

Q&A: SEX AND GENDER

28 APRIL 2020 | PHILO 36000 | HUNTER COLLEGE | DANIEL W. HARRIS

Fausto Sterling

With respect to the three other non-binary sexes, if a person who holds XX chromosome's is considered female, but also has both female and male reproductive and sex organs, wouldn't they still be classified as female biologically solely based on chromosomes? Fausto-Sterling uses the term pseudohemaphrodites, to define a person who possess gnodes, both genitals and a distinct chromosome, but doesn't the chromosome combination really determine the sex? (Pg.69) It seems by biological standards that the chromosomes determine the sex not the genitals right? —Sheana

This is a controversial question. I think what a lot of feminist philosophers have argued is that there is no privileged biomarker that takes precedent over all of the others. Why, in particular, should we privilege chromosomes over genitals (or over all manner of other things that usually go into determining someone's sex)? This is reminiscent of other debates in metaphysics. For example, it is common to draw the distinction between abstract and concrete entities by saying that concrete entities exist in space and time, enter into causal relations, etc., whereas abstract entities don't have any of these properties. But, as Ney pointed out, there seem to be things that have some but not all of these properties. In response to this point, one option would be to find one of the properties and say that that's what really matters. But another option would be to say that our original distinction was flawed, and we were just conflating a bunch of different distinctions that don't line up neatly. Many feminists (including Fausto-Sterling) think that we should take the latter path when it comes to sex.

When biologists do try to single out a single way of distinguishing biological sexes that is more important than all of the others, they tend not to choose either chromosomes or genitalia. What they choose is gamete size: females are organisms with relatively large gametes (like eggs) and males are organisms with relatively small gametes (like sperm). Biologists are interested in this distinction because it is a constant across all of the organisms that they have found it useful to organize into two sexes, whereas things like chromosomes and genitals vary enormously across different species. Byrne will talk about this in his reading for next week.

What percent of the population fall into each of the five categories? —Shah

Fausto-Sterling's three categories other than male and female now tend to be grouped together as "intersex". It is difficult to estimate the percent of the human population who are intersex, for a couple of reasons: First, there are many different conditions that may or may not get counted as intersex in different studies. Second, there are intersex conditions. At the high end, some (including Fausto-Sterling, in later work) estimate the percent to be around 1.7%—about 1 in 60. But many studies estimate much lower percentages, between 0.05% (1 in 2000) to 0.1% (1 in 1000).

In the reading by Alex Byrne next week, we'll see him make an argument that these small numbers show that we're not really talking about five sexes here, just some borderline cases that fall in between two sexes. This connects to your question last week about whether we should really treat borderline cases as showing that a binary distinction is untenable.

When reading the first paper, I was wondering what the author thinks about gender in relation to sex and why gender wasn't discussed in the paper at all. So, I was glad to see the second paper but I found that it made too clear of a distinction between sex and gender but not a good enough distinction between gender and feminine/masculine meanings.

You're right that none of today's readings do a great job of making the sex/gender distinction. Of course, one problem with this is that the distinction is made in a lot of different ways! (And not everyone finds it to be a helpful distinction, as we'll see when we read Byrne next week.)

A good thing to read about this would be [the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's article on Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender](#).

Can you elaborate on Michel Foucault's biopower?

I recommend checking out [this explanation](#) from the Oxford Dictionary of Critical theory. If that's not detailed enough, a good thing to read would be Chapter Six of Hubert Dreyfus's and Paul Rabinow's book about Foucault ([pdf here](#)).

...the first thing that made me unsatisfied was the mention of Suydam's fondness for "gay colors", I mean the only thing that would probably make this somewhat acceptable to understand is the fact that it was said in the 1800s, because I can't seem to imagine people determining someone's sexuality based on their fondness for certain colors. Besides, what makes a color a gay color? — Chelsea

I think you've misunderstood this bit. The use of the word "gay" to mean "homosexual" only became common in the the 1940s. In the 1800s, it meant a variety of other things. ([See this etymology dictionary entry for some details.](#)) In this context it probably meant something like "festive" or "gaudy". Of course, you're right that the link between gender and color is itself a constantly shifting cultural construct, but Fausto-Sterling would certainly agree!

