

Part I
Introduction

1

Key Concepts

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Distinguish among the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality.
- Articulate how gender is shaped by culture.
- Identify examples of nonbinary gender expressions.
- Discuss how gender is relational and the importance of understanding masculinity in relation to other gender expressions.

In this textbook we will explore the meanings and experiences of sex and gender from a global perspective. Let's start by posing a basic question: why learn about sex and gender globally? Don't we all know what it means to be a man or a woman? While the answer to that question may seem obvious, in fact, when we learn about gender and sexuality cross-culturally, it becomes clear that these are extremely complicated concepts. Ideas about gender and sexuality differ tremendously across different cultures. To make sense of this complexity, this chapter will introduce some key ideas, such as **sex**, **gender**, sexual orientation, **gender ideologies**, and **masculinity**.

WHAT IS CULTURE AND WHY ANTHROPOLOGY?

Given the fact that we want to learn more about sex and gender from a global perspective, the next question we might ask ourselves is: how will we learn more? We could learn more by reading the literature of different peoples, in different languages, to better understand how they tell stories about their lives and the ways in which people become men,

women, or something more in their own cultures. Alternatively, we could take a legal approach and search historical records to learn how laws determined proper gender and sexual behaviors and how people were punished for particular crimes relating to sex and gender. For example, in the United States there have been laws against cross-dressing (men wearing women’s clothing, and vice versa), or miscegenation (interracial marriage, or interracial sex). Another option, and the one that we have chosen for this book, is to employ the discipline of cultural anthropology to help us learn about sex and gender from a global perspective.

For anthropologists, culture is defined as “a set of beliefs, practices, and symbols that are learned and shared. Together, they form an all-encompassing, integrated whole that binds people together and shapes their worldview and lifeways” (Nelson 2020). These beliefs, traditions, and customs, transmitted through learning, guide the behavior of a people as well as how they think about the world and perceive others. Anthropologists seek to understand the internal logic of a culture and why things that may seem “strange” or “exotic” to us make sense to the people of another culture. As such, anthropology is fundamentally comparative. That is, anthropologists seek to describe, analyze, interpret, and explain social and cultural differences and similarities. In doing so, we often turn a critical eye on our own practices and beliefs to understand them in a different way. We often learn and become more conscious of our own culture when we experience or study other cultures. Thus, North Americans traveling in China or in Europe often become more aware of their own “Americanness”—they become aware of aspects of their own culture and lifestyle that they often took for granted. These cultural characteristics stand out in sharp relief against their experiences in a foreign country.

What is Anthropology?

In the most general terms, anthropology refers to the study of humans. It is a **holistic** field of study that focuses on the wide breadth of what makes us human: from human societies and cultures to past human lifeways, human language and evolution, and even nonhuman primates. In the United States, anthropology is divided into four subfields: cultural anthropology, archaeology, biological anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. Applied anthropology uses the methods and knowledge of these subfields to solve real-world problems faced by different societies and cultures.

Anthropologists are not the only scholars to focus on the human condition. Biologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others also examine human nature and societies. However, anthropologists uniquely draw on four key approaches to their research: holism, comparison, dynamism, and fieldwork. For a more detailed introduction to anthropology, see chapter 1, “Introduction to Anthropology” in *Perspectives: An Open Invitation to Cultural Anthropology*: <http://perspectives.americananthro.org/>.

holistic/holism

the idea that the parts of a system interconnect and interact to make up the whole.

What Is Culture?

Culture is a set of beliefs, practices, and symbols that are learned and shared. Together, they form an all-encompassing, integrated whole that binds groups of people together and shapes their worldview and lifeways. Additionally:

1. Humans are born with the capacity to learn the culture of any social group. We learn culture both directly and indirectly.
2. Culture changes in response to both internal and external factors.
3. Humans are not bound by culture; they have the capacity to conform to it or not and sometimes change it.
4. Culture is symbolic; individuals create and share the meanings of symbols within their group or society.
5. The degree to which humans rely on culture distinguishes us from other animals and shapes our evolution.
6. Human culture and biology are interrelated: our biology, growth, and development are impacted by culture.

ethnography

the in-depth study of the everyday practices and lives of a people.

We will be reading chapters created by cultural anthropologists who have conducted extensive fieldwork or **ethnography** in the country and culture they are writing about. The term *ethnography* refers both to the books written by anthropologists and to their research processes or fieldwork. So cultural anthropologists gather information through long-term fieldwork by participating in a particular culture over time. Fieldwork is primarily a qualitative research method and involves living among the people you are studying. Over time anthropologists collect information or data about a particular group of people through formal and informal interviews and observations they record in field notes.

