2 THEORIES OF GENDER/SEX

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

2.1 Describe how biological theories explain gender, and use concepts of biological determinism and stereotype threat to critique biological theories.

2.2 Describe how psychological theories (e.g., psychoanalytic and social learning theories) explain gender.

2.3 Describe the four shared assumptions of critical/cultural theories and how multicultural/global theories and queer theories explain gender.

2.4 Critique theories of gender using the four standards to assess theories (intersectional, communication focused, context-specific, power conscious).

Although people often think of theory as an abstraction far removed from day-to-day living, theories about gender/sex constantly circulate through public and interpersonal discussions. For example, in April 2011, controversy erupted about an e-mail advertisement showing J. Crew president and creative director Jenna Lyons with her son, whose toenails are painted neon pink. Although the advertisement is over a decade old, the reactions to it speak to continuing concerns about social and cultural influences on gender. The advertisement about how to be stylish during weekends includes a quotation indicating how happy Jenna is to have a son whose favorite color is pink (see Figure 2.1).

Media reactions appeared on all the major news networks and across the Internet. Responses ranged from Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* calling the controversy "Toemageddon" to the following:

> "It may be fun and games now, Jenna, but at least put some money aside for psychotherapy for the kid—and maybe a little for others who'll be affected by your 'innocent' pleasure. . . . [A]lmost nothing is now honored as real and true. . . . [T]his includes the truth that . . . it is unwise to encourage little boys to playact like little girls. . . . [E]ncouraging the choosing of gender identity, rather than suggesting our children become comfortable with the ones that they got at birth, can throw our species into real psychological turmoil."
>
> Dr. Keith Ablow, psychiatrist and Fox News contributor

FIGURE 2.1 ■ April 2011 J. Crew E-mail Advertisement

The J. Crew ad is a "marketing piece that features blatant propaganda celebrating transgendered[*sic*] children."

Erin R. Brown, Culture and Media Institute

"I can say with 100 percent certainty that a mother painting her children's toe nails pink does not cause transgenderism or homosexuality."

Dr. Jack Drescher, psychiatrist (as cited in S. D. James, 2011)

Embedded within these statements are theories about where a person's gender/sex comes from and whether it is acceptable for a person (even a 5-year-old) to engage in actions that violate the norms of gender socially assigned to the person's sex. Dr. Ablow's declaration that psychotherapy will be needed is premised on a theory that children's early experiences may be suppressed in their unconscious and that this particular experience will cause harm requiring therapy. Ablow also asserted that the natural "truth" about one's gender identity is "got at birth," meaning it is biologically determined, and it is harmful for parents to manipulate it through social interactions. In contrast, Dr. Drescher argued that a single gender nonnormative action will not cause a change in gender/sex or sexual orientation. To completely understand the controversy, one has to be aware of the different underlying theories at work that explain formative influences on gender/sex.

In this chapter, we examine theories that explain where gender comes from. People, whether researchers, media figures, or folks like you, generally identify one of three influences as central: biological, psychological, or cultural. **Biological theories** define gender

as biologically tied to sex and distinctive hormones, brain structures, and genitalia typify each sex. **Psychological theories** emphasize the internal psychological processes triggered by early childhood experiences with one's body and interpersonal interactions with primary caregivers. **Critical/cultural theories** emphasize the role broad cultural institutions and norms play in the construction and maintenance of gender.

Any research done on gender in communication is premised on some set of theoretical assumptions. Theories guide what questions researchers ask. For example, research that begins with a question about *how* men and women communicate differently makes sense only if one believes that men and women's communication is different and determined by biology. If you resist the biological approach where sex is a key variable, then you might instead ask: *Do* men and women communicate differently? or How do *diverse people* communicate? In many ways, research that begins with the assumption that differences exist reinforces those very differences by not asking questions about similarities or about whether the differences might be a result of some other variable, such as social power, rather than sex.

In this chapter, we review biological, psychological, and critical/cultural theories of gender/sex. By the end of the chapter, whenever you hear a statement about gender/sex in communication or read research about it, you should be able to identify the theoretical assumptions supporting that statement.

BIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Biological theories of gender/sex show up everywhere, including in popular culture. For example, in 2020 when *The Queen's Gambit* became Netflix's most-viewed limited scripted series up to that date, it generated discussion about women in chess and reminded people of real-life chess masters' dismissal of women players. In 2015, vice president of the world chess federation FIDE and grandmaster Nigel Short said, "Men are hardwired to be better chess players than women" (as cited in Ma, 2020). This statement has, at its core, a belief that biology determines sex and gender, that the brain—like a computer—is hard wired, and that the hard wiring is tied to sex. Short assumed biology explains why there has never been a female world champion, failing to recognize the underrepresentation of women among chess players, structural barriers like who gets invited to which tournaments (for example, women-only invitational tournaments exist and tend not to help one's rankings), or an environment hostile to women (Ma, 2020).

Research, theories, religious doctrine, and popular literature that describe the gender/sex binary as "hard-wired" and place an emphasis on differences between male and female brains rely on biological explanations for gender. Biological theories attribute *primary* causation to genetics, and the assumption of two "opposite" sexes leads to an emphasis on two "opposite" genders (Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Tavris, 1992). The reality is there is no scientific basis for the belief that there are differences between men's and women's brains.

Recent scientific research has made clear "human brains cannot be categorized into two distinct classes: male brain/female brain" (Joel et al., 2015). Researchers analyzed over 1,400 MRIs and found "extensive overlap between the distributions of females and males for all gray matter, white matter, and connections assessed" (Joel et al., 2015, p. 15468). In particular:

> Analyses of internal consistency reveal that brains with features that are consistently at one end of the "maleness-femaleness" continuum are rare. Rather,

most brains are comprised of unique "mosaics" of features, some more common in females compared with males, some more common in males compared with females, and some common in both females and males. . . . Our study demonstrates that, although there are sex/gender differences in the brain, human brains do not belong to one of two distinct categories: male brain/female brain. (Joel et al., 2015, p. 15468)

Much previous research only looks at one element of the brain. Although research that focuses on only one element might be interesting, it alone does not prove sex differences.

Most biological research focuses on two influences on sex: chromosomes (which in turn produce hormones and genitalia) and brains. As we review this research, you will note that it is far more complex, contradictory, and unsettled than the simplistic claim that sex hardwires people's gender in distinct ways.

Chromosomes (Hormones and Genitalia)

One determinant of the sex of a fetus is its chromosomes (usually XX for female and XY for male). We say *one* determinant because some people have sex chromosome combinations of XO, XXX, XXY, or XYY. The existence of intersex persons demonstrates there are more than two sexes. The existence of trans persons demonstrates chromosomes alone are not determinative of sex.

Males' and females' chromosomes are more alike than different. Males and females share 22 of 23 of the pairs of chromosomes in humans. Furthermore, a fetus's sex is undifferentiated through the 6th week of gestation; anatomically and hormonally all fetuses are alike (Carroll, 2005; Strong et al., 1999). The genes present in the chromosomes begin to induce gonadal (or reproductive gland) differences in about the 6th or 7th week, leading to hormonal and anatomical differences among the sexes.

Anatomical differences linked to the X and Y chromosomes have long been used to explain gender/sex identity. Artists, journalists, historians, and religious leaders have heralded the penis as an outward sign of men's virility and right to assert their strength over others. The virile penis has become an essential characteristic of masculinity. Communication studies scholar Diana Ivy (2011) suggested that the more obvious, external nature of males' sex organs makes the strength of it more overt than females' less overt sex organs: "The social interpretations of women's sexual organs identify them as reactors, receivers, followers, and beneficiaries of men's decisions" (p. 49).

Male and female genitalia are distinct, but what the penis (and clitoris) means is socially constructed. Power has been linked to the penis because of its visible size in comparison to the clitoris. But that size assessment is open to contest. Pulitzer Prize–winning science author Natalie Angier (1999) noted, "The clitoris is simply a bundle of nerves: 8,000 nerve fibers, to be precise. That's a higher concentration of nerve fibers than is found anywhere else on the body, including the fingertips, lips, and tongue, and it is twice the number in the penis" (pp. 63–64). So is a woman's clitoris smaller than a man's penis? In terms of external exposed tissue, yes. But regarding its function as a pleasure organ, is the clitoris smaller? Not if you measure size by the number of nerve endings. The meaning of sexual organs is socially constructed.

