

# CONSTRUCTING WOMEN & MEN GENDER SOCIALIZATION

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Marlene Mackie



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*Gender Socialization*

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The University of Calgary  
Calgary, Alberta



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For Karen, my daughter and my friend.

# Preface

*Free to Be You and Me*, a book for enlightened children, offers this new version of an old nursery rhyme:

*What are little boys made of, made of?  
What are little boys made of?  
Love and care  
And skin and hair  
That's what little boys are made of.*

*What are little girls made of, made of?  
What are little girls made of?  
Care and love  
And (SEE ABOVE)  
That's what little girls are made of.*

(Laron, 1974:38)

Not snips and snails and puppy dog tails. Not sugar and spice and everything nice. Ms. Laron presents her youthful audience with an approximate summary of scientific research on sex differences: males and females share the same basic blueprint. Although inborn distinctions are few, most of us do not feel free to be simply people. Instead, we feel constrained to follow “female” or “male” rules, to play “female” or “male” roles. It is important to realize that these constraints are social constraints. Along with providing the “love and care” required to transform human infants into functioning adult members of Canadian society, the socialization process teaches children how boys and girls, men and women should think, feel, and behave.

Perhaps, the primary gender socialization lesson is the inequality of females and males. A true story illustrates this point. Sixty years ago, a small boy was fascinated by the trains that whistled through his Saskatchewan town. On several occasions, he disappeared from his backyard and was discovered eventually at the train station. Finally, his exasperated mother dressed her son in his sister's clothing and tied him to the front porch in sight of passersby. The demotion to girl was effective punishment. The little boy never again risked humiliation to run away from home. In recent years, the latest wave of the women's movement has criticized the notion of male superiority, as well as other traditional ideas about females and males. Nevertheless, gender continues to be an axis of both individual identity and social organization.

The theme of this book is the social construction of femininity and masculinity in Canadian society. Gender is regarded as a socially salient but, for the most part, arbitrary accretion upon relatively minor biological and psychological sex differences. In the words of Ortner and Whitehead (1981:1), the processes of sex and reproduction

furnish only a suggestive and ambiguous backdrop to the cultural organization of gender and sexuality. What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them — all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological “givens,” but are largely products of social and cultural processes.

Therefore, this book emphasizes socialization: the genesis of gender identity in childhood; changing meanings of femininity and masculinity throughout the life cycle; primary, secondary, and symbolic agencies of socialization. These general questions are asked: What is the meaning of gender in Canadian society? How is it socially constructed? How are traditional gender definitions of the situation sustained in interaction? Is a “gender-blind” society possible?

Gender is understood to be a principle of social organization, not a property of individuals (Stacey and Thorne, 1985). The goal of *Constructing Women and Men* is to develop an innovative theoretical perspective that explains gender socialization as a social psychological process taking place within, and reflecting a social structural framework. Bernard’s visionary article, “My Four Revolutions” (1973), observes, with apparent approval, that socialization has been “an all-but-overwhelming preoccupation” of post-women’s liberation movement sociological theorizing:

They have alerted us to aspects of it not previously recognized by male researchers, highlighting especially the processes by which women are socialized for weakness, dependency . . . , and even mild mental illness . . . , and thus shaped for marriage . . . (p. 779).

However, in a footnote, Bernard goes on:

Hanisch (1971, p. 2) rejects this preoccupation with . . . socialization. She views it as a diversionary tactic, distracting attention from the real—power—basis for the position of women. She finds that male social scientists can cheerfully accept the socialization interpretation of the status of women because they gain greatly in substituting the socialization paradigm for a power paradigm (p. 779).

According to the view developed here, the “socialization paradigm” and “power paradigm” are not mutually exclusive.

This book is written in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, the framework that has provided sociology's theoretical treatment *par excellence* of problems of socialization. Moreover, interactionism is congruent with the conceptualization of gender as a processual, social construct, *not* an immutable attribute of the individual. According to this perspective, "the meanings of objects, their symbols, and our actions toward them evolve largely out of the contexts of our interactions with others" (Haas and Shaffir, 1978:4). Hierarchy and power are clearly the essence of gender. "The domination of women by men precedes the emergence of class domination and is structured deeply into the relations of production and reproduction of almost all known societies" (Miles, 1982:9). Therefore, theoretical analysis of socialization must attend to the power structure that underlies the socialization process and the institutional arrangements that buttress it (Rubin, 1976a). The ideas of George Herbert Mead, major progenitor of interactionism, are of some help here. According to Gerth and Mills (1953:xvi), Mead's concept of the generalized other enables "us to link the private and the public, the innermost acts of the individual with the widest kinds of social-historical phenomena." However, in order to facilitate further this combination of micro- and macro-analysis, central tenets from the sociology of knowledge are integrated with symbolic interactionism. As the "systematic study of the social conditions of knowledge" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:12), the sociology of knowledge provides insight into the question, "How is gender accomplished in everyday life?"