Participant observation is the term for the characteristic methodology of ethnographic research. It literally means being simultaneously a participant in and an observer of the culture you are studying. That is why anthropologists usually live with the people they are studying for at least a year and often longer. Originally, anthropologists studied small-scale societies in remote parts of the world, such as hunter-gatherer groups in Africa or Indigenous groups in Latin America. Now anthropologists study all types of cultures: Western and non-Western, urban and rural, industrialized and agricultural. Even the cultures of corporations are now within the domain of anthropology. While early anthropologists attempted to describe and understand the entire culture they studied, now most ethnographies (the books that cultural anthropologists write) focus on a

specific aspect of culture such as economics, politics, or religion—or in the case of our readings, gender and sexuality.

Throughout this book we will be exploring a lot of practices that some of us may find “strange” or “unnatural.” It is essential that we try to approach these subjects as anthropologists would. That is, to understand these practices from what the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called, “the native’s point of view.” In other words, our goal is to try to learn about and understand the perspective of the people who engage in these particular practices and beliefs. Anthropologists call this type of approach **cultural relativism**. Cultural relativism is the position that the values and standards of cultures differ and deserve respect, and it is a core value of anthropology. Cultural relativism is a particularly useful perspective in anthropology because without understanding a culture from an insider’s perspective, we can never fully understand how and why people do what they do. In essence, without cultural relativism, an accurate study of humanity is not possible.

In contrast to cultural relativism, **ethnocentrism** refers to the tendency to view one’s own culture as the best and to judge the behavior and beliefs of culturally different people by one’s own standards. All cultures tend to be ethnocentric, so it is not only Western, industrialized cultures that think their way of living is the best. In this course, we will all have to work hard to try to put aside our ethnocentrism as we explore meanings and practices of sex and gender across other cultures.

Check out the video titled “Anthropology Syllabus,” by the anthropologist Michael Wesch from Kansas State University. In the video, Dr. Wesch introduces the syllabus he has created for an Introduction to Anthropology course. In it, he describes the nine big ideas of anthropology; they make up the outline of the syllabus he has created. It’s a great introduction to anthropology, to the ideas of cultural construction, and to the assumptions we all carry within us that create ethnocentrism. The video is a testament to how important it is for us to understand how we—humans—make the world we live in.

WHAT IS SEX?

In general in the United States today, people often use the terms **sex** and **gender** interchangeably. This is incorrect and leads to a lot of confusion. So first we will define these concepts (and other related ones) so that the terms used in this text are clear.

cultural relativism

the idea that we should seek to understand another person’s beliefs and behaviors from the perspective of their own culture and not our own.

ethnocentric/ ethnocentrism

the tendency to view one’s own culture as most important and correct and as the yardstick by which to measure all other cultures.

sex

refers to male and female identity based on internal and external sex organs and chromosomes. While male and female are the most common biologic sexes, a percentage of the human population is intersex with ambiguous or mixed biological sex characteristics.

gender

the set of culturally and historically invented beliefs and expectations about gender that one learns and performs. Gender is an “identity” one can choose in some societies, but there is pressure in all societies to conform to expected gender roles and identities.

In the United States, as in other parts of the world, sex is generally understood to be the biological component that marks people as either male or female. Many believe that sex is a fixed characteristic that is determined at birth and can always be easily defined and determined. One way people define sex is by examining the genitalia of a person. For instance, expectant parents often use ultrasounds to get an educated guess of the sex of their baby before it is born (see figure 1.1). Chromosomes provide more definitive evidence, as fetuses or infants typically exhibit an XX or XY chromosomal combination. However, it is important to understand that there are more genetic combinations possible than simply XX or XY, and sometimes genitals are not clearly defined at birth. Intersex people (once referred to by the derogatory term *hermaphrodites*) may display ambiguous genitalia or possess a different chromosomal combination, such as XXY. Intersex people have been born in all societies throughout time. It is estimated that approximately 1.7 percent of the world population is intersex (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

In some societies, intersex people are revered as sacred and take on special roles in the community. In others, such as the United States, they have historically been seen as “deviant” and are often surgically “assigned” a sex shortly after birth. However, starting in the 1990s in the United States this practice has been increasingly challenged. Many parents now refrain from assigning a sex to intersex children at birth, allowing the child to later determine their own sex and gender identities instead.



Figure 1.1. Expectant parents often use ultrasounds to get an idea of the sex of their baby before it is born. Dr. Wolfgang Moroder; CC BY-SA.

Another way that people determine sex is by studying hormone levels and traits that develop in puberty. Sex-linked hormones such as testosterone and estrogen are excreted by both men and women and are responsible for the development of secondary sex characteristics such as height, muscle mass, and body fat distribution. However these characteristics are not always clearly defined. For instance, many biologically “normal” women have higher muscle mass than some men and many biologically “normal” men are shorter than some women. And while it is generally understood that men excrete more testosterone than women and women more estrogen, recent research is changing our understanding of human hormone physiology. For instance, some studies have shown that the levels of testosterone can rise in women as a result of wielding power in social situations, regardless of whether it is done in stereotypically masculine or feminine ways (van Anders 2015). Thus it’s becoming clear that testosterone and estrogen are not biologically fixed but that gender socialization may affect their excretion by encouraging or discouraging people toward behaviors that can modify their physiology.