Regarding hormones, testosterone tends to occur in larger proportions in males, and estrogen tends to occur in larger proportions in females. However, both hormones appear in male and female bodies. Biology professor Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), after reviewing

a year of articles in major newspapers, noted that "despite the fact that both hormones seem to pop up in all types of bodies, producing all sorts of different effects, many reporters and researchers continue to consider estrogen the female hormone and testosterone the male hormone" (p. 179). Fausto-Sterling urged people to remember, when thinking about hormones, "social belief systems weave themselves into the daily practice of science in ways that are often invisible to the working scientist" (p. 194). The question is "How do hormones interact with *all* people's bodies?" Not "How do hormones determine sex?"

Testosterone appears to be related to aggression and risk taking (Archer, 2006; Hermans et al., 2008; McAndrew, 2009). Although many people think there is a simple relationship wherein testosterone induces violent and aggressive behavior, the reality is much more complicated. Research makes clear that situational factors strongly influence how testosterone affects behavior. In their book *Heroes, Rogues, and Lovers: Testosterone and Behavior*, social psychologists James Dabbs and Mary Dabbs (2001) reviewed over two decades of research indicating that in certain circumstances (usually those relating to competition for social dominance), testosterone tends to motivate rebellious, aggressive, delinquent, and violent behavior. Under other conditions (where a person is in a protective position like a firefighter), testosterone tends to motivate altruistic and prosocial heroic behaviors. In other words, the social situation influences testosterone's effects. There is no simple biological cause but a complex interplay of biology and culture. Quite simply, testosterone does not determine one's gender or one's behavior.

Not only may social circumstances influence how testosterone's influence is expressed, but social circumstances can affect one's level of testosterone. Scientists had long known that fatherhood tended to reduce testosterone in nonhuman species whose males care for young, and so they hypothesized that would happen in human males, too. In a longitudinal study that followed 624 men in the Philippines, researchers found that when single nonfathers became partnered fathers, they experienced a larger decline in testosterone compared to the modest declines that occurred in nonfathers, and those who spent the most time parenting had the lowest levels (Gettler et al., 2011).

Given the 2021 Olympics, testosterone has been in the news. In 2018, World Athletics established convoluted guidelines regarding testosterone for women athletes for only races between the 400- and 1500-meter lengths, but not the 400-meter hurdles. Why those races when research has only found a relationship between natural testosterone and performance in the hammer throw and pole vault? These are the races run by Caster Semenya, a two-time winner of Olympic gold medals and an intersex woman with naturally elevated testosterone levels.

With these new guidelines, if a woman's natural levels of testosterone exceeded the artificially established limits, they could not run in those races and instead had to run in shorter (e.g., 200 meters) or longer (5000 meters) races. No similar limit on naturally occurring testosterone exists for men. In the runup to the 2021 Olympics, when two runners from Namibia, Christine Mboma and Beatrice Masilingi, ran blazingly fast times, they were subjected to testing, which found they had naturally occurring levels of testosterone that exceeded the World Athletics' limits. They were faced with the choice: take medicines to artificially lower their testosterone levels or run in a different length race. The runners opted to run in their second-best events at the Olympics. The faulty belief that women should only have a specified amount of testosterone has resulted in unfair rules that have, thus far, only targeted women of color from the global south (Campbell,

2021). The artificiality of this rule makes clear that people attribute meaning to testosterone that is not biologically warranted.

Brains

Despite popular culture references to there being pink and blue brains, no scientific data supports this. In a comprehensive analysis of three decades of MRI and postmortem studies of brains, researchers found "The human brain is not 'sexually dimorphic,'" meaning there is not a difference between men and women's brains (Eliot et al., 2021). The only difference is one in size, with men's brains running around 11% larger than women's, but brain size is relative to body mass, and males tend to have more body mass than females. No findings support the idea that women and men's brains differ in terms of "verbal, spatial or emotion processing" (Eliot et al., 2021). Although the size may differ, the functioning does not. Any claim that men and women's brains differ should be discounted. Why?

First, much of the research that has found the difference between male and female brains is fatally flawed. Neuroscience professor Lise Eliot (2019) explained: "The history of sex-difference research is rife with innumeracy, misinterpretation, publication bias, weak statistical power, inadequate controls and worse" (p. 453). In their book that comprehensively reviews all neuroscience research, Gina Rippon (2020) identified the ways the myth of "the female brain" has grown. For the last 30 years, since the development of the MRI machine, some scientists claim to have found some difference, the story gets picked up by the mainstream media that declares there is now proof of sex differences, other scientists point out the errors in the original research, news media do not report on that, the original research fades away, and then some other new study identifies a difference. The result is that bad research that claims to identify differences keeps capturing public attention, when good research that makes clear no differences exist rarely gets attention or is published.

A massive review of neuroscience research published in 2021 makes this vividly clear. The review essay, published in the scientific journal *Neuroscience and Biobehavioural Reviews*, examined brain studies from the past 30 years. Of the published studies, virtually no differences were found between male and female brains. Given that published studies tended to be the ones that purport to find differences, the lack of difference is remarkable. Additionally, there is the problem of the *file drawer effect*. Studies that find no differences tend not to be published. Thus, people are falsely led to believe that differences exist and are more pronounced than they really are. This creates *neurosexism*: "the persistent belief based on skewed (or even openly biased) science that female brains are less developed, less spatially capable, less logical, etc." (Muzdakis, 2021).

Second, even if differences do exist, this does not mean they are biologically caused. Because of brain plasticity (the fact the brain changes depending on a person's experiences over a lifetime), little can be inferred from the identification of differences (Vidal, 2011). Psychologist Cordelia Fine (2010) explained that the idea that dominates the popular press of "brain development as a gene-directed process of adding new circuitry" is just plain wrong; the most recent research makes clear how "our brains . . . are changed by our behavior, our thinking, our social world" (pp. 176–177; see also Hyde, 2007). Differences are not caused by sex but are caused by experiences over a lifetime (Maguire et al., 2000).

The gendered world in which people live genders their brains. Quite simply, "The notion of fundamentally female and male brains or natures is a misconception. Brains and behavior are the product of the combined, continuous interactions of innumerable causal

influences, that include, but go well beyond, sex-linked factors" (Joel & Fine, 2018). Biology alone does not determine gender.

When researchers do not start from the assumption that the sexes differ and instead sort people based on gender, interesting results emerge. Researchers at the University of Iowa studied the relationship among sex, gender, and social cognition. Given studies found women are more adept than men at social perception and the interpretation of non-verbal social cues, the researchers wondered whether the brain might give some clue about why. They studied 30 men and 30 women matched for age and IQ. The researchers used a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan to measure gray matter volume and surface area of the ventral frontal cortex (VFC). However, instead of just comparing people based on sex (comparing males to females), they sought to compare people based on gender (as determined by the answers to the Personal Attributes Questionnaire, the PAQ, a scale of femininity and masculinity). They found "identification with more feminine traits on the PAQ correlated with greater SG [straight gyrus] gray matter volume and surface area. In addition, higher degrees of femininity correlated with better performance on the IPT [Interpersonal Perception Test]" (Wood et al., 2008, p. 534).

This begs the question: Why is the SG larger in adult women? The researchers did a second study to look at 37 girl and 37 boy children to see if the size difference was innate (meaning programmed from birth). They found the SG was actually *larger* in boys, yet the same test of interpersonal awareness showed that skill in this area correlated to a smaller SG (Wood et al., 2008). In commentary on these studies, neuroscience professor Lise Eliot (2009a) explained,

> This finding—that brain structure correlates as well or better with psychological "gender" than with simple biological "sex"—is crucial to keep in mind when considering any comparisons of male and female brains. Yes, men and women are psychologically different and yes, neuroscientists are uncovering many differences in brain anatomy and physiology which seem to explain our behavioral differences. But just because a difference is biological doesn't mean it is "hard-wired." Individuals' gender traits—their preference for masculine or feminine clothes, careers, hobbies and interpersonal styles—are inevitably shaped more by rearing and experience than [by] their biological sex. Likewise, their brains, which are ultimately producing all this masculine or feminine behavior, must be molded—at least to some degree—by the sum of their experiences as a boy or girl. (para. 10)

The studies by Wood and colleagues are important because theirs are some of the very few studies that do not look solely for sex differences.

