

Introduction to
Anthropology:
Holistic and Applied
Research on Being
Human

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MODULE 14: GENDER AND SEX

Sex and gender

We often overlook the incredible diversity of adaptations to reproduction and sex that have evolved throughout the animal world. This includes fish that switch sexes to fill the role of a leading female (clown fish), banana slugs with both male and female genitals, and even **parthenogenesis**, or reproduction through only the female of the species, which has been observed in some shark species and the komodo dragon. Instead, many people may often and mistakenly assume that biological sex is a purely binary trait, and there is one way to reproduce “naturally.” These misleading assumptions reflect our own cultural norms. Biologists assess physical differences between the male and the female of a species to characterize and distinguish the biological sexes through assessment of size or robusticity. These general biological differences do exist and are known as **sexual dimorphism**. For example, the male elephant seal is often four times larger than the female elephant seal, which represents pronounced sexual dimorphism (see Figure 14.1).



Figure 14.1. Male, female, and juvenile elephant seals, depicting the pronounced sexual dimorphism between males and females. Image from Flickr/Tanner.

However, as a primate, humans have less sexual dimorphism than the other great apes, such as gorillas and orangutans (see Module 5: Primates). In general, humans exhibit a small degree of sexual dimorphism (up to 15%), meaning there is not a pronounced difference in size between males and females in our species. The most obvious differences lie in the morphology of our genitals and breasts. Additionally, human males tend to have more musculature, less body fat, and taller statures than females, although there is clearly a high degree of variation between the sexes. The human sexes also have varying degrees of hormones, including testosterone and estrogen. Interestingly, evolutionary biologists have found that the sexual dimorphism between humans seems to be decreasing through time, meaning males and females of the human species are becoming more physically similar.

One of the primary ways that we differentiate men and women in modern U.S. society is through cultural symbols such as hair length, dress, posture, and speech. **Sex** is the biological difference in our species, and **gender** can

be understood as the cultural meaning we apply to these biological differences. Although gender is a human universal, meaning all human groups have a gender system that can be studied by anthropologists, there exists incredible diversity across the globe on how these systems developed and what they mean (Nanda 2000).

For example, the Wodaabe are a tribal people of Niger who have a community beauty pageant where the contestants put on their finest makeup, clothes, and beads and stand in a line so that all may view the spectacle (see Figure 14.2). Unlike in the United States where women are the focus of the ideal beauty, for the Wodaabe, it is the men of the village who are the contestants in this practice, known as **Gerewol**. The Gerewol is a courtship ritual, where the males compete for the attention of potential marriage partners. Across the globe, there are many diverse gender systems that look very different from the way U.S. culture constructs gender roles. The division into two genders—men and women—is common in many cultures, but cross-cultural ethnographic data shows that a strict gender dichotomy is not a universal. Multiple genders are common, too.

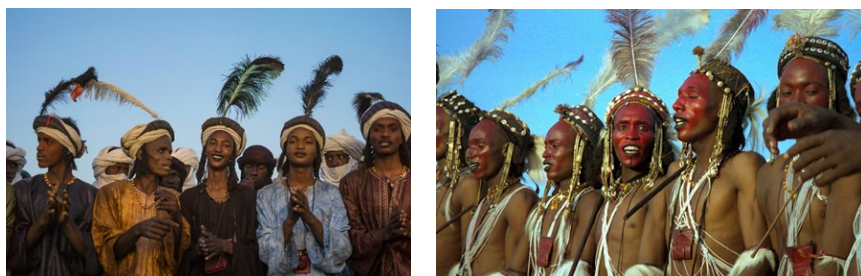


Figure 14.2. People of the Wodaabe culture participating in the Gerewol ritual. Images from Wikimedia Commons and Flickr/Weidinger.



Video 14.1. Check out the video from *Nat Geo* presenting a *tribal beauty pageant for men*.

In this chapter, we describe the rise in the anthropology of gender, explore how genders and gender roles are constructed among various cultures, and

examine how cultural interactions have impacted the construction or destruction of gender systems in recent times. Gender is a complicated topic that cannot be understood in isolation. It impacts how anthropology is done, who conducts research, what questions are asked, and how data are interpreted. Gender concerns transcend beyond research subjects and permeate the structure of the discipline itself.

