

# GENDER AND EVERYDAY LIFE

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2009  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group,  
an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Gender and everyday life / Mary Holmes.

p. cm.— (The new sociology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-415-42348-9 (hbk)—ISBN 978-0-415-42349-6 (pbk)

—ISBN 978-0-203-92938-4 (ebk) 1. Sex role. 2. Sex

differences. 3. Gender identity. I. Title.

HQ1075.H63 2008

305.3—dc22

2008007770

ISBN 0-203-92938-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-42348-1 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-42349-X (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-92938-1 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42348-9 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42349-6 (pbk)

ISBN10: 978-203-92938-4 (ebk)

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## **CONCLUSION: GENDER, EVERYDAY LIFE AND DEGENERATING**

In sociologically imagining the state of gender in everyday life I have packaged it up around themes that seem important: gendered embodiment, the learning and doing of gender, gender as relation(ship), resisting gender and future gender. In this Conclusion I want to draw together insights parcelled out in each chapter to give an overview of gender that is historical, comparative and critical. I do this so that some thought can be given to where thinking about gender might go next. The last major rethink of gender was by Judith Butler, whose first book on the topic appeared in 1990. This changed the way gender was thought about and I want to consider whether there might be any other revolutions in store. It would be nice to imagine that this Conclusion might contain such a revolution, but I have more humble hopes. I just hope that these last pages might leave you with a sense of why it is important to reflect on how gender is done in everyday life, how sociology can help with this, and to explore the possibility that gender could be done differently or even not at all.

## HISTORY OF GENDER: LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Looking back at how women's and men's lives have changed is a crucial element in seeing how we are not simply determined by our biology. Bodies play a part in how we live and form the basis on which social divisions such as gender operate. However, bodies are not just hunks of indisputable flesh but are interpreted in changing ways. There have been different ways of thinking about human bodies and in the past women's and men's bodies were seen as more similar than they are now.

If gender is not simply programmed into our anatomy, then there are bound to be variations in how women and men act. There are patterns to these variations over time and Chapter 2 documented some of the changing ways in which femininity and masculinity have been done. Social expectations about 'ladylike' or 'manly' behaviour do shift, as you will know from sometimes hearing older folk exclaim about how what youngsters are doing or wearing would not have been acceptable 'in their day'. Sociologists think about the patterns around gender in terms of large processes that are going on within particular societies and how they have brought us to where we are today. They may attend to the economic shifts that have taken place, for example. The emergence of a capitalist economy based on manufacturing in eighteenth-century Britain brought urbanization, and instigated a separation between home and work that had profound effects on individual men's and women's lives. Major changes in ideas and the meanings attached to gender have been related to changes in the way society is organized around gender. There is a general perception that inequalities between women and men are no longer acceptable, but the notion that women should act differently from men is still a powerful one.

Gender is not done in isolation, it is done in relation to others. There have been crucial changes in how these relations operate, both in the wider society and within intimate relationships. Up until the mid-twentieth century women's lives tended to revolve

around their families. As more women entered the workforce, they were subject to less control from fathers and husbands, but more control from employers and other powerful figures within the public world. These figures were usually men within a society that continues, despite many advances for women, to be male dominated. However, family life has also changed considerably, as have the kinds of family that exist. Couples are likely to cohabit before marrying, if they marry at all. People are having children later. Same-sex couples are receiving some recognition. Nevertheless, despite some shifts away from traditional types of intimate relationship, where women and men live together, there are still struggles over who does the washing-up, as well as more serious conflicts.

Although the way society is organized restricts people in gendered ways, there have always been spaces for doing things differently. This book shows how women have historically faced greater restrictions within a male-dominated society. However, there have always been women who have protested against the limitations of their lives, and the chapter on resistance began by examining some of the early writings advocating more freedom for women. Later, mass movements emerged that championed women's rights, and brought significant changes such as the right to vote, to education and, later, to equal pay. Gradually there have been shifts in how gender in everyday life works.

Previous attempts to imagine future gender shifts have often failed to think beyond differences between women and men as natural and unchangeable. Early sociologists, with notable exceptions such as Harriet Martineau, tended to think little about differences between women and men and, when they did imagine any change, it was that women would become more like men by entering the workforce (Marx and Weber), or women would specialize in the caring work at home within the family (Durkheim). More radical visions could be found in science fiction, but these, too, often struggled at some point to escape the idea that women and men just were different. Only in rare cases has the future been

imagined as degendered, and some discussion of comparisons might help reveal why.

## COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO GENDER

It does seem to be the case that most cultures and most social groups do make gender distinctions, but they do not make them in the same way. Even within lesbian culture, for example, some women are labelled 'butch' and some 'femme'. However, there are groups who are not particularly interested in distinguishing feminine from masculine. One classic example comes from anthropologist Margaret Mead's comparative study of gender in three different tribes in New Guinea. She noted that the Arapesh of New Guinea regarded both women and men as 'inherently gentle, responsive and co-operative', and that both women and men of the tribe took responsibility for childcare (Mead 1963/1935: 134). I have given other examples, within Chapter 1, about different cultures where rather than just feminine versus masculine there are one or two 'in between' genders. And of course there is considerable variation in the kinds of actions considered feminine or masculine by different groups, both across and within cultures.

One of the major variations in doing gender occurs around class. A society's dominant ideas about femininity and masculinity are usually the ideas of the dominant class. These ideals of femininity promote a ladylike delicacy, while the most rewarded styles of masculinity are besuited and physically and emotionally restrained. Although working-class women and men may take a certain pride in not being pretentious, they may also often feel put down or inadequate when measured against standards of respectability not of their own inventing. There are likely to be real effects involved in the lack of respect from which the working classes often suffer. Getting a decent education, decent job and indeed a decent life may remain a struggle for working-class women and men when they are constantly judged to be tarts and thugs. As this

suggests, the doing of gender is not achieved by individuals in isolation.

Gender is a relation. What it means and how it is done always relies on other people and other meanings and doings. Gender relations are organized at a social level such that women and men are typically thought suited for, and channelled into, different types of task. While women have made inroads into many formerly male occupations, one of the areas in which gendered divisions of labour have changed only very slowly is the home. The gap between the amount of housework women and men do may have closed a little, but it still remains substantial. That women continue to do the vast majority of the cleaning and caring work within intimate relationships is one indication of the persistence of gender inequalities. It is difficult for women to juggle work and family. This may be one reason why less traditional types of relationship are gaining ground. Non-conventional relationships, from same-sex families to living apart together, may provide better opportunities for doing gender in more equal ways.

Intimate relationships are not the only realm in which change occurs, and specific political attempts to bring changes to gender relations have come not only from women's movements, but a politics of masculinity. Comparing this politics to the success of women's movements can help explain how positive change can occur. In examining the variety of ways in which masculinity can be resisted in everyday life it is important to note that not all men are in positions of power. However, notions that men are somehow *meant* to have power and privilege remain persistent. Sometimes men who have been marginalized try to regain some sense of control by restricting the lives of women. Others turn to self-destruction, trying to prove their toughness by constantly engaging in danger and violence. In the case of pro-feminist men who recognize that society tends to privilege men, real possibilities arise for doing gender relations in more equal ways. This is because they focus not on trying to feel better about themselves,

but on achieving wider social changes that would bring greater equality.

What form social changes affecting gender might take in the future is the subject of considerable debate. They deserve a critical evaluation more easily executed if we take stock of the major perspectives on gender and everyday life.

## THINKING CRITICALLY

There is a wide variety of sociological and feminist approaches to gender and I cover only some in this book, focusing on those that deal most with the everyday aspects of gender. I have dealt with how the approaches covered critically address the key issues relevant to a sociological understanding of gender. These I see as follows:

- Differences between women and men are socially constructed, not biologically determined.
- Gender is learned and practised every day in relation to norms/rules/scripts.
- It is useful to consider whether we do gender, it is done to us, or produces us.
- There continue to be gender inequalities and social problems around gender.
- Processes of individualization and globalization foster new fashionings of gendered selves.
- Social and technological change continues to affect gender, and the future of gender may see continuities or breaks with the past.
- The most radical change would be for gender to disappear.

This is my synthesis of different ideas about gender, and drawing existing ideas together in such a way is a critical enterprise. Each chapter has taken one of these issues as the substance of its critical section, but by piecing back together those parts a bigger picture

can emerge. This is not a grand scheme that will finally explain everything about gender, but by doing this I hope to show you how to think critically and to clarify how sociology helps understand gender in everyday life.