Third, discussing stereotypical sex differences can actually create them because the people to whom the stereotypes apply may believe them and, as a result, perform according to the stereotype instead of according to their skills. A professor of cognitive neuroimaging who realized the search for differences was misdirected explained:

> We are at the point where we need to say, "Forget the male and female brain; it's a distraction, it's inaccurate." It's possibly harmful, too, because it's used as a hook to say, well, there's no point girls doing science because they haven't got a science brain, or boys shouldn't be emotional or should want to lead. (Rippon as cited in Fox, 2019).

The point this researcher is making is that by talking about differences, we actually produce those differences. It is not just that we project those differences onto others. People project those differences onto themselves.

Stereotype threat was defined by the research that initially identified it as "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Simply being "awar[e] of stereotypes about their group's under-performance" in a specific task, like math, nurturing, or navigating, may induce people in that group to perform that task less well even if they have the skills and ability to do it (Smith & Cokley, 2016, p. 145). Although stereotype threat can affect everyone, it "is a phenomenon that primarily affects individuals belonging to stigmatized groups" (Smith & Cokley, 2016, p. 157). Thus, mentioning sex differences actually may cause or maintain them.

Stereotype threat is so powerful that the message need not be linked specifically to an upcoming task. Instead, general cultural messages can influence performance. However, the good news is that messages countering the stereotype can mitigate its effects. In a study of performance in an upper-level university math course, one class was given a test under normal circumstances and another group was told that "this mathematics test has not shown any gender differences in performance or mathematics ability" to nullify the stereotype that males perform better than females in math (Good et al., 2008). In the first case, women and men performed equally well. In the second, women not only performed as well as the men in the class, but their performance "was raised significantly to surpass that of the men in the course" (p. 17). The study concluded, "Even among the most highly qualified and persistent women in college mathematics, stereotype threat suppresses test performance" (p. 17). This demonstrates how powerful communication about gender/sex can be. Messages about who is good at what influence who is good at what.

Stereotype threat can influence people's communication patterns just as much as it influences their math test performance (McGlone & Pfiester, 2015). One study placed participants in a communication situation that required conflict. When told the simulation was about leadership, women's communication was "less fluent and used more tentative language" (p. 111); when told the simulation was about relationship maintenance, men's communication was less fluent and more tentative. In other words, the way we talk about gender/sex communication in this textbook may cause the very effects we are describing. Thus, we want to be very clear: We note the differences in brain structure, but there is *no* evidence they actually affect performance or communication.

Biological Mosaic Instead of Dimorphism

Scientific consensus is emerging that "the human brain is not sexually dimorphic" (Eliot et al, 2021), meaning it does not occur in two distinct forms—for example, male and female. In fact, neuroscientists argue the term *dimorphism* should no longer be used in reference to brains because it "reinforces a binary understanding of s[ex]/g[ender] brain difference, when in fact, few such differences actually exist and the ones that do are very small, with great variability from population to population" (Eliot et al., 2021). Such a conclusion is reinforced by emerging research on trans people's brains: Gender and sex should not be viewed as a dichotomous binary.

So instead of categorizing brains as male and female, what do scientists suggest? Neither a binary nor a continuum. Instead, "a multidimensional 'mosaic' of countless

brain attributes that differ in unique patterns across all individuals" makes more sense (Eliot et al., 2021). Gender/sex diversity, not gender/sex difference, best describes brains.

Biological Theories Conclusion

Biological theories that rely on dimorphism should be approached with skepticism. If something is presented as caused by biology, this creates the impression it is unchange-able. **Biological determinism**—the idea that biology (sex) determines gender differ-ences—means that inequalities are natural and, hence, cannot be changed by social action. Biologist Fausto-Sterling (2000) urged people to never "lose sight of the fact that our debates about the body's biology are always simultaneously moral, ethical, and politi-cal debates about social and political equality and the possibilities for change. Nothing less is at stake" (p. 255).

Our point here is not to say no brain or hormonal differences exist between people. Each person's brain and body is unique. Instead, our point is that it is incorrect to draw differences between people on the basis of rigid binaries like testosterone being a male hormone or women having "pink brains." Biological elements may influence each person's gender, but biology does not determine gender.

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

When you read research, theory, or popular material that assumes gender is an innate part of one's personality, the authors are likely drawing from the field of psychology. They focus on how one's identity becomes gendered through early childhood experiences, as when Ablow warned of the "psychological turmoil" caused by a young boy having his toenails painted. Some argue that a child's gender identity is generally set as early as 1 to 3 years of age (A. Campbell, 1993). Although psychological theories vary, they focus on linking one's sex to gendered personalities via the influences of close relationships. Later theories also recognize the influences of culture in developing one's gender.

Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Feminism

Psychoanalytic theories call attention to how unconscious thoughts and memories influ-ence a person's identity, actions, and beliefs. Thus, to truly understand why a human being is the way they are, psychoanalysis demands attention to "early bodily and emotional experience in infancy and early childhood" as central elements forming the unconscious ways people do gender (Minsky, 1998, p. 6).

Sigmund Freud originated psychoanalysis as a psychological treatment technique. Central to psychoanalysis was the study of gender and sex identity formation. Freud (1975) theorized that children develop gender identity based on their perceptions of sex differences in biological genitalia. Freud theorized that until age 4, sex difference is irrele-vant to the child. At around 3 to 4 years of age, "the sexual life of children usually emerges in a form accessible to observation" when they enter the phallic stage, during which they become aware of their genitals (pp. 42–43). From the phallic stage till puberty (the genital stage), Freud argued, children see themselves in terms of having or not having a penis. While little boys initially assume everyone has a penis like theirs, Freud argued that little girls recognize their genitals are different and "are overcome by envy for the penis—an

envy culminating in the wish . . . to be boys themselves" (p. 61). When boys do notice girls lack a penis, they experience "castration complex" wherein they recognize the possibility that the penis can be removed, and they begin to fear castration as punishment (p. 61). In Freud's view, for girls to develop normally, they must be heterosexual and identify with their mother to compensate for their failed masculinity. For boys to develop normally, they must ultimately identify with their father. According to Freud's original theory, boys who do not make a complete break in their dependence on their mothers will not become fully masculine (Brannon, 2011). Thus, successful gender and sexual development in girls and boys is marked by their willingness to identify with the parent of their sex (instead of seeing that parent as competition for the affections of the other parent).

Much of Freud's work has been criticized for reflecting a heteronormative and masculine bias and a misunderstanding of women's psyche. A contemporary of Freud, Karen Horney, initiated the criticism. Horney argued that for girls, penis envy did not represent a literal envy for the physical penis but rather represented a symbolic envy for the social power and prestige men and boys experienced. In addition, Horney argued that men experienced "womb envy," in which men sought social and material accomplishments to compensate for their inability to give birth. Horney (1967) wrote, "From the biological point of view woman has . . . in the capacity for motherhood, a quite indisputable and by no means negligible physiological superiority. This is most clearly reflected in the unconscious of the male psyche in the boy's intense envy of motherhood" (pp. 60–61).

In addition to the near universal rejection of the theory that all women experience "penis envy" (Tavris, 1992), Freudian psychoanalysis is criticized because it essentializes gender/sex when it dictates only two sex-based paths for successful gender identity development (bell, 2004). The reality is children respond to gender identity in highly idiosyncratic and individual ways. Further, Freud's early theory recognized only heterosexual identities and did not consider cross-cultural variations.

Although many rightly critique Freud's work, the attention to the unconscious and the role of early experiences in gender identity formation were revolutionary. For feminists, Freud helped make clear that gender was not biologically determined but was influenced and formed by social experiences. One could understand gender from a psychoanalytic perspective by focusing on the way adults impose gender/sex norms on infants and, in the process, structure the human mind. Psychoanalysis generated multiple strands of psychoanalytic feminism (e.g., interpersonal psychoanalytic feminism [Gilligan, 1982], Lacanian theory [Lacan, 1998], and object relations theory).

