CHAPTER 7

Gender, sexuality and identity

Chapter aims

- To think critically about the social basis for categories of gender and sexuality
- To consider the relationships between social structures and inequality on the one hand, and individual experiences and identities on the other
- To explore the intersections of local and global formations of gender and sexuality
- To think broadly about the impact of gender and sexuality on everyday life

Introduction

Individual and social aspects of gender

Whether we are men or women, girls or boys, or identify as transgender or gender-fluid, gender influences many aspects of our lives. Our clothing and leisure activities reflect pervasive ideas about what is appropriate for our bodies and subjectivities, while gender profoundly affects our experiences of education, employment and the family. Our gender is central to our identities as individuals, and is experienced by us every day of our lives. While gender does not represent the sum total of our experience, it is always with us. We may be a 'friend, professional, citizen, and many other things to many different people', but we are always called to account as gendered beings (West & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 26).

The individual, however, is but one focus in the sociology of gender. Who we are as people is not the whole story, because gender is not only an individual matter – it is also an integral dynamic of social arrangements and social order. Our identities, that is the ways we understand ourselves as boys, girls, men, women, or people who cross these boundaries occasionally or permanently, develop as we interact with other members of our society. We become who we are, reflect upon our lives, and change over the years, all in the context of our relationships with significant and not-so-significant others and the cultural contexts in which we are immersed. Gender involves social processes as well as individual identities.

Sexuality and gender

Sexuality is closely related to gender. In Western societies, including Aotearoa New

Zealand, our sexual identities often relate to the gender of the partners we are attracted to: homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality all presume gendered objects of desire. The study of sexuality covers other elements, too, and we will look at these in this chapter: how history and context shape the ways we experience and talk about sexuality; how particular kinds of narratives – or 'scripts' – shape sexual interaction; and what the impact is of changing technology on human sexuality.

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This chapter begins with an overview of three different strands in the stud y of gender that reflect the organising themes of this book: difference, division, and the way we perform gendered identities. In the process, we examine the ways in which international theories and practices of gender are reflected in the New Zealand context. This requires us to explore a number of key concepts, including patriarchy, gender regimes and hegemonic masculinity. Drawing once again from broader themes of difference, division, identity and globalisation, our subsequent discussion examines the relationships between sexuality and gender and the ways that various modes of social change influence our experience of sexuality.

Gender as difference, division and performing identities

Factors in the sociological analysis of gender

There are many interrelated factors involved in a sociological analysis of gender. Sociologists are concerned with daily life and the different institutions and processes through which gender is produced and reproduced: the family in all its permutations, the state, medicine, religion, literature, the news media, the paid and unpaid work we engage in, the education system in which we learn to think about the world, and the forms of popular culture we enjoy or react against. Gender implicates us in larger patterns of social interaction and behaviour. In order to explore these in more detail, we will break down our analysis of gender into three interrelated approaches: gender as a *difference*, gender as a *division*, and gender as something we *perform*.

Gender as a difference

'Men and women are different.' This idea has long held sway within popular understandings of gender and its place in society. But what does it mean, exactly? It would be easy to assume its obviousness if we presume that 'being a man' or 'being a woman' is a stable state determined directly by 'natural' processes. However, sociologists have long challenged the notion that men and women are members of unchanging and unchangeable 'natural' categories. To some degree at least, ideas about gender difference are historically specific. In Aotearoa New Zealand during World War II, women took up traditionally male

jobs such as factory work, farming and non-combatant military roles while large numbers of men were engaged in armed combat on the battlefields. As patterns of work changed over time, New Zealanders began to re-think what it meant to be a woman – and sociologists explored the impact of these changes on ideas about masculinity, too. American researchers Helen Hacker (1957) and Ruth Hartley (1959) suggested the post-war world gave rise to 'role strain' for men. Women's entry into the paid workforce in increasing numbers began to challenge the notion that men were their families' 'breadwinners', an ideal that unravelled in decades to come. Now it is common for the men and women who share a household to both be in paid work, and the idea that having a career defines masculinity – and thus separates men from women – has lost its currency. Gender difference does not mean what it once did.

Sex vs gender

But what about biology? In 1972, feminist sociologist Ann Oakley wrote about the separation between 'sex' and 'gender' (Oakley, 1972). In this model, 'sex' referred to those biological characteristics such as chromosomes (XX or XY), genitalia, breast and beard development that make us female or male. 'Gender' denoted the roles and appearances we enact in our lives that mark us out as feminine or masculine, girls or boys, women or men. Although we are born with either a male or female sex, it was argued, we have to be 'socialised', trained into either a 'feminine' or a 'masculine' gender, as we grow up. Therefore, while our maleness or femaleness was assumed to be biologically fixed, new ways of being men and women remained possible because masculinity and femininity might be re-interpreted and modified.

Ironically, although this distinction between sex and gender has since become influential outside of sociology, it has lost its appeal within the discipline for three main reasons. Firstly, the biological distinctions denoted by the term 'sex' are not always as clear-cut as we might think. Chromosomal patterns are sometimes more complex than a simple XY or XX, while some people have ambiguous genitalia that do not allow an easy classification into either a male or a female category. It has been suggested that 'intersexed' individuals demonstrate how the process of assigning a sex to a body is actually a social rather than a biological one (Kessler, 1998). If it is not always clear whether an individual can be classified as 'male' or 'female', then how enduring or 'natural' is such a distinction?