The first bullet point states what I regard as the most crucial insight sociologists have to offer about gender and everyday life: that gender is socially constructed. While acknowledging that bodies are crucial – after all, we spend much of each day attending to bodily needs – it is important to see human bodies as always embedded within social life. How we attend to our bodily needs and what we think bodies mean are socially constructed. Thinking this way helps me have hope. There is something depressing and even paralyzing about the idea that we are always driven by our genes or our hormones. Not even geneticists really believe that. Possessing a gene for alcoholism does not mean I will inevitably become an alcoholic. I may have a slightly higher risk than someone without that gene, but whether I turn to alcoholism or not depends on the changing social environment in which I live out my life. Some people appear to find a belief in ‘natural’ differences between women and men reassuring. I can understand that, because those differences can be enormously frustrating, and if they are ‘natural’ then there is a sense that they cannot be helped and therefore we might be able to move towards a sense of calm acceptance. The alternative – believing that those differences are fundamentally socially created – implies that we all have much more responsibility for dealing with those frustrations. But sociologists are not suggesting that it is up to individuals to construct gender differently. It is not that easy, because no one sat down round a table and said: ‘Let’s organize society along gendered lines and here’s how we’re going to do it.’ Society *is* heavily organized along gendered lines, from games at school to jobs to who cleans the toilet. However, the social construction of gender is full of contradictions, disagreements and confusions. How am I supposed to do femininity? I could doll myself up and wear high heels but someone is likely to think I look vulgar. The point is that if

gender is socially constructed and not everyone knows or agrees exactly what it is, there are spaces and possibilities. This doesn't have to be how it is – gender is open to change, it could be made less frustrating.

There are already, as we have seen, a range of ways in which gender is learned and practised in everyday life. There are norms and rules and scripts that set out the most socially favoured ways of doing gender. These shift and change throughout history and from one culture or social group to another. When I was young doctors were rarely women, now they often are. Using moisturizer or taking an interest in clothes does not now automatically lead to a man being identified as gay. It is not a case of 'anything goes' – there are dominant patterns to how we learn femininity and masculinity, and early socialization is powerful in making girls girly and boys boyish. This does not mean that it is all mummy's fault. Parents do not live in a bubble with their children, and extended families, nurseries, schools, workplaces and the media are other sources of gender socialization. These communicate a range of sometimes conflicting ideas about how to do gender, so children do have a somewhat active part in learning gender in that there are choices to be made between the possibilities available. However, symbolic interactionists go further in that they suggest that gender is something we constantly have to learn and practise throughout our lives. We are always working at trying to get it 'right'. We continue to learn and do gender, according to this perspective, in interaction with others. However, there are those who suggest that saying that we 'do' gender puts too much emphasis on individuals' ability to choose.

The third bullet point touches on an ongoing debate within sociology about the extent to which our lives are governed by the way society is organized (structure) and how much power we have to choose (agency). Symbolic interactionists may veer a little towards the agency side of this debate, but they do think that there are structures, even at the level of everyday life, that constrain how gender is done. There are 'scripts' that set out 'normal'

expectations about doing gender in various social situations from workplaces to parties to intimate relationships. People can play out those scripts with some variations. For example, almost all the knowledge I had of how to lecture sociology when I became an academic, was from being lectured to by men. There were few women academics when I was studying. Doing lecturing was therefore muddled up with doing masculinity for me. It took me a while to figure out how to be a woman lecturer, and I think I still sometimes rub my chin thoughtfully as though I have a beard. And even if I have varied the script for that situation, sometimes others 'do' my gender for me in those interactions, in ways I may not like. For example, when I was younger I once got some obscene comments about my breasts on student evaluation forms. I thought I was being feminine yet scholarly, but a few (male?) students were doing my gender by sexually objectifying me. Maybe this made it less threatening for them dealing with a young woman lecturer, when most gender scripts encourage women to play down their intelligence and play up men's. The point is that there are limits to freely doing gender however we wish because gender is also done to us by others. Sitting alone, thinking about nothing in particular it may be possible that we sometimes 'forget' about our gender. However, in interaction we are liable to be reminded. Butler argues that gender fundamentally creates individuals according to current norms. It is not that gender is an aspect of who we are, but that gender is *the* main system through which social beings are produced. Gender is not simply done by us or to us, but it does us. Yet it never does us completely. The norms can only be approximated, so each gendered individual in imitating the norms does so slightly differently. Gender is not an actual property that individual women share and men have in common, but an illusion or a masquerade around which only certain ways of being human are possible. Every human being is understood in gendered terms, but almost always they are somehow not feminine enough or too masculine, and so on. This means that what it means to be gendered is never fixed, that we can never get it 'right'.