Construction of Gender Systems

One of the ways in which humans create and maintain our gender systems across the globe is through the **gender division of labor**, which is the delegation of work based on gender differences. Significantly, the gender division of labor is a human universal that can be studied across all cultures. In some communities, the jobs ascribed to women and men are very rigidly structured, meaning there is very little divergence from these cultural norms and divergent roles are often heavily sanctioned. In other cultural groups, such as with some foragers, the gender division of labor is much more fluid as individuals may associate certain tasks or jobs with one gender, but members are able to perform the labor not typically prescribed to their gender (such as women hunting) without repercussions or social marginalization.

Examples of gendered divisions of labor can be observed throughout the world. Recent research among the Hadza of Tanzania, a foraging group, suggested that individuals of all genders are likely to complete female-centric activities, but males are more likely to complete male-centric activities, particularly those with high risks, such as hunting. Among agricultural groups, 7,000-year-old female skeletons from Central Europe are described as robust with pronounced muscle attachment areas that indicate they participated in heavy manual labor and likely had strength exceeding that of present-day elite female athletes. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, it's traditional that men weave the Kente cloth, which is a fabric of cotton and silk often worn by high-status individuals. However, for the Diné (also known as the Navajo of the U.S. Southwest), women traditionally do the weaving.

Dominant U.S. cultural norms surrounding the gender division of labor have rapidly changed over the last few decades. This trend began during World War II and continued through the 1970s and 80s, influenced by both second wave feminism and the changing role of the family in U.S. culture. Social historians of the U.S. family note how the family was originally a site of labor production in the early era of the U.S. and, particularly after WWII, became redefined as an institution for personal growth and gratification. Similarly, after the World Wars, careers became understood as places where both men and women in could find personal fulfillment.

Some cultural groups have a strict or rigid separation of genders, in terms of both labor and space. These systems, called **gender separation systems**, may be highly pervasive in a culture. For example, Sambian men and women of New Guinea live very separate lives, which includes residing in different houses throughout their lives. In other cultures, gender separation systems are less pervasive and less rigidly enforced; like in Finnish society where there is very little separation of boys and girls. The dominant cultural practice in the United States is similar, however, there are certain spaces that are separated by gender, such as bedrooms, dormitories, and bathrooms. However, this system is changing as gender non-specific bathrooms become more common due to policies such as **Title IX**, a federal civil rights law that forbids sex-based discrimination in school and educational programs. The take-home message is that gender systems across the globe are sometimes rigid, sometimes not, and vary significantly in terms of roles and expectations across genders.

Cross-cultural Gender and Sexual Diversity

Anthropologists have identified multiple cultures across the globe that have more than two genders. On nearly every continent, and for all recorded history, thriving cultures have recognized, revered, and integrated more than two genders. Traditionally, in the U.S., we have had a binary gender system comprised of men and women. The gender binary system, which organizes societies in much of the Global North, was inherited from several historical and cultural threads including Judeo-Christian ideologies and colonialism. Our gender system, like all cultural structures, has always changed and is currently changing as diverse gender identities are finding

cultural endorsement. Individuals in the United States can identify as **transgender**, meaning an individual whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation, therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. (see discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation below). It is estimated that over one million Americans identify as non-binary in 2021.

Many Native North American cultures have traditionally recognized more than two genders. For example, the Dine/Navajo, recognize at least four genders: there is the feminine female (*asdzaan*), masculine male (*bastiin*), a person born male with a moving gender (*nadleehi*), and a person born female with a moving gender (*dilbaa*). Among the Zuni of the southwest U.S., the *Lhamana* are individuals that live as both male and female genders simultaneously. The *Lhamana* have critical roles in society as mediators and religious leaders, and they participate in both traditional male and female activities in society. Additionally, the anthropologist Will Roscoe conducted archival research and was able to identify alternative gender figures—which today are called **Two Spirit**—in 150 of about 400 tribes of the U.S. and Canada. Today, Two Spirits may biologically exhibit male or female genitalia, but like the *Lhamana*, their spirits are recognized as a blend of male and female (see Figure 14.3).



Figure 14.3. Sidewalk art depicting We'wha, famous two-spirit Zuni cultural

ambassador during the late 1800s. Image from Eytan 2017.

