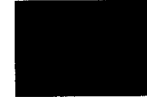


INTRODUCTION



When a new field of study emerges, it is usually based theoretically and in research practice on premises and problems current at the time. But as research brings in data that do not fit into accepted theory, the field begins to go through what Thomas Kuhn (1970) calls a scientific revolution. Eventually, if the field is to progress, it needs a new *paradigm*: new theories and new research questions.

In this book, I offer a new paradigm of gender—*gender as a social institution*. Its focus is the analysis of gender as a social structure that has its origins in the development of human culture, not in biology or procreation. Like any social institution, gender exhibits both universal features and chronological and cross-cultural variations that affect individual lives and social interaction in major ways. As is true of other institutions, gender's history can be traced, its structure examined, and its changing effects researched.

My concept of gender differs from previous conceptualizations in that I do not locate it in the individual or in interpersonal relations, although the construction and maintenance of gender are manifest in personal identities and in social interaction. Rather, I see gender as an institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself.

When studies of gender started, the field was called "sex roles." The perspective of sex roles is psychological and focused on individual attitudes and attributes. Sex-role theorists argue that what children learn from their families, teachers, picture books, and school books produces masculine and femi-

nine attitudes, motivations, and personalities that will fit children into their adult roles. Although change can take place later in life, many sex-role characteristics, such as women's parenting abilities, seem to be fixed for life. Since the liberal feminists who were promulgating the new field of sex roles believed in progress and change, the field had a built-in contradiction—where was change to take place? Reeducation and resocialization of adults? Or new, nonsexist patterns of socialization of children, which would require waiting a generation for change to take place? If parents and teachers enacted traditional sex roles, who was to institute the new, nonsexist patterns for the new generation? And what would be the content of future, androgynous roles? The concept of roles as the connection between individuals and society is useful for exploring how the consensus and contradictions of social structure play out in interpersonal relations (Komarovskiy 1992), but the roles women and men play don't explain gender as a social institution any more than the jobs people have explain the economy as a social institution.

Radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon (1982) threw down a powerful challenge to liberal feminists, arguing that sex and gender are a worldwide system of domination of women by men through control of women's sexuality and procreative capacity. In the radical feminist view, the sex-gender system of women's oppression is deliberate, not accidental, and pervades other social institutions—the family especially, and also the mass media and religion, which produce the justification for women's subordination. Radical feminists are particularly critical of such modern social-control agencies as law and the criminal-justice system because they allow men to rape, batter, prostitute, and sexually harass women with few legal restrictions.

Marxist feminists like Heidi Hartmann (1976) and Michèle Barrett ([1980] 1988) also locate women's oppression in the structure of society. In contrast to the radical feminists' focus on sexuality, Marxist feminists focus on the gendered division of labor. They argue for the equal importance of gender and class oppression and analyze the ways in which two parallel institutions—the economy (capitalism) and the family (patriarchy)—structure women's lives. Marxist feminists argue that work in the marketplace and work in the home are inextricably intertwined structures and that both exploit women. Recent theories claim that patriarchy, the ideological dominance of women by men, is located both in the family and in the workplace (Walby 1986, 1990).

Psychoanalytic feminists, such as Nancy Chodorow (1978), Luce Irigaray ([1974] 1985), Juliet Mitchell (1975), and Gayle Rubin (1975), building on the ideas of Freud, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss, have argued that gender is an idea of difference that emerges from family relationships, particularly mothering.

In the feminist psychoanalytic perspective, gender is embedded in the unconscious and is manifest in sexuality, fantasies, language, and the incest taboo. The focus is on sexuality as a powerful cultural and ideological force that oppresses women because it is inscribed in bodies and also in the unconscious.

For radical, Marxist, and psychoanalytic feminists, *patriarchy* is a central concept, but each perspective conceptualizes it somewhat differently. For radical feminists, patriarchy is *the* central concept—the structure and process of men's misogynist domination of women through violent control of their sexuality and childbearing. For Marxist feminists, women's patriarchal domination by their husbands in the home goes hand in hand with their exploitation as workers in the capitalistic marketplace (Hartmann 1981b; Young et al. 1981). For psychoanalytic feminists, patriarchy is the symbolic rule of the father through gendered sexuality and the unconscious.

