Theories of Gender: Crash Course Sociology #33

Crash Course: Sociology
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Why is gender even a thing? We've talked about what gender is and how it affects epople's lives, but we've skipped over a fundamental part of the whole issue of gender: why does it matter to us so much?

Gender isn't the same in all cultures. Mainstream western ideas have focused on the idea of gender as a binary, with masculinity and femininity serving as mutual opposites, but other cultures have three genders, or see gender as fluid, or describe gender as a spectrum rather than a set of distinct types.

For example, many native American and first nation peoples recognize a third gender that incorporates both the masculine and the feminine, and it plays a specific, sacred role within their culture. While different tribes all have different terms for this gender within their own languages, these days, many use the umbrella term "two-spirit."

But there are no known societies that have no concept of gender. So, why is that? Why do we, no matter what society we live in, ascribe so much meaning to gender?

===== Intro (0:55) =====

To talk about why we have gender in the first place we need to go back to the three theories that sociology is built on: Structural-Functional Theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory, and Social Conflict Theory. All three of these theories have different perspectives on why gender exists.

Let's start with Structural Functionalism. Remember, the Structural Functional approach understands human behavior as part of systems that help keep society organized and functioning. From this perspective, gender is a means of organizing society into distinct roles that compliment each other.

Some anthropologists have argued that hunter-gatherer societies originated the idea that men are providers and women take care of the home. Men were physically stronger and didn't have the demands of child-bearing, which made it easier for them to take on more aggressive, autonomous roles like hunting or warfare.

And these roles became institutionalized. Even once physical strength was no longer important for many jobs, it was taken for granted that men would be the breadwinners and women would care for the children.

But there are holes in this theory. Namely that the early anthropologists who studied this dynamic over-emphasized the role of things like big game hunting. More recent anthropological work suggests that gathering, fishing, and small game hunting - all of which were also performed by women - played a much larger role in providing food in these societies.

But the idea that we have two genders to play complimentary roles has stuck around, partially through the work of sociologist Talcott Parsons. He argued that boys and girls are socialized to take on traits that are complimentary to each other to make it easier to maintain stable, productive family units.

Boys are taught what Parsons called 'instrumental qualities' such as confidence and competitiveness that prepare them for the labor force. Meanwhile, girls are taught 'expressive qualities' such as empathy and sensitivity which prepare them to care for their families.

Parsons theory was that a successful family needs people to have complimentary skill sets; and gender gives us a way to pair these skills. And society, in turn, encourages gender conformity by making people feel like they have to fit these molds if they want to be romantically desirable. And by also teaching people to reject those who go against these gender norms.

Though this theory was influential in the mid-20th century, it's fallen out of favor for a few reasons. First, Parsons was basing his theory on a division of labor that was specific to middle-class white America in the 1940s and 50s.

It assumes a heteronormative and Western perspective on what a family is. But not all families are nuclear units with one man, one woman, and a gaggle of children.

When you expand the definition of family to include same-sex couples, single parents, multi-generational families, or childless adults, it's less obvious that you should assume that a man works outside the home and a woman works inside the home.

Second, the idea of complimentary genders rests on their being two distinct and opposite genders, again, a Western perspective. The idea of gender as a binary isn't a universal and it ignores all those whose identities don't conform to a two-gender system.

Third, Parsons' theory ignores the personal and social costs of maintaining rigid gender roles. Critics argue that the idea that men need to be the ones working outside the home to maintain family stability is arbitrary and it reinforces gender dynamics that give men power over women.

Now, another perspective on gender is the Symbolic Interaction approach. While Structural-Functionalists are concerned with how gender helps all of society work well, Symbolic Interactionists are more focused on how gender is part of day to day life.

From this perspective, gender is something that a person does, rather than something that's either innate or imposed by institutions. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to talk about different ways that people 'do gender'.

===== Thought Bubble (4:21) =====

Clothes, hairstyles, and makeup all telegraph gender to the people around you. Take these two people: you probably have a gut reaction about the gender of these people, even though the only thing that's different about them is what they're wearing.

But what if the person in the suit had long hair or was wearing makeup? These might flip a switch in our brain to start seeing this person as a woman in a business suit, but having short hair and no makeup while wearing a dress doesn't necessarily flip the same switch.

This pattern is an example of gender roles, or how a society defines how women and men should think and behave. A man wearing a skirt is seen as more of a rejection of traditional gender roles than a women wearing pants is. Body language and how people interact with each other are also part of how people do gender.