Multiple genders exist in other regions, too. In India and surrounding areas, the Hijra are a third gender group that includes transgender, intersex, and eunuch individuals. Traditionally, Hijras are born male but look and act in feminine ways. Some may voluntarily castrate their genitalia in religious offering, while others may be born intersex. As such, they typically consider themselves neither male nor female. Prior to European colonization, the Hijra were powerful religious leaders and spiritual healers with revered places in society. They devoted time to learning rituals, including song, dance, and blessings to perform within their communities. Ancient texts document their important role in society for over 4,000 years. However, in the two hundred years following colonialization efforts, Hijras were no longer treated with respect. As Christianity spread throughout India, Hijras were labeled as criminals because they did not fit into European norms. Today, this treatment continues as many Hijra are relegated to low-status roles with little access to employment, education, or other opportunities in society. They are also often victims of violence and hate crimes and receive inadequate treatment by law enforcement and health officials. It's only in the past few decades that Hijra human rights are beginning to be re-recognized.



Video 14.2. Check out the video from *BBC World Service, Gender identity: “How colonialism killed my culture’s gender fluidity.”*

Intersex Individuals

Approximately 2% of babies in the U.S. are born **intersex**, meaning they have biological characteristics of both the male and the female sex. Modern surgical techniques help maintain the two-sex system as children who are born "either/or-neither/both," and this status usually disappear because medical doctors "correct" children right away with surgery. However, intersex people are pushing back against early surgical intervention as many studies indicate that a person's gender identity emerges around 6-7 years old. Intersex activist Hida Vioria says, "There is a spectrum of sexual identity and intersex people bridge this spectrum. We have a unique vision

to offer the world and we have existed since the dawn of humanity.”

In 1993, professor of biology and researcher Anne Fausto-Sterling, published an article titled, “The Five Sexes,” that unleashed a firestorm of debate about sex and gender, with a particular focus the experiences of intersex people. She asserted that the two-sex system was not adequate to encompass the full spectrum of human sexuality. She writes,

“While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many bodies [...] that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. The implications of my argument for a sexual continuum are profound. If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural.” - Anne Fausto-Sterling, 1993

Public figures such as South African track star Caster Semenya and other intersex athletes like Dutee Chand of India (see Figure 14.4) have brought questions about bodies, the sex binary, and hormones to the center of public dialogue. In 2019, the International Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled that Semenya had to take testosterone-suppressing medications to compete internationally. Although Semenya’s testosterone levels occur naturally for her as an intersex person, it was ruled that this gives her an unfair advantage. The controversial case cast a spotlight on issues of women’s rights, fairness in sport, and human rights in sports. At stake was whether the rule was fair to Semenya, one of the world’s fastest runners, and whether allowing Semenya to race with more testosterone was fair to competitors. Similar debates about equality in sports have arisen around transgender athletes in professional competition as our ideas about gender in U.S. culture changes. According to Fusions Mass Millennial Poll, about 50% of millennials believe that gender exists on a spectrum and that “some people fall outside of conventional categories.”



Figure 14.4. Famous intersex athletes Caster Semenya and Dutee Chand. Images from Wikimedia Commons.

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

In dominant U.S. culture, we often make the fallacy of conflating gender identity with sexual orientation. This means that people will often assume that a feminine male is gay, or a masculine female is a lesbian. In reality, human gender and sexuality is much more complex. **Gender identity** is the personal sense of one's own gender, which can be the same as a person's assigned sex at birth (cisgender) or can differ from it. **Sexuality orientation** is the emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. It is important to keep in mind that a person's gender identity is separate than their sexual orientation, and an individual can be born with a specific biological sex and identify with a gender that may or may not match their biological sex (transgender). They may also be attracted to individuals of the same, opposite, or other non-conforming gender. The combinations of identities and orientations are limited only by the cultural categories that we enforce within our societies. Our modern understanding of the variation of human sexuality and gender identity occurred through the emerging positivistic practices of psychiatry, psychology, and sociology at the beginning of the last century. For example, studies on sexual attraction in the 1940s and '50s by sexologist Alfred Kinsey contribute to popular dialogue surrounding sexual orientation.

Women in Anthropology

As described above, gender systems across human groups are incredibly diverse. Anthropologists have long studied gender and gender systems, but such analysis was rarely central to their research. This is primarily because most professional anthropologists were men, and the cultural worlds of women were not considered a valid focus of anthropological investigation. There were some exceptions, such as the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead, who studied the gender systems of Polynesia in her famous ethnography, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, published in 1928. Mead became a household name during this time and brought anthropology into the everyday consciousness of people through her study of the cultural factors impacting adolescent development among Samoan communities.