In the reading it is also mentioned that children born intersex as infants can enter a program of hormonal and surgical management so that they can easily "slip quietly into society as NORMAL heterosexual males or females." There's just so many things wrong with that thought because first of all, why should heterosexuality be regarded as the norm? Kind of makes it seem as if they're saying that if someone isn't heterosexual, then they are abnormal. —Chelsea

Again, Fausto-Sterling is not endorsing the claim that we should think of LGBTQ or intersex people as abnormal. She is merely claiming that such people were treated as abnormal according to the cultural norms of her time when she wrote the paper, which was in 1993. She was surely right about that! And although social norms in many parts of the United States and Europe have evolved considerably since then, I think that her claim is still substantially correct now—more when it

comes to transgender and intersex people, and especially in parts of the world outside North America and Europe where gay rights have not made great strides in the last two decades.

Frye on Sexism

In “Sexism” Frye discusses gender norms and discrimination based on sex. In the article Frye is very critical of gender norms in society or “sex-marking” and “sex announcing” as she puts it. However, do all gender norms that reinforce cultural structures need to be dismantled, as Frye suggests on pg. 850? For instance, Frye brings up the point that there are products marketed at “Ladies” and products targeted at “Men,” which reinforces gender norms about men and women. I don’t see a problem with targeting different products to Men and Ladies. After all, generally speaking, men and women do have different psychologies and like different products. I don’t see any harm in acknowledging that men and women are attracted to different colors, items of clothing, and smells. —Aanisah

Frye talks about how women's clothing is generally more restrictive and less functional than men's clothing, but what if some women generally don't have a problem with this, and enjoy wearing skirts for example? Some men could argue that women nowadays have a larger selection of clothing choices than men, so in that case, who is really at the disadvantage regarding the subject matter? —Cynthia

These are important questions, and different feminists disagree about how to answer them. Some have argued, a bit like you, that we should respect women’s preferences, even if their preference is to subject themselves to stricter and more binding beauty norms than men (or, for example, if their preference is to wear a burka, or to have female genital mutilation performed on them, etc.).

A prominent response to this line of thought is that we can’t take people’s preferences at face value, because our preferences are themselves the product of social conditioning. It is part of how humans think that we tend to adjust our hopes and expectations to what we take to be possible for us, and this tends to lead oppressed people to form preferences that are less aspirational than others. In her article, “Adaptive Preferences and Women’s Options”, Martha Nussbaum makes this point by considering evidence that poor women in India, who tend to have much less access to healthcare than even poor men, tend to rate themselves as being much healthier than men who have gotten similar results in objective measures of their health. It seems that their lack of access to healthcare has caused these women to lower their standards, and to consider themselves to be relatively healthy even when they are objectively not. So, feminists have argued, we should expect to see the same sort of adaptive preferences in any situation where the members of a group has their options limited, even if those limits are imposed by social norms rather than objective circumstances. This line of thought has led some feminists to the conclusion that womens’ preferences are often themselves symptoms of women’s oppression, and not something that we can incautiously cite in response to arguments like Frye’s.

Furthermore, what is Frye's definition of sexism? Is sexism, to Frye, being discriminated against on the basis of sex, as she suggests in the job interview example? Is sexism the reinforcement of cultural and economic gender norms and the acknowledgement that society needs to dismantle those norms? Is it some combination of the two? —Anisah

Here is the definition that Frye gives in the text:

The term "sexist" characterizes cultural and economic structures which create and enforce the elaborate and rigid patterns of sex-marking and sex-announcing which divide the species, along lines of sex, into dominators and subordinates. Individual acts and practices are sexist which reinforce and support those structures, either as culture or as shapes taken on by the enculturated animals. Resistance to sexism is that which undermines those structures by social and political action and by projects of reconstruction and revision of ourselves.

By this definition, a lot of things turn out to be sexist, including all of the things that you mention. (But I don't think she would say that "the acknowledgement that society needs to dismantle those norms" is sexist; quite the opposite.)

Frye wrote a generally clear paper on the nature of sexism, explaining how its imperceptibility enables it to flourish in society. However, I wish she brought forth more examples of it in relation to the workforce, as she only really explains a very specific case regarding an all male company (and doesn't address the workplace anywhere after, but brings up different cases of sexism which she explains very clearly). I want to know who is "looking for excuses not to hire women" and what these excuses are, since Frye uses this to support her claim on the general nature of sexism. Personally, as a woman, I can't relate to her workplace example in that I treated my supervisors differently according to their sex (I treated them all the same because I feared ALL of them), and I am left wanting to know how sexism persists in a modern workplace that supposedly pushes for equal opportunity and diversity in a workplace. —Ksenia