All that is certain is that being feminine means not being masculine, and vice versa. However, in our everyday lives we are all aware that women can sometimes be considered masculine and men feminine. This troubles the gender system and, if the boundary between feminine and masculine can be blurred, then that system can become less constraining.

As it stands, the binary opposition between feminine and masculine creates a gender system that perpetuates inequalities. The male-dominated societies in which we live tend to privilege men and disadvantage women. The problem is that 'feminine' and 'masculine' are not considered equal opposites. Whatever is masculine at various different times and in different places is rated superior to what is feminine. Maleness and masculinity tend to carry with them greater social rewards: more money, more power, more prestige. Not all men share equally in these rewards, and not all women are equally excluded. There are other inequalities in the dividing up of social goodies around class, race/ethnicity, age, disability and sexuality. However, generally speaking, men are likely to benefit more than women from the current way in which society is organized. Some men might recognize this and feel guilty, some women may believe that their proper place is in the home. Whether people are happy or unhappy with the way society works they are still affected by it. The men who feel guilty cannot instantly avoid all the privileges they receive by being men. Women who want to stay at home and care for their families might find that difficult in times where both partners are under pressure to work in order to pay a mortgage and provide the things their kids want. Individuals are still influenced by social norms, even if their experiences differ from the norm. My experience of close relationships with men has been overwhelmingly one of kindness and gentleness from them, but I am well aware, from speaking to other women and from looking at the statistics, that this is not the case for large numbers of women who are subject to violence from the men in their lives. But I cannot escape that violence completely and it could be argued that the obscene

comments those students made about me are in a small way an act of violence designed to punish me for straying into masculine territory. As C. Wright Mills said, we need to sort out what are private troubles from what are public issues. And, for sociologists, it is important to think about social problems. These are public issues that negatively affect large groups of people. For example, if one or two men are being occasionally slapped by their wives that is not to be condoned, but still qualifies as a private trouble. On the other hand, if huge numbers of women are being severely beaten and killed by men because they are somehow not doing what their man thinks a good woman should, that is a public issue. This violence against women is a social problem and one of the worst things that results from gender inequalities.

There are always new social problems arising and gendering within everyday life is something individuals often resist as they are swept up by processes of individualization and globalization. These processes can be overwhelming as tradition becomes a less and less automatic arbiter of action. People face constant choices about how to live their lives, and yet some people have far fewer resources and far less power to call on in overcoming obstacles. Global connections, both economic and environmental, are almost impossible to ignore, but they work better for some than for others. For most women individualization has been limited by caring obligations, or at least by the way in which paid work does not easily accommodate care work done at home. Women and men with more resources and power are still affected by individualization and globalization but have more options in responding to or alleviating that constraint. Many appear to be turning to self-fashioning as a response. These self-fashionings are highly gendered, with women usually focusing on looking more feminine according to dominant ideals that emphasize slender, respectable whiteness. Men, to a lesser degree and in different ways, are also subject to social pressures that require them to display toned and controlled bodies as a signal of their ability to take charge. Through diet and dress and exercise people try to discipline their

bodies, but they may sometimes do this in ways that resist rather than accommodate gender norms. These forms of resistance may blur gender boundaries, but emphasis on the self rather than on wider social structures is unlikely to really challenge how gender relations perpetuate inequalities.

As society changes and humans respond to and create change – for example, through the creation of new technologies – gender will continue to shift. In the 1990s there was considerable interest in the impact of bio-technologies that made humans part machine. These cyborg technologies can be used to reinforce sex/gender differences – for example, via breast implants or bra technology. However, the same and other technologies may blur gender boundaries as transvestites wear special bras or individuals undergo sex-change operations. Whether such technology brings positive change is debated and some fear that gender may be reinforced in restrictive ways, or that embodied femininity may be threatened with disappearance. It could be that blurring means masculinization, rather than real change. And indeed other debates question the extent to which tradition has ceased to guide people's lives, many arguing that in many areas a retraditionalization of gender has occurred that has pushed many women back into restrictive feminine roles, rather than bringing positive change.