Other earlier, famous women anthropologists include Elsie Clews Parsons and Ruth Benedict, both contemporaries of Mead in the 1930s and '40s. It's also worth noting that Benedict and Mead were both students of Franz Boas (see Module 2: A Brief History of Anthropology). Parsons wrote about domestic social problems and oppression of women, African American folklore, and Pueblo Indian legends. Her work helped demonstrate that culture is an ongoing negotiation between tradition and innovation, layered and amassed over generations, that adapts and borrows elements from other cultures. Benedict asserted that anthropologists must mediate between groups of different cultures and fight on behalf of the disenfranchised. She also argued that anthropology functions best when it combines humanistic and scientific approaches.

Additionally, the famed folklorist and Black anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston achieved a degree of disciplinary recognition in the 1940s and 1950s during the Harlem Renaissance (see Figure 14.5). Hurston, another student of Franz Boas, conducted ethnographies of Black communities of the U.S. South.

Her work, both ethnographic and fictive (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), has been a significant voice in preserving the Black American experience. The anthropologist Paula Ebron writes

“At age thirteen, I discovered Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. This book introduced me to an anthropology and the importance of African American culture kept alive in folkways and stories. These stories were exotic to my Northern imagination – magical in their apparent Otherness.”

-Paula Ebron



Figure 14.5. Zora Neale Hurston is a famed folklorist and Black anthropologist in a field where women were underrepresented as professionals in the field or as the subjects of anthropological research. Image from Flickr/Vercruyse.

Otherwise, women were underrepresented as professionals in the field or as the subjects of anthropological research. For example, in the southwest U.S., Alfred Kidder and Edgar Lee Hewett are among several well-known archaeologists who established the foundation of research in the region. What is less well-known is the number of women who worked with them by excavating sites, taking notes, drawing artifacts, and writing site reports. Many of these women didn't receive due recognition or compensation for their work, and sometimes, the extent of their contributions can only be realized through reviews of archival case records and photographs. Furthermore, archaeological and ethnographic research often emphasized men as the dominant players in society, ignoring the critical role that women play in societies throughout the world.

The study of women's cultural worlds first achieved disciplinary prominence in the U.S. during 1970s, influenced by Second-wave Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement. Before this time, with the notable exceptions discussed above, the discussion of women in anthropological literature was mostly limited to chapters on marriage, family, and kinship, with women depicted as little more than caretakers and links between family groups. Women were rarely illustrated as agents of their own lives, and when the 'anthropology of women' emerged in the 1970s, it was (predominantly) women scholars focused on documenting women's lives. This was an effort to flush-out anthropological literature's imbalance of male representation in the study of culture, called **androcentric**.

Anthropology of women pursued several ideas: exposing androcentrism in anthropological work, reassessing gender roles across cultures, and revealing the dynamic nature of gender constructs. One of the first things that the anthropology of women did as an academic enterprise was challenge a theory about human evolution proposed in 1966 by the anthropologists Steward and Elman called the "Man the Hunter" model. The "Man the Hunter" model focuses on the role of hunting in the evolution of humans and argues that the act of hunting was critical in transforming bipedal apes into culture bearing, language-using humans. Historically understood as a male-centered activity, anthropologists Zihlman and Tanner challenged this model on two perceived insufficiencies: first, if hunting was the primary social activity that drove human evolution, this leaves women (half of all

humans), out of the evolutionary process. Research has since revealed a number of past societies where women participated in hunting activities. This highlights the oversimplification of gender roles used the “Man Hunter” model.

Secondly, ethnographic evidence of modern foragers, such as the !Kung San of Botswana, indicates that a significant portion of calories they consume (60-80%) come from plant foods foraged primarily by women. Hunting activities alone may not be enough to support a population. Instead, hunting may have been an important dietary supplement and opportunity for individuals to gain status and experience. Activities traditionally viewed as “women’s” work, such as gathering and processing plants, were likely integral parts of diet and survival. In other words, the evolution of humans cannot be understood without considering all genders within society.