Secondly, our bodies are always experienced within their social contexts, and so their biological properties can be constrained and modified through historically specific social norms linked to bodily comportment, exercise and food. For example, as Alison Jaggar suggests, the rate 'at which women's athletic records are being broken and the speed at which women's bodies have changed . . . shows that in the past, social norms have limited the way in which women fulfilled their genetic potential, so that we have no idea of the extent of that potential' (Jaggar, 1992, p. 84). Relationships between food and bodies tell a similar story. The contemporary Western ideal of female beauty that involves a slender body type is, in fact, a relatively recent one. Throughout most of history, a rather more fleshy body was desirable because it symbolised ready access to food and therefore wealth. Up until the mid-

nineteenth century, thinness was generally seen as a sign of poverty; but around this time, being slender emerged as a desirable characteristic among many middle-class groups in Western societies. It seems likely that meanings of body shape and beauty are connected to systems of food production, distribution and consumption: when food is scarce or its supply unpredictable, beauty is signalled in the capacity to have plentiful consumption. When food is in abundance, beauty is signalled in the lack of a need to display 'food wealth'. The distinction between biological 'sex' and social 'gender' starts to lose its grip once we recognise the very real impact of social and technological forces upon basic physiological forms and capacities.

Thirdly, the ways we understand biology – and therefore 'maleness' and 'femaleness' themselves – are deeply affected by social presumptions. Scientific knowledge is itself gendered, and powerful ideas from our culture are smuggled consciously or unconsciously into investigations of the biological body. For example, the way in which many biologists describe the process of conception owes much to gendered assumptions that maleness is active and conquering, while femaleness is languid and passive. In many medical textbooks, for instance,

> The egg is seen as large and passive. It 'is swept' or 'drifts' along the fallopian tube . . . [the sperm in contrast are] 'streamlined' and invariably active . . . they have a 'velocity' that is often remarked upon . . . they need 'energy' and 'fuel' so that with a 'whiplash movement and strong lurches', they can 'burrow through the egg coat' and 'penetrate' it. [Some writers] liken the egg's role to that of Sleeping Beauty: 'a dormant bride awaiting her mate's magic kiss, which instills the spirit that brings her to life'. (Martin, 1991, pp. 489, 490)

In a discussion of these representations of human conception, Emily Martin makes the point that while bodies and bodily processes are undoubtedly 'real' in one way, they come to make sense to us only when we interpret them through language which, in turn, reflects a mesh of social expectations. Decisions about what biology 'is', and where it stops and 'society' starts, are themselves affected by social beliefs and norms. Judgements about which attributes 'belong' with (biological) sex and which 'belong' with (social) gender depend on how knowledge is socially constructed in our own time and place. Martin shows how even the process of conception, one that most people would assume to be 'natural', is understood in socially prescribed ways. It is difficult to even think about a process such as conception outside of the prevailing ideas we have about it.

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In summary

To summarise so far, most sociologists agree that many 'differences' between men and women are not 'natural', and that the precise character of these differences varies across time and between cultures and contexts. This is not to say that we must dispense entirely with the notion of difference. Instead, we can understand it as a sociological reality in the sense that social inequalities divide men from women, and men (and women) from each other, and

constitute them as ‘different’ in the process. While there is nothing immutable or eternal about these divisions, they play a significant part in the lives of actual women and men. Difference, then, is not a matter of inherent, natural distinctions between people; this idea is sometimes referred to as **‘essentialism’**. Most sociologists reject essentialism, arguing instead that gender difference reflects inequalities and expresses the power embedded in social practices. The categories ‘men’ and ‘women’ owe their very existence to the social hierarchies in which they are located.

Essentialism, a concept from philosophy, refers to the idea that people or objects have a discernible inner truth. When applied to gender, it usually denotes the assumption that men and women are inherently different and that biology and psychology determine individual experiences and the gendered patterns of social life.

Gender inequality

A serious consequence of gender differentiation is that the relationship between masculinity and femininity is often characterised by domination and subordination. These dynamics have long been a focus of feminist writers and activists. In the late eighteenth century, feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft drew attention to women’s unequal status in relation to men. Recent feminist sociological theorising has examined the systematic inequalities that exist between men and women in almost every sphere of social life, developing new concepts to understand them.

One key term used in feminist sociology to describe gender inequality is ‘patriarchy’. Used in 1922 by sociologist Max Weber to refer to the rule of older male heads of households over women and younger men, in recent decades the term has been employed within sociology to describe how men of all ages establish and maintain dominance over women. Some have suggested that the term implies a lack of historical change in gender relations and leads to an over-simplified analysis of social inequality, and the concept of patriarchy is now used less often in sociological writing than it once was (Pollert, 1996). More recently, Sylvia Walby has used the term **gender regime** to replace the older concept of patriarchy. Walby’s idea of gender regimes refers to ‘a set of inter-connected gender relations and gendered institutions that constitutes a system’ (Walby, 2011, p. 104). Gender regimes change over time and possess both private and public elements; that is, they involve relations of intimate and domestic life as well as the world of paid work and politics. Sometimes these come together: for instance, one person’s capacity to engage in paid work often rests upon the unpaid labour of others. Gender regimes also intersect with other forms of inequality. A person’s class position, for instance, influences how much power they have in the workplace and affects their gendered experience. Ethnicity also moderates gender: different cultural backgrounds and degrees of relative social disadvantage affect the ways in which men and women’s lives play out. This is known as **intersectionality**.