"Patriarchy" has been used so commonly by feminists of every perspective to stand for "what oppresses women" that it sometimes seems to be the theoretical equivalent of phlogiston—what causes fire to burn—before the discovery of oxygen. More than all men's individual actions, patriarchy is simultaneously the process, structure, and ideology of women's subordination. While different aspects of women's subordination are teased out and dissected, the connections among the parts are left to "patriarchy." More recently, some Marxist feminists have been developing a theory of women's subordination that connects psychological development, sexual dominance, production, procreation, child care, and ideology (Hartsock 1983; Walby 1990). They want to look at patriarchy in all aspects of society at once to see how each form of men's exploitation of women supports and reinforces the others.¹

I have chosen not to use the term "patriarchy" as an explanatory concept because of its overuse and slippery conceptualization, but I have quoted many passages that do discuss patriarchy as "what men do that subordinates or exploits women." My focus is *gender* because this term badly needs precise definition and clearer conceptualization or it will go the way of patriarchy. Although I see patriarchy, or men's subordination and exploitation of women, as the salient feature of gender as a social institution in many societies, including late twentieth-century postindustrial countries, gender is not synonymous with patriarchy or men's domination of women. *Gender* is a more general term encompassing all social relations that separate people into differentiated gendered statuses. I argue that inequality of the statuses of women and men was a historical development and that, as feminist research from a racial ethnic perspective has shown, there are cross-cutting racial and class statuses

within each gender status that belie the universal pattern of men's domination and women's subordination implied by the concept of patriarchy.

Feminists writing from a racial ethnic perspective, such as bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1989), have argued that it is incorrect to build research and feminist theory on a binary opposition of women and men when race and social class produce many categories of women and men that form hierarchical stratification systems in many societies. In that stratification system, race, class, and gender intersect to produce domination by upper-class white men *and* women and subordination of lower-class women *and* men of color.²

Such theorists in men's studies as R. W. Connell (1987), using a concept of hegemonic masculinity—economically successful, racially superior, and visibly heterosexual—have similarly developed the idea of a multiplicity of masculinities. In particular, they have shown how the practices of power are layered and interwoven in a society and have argued that gender dominance and its ideological justification include men's subordination and denigration of other men as well as men's exploitation of women (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1987).³

Cultural feminists—Judith Butler (1990), Donna Haraway (1989, 1991), Jane Flax (1990), and Marjorie Garber (1992), for example—also challenge the concept of gender categories as dual and oppositional. Their theories are rooted in the French feminist critique of psychoanalytic concepts of gendered sexuality and language.⁴ But where the French feminists' political stance has been to valorize women's sexuality and its evocation in literature, cultural feminists claim that sexuality and gender are shifting, fluid categories. By teasing out the intertwined strands of the socially constructed body, self, desire, and symbolic representation, cultural feminists critique a feminist politics based solely on women as a subordinated status, presenting instead a more subversive view that undermines the solidity of a social order built on concepts of two sexes and two genders.⁵

The concept of gender as constructed was explored by American feminists in the 1970s, particularly Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna ([1978] 1985). Building on Harold Garfinkel's (1967, 116–85) ethnomethodological analysis of how “Agnes,” a transsexual, constructed a conventional womanhood, Kessler and McKenna argued that gender *and* sex are socially constructed. Their important point, that there is neither an essential sex dichotomy nor an essential gender dichotomy, was absorbed into liberal feminism. But liberal feminism emphasized only the social construction of femininity and masculinity and their translation into family and work roles. Cynthia Fuchs Ep-

stein's *Deceptive Distinctions* (1988) is an extensive critique of the scientific premises of gender dichotomies, but it does not probe deeply enough into the way the dichotomies of sex, sexuality, and gender are built into the organization and politics of all social institutions, the interactions of everyday life, and the consciousness of self we call identity. The work on psychoanalysis and politics that the French feminists were doing in the 1970s was not translated into English until the 1980s. It is only now, in the 1990s, that a full-fledged analysis of gender as wholly constructed, symbolically loaded, and ideologically enforced is taking place in American feminism.