The Anthropology of Gender

The anthropology of women has since developed into an anthropology of gender, recognizing the necessity of balance amongst all genders within a society and not just male, female, or non-binary genders. Additionally, an archaeological focus on gender provides a lens for reassessing past myths that emphasize men as the prime movers of cultural change. For example, in Chaco Canyon in the southwest U.S., recent DNA evidence from the 1,000-year-old site reveals that lineage was traced through the mother, and high-status burials of related males and females have been discovered (see Module 15: Kinship and Marriage). At another site, Cahokia near St. Louis, a 900-year-old ornate burial on Mound 72 was discovered several decades ago. Initial analyses indicated that the burial included more than 250 human sacrifices in a mass grave, and a central grave with four males surrounding two elite males who were covered with thousands of shell beads and grave goods. The elite males were interpreted as warrior kings and few challenged the interpretation. More recently, however, a team of archaeologists re-analyzed the skeletal remains to review some inconsistencies in the original reports. When they re-examined the remains, they discovered the central grave included six additional individuals, including a child, and of the ten individuals surrounding the elite burials, at least four of them were female. Finally, the two elite males were revealed to actually be a male and

female. This new insight has forced researchers at Cahokia to reconsider the idea of a patriarchal, warrior society. In other words, our culture's present gender constructs can create a fallacy when they are projected onto the past. When gender constructs are framed as eternal and unchanging, they do not accurately represent the gender dynamics at play in past societies.

Gender Asymmetry

Another important disciplinary project that feminist anthropologist took on in the 1970s and 1980s was trying to understand the prevalence of gender systems across the globe that devalue women. This is **gender asymmetry**, when one gender has greater cultural and political power than another. When newly minted women anthropologists began to focus on the cultural experiences of women, it was widely assumed that there must be a society where women hold the power (matriarchal society). For over a decade, anthropologists scoured the globe to find such a culture, but they never did. This led feminist anthropologists to consider what conditions of human existence would lead to the near universal devaluation of women?

For the anthropologist Sherri Ortner, sexual asymmetry originated from the fact that women bear children, lactate, and menstruate. According to Ortner, the biological role of women as the site of reproduction readily designates women, primarily, as mothers who nurture and care for their young. Michelle Rosaldo, another important contemporary of Ortner's and a "founding mother" of the anthropology of women (now the anthropology of gender), started to view gender as a system that is produced by local meanings. She wrote, "I now believe that gender is not a unitary fact determined everywhere by the same sorts of concerns but, instead, the complex product of a variety of social forces." Part of Rosaldo's rejection of the search for biological origins of the near universal subjugation of women hinged on her recognition that the search for a universal explanation for gender asymmetry could justify women's subordination and frustrate efforts to create equity in gender systems. Cultures around the world have different beliefs or reasons for the gender roles they recognize, and it cannot simply be reduced to reproductive and childrearing practices.

Anthropologists have identified several cultures where women have a high degree of cultural power and valuation. In general, these cultures tend to be matrilineal, meaning that familial belonging is traced through mothers. They also tend to be matrilocal, meaning adults reside with or around their mothers. These cultures include the Navajo/Diné of the U.S. Southwest, the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, as well as the Mosuo of China, dubbed the most “matriarchal” society on the planet (see Module 15: Kinship and Marriage).



Video 14.3. Check out the video from *Bloomberg Quicktake* presenting “*Inside China’s last Matriarchal Tribe.*”

It’s also argued by some archeologists and historians that women most likely had a higher status in pre-agricultural cultures. Research suggests that, in addition to foraging, women also performed numerous other essential activities that contributed to their status in society. Therefore, it’s likely that the strict binary and gender roles that are predominant among many cultures today were *not* previously the norm. In this same vein, some researchers argue that the transition from hunting and gathering to farming was heavily influenced by gender roles and norms. Transitioning to agriculture wasn’t a decision made by men alone, but the subsequent cultural impacts couldn’t be foreseen.