There are also conditions in which a person’s sex can change throughout their lives. For instance there are documented cases including the *Guevedoce* of the Dominican Republic in which some children (about 1 percent of the population) look like girls at birth, with no testes and what appears to be a vagina. They are subsequently socialized as girls during childhood. However, during puberty, when hormone levels rise, they begin to grow a penis, their testicles descend, they develop a “masculine” physique, and they are frequently then seen as male (Imperato-McGinley 1975). In sum, while sex may refer to biology, it is not easily defined by the binary opposition between “male” and “female.” There are actually additional complexities to consider.

For more information on intersexuality, do some research on the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) and the Accord Alliance.

WHAT IS SEXUALITY?

As we have discussed, sex refers to the biological basis (male/female/intersex) for gender (man/woman/trans/third gender). Just as gender is not inextricably linked to sex, sexuality is experienced independently of both. In short, sexuality refers to “what we find erotic and how we take pleasure in our bodies” (Stryker 2008, 33). Like gender, sexuality and sexual practices vary from culture to culture and across time and so must also be considered socially constructed.

Sexual orientation refers to the ways in which we seek out erotic pleasure or how our sexuality is “oriented” toward particular types of people. Thus, heterosexuality refers to an orientation toward pleasure that takes place between men and women, while homosexuality refers to

transgender

a category for people who transition from one sex to another, either male-to-female or female-to-male.

erotic pleasure between men or between women. Bisexuality refers to an orientation that includes both men and women, while asexuality refers to the absence of a desire or sexual orientation toward other people. However, this is not to say that these are the only ways people experience sexuality. In fact, the concept of humans as either “heterosexual” or “homosexual” is a culturally and historically specific invention that is increasingly being challenged in the United States and elsewhere. Indeed, humans show a great deal of flexibility and variability in their sexual orientations and practices. Rather than being simply natural, human sexuality is one of the most culturally significant, regulated, and symbolic of all human capacities.

WHAT IS GENDER?

While sex refers to one’s biology (male, female, intersex), gender refers to a person’s internal identity as “masculine,” “feminine,” or some combination thereof. Gender is also something that is publicly expressed and shaped by culturally acceptable ways of being “male” or “female.” People tend to internalize and naturalize these expectations in ways that make gender categories seem “natural” and normal. In fact, the ways that people, things, actions, places, spaces, etc. are gendered sometimes seem invisible to people, even though they are central to the ways that society is organized.

For instance, consider the following thought experiment. Think about the ways that your day is organized by your gender. Consider, first, how you woke up this morning and started your day. What was the pattern of your bedsheets and the color of your toothbrush? Do these reveal something about your gender identity? What do the bottles of shampoo and body soap you used in the shower look like? What does your deodorant smell like? Do these reflect your gender? What style of clothing did you choose to wear today? Did you apply any skin treatments or makeup? Did you apply a perfume/cologne? What does the scent say about your gender? Once you left your home, how did you move your body and walk and talk to others? What was the tone of your voice like, and what were the choices of words you spoke? What do these actions say about your gender? Do they conform with societal expectations, or do they defy them in some ways? Do you think conforming to or defying these expectations make your life easier or more difficult?

As you can see, gender is a pervasive social category that impacts people’s lives in multiple and intimate ways. Studies of gender teach us that the categories of “man” and “woman,” which we often think of as

being “natural” categories, are in fact cultural constructs. That is, they are ways of being, doing, and even performing one’s identity that are shaped by a particular culture and often based on the biological labels assigned to us. As children, we begin to learn **gender ideologies** from the moment we are born, and a small blue or pink hat is placed on our head. As babies, our gender label can impact the way our caregivers interact with us. As we grow, we learn the “correct” and “normal” ways to behave based on the category we are assigned to (“boy” or “girl”) and then the toys we are given, the advertisements we see, the activities we engage in, and so on (see figure 1.2).

EXPLORE: Watch this video (<https://vimeo.com/209451071>) by Anne Fausto-Sterling, which elaborates on how gender is formed in childhood and how it can change throughout one’s life.

We readily accept that clothing, language, and music are cultural— invented, created, and alterable—but often find it difficult to accept that gender is not natural but deeply embedded in and shaped by culture (see figure 1.3). We struggle with the idea that the division of humans into only two categories, “male” and “female,” is not universal, that “male” and “female” are cultural concepts that take different forms and have

gender ideology

a complex set of beliefs about gender and gendered capacities, propensities, roles, identities, and socially expected behaviors and interactions that apply to males, females, and other gender categories. Gender ideology can differ across cultures and is acquired through enculturation.



