

Sociology 327A Reading Guide (v. 2)

Lorber. "The Social Construction of Gender." (D, chapter 9)

This excerpt is from Judith Lorber's book *Paradoxes of Gender* (1994).

1. According to Lorber, "Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water" (p. 96) Do you find it easy to answer the question, What is it like to be the sex you are? Can you answer it without referring to the other sex?
2. What does Lorber mean by "doing gender"? How have you done gender this week?
3. What does Lorber mean when she claims that gender is an "institution"? What are the three aspects of gender as an institution?
4. Lorber claims that "man" is "the touchstone, the normal, the dominant" and "woman" is "different, deviant, and subordinate" (p. 99). What would a society be like if "woman" was the normal sex and "man" was the different sex?
5. Lorber claims that what men do valued and considered difficult, while what women do is less valued and considered less difficult? Do you agree? Can you think of examples?
6. According to Lorber, "the continuing purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be subordinate to men as a group." Do you agree? Is it possible to have gender without gender subordination?
7. Lorber ends with a very strong constructionist statement: "There is no core or bedrock in human nature below these endlessly looping processes of the social production of sex and gender, self and other, identity and psyche, each of which is a 'complex cultural construction'" (p. 101). Do you think there is a "human nature"? Do men and women have different "human natures"?

Stewart. "Explanations of Differences Between Females and Males" (CP 1-5)

This excerpt is from Stewart's book *Living and Acting Together*, in which he explains how people are able to work together even though we are naturally unpredictable and untrustworthy.

1. What are the three trends that Stewart critiques and rejects?
2. What is the alternative Stewart suggests? How does he conceptualize biology, society and culture? What is your reaction to his alternative? Do you have any sense that you are performing your sex this way? Can you think of sex-specific examples for men and women?
3. Stewart declines to give a full critique of biological explanations for sex differences, claiming that "most alert undergraduates could produce" "three or four" "nonbiological explanations for the same data" "in an hour." Can you produce any?
4. What is Stewart's answer to the question of why males use their superior force to limit the behavioral ranges of females? Do you agree?
5. Although Stewart is critical of male-domination, does his analysis suggest any advantages of this social arrangement? Are there advantages of "traditional" unequal marriage?

6. Stewart claims that “young, highly educated couples” are now attempting to live together as equals, but they “repeatedly end in separation or the dominance of one partner by the other.” Do you plan on attempting to live “as equals” with your current or future partner? If so, how do you intend to do so? Is Stewart’s pessimism called for?

7. Do you agree with Stewart that belief in determinism is part of the problem for the continued existence of male domination? Do you believe we can create alternates for men and women living together?

Roy. “Gender.” Part 1 (CP 7-18)

This selection, which you are reading over three course days, is the chapter on gender from Roy’s book *Making Societies*, one of the best available overviews of a social constructionist approach to understanding society.

1. Do you agree with Roy’s claim that biological differences between men and women are “irrelevant for most aspects of social life”?

2. What relevance does the existence of categories like berdache and Hijra in non-Western cultures and other examples of cross-cultural gender variation have for understanding the social construction of sex and gender?

3. Is it true that the general American culture makes no distinction between sex and gender? Is it true that general American culture treats gender as prescriptive, not just descriptive?

4. What is the difference between the one-sex and two-sex models of the human body? Has the adoption of the two-sex model been helpful or harmful in formulating gender arrangements? Can you propose a better model?

5. According to Roy, what were gender relations like “before femininity”? What was the process by which femininity was established? What role did the creation of public and private spheres play in its creation? What role did capitalism play? Voting?

Roy. “Gender.” Part 2 (CP 18-27)

1. Through what two processes did the growth of the European state contribute to the construction of masculinity?

2. What are the three stages that American masculinity has gone through since the American Revolution? Which of these meanings of masculinity do you think is most beneficial?

3. Roy describes a 19th Century “crisis of masculinity.” What caused this crisis? How did society respond to this crisis to create a new meaning of masculinity? What new institutions played a role in this response?

4. According to Roy, what was manhood contrasted with before the crisis of masculinity? What is it contrasted with now? Is this change a negative or positive development?

5. How did the crisis of masculinity create a new type of person, the “homosexual”? What relevance does cross-cultural variation in homosexuality have for understanding its social construction?

6. Roy sets out in this chapter to make the case that gender is indeed historically constructed. Are you convinced? What problems do you have with his argument?

