Chapter 3

# Learning Gender

# Chapter 3 narrative

**Conceptual overview**: This chapter focuses on the social construction of gender in contemporary U.S. society and explores the concepts of gender assignment, identity, and expression, emphasizing the ways gender performances are framed by multiple structures of difference. The chapter begins with a section on the relationship between biology and culture and focuses on gender diversity, gender identity, and the practices of gender. It discusses intersexuality, “trans” identity and androgyny. The chapter continues with sections focusing on contemporary femininity and masculinity and explores the concept of gender ranking. These issues emphasize the interaction or confluence of gender and other systems of difference. **Key concepts**: sex, gender, intersex, femininity, masculinity, gender assignment, gender identity, gender expression, gender performance, biology, culture, gender socialization, intersectionality, androgyny, transgender, queer, genderqueer, cisgender, transsexuals, transvestism, misogyny, machismo, double bind, superwoman, gender ranking and stratification, systems of inequality and privilege.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions**:

1. What is the distinction between sex and gender? Explain the complexity of this distinction. Understand the concepts gender assignment, gender identity, and gender expression.
2. What does intersex mean and how have societies tended to respond to this gender ambiguity?
3. Define the terms transgender and androgyny and explain their differences. What does genderqueer mean? What is cisgender?
4. What does it mean to say gender is a “performance”? Explain what it means to say that gender performance is more than a voluntary act.
5. If masculinity is associated with the planet Mars, what planet is associated with femininity? What does that teach us about gender?
6. What are contemporary norms associated with femininity and masculinity? Give examples of the various institutions that maintain these norms.
7. Understand the socially constructed traits of “masculinity” and “femininity,” including the research by David and Brannon. Why are these terms in quotation marks?
8. What are the limitations of masculine scripts? Explore the ways men have responded to changes in contemporary gender.
9. What are the socially constructed traits associated with femininity? How do these limit and/or provide opportunities for women? How have notions of appropriate feminine behavior changed over the last century?
10. Explain the two types of gender ranking and be able to give examples.
11. Explain the relationship between gender ranking, cisgender, and transgender.
12. Discuss the complexities of the term queer in the context of gender performance. What is genderqueer?
13. Explain in your own words how gender and sexuality are distinct (although interacting) concepts.

**Critical Thinking Exercises**

1. Do you know a superwoman (it could be yourself)? What is her life like? What are the consequences of such activity for her (or you), and for women as a group?
2. In what ways do you think contemporary notions of masculinity are/are not changing? Give examples from your personal/family experiences.
3. Recall the most recent television show or movie you watched. What do you learn about gender from reflecting on this show?
4. Class exercise: choose different institutions and ask students to give examples of the ways these institutions maintain and/or resist gender.
5. Class exercise: bring magazines to class and explore expressions of gender, focusing on the institutional, ideological (symbolic), and individual levels associated with gender analysis.
6. Imagine yourself of another gender. How would your life be different? Specifically go through the day and imagine how your day might be different.
7. Imagine yourself living a truly androgynous life. How would your life be different? Specifically go through the day and imagine how your day might be different.

# Reading 17 “The Five Sexes, Revisited” Anne Fausto-Sterling

**Conceptual overview**: In this article Fausto-Sterling critiques the way contemporary Western societies organize humans into two discrete categories and argues for theories that allow for human variation and an understanding of gender on a continuum rather than as polar opposites. She reviews “The Five Sexes,” an article written in 1993, that provocatively asserted a diverse sex system that included “herms,” “merms,” and “ferms” and emphasized that “female” and “male” form the extremes of a continuum that features many types of intersex conditions. In this essay Fausto-Sterling reviews the history and contemporary medical treatments of intersex gender assignment and proposes an ethical approach reflecting the needs of intersex individuals themselves.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions**:

1. Who was the speaker discussed in Fausto-Sterling’s article and what was her history? What was her talk about and how was it received?
2. What is the “biocultural iceberg of which the author writes? According to Fausto-Sterling, approximately what is the percentage of intersex children born currently?
3. What article does this essay revisit, what did this original article claim, and why was this controversial? What is the “bimorphic divide” that Fausto-Sterling writes about?
4. Who was Dr. John Money and what was his famous case about twin boys?
5. Discuss McCullough’s ethical framework for intersex treatment and practices. What is NAFTI and what are their goals?

**Critical Thinking Exercises**

What are your personal opinions about a continuum of sex/gender variation? Does that make sense to you? How might childhood have been different for you if you had been raised a “merm” or a “ferm”? What might you have gained or lost?

# Reading 18 “The Social Construction of Gender” Judith Lorber

**Conceptual overview**: This article explores the social construction of gender and emphasizes that gender is a process that involves multiple patterns of interaction, created and recreated constantly in human interaction. Lorber emphasizes the ways processes associated with gender are normalized and made to seem natural. She writes about the process, stratification, and structures of gender.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions**:

1. When does gender socialization begin and through what institutions does it work?
2. What does Lorber assert as the continuing purpose of gender in modern social institutions?
3. What, according to Lorber, is the paradox of human nature, and what, as a result, is destiny?

**Critical Thinking Exercises:**

1. Interview certain people (you might assign types of interviewees) about gender issues and their opinions on this concept. Analyze in light of insights from this reading.
2. Take a field trip to a toy store and observe the boys’ and girls’ aisle. What do you learn about gender?
3. Watch commercials on television on a Saturday morning during cartoons and describe what children learn about gender and other systems of inequality and privilege. Note the products advertised and reflect on their effects on girls and boys.
4. How were you raised? What are your experiences of learning gender?