Gender regime refers to sets of gendered relationships and systems that change over time and intersect with other kinds of social structures such as class and ethnicity. Sociologists who focus on **intersectionality**, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, look carefully at the overlaps and interactions between gender and other forms of social organisation. How do class, ethnicity and gender influence one another, and what does this mean for social life, power relations and political change?

The gendered division of labour

As Walby explains, and Hartley and Hacker pointed out during the middle of the twentieth century, labour is a crucial element of gender regimes. The gendered division of labour refers to ways in which the differences between men's and women's work activities are the result of broader social patterns. Economic factors are important here: the gendered division of labour shifts over time as economic systems change. In Aotearoa New Zealand – and in many other countries – men tend to be clustered in the highest-paying jobs and those that offer the best prospects for autonomy and promotion (Hyman, 2017). Women, in contrast, are concentrated in lower-status and lower-paying part-time jobs. Even in those areas of the labour force where women predominate, such as service work, men earn the highest wages and occupy the most senior positions. This is a powerful example of the intersection of class and gender. Since 2000, New Zealand's gender pay gap – the gap between women's and men's average hourly earnings – has hovered at a relatively constant 17%. Walby suggests that men are privileged over women in respect of other social structures, too. Our culture encodes a diverse set of unequal practices: men's contributions to literature and art have often been valued more highly than women's, while men occupy dominant positions within religion and the news media. We will return to examine gender inequalities when we examine sexuality in the sections below.

Masculinity

Although men are generally advantaged in relation to women, they too must negotiate prevailing forms of masculinity and the social expectations that accompany these. Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell coined the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to describe the form of masculinity that occupies a dominant position in society (Connell, 2005). Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity relies on a broad social consensus about which forms of masculinity are the most socially desirable. What is hegemonic, however, changes over time: hegemonic masculinity is a variable 'state of play' that might be contested or challenged by other forms of masculinity. Connell suggests that traditional masculinities based on a hard day's labour and physical confrontations with others have been overtaken by newly hegemonic forms: the competitive businessman and the bureaucrat. Connell argues that today's hegemonic masculinity is more technocratic than confrontationist, and is defined by rationality and expertise rather than physical force. Ironically, hegemonic masculine ideals (the pursuit of wealth and influence, for example) do not necessarily reflect the lives of the majority of men, even many of those who aspire to them. Clearly, the relationships between

wider social processes and individual men's lives are complex.

The new technocratic masculinity: these men were stockbrokers during the sharemarket crash of 1987. SOURCE: EP/1987/5979-F, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON

Performing gender

When we analyse gender as a social division we work on a large scale, examining social processes and power relations in the widest sense. However, what goes on at the individual level is also important, and some sociologists focus on the ways in which we produce and express gender in everyday life. Well-known North American scholar Erving Goffman, for instance, argued that our sense of ourselves as gendered is heavily influenced by the ways we manage impressions of ourselves to those around us (Goffman, 1971). He suggested that we all want to present or perform gender in ways that gain a favourable reception from others. Our gender 'performances' involve 'frontstage' and 'backstage' zones, just like in a theatre. Each of us performs publicly, 'up front' and under the scrutiny of others, after we have prepared ourselves and practised our technique 'out back', away from prying eyes. So, while we might appear as an acceptably gendered man or woman out in the classroom, the street, the pub or the lecture theatre, we first prepare our appearance, emotions and deportment in our own living room and in front of the bathroom mirror.

This process – performing gender – involves a delicate balance between constraint and freedom. On the one hand, we see that the specific ways in which we perform our genders are not fully determined by societal ideals and directives, so it is possible for us to resist the expectations placed upon us in any given time and place – to some extent at least. But this is not a matter of complete freedom. For example, in his work on gender and advertising, Goffman suggested that our gender performances are informed by the 'schedules' society makes available to guide our 'portrayals of gender' (Goffman, 1979). Put simply, ways of being 'feminine' or 'masculine' are made available to us by our cultures, and each of us adopts, modifies and (sometimes) resists them as we perform our gendered identities.

Goffman suggested that masculinity and femininity are social accomplishments. By this he meant that people usually strive to present themselves to others as coherently and 'properly' gendered. Over time this becomes a matter of routine, and we perform our masculinity or femininity without consciously thinking about the processes involved. Goffman never adopted a distinction between sex and gender, rejecting the idea that we could easily distinguish between 'biological' and 'social' aspects of maleness and femaleness. Instead, he argued that the division of individual bodies into the categories of 'male' and 'female' is itself the result of social practices such as naming and talk (one example would be the phrase 'it's a girl!' uttered at birth). These naming practices produce the very notion that gender differences are 'natural' in the first place (Goffman, 1977). 'Nature' is an idea rather than an absolute, and it takes shape as gendered subjects talk, walk and act 'like a woman' or 'like a man', whatever those categories come to mean in any given society.

None of this is to say that we all perform our gender in the same way, nor that we wholeheartedly embrace the social expectations to which we are subjected. Shirley Tate's (1999) study of female weightlifters, for instance, explores how such 'body projects' provide women with ways of reworking conventional notions of femininity. Tate suggests that while weightlifting women are to some degree constrained by the category of 'feminine woman', they can perform feminine embodiment in new ways that provide a pleasurable and empowering sense of strength and control over their bodies and their lives. While these women carefully tread a line between a socially acceptable muscularity and less-accepted notions of 'butchness', that is, they enact their gendered identities with great care, Tait argues that weight training does provide some possibilities for transgressing prevailing modes of gender performance.

