Social Construction of Sex/ 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. 112-114)
- 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. 129)

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. 132)
  - Looking-glass self: sense of who we are that is defined by incorporating the reflected appraisals of others (p. 131)
  - Howard Becker's "Becoming a Marihuana User"