, the major task was to conduct studies and develop courses about the lives of women in order to begin to correct centuries of scholarship that rendered women’s lives, problems, and accomplishments invisible. But the core idea of feminism—that “femininity” and women’s subordination is a social construction—logically led to an examination of the social construction of “masculinity” and men’s power. Many of the first scholars to take on this task were psychologists, who were concerned with looking at the social construction of “the male sex role” (e.g., Pleck 1981). By the late 1980s, there was a growing interdisciplinary collection of studies of men and masculinity, much of it by social scientists (Brod 1987; Kaufman 1987; Kimmel 1987; Kimmel & Messner 1989).

Reflecting developments in women’s studies, the scholarship on men’s lives tended to develop three themes: First, what we think of as “masculinity” is not a fixed, biological essence of men but, rather, is a social construction
that shifts and changes over time, as well as between and among various national and cultural contexts. Second, power is central to understanding gender as a relational construct, and the dominant definition of masculinity is largely about expressing difference from—and superiority over—anything considered "feminine." Third, there is no singular "male sex role." Rather, at any given time there are various masculinities. R. W. Connell (1987, 1995) has been among the most articulate advocates of this perspective. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity (the dominant form of masculinity at any given moment) is constructed in relation to femininities as well as in relation to various subordinated or marginalized masculinities. For example, in the United States, various racialized masculinities (e.g., as represented by African American men, Latino immigrant men, etc.) have been central to the construction of hegemonic (White, middle-class) masculinity. . . . This "othering" of racialized masculinities helps to shore up the material privileges that have been historically connected to hegemonic masculinity. When viewed this way, we can better understand hegemonic masculinity as part of a system that includes gender, as well as racial, class, sexual, and other relations of power.

The new literature on men and masculinities also begins to move us beyond the simplistic, falsely categorical, and pessimistic view of men simply as a privileged sex class. When race, social class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and immigrant or national status are taken into account, we can see that in some circumstances, "male privilege" is partly—sometimes substantially—muted (Kimmel & Messner 1998). Although it is unlikely that we will soon see a "men's movement" that aims to undermine the power and privileges that are connected with hegemonic masculinity, when we begin to look at "masculinities" through the prism of difference, we can begin to see similarities and possible points of coalition between and among certain groups of women and men (Messner 1998). Certain kinds of changes in gender relations—for instance, a national family leave policy for working parents—might serve as a means of uniting particular groups of women and men.

GENDER IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

It is an increasingly accepted truism that late-twentieth-century increases in transnational trade, international migration, and global systems of production and communication have diminished both the power of nation-states and the significance of national borders. A much more ignored issue is the extent to which gender relations—in the United States and elsewhere in the world—are increasingly linked to patterns of global economic restructuring. Decisions made in corporate headquarters located in Los Angeles, Tokyo, or
London may have immediate repercussions in how women and men thousands of miles away organize their work, community, and family lives (Sassen 1991). It is no longer possible to study gender relations without attention to global processes and inequalities.

Around the world, women's paid and unpaid labor is key to global development strategies. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that gender is molded from the "top down." What happens on a daily basis in families and workplaces simultaneously constitutes and is constrained by structural transnational institutions. For instance, in the second half of the twentieth century young, single women, many of them from poor rural areas, have been recruited for work in export assembly plants along the U.S.-Mexico border, in East and Southeast Asia, in Silicon Valley, in the Caribbean, and in Central America. While the profitability of these multinational factories depends, in part, on management's ability to manipulate the young women's ideologies of gender, the women . . . do not respond passively or uniformly, but they actively resist, challenge, and accommodate. At the same time, the global diversion of the assembly line has concentrated corporate facilities in many U.S. cities, making available myriad managerial, administrative, and clerical jobs for college educated women. Women's paid labor is used at various points along this international system of production. Not only employment, but also consumption, embodies global interdependencies. There is a high probability that the clothes you wear and the computer you use originated in multinational corporate headquarters and in assembly plants scattered around third-world nations. And if these items were actually manufactured in the United States, they were probably assembled by Latin American and Asian-born women.