In this book, I have used theoretical ideas of all of these strands of feminism and drawn on research on the social aspects of gender from anthropology, history, sociology, social psychology, sociolinguistics, men's studies, and culture studies. I have tried to fit these pieces together into a coherent picture of gender as a process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state, as well as in sexuality, language, and culture. The intent of this book, however, is not to valorize that institutionalization but to call its naturalness and inevitability into question. My politics is that of feminist deconstructionism, and my aim in this book is to challenge the validity, permanence, and necessity of gender. For that reason, I have not used the feminist “we,” but refer to women in the third person. I agree with Judith Butler that an inclusive, monolithic concept of “woman” denies the multiplicity, complexity, and historical and geographical location of genders (1990, 142).

Paradoxes of Gender

This book is called *Paradoxes of Gender* because, when examined closely, much of what we take for granted about gender and its causes and effects either does not hold up or can be explained differently. For example, despite the evidence that women and men are more similar than different, the institution of gender continues to create and maintain socially significant differences between women and men (Hess 1990). What seems to be relevant—gender differences—is a means, not an end. The point of these differences is to justify the exploitation of an identifiable group—women. If one set of differences is successfully challenged, another set will take its place (Reskin 1988). As Joan Wallach Scott says, “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (1988a, 42).

A second major paradox is the origin of gender and, especially, gender inequality. Because gender is ubiquitous in human society, the belief has been that it must be genetic or physiological and that gender inequality is ultimately based on procreative differences. But a close examination of females' and males' relationship to procreation reveals that it is females who are at an advantage, not males:

Women's ability to bear babies in contrast to men's inability to do so, is a potential source of power unmatched in modern times by any physical advantages men have. . . . Usually, in civilized societies, varying degrees of compensations have been created for the deprived. . . . In the case of fertility, however, instead of repairing the disabled—that is, men—they have received compensation in the form of social customs that give them power over the able—that is, over women's bodies—and fertility. (Tangri 1976, 896)

This paradox is resolved if gender is conceptualized as a social institution often rooted in conflict over scarce resources and in social relationships of power. Gender inequality structures the unequal conditions of procreation, not the other way around (Rich 1977). Where women and men are different but not unequal, women's birth-giving is not a source of subordination. Indeed, for much of human history, people worshiped goddesses of fertility; statues of these goddesses can be found in every archaeological museum.

Gender is a human invention, like language, kinship, religion, and technology; like them, gender organizes human social life in culturally patterned ways. Gender organizes social relations in everyday life as well as in the major social structures, such as social class and the hierarchies of bureaucratic organizations (Acker 1988, 1990). The gendered microstructure and the gendered macrostructure reproduce and reinforce each other. The social reproduction of gender in individuals reproduces the gendered societal structure; as individuals act out gender norms and expectations in face-to-face interaction, they are constructing gendered systems of dominance and power.⁶ Gender has changed in the past and will change in the future, but without deliberate restructuring it will not necessarily change in the direction of greater equality between women and men.

Order of the Book

The usual order of most books (and courses) on gender is to start with individuals and show how they are gendered through socialization and through

selective learning of gender norms and roles. These learned patterns are projected into adult men's and women's behavior in families and in the labor force. Adults' behavior is said to create men's and women's unequal social and political status in any society. The order of such explanations implies that individual actions construct social institutions and therefore that changes in individual behavior can topple social institutions.

It is true that without individual actions (voluntary or coerced) there would be no social institutions, since the social structures we call "gender," "government," "family," "economy," and so on must be enacted every day in order to continue and in that enactment are strengthened or weakened, sustained or resisted (D. E. Smith 1987a). Nonetheless, social institutions, except in periods of revolutionary or anarchic upheaval, exist *prior* to any individual's birth, education, and social patterning. The patterned and intertwined structures of work, family, culture, education, religion, and law are gendered, and they deeply and continuously shape the lives of individuals, starting at birth (or even before, when the sex of the fetus is known). Through gendered personalities and identities, these patterns are internalized and willingly reenacted.

The familiar data about women and men in the economy, education, the media, law, medicine, and politics are the concrete manifestations of an underlying structure—the social institution of gender. The concept of gender as an institution explains work patterns (why do occupational gender segregation and stratification persist?), family patterns (why is housework mostly women's responsibility?), norms of sexuality (why is there violence against women?), the micropolitics of authority (why are there so few women leaders?), and symbolic cultural representations (why are they seen through men's eyes?).

