

# Contrasting Sex and Gender

KRISTI BROWNFIELD

Northern State University, USA

Our understanding of both “sex” and “gender” has evolved predominantly due to feminist movements within science (Acker 1992). The burgeoning field of sex roles was grounded in psychology and looked at attitudes and attributes of individuals; sex roles were learned early in life from families, schools, peers, and media, and then were fixed for life. Second Wave feminist scholars began to believe the concept of “sex” as a biological entity needed to be divorced from the meanings associated with each sex. From these critiques, we see the beginning of the concept of “gender.” In essence, “sex” came to mean the biological and physical characteristics associated with sex such as genitalia, chromosomes, and hormones. “Gender” was the socially constructed meanings associated with gendered actions such as clothing, behavior, language, and so forth. Creating two different terms for biological sex and socially constructed gender allowed for the investigation of the greater variation in performances of masculinity and femininity and greater study of boundary breakers and gender transgressors. Masculinity becomes something more than a synonym for “maleness” and femininity becomes something more than another word for “femaleness” (Halberstam 1998).

Some scholars disagreed with this separation on various grounds. Rossi (1984) argued that no theories of gender and parenthood are adequate because of this separation. Gould and Kern-Daniels (1977) made a similar critique by pointing out the confusion over which roles women engage in biologically or socially and whether we can truly distinguish between the two. Fausto-Sterling (2009) argued that while there may be real biological differences between the sexes how we consider and define the sexes is itself a social construction. Lorber critiques gender’s simplicity and breaks the concept down into

further categories: gender status, or being taken as a man or a woman in society, gender identity, or our own self-image as man or woman, and gender display, or how we present ourselves as masculine or feminine bodies (2000:417). Lorber ([2005] 2009) makes a second critique of gender: it creates yet another binary when we should be working to dismantle those binaries. Despite critiques, the concept of gender still persists and is used commonly.

SEE ALSO: Gender Disparity and Arrests; Gendered Pathways into Crime; Trends in Female Offending; Gender Stereotypes and Victimization; ewac0220

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## ABSTRACT

This entry explores contrasting definitions between the terms "sex" and "gender," how the terminology came about, and critiques of the use of two different definitions for "sex" and "gender."

## KEYWORDS

gender; gendered bodies; gender roles; sex; sex roles

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Kristi Brownfield** received her PhD in sociology from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and currently teaches at Northern State University. Her main areas of research include deviance, gender, media, and popular culture.