

‘Performing Gender’: Concepts and Contemporary Issues.

- Research on gender and sex in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis started in the early 1970s.
- Investigators examined two domains of language behaviour in particular: speech **behaviour of men and women** on the phonological level, and interactions (conversational styles) between women and men in discourse.
- Owing to the many contradictory approaches, assumptions and results, it is necessary to develop a critical approach to this vast literature.
- All the claims made about women and men at different times, in different circumstances and with totally different samples, on the basis of **different implicit ideologies about gender**, must be analysed carefully and viewed in relation to the development of gender studies in the social sciences.

- At this time in the 1960s and early 1970s, **the sheer number of women concentrated in the humanities in comparison to other academic fields** made it an area ripe for feminist critique, since women's existence in such numbers here was itself the result of the **gendered logic of the workplace**.
- It is at this stage, during the late 1960s in the US and from the mid-to late 1970s in the UK, that women's studies as a specialised area of academic interest began to develop, as well as rapidly spreading elsewhere around the globe (the first British women's studies programmes were all taught MAs, emerging first in Kent (1980) and then York and Warwick).
- Thus **women's studies** as a discrete area of study was born, even though the early days were characterised by a huge rush of energy, where 'such courses began to be taught, quite spontaneously and without substantial prior organisation, at many US colleges and universities beginning in 1969' (Tobias 1978: 86).

- Formal characteristics of academic study, particularly the teacher–student relationship and assessment, were kept under scrutiny and other means of teaching and assessment than the formal lecture or seminar, the essay or examination were experimented with.
- One thing is certain: the creation of this area announced with confidence that women were worthy of study in their own right, and suggested a clear success for feminist political analysis.

- Firmly **interdisciplinary** in perspective, women's studies initially resided mainly (if uneasily) within the disciplines of English, history and sociology, and was dependent upon the energies of sometimes isolated individuals working within a generally male-oriented curriculum.
- Once women's studies programmes emerged, often gathering together the work of scholars across the disciplines into one centre or as the core team of a master's or undergraduate degree, **the area developed a clearer identity.**

- Rather than seeing its major role as casting a critical eye over the **traditional disciplines**, women's studies could become more broadly a contestation of knowledges under **patriarchy** and allow a **reevaluation of knowledge, art and experience** that had formed the basis of women's lives.
- Broadly speaking it is still centred around the social sciences, arts and humanities rather than the physical sciences and related disciplines such as engineering and medicine, but the presence of women's studies in the academy has had wider ramifications as the core practices and prejudices of the latter come under scrutiny.

- Together, these theoretical approaches have had a great impact on **feminism, women's studies and men's studies**, and have been a key driver of the **increased recognition of diversity** and difference.
- **Inequalities and differences**, not just between genders but within genders, based on class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, nationality, religion, and citizenship status, for example, are now attended to. In this context, 'women's studies' and 'men's studies' have become increasingly contested terms.
- As **understandings of gender have developed as a complex, multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary area**, involving the **study of relationships** within as well as between genders, the term '**gender studies**' has gained currency, albeit not uncontested.

- **Gender is a mix of nature and culture, of biology and learned behavior.**
- **Understanding gender requires, therefore, an understanding between the biological, social and cultural levels**
- Culture would seem, therefore, to have a natural basis.

Traditional and Modern Cultural Perspectives on Gender Roles.

Political and economic narratives of European history often rely upon an implicit **model of progress**, whereas no such neat story exists in European gender history.

Attention to topics of gender history, such as sexuality, marriage, reproduction, and birth control, teaches us important lessons about resistances to change and the **uneven distribution of power in society**.

Eighteenth-century European institutions of Church, State, and family rested on patriarchal assumptions subordinating women to men. Though the use of scriptural justification for male authority was waning by the eighteenth century, most social relations between women and men remained determined by conventions of male dominance.