Figure 1.2. Many consumer products are marketed as either masculine or feminine. These include razors, body soap, deodorant, shampoo, and so on. Do you think there are significant differences in the makeup of these products? Why do you think consumers prefer gendered products? Harry Somers, CC-BY.



Figure 1.3a/1.3b. People readily accept that things like clothing are cultural constructions, but many find it more difficult to appreciate the ways that gender is embedded in and shaped by culture. (1.3a) US Marine Corps, Carol Highsmith, (1.3b) Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

different meanings cross-culturally. For anthropologists, the comparative method—contrasting certain cultural elements cross-culturally—helps us see how categories like “male” and “female” are not universal but are cultural constructions.

Part of the difficulty of seeing gender as a cultural construct is that gender also has a biological component, unlike other types of cultural inventions such as a sewing machine, cell phone, or poem. We do have

bodies, and there are some male-female differences, including in reproductive capacities and roles (albeit far fewer than we have been taught). Similarly, sexuality, sexual desires, and responses are partially rooted in natural human capacities. However, in many ways, sexuality and gender are like food. We have a biologically rooted need to eat to survive, and we have the capacity to enjoy eating. What constitutes “food,” what is “delicious” or “repulsive,” and the contexts and meanings that surround food and human eating—those are cultural. Many potentially edible items are not “food” (for example, rats, bumblebees, and cats in the United States), and the concept of “food” itself is embedded in elaborate conventions about eating: how, when, with whom, where, with “utensils,” for what purposes? In short, gender and sexuality, like eating, have biological components. But cultures over time have built complex edifices around them, creating systems of meaning that often barely resemble what is natural and innate. We experience gender and sexuality largely through the prism of the culture or cultures to which we have been exposed and in which we have been raised.

In this book we are asking you to reflect deeply on the ways in which what we have been taught to think of as natural—that is, our sex, gender, and sexuality—is, in fact, deeply embedded in and shaped by our culture. We challenge you to explore exactly which, if any, aspects of our gender and our sexuality are totally natural. One powerful aspect of culture, and one reason cultural norms feel so natural, is that we learn culture the way we learn our native language: without formal instruction, in social contexts, unconsciously picking it up from others around us. Soon, it becomes deeply embedded in our brains. We no longer think consciously about the meaning of the sounds we hear when someone says “hello” unless we do not speak English. Nor is it difficult to “tell the time” on a “clock” even though “time” and “clocks” are complex cultural inventions. These norms seem “natural” to us, and when we go against the norms we are often considered “deviant.” These sociocultural norms are continually being reinforced and reinvented as people resist or enforce them. This is what we mean when we refer to *social constructionism*. The same principles apply to gender and sexuality. We learn very early (by at least age three) about the categories of gender in our culture—that individuals are either “male” or “female” and that elaborate beliefs, behaviors, and meanings are associated with each gender. We can think of this complex set of ideas as a gender ideology or a cultural model of gender. Looking at humans and human cultures cross-culturally we can observe incredible variations and diversity that

EXPLORE: Take a look at Dr. Wesch’s video on “The Matrix & the Social Construction of Reality” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rukdvq8v8So>). In it, he tries to teach and learn from his young son about social constructionism.

exist in terms of sex and gender. This diversity, along with changing attitudes toward sex and gender, provides evidence to support social constructionist perspectives.

GENDER IDEOLOGIES

Words can reveal cultural beliefs. A good example is the term “sex.” In the past, sex referred both to sexuality and to someone’s biological sex: male or female. Today, although sex still refers to sexuality, “gender” now means not only the categories of male and female but also other gender possibilities. Why has this occurred? The change in terminology reflects profound alterations in gender ideology in the United States (and elsewhere). Gender ideology refers to the collective set of beliefs about the appropriate roles, rights, and responsibilities of men and women in society. Throughout this book you will read about various historical constructions of gender ideologies in different parts of the world. In particular, you will explore how the systems of colonialism profoundly shaped gender ideologies in places like Latin America and South Asia and how these gender ideologies continue to change.

In the past, influenced by Judeo-Christian religion and nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific beliefs, biology (and reproductive capacity) was literally considered to be destiny. Males and females—at least “normal” males and females—were thought to be born with different intellectual, physical, and moral capacities, preferences, tastes, personalities, and predispositions for violence and suffering. Ironically, many cultures, including European Christianity in the Middle Ages, viewed women as having a strong, often “insatiable” sexual “drive” and capacity. But by the nineteenth century, women and their sexuality were largely defined in reproductive terms, as in their capacity to “carry a man’s child.” Even late twentieth-century human sexuality texts often referred only to “reproductive systems,” to genitals as “reproductive” organs, and excluded the “clitoris” and other female organs of sexual pleasure that had no reproductive function. For women, the primary (if not sole) legitimate purpose of sexuality was reproduction.

Nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century European and US gender ideologies linked sexuality and gender in other ways. Sexual preference—the sex to whom one was attracted—was “naturally” heterosexual, at least among “normal” humans, and “normal,” according to mid-twentieth-century Freudian-influenced psychology, was defined largely by whether one adhered to conventional gender roles for males and females. So, appropriately, “masculine” men were “naturally” attracted to “feminine”

women and vice versa. Homosexuality, too, was depicted not just as a sexual preference but as gender-inappropriate role behavior, including things like gestures, cadence of speech and style of clothing. This is apparent in old stereotypes of gay men as “effeminate” (acting like a female, wearing “female” fabrics such as silk or colors such as pink, and participating in “feminine” professions like ballet) and of lesbian women as “butch” (cropped hair, riding motorcycles, wearing leather—prototypical masculinity). Once again, separate phenomena—sexual preference and gender role performance—were conflated because of beliefs that rooted both in biology. “Abnormality” in one sphere (sexual preference) was linked to “abnormality” in the other sphere (gendered capacities and preferences).

In short, the gender and sexual ideologies were based on **biological determinism**. According to this theory, males and females were supposedly born fundamentally different reproductively and in other major capacities. They were therefore believed to be “naturally” (biologically) capable of different activities and were sexually attracted to each other, although women’s sexual “drive” was not very well developed relative to men’s and was reproductively oriented.

REJECTING BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

Decades of research on gender and sexuality, including by feminist anthropologists, have challenged these old theories, particularly biological determinism. We now understand that cultures, not nature, create the gender ideologies that go along with being born male, female, or intersex, and the ideologies vary widely, cross-culturally. What is considered “man’s work” in some societies, such as carrying heavy loads or farming, can be “woman’s work” in others. What is “masculine” and “feminine” varies: pink and blue, for example, are culturally invented gender-color linkages, and skirts and “make-up” can be worn by men, indeed by “warriors” (see figure 1.4).

Margaret Mead was among the first anthropologists to explore the social construction of gender cross-culturally in the 1930s. She traveled to New Guinea and studied among three cultural groups, the Arapesh, the Mundugumor and Tchambuli, documenting gender expressions and personalities, describing her findings in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). She found that each society had different gender ideologies, and all were significantly distinct from those in the United States at that time. For instance, among the Arapesh both men and women had similar temperaments. They were gentle, cooperative, and sensitive to the needs of others. Men as well as women were intimately

biological determinism
the scientifically unsupported view that biological differences (rather than culture) between males and females lead to fundamentally different capacities, preferences, and gendered behaviors.



Figure 1.4. Wodaabe men (of the Sahel region of Africa) wear makeup and dance in elaborate dress for an annual courtship ritual competition. Women select the most attractive man to marry. Dan Lundberg; CC BY-SA 2.0.

involved with parenting and childcare, including infant care. Among the Mundugumor, similar to the Araphesh, both men and women had similar characteristics. However the Mundugamor, by contrast, tended to be aggressive, insecure, selfish, individualistic, violent, and lacking in self-control. The Tchambuli differed from these cultural patterns in that both male and female temperaments were distinct from each other. While they were structurally a **patriarchal** society, the women tended to be more dominant, impersonal, efficient, and managerial. They often had the last word in economic decisions and asserted their dominant position frequently and in a variety of ways (Mead 1935, 252). Men were typically less responsible, less forceful, more interested in artistic sensibilities and more emotionally dependent.

Mead's work provided strong evidence against some early twentieth-century anthropology claims positing that specific gender roles and male dominance were part of our evolutionary heritage and fixed characteristics of human biology. This gender ideology argued that males evolved to be food providers—stronger, more aggressive, more effective leaders with cooperative and bonding capacities, planning skills, and technological inventiveness (toolmaking, for example). By contrast, females were never supposed to acquire those capacities because they were burdened by their reproductive roles—pregnancy, giving birth, lactation, and childcare—and thus became dependent on males for food and protection. These gender ideologies were persistent and persuasive; indeed, in many societies today, men are portrayed as active, dominant leaders, and women are viewed as passive, subordinate followers. Similar stories are invoked today for

everything from some men's love of hunting to why men dominate “technical” fields, accumulate tools, have extramarital affairs, or commit the vast majority of homicides.

Strength and toughness remain defining characteristics of masculinity in the United States and other countries. However, decades of research have altered our views of human sex and gender and our evolutionary past. As a way to understand the ways humans evolved, many biological anthropologists look to nonhuman primates for insight, as we share a common ancestor that is more recent than other animals. For many years primatologists believed that nonhuman primates live exclusively in male-centered, male-dominated groups and that females are passive. These assumptions were used to claim that this structure in humans is biologically predestined and based on our evolutionary origins. However, more recent research has shown that, in fact, this does not accurately describe our closest primate relatives: gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos.

