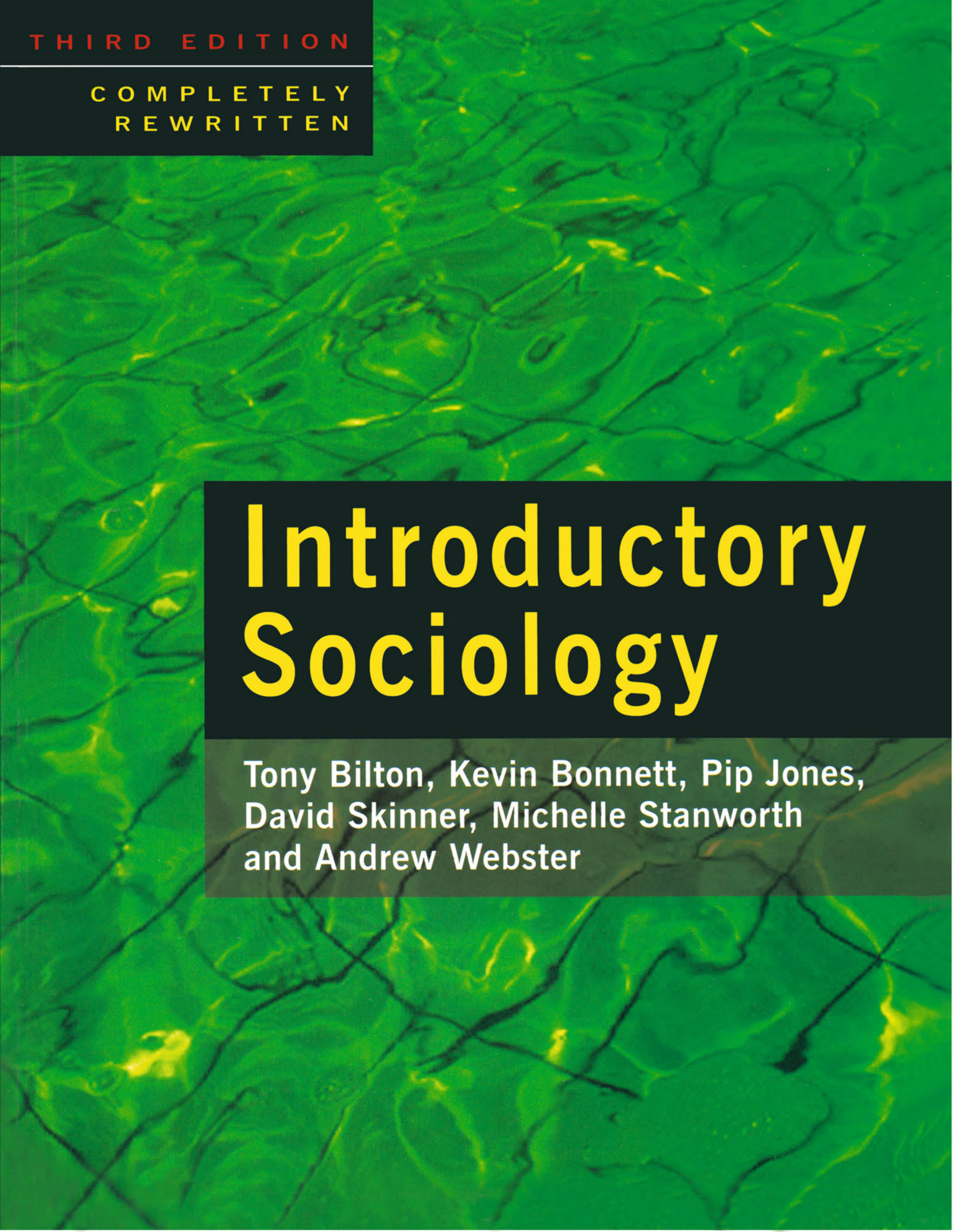

THIRD EDITION

COMPLETELY
REWRITTEN

Introductory Sociology

Tony Bilton, Kevin Bonnett, Pip Jones,
David Skinner, Michelle Stanworth
and Andrew Webster

Introductory Sociology

Third Edition

Tony Bilton, Kevin Bonnett, Pip Jones, David Skinner, Michelle Stanworth and Andrew Webster

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8

Gender Relations

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Aims of the Chapter

This chapter provides an overview of some of the social processes that shape gender relations in contemporary societies. It emphasises that there are many forms of masculinity and femininity. It describes and assesses two major accounts of the individual acquisition of gendered identity, and argues for the necessity of viewing gender as a property of social institutions and of culture as much as of individuals. Therefore, the chapter examines in some detail the way that key institutional areas – divisions of labour, the social organisation of childbirth and childcare, sexuality and popular culture and the media – have been permeated by gender, and considers some of the implications of this for contemporary gender relations.