In object relations theory, feminist psychologist Nancy Chodorow (1978) built on Freud by arguing that the mind (and gender identity) is formed in childhood, not in response to children discovering their genitalia but rather by the relationships children have with others—particularly their primary caregivers, who tended to be women. According to Chodorow, because the mother is a gendered person herself, she interacts with boy and girl children according to her gender, forming distinct relationships. At the same time, each child experiences internal conflict in trying to construct a separate identity from the mother. Because the mother and daughter are overtly similar, the daughter resolves her conflict by identifying with the mother and thus emulates a feminine gender identity. The girl develops intimacy and relationship as a primary part of who she is. According to Chodorow, the mother tends to treat a boy child differently from a girl child. The mother encourages independence in the boy earlier than in the girl and is less intimate in her talk with the boy. The boy child also recognizes that he is not like his mother in basic ways. To resolve his internal conflict, the boy must reject the mother as a part of

his independent identity development. The boy develops an orientation toward independence and activity as a primary part of who he is and thus finds relationships potentially smothering.

Object relations and other strands of feminist psychoanalysis agree with Freud that all gender identity, conscious and unconscious, has its origins in early bodily and emotional experiences and the fantasies associated with them (Minsky, 1998). They also suggest gender is influenced by one's sex identity and vice versa. Persons do not experience these in isolation but rather as related parts of the self (bell, 2004). However, this does not mean that sex *causes* gender. Psychoanalytic theorists since Freud have emphasized the role of culture in gender development.

By combining the influences of culture and the unconscious self, theorists are better able to explain why some individuals do not conform to cultural pressures of gender/sex expectations; why gender, sex, and sexuality are more fluid and diverse than cultural stereotypes suggest; and how race, class, and culture create multiple variations of gender, sex, and sexuality (bell, 2004). Social learning theorists offer examples of this explanatory power.

Social Learning

Social learning theory posits gender is a learned behavior, learned by observing, analyzing, and modeling others. When gender behavior is modeled consistent with sex identity, it is rewarded; if done incorrectly, it is punished. Particularly with children, this process of modeling, reinforcement, and punishment shapes gender/sex identities. Originally developed by Walter Mischel (1966) and later modified by Albert Bandura (2002; Bandura & Walters, 1963), this theory explains the socialization process whereby children internalize many identity ingredients and norms of behavior, not just gender. When children are positively rewarded for mimicking preferred behaviors, the behaviors attached to prescribed social roles become internalized habits (Addis et al., 2010). Young girls tend to be rewarded for being polite, neat, emotionally expressive, and well behaved. Young boys tend to be rewarded for being independent, emotionally controlled, and physically active. Thus, girls tend to develop feminine qualities, and boys tend to develop masculine qualities.

As with object relations theory, in the initial research on social learning theory, the parents' and/or primary caregivers' behaviors were considered most influential. However, more recent uses of social learning theory have highlighted three things. First, observational learning occurs not only in relation to immediate family but also through media sources such as video games (Wohn, 2011). Second, social learning is situational; a variety of ways to do gender in different situations are rewarded. Third, relationships with peers are influential.

Understanding the role media play in social learning is necessary. For example, given most people do not directly observe others' sexual activity, social learning theory recognizes people can learn from and model mediated gender and sexuality performances. This also demonstrates why "increased exposure to media is associated with more sexually permissive behaviors and attitudes" (Petersen & Hyde, 2010, p. 23). Given that sex scenes on television doubled from 1998 to 2003 and that they increased most dramatically in depicting sexually active women, based on social learning theory, researchers predicted that women would report engaging in more sexual behaviors. These predictions proved true (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Mediated communication practices contribute to the formation of gendered expression related to sexuality.

Recent research on social learning also encourages scholars to recognize that learning is far more situational than previously thought. The same action might be rewarded by one group in one setting but punished by a different group in a different setting. Psychologists Addis et al. (2010) explained:

Social learning is situated learning; particular actions are followed by particular consequences in specific contexts. Young boys, for example, often learn that expressing soft vulnerable emotions like sadness will be followed by punishment and other forms of ridicule, particularly when this behavior occurs in the context of other dominant males. These same consequences may be less likely to occur among close confidants, or around one's mother versus one's father. Over time, what emerge are relatively differentiated or discriminated repertoires of activity that are highly sensitive to context. (p. 80)

As a result of their research, they argue that researchers and theorists should "embrace the contextual nature of gendered social learning" and "avoid metaphors that locate gender as an internal property of individuals" (p. 83). Again, gender is something one does, not something one has.

Recent research has focused on the role of peer relationships in identity development. The **relational theory** approach "starts from the premise that our perceptions of, and subsequently our knowledge about, our selves and our world are inextricably embedded within and influenced by our interpersonal relationships as well as our social and cultural contexts" (Chu, 2014, p. 3). Chu (2014) intensively studied 4- and 5-year–old boys over a 2-year period to explore the ways in which their relationships with each other interact with gendered social expectations. Chu's conclusion was that characteristics labeled "boy behavior" are not inherent to boys but are learned behaviors. In commenting about the results, Chu noted:

I am wary of the whole "[just] boys being boys" thing because . . . if you expect boys to be a certain way, you'll say, oh, it's boys being boys when they're rowdy or rambunctious or whatever, but never "boys will be boys" when they're being sweet or sensitive or smart or insightful. So I am wary of those kinds of stereotypes or gender roles.

Especially because . . . when you take the whole range of human capabilities and qualities, and you say one half is masculine, and one half is feminine, and only boys can be masculine, and only girls can be feminine, then everybody loses, because you're asking everyone to cut off and deny a part of their humanity. (as quoted in Berlatsky, 2014)

Chu argued that the perception that boys are worse at relationships than girls is likely the result of two factors: (1) because people do not expect boys to have relationships skills, they do not look for them, and (2) boys' relationship skills may not be apparent especially as they get older because they have been socialized to hide that capacity so they do not appear feminine (Chu, 2014, p. 200). For Chu (2014), "becoming 'boys'—namely by aligning with prevailing norms of masculinity—is neither automatic nor inevitable" (p. 204).

Social learning theory fares better than the psychoanalytic approaches in its ability to help explain communication influences and because it is much easier to directly observe

and test. However, it still tends to dichotomize gender/sex, and it cannot explain why some boys and girls do not conform to social expectations.

Psychological Theories Conclusion

Psychological approaches suggest that gender identity is not naturally set at birth but instead developed through early childhood interaction. The psychological approaches we reviewed presume that all children are raised in Western, two-parent, heterosexual, nuclear, bourgeois families. Psychologist Janet Hyde (2005) conducted a review of 46 meta-analyses on gender and psychology research. Hyde concluded that there is no foundation for the continued belief in prominent psychological gender differences: "The gender similarities hypothesis holds that males and females are similar on most, but not all, psychological variables. That is, men and women, as well as boys and girls, are more alike than they are different" (p. 581).

CRITICAL/CULTURAL THEORIES

Writing in 1949, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir questioned how the natural and social sciences had depicted womanhood as mysterious when justifying women's inferiority. Beauvoir argued that these supposedly objective sciences were biased in the presumption of women's inferiority to men and, in turn, reinforced that bias and justified patriarchy (the institutionalized maintenance of male privilege). Beauvoir recognized biological differences exist but challenged the social value attached to those differences. To make clear the cultural and not innate biological or inherent psychological causes of gender, de Beauvoir (2011) declared,

> One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates [what] is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*. (p. 283)

Although social inequality between the sexes had been questioned for decades, if not centuries, de Beauvoir's book marked a turning point in the critical analysis of the cultural foundations of gender. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* declared, "Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* gave us the vocabulary for analyzing the social constructions of femininity and a method for critiquing these constructions" ("Simone de Beauvoir," 2014, part 6, para. 6). To fully understand where gender/sex comes from, critical attention to cultural constructions of gender/sex is necessary.

The emphasis on gender as something a person *does* and not something a person *is* emerged from this perspective. A critical/cultural approach calls for people to understand gender as something that is done—by individuals, groups, and institutions. Gender cannot be understood by examining a single individual's biology or psychology. Instead, the broader situations in which an individual lives—the social meanings embedded within communication—must be studied. West and Zimmerman (1987), the scholars who wrote the germinal essay "Doing Gender," explained,

> Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures."

