The Social Construction of Sex/
Introduction to Socialization

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

- Sex: biological maleness or femaleness
- Gender: psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness
- A central part of our gender ideology is the sexual dichotomy
  - Sexual dichotomy: Belief that two biological sex categories, male and female, are permanent, universal, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive (p. 128)
- 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?
- Three important pieces of evidence:
  - Cross-cultural variation
  - Transsexuals: People who identify with a different sex and sometimes undergo hormone treatment and surgery to change their sex (p. 128)
  - Intersexuals: Individuals in whom sexual differentiation is either incomplete or ambiguous (p. 128)
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 Bruce/Brenda/David Reimer points to important 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).
  - Generalized other: Perspective of the larger society and its constituent values (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”

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.
Stage one

✓ Learning to smoke drug so that it will have a real effect

I was smoking like I did an ordinary cigarette. He said, “No, don’t do it like that.” He said, “Suck it you know, draw in and hold it in your lungs till you… for a period of time.”
I said, “Is there any limit of time to hold it?”
He said, “No, just till you feel that you want to let it out, let it out.” So I did that three or four times.

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

✓ Learning to recognize the effects and connect them to drug use

They were just laughing the hell out of me because like I was eating so much…. Sometimes I’d be looking at them, you know, wondering why they’re laughing, you know, not knowing what I was doing. … I come back, “Hey, man, what’s happening?” Like, you know, like I’d ask, “What’s happening?” and all of a sudden I feel weird, you know. “Man, you’re on you know. You’re on pot.” I said, “No, am I?” Like I don’t know what’s happening.

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

✔ Learning to enjoy the sensations that are perceived

Well, they get pretty high sometimes. The average person isn’t ready for that, and it is a little frightening to them sometimes… and they don’t know what’s happening to them…. You have to like reassure them, explain to them that they’re not really flipping or anything, that they’re gonna be all right. You have to just talk them out of being afraid…. And come on with your own story, you know: “The same thing happened to me. You’ll get to like that after awhile.” Keep coming on like that; pretty soon you talk them out of being scared.

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

✔ Agents of drug socialization matter
  • Drug effects vary from culture to culture

✔ Treatment involves changing drug meanings
  • Resocialization: process of learning new values, norms, and expectations when an adult leaves an old role and enters a new one (p. 141)
  • Total institution: place where individuals are cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period and where together they lead an enclosed, formally administered life (p. 141)