In thinking about gender, even more than other areas of social life, people frequently have recourse to explanations in terms of 'naturalness', and so our discussions of childbirth and childcare, of sexuality, and indeed of gender difference itself begin by contrasting biological explanations with social ones. But we also question in this chapter whether biological and social phenomena can be so neatly separated. Even the **bodies** ***of men and women, it is suggested here, are constituted partly by social processes.***

Introduction

In late August 1995, some 25,000 women from all over the world gathered in China. Their intention was to press their agendas upon the government delegations from 185 nations who had been invited by the United Nations to debate a programme of action for women for the coming decade. There was anything but consensus in the early days: marching with their mouths bandaged, Tibetan women bore silent witness to the Chinese occupation of their country – and were harrassed by Chinese police; a 'conservative' nine-delegation alliance (including the Vatican, Iran and the Sudan) vigorously opposed proposals for sexual and reproductive freedoms; all delegates applauded the recognition by the UN that women's rights are human rights, and yet many argued that the emphasis on *rights* detracted from the way in which, especially in poorer countries, lack of resources spelled disaster for women.

The reporting of the conference in the media often focused upon disagreements among delegates, highlighting the fact that an identity as women does not generate a uniform consciousness or a uniform set of priorities and interests; other circumstances, and other identities –

national, ethnic, religious, class – may be crucial. But the conference also illustrates the widespread recognition of, and challenge to, patterns of inequality that generate gender disadvantage. Not only did Benazir Bhutto's eloquent call for an end to **female infanticide** win widespread acclaim, but there was also remarkable commitment – from diverse groups – to seek measures that might improve the health, educational standing and economic power of women across the world.

female infanticide
The murder of female babies and infants.

biological determinism
A simple causal, reductionist approach that explains human behaviour in terms of biological or genetic characteristics.

social construction
The process whereby 'natural', instinctive, forms of behaviour become mediated by social processes. Sociologists would argue that most forms of human behaviour are socially constructed.

cathexis
Originally employed by Freud to describe a psychic charge or the formation of an emotional attraction towards another person. More generally associated with the social and psychological patterning of desire and the construction of emotionally charged relationships

masculinities
Various socially constructed collections of assumptions, expectations and ways of behaving that serve as standards for forms of male behaviour.

femininities
Various socially constructed collections of assumptions, expectations and ways of behaving that serve as standards for female behaviour.

Men, Women and Gender Difference

What is gender difference, and where does it come from? Why, for example, in Western societies, are men more sparing with their smiles? Why are they less likely to coo over other people's babies, or to abandon careers to care for their own?

Answers to such questions can be placed along a continuum, according to the importance they attach to biology in explaining gender difference. At one end of the continuum, **biological determinists** highlight similarities in male behaviour across different environments. They argue that male traits (whether a preference for competitive sport, or a lack of 'maternal' feeling) have their roots in chromosomal differences (e.g. XYY chromosomes) or in hormonal differences (e.g. testosterone) or in some other natural characteristic that distinguishes men from women.

At the other end of the continuum, **social constructionists** contend instead that gender differences derive from social and cultural processes. These processes create systems of ideas and practices about gender that vary across time and space. They also create gender divisions of labour, allocating women and men to different activities and responsibilities. Individuals raised within such a framework will come to have appropriately gendered identities and desires. For example, Connell (1987) argues that every society has a gender order, composed of a historically-specific division of labour, a structure of **cathexis** or desire, and a structure of power. The gender order generates a variety of **masculinities** (some dominant, some not) and of **femininities**. The gender order acts as a framework within which gender differences emerge and are reproduced or challenged.

Assembling evidence on the issue of gender difference is more difficult than is sometimes suggested. To support a biological determinist case, we would need, first, to establish that a substantial and universal difference exists: that men across societies are characterised by more or less identical behaviours (and that the same is true of women). Second, we would need to show that this difference is caused by biology – and not, for example, by similarities in the upbringing of boys, or in the responsibilities they have as adults. The more segregated the worlds that women and men inhabit, the harder it is to demonstrate that nature, rather than nurture, accounts for gender difference.

Sociological, historical and anthropological research shows that femininity and masculinity vary dramatically across cultures. The definition of womanhood among bourgeois women in Victorian Britain, for example, involved physical delicacy, exclusion from paid work and lack of sexual feeling; womanhood in many rural parts of Africa today is synonymous with physical robustness, breadwinning and sexual confidence. In the face of such diversity, it is difficult to sustain a claim that there is a necessary connection between female bodies (or male bodies) and particular gender traits.

'Femininity' and 'masculinity' are subject to change not only across cultures, but also over time. Masculinity in the 1940s and 1950s, in the United States of America, had breadwinning at its core; it was imaged in popular culture by the sober-suited, domestically incompetent, hardworking family man played in films by actors like James Stewart. Ehrenreich (1983) argues that this form of masculinity became, over time, less prominent. The publication of *Playboy* magazine (promoting an exploitative bachelor style), the writings of the beat poets (who scoffed at conventional morality), the trumpeting of the dangers of workaholism – these and other cultural influences helped to articulate new masculinities and contributed, Ehrenreich argues, to the erosion of a breadwinner ethic.

