

### 3. Gender Theory

#### Overview

In this lecture we will focus on the difference between sex and gender, and review the emergence of the study of gender as a discipline.

#### Objectives

By the end of this topic you will have:

- Reflected on your own understandings about gender
- Gained an understanding about the difference between different theoretical constructions of gender
- Focused on the development of gender identity, and considered gender diversity.
- Considered the implications of this for your own practice.

#### Key Concepts

Social construction, binaries, sex, gender, male/female, masculine/feminine, gender theory, queer theory, systemic discrimination

#### *Required reading*

Calasanti, TM & Slevin, KF (2001). Chapters 1 & 2 in Gender, Social Inequalities and Aging. AltaMira press, Walnut Creek CA. pp 1 – 27.

Butler, J. (1990) Chapter 1, Subjects of sex/gender/desire in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity pp 1-25. Routledge, NY.

#### *Further reading*

Leonard W. (2005). Queer occupations: Development of Victoria's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex health and wellbeing action plan. Gay & Lesbian Issues in Psychology Journal 1 (3) p. 92

Peters J. (2005). Gender prac: Gender as performance, not gender theory. Gay & Lesbian Issues in Psychology Journal 1 (3) p. 98

#### **Activity: What is gender?**

**Objective:** To explore discourses about gender and sex.

- Write down all the words and phrases that come to mind when you hear the word 'gender'.

- Now write down all the words that come to mind when you hear the word 'sex'.
- When you have exhausted your ideas, sort and categorise them as follows:
- Group all the words that apply mostly to women together
- Group all the words that apply mostly to men.
- Look at these groups of words. Are there similarities? Differences?
- Are any words or concepts left over? If there are, why don't they belong to one of the above categories above?

**Journal work:** Reflect on the results of this activity and make notes in your journal. Complete the following sentence stems:

- I learned that I ...
- I was surprised that I ...
- In future I will ...

## Lecture Notes

'Gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, identities and expectations assigned to men and women. It contrasts with the fundamental biological and physiological differences between males and females, which are known as secondary sex characteristics. Gender roles differ between cultures and communities and over time.

For many, gender is always thought about in binary terms: man/woman; masculine/feminine. Expectations of women and men are limited by these binaries, and are communicated through sex role stereotyping. These stereotypes limit gender appropriate behaviour to a range of rigid roles which are assigned to women and men on the basis of their gender, for example, 'women are nurturers', 'men are aggressors'. These role expectations are subtle and deeply ingrained, however there is great diversity in how individuals express their gender which frequently does not conform to these stereotypes. Not all women fit the stereotypical expectations of femininity, not all men fit those qualities associated with masculinity.

Transgender people feel that they have been born into a body in which their gender identity and their physical sex are not coherent. The terms transgender and transsexual are both used to describe this phenomenon, generally, transsexual people have had surgical intervention to change their physical characteristics to match their gender identity, while transgender people have not. Many people who identify as transgender choose to live their gender identity rather than their physical or genetic sex. The transition from one gender to another can be painful and difficult. Transgender people are not transvestites. Transvestites are people who cross-dress, that is, they choose from time to time to wear the clothes of the opposite gender. Because one area in which women have greater freedom of expression than men is in how they dress,

women are rarely called transvestites when they choose to wear what was traditionally known as men's clothing.

**Activity:**

Think about the following statements and reflect on the implications of each one for your work.

- Women and men are not all the same. Age, race, ability/ disability, culture, language, class, sexual orientation and access to resources (among other differences) all factors that influence access to resources and services.
- Workers, policy makers and planners all bring their own bias to their work. This will be influenced by life experience, gender, class, culture, education, economic status and other factors.
- Older women, particularly those from marginalised groups such as indigenous people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and lesbians, often do not have economic equality with men from similar backgrounds and status. They are under represented in decision making processes, therefore measures are necessary to ensure that their voices are heard.
- To be responsive to the diversity of women and men in the community it is important to consult with the people who will be affected by the policies/ programs.

**Journal work:** In your journal, write about your reflections, and then identify three things you can do to change/improve your practice in relation to ensuring that stereotypes and assumptions are not used about gender roles and expressions with older people.

***Gender Theory***

In the lecture on sexuality theory, we discussed how heterosexuality was so naturalised that it was not named until after those practices which deviated from the heterosexual norm were categorised. In many way, gender is similar; the binary construction of male/female and the correspondingly appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours and role were, until recently, so naturalised that to think outside of this binary was almost impossible.

In the 1960s, second wave feminism started to critique essentialist assumptions about gender, and in the academy, feminist scholars started to develop feminist theory based on a theoretical or philosophical analysis of women's liberation politics, and a field of study called women's studies emerged.

Feminist politics and women's studies put a spotlight on the inequities between women and men in almost all societies. In the West, women campaigned to gain equal rights and opportunities and in the developing world, a 'gender analysis' was applied to aid and development funding. While there are vast differences between the needs of women in developed and developing nations, and different approaches have been applied, by using a gender lens, many inequalities between men and women were

highlighted and work was undertaken to try to address or change the status quo. However, in this focus on inequalities between women and men, the term 'gender' somehow became synonymous with 'women'.

It was not until the 1980s that the field of masculinity studies emerged in the academy. Masculinity (or men's) studies focused on the construction of masculinity, and used feminist theory to analyse the ways in which gender and power operate in the lives of men and develop masculinity theory. This new field of study has started to highlight the ways in which gender inequities affect not only women, but also men.

More recently, a multidisciplinary field of study has emerged that examines the cultural representations and the lived experience of being male or female. This allows for an analysis of gender for both women and men, and is used to interrogate the phenomena in a wide range of disciplines.