Worldwide, international labor migration and refugee movements are creating new types of multiracial societies. Although these developments are often discussed and analyzed with respect to racial differences, gender typically remains absent. As several commentators have noted, the White feminist movement in the United States has not addressed issues of immigration and nationality. Gender, however, has been fundamental in shaping immigration policies (Chang 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Direct labor recruitment programs generally solicit either male or female labor (e.g., Filipina nurses, Mexican male farm workers); national disenfranchisement has particular repercussions for women and men; and current immigrant laws are based on very gendered notions of what constitutes "family unification." As Chandra Mohanty suggests, "analytically these issues are the contemporary metropolitan counterpart of women's struggles against colonial occupation in the geographical third world" (1991: 23). Moreover, immigrant and refugee women's daily lives often challenge familiar feminist paradigms. The occupations in which immigrant and refugee women concentrate—paid domestic work, informal sector street vending, assembly or industrial piece work performed
in the home—often blur the ideological distinction between work and family and between public and private spheres.

FROM PATCHWORK QUILT TO PRISM

All of these developments—the voices of “other” women, the study of men and masculinities, and the examination of gender in transnational contexts—have helped redefine the study of gender. By working to develop knowledge that is inclusive of the experiences of all groups, new insights about gender have begun to emerge. Examining gender in the context of other differences makes it clear that nobody experiences themselves as solely gendered. Instead, gender is configured through cross-cutting forms of difference that carry deep social and economic consequences.

By the mid-1980s, thinking about gender had entered a new stage that was more carefully grounded in the experiences of diverse groups of women and men. This perspective is a general way of looking at women and men and understanding their relationships to the structure of society. Gender is no longer viewed simply as a matter of two opposite categories of people—males and females—but as a range of social relations among differently situated people. Because centering on difference is a radical challenge to the conventional gender framework, it raises several concerns. Does the recognition that gender can only be understood contextually (meaning that there is no singular “gender” per se) make women’s studies and gender studies newly vulnerable to critics in the academy? Does the immersion in difference throw us into a whirlwind of “spiraling diversity” (Hewitt 1992: 316) where multiple identities and locations shatter the categories women and men?

. . . We take a position directly opposed to an empty pluralism. Although the categories woman and man have multiple meanings, this does not reduce gender to a “postmodern kaleidoscope of lifestyles. Rather, it points to the relational character of gender” (Connell 1992: 736). Not only are masculinity and femininity relational, but different masculinities and femininities are interconnected also through other social structures such as race, class, and nation. Groups are created by their relationships with each other. The meaning of woman is defined by the existence of women of different races and classes. Being a White woman in the United States is meaningful only insofar as it is set apart from and in contradistinction to women of color.

Just as masculinity and femininity each depend on the definitions of the other to produce domination, differences among women and among men are also created in the context of structured relationships. Some women derive benefits from their race and class position, and from their location in the
global economy, while they are simultaneously restricted by gender. In other
terms, such women are subordinated by patriarchy, yet their relatively privi-
leged positions within hierarchies of race, class, and the global political eco-
nomy intersect to create for them an expanded range of opportunities, choices,
and ways of living. They may even use their race and class advantage to mini-
imize some of the consequences of patriarchy and/or to oppose other women.
Similarly, one can become a man in opposition to other men. For example,
"the relation between heterosexual and homosexual men is central, carrying
heavy symbolic freight. To many people, homosexuality is the negation of mas-
culinity... Given that assumption, antagonism toward homosexual men may
be used to define masculinity" (Connell 1992: 736).

In the past decade, viewing gender through the prism of difference has
profoundly reoriented the field (Acker 1999; Glenn 1999; Messner 1996;
West & Fenstermaker 1995). Yet analyzing the multiple constructions of gen-
der does not mean studying just groups of women and groups of men as dif-
f erent. It is clearly time to go beyond what we call the "patchwork quilt" phase
in the study of women and men—that is, the phase in which we have ac-
knowledge d the importance of examining differences within constructions of
gender, but do so largely by collecting a study here on African American
women, a study there on gay men, and a study on working-class Chicanas.
This patchwork quilt approach too often amounts to no more than "adding
difference and stirring." The result may be a lovely mosaic, but like a patch-
work quilt it still tends to overemphasize boundaries, rather than highlighting
bridges of interdependency. In addition, this approach too often does not ex-
pl ore the ways that social constructions of femininities and masculinities are
based on, and reproduce relations of, power. In short, we think that the sub-
stantial quantity of research that has now been done on various groups and
subgroups needs to be analyzed within a framework that emphasizes differ-
ences and inequalities not as discrete areas of separation, but as interrelated
bands of color that together make up a spectrum.

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