- New political arguments, moreover, substituted civil authority for the Church, naming **men** as legal representatives of all other members of families.
- In towns and throughout the countryside, the majority of European women spent their entire lives, as daughters, sisters, servants, or wives, **within the confines of households governed by men.**
- **Married women lacked the right to own or administer property, defend themselves in court, and seek legal remedy for physical abuse.** The sexual division of labor insured that their reproductive and working lives would be adapted to household status and needs.
- **Marriage** was often as much a decision about **work arrangements** as sexual preference; autonomy was a concept of little relevance.
- Within households and families, the question of **authority** was seldom raised, overlaid as it was by custom, popular wisdom, and unvarnished material need.

- In the next century and a half, Europeans would question the authority of fathers, kings, and aristocrats; cultural changes would slowly undermine religious dogma and time-honored customs.
- Though undeveloped peasant economies and absolutist governments followed a different path to the twentieth century, they could not resist registering the impact of population change, the spread of epidemic disease, and the arrival of new technologies of **power** and transport.
- **Such forces hastened alterations of social relations and, in turn, the constructions of gender in each nation.**

- **Between 1918 and 2000, gender relations in the “West,”** the name we will use for the countries in the title – underwent **major readjustments.**
- The degree and rate of change varied in different countries, but followed parallel trajectories.
- **Gender relations were experienced differently not only in different nations, but also by class, occupation, ethnic background, and religious affiliation.** Nonetheless, four patterns emerged and continue to be of major significance.

- (1) Women gained the **suffrage** in the early twentieth century but it was not until the late twentieth century that they entered the mainstream political arena in significant numbers. In the last two decades, impoverished indigenous minorities in First World countries, other minority women – black, colored, indigenous, and immigrant – also embarked on political activity on behalf of their own communities in significant numbers.
- (2) Women, especially married women with children, took on a greater and less unequal share of **waged labor**. This accompanied significant changes in household structure, away from the nuclear family with four or more children to new forms of relationships and fewer children.
- (3) Women **increased their capacity to control reproduction** and expectations were raised that men would begin to involve themselves more in the domestic sphere and child rearing.
- (4) For heterosexuals, **sexuality was increasingly split from reproduction and became recreational**, while gays and lesbians gained increased public acceptance of alternative sexualities and indeed of the right to raise children.

- The **suffrage opened doors** for all women, even those who had opposed it.
- **Single women** were much more common in the 1920s and they had to **work**.
- Women, especially of the working classes, were already accustomed to waged work.
- On the eve of the war, women constituted between a quarter and a third of the working population in most Western countries, ranging from 25 percent in the US and 28 percent in the UK to 36 percent in France.
- This proportion changed little after the war.

- Middle-class women were able to take up new educational and career opportunities. In Europe, women made up half of the secondary school population by World War II.
- The USA was unique: women's entry into higher education had already begun, so that women made up nearly half of all higher-education enrolments in the early 1920s.
- A **cultural revolution** produced a new image of women as **free, assertive, and independent**.
- Most commonly associated with that **image** was short or "bobbed" hair, which profoundly shocked a culture that read hair length as a primary sign of gender. One well-to-do French woman told her hairdresser, "[long hair] is the symbol of our past servitude; its loss will put an end to our humiliation."

- Women experienced greatly increased access to public space.
- Progress toward birth control (the term was coined in 1914 by the American feminist Margaret Sanger) had begun before the war.
- Average family size fell from **5–7 children** at the turn of the century to **2–4 in the 1930s**.

Emancipation & Backlashes

- Women who used birth control faced a **backlash**, however.
- The war had left so many dead that **conservatives** in many countries pushed through legislation to pressure women (and the remaining men) to produce children to replace those killed in the war.
- Most countries **refused** to grant women control over their bodies. **Anti-abortion laws** were introduced or reinforced. French laws of 1920 and 1923 provided prison terms for anyone involved in abortion, including the pregnant woman.