Changes over time

Ways of performing gender have changed over time. Women can now work on construction sites; more men teach in primary schools and push prams along the street than they did 20 or even 10 years ago. Meanwhile, 'metrosexual' men look neater and smell sweeter than their predecessors, and women's rugby or extreme sports are no longer unheard of. In contrast, the Black Ferns, New Zealand's premier women's rugby team, is performing strongly on the world stage. Gendered patterns of alcohol consumption are changing as notions of femininity and masculinity shift and, as we will show in the next section of this

chapter, people can adopt a gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual identity more openly than at any time in the past. This is not to say, of course, that there are no longer clear patterns in gendered expectations. Some changes take place slowly – school uniforms offer one example. While many New Zealand girls and women have worn shorts and trousers in their leisure and work life since the 1960s, only now are many secondary schools incorporating these as options in their uniform options for girls. The dominant place of the skirt, which fashions and sometimes restricts bodily mobility in particular ways, has proved hard to dislodge. There is a double movement in this enforcement of femininity: while young people tend to be early adopters of new modes of life, many schools uphold much older ideas about how gendered bodies ought to appear.

Gender fluidity

Because many of society's members assume a certain inevitability in the way the majority of men and women perform their gender, those with an idiosyncratic gender presentation are not considered 'real' men or women. They might be subject to negative comment or even ostracism. There are some gaps and opportunities, though, and our society allows some room for its members to become beings 'whom neither *man* nor *woman* truly describes', as gender theorist Judith Butler puts it (Butler, 1990, p. 127). Recently, in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, there has been a proliferation of transgender writing and activism. Broadly defined, the term *transgender* describes people who do not identify with the gender identity assigned to them at birth. (Its opposite is *cis-gender*: those who do identify with their original gender assignment). A transgender identity is sometimes adopted by a person rather than imposed by outside, and at other times people identify not as transgender but with their 'new' gender: man or woman, or sometimes as a 'transman' or 'transwoman'. They may change their bodies by taking hormones and/or undergoing breast and genital reconstruction, but not always. People experience transgender differently (Reiff-Hill & Mayes, 2013).

There are other kinds of fluidity, too. The terms *genderqueer* and *multiple gendered* refer to those who do not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions. Instead, they may identify with neither male nor female genders, or with a combination of both. Among those who see themselves as multiple gendered, a subset of related terms includes *bigender, trigender, mixed gender* and *pangender*. Those who seek to live in a non-gendered space might refer to themselves as *agender, nongendered*, or *androgynous*. The broad terrain of genderqueer can be context-dependent for any given person, and shift over time. One genderqueer writer describes her shape-shifting self this way:

> As a grown-ass adult, I'm comfortable in my female body, with the idea that other people, men and women, may find my body (not just my 'androgynous mind') attractive, and also with expressing a more conventionally masculine appearance. I talk with my hands, cry at sappy movies, and gossip like a 13-year-old mean girl. I cut my hair military-short, grow it out into a Maddow, and trim it back again. When I want to look nice, I wear a tie. When I want to look really nice, I wear a tailored three-piece suit and a tie. I never feel more confident, at home in my own skin or more sexy, than in drag. (PoBoyNation, 2011)

Gender perception

At the macro level, possibilities for ambiguous gendering continuously interact with wider expectations and power relationships. Writer Telyn Kusalik, who identifies as mixed gender and regards the realities of lived experience as more significant than identity itself, suggests that those who are perceived to be women are subject to higher levels of harassment and social opprobrium than those who are read as men. Sometimes the relevant factor in sexual harassment, Kusalik writes, 'is not gender *identity* but gender *perception*. Some friends and acquaintances who have experienced harassment do not, in fact, identify as women; they were perceived as women' (Kusalik, 2010, p. 56). Even though there is scope for gender fluidity, and perceptions of selves and others have changed in recent times, Kusalik suggests that social inequalities maintain their hold. Much the same is true of sexuality, the subject of the discussion that follows.

Sexuality

Sexuality comes into being when human bodies, sensations and experiences are interpreted and organised in society. Even though we often imagine sexuality to be a private matter, social debate over sexual lives, morals and meanings can be a noisy and contentious affair. As sociologist Jeffrey Weeks suggests, there is a constant, cacophonous discussion about sexuality in society. Not merely a matter of personal interest, sexuality is highly symbolic, and its very mention evokes ideas about reproduction, sin, pleasure and disease. Between ourselves we may speak of sexuality in whispers, but we shout about it in popular culture and the news media (Weeks, 2000, p. 164).

The social construction of sexuality

Sociological ways of thinking about sexuality cut across some common-view ideas we may have about the essential and fixed nature of our own sexual personas. Most sociologists suggest that sexuality takes its meaning from its social, cultural and historical contexts. This *social constructionist* perspective on sexuality can be distinguished from the *essentialist* presumption that sexuality is a 'natural' characteristic flowing from an individual's mind or body that forces its way outwards. Social constructionist scholars challenge the view that we are slaves to our sexual desires, human robots who endlessly reiterate some kind of biological destiny. Instead, the very notion of an inherent sexuality is open to challenge, as we consider how our bodies and their capacities take shape within particular moments. Across time and space, sexuality – like gender – is constructed in a range of settings: families, educational institutions, and the visual and textual representations that saturate our culture. From television advertisements to the gritty realities of everyday life, from the classroom to the bedroom, sexuality takes form socially.