If masculinity changes over time, so too men – even at a single point in time – are likely to be diverse. 'Men' are no more homogeneous than are 'human beings' or 'Germans' or 'the young'. Even within a single society, different social and cultural contexts – linked to race or ethnicity, to age or physical capacities, to sexual orientation or social class – alter the meaning of male or female bodies, and of gender difference, often in quite dramatic ways. The delicate bourgeois lady of Victorian England coexisted with the sturdy hard-working housemaid. Indeed, without the robust housemaid, the fragility of the lady would have been unthinkable.

essentialism

An approach which assumes some universal essence, homogeneity and unity in the phenomena under study. Such approaches to gender, for example, identify traits and behaviour common to all men and women.

This recognition of diversity puts paid to **essentialist** views of gender – to views that claim to identify some natural feature (or essence) that all women (or all men) share in common. As Brown and Jordanova (1982, p. 390) conclude: 'there is no such thing as woman or man in asocial terms; women and men, or rather femininity and masculinity, are constituted in specific cultural settings according to class, age, marital status and so on'.

Box 8.1: Ain't I a woman?

Because gender varies so dramatically across time and space, sociologists have to be careful to challenge the universal validity of models developed in particular contexts. Often descriptions of femininity (or masculinity) are presented as standard that really only fit Western white middle-class heterosexuals. Such models of femininity (or masculinity) render invisible – or make 'deviant' – the experience of other groups of women (or men). They make diversity invisible.

In nineteenth-century America, for example, the dominant femininity emphasised women's delicacy, and their need for male protection. This description may have seemed 'real' to some people, but of course it did not correspond to the experience of a great many women. The definition was challenged forcefully by Sojourner Truth, a feminist activist.

Truth was a former slave. She campaigned vigorously for extension of suffrage to black men and to all women. At a convention in Ohio in 1852, women's rights campaigners were jeered at by hostile men who insisted that women needed protection, not the vote. Sojourner Truth strode to the platform to repudiate these claims. She declared:

'That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?' (in hooks, 1982, p. 160).

Collins (1990, pp. 14–15) comments that although Truth had never learned to read, she demonstrated in her speech that an idea of 'woman' that appeared to reflect bodily reality was in fact a cultural construct, and relevant only to certain sections of the female population.

Gender and the body

If gender difference is socially constructed, what remains of the relationship between gender and the body? Does the fact that males and females are anatomically different have nothing to do with gender?

One answer, influential in the 1970s and early 1980s, is that **gender** is the 'cultural' gloss put on a 'natural' foundation of **sex**. 'Sex' refers to universal differences in male and female bodies – in chromosomes, genitals and reproductive capacities. Sex is rooted in nature; it distinguishes males from females. 'Gender', on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed and infinitely variable categories of masculine and feminine. As Anne Oakley explained in her influential book *Sex, Gender and Society*, bodies are the trigger for the assignment of gender difference; femininity of some sort will be elaborated for anatomical females, and masculinity of some sort for males. 'The chief importance of biological sex,' argued Oakley (1972, p. 156), 'is in providing a universal and obvious division around which other distinctions can be organised.'

Examination of other cultures throws doubt on the claim that 'male' and 'female' are universal categories based on natural anatomical differences. Before the twentieth century, among many of the native peoples of North America – for example, the Cheyenne and the Ojibwa, the Navajo and the Iroquois – anatomy was not the only criterion for deciding whether a person would rank as a man or a woman. Following a practice called **berdache**, anatomical males who strongly preferred basket-weaving or burden-carrying – women's work – to hunting with the bow or going to battle, could move in female circles, dress as women did, and even take husbands. Although they retained their male genitals, they ceased to be males. Activities were as significant as anatomy in determining sex (Whitehead, 1981).

In contemporary Europe and North America, the usual approach to sex is rather different. We assume – indeed, we believe it to be objectively true – that men can readily be distinguished from women by reference to genitals. This is part of what Garfinkel terms our 'natural attitude' towards sex. Kessler and McKenna (1985) argue that although we may perceive the Western view of sex to be objectively correct, it is as much a constructed reality as that of the societies that practised berdache. When we come across a 'man' who wears stilettos and speaks of giving birth, instead of accepting the evidence of our senses – that not everyone fits neatly into male or female – we search for further evidence (facial hair, name, jewellery). We conduct ourselves, in everyday life, so as to confirm the view that sex is clear-cut, and in so doing we shore up the belief that a male/female distinction is 'universal and obvious'.

This type of evidence from other cultures and from our own suggests that the simple division into male and female sex – only recently

gender

Distinct from 'sex', this concept often refers to the socially constructed categories of masculine and feminine that are differently defined in various cultures. Many contemporary theorists use a broader definition to refer to the variable sets of beliefs and practices about male and female (or other genders), that not only feed into individual identities, but are fundamental to social institutions and symbolic systems.

sex

The division of human beings into male and female on the basis of chromosomal and reproductive differences; it has been defined as a biological category, in contrast to the social category of gender (*see* gender).

berdache

A practice among the native people of North America to allocate male gender roles on the basis of cultural preference rather than on the assumption of a biological predisposition (*see* gender).

regarded as an obvious and universal distinction based upon bodies – is itself a social construction. In Western societies, it is our gender ideas (not bodies themselves) that make us insist that people are unambiguously male or female. The process of gender attribution – whereby we classify people as male or female – is a social process, that varies from one social setting to another.

Box 8 .2: Male and female: a universal and obvious distinction?

