

Individuals do not chose their actions by their own free will. The assignment of gender has dictated their actions since before they were capable of forming complex thoughts because they have been taught what actions are, and are not appropriate for each gender by group relations. While this may be a hard concept to initially understand, by explaining how gender is a powerful institution that forces all individuals to have a sex, and thus a gender, this paper illustrates that because gender is social relations, rather than individual, assignment of a gender dictates an individual's actions.

Gender is an institution that governs our lives whether we are actively aware of its chokehold or not. Gender is an institution because it is associated with social norms, laws, and practices that shape and restrict individual's thinking and behaviors. It is not just an individual fact that's significance is internally held. Gender is a social fact that's control is beyond our personal whims. This strong held is one of the major ways we organize our lives (Lorber, 1994, p. 15). The institution of gender demands that gender statuses be clearly differentiated. (Lorber, 1994, p. 26). So much so that, "it does not matter what men, and women actually do; it doesn't even matter if they do exactly the same thing. The social institution of gender insists only that what they do is perceived as different." (Lorber, 1994, p. 26). The institution of gender creates separation, and differences in behaviors between the genders. In order for this institution to be continuously reproduced within our society it must act on individuals. Which therefore means each individual must be assigned a single gender which often is dependent on the individual's sex.

From the moment one exits a womb as a neonate they are assigned a sex. The sex of a child is based solely on gonads (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 38). A body with two ovaries is sexed

as female, and a body with a pair of testes is donned male (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 38). Within the institution of gender only two sexes are present, therefore creating a binary system; a person is either male or female. Those who defy this binary system, intersex individuals, are thought to be abnormal, and in need of corrections, which medical advances have made possible, to fix nature's mistake (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p.36).

While gonads determined one's sex society determines one's gender. Our culture forces individuals to be gendered, and must belong to one of the two binary systems (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 3). Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna define the process by which an individual determines whether another individual is male or female as gender attribution (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 2). Oftentimes gender, and sex are interconnected. Individuals with male gonads are attributed the men gender due to their sex, and females the woman gender. But sex and gender are not the same thing. Gender is a term used to designate psychological, social and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness while sex is the biological components of maleness and femaleness (Connell, 2002, p. 7). The interconnect between sex and gender in gender attribution is such a natural process we have perfected that we only realize it exists when the attribution is not connected to sex. This is apparent in cases where the individual's sex is ambiguous and we find ourselves becoming more attuned to clues because the process is more difficult (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p. 3).

With the binary system of sex present in society a binary system of gender is also present. The danger of linking sex and gender together in a binary society is it does not account for the individual's gender identity. From the moment an individual is assigned a gender a specific set of actions are expected out of that individual. "Gender is an anchor. Once people decide what you are they interpret everything in light of that" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 6). Without allowing the

individual total control over what gender they would like to be perceived as, and allowing for a spectrum of different genders individuals are not allowed total control over their actions.

“Once when a group of girls were deciding who would jump and who would ‘twirl’ (the less desirable position). Evan recognized a means of access to the game and offered, ‘I’ll swing it.’ Julie responded, ‘No way, you don’t know how to do it, to swing it. You gotta be a girl’. He left without protest” (Thorne, 1993, p.45). The scene just described was an excerpt from *Gender Play* by Barrie Thorne. It describes a situation in which an individual’s actions were dictated due to his presumed gender. Evan was not allowed to twirl the rope because he was a boy, and thus was not capable of properly twirling. Observations like this were not uncommon to Thorne. Throughout her ethnography she observed school aged children recognizing the differences between gender, and reinforcing it. The media through which these children learned and reinforced gender was social relations (Thorne, 1993, p.4).

In the very beginning of *Gender Play*, author Barrie Thorne states that gender is social relations- “the organization and meanings of social situations, the collective practices through which children actively come together to help create and recreate gender in their daily interactions” (Thorne, 1993, p. 4) By this Thorne means that children learn from group interactions what gender is, and the significance it has for them. She also means that gender is present and created from social relations, and thus group interactions recreate gender. Gender is assigned socially and group life reinforces gender by creating standards for individuals based on their gender and dictating their actions.