More specifically, sexual worlds develop as their participants interact with each other and

with the meanings that circulate around them. ‘Definitions of the situation’, to use a sociological term, determine whether or not given activities are even considered sexual in the first place. John Gagnon and William Simon first developed this idea during the 1960s. ‘Without the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behavior’, they wrote, ‘nothing sexual is likely to happen’ (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, p. 19). These American sociologists offered the medical examination as an example. Its elements, Gagnon and Simon suggested, are similar to sexual situations in certain respects: ‘the palpation of the breast for cancer [and] the gynecological examination’ involve touching parts of the body that are often touched in sexual contexts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, p. 23). In a medical setting, though, ‘the social situation and the actors are not defined as sexual or potentially sexual, and the introduction of a sexual element is seen as a violation of the expected social arrangements’ (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, p. 23). Medical personnel project and maintain a definition of the situation as decidedly non-sexual.

Cultural variations

Further evidence of the cultural construction of sexuality is found in the various ways in which different cultures express sexuality through sanctioning with whom, when, where and how it is permissible to have sex. In Western societies, heterosexuality and homosexuality are seen as mutually exclusive and self-evident categories that express an individual’s inherent character. However, this way of linking sexual practice and identity is in fact relatively recent in historical terms, and does not characterise all cultural expressions. For example, among the Sambia, a Papua New Guinean tribe, all men take part in ritualised same-sex behaviour as part of the initiation into manhood (Herdt, 2006). In this culture, semen, which is considered an essential part of masculinity, must be ingested by boy initiates in order for them to become real men. For a period of some years, boys and young adult men take part in a practice – fellatio – that in Western culture would be regarded as homosexual. These boys go through this ritualised practice in order to become the heterosexually active and aggressive masculine beings that are appropriate in their culture. In this context, though, fellatio is neither an expression of desire nor one of identity. The practice is confined to a particular period of the life span, for the express purpose of initiating boys into the Sambian form of masculinity. A Sambian man would be perplexed by the notion of gay identity that is found in Western societies, just as we find the notion of an age-specific homosexuality unusual.

Sexual scripting

The concept of *sexual scripts* further helps us to understand the social organisation of sexuality. As patterned constellations of language and action, convention and expectation, sexual scripts link specific social contexts to individuals’ sexual experiences. Scripts specify with whom people have sex, when and where they should do it, what sexual activities they should participate in and why. Within sexual scripting theory, cultural scenarios prescribe the *what* and *how* of sexual conduct. With whom might we engage sexually, why and when?

What is expected of us in a sexual situation? How ought we to act, and what might we expect to feel? These scenarios can be highly gendered. Men are often presumed to take the role of initiators and pleasure-seekers while women are expected to act as gatekeepers and satisfiers:

> The sexual script for men has been identified as including elements such as: actively seeking out sexual partners; endorsement of sexual exploits by peers; uncontrollable sexuality once aroused; and seeking sex as a source of pleasure for its own sake. For women, the sexual script is said to include elements such as: passively waiting to be chosen rather than actively seeking a partner; desire for affection or love rather than sex; and the desire to please men. (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001, p. 214).

Popular media – magazines, news sites and popular novels – provides an important source of cultural scenarios. It guides our beliefs about the who, what, where, when and how of sex. Magazine articles that reveal to their readers the secrets of 'great sex', for instance, often portray men as sexually active and women as rather more passive. Men are represented as sexually insatiable and women are generally instructed to appear attractive to men – but not too eager (Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008). At the same time, women are instructed in techniques to enhance men's sexual pleasure rather than their own. Within the scenarios evoked in magazines, heterosexuality and monogamy are often taken-for-granted baseline assumptions: not only will participants take part in heterosexual encounters, but they will do so with only one partner over a period of time.

Changes in the social expectations of sex

Some ideas about sexuality are relatively old – the notions that woman seek romance and that men are sexually rapacious have their equivalents in the nineteenth century – but social expectations of sex have changed in other respects. Weeks takes note of three particular strands: secularisation, a shift away from the moral authority of religion; a liberalisation of attitudes towards sexuality; and the challenges placed by growing sexual diversity (Weeks, 2000, p. 167). The idea that sex between men and women was primarily about reproduction, not pleasure, weakened through the twentieth century, and the advent of the birth control pill during the early 1960s further uncoupled sexual desire from reproductive aims. As odd as it might seem to us today, many New Zealanders were scandalised by mixed flatting – single men and women living together – during the 1960s, thinking that it would result in wholesale sexual debauchery, but mixed flatting has since become commonplace. Soliciting for sex, escort agencies and brothels were illegal in Aotearoa New Zealand until 2003. Same-sex relationships have also enjoyed this move towards liberalisation. Agitation for homosexual law reform began in New Zealand at the start of the 1960s, and in 1986 sex between men became legal here (Brickell, 2008). (Interestingly, sex between women had never been banned by New Zealand law.) Civil unions for gay, lesbian and heterosexual couples became a possibility in 2004, and the New Zealand government granted marriage equality in 2013. Each time New Zealand's law was liberalised, the public debate was less strident than before.

Still, there remains a certain expectation of heterosexuality; it is assumed to be a person's default sexuality until they declare otherwise. This is partly because many people still believe

that heterosexuality is universal, natural and unquestionable. In 1991, social theorist Michael Warner coined the term *heteronormativity* to describe this belief. He believed that the social hierarchy between heterosexuality and homosexuality was not always reinforced by overt violence – although it sometimes is, as the existence of 'gay bashing' attests. As 'a wide field of normalization', Warner writes, heteronormativity also operates to secure this hierarchy (Warner, 1991, p. 16). The effect is to hide the ways in which heterosexuality, as much as homosexuality, is a social phenomenon buttressed by language, assumptions and social practices.