Gender and Colonialism

Anthropologists also have demonstrated that the global process of colonialism was incredibly harmful to women in positions of power. Women leaders in matriarchal societies were forced to produce male heirs and leaders under the regimes of the colonists. For example, in pre-colonial West Africa, women were often leaders in society who oversaw armies and maneuvered political circles. Women could marry men or other women, and they could marry multiple partners if they could support their spouses and create kinship networks. However, European colonialists couldn’t fathom the idea of a woman in a role of power, or women in a role that mirrored colonial ideas of ‘husband.’ Furthermore, feminine males, mudoko dako, took on feminine

tasks and could marry men within West African societies, representing another irreconcilable skew from European norms. There was not a strict delineation between gender identity and sexual orientation in many West African societies, but colonial efforts enforced the use of a binary system and condemned traditional practices from these societies. Much like the criminalization of the Hijra in India (see discussion above), gender systems and power structures everywhere were disrupted by colonial mindsets.

In cultures where women have little power, anthropologists have recognized a cultural pattern of patrilineal-patrilocal societies exhibiting higher degrees of gender stratification. This is known as the patrilineal-patrilocal complex. In cultures that exhibit the **patrilineal-patrilocal complex**, a rigid separation between women and men is observed in the domestic and public spheres, with a heavy focus on male warfare.

The Study of Masculinity

Beginning in the 1980s but happening in critical mass in the 1990s, anthropologists began to study the experiences of men in relationship to women within a gender system. **Masculinity** is the qualities or characteristics considered appropriate or typical to a man. Through ethnographic research, anthropologist Matthew Gutmann demonstrates how the struggle over the division of labor in Mexico City chips away at notions of “macho” among working-class men. Ideas of maleness in Western, industrialized nations are linked to economic participation, and gender systems change as the traditional meaning of the family changes. What Gutmann observed as he lived among and interviewed men in Colonia Santo Domingo in Mexico City are that young men’s ideas of what defines a “good man” is changing as women gain more economic power and childcare and household duties become less gender rigid. Through urbanization, men are beginning to lose their traditional work roles. According to Guzman, although women are still subordinate, their economic participation (formal and informal) and history of community activism creates the basis for changing the traditional gender order. However, women are still primarily responsible for childcare and housework, even when employed outside the home (ama de casa) and may experience what is known as the second shift, or when women employed outside the home have the double burden of

domestic obligations when they get home that may not be expected of or experienced by men.

The Method of Feminist Ethnography

The global study of gender has taught us that gender is best understood in human groups, not based on biological constraints. Gender is locally developed and represents specific forms of social relationships, or culture. Since its emergence in the 1970s, the Anthropology of Women has transformed into the Anthropology of Gender in which anthropologists understand gender as relational. Additionally, the important practice of feminist ethnography has developed and gained disciplinary validity. Feminist ethnography is a methodological approach that can be practiced by any ethnographer that focuses on gender equity, antiracism, anticolonialism, queer rights, reproductive justice, and antiviolenace practices. It is important to clarify that feminist anthropology includes the study of men, women, and alternatively gendered people, not just women.

“In essence, feminist ethnography attends to the dynamics of power in social interaction that starts from a gender analysis”

(Davis and Craven 2016)

Feminist Ethnography has five important characteristics:

1. Involves a feminist sensibility (intersectionality and power).
2. Draws inspiration from feminist scholarship (feminist intellectual genealogy).
3. Challenges marginalization and injustice.
4. Acknowledges and reflects upon power relations within the research context.
5. Aims to produce scholarship that contributes to movement building and/or be in the service of the communities we study.

An example of a feminist ethnography is Sarah Horton’s *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields: Illness, Injury, and Illegality among U.S. Farmworkers* in which she answers the research question: “Why do farmworkers (in California) suffer heat death at a rate higher than other outdoor workers and why do

foreign-born Latino men bear particular risk?” She found that young, Latino men were more likely to suffer heat stroke and death because they typically performed the more strenuous jobs in farm work, including being a *carcador*, or box staker, which requires moving boxes weighing between 20-40 lbs. while in the direct sun (see Figure 14.6). It’s the intersection of their gender and legal status that creates a context in which Latino men become **structurally vulnerable** to severe dehydration and death. This is a good example of a feminist ethnography because Horton’s research centers questions about gender, power, and marginalization in America’s farmlands.



Figure 14.6. Farmworkers carrying boxes of fruit. Image from Flickr/USDA.