Garfinkel (1967, pp. 122–8) describes the 'natural attitude' of modern Western societies towards sex:

- There are two, and only two, sexes – female and male.
- Every individual is either male or female. There are no exceptions.
- A person's sex is invariant. Once a male, always a male.
- Genitals are the key to sex. A male has a penis. A female has a vagina.
- The male/female dichotomy is natural and objectively given. It exists independently of social criteria for being male or female.

Professionals play a large part in sustaining the natural attitude. Where the anatomical sex of a baby is ambiguous, consultants authorise treatment to reconstruct it as either male or female. Adult **transsexuals** are people whose anatomical sex is out of synch with their gender identity. Where an anatomical man claims he is a woman, he may be referred for psychiatric and medical treatment including surgery to remove the penis, and create a vagina and breasts. Transsexuals are often keen to have such surgery. What is interesting is that in Western societies it has been perceived as less problematic to want to have a surgical reconstruction of the genitals, than it is to be a woman with a penis. Transsexualism, Kessler and McKenna claim (1985, p. 120), 'is a category contructed to alleviate ambiguity – to avoid the kinds of combinations (e.g., male genitals–female gender identity) that make people uncomfortable because they violate the basic rules about gender'.

transsexuals
People whose gender identity is at odds with the gender indicated by their body and who take steps to change their body to match their perceived identity

Ideas about masculinity and femininity mould male and female bodies in more concrete ways, too. There are a range of social practices – from body-building to cosmetic surgery, from hormonal treatment to nutrition, from sport to styles of dress to forms of work – that contribute to bodily difference. In Western societies, women are on average smaller than men, and slimness is a strong element in definitions of femininity. If, as some commentators suggest, a high proportion of girls spend their teenage years on weight-reducing diets, is this not a powerful example of the ways in which gender 'produces' sexual difference?

As Ruth Hubbard (1990, p. 69) argues,

> **If a society puts half its children into short skirts and warns them not to move in ways that reveal their panties, while putting the other half into jeans and overalls and encouraging them to climb trees, play ball, and participate in other vigorous outdoor games; if later, during adolescence, the children who have been wearing trousers are urged to eat like growing boys, while the children in skirts are warned to watch their weight and not get fat; if the half in jeans runs around in sneakers or boots, while the half in skirts totters about on spike heels, then these two groups of people will be biologically as well as socially different.**
>
> **[HUBBARD, 1990, p. 69]**

Our male and female bodies are, in short, the product of the interaction of nature and of social processes – including those of gender. This recognition challenges the opposition between biological determinism and social construction with which the chapter began; the search for 'biological' differences between the sexes, unadulterated by culture – or, for that matter, for 'cultural' differences that have not had an impact on our bodies – may in fact be misguided.

Gender identity

By the time children in Western societies reach their second birthday, many will have acquired a firm sense of themselves as male or female, a gender identity that remains throughout life. In addition, many pre-schoolers have a firm awareness of gender stereotypes, insisting that certain activities or items of clothing are not for girls and others not for boys. Yet – as a consideration of transsexuals makes clear – gender identity does not automatically follow from biological sex. Money and Ehrhardt (1972, cited in Oakley, 1981, p. 53) report a case in which a seven-month-old boy lost his penis through an accident. A few months later, the boy's genitals were surgically reconstructed as female. He was assigned a girlish name, girlish clothing, a girlish hairdo. According to the researchers, he developed 'normally', as a very feminine girl.

socialisation
An on-going process whereby individuals learn to conform to society's prevailing norms and values (see norms *and* values).

Socialisation theory offers a straightforward account of the acquisition of gendered identities. Infants are seen, from this perspective, as blank slates, waiting to be written on by their environment. Through their interactions with people close to them, and through exposure to the values of their society, infants learn what sex has been attributed to them (male? or female?) and what is expected of them as little girls or boys. Reinforcement (praise and other rewards for gender-appropriate behaviour, punishment for deviation) brings the message home. A process of modelling (imitating parents or older siblings or teachers of the same sex) may also occur, until eventually children internalise – i.e., incorporate as part of their sense of self – the gender prescriptions of their society. And the more polarised the culture around gender, the greater will be the gender difference in the identities of girls and boys.

In spite of public interest in gender equality in the past two decades in Europe and America, it is undeniably the case that children receive frequent reminders of difference between the sexes. The division of labour in most families will point to different responsibilities for women and men. Boys' clothing differs from girls' clothing in crucial details (*Star Trek* pyjamas v. *Forever Friends* nightgowns, or joggers v. leggings), and on the occasions when children dress up, the differences are even sharper. Even bedrooms are gendered: floral designs and ruffles or pleats for girls, military or animal designs for boys.

Parents, whatever their intentions, tend to treat girls and boys differently in ways that influence their development. Parents are far more likely to engage their infant sons in rough physical play – tossing them up in the air, or wrestling with them – than they are their daughters (McDonald and Parke, 1986) and it has been argued that long-term consequences (in this case, a head start for little boys in the development of physical confidence, aggressiveness and motor skills) may follow. Adults respond differently to the communicative efforts of girls and boys. In a study by Fagot and her colleagues (1985) of infants aged thirteen months, when boys demanded attention – behaving aggressively, or crying, whining or screaming – they tended to get it. By contrast, adults tended to respond to girls only when they used language or gestures or gentle touches; girls who tried attention-grabbing techniques were likely to be ignored. There was little difference in the communicative patterns of girls and boys at the start of the study, but by the age of two, the girls had become more talkative, and the boys more assertive, in their communicative styles. There is a possibility that, through patterns of reinforcement, adults helped to create these gender differences, as socialisation theory predicts.