The book expands on and documents these ideas. Although many paradoxes of gender are discussed throughout the book, each chapter takes up a particular paradox of gender:

Why does gender simultaneously construct difference and sameness?

Why are the phenomena of bodily experiences gendered?

Why, given the variety of sexual behaviors and relationships, do we speak of only two opposite sexes?

Why don't transvestites, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and the institutionalized third genders in some societies affect the conceptualization of two genders and two sexes?

Why are most of our cultural images of women the way men see them, not the way women see themselves?

Why was inequality of women and men the consequence of humans'

invention of gender when originally the gendered division of labor was a means of cooperatively expanding the food supply and ensuring the survival of children?

Why are all women expected to have children and care for them in modern society? How does this responsibility coopt women into a system of inequality?

Why is domestic work the wife's responsibility in modern societies even when she earns more than half the family income?

Why does gendered segregation of jobs and lower compensation of work done by women persist throughout industrialized economies despite the enormous variety of types of work and work skills?

Why, when women can be found in substantial numbers in many occupations and professions, are there so few women in positions of authority in modern industrialized societies?

Why do societies established for equality (including, in some revolutionary cases, gender equality) still exhibit substantial and systematic gender inequality?

Why, since gender is socially constructed, is it so difficult to eradicate or even minimize?

Although each chapter explores one topic, the overall frame of gender as a social institution means that the discussion of gender structures and practices in one chapter resonates with themes in other chapters. The three parts are intertwined as well: gendered practices produce the social institution of gender, which in turn constrains social practices; structure and practices simultaneously sustain and are legitimized by the micropolitics of everyday life and the macropolitics of state power.

Where Are We Going?

The enormous weight of history and current institutionalized practices makes it seem as if there is no way out—no way to make significant and lasting changes in the social institution of gender. Yet changes are made every day (another paradox of gender). There is constant tension between individual and group resistance and social control, between the exceptions and the rules. Indeed, the rules of existing institutions are constantly being revised and repaired (Hilbert 1987). Human beings are both orderly and rebellious; they like knowing what to expect from others, even if they protest and challenge.

Feminists have resisted and rebelled as scholars, researchers, and activists (Chafetz and Dworkin 1986; Rowbotham 1989). The "known world" looks

very different through women's eyes. As activists, feminists have promulgated reforms of existing institutional laws, rules, and norms. As researchers, feminists have made evident the built-in oppression of women in patterns of behavior that are taken for granted, particularly concerning sexuality and violence. As theorists, feminists have turned inside out the categories of production and social reproduction by demonstrating that housework and child care are unpaid *work* for the family and for society, and that paid work is so deeply gendered that there seem to be built-in sexual taboos about how women can earn money. Lesbian feminists and gay men particularly, through their open rebellions, have changed ideas of normalcy and deviance in sexual mores, living arrangements, and parenting.

But I do not think it is inevitable that gender categories will gradually blur under the weight of evidence of the similarities of women and men, or that by gradual erosion, gender will stop being the major determinant of how the work of modern society is allocated and the rewards distributed. Pendulum swings are common and social exigencies often excuse greater oppression of one group by another. It can certainly happen to women and men.⁷

In the United States during World War II, women were recruited for work in defense plants, steel mills, and other heavy industry. Day-care centers were set up in many workplaces because of the desperate need for workers. But despite women's evident ability to handle heavy physical labor and their desire to keep working and earning high wages, gender segregation of jobs persisted, and women were fired when the war ended (Milkman 1987). The day-care centers were abandoned, and the 1950s were conservative, family-oriented, and gender-segregated.⁸ In Islamic countries that have become more fundamentalist, women have put on the veil over their blue jeans; more problematic, they have been stripped of all their civil rights (Kandiyoti 1991; Moghadam 1989). With the crumbling of communism and the turn to capitalist economies in Eastern Europe, women workers expect to be fired first, and liberal abortion laws are under challenge from resurgent Catholic hierarchies.⁹

Change can go the other way, too. The Persian Gulf War of 1990–91 sent 35,000 U.S. servicewomen to the frontlines, including mothers of small children, some of whom volunteered.¹⁰ They were 6 percent of the total force of 541,425, and 10 percent of those who were killed.¹¹ Although the disruption of family life may lead to promulgation of protective rules once again, U.S. servicewomen attained widespread public recognition of their role. ("Our men and women in the Armed Services" was the slogan of the day.) Indeed, a few months after the end of the war, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to allow women to be combat pilots (*New York Times* 1991d).¹²