This 2014 UniQ poster refers to a range of sexual identities.
SOURCE: UNIQ DUNEDIN

In the following contribution, Chris Brickell discusses how homosexuality and heterosexuality emerged as categories and identities, and considers the complexity of sexual

classifications in the twenty-first century.

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Classifications of sexuality and the re-emergence of sexual fluidity

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Sexual identities are social facts. We define ourselves as sexual in relation to others and the world around us; we become identified with our sexual desires in ways that unfold across history, between contexts, and among loose and strong social groupings. Some historians who have examined sexuality in classical societies suggest that social status as well as gender usually determined sexual activity in ancient Greece and Rome: free male citizens were the sexually active (insertive) partners while women, children, younger men and slaves took a passive (receptive) role. In successive centuries, Christian churches came to define the boundaries of sexual acceptability, and once again gender was not the main marker of distinction: procreative sex was considered acceptable and non-procreative sex was sinful. This was reflected in New Zealand law: during the nineteenth century, two sets of unprocreative acts, anal sex between men and sex between men and animals, were both described using the same legal term: buggery. Both were punished by the state; men were sent to prison if convicted.

The late nineteenth century saw an important transition. This is often understood as a time of sexual repression, but French philosopher Michel Foucault (1990) famously suggested that, in fact, this period saw much discussion of sexuality. The medical literature, advertising and popular press were full of chatter about sex. Paradoxically, people talked about, enjoyed and flirted with desire, even in this time of strong social regulation (Phillips & Reay, 2000, p. 12). New Zealand's bookshops sold books and pamphlets describing sexual crimes, and schoolboys crowded around to read and discuss them (Brickell, 2008). Sexology, a curious combination of medicine, morality, philosophy and psychiatry, played an important role in reconfiguring sexual identity. Such terms as *heterosexuality*, *homosexuality* (sometimes called 'antipathic sexual instinct' and later 'sexual inversion') and *bisexuality* emerged, along with *sadism*, *masochism* and *fetishism*. Doctors in Aotearoa New Zealand – including Truby King, who was superintendent of the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum near Dunedin and the founder of the Plunket Society – read the international medical literature and wrote about sexuality for a public audience. Sexologists' distinctions between 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexuality offered a new take on old distinctions between acceptable and 'sinful' behaviour, and people's sexual desires began to be moulded into identities. Sociologist Michael Stevens puts it this way: 'Human sexual behaviour became subject to the great cataloguing, rationalizing project of modernity, with attempts to fit all sorts of aspects of human life and its varieties into neat organizational categories' (Stevens, 2007, p. 217).

The idea that most humans came in one of three forms – homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual – coalesced during the twentieth century as the sexologists' classifications took hold. Local newspapers used these terms during the early decades of the century, and in 1942 a New Zealand Young Women's Christian Association guidebook urged youth leaders to ensure that girls 'become heterosexual' (Brickell, 2017, p. 227). Occasionally, though, the hard-and-fast distinctions gave way to something a little more flexible. During the 1940s, American sexologist Alfred Kinsey suggested that humans could not be divided into 'sheep and goats', as he put it, and his 'Kinsey scale' placed them on a spectrum from zero (which denoted an individual's exclusively heterosexual behaviour) to six (a completely homosexual orientation). This sliding scale proved controversial during the middle of the twentieth century. But what is happening in the twenty-first century? Are diverse sexualities – and sexual labels – proliferating once more?

There is little in the way of statistical evidence for Aotearoa New Zealand, but a 2015 survey conducted by British market research firm YouGov produced some interesting results. A total of 49% of the 18-to 24-year-olds who took part in the survey defined themselves as something other than totally heterosexual. The researchers used Kinsey's scale in order to organise the survey data. Of the 49% who did not regard themselves as completely heterosexual – either in terms of their sexual experience up until that point or what they expected might happen in the future – only 6% identified as totally homosexual (that is, a Kinsey six) with the remaining 43% placing themselves along Kinsey's scale between points one and five (YouGov, 2015). A marked generational difference became apparent when the researchers further analysed their data. These results for the 18–24 age group sharply contrasted with the statistics for the general population of the United Kingdom: 72% of the total population defined themselves as exclusively heterosexual and

28% fell somewhere else on the Kinsey scale.

What is happening here? Is sexual attraction changing as society changes? Perhaps. Are older adults less willing to admit, or less able to remember, the fluid desires of their own youth? Possibly. Whatever the case, there can be no doubt that the twenty-first century has seen the rise of a rich new terminology with which to label human sexuality. Avid blog-readers and followers of popular culture will notice a range of descriptors that were nowhere to be seen during the later years of the twentieth century. *Pansexuality* (and the associated identity label *pansexual*) refers to people attracted to members of all gender categories: women, men, transgender and genderqueer. The total inclusivity of pansexuality renders it somewhat broader in its scope than bisexuality. The term *heteroflexibility* is used by – or of – those who regard their sexual interests as primarily or predominantly oriented towards those of the opposite sex but who may, on occasion, engage in same-sex activity. This may be pre-planned or not: as we write this book, the most popular definition of heteroflexibility on urbandictionary.com is 'I'm straight but shit happens', and the example reads: 'Dude, it's not my fault. I was drunk and it was fun. What can I say? I'm heteroflexible.' This term – along with the option 'dunno' – makes an appearance on a poster circulated by UniQ, the queer support organisation at University of Otago, which offers support to students who identify across the spectrum of sexual identities.

