GENDER, MEN, AND MASCULINITIES

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Summary

Gender involves men as well as women. Attempts to understand gender have sometimes used the idea of sex roles; and sometimes have treated men and women as simple categories. But the most fruitful approach is to see gender as a system of social relations. Masculinities are the patterns of social practice associated with the position of men in any society's set of gender relations. Bodily difference is not a fixed determinant of gender patterns; it is, rather, a point of reference in gender practices.

In recent years a body of international research on masculinities has emerged. Important conclusions of this research are: there are multiple masculinities; there are hierarchies of masculinities, often defining a "hegemonic" pattern for a given society; masculinities are collective as well as individual; masculinities are actively constructed in social life; masculinities are internally complex; masculinities change in history.

Certain masculinities operate in global, not just local, arenas. We can trace this historically, through the phases of imperialism, colonialism, de-colonization, and contemporary globalization. New masculinities are emerging in global business.

At the same time, movements for reform of traditional masculinities have developed in many countries. Many men resist change, because of the "dividend" they get from patriarchal gender systems. But there are also important motives for men to change. Such reform is most likely to be successful when it emphasizes social justice as well as de-gendering or gender diversity.

1. Men and Gender

Since the 1970s there has been increasing awareness that issues about environment and development are interwoven with the gender arrangements of society. Since this relationship has mainly been pointed out by the women's movement, there is a strong

tendency in many discussions to assume that "gender" issues are issues about women. Any report with a title like “Gender and Development” is likely to be really about women and development. Most politicians, bureaucrats and journalists assume that men are the norm, and that "gender" is about the way women differ from this norm. Thus gender issues often in practice drift into questions about the special needs of women.

Ironically, feminist thought has sometimes reinforced this drift, because feminist research has, by and large, focused on the lives of women. There have been good reasons for this, given the historic exclusion of women’s experience from patriarchal culture.

But gender is inherently relational. Even if our understanding of gender is no more than "sex differences," there must always be two terms in a difference. And a closer look at gender shows much more complex patterns than simple difference. Gender is also about relationships of desire and power, and these must be examined from both sides. In understanding gender inequalities it is essential to research the more privileged group as well as the less privileged.

This requires more than simply an examination of men as a statistical category (though it is useful to do that). We must examine men’s gender practices, and the ways the gender order defines, positions, empowers, and constrains men.

The gender position that society constructs for men may not correspond exactly with what men actually are, or desire to be, or what they actually do. It is therefore necessary to study masculinity as well as men. By "masculinity" I mean the pattern or configuration of social practices linked to the position of men in the gender order, and socially distinguished from practices linked to the position of women.

Masculinity, understood as a configuration of practice in everyday life, is substantially a social construction. Masculinity refers to male bodies (sometimes symbolically and indirectly), but is not determined by male biology. (It is, thus, perfectly logical to talk about "masculine" women, when women behave or present themselves in a way their society regards as distinctive of men.)

To understand masculinity, we must start by understanding the gender system, in which masculinities are defined. The two most popular ways of thinking about gender are in terms of (a) "sex roles"; and (b) sex categories. A less popular but more scientifically adequate approach has also been developed, which focuses on (c) gender relations. These approaches yield different views of masculinity, which I will now briefly examine.

a. "Role theory" is a theory of society based on the power of custom and social conformity. People learn their roles, in the course of growing up, and then perform them under social pressure. "Sex role" theory explains gender patterns by appealing to the social customs that define proper behavior for women and for men.

Applied to men, "sex role" theory emphasizes the way expectations about proper masculine behavior are conveyed to boys as they grow up, by parents, schools, mass

media, and peer groups. This theory emphasizes the "role models" provided by sportsmen, military heroes, etc; and the social sanctions (from mild disapproval to violence) that are applied to boys and men who do not live up to the role norms.

This is a plausible approach to some issues about masculinity. But "sex role" theory has serious intellectual weaknesses. It gives no grasp on issues of power, violence, or material inequality. It misses the complexities within femininity and masculinity, and it offers very limited strategies of change. Even in a field like education, it offers no protection against the backlash now emerging against gender equality; and gives little understanding of the diversity of desires and responses among boys in schools.

b. The second model of gender, which I call "categorical theory," treats women and men as pre-formed categories. This approach often appeals, explicitly or implicitly, to the biological difference of the sexes as the catchall explanation of social behavior.

In categorical thinking about gender, the focus is on some relation between the categories, which is external to their constitution as categories. This is, for instance, the logical structure underlying most discussion of Equal Employment Opportunity (based on statistics contrasting men's employment with women's employment). It is also found in much of the discussion of sexual harassment and gender violence.

Compared with "sex role" theory, this approach more readily addresses issues of power. But categorical theory too has difficulty grasping any of the complexities of gender, such as gendered violence within either of the two main categories, men and women (e.g. violence by straight men against gay men).

The categorical approach leaves little space for the interplay of gender with class and race, and misses such issues as the importance of unionism for working-class women, or community organizing for indigenous women. It readily leads to ethnocentric generalizations about women and men, which miss the importance of the global structures of exploitation and under-development.

c. These problems have led a number of theorists towards a third approach, focussed on "gender relations". This approach emphasizes that gender issues always concern a structure of social relations. I consider that this approach is the only scientifically adequate basis for an understanding of men and masculinity, so will outline some key points of its model of gender.