The stereotypes came from 1960s research on ground-dwelling savannah baboons. It suggested they are organized socially by a stable male-dominant hierarchy. The “core” of the group was established through force and regulated sexual access to females, providing internal and external defense of the “troop” in a supposedly hostile savannah environment. Females were thought to lack hierarchies or coalitions, were passive, and were part of dominant male “harems.” This understanding changed with more nuanced research. Critics first argued that baboons, as monkeys rather than apes,¹ were too far removed from humans evolutionarily to tell us much about early human social organization. Then, further research on baboons living in other environments by primatologists such as Thelma Rowell discovered that those baboons are neither male focused nor male dominated. Instead, the stable group core is **matrifocal**—a mother and her offspring constituted the central and enduring ties. Her research also illustrated that males do not control females' sexuality. Quite the contrary, in fact: females mate freely and frequently, choosing males of all ages, sometimes establishing special relationships—“friends with favors.” Dominance, while infrequent, is not based simply on size or strength; it is learned, situational, and often stress-induced. And like other primates, both male and female baboons use sophisticated strategies, dubbed “primate politics,” to predict and manipulate the intricate

matrifocal

groups of related females (e.g., mother, her sisters, their offspring) form the core of the family and constitute the family's most central and enduring social and emotional ties.

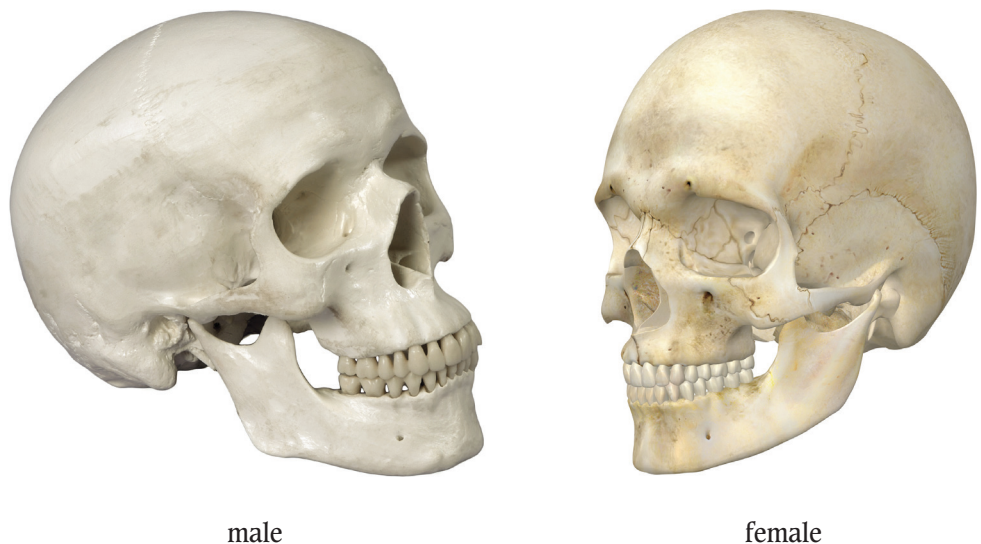
1. Research indicates that humans are more closely related to African apes than monkeys. The last common ancestor between chimpanzees and humans was alive approximately eight million years ago, whereas Old World monkeys and apes diverged around twenty-five million years ago (Shook et al. 2019).

social networks in which they live. Rowell also restudied the savannah baboons. Even they do not fit the baboon “stereotype,” she found that their groups are loosely structured with no specialized stable male-leadership coalitions and are sociable, matrifocal, and infant-centered much like Rhesus monkeys. Females actively initiate sexual encounters with a variety of male partners. When attacked by predators or frightened by some other major threat, males, rather than “defending the troop,” typically flee first, leaving the infant-carrying females to follow behind.

Research among primates as well as other lines of research are helping us better understand the complex relationship between behavior and biology among male and female primates, including humans. Ongoing research in a variety of disciplines shows that the biological differences between men and women are less pronounced than we believed previously. For instance, research on human parental care has shown that when caring for infants, men excrete equal amounts of hormones oxytocin and prolactin as women do when they go through childbirth and lactation (Gordon 2010). These hormones play an important role in bonding with infants and encourage positive care behaviors, demonstrating that, biologically, men can be equally sensitive to the needs of infants as women.

Like many other primates, humans show a degree of sexual dimorphism, or differences in stature, musculature, and skeletal robustness between males and females, although much less than other primates (see figure 1.5). Yet there is also a lot of variability among males and females.