It is worth noting that Frye's paper was written in the early 1980s, so many of her examples are dated, and some of the forms of sexism that she discusses have been alleviated since then. But there is a lot of evidence that sexism (by Frye's definition) still pervades the modern workplace. One good way to see this is to look at some of the ways that parental leave policy varies between countries, and how this affects the earning potentials of men and women. Parental leave policies are one of the main causes of gender disparities in income, and so I have found this to be an interesting case study. A good article on this topic is [this one by Sarah Kliff](#). A lot of people might respond that of course becoming a parent brings out the differences between men and women, but these differences are biological: mothers are naturally nurturing and so want to take time off from their careers to do childcare, etc. But this doesn't fit well with the fact that some countries have succeeded in creating a culture in which it is normal for men to take parental leave, and this has greatly reduced the gender pay gap there. One example is Iceland, where some of the parental leave that is allotted to families can only be taken by fathers (or, more generally, by the parent who didn't give birth). The result of this is has been to drastically alter how normal it is for men to perform childcare, which has disrupted the patterns of sex marking and sex announcing that are prevalent in Iceland. Needless to say, we haven't pulled that off here in the US, and so I think our norms about who cares for new babies is an example of something that Frye would consider a deeply sexist in the contemporary United States.

Based on the podcast “Be a Man,” Frye’s “Sexism” reading and as a woman, what always strikes me is that over the time women were integrated into men’s world but mostly without any accommodation. That is why I believe we can see that sexism is often expressed towards girls and women. The society /world was previously structured and built for men. When women are integrated to men’s world, they are required to change and become more men like or reach the standards set for men. At the same time, men do not have to change the rigid patterns. —Syeda

I think this is a good point. I talked about an example of this in my last answer. Iceland has demonstrated that changing gender roles requires actively shaping men’s behavior so that they’re willing to do things that have traditionally been marked as feminine (such as childcare). They show that this can be effective, but it sometimes takes significant top-down interventions in people’s lives. There tends to be a lot of push-back to that sort of thing, especially in the United States.

Would Frye’s definition still work without the dominator and subordinate part or is division and hierarchy interlinked? —Shah

I think we can at least imagine a world in which we make and reinforce gender distinctions without either gender being the clear oppressor or oppressed. But I think that a lot of feminists would argue that there’s a reason why it doesn’t ever happen that way, and this is linked to why we work so hard to reinforce gender norms at all: it’s because some of us have something to gain by doing so.

Of course, as I think Goldstein makes clear (and Frye sort of does too, in her own way), it’s not as though gender norms are entirely good for men and entirely bad for women. Men are conditioned to be willing to die in war if needed, which doesn’t seem like such a great thing for men. Men are also much more likely to be the victims (and the perpetrators) of violent crime, and so on. Goldstein would argue that this is largely due to the ways that gender norms shape men’s options and condition them to be warlike. So I think one way to think about it is that the gender system that we have constricts everyone’s freedom in different ways.

What if some of those advantages/disadvantages have less to do with gender markings and more to do with biological differences? Furthermore, would it have to do with the kind of jobs we have in society that make sexism more or less relevant? Maybe many years ago, when machine power and technology was less relevant, the types of jobs for men and women were more restrictive for example. —Cynthia

You are certainly right that there is a very difficult nature/nurture problem here, and that it is extremely difficult to separate out biological and cultural factors. This is why I have encouraged everyone to read Joshua Goldstein’s book, *War and Gender*. He does this more carefully than anyone else I have ever read. In particular, his Chapter 3 does an amazing job of showing how limited various biological explanations of gender differences are (at least when it comes to gender roles in the military). So I would definitely encourage you to read that.

In Frye’s paper she makes the claim that the need to know someone’s sex at all times is based on social construction and not sex “There are reasons...why you should want to know whether the person filling your water glass or your tooth is male or female... but those reasons are woven invisibly into the fabric of social structure”. I think there is a range of ways of acting relating to

sex. Some sex-based actions are more obviously part of social structure, while there are others for which it is as of yet unclear whether they are more inherent or not. For instance, I think there is a difference between the feeling, "I should greet this person with a bow or handshake due to my perception of their sex" and "I should be guarded when I interact with this person given a statistical probability of rape". Not to harp on a specific example though, on the whole Frye seems to think that the showing of markers of sex far outweighs their utility. But the next question is "why?". Is there a reason these markers are so prevalent in society? Charity would incline me to assume that there is. If there is, that doesn't mean that Frye is wrong about it being sexist, but it does mean we can better evaluate it and understand it. In the HiPhi Nation Podcast, for instance, there is an attempt to answer the question "why" -- it isn't the same question, but they try to address the "why" of their question of sex related trends and attitudes. Their answer was interesting, but since it is based on a historical narrative, its usefulness depends on the truth of that narrative. —Miriam

Right, so the reason that I assigned the Hi-Phi nation podcast is that Goldstein's book gives what I think is the most interesting and plausible answer to your "why" question that I have ever heard about. (He also does a pretty impressive job of debunking most of the obvious biological answers that might come to mind.) All I can say about the book is that you should read it before you decide whether it is correct.