Women are socialized to be deferential in conversation, meaning that they're more likely to make eye contact to show that they're listening or to smile as a way of encouraging their speaking partner.

Crossing your legs is called 'ladylike' whereas if you sit on the

subway with your legs spread out, you might get glared at for 'manspreading.'

Thanks Thought Bubble!

===== End Thought Bubble (5:18) =====

These exercises in doing gender are good examples of how our society's definitions of masculinity and femininity are inextricably linked to each gender's power in society.

Masculine traits are associated with power - taking up more space, directing the conversation - and are often valued more than feminine traits. In other words, everyday social interaction reflects and helps reinforce gender stratification.

But a limitation of the Symbolic Interaction approach is that it focuses on the micro rather than the macro. Because of its focus on situational experiences, it misses the broader patterns in gender inequality.

For that, we need Social Conflict Theory. You might remember Gender Conflict Theory from our episode about Harriet Martineau, but in case you've forgotten, Gender Conflict Theory argues that gender is a structural system that distributes power and privilege to some and disadvantage to others.

Specifically, that structural system is the patriarchy, a form of social organization in which men have more power and dominate other genders. We can see examples of this structure in institutional practices that disadvantage women like restricting higher education to men or refusing to allow women to vote.

But we also see this in less official ways. Think about the traits that our society values. Rationality is often praised as a desirable way of thinking, especially in leaders while irrationality means letting emotion affect decisions and is seen as a weakness.

Women are stereotyped as more emotional and men as more rational, which makes people falsely see men as more natural fits for leadership positions.

The way that patriarchy privileges certain people over others also isn't as simple as saying that all men are at the top of the power distribution.

This is why there's more attention paid in sociology to intersectionality. Or the analysis of the interplay of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other identities, which often results in multiple dimensions of disadvantage.

While all women are disadvantaged by gender, it's also true that some women experience more disadvantage than others. And the converse is true for men. All men benefit from living in men that privileges masculinity, but some men benefit more than others.

To see this in action, lets go back to the stats on the gender wage gap that we talked about in the last episode.

White women make 80 cents for every dollar a white man makes. Black women make 65 cents for every dollar a white man makes. If we divide those two numbers, we get the wage gap between white women and black women. A black woman makes 81 cents for every dollar that a white woman makes.

But what about black men? Well, they make 73 cents for every dollar that white men make. So black women do worse economically than black men who do worse than white women who do worse than white men.

Just looking at gender or just looking at race misses the way that disadvantages can stack on top of one another. Our understanding of Social Conflict Theory also would not be complete without discussing a movement closely entwined with gender conflict theory: feminism.

Feminism is the support of social equality for all genders, in opposition to patriarchy and sexism. Broadly ;peaking, feminism advocates the elimination of gender stratification, expanding the choices that women, men, and other genders are allowed to make; ending gender based violence; and promoting sexual freedom.

There are many forms that feminism can take, but let's highlight three major schools of thought within feminist theory.

The first is liberal feminism. And no, I don't mean liberal in the political sense, I mean liberal in the classical sense, rooted in the ideals of freedom of choice and equal opportunity.

Liberal feminists seek to expand the rights and opportunities of women by removing cultural and legal barriers to women's quality, like implementing policies that prevent discrimination in the workforce or improve reproductive freedom.

This contrasts with socialist feminism, which views capitalism as the foundation of the patriarchy and advocates for full economic equality in the socialist tradition. Socialist feminists tend to believe that the liberal feminist reforms don't go far enough since they maintain most of the existing institutions of power.

The third feminist school of thought is known as radical feminism, which believes that to reach gender quality, society must actually eliminate gender as we know it. Radical feminism has clashed heavily with other subsets of feminism, particularly on transgender individuals' rights.

Many radical feminists refuse to acknowledge the gender identities of trans-women and have accused the transgender movement of perpetuating patriarchal gender norms.

And these three ways of thinking about feminism are only a few of the many views on how best to advocate for gender equality. Kinda like how there are many theories within sociology about how we should think about gender.

Today we learned about three of those schools of thought on gender theory. Structural Functionalism sees gender as a way of organizing society and emphasizes the way that men and women can act as compliments to each other.

Symbolic Interactionism looks at gender on the micro level, exploring how gender guides day-to-day life. And Gender Conflict Theory, Intersection Theory, and the theories of feminism focus on the ways that gender distributes power within society.

===== Credits (9:54) =====

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