When we view gender as an accomplishment . . . our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. . . . Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. (p. 126)

West and Zimmerman's idea of *doing gender* "de-emphasized socialization as the basis for gendered difference between men and women" (Deutsch, 2007, p. 107). Thus, studying gender is about more than studying how an individual person acts or was socialized. To study gender, one needs to analyze how it is culturally and socially constructed. One's gendered lens should focus on how social interactions and institutions do gender by gendering people and practices (West & Zimmerman, 2009).

If gender is done, then it can be *un*done as well. Psychology professor Francine Deutsch (2007) clarified: "If gender is constructed, then it can be deconstructed" (p. 108). Thus, when examining how gender is done, you should also look for places where it is undone, where other ways of doing and undoing arise. Exploring other ways of doing gender requires attention to individual examples of resistance and to institutions because power differentials are always in play (Collins, 1995, p. 493).

A range of critical/cultural approaches to gender/sex exist, including postmodernism, deconstructionism, poststructuralism, global feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, and cultural studies. We outline some of the common assumptions these approaches share and then focus on two of them to give a better sense of how critical/cultural approaches explain gender/sex.

Shared Premises

Critical/cultural approaches share at least four central premises

1. Communication constructs social reality.

2. Sex and gender categories should be questioned and critiqued.

3. Power and systems of hierarchy are central to the study of gender/sex.

4. Oppositional views are needed to critique hegemonic norms.

We explain each of these following.

Social reality is communicatively constructed.

Social reality is reality as understood through the symbols humans use to represent it. Social reality is created as people name objects, actions, and each other. Although a material world from which human beings receive sensory data exists, people do not know how to interact with that world until their sensory data is given meaning through symbolic action.

The centrality of communication to social reality is explained by communication scholar Barry Brummett (1976), who argued "experience is sensation plus *meaning*" and "*reality is meaning*" (pp. 28, 29). All symbolic action participates in the creation of meaning. The power of symbols to make meaning explains why communication scholars

note a distinction between reality and *social* reality. Critical/cultural theorists emphasize the power of discourse to shape social reality and study the processes by which this is accomplished.

Communication is more than a means to transmit information. When people communicate, they participate in the construction of social reality. Introduced in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book *The Social Construction of Reality*, social construction theory informs much contemporary communication research (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Although you may know things exist apart from your symbol systems, you cannot know what those things mean or how you are to react to them, except through the symbol system. In terms of gender/sex, critical/cultural approaches examine gender as a social construction, communicatively constituted, and ask how a particular construction of gender and sex privileges some and disempowers others.

No biological entity exists that humans can access without socially constructing it in some way. Critical/cultural scholars emphasize the role communication plays in forming people's understandings of the world. Even the seemingly simple terms of *female* and *male* illustrate the power of communication to create social reality. As long as these were the only terms available to refer to the human body, bodies were forcibly fit—through sex assignment surgery at birth—into one of those binary categories. Until the language for intersex emerged, bodies could only be one of two things.

Imagine if you had to find a way to present your gender to the world, but you could not use any form of communication. You could not speak, wear clothes (which carry with them symbolic messages), or move. How would others know your gender? For critical/cultural theorists, gender is something one does, not something one is, *and* gender is something that is socially created, not biologically or individually created.

Given this, English professor Jordynn Jack (2012) pointed out how "the formation of gender identities themselves . . . constitutes a rhetorical process" in which gender "provid[es] a range of available discourses through which individuals make sense of, model, and perform a gendered identity" (p. 2). Thus, critical/cultural scholars tend to focus on the rhetoric of gender and sex.

Categories such as sex, gender, sexuality, and race become the focus of criticism.

Because reality is socially constructed, critical/cultural theorists conceive of sex, gender, sexuality, race, and other categories not as neutral designations of "the way things are" but as ways people structure what is. Philosopher Judith Butler (1992) explained how the critical/cultural theory of poststructuralism highlights how "power pervades the very conceptual apparatus" that people use to understand the world and themselves (p. 6).

Critical/cultural theorists note how the categories just listed tend to be mutually exclusive binaries (if you are *either* male *or* female, then intersex people do not exist) or create differences where none exist (the single human race has been artificially divided into races). The categories determine whose lives are recognizable and intelligible—which people exist socially. Thus, instead of starting from the assumption that males and females indicate the two sexes that exist, a critical/cultural theorist would question and investigate how those categories were created, who those categories benefit, and how the categories are placed in a hierarchical relation to each other.

To study gender/sex you also must study power and systems of hierarchy.

Systems of hierarchy refer to the patterns and institutional structures that maintain inequality between groups. Critical/cultural scholars emphasize the broad cultural patterns at play to highlight that gender/sex is not simply located within individuals but is sustained throughout the culture, in its symbol systems, institutions, and rituals. In other words, gender is not something you were born with or learned only from interactions with your parents; socialization is an insufficient explanation for gender. Saying that you learned gender from only your parents begs the question: Where did your parents learn gender? Gender/sex, together with ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and other cultural identities, lives in the ideology, norms, laws, worldviews, traditions, popular culture, and social institutions that sustain a culture. Critical/cultural approaches argue that you cannot understand gender only by studying individuals' performance of it. Instead, one must study the systems of hierarchy that privilege some sexes over others and some performances of gender over others.

Critical/cultural scholars make clear that the issue is not just whether one person exerts power over another. Instead, one needs to critique systems. Systems of hierarchy, embedded within social, economic, and political institutions, explain the existence of ethnic and gender/sex inequality; biology and personal bias are not the central foundations of inequality. Critical/cultural scholars understand discrimination as a system of hierarchy, "fundamentally a political relationship, a strategy that" as a system, gives social, economic, political, psychological, and social privileges to one group and denies them to another (Harding, 1995, p. 122).

Privileges are unearned freedoms or opportunities. Often, privileges are unconscious and unmarked. They are made to appear natural and normal, which makes them easy to deny and more resistant to change. When violence prevention educator Jackson Katz (2003) asked men in his workshops what they do to prepare to walk alone on campus at night, most of them responded with an unknowing stare. When Katz asked women this question, they readily offered several strategies they used to keep safe, such as phoning roommates ahead to tell them they are leaving, carrying their keys pointed out between their fingers as a weapon against would-be attackers, or looking in their cars before they open the doors. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons often try to pass as straight to avoid possible verbal or physical violence. Heterosexuals usually do not have to consider such acts.

For critical/cultural scholars, gender/sex is never just a simple difference. Instead, to study gender/sex, one must study power. Power is a social phenomenon. People have power in relationship to others. Social power is embedded in the communicative negotiations of gender/sex, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity ingredients. For each of these social groups, multiple differences are socially created, and differences are rarely constructed equally. Rather, the groups that have more say about the construction are privileged over others.

Power can simply mean "the ability to get things done" (Kramarae & Treichler, 1992, p. 351). It is not an innately evil concept. However, feminist theorists make an important distinction between "power to" and "power over" (Freeman & Bourque, 2001, pp. 10–11). *Power to* is the ability to get things done that does not infringe on others' rights and may actually lead to the emancipation of others. *Power over* refers to coercive misuses of power. If one is in a position of power over others, then one can dominate and coerce others and, in the process, subordinate or oppress them. If one lacks power over, one is more likely

to be in a subordinate position. The interesting point is that to respond to any instance of power over or to get out of a situation in which one is subordinated by those who have power over, one needs power to.

In their book on intersectionality, sociology professors Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) identified four "distinctive yet interconnected **domains of power**: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural" (p. 7). Interpersonal power can be found in one's ability to control or dominate others in the negotiation of personal or professional relationships. Thus, it is important to recognize "power relations are about people's lives, how people relate to one another, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged within social interactions" (p. 7). However, power also is systemic. Disciplinary power can be found in how "informal social rewards and punishments get distributed in everyday interactions" (p. 27). For example, when parents punish boys for showing emotion and reward girls for being agreeable, disciplinary power is at work. Cultural power can be traced in socially accepted ideas and messages transmitted across media. For example, cultural norms of masculinity and femininity, reinforced by media representations, are a form of cultural power as is the privileging of the nuclear family over other family forms. Finally, structural power can be traced through how groups, institutions, and laws are organized (p. 12). For example, the disproportionate incarceration of men of color is an example of how racism is embedded within structures of law.