The rider 'shit happens' suggests that ideas about sexual fluidity sometimes clash with closely held identities. Gender studies scholar Jane Ward has made two observations here. Firstly, she contends that occasional, context-specific same-sex activity – especially between men – can bolster heterosexuality instead of creating space for new sexual identities. Some of those who cross boundaries, especially in such settings as university hostels, prisons, sports teams, or under the influence of alcohol, regard such transgressions as an incidental departure from an essential heterosexuality. In a context where many still believe that people are 'really' straight or gay, we can 'let "shit happen" without fear that we have somehow hidden or misrecognized or damaged our true sexual orientation'. In this context, lapses can be understood as exceptional, 'not bound to the same identarian consequences experienced as true homosexuals' (Ward, 2015, p. 41). An apparent fluidity, then, exists alongside a dominant form of heterosexuality and does not necessarily challenge the marginalisation of homosexuality. While heteroflexibility may signal a political allegiance with LGBT activism, it might just as easily be accompanied by 'shame, secrecy, homophobia and a disavowal of queerness' (Ward, 2015, p. 20).

Secondly, Ward shows that sexual acts, categories and the relationships between them can be complex. An occasional movement across sexual boundaries, she adds, is not new in itself. Not only did Kinsey observe this, but the late-nineteenth-century sexologists also told of men and women who became bored with their heterosexual lives and turned to members of their own sex for a bit of variety. The case remains, as Jeffrey Weeks writes, that people's sexuality does not always fit into the 'neat categories and moral systems we build to contain them' – either now or in the past (Weeks, 2000, p. 173). It becomes clear that sexual behaviour and identity do not necessarily line up: the enjoyment of sex between women, for instance, provides no guarantee that those involved will identify as lesbian, or even bisexual or heteroflexible. This general principle holds in Aotearoa New Zealand, just as it does internationally.

The spaces in between heterosexuality and homosexuality are not the whole story. Until recently, those who had little or no interest in sexual activity did not define themselves, just like most of those who engaged in same-sex and opposite-sex practices before the late nineteenth century. The label 'asexuality' became increasingly visible, and available as an identity, during the early years of the twenty-first century. Some people who identify as asexual are completely disinterested in sexual activity, but others enjoy it only in certain circumstances ('grey-A' or 'demisexual' asexuals). Asexual people can craft complex, context-specific identities: a demi-sapiocentred-heteroromantic person might be 'sometimes-sexual-but-only-when-I-have-an-intellectual-and-emotional-connection-to-a-person-of-the-opposite-sex' (Scott, Dawson, & Newmahr, 2015, p. 216). A demisexual person only experiences sexual attraction if they have bonded with their partner emotionally, while the term *heteroromantic* refers to an attraction to the opposite sex in an emotional sense but not a sexual one. Once again, the confluence of social context, individual experience and sexual identities gives intimacy its particular character.

Study questions

1. Why do you think the twenty-first century is seeing a proliferation of sexual categories?
2. What do you think is the influence of international media (including social media) on the ways New Zealanders understand their sexual identities?
3. To what extent does the concept of asexuality help us to re-think what we 'know' about sexuality more broadly?
4. Do you think sexuality is coming to be understood as more fluid than it once was?

5. Might heteroflexibility become a politicised sexual identity?

The influence of technology

Alongside political shifts, sociologists examine the impact of technological transformations. The prevalence of the online world has changed sexual experience and practice to a considerable degree. Not only is the internet our portal into modern life – and a powerful connection between local contexts and global trends – but many of us now carry it around in our pocket: the smartphone is both a constant enabler and an electronic leash that attaches cyberworlds to our bodies. It offers us a continual flow of sexual representations and knowledges; the internet opens up new possibilities for finding information and developing our sexual selves. Many teenagers, for instance, learn about sexual practice and culture online. New technologies contain as well as enable particular kinds of sexual interaction. Kane Race explains that smartphones with hook-up apps like Grindr and Tinder constitute 'a relatively new infrastructure of the social encounter, by which I mean to draw attention to their material specificity and also make the point that they mediate the sexual encounter in new ways; making certain activities, relations, and practices possible while obviating others' (Race, 2015, p. 254). The 'architecture' of phone hook-up apps tends to channel self-expression in particular ways. Images and text give off certain impressions and assist in (or mitigate against) social success, while every participant negotiates the social limitations of physical attractiveness and sexual appeal. What might look like a realm of freedom may not, in fact, feel that way to everybody.

Sexuality and inequality

Sexual harassment

Inequality continues to structure social assumptions and sexual experience. Sexual harassment and cyberstalking have caused concern among scholars and activists working in the area of cybersexuality. Unwanted sexual solicitation and persistent sexual remarks are made in chat-rooms, by instant message, or by email; some harassers abuse their victims as soon as they appear online, or send pornographic pictures and spam. This behaviour is highly gendered: the majority of cyberstalkers are men, the victims women, and cyberharassment is often minimised as 'harmless teasing' or dismissed as an individual matter rather than an increasingly institutionalised feature of online life. 'Revenge porn' offers a similar example. This involves uploading and distributing explicit images of a previous (usually female) partner without their agreement, for the purpose of humiliating that person online (Jane, 2016).

