

SEX + GENDER

Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

- Show it to the mother. That's enough. Sedate her. Number the child.
- Is it a boy or a girl?
- Now, I think it's a little early to start imposing roles on it, don't you?

SUT JHALLY: Goffman argues that there is nothing natural about gender identity. That is, we don't just pop out the womb with our gender identities imprinted in our genes; that it is part of a process whereby we learn to take on certain attributes that we think are appropriate to our understanding of ourselves in gendered terms. Therefore, we have to analyze how the society constructs the categories within which we fit. And to understand how that takes place, we have to first make a distinction between the terms "sex" and "gender."

Sex refers to our different biological characteristics as we come out of the womb. Gender refers to the way those differences are made sense of within culture – in most cultures, by assigning it to one of two categories: male or female. And then each of those categories is further defined with a set of characteristics – that seem to be mutually exclusive – that are labeled as masculine and feminine.

This does not mean that everything is about culture. The point is that while we are born with a set of different individual physical and biological characteristics, these traits are then made sense of through the categories of culture. In this way, there is nothing natural or biological about gender or our gender identities. We learn to inhabit the gender category that we have been assigned from outside, from the culture.

There are some interesting cases where individuals born as one sex have been assigned to the "wrong" gender category. That is, someone born with male physical characteristics but assigned to the female gender, and they then grow up as that gender, despite the physical sexual origin.

And there are some cultures that actually recognize a "third" sex, or a "middle" sex, with its own set of gender characteristics. For example, in the culture of the Indian subcontinent, there is a whole class of people, who are called "hijrah," who are neither male nor female but a third intersex category. They have a recognized and legitimate role to play in the society, and it is estimated that they number close to a million people. If nothing else, these examples show that our ideas and attitudes about gender are shaped by the culture and society we grow up in.

But while potentially, and in actual real life, there could be many different categories of genders, western culture mostly operates with the two sex/two gender distinction. It is starting to break down a little as transsexual and transgender people have challenged this binary distinction and insisted upon having a legitimate place in the culture – not on the margins but at the center of the society. And their example shows us that the two sex/two gender distinction is a socially created one – not natural. However, a clear and unambiguous two sex/two gender distinction is obviously the norm, and a couple of consequences have resulted from this.

First, the neatness of this distinction has functioned to downplay similarities between the sexes – that is, the things that men and women have in common as human beings in favor of highlighting their differences. And second, this distinction downplays the variability within each sex. It papers over the differences between men, between different ways of being a man, as well as the differences between

women, and different ways of being a woman, so that it is presented that there is only one dominant and normal way in which to be feminine and only one dominant and normal way to be masculine.

And what Goffman is interested in is how the two sex/two gender categories – these codes of normality – are created, and, more importantly, maintained and held in place. He makes us see that because these distinctions are not natural but created, we all have to learn how to send the signals to others as to how we want to be understood in socially recognizable gendered terms. That is what Goffman means by what he calls “gender display,” the process whereby we perform the roles expected of us by the social conventions that surround us. In this perspective, our gender is not assigned by birth or by nature but is the result of an active process whereby we are performing it by learning a script or internalizing a set of shorthand codes.

So we can understand the term “code” in a couple of ways. First of all, it refers to a kind of shorthand language, that everyone shares and understands, through which we can communicate some larger ideas. And secondly, it refers to a set of rules or ways to be in the world – like a code of behavior.

The Birdcage

- Too swishy?

- Let me give you an image. It's cliché, but it's an image. John Wayne. Nice touch.

- Howdy, ma'am. No good?

- Actually, it's perfect. I just never realized John Wayne walked like that.

SUT JHALLY: So the human body – for example, the way we walk – becomes the medium through which we communicate. And because these codes are so deep – so deep they almost appear natural – it is difficult to even see them, or consciously recognize them in operation, until they are pointed out.