Oppositional critical views are necessary to critique hegemonic norms.

Hegemony designates the systems of hierarchy maintained by the predominant social group's ideology (Gramsci et al., 1993). Philosopher Rosemary Hennessy (1995) explained that hegemony is not a form of power that controls through overt violence. Rather, it controls subtly by determining what makes sense: "**Hegemony** is the process whereby the interests of a ruling group come to dominate by establishing the common sense, that is, those values, beliefs, and knowledges that go without saying" (pp. 145–146). People willingly belong to cultures for the protection and order those cultures provide, even though predominant cultural ideology may control them in some ways. By following society's norms of behavior, members uphold the culture's ideology.

When analysts of gender talk about **patriarchy**, they are not talking about the domination of one man over one woman but are talking about a hierarchical system that exercises hegemonic control wherein men are privileged over women, masculinity is privileged over femininity, some men are privileged over other men, and in which even some of those who are subordinate in the hierarchy accept it because such an ordering appears natural and inevitable.

Sociologist R. W. Connell introduced the concept of **hegemonic masculinity** in 1982. Connell noted there is not one single way to perform masculinity; instead, a range of masculinities exists. But not all forms of masculinity are equal; some forms of masculinity are privileged (white, upper-class, wage-earning, heterosexual, athletic) over other forms, and masculinity is privileged over femininity. Although Connell recognized that a plurality of masculinities exists, the focus was on the normative form of masculinity, the type that has been the most honored way to be a man, even if it is not the type that is most prevalent (or the norm). Hegemonic masculinity does not require all men to engage in overt toxic practices, but it does encourage men to remain silent to protect their own masculinity when others commit such practices. In doing so, they become complicit in the violence (Katz,

2003). Thus, hegemonic masculinity constitutes a "pattern of practices . . . that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

To see hegemony at work, one needs to be critical of taken-for-granted cultural norms, to take what media scholar Stuart Hall (1993) identified as an oppositional, or counterhegemonic, reading of cultural texts (pp. 98–102). Instead of "*operating inside the dominant code*" (p. 102, italics in original), an oppositional reading challenges the social meanings. Thus, one finds critical/cultural scholars critiquing the way blood donation, as "a performative act of civic engagement," constructs sex, sexuality, and citizenship in a way that disempowers gay men (Bennett, 2008, p. 23); how *Knocked Up, Juno*, and *Waitress*, three 2007 films that all centered around a white pregnant woman, "reframe unplanned pregnancy as women's liberation" and present a model of family that serves only the needs of white, economically privileged women (Hoerl & Kelly, 2010, p. 362); and how media stories about Black male athletes accused of domestic violence construct understandings of them as "naturally aggressive due to their sporting background and black rage" and, in the process, reinforce hegemonic white masculinity (Enck-Wanzer, 2009, p. 1).

To see how specific critical/cultural approaches enact these four assumptions, we offer two examples: Multiracial and global feminisms and queer theory.

Multiracial and Global Feminisms

Scholars and activists studying gender/sex through the lens of *global feminist theory* and *multiracial feminist theory* have crystallized the reasons that gender/sex must be studied from an intersectional critical/cultural perspective. They note how the category of woman often has represented the concerns of white, economically privileged women from Western countries and, as a result, has reinforced hierarchies that emphasize the concerns of the privileged. Thus, they make clear how the category of *woman* itself is inflected with race, nationality, and class. To unpack how the categories of woman, man, human, and other have come to be, critical/cultural scholars focus on the role communication plays in the construction of categories based on sex, race, and nationality. They particularly focus on the way power has been exercised as a result of colonialism.

Communication constructs social reality, and global powers exert extensive power over that construction: Rhetorician Raka Shome (1996) explained why the study of communication from a global perspective is important: A focus on communication is necessary because "discourses have become one of the primary means of imperialism" (p. 42). Although "in the past, imperialism was about controlling the 'native' by colonizing her or him territorially, now imperialism is more about subjugating the 'native' by colonizing her or him discursively" (p. 42) by forcibly changing gender and national identities and values. The tremendous reach of Western media, the universality of English (a legacy of earlier territorial imperialism), the way in which academics have named and defined the "native" as "other," and the creation of economic dependency all mean that attention to communication patterns is central to understanding how colonialism persists (see also Shome & Hegde, 2002). Although territorial imperialism through colonization might be at an end, ideological imperialism is not.

Postcolonialism, as a theoretical orientation, examines the social, gendered, economic, and environmental impacts of colonization and the ways in which colonial ideologies persist in contemporary institutions in the form of neocolonialism. Neocolonialism points out how colonial power is not only about resource extraction but also about the ways colonial power constructs social reality. As "a critical perspective that primarily seeks

to expose the Eurocentrism and imperialism of Western discourses," postcolonialism asks two related questions about the construction of social reality:

> How do Western discursive practices, in their representations of the world and of themselves, legitimize the contemporary global power structures? To what extent do the cultural texts of nations such as the United States and England reinforce the neo-imperial political practices of these nations? (Shome, 1996, p. 41)

Thus, global feminists ask how neocolonialism constructs gender and sex.

Both *neo* and *post* colonialism position economic and land colonization as thing of the past. However, for some peoples, resource extraction, land possession, and cultural colonization persist. In the United States and Canada and other territories of the United States, attention to colonization means attention to *settler colonialism*, or how the settling of the lands in the western hemisphere displaced Native and Indigenous peoples and how that colonial violence is an "enduring phenomenon" (Na'puti, 2019, p. 497).

For example, the #MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) campaign highlights how the contemporary constructions of and violence against Native American women are rooted in the "history of mistreatment by white settlers" of Native women (Parsloe & Campbell, 2021). The horrifying reality is that Indigenous women are murdered at a rate ten times higher than other ethnicities, and four out of five experience violence during their lifetime (Joseph, 2021). A report released in 2020 identified 2,306 missing U.S. Indigenous women and girls, yet 62% were *not* included in national crime databases and 74% had no official documentation. In other words, no official recognition of the missing and murdered women existed until a non-governmental entity did research (Ortiz, 2020). In an analysis of the data, one scholar found that 23 locations had the highest number of cases. Of those, 16 locations were near places where hydraulic fracking was used for fossil fuel extraction (Joseph, 2021).

Categories should be critiqued: For example, the category of *woman*, itself, should be critiqued and complicated. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) outlined the failures of white Western feminists' studies of third-world women and women of color:

> To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being "women" has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender. But no one "becomes a woman" (in Simone de Beauvoir's sense) purely because she is female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex. Thus, during the period of American slavery, constructions of white womanhood as chaste, domesticated, and morally pure had everything to do with corresponding constructions of black slave women as promiscuous, available plantation workers. It is the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero) sexuality, and nation, then, that positions us as "women." (p. 55)

Mohanty (2003) urged everyone to recognize "the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency" (p. 39). An intersectional approach to understanding gender/sex is necessary because woman and man are not simple and distinct categories determined solely by sex.

Power and systems of hierarchy are central to the study of gender/sex: Authors from this perspective emphasize the experiences and voices of multiple gendered/sexed people, particularly racial minorities living in the West and those living in non-Western, nonindustrialized, noncapitalist countries. They argue that white, Western feminists have had the most to say in defining women's experiences and have falsely assumed that their worldview represents all women, consequently portraying other women as passive, backward, unenlightened, oppressed, undereducated, and needing help (Kapur, 2005). These scholars make clear the role of privilege.

Global feminists urge a consideration of all hierarchies and how they interact. A sex-only approach misidentifies third-world men as the root cause of third-world women's oppression, not capitalist colonial systems. This creates a dynamic that English professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) described as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (p. 297). This is not a dynamic confined only to colonial times. Dana Cloud (2004) provided a trenchant analysis of images circulated by Time.com of Afghan people while the U.S. administration was building public support for the 2001 invasion of and war in Afghanistan. Focusing on the women as veiled and oppressed, the images appealed to white men to save Brown women from Brown men and evoked a paternalistic stance toward the women of Afghanistan. Power is at the center of their analysis.