Kimmel. “Masculinity as Homophobia.” (D, chapter 10)

1. What does Kimmel mean by his claim that “the great secret of American manhood” is that “we are afraid of other men”? Do you agree?
2. According to Kimmel, “The fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood.” What does he claim are the affects of this fear? How has this fear affected you?
3. What does Kimmel mean when he says “Homophobia and sexism go hand in hand” (p. 105)?
4. What is Kimmel’s answer to the “paradox in which men have virtually all the power and yet do not feel powerful” (p. 106)? What is his solution?
5. Kimmel paints a bleak picture of American masculinity. Do you agree with it? Are there positive features of American masculinity?

Saltzberg & Chrisler. “Beauty is the Beast.” (D, chapter 18)

1. What are some of the costs of achieving female beauty that Saltzberg and Chrisler describe?
2. Based on the reading, do you think women have made any progress regarding beauty standards over the past 500 years?
3. What are some ways that beauty ideals are connected to race and class?
4. In the final paragraph, what do Saltzberg and Chrisler suggest is a good reason to decorate the body?
5. After reading this article, do you agree that “beauty is the beast”? What can be done to less the harmful effects of our beauty standards?

Harris. “If the Shoe Won’t Fit, Fix the Foot?” (hand-out)

1. Is this article surprising? How do the foot surgeries described in the article compare to more common nose jobs and breast enhancement surgeries?

Roy. “Gender.” Part 3 (CP 27-33)

1. What are some of the intersections between gender and time? How do these result in men and women tending to have different social experience of time?
2. What are some of the intersections between gender and space?
3. What are some of the intersections between gender and race? Why would the “ideal of white womanhood” have been impossible without racial inequality? What is the connection between racial inequality and today’s “new woman”?
4. Roy argues that our “rigid and incessant” system of gender socialization demonstrates that gender is not natural. Is this a convincing argument?
5. Roy claims that people in our culture have become very self-conscious about gender. Do you agree? Is this a positive or negative development?

Staples. “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power.” (D, chapter 20)

1. How does this reading illustrate the intersection between gender inequality and racial inequality?
2. What are possible effects on someone who is treated as Staples is?
3. What are some of the strategies Staples used to be perceived as not dangerous?
4. Are there other types of people who alter public space, positively or negatively?
5. How does this story illustrate how racism is built into social structure (rather than just on personal racism)?

Collins. “Color, Hair Texture and Standards of Beauty.” (D, chapter 12)

1. How does this reading illustrate the intersection between gender inequality and racial inequality?
2. What other effects do white beauty standards have on non-white women? Are there advantages to being non-white vis-à-vis white beauty standards?
3. How does the standard for male attractiveness intersect with race?

McIntosh. “White Privilege and Male Privilege.” (D, chapter 7)

1. Why do people who can accept that others face discrimination have trouble thinking about their privilege?
2. After reading the article, do you see examples of privilege in your life? Is the concept of “privilege” a useful one?
3. What is the difference between the concepts of “unearned entitlement,” “unearned advantage,” and “conferred dominance?”
4. Is it true that people with privilege have been taught not to recognize it? How does this happen?
5. McIntosh claims that privilege isn’t good for the development of people who have it. Why might this be?
6. What should people with privilege do about it?
7. McIntosh focuses on men and whites as privileged. Stewart suggests that biology, society and culture are resources for everyone. Are there cultural resources that women can draw upon but not men? Resources for non-white racial groups?

Lucal. “What It Means to Be Gendered Me.” (CP 35-47)

1. What is Lorber’s argument about how “gender bending” may serve to preserve and perpetuate gender categories?
2. How do Lucal’s experiences support Lorber’s argument? How do they contradict it?

3. According to Lucal, what is the “default reading of a nonfeminine person”? Do you agree? How does this “default reading” affect the way people do gender?
4. According to Lucal, because gender is a social construction, there may be differences among one’s sex, one’s gender self-identity, one’s presented identity, and one’s perceived identity. What does each of these mean? Where does Lucal fit into each of these categories?
5. What are examples of “issues of identity” and “issues of interaction” Lucal experiences because of her gender display?
6. Why do Lorber and Lucal claim that in our society we can’t not “do gender”? Do you agree?
7. What does Lucal suggest may be necessary for people to carry out “gender rebellion” more effectively than she has? Do you think this would contribute to “the demise of gender as we know it”?
8. What does Lucal claim about the connection between gender and patriarchy? What do you think gender would look like without patriarchy?
9. What is your participation in the gender system? Do you follow the “path of least resistance”? Do you engage in “gender rebellion”?
10. Have you ever interacted with someone without knowing their gender? How did you feel about it? Does this article illuminate your experience?