Gender is a way in which social practice is ordered. In gender processes, the everyday conduct of life is organized in relation to a reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction. This arena includes sexual arousal and intercourse; childbirth and infant- care; bodily sex difference, and similarity.

I call this a "reproductive arena" rather than a "biological basis" because biology does not determine what happens. Rather, bodies are participants in a historical process; they are both agents and objects of practice. For instance, when a teenage girl learns to use cosmetics to make herself heterosexually attractive, or a teenage boy works out in a gym to develop a masculine physique, bodily pleasures are involved, and the learning is

a very active process; but the learning is at the same time shaped by social symbolism and the social division of labor.

Such body-reflexive practices are not internal to the individual. They involve social relations and shared symbolism; they may well involve large-scale social institutions. Within this historical process, particular versions of femininity and masculinity are materialized as meaningful bodies, and embodied meanings. Through body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed.

The broad division of human bodies into male and female (plus a few other minor groups) is constantly a point of reference in gender divisions; but it is vital to recognize that gender is a social arrangement, which under different historical circumstances takes vastly different forms. Biological reproduction does not cause, or even provide a template for, gender as practice. Lesbian and gay sexualities, for instance, are gendered practices quite as much as heterosexuality is, since they are sexualities organized with reference to female bodies (and male bodies, respectively) as partners. Gender differentiations occur, which have not the slightest logical connection with reproduction for instance the crude gender coding in computer games.

Social practice is creative and inventive, but not inchoate. As social beings, we act in response to particular situations, within definite structures of social relations. Gender relations, the relations among people and groups organized through the reproductive arena, form one of the major structures of all documented societies.

Practice that relates to this structure, generated as people and groups grapple with their historical situations, does not consist of isolated acts. Actions are configured in larger units, and when we speak of "masculinity" and "femininity" we are naming configurations of gender practice.

"Configuration" is perhaps too static a term. The important thing is the process of configuring practice. Masculinities and femininities are best understood as gender projects, dynamic arrangements of social practice through time, in which we make ourselves and are made as particular kinds of human beings.

We find this gender shaping of practice at every level of social reality. There is no separate sphere in which gender exists, isolated from other kinds of social relations. Gender is an aspect of all social situations (though in some it is more prominent than in others).

Gender configurations are very clearly seen in the individual life course, the basis of the common-sense notions of masculinity and femininity. The configuration of practice here is what psychologists have traditionally called "personality" or "character". Psychoanalytic discussions of gender focus almost exclusively on this site.

This focus can, however, exaggerate the coherence of practice. Post-structuralist critics have emphasized that gender identities are not fixed, because multiple discourses intersect in any individual life. Their argument highlights another site, that of discourse, ideology or culture. Here gender takes the form of symbolic practices, made familiar by

feminist critiques of sexist language, sexist images of women in mass media, and in school textbooks, etc. A similar critique of patriarchal images of masculinity has now emerged.

Social science has increasingly recognized a third site of the gender configuration of practice: institutions such as the state, the workplace and the school.

Educational institutions, for instance, are gendered in several ways. Male staff predominate in higher education and in school administration; women staff predominate in kindergarten and elementary teaching. The curriculum tends to divide into "masculine" subjects (physics, mathematics, and technology) and "feminine" subjects (languages, human relations), and some parts of it (technical education for instance) virtually segregate youth on gender lines. Educational authority is masculinized, and so are parts of the non-academic curriculum, such as competitive team sports. Gender relations among the children are a constant preoccupation of peer group life, ranging from terms of casual playground abuse to elaborate dating rituals. These relations are constantly re-negotiated in the changing arenas provided by the school.

The pattern that all these relations take within an institution (such as a school or a corporation) may be called its "gender regime". The pattern of gender regimes, together with the gender pattern in culture and personal life, may be called the "gender order" of a society. It is implicit in these concepts that gender regimes and gender orders are historical products, and subject to change in history.

It follows that gender is connected with the most important historical change in modern world history, the process of colonial expansion, conquest, resistance, and also neocolonialism and postcolonial globalization. It is increasingly recognized that these are crucial contexts for the making of masculinities, both in the colonizing powers and among the colonized. Recent research on southern Africa, for instance, has provided a very clear demonstration of the importance of colonialism and post-colonial struggles in shaping gender relations and masculinities.

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Biographical Sketch

Raewyn Connell is University Professor at the University of Sydney. Formerly Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz (1992-95), Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard University (1991-92), Professor of Sociology, Macquarie University, Sydney (1976-91). Born 1944 in Sydney, Australia; BA Hons, with majors in history and psychology, University of Melbourne; PhD in government with thesis in political sociology, University of Sydney. She is author or co-author of nineteen books, including *Making The Difference* (1982) *Gender And Power* (1987) *Schools And Social Justice* (1993), *Masculinities* (1995), *The Men and the Boys* (2000) and *Gender* (2002). A past president of the Sociological Association of Australia, and New Zealand, she has been a member of policy advisory committees, and a contributor to research journals in sociology, education, political science, gender studies, and related fields. She is recognized as a leading contributor to international social research and theory on gender, giving keynote addresses at conferences on gender issues in many countries. Her book *Masculinities* is available in six languages.