An Anthropological Look at Our Story of Reproduction

One day, the anthropologist Emily Martin just happened to be flipping through the textbook that her husband, a biology professor, used in his classroom. She stopped and read the scientific description of human reproduction. It became obvious as Martin read the passage that science was anything but “neutral knowledge” when it came to describing the process of human fertilization. Martin’s article demonstrates how the traditional narrative about the sperm fertilizing the egg reinforces gender stereotypes. She went on to analyze (method of content analysis) the “story” that science textbooks tell about how reproduction happens. Commonly, the

egg is portrayed as the “damsel in distress,” “the hard to get prize” (both passive metaphors) or a female aggressor who “captures and tethers the sperm.” The sperm is portrayed as active, mobile, and penetrating. These descriptors map the gender stereotypes in U.S. culture that construct men as active and aggressive and women as passive and requiring protection.

There are consequences with the heavily gendered language of science. Biologist Scott Gilbert has built upon Martin’s analysis to look at what scientists have missed. He said, “Most studies clearly show that the sperm is attracted by the egg and activated by it...but if you don’t have an interpretation of fertilization that allows you to look at the egg as active, you won’t look for the molecules that can prove it.” Gilbert and other science scholars have found that by viewing the egg as inactive, the egg’s role in the biological process of human reproduction has been understudied and underestimated. Scientists have begun to think of the egg as active, have begun to study it, and what they’ve found is that the egg has a much larger role in fertilization than previously understood. For example, a study released by researchers from the U.K. and Sweden in 2020 found that, although the fastest sperm reaches the ovum first, the egg decides between the sperm swimming towards it. If these researchers hadn’t thought of the egg as active and looked closely at its role, this discovery wouldn’t have been made.

Summary

Over the course of this module, we have discussed the error of conflating sex with gender, briefly described the diversity of gender systems observed around the world and noted how gender asymmetries have impacted the development of the field of anthropology. The differences between gender and sex have also been discussed: gender is a cultural construct that reflects how societies categorize people and labor, sex is based on biology, and sex and gender are not synonyms nor interchangeable terms. Although it is often reduced to a binary, binary sex does not reflect the range of variation within nature, and similarly, gender doesn’t need to align with biological sex. Numerous cultures around the world recognize multiple genders that have their own roles and identities within society. However, anthropology developed with an androcentric premise, and it wasn’t until more recently that women began to challenge these male-centric paradigms and support an

anthropology of gender that recognizes the need for a balanced understanding of gender within society.

Review Questions

- **T/F.** Sex and gender are synonyms and can be used interchangeably.
- **T/F.** Title IX is a federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in school and educational systems.
- **T/F.** Many cultures around the world recognize multiple, non-binary genders.
- **T/F.** A person's sexual orientation is separate from their gender identity.
- **T/F.** Traditionally, archaeological and ethnographic research portrayed men as the dominant players of society, ignoring the critical role that women play in societies around the world.

Discussion Questions

- How does sex differ from gender?
- What is the relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation?
- Why is an anthropological understanding gender critical to understanding culture?
- Have dominant ideas of “masculinity” impacted male identity and power in recent decades?

Key Terms

Androcentric: Imbalance of representation, skewed in favor of males.

Gender: The cultural meaning we apply to biological sex differences.

Gender asymmetry: When one gender has greater cultural and political power than another.

Gender division of labor: The delegation of work by gender difference.

Gender identity: The personal sense of one's own gender, which can align or diverge from a person's assigned sex at birth.

Gender separation systems: Strict or rigid separation of genders, in terms of labor and space.

Gerewol: A courtship ritual among the Wodaabe of Niger, where the males compete for the attention of potential marriage partners.

Intersex: Individuals that exhibit biological characteristics of males and females.

Masculinity: The qualities or characteristics considered appropriate or typical to a man.

Parthenogenesis: Reproduction through only the female of the species.

patrilineal-patrilocal complex: In cultures where women have little power, a cultural pattern of patrilineal-patrilocal societies exhibiting higher degrees of gender stratification has been observed.

Sex: Biological differences within species.

Sexual dimorphism: Physical differences between the male and the female of a species, such as in size or robusticity.

Sexuality orientation: The emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people.

Structural vulnerability: The kinds of risks with which an individual is saddled by virtue of their 'location' in a hierarchical social order and its diverse networks of power relationships.

Title IX: A federal civil rights law that forbids sex-based discrimination in school and educational programs that receive federal money.

Transgender: Individuals who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Two Spirits: Individuals who may biologically exhibit male or female genitalia, but their spirits are recognized as a blend of male and female within their cultures.

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