Figure 1.5a–d. Many non-human primates such as gorillas display much more sexual dimorphism than humans. You can see the differences in size and robustness in the male gorilla compared to the female gorilla. These differences are much less noticeable among humans where the female skull is nearly the same size as the male skull. Henri et George/Shutterstock; Randall Reed/Shutterstock; uzuri/Shutterstock; ivanpavlisiko/Shutterstock.





male



female

For instance, some females are taller than some males, and some males have more body fat than some females. Research on cross-cultural gender norms, human biology, primatology among others, demonstrates that these differences do not dictate behaviors nor predict abilities in individuals. The relationship between human biology and behavior is much more complex than we ever knew and strongly influenced by culture. In anthropology, looking at the ways in which our biology influences our culture—and how our culture influences our biology—is called the “biocultural” approach and is an exciting and growing area of research.

BEYOND THE BINARY

As you have seen, anthropologists love to shake up notions of what is “natural” and “normal.” One common assumption is that all cultures divide human beings into a binary or dualistic model of gender. However, in some cultures gender is more fluid and flexible, allowing individuals born as one biological sex to assume another gender or creating more than two genders from which individuals can select.

Some examples of nonbinary cultures come from precontact Native America. Anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict long ago identified a fairly widespread phenomenon of so-called **Two-Spirit** people, individuals who did not comfortably conform to the gender roles and gender ideol-

Two-Spirit

A Native American term referring to individuals who combined gendered activities of both men, giving them a unique status. They were considered neither men nor women but were seen as a distinct, alternative third gender.

ogy normally associated with their biological sex. Among the precontact Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, which was a relatively gender-egalitarian horticultural society, for example, individuals could choose an alternative role of “not-men” or “not-women.” A Two-Spirit Zuni man would do the work and wear clothing normally associated with females, having shown a preference for female-identified activities and symbols at an early age. In some cases, he would eventually marry a man (see figure 1.6). Early European ethnocentric reports often described it as a form of homosexuality. Anthropologists suggested more complex motivations, including dreams of selection by spirits, individual psychologies, biological characteristics, and negative aspects of male roles (e.g., warfare). Most significantly, these alternative gender roles were acceptable, publicly recognized, and sometimes venerated. For example, a Kutenai woman known to have lived in 1811 was originally married to a French-Canadian man but then returned to the Kutenai and assumed a male gender role, changing her name to Kauxuma nupika (Gone-to-the-Spirits), becoming a spiritual prophet, and eventually marrying a woman.

Burrnesha, or “sworn virgins” in Albania are another example of a third gender. In traditionally patriarchal parts of Albanian society, gender roles are strict and place substantial limitations on women. Sworn virgins are women who renounce sexual relations completely to become honorary men, taking on the role of the man in their household and community;



Figure 1.6. We Wha (1849–1896), a Zuni Two-Spirit person. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

they dress, act, and are treated as men (enjoying the relative freedoms of men as well) (see figure 1.7). Another, more well-known example of a nonbinary gender system is found among the Hijra in India, who are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5 of this book (see figure 1.9). Often referred to as a **third gender**, these individuals are usually biologically male but adopt female clothing, gestures, and names; eschew sexual desire and sexual activity; and go through religious rituals that give them certain divine powers, including blessing or cursing couples' fertility and performing at weddings and births. Hijra may undergo voluntary surgical removal of genitals through a nirvan or rebirth operation. Some hijra are males born with ambiguous external genitals, such as a particularly small penis or testicles that did not fully descend.

third gender

a gender identity that exists in nonbinary gender systems offering one or more gender roles separate from male or female.



Figure 1.7.
In Albania,
Burnesha or
“sworn virgins”
are women who
become honorary
men, taking on
the role of men in
their community;
they dress, act,
and are treated
like men. © 2011
Jill Peters.

As we have discussed in the section “What Is Sex?,” research has shown that individuals with ambiguous genitals, sometimes called “intersex,” are surprisingly common, as are those whose internal gender identity does not conform to their socially recognized gender or sex. So what are cultures to do when faced with an infant or child who cannot easily be “sexed”? Some cultures, including in the United States, used to force children into one of the two binary categories, even if it required surgery or hormone therapy. But in other places, such as India and among the Isthmus Zapotec in southern Oaxaca, Mexico, they have instead created a third gender category that has an institutional identity and role to perform in society (Mirande 2015) (see figure 1.8).



Figure 1.8. Muxes are a third gender recognized in indigenous Zapotec Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico. Muxes play important social and family roles and are generally respected by the local community. Mario Patinho; CC-SA 4.0 International.

Figure 1.9. In India, many people ask hijras to grant their newborn babies good health, since hijras are believed to have a God-given ability to bestow blessings. Ina Goel.



These cross-cultural examples demonstrate that the traditional rigid binary gender model in the United States is neither universal nor necessary. While all cultures recognize at least two biological sexes, usually based on genitals visible at birth (and have created at least two gender roles), many cultures go beyond the binary model, offering a third or fourth (or more) gender categories. Other cultures allow individuals to adopt, without sanctions, a gender role that is not congruent with their biological sex. In short, biology need not be destiny when it comes to gender roles, as we are increasingly discovering in the United States. Or, as Anne Fausto-Sterling asserts, “Sex and gender are best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space” (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Indeed, research is increasingly pointing to considerable flexibility in gender and sex throughout human cultures.