But although socialisation theory may explain certain aspects of gendered behaviour, it cannot stand as a complete explanation for gendered identity and gendered desires. For one thing, socialisation theory makes children the passive receivers of gendered messages from their environment. But this assumption is incompatible with research that shows that even very young children often make gender-stereotyped choices for themselves. A study of pre-school children in North Carolina (Robinson and Morris, 1986) found that their Christmas presents tended to be heavily gender-stereotyped (e.g., military toys for boys, dolls and domestic items for girls) . But these gifts, it turned out, had been purchased largely at the insistence of the children themselves. The toys that had been selected for them by grown-ups tended to be (like art supplies, games, musical instruments) sex-neutral. Children's early 'spontaneous' gender commitments cannot readily be explained by socialisation theory.

Moreover, socialisation theory may be insufficiently subtle to account for the complexity of gender identity and gendered desires. The attachment of adult men and women to elements of masculinity or femininity which they would like to slough off (something experienced by many women in the women's movements and men in men's movements), the depths of emotion surrounding gendered desires (excitement or passion or shame), and the conflicts that continue to trouble 'fully socialised' women and men – all these suggest that socialisation theory operates too much at the level of conscious processes, and pays too little attention to the underlying psychic processes by which gender may be embedded.

psychoanalytic
Pertaining to the unconscious processes of the mind. A psychoanalytic approach would attempt to explain human behaviour by uncovering some of these processes.

One of the most influential of the **psychoanalytic** theories of gender identity – those that take account of unconscious processes – is the perspective developed in Chodorow's (1978) book *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Nancy Chodorow traces the implications for emotional development of the fact that mothers generally care for infants in their early years, while fathers are more emotionally distant. The formation of the self involves separating from the mother with whom the infant is initially psychically merged. But this process operates differently for girls and boys. Girls can separate gradually, maintaining a continuous sense of relationship with the mother who is, after all, experienced as like. For boys, on the other hand, separating from the mother, who is experienced as different, involves repressing the feminine aspects of themselves, and rejecting much of the tenderness that was central to that early relationship. Boys' sense of maleness is, Chodorow suggests, achieved at great emotional cost.

As a result of these processes, adult men are likely to have a more autonomous sense of self, and to be more independent, more instrumental and more competitive in their dealings with others; they are also likely to have difficulty expressing emotions and to be anxious about intimacy. Women, on the other hand, have more need and more ability to sustain relationships with others; they have greater empathy with others; they have difficulty, however, in maintaining the boundaries of an independent and autonomous self.

Thus, assymmetrical mothering helps to explain, in Chodorow's view, the reproduction of divisions of labour around childcare. 'Because women are themselves mothered by women, they grow up with the relational capacities and needs, and psychological definition of self-in-relationship, which commits them to mothering. Men, because they are mothered by women, do not' (Chodorow, 1978, p. 209).

In Chodorow's view, however, these patterns are not inevitable. Changes in the social arrangements for care of children – changes such as dual parenting, that would involve fathers in emotional intimacy with their children and in close physical care – could break the cycle, developing in both women and men the parts of their psyches that are currently stunted and raising a generation of children who might be very different.

Chodorow's theory of the reproduction of mothering has been influential within sociology. Many writers on masculinity, in particular, have found her analysis helpful in understanding the problems some men experience in relating to others.

We can, however, question the scope of the theory, the range of situations to which it might apply. We might ask, on the one hand, how many societies are characterised by full-time mothers and emotionally distant fathers? Can the idea that women are psychologically driven to mother be squared with the evidence of variations in mothering at different times and in different places – with, for example, communal patterns of mothering in some African communities, or with the strong tendency of wealthy mothers in eighteenth-century France to send their babies away to be wet-nursed? We can challenge, on the other hand, the idea of a single femininity (a self attuned to relationship, lacking autonomy) and a single masculinity (instrumental and uncomfortable with emotion). It is not clear whether Chodorow's account would apply, for instance, to the black London schoolgirls in Riley's (1988) study who expected to be economically independent ('doesn't everybody?') and to enter emotional relationships on their own terms.

Moreover, the proposed solution of dual parenting has been rejected by some critics, who point out that it rests upon a particular model of family life – not all children have a reliable father who could be more closely involved in their care – and upon a faulty logic. If men are as lacking in the *capacity* to mother as Chodorow suggests (and not simply the will), if they are unable to empathise with or to relate to others, then how could they possibly be entrusted with the intimate care of children?

Limitations of theories of gender identity

More important than the specific limitations of Chodorow's theory , or of socialisation theory, is the need to recognise that all such theories, however well-crafted, are limited in what they can explain.