So-called third-world people and the colonization of them can exist in any country, including the United States. Chicana author and activist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) explored the ways in which living on the U.S.-Mexican border shapes mestiza (mixed-race) women in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Throughout this work, Anzaldúa moved between English and Spanish, detailing the process and purpose of communication, constantly reminding the reader of their role as a person positioned on the border between two cultures. As part of the exploration of political and personal borderlands, Anzaldúa, like other Chicana feminists, created a space in which to perform multiple identities (Flores, 1996; Palczewski, 1996).

Oppositional views critique hegemonic norms: Critical/cultural scholars' position is that no singular gendered experience defines women or men. Inspired by Argentine feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, law professor Isabelle Gunning (1997) put the challenge this way: Instead of being "arrogant perceivers" of the world who judge other cultures based on the ethnocentric view of their own culture as the norm, people should strive to be "world travelers" (p. 352). To be world travelers means to be ethnographers, to try to view other cultures from their members' perspectives rather than one's own. To be world travelers also means to recognize the interconnections between cultures. This requires not only observing the other culture but also being willing to turn that same critical lens back on one's own culture, including examining how one's cultural practices contribute to the oppression of other cultures. These scholars call for an oppositional perspective.

Queer Theory

Queer theorists challenge noncritical approaches' use of binary categories such as gender (feminine/masculine), sex (female/male, woman/man), and sexuality (homosexual/heterosexual); contest heteronormativity; and offer a politics that is not tied to stable identity categories (McDonald, 2015). Queer theorists do not deny that identity categories exist. Instead, they argue that the categories should be analyzed because identity is, in the words of Heather Love (2011), "spoiled, partial, never fully achieved, but sticky, familiar, and hard to lose completely" (p. 185). Because queer theory focuses on how sexes, genders,

and sexualities are constructed, queer theory can be used to analyze anyone's performance of gender in communication (Manning et al., 2020, p. 414). With its constant questioning of socially constructed categories, queer theory induces you to become comfortable with "ambiguity, contradiction, hybridity, fluidity, and sitting in uncertainty" (Young in Manning et al., 2020, p. 415).

Communication constructs social reality: **Queer theory** argues that communicatively created social categories artificially restrict people's perceptions. Thus, when communication scholars use the word *queer*, they do so "to denote bodies, identities, and enactments that challenge and/or reimagine normative gender and sexual arrangements" (LeMaster, 2015, p. 170). How we communicate about sex, gender, and sexuality is the focus of queer theory.

Categories should be critiqued: As a form of study, queer theory is the "process by which people have made dissident sexuality articulate," meaning "available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" (Warner, 2002, pp. 17, 203). Queer theory creates a language that names and makes present those who live outside the binaries. Queer theory critiques the categories used to understand gender, sex, and sexuality as part of the very hierarchies that maintain privilege for some groups over others. Queer theorists "contest and deconstruct identity categories by conceptualizing identities as multiple, fluid, unstable, changeable, and constantly evolving" (McDonald, 2015, p. 319). Queer theory is one of the clearest locations where the categories themselves become the subject of study. When doing research, this means that "instead of starting with the identity category," you should "explore how that identity is created, performed, and embodied—and the effects of that process on our cognitive, relational, and cultural experiences" (Rudnick in Manning et al., 2020, p. 422).

Power and systems of hierarchy are central to the study of gender/sex: Queer theory questions all forms of sex and sexuality categorization because it addresses "the full range of power-ridden normativities of sex" (Berlant & Warner, 1995, p. 345), particularly heteronormativity. Queer theory makes clear the variety of ways in which heterosexual sexual orientation is composed of practices that have very little to do with sex (Warner, 2002, p. 198). When it comes to thinking about sex, sexuality, and gender, queer theory calls for a "rethinking of both the perverse and the normal" (p. 345). For queer theorists, desire is a focus of study, including the "categorization of desiring subjects" and what allows some desires to "pass as normal, while others are rendered wrong or evil" (Giffney, 2004, p. 74). This focus on power also means queer theory, intersectionality, and postcolonial theory can and should be used together. As communication scholar Lydia Huerta Morena pointed out, research should "engage in intersectional and decolonial methodologies to study queer bodies, especially because identifying as queer is not the only part of someone's identity" (in Manning et al., 2020, p. 422).

Oppositional views critique hegemonic norms: By recognizing and examining connections among sexual desire, gender, sex, and sexual orientation, this approach broadens the study of gender/sex in communication in important ways. For example, English professor J. Halberstam (1998) showed that studying women performing masculinity may reveal more about cultural assumptions of masculinity than studying men, for whom society assumes the relationship is normal. Halberstam's (2005) study of drag kings (women and men who expressly perform masculinity, like Mike Myers in *Austin Powers*) exposed some of the absurdity of gender norms and how gender functions as "*a kind of imitation* [or

copy] *for which there is no original*" (Butler, 1991, p. 21, italics in original). Halberstam's oppositional perspective made hegemonic norms more visible.

In communication studies, queer theory critiques the heteronormativity of much research in family and interpersonal communication. The family, for example, is not a neutral or natural institution but "a primary vehicle through which heteronormative ideologies are mobilized" (Chevrette, 2013, p. 173). But emerging research offers an alternative. As Roberta Chevrette (2013) compellingly argued in their *Communication Theory* essay, "Queering communication, and 'feminizing' queer theory, requires scholars to be theoretically diverse, to utilize mixed methods, and to frame research questions with power, language, sexuality, and difference in mind" (p. 185).

Cultural Critic Wesley Morris reflected on the effect of three pop culture icons: Prince, David Bowie, and George Michael, all of whom died in 2016. All three rose to prominence in a time of hyper-masculinity during the 1980s: "Arnold Schwarzenegger's career as an action hero began. Sylvester Stallone moving from *Rocky* not just to *Rambo*, but to things like *Cobra* and *Over the Top*. This was a time when Michael Douglas was the sexiest man alive." In assessing their impact on understandings of masculinity, Morris said the following about the three performers:

> Prince: "And so you have this tension between straight culture—and you have, in somebody like Prince, this person who is really queering the difference between these two. He was singing about heterosexual sex while looking anything but conventionally heterosexual."
>
> George Michael: "I think that by the time the 'Faith' video came around—it was his first solo album—he wanted to have a look that separated him from Wham! And this very sort of butch, rockabilly thing that he went for was so different than the other George Michael that it was arresting. That video just completely eroticized him: I mean, the camera is rising up his body as moving around this contraption that's spinning. It's great."
>
> David Bowie: "He made every aspect of what was normal about being human seem foreign. I think that *Ziggy Stardust* period was probably the most obviously queer period that he performed in. He was interested in this makeup and these platforms and this hair, and it was neither male nor female, and I think that was what was so disconcerting about him. "But also, if you were a kid, it was kind of weirdly exciting, because these ideas of gender and masculinity and femininity are these acquired notions. I think that if you're ignorant of what they signify, you see this person signifying none of it and it kind of blows your mind."
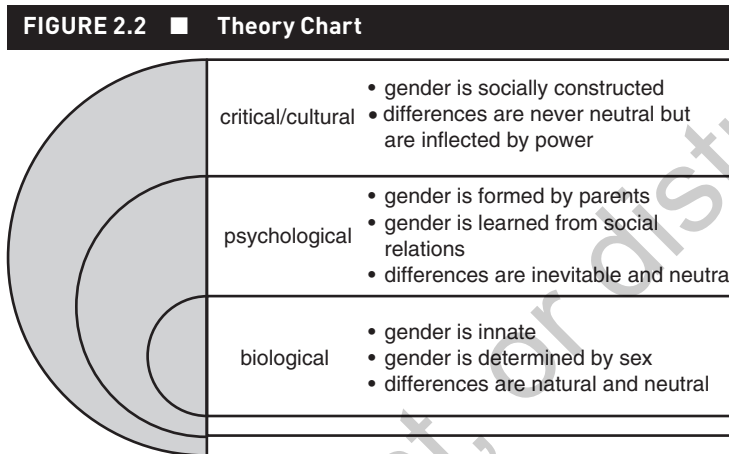
(as cited in Shapiro, 2016)

Critical/Cultural Theories Conclusion

Despite the range of approaches, critical/cultural approaches theorize that one can never understand gender and sex unless one studies broad cultural systems that sustain power differences. Critical/cultural approaches emphasize that reality is constructed through communication and that social reality contains systems of hierarchy and power differentials. Thus, gender differences are never seen just as differences but always as possible patterns that expose relations of power.