Menstrual Equity

Ambivalence and even fear of female sexuality, or negative associations with female bodily fluids, such as menstrual blood, are widespread in the world’s major religions. Orthodox Jewish women are not supposed to sleep in the same bed as their husbands when menstruating. In Kypseli, Greece, people believe that menstruating women can cause wine to go bad. In some Catholic Portuguese villages, menstruating women are restricted from preparing fresh pork sausages and from being in the room where the sausages are made as their presence is believed to cause the pork to spoil. Contact with these women also supposedly wilts plants and causes inexplicable movements of objects. Orthodox forms of Hinduism prohibit menstruating women from activities such as cooking and attending temples. These traditions are being challenged. A 2016 British Broadcasting Company (BBC) television program, for example, described “Happy to Bleed,” a movement in India to change negative attitudes about menstruation and eliminate the ban on menstruating-age women entering the famous Sabriamala Temple in Kerala. Activists around the world have launched social movements and other projects to make menstruation less taboo and make feminine hygiene products more easily accessible. The film *Period End of Sentence*, which won the 2018 Oscar for Best Documentary, illustrates one example of such an effort in India. The profile that follows describes another important project to further menstrual equity in Zimbabwe.

For more information on the menstrual equity movement, visit The Pad Project: <https://thepadproject.org/>

PROFILE: SAVE THE GIRL CHILD MOVEMENT

Nolwazi Ncube, University of Cape Town

Save the Girl Child Movement (SGCM; <https://www.savethegirlchildmovement.org/>) with its flagship program, “Save the Girl-with-a-Vision” (SGV) was founded by Nolwazi Ncube, a Zimbabwean menstrual activist. Girls in Zimbabwe are said to miss as many as 528 days across the full span of their school-going years. SGV is a rural development program in the Umzingwane District of Zimbabwe, which was established to combat this problem and improve educational outcomes for adolescent girls. SGV is a multipronged program providing: (1) sanitary wear relief, (2) mentorship, and (3) financial support. SGV beneficiaries or “Saved Girls” receive free sanitary wear from the time they enter into the program until they have finished school. We have chosen to focus our activities in the Umzingwane district, which lies in the underserved and historically underdeveloped area of Matabeleland South Province; however, SGV also makes donations to other communities in need outside of Umzingwane, since the need for sanitary wear is a nationwide issue. There is an uneven division of the burden of domestic labor that falls more heavily on the shoulders of girls than boys. Cultural practice dictates that disposable sanitary wear is not meant to be disposed of along with household trash. As a result, girls must go into the field or forest and make a fire to burn and dispose of it. SGV focuses mostly on the provision of reusable pads for rural girls



Figure 1.10. The villagers of Mbizingwe after the sanitary wear distribution of April 26, 2019. Josh Webster.

as it is their expressed preference, since disposable sanitary wear comes with its own encumbrances that add to the burden of labor they already participate in.

The high school completion rate for girls in the catchment area is very low, as they are faced with many different challenges that impact their educational outcomes. In order to assist with this, the SGV program



Figure 1.11. Community elder, human rights activist and cofounder of SGV, Joice Dube. Josh Webster.



Figure 1.12. Nolwazi Ncube, founder of SGCM, distributing washable sanitary wear. Josh Webster.

has developed a set of criteria for prioritizing its most needy girls who are at high risk of dropping out of school. It considers factors such as orphanhood, family income, and stability of family structure. SGV also has a “buy-a-bike” initiative whereby sponsors can purchase a bike for a girl and to make the distance to the nearest secondary schools more manageable. Save the Girl Child Movement is supported by a small donor called the Geddes Foundation in Cyprus; donations can also be made on this web link: <https://geddesfoundation.com/save-the-girl/>.

Each year to raise menstrual education and hygiene awareness and mobilize funds for program activities, Save the Girl Child Movement launches its annual Let’s Get Padded Up #LGPU campaign (<https://www.gofundme.com/lets-get-padded-up-campaign>) with the tagline “Every girl needs pads. PERIOD.” Let’s Get Padded Up fundraisers are organized in conjunction with strategic partners—with special mention to the Rotaract Club of Harare West, the Rotary Club of Harare West, and the Rotaract Club of Borrowdale Brooke. Rotaract clubs are the youth program for Rotary International for young adults up to age thirty. With the help of these clubs, the 2018 Let’s Get Padded Up campaign met its target and was able to obtain a donation of five hundred sanitary hygiene kits from Days for Girls, a nonprofit organization in Australia that sews washable sanitary wear.



Figure 1.13. SGV beneficiaries in the village of Mbizingwe. If you raise up a girl child, you raise a village. Josh Webster.