I have suggested that the most radical change would be for gender to disappear, but only if that meant an end to gender inequalities. Some queer theorists propose this, or at least that gender can become much more fluid. What is difficult to imagine is a world without any gender categories at all. But if this book tells us anything it tells us that gender is a system that is socially created and other ways of organizing the social world are possible. Have another think about your day and how it would differ if your sex/gender was no longer an issue, no more an issue than whether you have brown eyes rather than blue eyes, or big ears instead of little ears. Would everything have to be thought of differently, from pyjamas, to washing and dressing, to breakfast, to work, to

how the evening meal was prepared and by whom, to how to relate to any children and what stories they were read at bedtime? Most people do not think much about how gender may creep into these everyday spaces. Yet even trivial matters like gender-neutral pyjamas are difficult to conjure up in the mind: no Spider-Man, no flowers or lace. And the shape is uncertain – they could be trousers and tops or like nightshirts. The toiletries in the bathroom would have to be redesigned. Gone would be the functional, subdued packaging of men's products, versus the colour (especially pink) and the flowers and other 'feminine touches' sprinkled on anything for women. Would ordinary soap be safely degendered or is Imperial Leather 'man's soap'? Obviously clothes could be an issue. Trousers have been adopted by women, and jeans can be pretty androgynous, but there are differences in the way trousers are worn by women and men that would disappear. And maybe everyone would sometimes wear some kind of skirt or dress. Bras might be considered ancient and barbaric devices, which is largely how we view corsets now. People with breasts (and some men have breasts) would no more think of wearing a bra than people with big ears feel they should bandage them to their head. Then two (or more?) people with no bras, in some kind of skirts might sit down to breakfast together without feeling the need to have either a delicate portion of fruit or a manly serving of bacon and eggs. Some in-between consumption of toast may occur (or fruit some days, bacon and eggs others) before going off to work at jobs divided not according to a gendered division of labour, but according to each person's merits. Construction sites would contain people with a wider variety of bodies than they do now, although all those bodies would be strong. Less strong people with different skills might do clerical or service work. People in power, at the top of companies and in charge of countries, would be a better mix of types of people than at present, as would those professionally caring for others in hospitals, childcare facilities and nursing homes. There would be different ways of caring for children that did not necessarily entail one person having to stay at

home. Maybe workplaces would all have a crèche so that parents could visit children at lunchtime or pop in for morning tea. If there are two (or more?) parents involved with the kids, the kids might go to one parent's workplace one week and another's the next, and so on. Or paid parental leave would be available for any parent if they wanted to stay at home with the kids. But home and work might not even be separated in the way they are now, so other things might be possible. Kids not tied in to having to try to be boyish or girlish might have some unexpected stories to tell us in the evenings.

The idea of a social world without gender may seem a little like some weird fairy story for feminist bedtimes, but we need to imagine it. Imagining and debating about creating different ways of living is crucial given the major challenges the world currently faces. There are profoundly gendered aspects to global inequalities, environmental degradation, and burgeoning violent conflict in the form of wars and terrorism. Those of us in what seem safer countries may not feel that these are part of our everyday life, yet they do not only appear on our televisions. For example, I currently live in Australia. Nearly all the clothes on sale here are made in China because workers there are much cheaper to employ. I get cheap clothes because many women in China are working long hours in poor conditions (Klein 2002/2000). And I live in the driest state: South Australia. Global warming is not something just threatening Caribou populations in the Arctic on which some Inuit peoples are highly dependent. It is not just something bringing famine and war to Darfur, or flooding to Bangladesh, both of which are creating huge numbers of refugees. It is also making water scarce and food expensive in Australia. This is presently manageable for a more privileged nation and for more privileged women such as myself, but makes everyday life more of a struggle for Australian men and women on low incomes, especially single mothers with children to care for. Changing the world is not as simple as giving up 'macho' four-wheel drives (often beloved by wealthier mothers with small children) or looking at who is

clocking up air miles doing business around the world. It is not that men are naturally suited to sitting on aeroplanes, nor to killing each other while women make porridge and babies. We don't have to live this way. Sociological criticism should bewail the terrible state of the world, but it should also imagine, debate and hope for better.