The Social Construction of Sex/
Introduction to Socialization

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Sex vs. gender

✓ Sex: biological maleness or femaleness
✓ Gender: psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness
✓ The two sexes are assumed to be
  • Universal (found in all cultures throughout history)
  • Exhaustive (there’s no third sex)
  • Mutually exclusive (a person can’t be both)
✓ Recently, sociologists have been questioning the taken-for-grantedness of the categories “man” and “woman”
  • Do the two sexes belong to the physical world or the world of meaning?
✓ Two important pieces of evidence:
  • Cross-cultural variation
  • Existence of intersexuals (and our reaction to them)
Social construction of sex

✓ Our belief in two sexes is not universal (pp. 117, 128-9)
✓ A brief history of the sexes in Western culture
  ✓ Pre-18th Century: One sex (females are inferior version)
  ✓ 18th Century: two sexes
  ✓ 1960s: Surgical assigning sex becomes norm (“culture demands it”)
  ✓ 1990s: Hermaphrodite liberation movement (ISNA)
✓ Intersexuals illustrate constructedness of two-sex model
  ✓ Cheryl Case illustrates how sex (not just gender) is a social construct
  ✓ But case of “As Nature Made Him” points to some role for biology
People as consequence of society

Process through which one learns how to act according to the rules and expectations of a particular culture (p. 135)
Three perspectives on socialization

- **Structural-functionalism**: Socialization perpetuates society by making needs of individuals match needs of society.

- **Conflict perspective**: Socialization reproduces inequality
  - “Haves” & “have-nots” are socialized differently
  - “Haves” control agents of socialization

- **Symbolic interactionism**: Socialization involves learning shared meanings that make social action possible
  - Role-taking: ability to see oneself from the perspective of others and to use that perspective in formulating one’s own behavior (p. 139)
  - Looking-glass self: sense of who we are that is defined by incorporating the reflected appraisals of others (p. 138)
  - Howard Becker’s “Becoming a Marihuana User”

Becoming a Marihuana User

✓ Research method: participant observation, 50 interviews
✓ Premise: Any behavior (e.g., marihuana use for pleasure) requires acquiring particular meanings through social experiences
✓ Three stages in developing meaning of marihuana as drug used for pleasure

Source: Becker (1953). “Becoming a Marihuana User.” AJS.