Frye says that "Sex-identification intrudes into every moment of our lives and discourse [...]. Elaborate, systematic, ubiquitous, and redundant marking of a distinction between the two sexes of humans and most animals is customary and obligatory. One never can ignore it"(846). I agree with Frye. I think that (the same as race) sex is a social construction in our lives and discourse. We always cannot ignore sex-identification. Why can we not be freed from sexism? How are the custom and obligations formed? —Misa

Again, I think the best thing I have read about this is the Goldstein book, which is described in the podcast assigned for today. Another possible answer is that gender norms are created and reinforced primarily for the benefit of men, who oppress women for their own benefit. On that theory, I would suggest reading "Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny" by Kate Manne.

Goldstein/Hi-Phi Nation

In the podcast they seemed to be implying that there's something wrong with associating strength and dominance with being a man. But men are more stronger and dominant by nature and biology when compared to women. War is brutal, I see the disproportions in numbers when it comes to men and women in the army as a result of simply trying to put oneself in the best possible position to succeed. War requires the strongest individuals to be able to endure all of it's hardships, men are naturally more stronger than women, so how can one be surprised or dissatisfied with the fact that there are more men than women in service? —Brendan

Goldstein acknowledges that there are biological factors that partially explain why men would be more likely to be good soldiers: greater average upper-body strength, greater average aggression,

etc. But he also points out that these are average differences, and that many women are stronger and more aggressive than the average man. So if these biological differences are what explain the difference in men's and women's historical participation in the military, what we should expect is that there would be more men than women. But that's not what we find. In his first chapter, Goldstein surveys a huge amount of historical data showing that active militaries have, throughout all of history, been *entirely* made up of men. And that cannot be explained by the fact that men are slightly better suited to military service on average.

So what Goldstein wants is a better explanation for this fact. And he argues—quite convincingly, I think—that the only good explanation is that we use gender norms to systematically condition one of the two sexes to be willing to fight in war, which is something that we need to be convinced to do because it is a highly unnatural thing to be willing to do on our own. Because of the small average biological advantage that men have over women, men have been chosen for this conditioning process. Societies that don't adopt this strategy are crushed because they cannot convince enough people to fight, and so a process of survival of the fittest has left us with all and only cultures that condition men to be willing to fight in war.

I'm not denying that there are capable women out there, if they are capable let them join, but to act shocked or offended by the practicality of the results, I just don't understand. We see this played out in sports all the time. The best of the best women athletes don't hold up against the top men athletes. To me this argument always seems to come from a point of feelings rather than logic. Making changes simply for the fact that one feels like it's not right isn't good enough when it comes to something like war preparation, we're talking about life/death and defense/invasion after all. If it's a fact that naturally men are stronger than women, then it's logical to have more men than women in a field that requires overpowering ones opposition. —Brendan

Goldstein isn't primarily arguing that we should change gender norms. He is mainly interested in explaining where they come from. He is trying to give an actual explanation of *how* gender is socially constructed, not just claiming that it is and that that's bad. One possible way to react to his book is that we'd better keep the gender norms we have, since societies who haven't had similar norms have tended to lose wars and die out!

Looking at the men's role as soldiers and warriors and the connection to the traditional definition of masculinity there seems to be an ancient connection going back at least as far as recorded history and possibly further. Additionally, there are biological assumptions built in about superior strength and stamina. In the assumptions made about sex and gender, there are similar appeals to customs and arguments made from claims about biology. When faced with such persistent and ingrained ideas about sex and gender arguments that reveal less clear cut divisions with more room for diversity and nuance usually face dramatic even violent push back. Is it possible to make metaphysical claims on such topics in a way that fosters discourse rather than resistance or when the categories that people hold as key to their identity are challenged will resistance always be the most fierce? —Matt

I think that it is possible, and that the readings I've been assigning are very good examples of things that have advanced our understanding of sex and gender. The piece by Byrne that we'll read next

week is another good example, although Byrne disagrees with much of what we've read for today. He shows that civil disagreement and argument is possible on these topics, even if it's not always common.

Obviously there will be lots of pushback, sometimes pushback that is much more aggravated than the sort of objections to the views on things like the philosophy of math that we studied earlier this semester. That's also something that both Frye and Goldstein would predict, since anything that unmasks or undermines deeply rooted norms will tend to bother people and face resistance.