- The world depression that began in the US in 1929 not only brought widespread unemployment but also a **changed climate for gender relations**.
- Hollywood embraced a code which provided that “the sanctity of the institution of **marriage** and the home shall be upheld.”
- Women learned how to attract men from a new generation of cheap mass circulation women’s magazines, *Wife and Home* (UK, 1929), *Australian Women’s Weekly* (1933), *Marie-Claire* (France, 1937), *Confidences* (France, 1938), and *Elle* (France, 1945).

- In most English-speaking countries, World War II led to the **massive industrial mobilization of women** and to their inclusion in the armed forces of many countries, though not in combat roles.
- In the US, the famous poster of “**Rosie the Riveter**” appeared widely, **urging women to join the war effort by working for industry**, especially in armaments.
- The mythical figure of Rosie was created to encourage women to enter the workforce and help increase production for the war effort.
- They responded: the **number of women employed** outside the home rose from 11.97 million in 1940 to 18.61 million in 1945.

- The Fascist and Nazi regimes and those which collaborated with them, like Quisling's Norway and Vichy France, shared an emphasis on restoring the family, by which they meant **returning women to domestic roles.**
- Vichy France changed the famous "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality" to "Work, Family, Fatherland." Men's position as "**head of the family**" was reinforced and divorce made more difficult.
- Vichy promulgated measures **to return women to the home,** but the demands of the Nazis for additional labor made this impossible in reality.

- In America, the Cold War meant an extreme **conservative backlash**, a cultural revolution that ruled off the agenda many issues debated in the preceding half century.
- In the new atmosphere, great efforts were made to roll back the 1920s' loosening of the gender order.
- The 1930 Screen Code was revised, further emphasizing domesticity (only twin beds, not double beds could be shown in bedroom scenes!). Government bodies financed short films for cinema in which experts, often women, explained that **children needed a mother at home.**
- Other experts produced books arguing that women's place was in the home: *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* argued that successful marriage required a dependent spouse; the best-selling *Child Care and the Growth of Love* "proved" that children needed a **full-time mother at home.**

- Throughout the Western world, men and women sought comfort in **domesticity** from the horrors of depression, Fascism and war, a war whose ravages had, much more than World War I, affected every corner of Europe and spread to all corners of the globe.
- The car made possible the new **suburban** way of life and with it a new focus on the home, on the private, on the individual, on what Kristin Ross has called a *“movement inward...the withdrawal of the new middle classes to their newly comfortable domestic interiors, to the electric kitchens, to the enclosure of private equality and difference in the twentieth-century West automobiles, to the interior of a new vision of conjugality and an ideology of happiness built around the new unit of middle-class consumption, the couple.”*
- Prosperity translated this ideology into reality.

- In terms of representations, Hollywood held up maternity and domesticity as ideals while a housing boom offered women new spaces for modern domesticity
- All these circumstances led in the decade after the war to a temporary increase in the birth rate which we now call the **“baby boom.”**
- Increased expectations may even have **increased housework**. British middle-class women, who got these appliances first, nearly doubled their time on housework, from 4.17 hours a day in 1937 to 7.5 hours in 1961!
- Working-class women, however, may not have had to meet the same expectations and may have benefited slightly from appliances. **British working-class women spent more than eight hours a day on housework** in 1937, but only 7.5 hours in 1961, reducing their housework time to exactly that now spent by middle-class women.

- **The 1960s saw two revolutions, one structural, the other cultural.**
- The structural revolution saw married women, most notably married middle-class women with young children, enter the workforce in substantial numbers.
- Activists promoted this transition with their pleas for childcare centers, their efforts to break down the gendered division of labor in the workforce, and their struggles to gain acceptance of women's dual role as both mothers and waged workers.