# Reading 19 “Gender Fluidity and Nonbinary Gender Identities Among Children and Adolescents” Lisa M. Diamon

**Conceptual overview**: In this short article the author discusses gender identity among children and adolescents and the psychological influences that may impact them over the course of their lifetime. It also defines and provides examples on a variety of terminology including but not limited to: transgender, genderqueer, gender fluid, nonbinary identity, fluid, etc.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions:**

1. What are some of the social challenges that children, adolescents, and adults face as it relates to defining their sexual and gender identity?

2. In what ways can practitioners, such as physicians, nurses and psychologists support the psychological, emotional and social development of children and adolescents that identify or view themselves as transgender, genderqueer, or gender fluid?

3.Discuss the controversy regarding surrounding gender transition among prepubertal children, weigh the pros and cons, and develop solutions that provide support.

**Critical Thinking Exercises**

1.Activity: Find one gender-affirmative practice guideline that has been addressed to provide support to youth with nonbinary or gender fluid identities. Then, evaluate its effectiveness and create additional guidelines that strengthen and provide evidence-based information for clinicians to use in the field.

**Reading 20 “You Don’t Have a Male or Female Brain” Lisa Eliot**

**Conceptual overview:** In this excerpt the author dispels the myth that there is a difference between the male and female brain with the exception of size. It highlights some of the research that has been conducted in science since the emergence of the MRI.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions:**

1.Discuss some of the stereotypes that you may have heard about the differences between the male and female brain. Did you believe them? Why or why not?

2.What does the author mean by ‘dump the dimorphism’? Provide 1-2 examples from the reading.

**Critical Thinking Exercises:**

1.Activity: Watch the documentary *ABC News 20/20 The Difference Between Men & Women* (2008) and write a 1-2 page reflection about the connections between the male and female brain.

**Reading 21 “Becoming a Maya Woman: Beauty Pageants at the Intersection of Indigeneity, Gender and Class in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala” Elisabeth Dueholm Rasch**

**Conceptual Overview:** The author discusses the impact of beauty pageants indigenous culture and its connections to political engagement and authentic identity. In particular it analyzes how Maya women Guatemala move through social categories such as gender, ethnicity and class as the bearers of culture.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions:**

1.Define bearers of culture. Explain why the author believes that beauty pageants reproduce gender values and norms based on cultural norms.

2. What four claims is Rasch making as it relates to beauty pageants in Guatemala? Why?

3. Why does 75% of the Guatemala population continue to live in extreme poverty even though gender equity is one of their highest values?

**Reading 22 “When I was Growing Up” Nellie Wong**

**Conceptual overview**: This is a poem about a Chinese-American woman’s memories of growing up in a society where white is “normal,” valued, and desirable.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions:**

1. What was Nellie Wong’s experience when she was growing up? From what sources did messages about white as desirable come?
2. What was Nellie Wong ashamed of?
3. How was she encouraged to see herself sexually? How does this relate to stereotypes of Asian-American women? Relate this poem to the article by Virginia Sapiro.

**Making connections:**

1. Have you ever had the experience of not “fitting in”? How did it make you feel?
2. How does this poem make you feel? What is your favorite or most powerful part of the poem for you?

**Reading 23 “X: A Fabulous Child’s Story” Lois Gold**

**Conceptual overview**: This article takes an in-depth look at gender roles through the eyes of the story of Project Baby X where scientists chose parents to raise X without explicitly being called a boy or girl. A billion-dollar project that was designed to see how others would react without defined gender roles and the impact of the development of Baby X when there is no defined roles.

**Study guide/discussion/exam questions**:

1. What were the core guidelines for the Secret Scientific Xperiment?
2. Why do you think the scientists chose the Joneses to be X’s parents?
3. Why didn’t the scientists name X Milton or Agatha?
4. Review the article and write down every instance of social construction of gender that occurs when X is interacting with the other children and the parents.

**Critical Thinking Exercises**1**.**Activity: Discuss the gender roles of family that have been defined by American society by listing the first thoughts that come to mind on a piece of paper. In what ways do these definitions impact the way in which gender roles (male and female) have been built within societal systems.

**Recommended Readings, Websites, and Films**

**Readings**

Babis, Deby. “Inclusion and beauty pageants? The Filipino migrant worker community in Israel.” *Taylor & Francis Online* 29.5 (2021): 625-648.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America." *Ethnic and racial studies* 35.2 (2012): 173-194.

Boyd, Elizabeth Bronwyn. *Southern Beauty: Race, Ritual, and Memory in the Modern South.* University of Georgia Press, 2022.

Carney, Nikita. "All lives matter, but so does race: Black lives matter and the evolving role of social media." *Humanity & Society* 40.2 (2016): 180-199.

Connell, Robert W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept." *Gender & society* 19.6 (2005): 829-859.

Cornwall, Andrea, and Nancy Lindisfarne, eds. *Dislocating masculinity: Comparative ethnographies*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

Halberstam, Jack. *Female masculinity*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Halberstam, Jack. “Gender Trouble in Paradise.” *Representations* 158.1 (2022): 17-29.

**Websites**

Glaad

<https://www.glaad.org/transgender/resources>

Miss Universe  
<https://www.missuniverse.com/>

The Other Sociologist

<https://othersociologist.com/sociology-of-gender/>

World Health Organization

<https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1>

**Films**

Abdelmoneim, Javid. *No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?* United Kingdom: Outline Productions and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2017.

Baroni, Gil. *Alice Junior.* Pragda, 2019.

Bolinger, Alex. *Miss Universe.* New York: Park Studio NYC, 2021.

Haas, Shaleece. *Real Boy.* Prandial Pictures, 2016.

Knowlton, Vlada. *The Most Dangerous Years.* Collective Eye Films, 2018.

Ophelian, Annalise, StormMiguel Florez, Major Griffin-Gracy, and Floating Ophelia Productions. *Major!* [San Francisco]: Floating Ophelia Productions, LLC, 2016.