These theories tend to be deterministic, underestimating the fluidity of gendered behaviour and the capacity of women and men to change. In her retrospective study of a sample of white American women, Gerson (1985) found that the orientations they held in adolescence towards domesticity or careers provided a poor guide to their later behaviour; changes in circumstance (e.g., divorce) or in opportunity (e.g., promotion) marked for many women the first stage in constructing completely new identities. Identity may, in short, be more malleable than accounts of the acquisition of gender identity often imply. A little girl can wear frilly pyjamas and still grow up to be a tough union negotiator; and a little boy who plays at warfare can become nevertheless a gentle and caring father.

Theories of gender identity may contribute also to an unhelpful view of gender as a watertight compartment of identity that co-exists with, but evolves independently from, other aspects of identity. Such theories may give the impression that while women are differentiated by race, ethnicity, sexuality and class, the meanings that 'womanhood' holds for them will be, nonetheless, common to all. But earlier in this chapter, it was emphasised that the meaning of femininity (or of masculinity) often differs dramatically for people in different social positions, even within the same society. As one anthropologist puts it (Moore, 1994, p. 25), 'class, race, sexuality and religion completely alter the experience of a "lived anatomy", of what it is that sex, gender and sexual difference signify'. Or in the snappier words of a poet: 'The juice from tomatoes is not called merely *juice*. It is always called TOMATO juice' (Gwendolyn Brooks, cited by Spelman, 1990, p. 186). There may be no such thing as 'gender identities' that are not also constituted as identities of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class; this is an issue we return to at the conclusion of Chapter 9.

Moreover, gender is not primarily a property of individuals, but a property of societies, of social institutions, and of culture. Theories of gender acquisition may help us to understand why individuals accept their positions in a gendered world, or even why individuals sometimes feel compelled to resist. But such theories cannot explain how the social world came to be gendered. To account for inequalities in earnings; to explain why, in parts of the USA, childcare workers earn less than parking lot attendants; to account for the concentration of power among men rather than women in the Church, in the Labour Party, in the medical profession; to understand why rape in marriage was legal in Britain until 1991 – in short, to understand gender relations, gender disadvantage and their links to the distribution of power – we have to look beyond psychological processes to social patterns and societal arrangements. Indeed, thinking of Chodorow's analysis, we might wonder whether a gendered world – a world, for example, in which women's average pay is only three-quarters that of men – has any part to play in ensuring that it is women, rather than men, who mother. Could it be that social structures outside the family influence the parenting roles of women and men, and not the other way around?

The rest of this chapter will be concerned with key aspects of the social processes that construct our gendered world. The implications of changes in divisions of labour, in the social organisation of childbirth and childcare, in popular culture and the media, and in sexuality will be explored.

Divisions of Labour

In pre-industrial Britain, prior to 1780, economic activity – the production of agricultural goods, craft production and so forth – was organised through households. Household members, male or female, young or old, contributed to the family's livelihood. Although women might do some jobs and men others, depending upon region and class, a distinction between men as breadwinners and women as housewives did not characterise pre-industrial divisions of labour.

Industrialisation re-located much productive activity to factories, shops and offices. This separation of 'work' from 'home' signalled a profound shift in gender relations and gender **discourse**. The 'home' came to be understood not as the site of a family enterprise, but as a refuge from the world of work. Women were defined as the keepers of the home, whose nature it was to create harmony and virtue rather than services and goods.

discourse
A body of ideas, concepts and beliefs which become established as knowledge or as an accepted world-view. These ideas become a powerful framework for understanding and action in social life. For example, Foucault studied the discourse of madness, highlighting its changes over the centuries and its interplay with other discourses such as religious and medical discourses, and illustrated how these shifts affect how madness is perceived and reacted to by others.

This ideology of domesticity, and the associated notion of separate spheres for women and men, originated in the middle classes but affected all women in different ways. For the wives of wealthy men, it spelled a life of enforced idleness. For the daughters of the lower-middle class, it meant a desperate search for a husband; debarred from higher education and many forms of employment, an unmarried 'lady' risked impoverishment and degradation. For working-class women, the ideology of domesticity brought not relief from labour, but exclusion from skilled occupations, even lower earnings and sharper segregation from men in daily life. The notion that masculinity required a wife who 'didn't have to work' inspired the trade union movement to set its sights on securing for male workers a 'family' wage. As a result, much of the work (paid and unpaid) that working-class women did to sustain their families became invisible, while single or separated or widowed working-class women could expect to live and die in poverty. Although the ideology of domesticity has been dealt a severe blow in the post-war period by changing patterns of employment, its legacy lives on in four important ways.

First, the ideology of domesticity lives on in contemporary divisions of labour – in the association of (dominant forms of) masculinity with rational calculation, productive work and the exercise of authority and of femininity with emotionality, domestic work and the provision of care. It is no accident that, of the six million adults found to be involved in Britain in what is called the **community care** of the elderly and disabled, the majority are women (Green, 1988). Nor is it an accident that although people of both sexes tend to value family and intimate relationships, men in Western societies express this commitment primarily in terms of financial maintenance, while as well as earning women tend to shoulder responsibility for day-to-day physical and emotional care and for the running of the home. The gender division of labour, in its broadest sense, encapsulates these differences.

care in the community
A range of informal and professional care of the elderly, disabled and sick undertaken in the community, rather than in institutional settings, typically by female relatives.