The paradox of women fighting and dying to protect and liberate countries that don't allow their women to vote, drive cars, or appear in public unveiled seems to have raised the consciousness of women in both cultures.¹³ American servicewomen had to wear long sleeves off their bases, be accompanied into town by a man and have him pay, and use the back doors of gymnasiums and other facilities. Under orders from generals and politicians, they conformed, but grudgingly; they would have liked servicemen to give up their prerogatives in sympathy.¹⁴ At the same time, forty-seven Saudi women were empowered enough to stage a drive-in, which resulted in eight hours of questioning by the police, harassment by the religious authorities, and loss of jobs, but also acts of support from kinsmen (*Ms. Magazine* 1991).

Because consciousness of oppression does not always lead to a push for action (Davis and Robinson 1991) and rebels are frequently publicly punished, individuals are more likely to conform than to rebel. Not surprisingly, those advantaged by the social institution of gender want to maintain the status quo, but the not-so-privileged also have an investment in a going social order that gives them some bargaining power.¹⁵ Rebellion is hard on individual lives—it can eat up a person's livelihood, emotions, and freedom. Unless rebellion is a major group effort, supported by a substantial number of women and men, it is not likely to make a dent in an existing major institution like gender.

Real change would mean a conscious reordering of the organizing principles of social life (women take care of children, men go to work) with awareness of hidden assumptions (children have different attachments to mothers than to fathers) and latent effects (men need to suppress the feminine in themselves and can't allow women to have any authority over them). Change is unlikely to be deep-seated unless the pervasiveness of the social institution of gender and its social construction are made explicit.¹⁶ The prime paradox of gender is that in order to dismantle the institution you must first make it very visible, which is the purpose of this book.

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

1. The French feminist groups of the 1970s that called themselves *Psychoanalyse et Politique* were Marxists who tried to amalgamate dialectical materialism and the Freudian and Lacanian discourse on sexuality and the unconscious.
2. In addition to Hill Collins and hooks, see Chow 1987; Christian 1988; Garcia 1989; King 1988; Spelman 1988.
3. For the new scholarship in men's studies, see Brod 1987; Hearn 1987; Hearn and Morgan 1990; Kimmel 1987b; Kimmel and Messner 1992; Staples 1982.
4. For overviews, see Marks and Courtivron 1981; Mitchell and Rose 1985; Moi 1985.
5. For debates over the politics of gender as a stable or shifting category both culturally and historically, see Alcoff 1988; de Lauretis 1989; Riley 1988; J. W. Scott 1988a, 1988b.
6. Bem 1993, 133–75; Gerson and Peiss 1985; Margolis 1985; D. E. Smith 1987a, 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987.
7. Blair 1989; Jenson 1986.
8. See Riley 1983 for the British experience with war nurseries.
9. Fuszara 1991; Moghadam 1990; Rosenberg 1991; Szalai 1991; and the special issue of *Feminist Review* entitled "Shifting Territories: Feminisms and Europe," no. 39 (1991).
10. Applebome 1991; Clymer 1991; J. Gross 1990a, 1990b; Nordheimer 1991; Schmitt 1991; M. W. Segal 1986.
11. A slightly higher percentage of women were killed, .0004 to .0003 for the men. Figures are taken from the *New York Times* story looking back one year later (Applebome 1992).
12. Francke 1991; Nordheimer 1991; Quindlen 1991a, 1992; Sciolino 1990; Stiehm 1985; and U.S. General Accounting Office 1989. For a variety of feminist

- writings on women and war, see Cooper, Munich, and Squier 1989; Elshstain and Tobias 1990; Gioseffi 1988; and M. L. Rossiter 1986.
13. Ayres 1991; Gonzalez 1991; LeMoyné 1990a; McFadden 1991.
 14. Not only were the servicemen unlikely to give up their privileges, but a year later there were published reports of twenty-three incidents of sex crimes against servicewomen, including rape (*New York Times*, 1992b).
 15. Goode [1982]1993; Kandiyoti 1988; Klatch 1987.
 16. Acker 1989b; Connell 1990; Stacey and Thorne 1985.