Thorne observed teachers and students from Miss Bailey’s fourth-fifth grade class routinely speak of boys’ and girls’ side in the classroom (Thorne, 1993, p. 37). She also observed a separation of boys and girls in relation to the area on the playground and lunchroom tables

(Thorne, 1993, p. 45, 43). These observations are consistent with Connell when he says that dichotomy and difference are the substance of the idea of gender (Connell, 2002, p. 11). Active participants in the institution of gender are taught from social relations. In Thorne's observations the social relations being the school setting, that the two different genders are dichotomous. This can be seen by the teacher, an individual in a higher authoritative position, acknowledging the separation between genders by calling it the boys' and girls' side. The children then reinforce, and recreate this component of gender by remaining separated from one another based on different genders while in group settings on the playground and at lunch tables.

Individuals also learn from social relations which characteristics are acceptable for the genders, and which are not. When Miss Bailey named the different teams as "Gossipy Girls" and "Beastly Boys" she was presenting characteristics each gender is thought to possess (Thorne, 1993, p. 67). The boys should not be gossipy, nor the girls beastly because it would oppose their assigned gender's norms. Even within the medical field there are certain characteristics that doctors believe each sex should hold but not the other. Dr. Money used a testimony from a mother whose male born son underwent feminizing surgery as evidence that the child's sex change was successful. She testified that her daughter "loves wearing dresses, hates being dirty, and 'just loves to have her hair set'". (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 68). Ideas about gender-appropriate behavior are constantly being circulated by individuals in group based settings, teaching individuals what actions they should and should not perform based on their gender (Connell, 2002, p. 5).

C.J Pascoe studied children in high school, and shed light on how masculinity was developed. Teachers tease young men about lack of heterosexual success, and tell students they "should be doing that to girls, not to me" (in reference to a student giving him the finger, a

reference for fuck you) (Pascoe, 2007, p. 36). Schools organize courts of men and allow the men to showcase their perceived masculinity by having a female date, acting out a skit that encourages violence and heterosexuality, with women as rewards for a job well done, and reward the boy who does the best job of displaying his masculinity during this spectacle (Pascoe, 2007, p. 45). Peers teach each other what it means to be masculine when speaking with each other in the weight room about what they can make women's bodies do in sexual situations (Pascoe, 2007, p. 104). They offer each other tips, and advice, and encourage others to "get laid" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 102). Within gender relations boys are taught that by dominating girls' bodies they defend their heterosexuality, increase their social status, and form bonds with other boys (Pascoe, 2007, p. 114). Teenagers are taught that heterosexual flirting entails female helplessness and male bodily dominance (Pascoe, 2007, p. 100). The way children have been taught to flirt through gendered social relations is dangerous because it leads to a society in which rape is prevalent, and misunderstood.

During her observations at high schools Pascoe spoke with a teenage boy, Chad, who was telling her about his successful sex life. Throughout his account he spoke about how eighth and ninth grade girls were stupid because "they didn't know what they were doing" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 88). By this the young boy meant that coming over to a house past midnight, where alcohol was present meant sex was expected (Pascoe, 2007, p. 88). Josh, much like Chad, also admitted to using substances in order to obtain sex from females. When responding to a friend's comment about "getting some", Josh said "I got a big bag of marijuana. The sooner I get her drunk, the sooner I get laid" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 102). Males learn from their interactions with peers that dominating female bodies is apart of being masculine. Therefore despite the fact that the girls were given drugs and alcohol and legally unable to consent it was not rape in the boy's eyes, just

heterosexual flirting. Pascoe noted that she did not feel the boys were unrepentant sexists but, “rather, for the most part, these behaviors were social behaviors” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 114).

In our society gender is an institution, and forces individuals to have a gender. The gender an individual is assigned dictates their actions from the point of gender assignment, and shapes their development. Gender is social relations and individuals learn how and why they must appropriately display their gender, and reinforce it. Gender as social relations is dangerous to individuals because it takes away free will. Individuals are not entirely free to choose the way they want to live. Gender as social relations is also dangerous to society because it teaches young males that in order to properly display masculinity they must dominate female bodies, thus leading to a society in which rape is prevalent. As an individual that is aware of how large gender plays a role in dictating our actions it worries me how little control I feel over my life. As a woman, it saddens me to see how society reinforces the dichotomy and separation of gender, and how individual's actions are strongly correlated with their gender. I agree with Pascoe when she says she feels gender equality is still a long ways off (Pascoe, 2007, p. 114).

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