APPLYING GENDER THEORY: SOME USEFUL CRITERIA

In this chapter, we outlined three primary approaches (biological, psychological, critical/cultural) used to explain gender in communication. They have different underlying assumptions about how people conceptualize, study, and explain gender/sex. Our goal has been to help you better identify and examine your own and others' assumptions before our upcoming chapters present more specifics about gender in communication.

After reviewing these approaches to studying gender/sex in communication, we find

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Theory Chart

	critical/cultural	• gender is socially constructed • differences are never neutral but are inflected by power
	psychological	• gender is formed by parents • gender is learned from social relations • differences are inevitable and neutral
	biological	• gender is innate • gender is determined by sex • differences are natural and neutral

the multiple theories and research practices useful, depending on the precise question studied. Given that gender is complex and diverse, it makes sense that complex and diverse theories are necessary and that the influence of biology, psychology, and social hierarchies are likely interrelated. To make clear the way the theories interact, we offer the diagram shown in Figure 2.2.

The three approaches differ in the expansiveness of their assumed cause of gender, with the critical/cultural approach being the most encompassing.

We now offer some fundamental criteria for and questions to empower, you to do your own critical thinking about gender/sex in research and popular culture.

Criterion 1: Is an intersectional approach being used?

An intersectional approach is needed to avoid stereotypes and to more accurately reflect the diversity that exists in gender/sex identities. Because many other identity ingredients intersect with gender, gender diversity makes more sense than gender differences tracked along a single axis. There is not just one femininity or one masculinity. Given the multitude of variables that influence who persons are, it makes sense that there would never be just two gendered types of communication. Like Jordynn Jack (2012), we embrace moving beyond binary gender differences and toward gender copia.

Communication studies professor Celeste M. Condit (1998) outlined the benefits of a **gender diversity perspective**. First, "the gender diversity perspective advocates respect and care for persons of all genders and gender types (as long as those types do not directly harm others or infringe on the human rights of others)" (p. 177). It is inclusive. Second, it reorients research in an invigorating way: "Instead of trying to describe how men and

women speak differently, we can begin to explore the range of gendered options available to people" (p. 183). It diverts attention from the study of how women's gender limits communication and directs it to the study of how a range of people have used diverse gender styles to speak passionately, ethically, and effectively to their audiences. A gender diversity approach provides a more realistic, more interesting, and wider scope for analyzing gender/sex in communication.

How will you know if an approach is intersectional? Here are some questions you can ask:

- Does the source study sex or gender or both? Research that identifies only the sex of each person in the study and then draws conclusions about gender may be unintentionally conflating these concepts.

- Does the gender/sex analysis include other possible interdependent influences on one's behavior and on how others perceive that behavior, such as how one's gender intersects with ethnicity, age/generation, social class, physical or mental ability, and nationality?

- Does the analysis consider gender/sex differences *and* similarities?

- Does the source offer nuanced conclusions? For example, claiming gender/sex differences exist does not tell *how much* difference was found. In a study of sex and self-disclosure, Dindia and Allen (1992) claimed statistically significant differences, but in looking closer they admit only about 1% of the differences in self-disclosure could be attributed to sex differences (Dindia, 2006).

- Does the source account for power differences? Intersectionality is not about identity alone; it also explains power. Does the source account for how the same act of communication might be interpreted differently depending on how the body communicating is perceived and where the person is placed in social hierarchies of power? For example, anger when expressed by a white male body might be perceived as righteous indignation and passionate defense of an idea, while anger expressed by a Black male body is perceived as incipient violence and anger expressed by a Black woman is perceived as mental imbalance (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003). Keep in mind that descriptions of behavior alone tell little about why the behaviors exist or what the social consequences might be. Others might interpret the same behaviors very differently depending on the sex, ethnicity, age, and so on of the person doing them.

To examine how people communicate, one needs to look beyond gender/sex. Communication differences *and* similarities between people are rarely, if ever, determined solely by the sex of the speaker.

Criterion 2: Is the focus on communication?

We suggest placing communication at the center of analysis. Communication creates, maintains, and alters identities and relationships. Communication creates gender/sex;

gender/sex is not a static identity that produces communication. Gender/sex is a communicative process, not a fixed attribute.

This does not mean things like economics, politics, psychology, or biology are irrelevant to gender/sex. Indeed, we have demonstrated the value of combining information from diverse fields. We emphasize communication because it is important to recognize people have degrees of agency in creating and communicating their gendered/sexed identities, *and* people are compelled to follow social norms through communication in relational, institutional, or cultural interactions.

Here are some questions you can ask:

- Are claims about gender based on specific observations of communication, mere generalizations, or anecdotal experiences? Many popular publications and media products are based on cultural assumptions, not careful analysis of particular data collected.

- Are the communication process and the possible patterns it creates the focus? People create meaning by practicing recognizable patterns of interaction (such as norms of taking turns to speak) or unique interpersonal patterns (such as both parties using a particular emoticon in text messages). These patterns create meanings. Claims based on an isolated example may only serve to maintain stereotypes.

Criterion 3: Does the source recognize unique context-dependent influences on behaviors?

Surprisingly, most of the research on gender in communication has not traditionally taken into account unique situational influences (Dindia & Canary, 2006; Eckert & McConnell-Ginnet, 1992, 2011). This is problematic because any act of communication can have multiple meanings and serve a variety of functions (Tannen, 1994). Without context, researchers fall back on stereotypical cisgender norms to simply label behaviors as masculine *or* feminine. Communication context includes the physical, social (West & Turner, 2014), cultural (Campbell et al., 2015), and psychological elements of a given interaction (Palomares, 2012).

Here are some questions you can ask:

- How might the physical context influence behavior? Consider the immediate setting, time, place, and so on.

- How might the social context influence behavior? This refers to the type of relationship, such as interpersonal, small group, organizational, public speaking, or social media.

- How might larger cultural influences, such as social norms, values, languages, inequalities, and violence, influence communication?

- How do the participants view their own interactions? What is going on for a person in the moment can be very telling. People can play active roles in creating,

maintaining, and/or challenging their gendered identities. The lesson here is that you should not assume a person always talks the same way regardless of context.

Criterion 4: Are there possible power implications?

Power can take many forms, and it exists on many levels. The pervasiveness of power is a part of the reason it is difficult to recognize and so influential.

Here are some questions you can ask:

- What roles do the participants play, and is power embedded in these roles (e.g., parent/child, boss/worker, friends)?
- Are there signs of some people trying to control others or trying to resist control?
- Do the participants seem free to be themselves?
- Can you identify ways in which power might be embedded in the context (e.g., cultural expectations, standard organization policies or procedures)?

We note power separately to mark its importance. When studying groups defined by their gender, ethnicity, class, and so on, identity distinctions are rarely different and equal. The nature of the distinctions, the values assigned, and the power attributed to those distinctions are culturally determined and decidedly unequal most of the time.

CONCLUSION

A more productive way to study the topic of gender in communication is to use a broader lens of analysis that recognizes that theory and knowledge construction are rhetorical and political acts, as are people's efforts to interpret, embrace, and reject them. This does not mean that there is no objective reality but rather that reality means nothing until people give that reality meaning as they play active roles in its construction and deconstruction. People's perceptions are their reality. This is no less true for researchers. Understanding the link between expectations and reality brings with it an awesome ethical responsibility to attend to how one communicates and how one studies gender in communication. It also represents an exciting adventure through which we travel in the remainder of this book.

KEY CONCEPTS

biological determinism
biological theories
critical/cultural theories
domains of power
gender diversity perspective
hegemonic masculinity
hegemony
patriarchy
postcolonialism

privileges
psychoanalytic theories
psychological theories
queer theory
relational theory
social learning
social reality
stereotype threat

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What expectations do you have for appropriate gender-related behaviors? Where do you think these expectations come from? What are your underlying theories about gender given what you have identified as the sources of gender?

2. How do biological theories explain the formation of gender and its role in communication? Identify examples from popular culture that embrace this theory.

3. How do psychological theories explain the formation of gender and its role in communication? Identify examples from popular culture that embrace this theory.

4. How do critical/cultural theories explain the formation of gender and its role in communication? Identify examples from popular culture that embrace this theory.