Second, the ideology of domesticity renders invisible important forms of work, with consequences that are practical as well as theoretical. For much of the twentieth century, only paid employment (preferably that done by men, in large-scale enterprises, on full-time 'permanent' contracts) has been given full recognition as work. This narrow definition obscures those forms of work (e.g., labour-sharing between households) that are characteristic of the **informal economy** and that may become, Pahl (1988) argues, more important in the future. The narrow definition excludes domestic work (done mainly by women), which is a crucial factor in maintaining quality of life; with the work done by the 'average' housewife in Britain valued at £369 per week (*Daily Express*, 3 February 1993), few families could afford to replace this unpaid work with services bought in. Last but not least, the narrow definition excludes the important subsistence work done (mainly by women) which provides the basic necessities for much of the rural population of

informal economy
Includes unwaged work such as housework or labour-sharing between households.

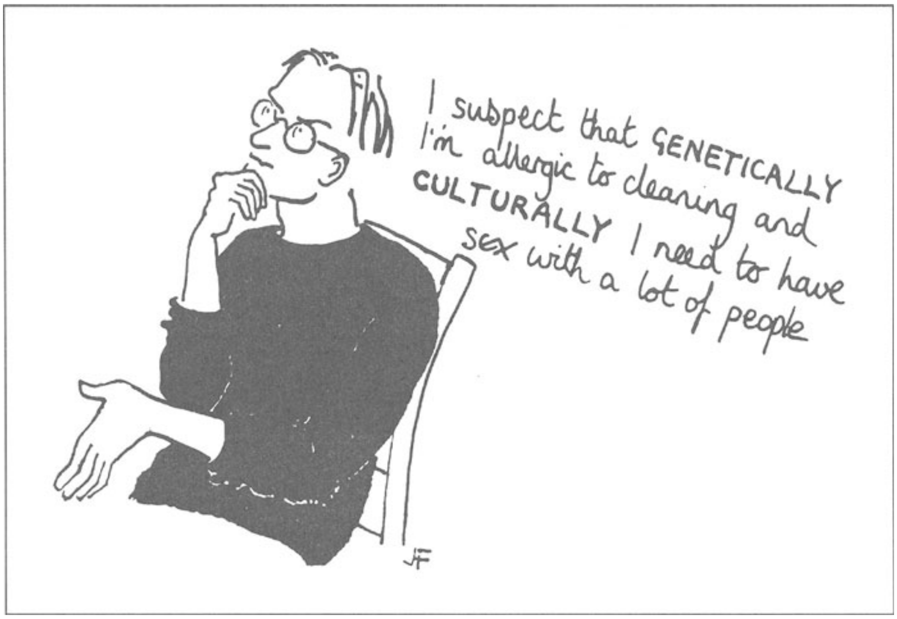
countries in the south; Beneria (1982) made a cogent case that the failure of economic statistics to take account of subsistence work perpetuates development policies that increase Gross National Product but endanger lives.

Third, the ideology of domesticity contributes to the continuing tendency to see the work women do as a natural by-product of femininity – of pliability, say, or 'caring' – rather than skill. The skills involved in housework, for example, often go unnoticed – except perhaps by housewives themselves, struggling to measure up for curtains or to stretch housekeeping money from one week to the next. In Britain, as Beechey and Perkins (1987) demonstrate, jobs of part-time women workers in the social services, often involving complex competencies, tend to be classified and paid as 'unskilled caring work'. Further afield, multinational companies, shifting some of their production of computer parts, toys, clothing and pharmaceuticals to new factories in countries in the south, often justify recruitment patterns by reference to the naturally nimble fingers of young women; as Elson and Pearson (1981) pointed out, the 'natural' dexterity of these women in fact reflects their earlier training in sewing and darning techniques that parallel the assembly process. Thus, in global as well as national divisions of labour, the definition of skill is underpinned by discourses of gender. Phillips and Taylor (1980, p. 79) explain: 'Far from being an objective economic fact, skill is often an ideological category imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who perform it.'

Fourth, the ideology of domesticity has contributed to practices that have produced and reproduced gender segregation within employment. Over the past 150 years, for example, ideas about the protection of women have often been deployed to secure their exclusion from certain types of work – from night work in factories, say, or from heavy work in the printing trades. Although such arguments have often been hypocritical – restrictions on night work for women factory workers were seldom extended to hospitals or to cleaning jobs – they have been, nevertheless, effective.

Feminisation of the labour force

While gender segregation in employment has deep roots in the nineteenth century, events in the second half of the twentieth century have posed a challenge. The economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s created expansion in employment, an expansion met in Britain first by seeking commonwealth workers and then by recruiting indigenous women. From 1960 onwards, the service sector began to overtake


I suspect that GENETICALLY I'm allergic to cleaning and CULTURALLY I need to have sex with a lot of people
JF

Source:
Jacky Fleming

manufacturing. During the 1970s and 1980s, as described in detail in Chapter 7, **de-industrialisation** and **deskilling** generated massive unemployment in all industrialised states, and radically altered the nature of employment.

de-industrialisation
A concept used to describe economic changes due to the decline of industrial manufacturing and the increase of output and employment growth in the service sector of the economy.

deskilling
Developed by Braverman to describe what he believed to be strategies of employers to reduce the skills required of their labour force, which often occurs alongside the introduction of new technological processes into the work place.