The author writes as a feminist sociologist. The term "feminism" applies to people of both sexes who believe "in the full social-political equality of human beings" (Steinem, 1983b:15). Feminism, which also implies the equality of female and male in sociological analysis, provides the author's personal motivation for study, as the "revival of organized feminism" (Oakley, 1974:1) provided the stimulus for the social scientific study of gender. The women's movement provoked this fundamental realization: the sociology that had previously been accepted as the science of society was really the male science of male society (Bernard, 1973). "Women have been excluded as the producers of knowledge and as the subjects of knowledge . . ." (Spender, 1981b:1). Under the creative guidance of Smith (1974; 1975a) and Daniels (1975), feminists derived from the sociology of knowledge an appreciation of the politics of social science inquiry.

However, the most effective theoretical path to development of a sociology *for*, rather than *of* women (Smith, 1975a:367) is not necessarily the reinvention of "the world of knowledge, of thought, of symbols, and images" (p. 367). So far, the iconoclastic thrust of feminist thought has "worked better to criticize than to reconstruct most bodies of theoretical thought" (Stacey and Thorne, 1985:312). Refurbishing intellectual tools from the past, cleansing them of sexist assumptions and

concepts may be one route to go. Several characteristics of symbolic interactionism make it congenial to feminists. As its label suggests, it focuses on language (the root of female invisibility in social life and social science) and on connectedness with others. Although interactionists use many methods, their traditional emphasis on "taking the role of the other," participant observation, small-sample depth-interviewing, and the like accord with the communal research style preferred by feminists (Bernard, 1973). Nevertheless, in this book, ideas from symbolic interactionism and the sociology of knowledge are augmented by "sparks for the sociological imagination" (Gould, 1980:460) found in the work of feminists inside and outside social science.

Finally, a few words about the content of *Constructing Women and Men*. The book attempts a balanced treatment of theory and up-to-date empirical studies. Although Canadian research, including the writer's own, is emphasized, extensive use is also made of ideas developed elsewhere. As the title indicates, the book deals with females and males.

Feminism begins with the situation of women and analyzes the way that women's situation has been shaped by and in turn shapes the whole social world. *The focus is on women, but the basic enterprise is an attempt to understand and evaluate human affairs* (Benston, 1982:49, emphasis added).

Because the author is an Anglophone Canadian sociologist, the book is, of necessity, addressed to an Anglophone audience. It is intended for university or college students interested in the topics of gender relations, socialization, or symbolic interaction theory. Although prior exposure to an introductory-level sociology course would be helpful, it is not necessary. Specialized concepts are italicized and defined in the text. In addition, it is hoped that professional social scientists will find useful the theoretical analysis of gender socialization and the presentation of the author's own research.

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# Gender as Social Construct

## Introduction

*In modern industrial society, as apparently in all others, sex is at the base of a fundamental code in accordance with which social interactions and social structures are built up, a code which also establishes the conceptions individuals have concerning their fundamental human nature (Goffman, 1977:301).*

Male, female. The difference that makes a difference. He ejaculates and impregnates. She menstruates, gestates, lactates. She can identify 25 colors, including taupe and magenta. He can identify 25 cars (Aston Martin, Lamborghini). She smiles more. Except for anger, she finds it easier to express her feelings (Jourard, 1964), while he tends to be "emotionally constipated" (Farrell, 1974).

When an emergency occurs in a public place, he is more likely to help and she is more likely to be helped (Baron and Byrne, 1984:301). Moreover, he is usually both agent and object of aggression (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). He is more likely to cross the street against the light. When the traffic light is disobeyed, men "walk without hesitating and with a steady gait. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to pause, laugh, and then run" (Andersen, 1983:3). Indeed, across the world men commit more crime than women (Nettler, 1978:120).

In general, males enjoy more status and influence than females. When they are together, he does more of the talking and is more likely to interrupt her remarks. He initiates more touching and commands more personal space (Thorne and Henley, 1975). In informal task groups, he is more likely to be chosen leader and to influence the group's problem-solving processes (Unger, 1978:469). A petition sponsored by a male is more likely to be signed (Keasey and Tomlinson-Keasey, 1971). Political power is in male hands. After the 1984 Canadian federal election, women held a record high of 9.6 percent of the seats in the House of Commons.