Davis. “Gaining a Daughter: A Father’s Transgendered Tale” (CP 49-54)

1. Is Davis’ son attempting the sort of “gender rebellion” described by Lucal? Does he appear to be more successful than Lucal is in challenging our constructions of gender?
2. According to the passage from Feinberg that Davis’ son reads to his parents, what are the two tasks presented by women’s and trans liberation? Are these worthwhile goals? Does Davis’ son’s actions further these goals?
3. What would you do if your son took actions similar to Davis’?
4. Davis’ son claims that wearing a dress is a great way to meet women. How would this go over at Iowa State?
5. What are the four waves of gender activism?

Coventry. “The Tyranny of the Esthetic.” (D, chapter 24)

1. What does Coventry mean when she claims that operations on children with atypical genitals are “cosmetic” surgery for “esthetic” reasons. Do you agree with her argument? What about her comparison of these procedures with female genital mutilation?
2. How did Coventry’s condition differ from Angela Moreno’s? Do you agree with Coventry that both surgeries were cosmetic?
3. The cases Coventry describes all involve multiple deceptions. Why do you think these cases produce so much dishonesty?
4. What role to these operations play in the social construction of sex and gender?

5. Is there a need for the surgeries Coventry describes? What advice would you give parents who had a child with atypical genitals?

Colapinto. “The True Story of John/Joan.” (CP 55-78)

This article, which was published in *Rolling Stone*, was expanded into an excellent book, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised a Girl* (2001, Perennial). The subject of the book, whose real name is David Reimer, committed suicide May 4, 2004. He was 38 years old. Colapinto wrote his obituary for *Slate* (www.slate.com/id/2101678).

1. Colapinto quotes a psychiatrist whose prediction of John Thiessen’s future after the botched circumcision is “he will have to recognize that he is incomplete, physically defective, and that he must live apart.” Did the prediction prove accurate? What does this prediction tell us about the role of psychiatrists in constructing sex and gender?

2. What lessons do the career of John Money have for social and behavioral scientists?

3. What does the story of John/Joan tell us about the social construction of sex and gender? Do you agree with the conclusion that “while rearing may play a role in helping to shape a person’s sexual identity, nature is by far the stronger of the two forces so much so that even the concerted 12-year efforts of parents, psychologists, psychiatrists, surgeons and hormone specialists could not override it.”

4. By what possible mechanism could John/Joan’s chromosomal or hormonal sex lead to her liking boy’s toys and wanting to be a garbage man? How could she have known she was a boy?

5. Do you support Cheryl Chase’s goal of ending “the idea that it’s monstrous to be different”? How can this be accomplished?

6. What explains the medical establishment’s rejection of the demands of intersexual activists? What does this say about doctors’ role in the social construction of sex and gender?

7. The article ends with John Thiessen defining manhood as being a caretaker for his family. Where does this definition of manhood fit into the article’s other arguments about the origin of gender?

Thorne. “Girls and Boys Together... But Mostly Apart.” (D, chapter 45)

1. What is the “two worlds” model and why is Thorne critical of it?

2. What is borderwork? What is its significance for understanding the social organization of gender in schools?

3. What are the four types of borderwork Thorne describes? Can you think of other types of borderwork from your own school experience?

4. What are the other three types of cross-sex interaction that Thorne describes? Under what conditions are relaxed cross-sex interactions possible?

Messner. “Boyhood, Organized Sports, and the Construction of Masculinities.” (D, chapter 11)

1. How did the men in Messner’s study get involved in sports?
2. Why are organized sports an attractive context for boys to develop attachments to others? What are the drawbacks of this context for developing self-worth?
3. How do race and social class shape boy’s involvement with sports?
4. What it mean that sports is both a gendered institution and a gendering institution?
5. How does Messner’s account illuminate your experience in athletics? What might an analysis of the connection between sports and femininity find?

Pollack. “Inside the World of Boys.” (D, chapter 27)

1. What is the Boy Code? Do you agree that it is still operating?
2. What purpose does wearing a “mask of masculine bravado” have for boys? What harm can it cause them?
3. Messner claims that the Boy Code affects “the behavior of all of us—the boys themselves, their parents, their teachers, and society as a whole.” Do you agree? How has the Boy Code affected you?