### ***Queer theory***

Queer theory comes out of gender, gay and lesbian and feminist studies. It is influenced by the work of post structuralists such as Foucault and Derrida (among others). Queer theory explores categories of gender and sexuality and challenges the notion of identity. As a field of study, it focuses on the construction of identity and examines how normalisation is implicated in its construction.

Simone de Beauvoir observed that 'one is not born a woman, but becomes one'. Similarly, for Butler (1990) gender is not so much something one is, as something one does. She uses the concept of performativity – the aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names – as setting the limits of 'normality' and 'otherness'. According to Butler (1993):

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives for instance are statements that, in uttering also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power ... If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse (Butler, 1993, p. 225).

By this she means that the repeated normalising of certain social positions – such as heterosexuality, masculinity or femininity – naturalises the acts, thereby acting to set limits on what is normal and excluding anything outside of these limits as deviant.

In this theory, gender is an embodied discourse. It has no relation to biological truths about the sexed body, and exists only in discourse. Gender has a history that exists beyond the individual who enacts (or resists) the roles expected from the category to whom s/he has been assigned.

### ***Identity***

Psychology (clinical and academic), sociology and other social sciences, as well as literary and cultural theory have all contributed to developing theories on identity formation. Esterberg (1997) posited that:

... at least ten different meanings [of identity, have been] used by scholars, ranging from the sense of oneself as continuous, existing throughout time, to a sense of oneself as belonging to a group or having shared group membership.

Some see identities as something essential, tangible, and real, inherent in the self; yet others see identities as shifting, constructed, a matter of creating meaning from social categories and coming to attach labels to oneself. The body of academic and popular literature on identity is so large that it nearly defies categorization. Perhaps no term has been used so much in recent years or become so popular – both in academic and in lay worlds – as identity (Esterberg, 1997, p. 14).

This quote draws attention to the way in which debates about the origins of identity are often constructed as being produced by either nature or nurture, which reduces what is essentially a complex process to a simple binary (Dyson, 2007).

Psychologists such as Erikson defined identity as the development of individual personality involving a stable core sense of self, within the context of the social milieu. Here notions of stability and interiority are central. However, for sociologists: "... identities are not something deep down inside the individual but are located in the interaction between the individual and society. Identities, thus, are always in process" (Esterberg, 1997, p. 14 – 15). Ussher (1997) represented this debate as material/discursive (see Lecture One), arguing that the two are always placed in opposition to each other, which is counterproductive (Dyson, 2007).

Assumptions about older people's gender and sexual identity being masculine/feminine and heterosexual can lead to marginalising those who do not conform to these assumed norms. These issues will be addressed in more detail in Lecture 10. In planning, policy development and service delivery it is important not to make assumptions about identity, but to acknowledge the possibility that applying normative assumptions about gender or identity to everyone can be harmful to some.

### ***A gender sensitive approach***

As has been pointed out earlier in this lecture, the socialised roles of masculinity and femininity are not innate, but socially constructed:

The forces that construct gender roles embed men and women in relations of subordination and dominance... In spite of the relative advantages afforded to men under the social and political system that socialised us, many men feel disadvantaged compared to women' (Pease 1999).

A gender sensitive approach is not about creating competition between individual women and men to equalise access to resources and services. It is about recognising that we live in a system that creates competition between women and men and that men are socialised to maintain that system through domination and aggression. A gender sensitive approach works on a number of levels

- Analysing and understanding the system that creates gender roles and stereotypes;
- Understanding both personal values and systemic biases about gender, and how these effect us as workers and the people with whom we work;
- Striving to achieve equity and justice for consumers and for workers.

## ***Gender and Policy***

Gender is a critical consideration in all areas of policy and program planning and development, and there is no area that impacts on women and men in exactly the same way. There has been a tendency to make 'gender' synonymous with 'women'. Until the women's health movement of the 1970s, biomedicine used a male model as the norm in research, and the investigation and recognition of gender differences were restricted to reproductive issues. This was essentially seen as the female domain, with the focus being on pregnancy and reproduction. Although there is increased recognition of gender differences in health status and service usage, there are many gaps in understanding of how to measure gender differences in health status. A gender sensitive approach to policy, research and practice would provide a gendered picture of health status and recognise the differences between, and diversity of, women and men by actively listening to the voices of consumers and working to achieve equity in outcomes.

## **Gender Inclusive Analysis**

Seeks to understand the differences and disparities in the roles that women and men play, the power imbalances in their relations, their needs, constraints and opportunities and the impact of these differences on their lives. In health, a gender analysis determines how these differences determine their differential exposure to risk, access to the benefits of technology, information, resources and health care, and the realisation of rights. It is important to understand how the lives of women and men differ in family life, labour force participation, economic status, educational background, subjective experience of violence and participation in decision making roles.

## ***Systemic Discrimination***

Systemic discrimination, is often enshrined in the institutions that govern our lives. It stems from assumptions and stereotypes about women and men, as well as about class, age, race, ethnicity and ability. While roles and expectations may differ between cultures and over time, the process by which we learn them is so much part of our everyday experience, that to most people it is invisible. This then is the discrimination that is called systemic, because it is so pervasive as to constitute a system under which we live. There are a number of factors that impact differently on the lives of women and men. The more gender awareness is incorporated into your work, the more you will become aware of these factors.

## **Journal Work**

Reflect on the ways in which you address gender issues in your work.

- In what ways might you be able to apply a gender lens to your work?
- How can you ensure that people who do not conform to normative gender identity are not ignored and have their needs met?

Write about this in your journal.