‘Slutwalk’ provided an opportunity to challenge prevailing ideas about women’s sexuality – and gender inequality more broadly. This event took place in Wellington in 2011. SOURCE: DYLAN OWEN

Double standards

Within the realm of sexual relations, a ‘sexual double standard’ allows men more sex than women without being subject to the kinds of social judgement made of their female counterparts. The sexual double standard is firmly entrenched in the different value judgements made of the same behaviour in men and women – that is, sexual permissiveness on the part of men is more tolerantly accepted than similar permissiveness on the part of women. This is reflected in the fact that there are far more words for women who have sex outside what is deemed culturally acceptable (e.g. ‘slut’, ‘whore’, ‘tramp’) than are available to describe men who are sexually promiscuous. There is really no masculine equivalent of ‘slut’. Instead, men might be considered to be ‘studs’ – an appellation that does not have the negative connotations associated with ‘slut’. In fact, to be a ‘stud’ is positively valued by many men and women. In this view, sexuality – and a seeking of sexual pleasure, especially outside of an established relationship – is a male prerogative. Such beliefs about female

sexual passivity can sometimes make it difficult for women to negotiate safe and pleasurable sex in relationships with men: the ability to demand safe and good sex is compromised in cases where men's demands are prioritised.

Control at work

Sexual harassment at work is one means by which men seek to maintain their control of the work space. Harassment of women workers is often considered commonplace and hardly noteworthy. It occurs in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways, and is often passed off as a 'bit of good fun'. The ability of men to define sexual harassment in this way testifies to their power to assert the authority of a particular definition of male and female sexuality. There is also an assumption that women's bodies are available to be looked at, commented on and touched in a way that men's bodies are not. Sexual harassment is often used in occupations that are traditionally male. It is one way to marginalise and sometimes eliminate women from these jobs.

Sexual violence

While sexual harassment is still often viewed as a minor exercise of male power, rape is increasingly recognised as unacceptable. One useful way to understand male violence is to examine the social meanings and attributes of masculinity. The fact that it is overwhelmingly men who rape women and other men, and not vice versa, can be related to the way in which masculinity, and not femininity, is associated with power, dominance and toughness. Moreover, dominant male sexuality is constructed around themes of conquest, control and mastery of the situation (Phipps, 2015). Some feminists have argued that fear of rape affects all women. Many know their attackers but others do not, and this fear contributes to the limitation of women's access to certain, usually public, spaces and what they do in these spaces. If a woman is raped at 3 a.m. on her way home from a nightclub, it might be suggested that she was foolish to be out so late, even more so if she had been drinking. Rarely is it argued that men should be extremely conscious about how vulnerable they are when out in public. Fear of rape is a powerful and effective means to get women to curtail their activities. There is no equivalent for men even though they stand a much higher statistical risk of violence against the person if out drinking late at night.

Pressure experienced by men

The discussion so far has focused on the sexual regulation of women and the general argument that the social structures underpinning heterosexuality benefit men more than they do women. However, there are costs for some men in having to achieve some of the standards of performance and of being in charge that are associated with particular versions of masculine sexuality. Being a 'stud' may involve the repression of other desires (e.g. the desire to be passive, to be held, to be the 'beloved') in order for men to meet the expected

standards of masculinity. The pressure to perform at work, in the bedroom, on the sports field or on the political stage are also seen as sources of debilitating stress-related illnesses and have been linked to men's shorter life span in Western societies. The development of easily available performance-enhancing drugs such as Viagra perpetuates the pressure. While these costs may be apparent for some men, they are generally less profound and debilitating than women's experience of the exercise of male power. The gender regimes that Walby writes about, and that we examined earlier in the chapter, can have a significant effect on sexuality, and structures of gender inequality influence intimate life as well as public worlds.

Conclusion

The sociological analysis that we have offered in this chapter identifies some of the many ways in which gender informs all aspects of social life, from work to food, clothing, body-building and gendered violence. We suggest that both gender and sexuality should be thought of as 'social constructions' rather than elements of 'nature' as such. The differences that are commonly held to exist between men and women, and between people of different sexualities, should be understood mainly as creations of culture and power rather than unmediated facts of biology. For instance, although our bodies offer one important means through which we experience sexuality, we become sexual subjects not by expressing an already meaningful, sexualised inner impulse. Instead, we assemble sexual meanings during our interactions with other members of society. Precisely how we do this depends on the meanings given to feelings and situations by ourselves and others; the resources through which these might form into scripts; and our wider social relationships.

The meaning of gender and sexuality changes over time. As individuals and members of groups, our own choices are constrained by a long and complicated history. Gender and sexuality, as social relations, also enter into all other social relations; they profoundly affect what happens in families, cities, workplaces, online and elsewhere. So in every sociological issue, including those covered by the chapters to come, gender and sexuality form a core dimension to consider and reflect upon.

Study questions

7.1 Why do sociologists argue that sexuality is socially constructed? Provide examples of this social construction.

7.2 How does gender inequality shape sexuality?

7.3 How does technology affect the ways in which we experience gender and/or sexuality in our own lives?

7.4 Gender assignment: Make a list of five characteristics associated with being masculine, then five associated with being feminine. Looking at this list, identify which characteristics are forms of behaviour and which are physical attributes associated with either the male or the female body. Remember to ask yourself – is it

possible for a person of the opposite sex to behave in this way or accomplish that physical task? This exercise is a good way to separate the physical potentials of male and female bodies from the socially ascribed ways of behaving.

FURTHER READING

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