Family life continues to be specialized by gender (Miller and Garrison, 1982). In our society, marriage is still the sign of the successful woman, while occupational achievement is the sign of the successful man (the "sex object" versus the "success object"). Therefore, it is women who show primary (though not exclusive) interest in makeup, cosmetic surgery for wrinkles and jowls, Weight Watchers meetings, and fashion shows. Men, on the other hand, still accept most of the responsibility for initiating contact with women (and the risk of rejec-

tion). Though "women are more likely than men to report emotional symptoms of love, such as feeling euphoric, having trouble concentrating, or feeling as though they are 'floating on a cloud', "men tend to have "more severe emotional reactions to the ending of a relationship" (Peplau, 1983: 242, 246). The burdens of decision making and economic support within marriage are carried disproportionately by men. Society expects them to achieve, to compete, to be aggressive. These "men of iron" do not have the option to be voluntarily unemployed or to fail occupationally (Safilios-Rothschild, 1974). On the other hand, the children belong to the women. Revolutionary changes in divorce custody awards have *not* occurred in recent years. Wives receive custody in 86 percent of Canadian divorce cases (McKie, Prentice and Reed, 1983).

Education and economic experiences also differ by sex. In the 20-to-24-year age category, more Canadian males than females have been enrolled full-time in school in every census year since 1911 (Hunter, 1981). The number of girls studying physics and mathematics in high school is less than half the number of boys, with a corresponding absence of women in the ranks of physical scientists (Shore, 1982). Despite news stories of pioneering women lumberjacks, judges, and a Governor General, most Canadian women are segregated into relatively few, mostly low-skilled, poorly paid occupations (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984). The "micro-chip revolution" is making jobs for men and taking them away from women (Menzies, 1984). As Gloria Steinem (1983a:8) puts it, most women are "only one man away from welfare."

Old age is not easy for either sex. Compared to older men, older women are more likely to be poor and widowed, to be living alone, or to be institutionalized (Abu-Laban, 1980; Dulude, 1978; Matthews, 1980). Elderly men, on the other hand, generally lack the occupational prestige, income, physical strength, and sexual prowess that are considered prerequisites for masculinity in our society (Abu-Laban, 1980). In recent years, destitute women have joined homeless men on the Skid Rows of our cities (Ross, 1982).

Men and women differentially experience physical and mental health. Although women are ill more often than men (Thompson and Brown, 1980), the average woman outlives the average man by seven years (Statistics Canada, 1985). More females than males have been diagnosed with depression, phobia, anxiety, hysteria, and chronic schizophrenia. More males than females have been diagnosed with personality disorders, such as alcoholism and drug addiction, and psychophysiological disorders, such as ulcers, heart, and respiratory illness (Al-Issa, 1980). At every age, Canadian males are more likely than Canadian females to kill themselves (Cumming and Lazer, 1981).

Though changes are occurring, women and men are socialized differently, play different roles, and have somewhat different thoughts



and experiences. They live out their lives in social worlds that are separate at some points and overlapping at others. The masculine world is more powerful and prestigious than the feminine world. "Men and women march to different drummers"; in some respects, "they are not even in the same parade" (Bernard, 1975).

## The Sex/Gender Distinction

In the late 1960s, the feminist movement alerted social scientists to the fact that the world contains women as well as men. A preliminary problem faced by those motivated to study female and male experiences in society was to specify basic vocabulary. Eventually, a consensus emerged to define *sex* as the "biological dichotomy between females and males," and *gender* as that "which is recognized as feminine or masculine by a social world" (Gould and Kern-Daniels, 1977). In other words, "sex" refers to physiology and "gender" to the sociocultural elaborations upon physiology.<sup>1</sup>

To go a step further, *sex roles* (behaviors stemming from biological sexual differences) may be distinguished from *gender roles* (socially created behaviors differentially assigned to men and women) (Lipman-Blumen, 1984:1). Child bearer and sperm donor are examples of sex roles, and mother and father of social roles. Similarly, we may speak of *sex norms* and *gender norms* (standards guiding biologically relevant and socially relevant behavior, respectively).

At first, the sex/gender distinction seemed straightforward enough. However, it was soon noticed that even sophisticated researchers tend to use the terms interchangeably, not because they are careless, but because it is often difficult, even impossible, to disentangle biology from culture (Eichler, 1980:12). For example, though pregnancy is a biological fact, being pregnant in medieval England was a different experience from being pregnant in twentieth-century Canada. Similarly, sexual intercourse is interpreted and guided by social scripts (Laws and Schwartz, 1977). Witness the emergence in the 1980s of a *herpes simplex* etiquette. In short, culture conditions biology, and biology sets limits on culture.

A second problem with the sex/gender terminology is a tendency to view *both* sex and gender as inevitable, dichotomous qualities, deeply rooted in human nature. This thinking is more characteristic of laypersons than social scientists. The difficulty stems, in part, from the high degree of congruency between sex and gender. Most biological females and males also learn to display feminine and masculine behavior, respectively. Moreover, since sex is determined at conception and is, for the most part, immutable, there is a temptation to see gender as similarly constant. Perhaps because sexuality and gender arouse con-