- All married women who needed to work or wished to work were greatly aided by the development of secure contraception. In 1960 the American Food and Drug Administration gave approval for the birth-control pill, which permitted sex safely dissociated from reproduction.
- The use of contraception became common, especially in European nations and among the educated middle classes in general.
- **The assumed biological difference underpinning gender differentiation disappeared.**
- **This trend continued through the rest of the century.**

Performing gender

- One of the most interesting ideas regarding gender to emerge in Cultural Studies contends that our **gender identities are performances**, like theatrical performances on stage.
 - “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.” (J. Butler)
- We act out ideals of gender identity such as “**femininity**” and “**masculinity**” that would not appear normally or naturally in the absence of strong cultural and social pressures on us to perform or act in certain ways

Performing identity

- Our biological gender usually expresses itself in cultural forms such as dress and hairstyle in a way that might convince us that gender identity is entirely a matter of biological destiny whose most palpable physical emblem is our differing genitalia.
- **Culture can express nature in many ways.**
- **But in recent years, scholars of culture have also explored the ways in which culture shapes nature.**

J. Butler, *Performance Acts and Gender Constitution*:

- “Consider gender, for instance, as a **corporeal style**, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' itself carries the double-meaning of 'dramatic' and 'non-referential.'
- When Beauvoir claims that 'woman' is a **historical idea and not a natural fact**, she clearly underscores the **distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity**. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a *woman is to have become a woman*, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a **sustained and repeated corporeal project**.

J. Butler, *Performance Acts and Gender Constitution*:

- The notion of a '**project**', however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strated better suggests the situation of duress under which gender **performance** always and variously occurs.
- Hence, as a **strategy of survival, gender** is a **performance** with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. *Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires;* because **gender is not a fact**, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.

J. Butler, *Performance Acts and Gender Constitution*:

- **Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.** *The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production.*
- The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through **various corporeal styles** are nothing other than those **punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress.**

When Beauvoir claims that woman is an "historical situation," she emphasizes that **the body suffers a certain cultural construction**, not only through conventions that sanction and proscribe how one acts one's body, the **'act' or performance** that one's body is, but also in the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived. Indeed, if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender. The reproduction of the category of gender is enacted on a large political scale, as when **women first enter a profession** or gain certain rights, or are reconceived in legal or political discourse in significantly new ways. But the more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence.

- Consider that there is a **sedimentation of gender norms that produces the peculiar phenomenon of a natural sex**, or a real woman, or any number of prevalent and **compelling social fictions**, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a **binary relation** to one another.

Performing gender

- We see expressions of gender nature everywhere, from women' s birthing of babies to men' s usually larger bodies, and those expressions are consistent over time.
- Women in ancient times wore dresses and looked after children, and they still do so today in many places.
- But sociologists argue that much of the behavior that is considered natural to a gender identity is in fact taught and learned.

- The **pressure of the social power hierarchy**, for example, which **favors men over women in economic and political life**, **imprints** on women dispositions that may favor the **reproduction** over time of that **hierarchy**.
- The **seemingly spontaneous and natural** desire many young women feel in conservative social locations especially to become caretakers of men and of children **may not be spontaneously generated at all**.
- It may be a **lesson learned from the surrounding culture** that was placed there by men because their own interests were served by it.

J. Butler:

- "acts" are a shared experience and 'collective action.' ...The act that gender is, the act that embodied agents are in as much as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed, wear certain cultural significations, is clearly not one's act alone. Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of **doing** one's gender, **but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter. “**

- And the **imprinting of those ideals and norms on women** makes the existing gender power relations **appear to arise spontaneously from a natural process** – women seem to spontaneously want to engage in service labor for men – but in fact, those **internal dispositions toward certain kinds of behavior are learned.**
- They seem original, but they are repetitions, rote rehearsals of **scripts** whose scripted character has been erased or forgotten.

What appears to be nature, in other words, may be a fabrication. It may be culture.

Similarly, sexuality, which might be called the practice of gender, would seem to be characterized by a clear male - female binary opposition in most people.

Biology would seem to sustain a limited dyadic heterosexual paradigm or model.

But **sexuality is so forged by culture** and experience and so bent from the simple dominant heterosexual binary in plural ways that it in fact consists of a fluid range of possibilities – even in those firmly lodged in one of the binary heterosexual identities.