A consequence of these changes has been – in countries such as the USA and Canada, in Sweden, Italy, Germany or Britain – a massive influx of women into the paid labour force, and an increasing tendency for them to stay longer in employment and to take shorter career breaks when children are young. In Britain, almost 90 per cent of the new jobs that have been created since 1970 have gone to women (Cohen and Borrill, 1993).

Thus we have witnessed in recent decades feminisation of the labour forces of many industrialised countries. The extent of change has been documented by McDowell (1992). Using statistics for Britain (see Table 8.1), she shows that between 1971 and 1988 the number of British women of working age who were in (or seeking) employment rose by 1.7m, while the number of males in employment fell by a similar amount. Women constituted 38 per cent of the labour force in 1971, but almost half in 1988. The 'flexibility' for which women workers were notorious in the earlier part of the twentieth appears now in a 'post-Fordist' era to be part of their appeal to employers. Hagen and Jenson (1988, p. 11) remark that 'It is not without irony that women, who have always been at the margin of the labour force, now might even replace men as the "model worker".'

Table 8.1 Changes in employment patterns: Britain, 1971–88

1971	*1988*
% of women aged 15–59 who were in or seeking employment: 56%	% of women aged 15–59 who were in or seeking employment: 70%
No. of males in employment 13,424,000	No. of males in employment 11,978,000 (= loss of 1.8m)
No. of females in employment 8,224,000	No. of females in employment 10,096,000 (= gain of 1.7m)
Women as a % of total labour force: 38.0%	Women as a % of total labour force: 45.7%
% of female workers who are part-timers: 33.5%	% of female workers who are part-timers: 42.8%
	% of workers in each category who are service employees: 56% of men 81% of women 91% of female part-timers
Ratio of hourly earnings of female to male, full-time workers only: 63.3%	Ratio of hourly earnings of female to male, full-time workers only 76.0%

Source: Adapted from McDowell (1992) pp. 183–4.

However, feminisation does not mean that gender segregation has now been eradicated, nor that women have come out on top in employment terms. On the contrary, restructuring has been accompanied by the reproduction of gender segregation and the creation of new forms of inequality between – and among – women and men.

In the first place, female workers tend to be concentrated in a remarkably narrow range of occupations. Although eighteen occupational orders are listed in the New Earnings Survey 1985, over 70 per cent of full-time women workers are contained in only three groups: clerical work; professional and similar occupations in education, welfare and health; and personal services. At finer levels of analysis, the segregation is sharper: 'personal service workers', for example, turn out to be mainly domestic staff and school helpers (98.1 per cent are women), counter-hands and kitchen assistants (92.5 per cent female), or cleaners, road sweepers and caretakers (74.4 per cent are women). **Horizontal gender segregation** – the tendency for men and women to be separated into qualitatively different types of jobs – is a persistent feature of employment patterns in Britain.

horizontal gender segregation

The separation of men and women into qualitatively different types of jobs.

vertical gender segregation
The separation of men and women within the same occupation, where women are concentrated at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy.

Second, **vertical segregation** is also marked, with women concentrated at the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy in terms of wages or salary, status and authority. Among full-time workers, in 1991, a far smaller proportion of women than men (10 per cent v. 26 per cent) are in the top stratum of professionals, managers and employers; fully 33 per cent of women (as compared with 19 per cent of men) are classified as semi-skilled or unskilled workers in manual or personal services (OPCS, 1991, table 5.6, p. 91) – and again, finer levels of analysis would reveal sharper segregation.

In spite of the popular image of women storming the citadels of male employment, then, the feminisation of the labour force has not resulted in a fundamental challenge to demarcations or divisions of reward between men's and women's work. Bakker (1988, p. 31) refers to 'the paradox of, on the one hand, an enormous growth in female labor force activity and, on the other hand, an intensified segregation of women into secondary, low-wage jobs'. The paradox can be accounted for, in part, by the nature of restructuring itself. 'Women as a group have more work,' Bakker explains, 'but it is often poorly-paid, unprotected and part-time, because restructuring has brought fewer good jobs in its wake.'

Another explanation invokes wider divisions of labour, arguing that childcare responsibilities force women into part-time work and jobs at the bottom of hierarchy. But while part-time work may disadvantage some women, it cannot explain the employment position of all. In Britain, Bruegel (1994) points out, black women workers and especially Afro-Caribbean women are likely to work full-time regardless of their childcare responsibilities, and they are, nevertheless, concentrated in less-rewarded jobs.

Comparative data offers an even more serious challenge to explanations that focus on women's responsiblities for childcare. In Britain, 43 per cent of women workers are part-time and the move into part-time work often follows a career break for the care of children. In France, by contrast – where women tend to leave the labour market only if they have three or more children, or are made redundant – only one woman worker in five is part-time. If women's disadvantaged employment position were due to the relationship between family responsibilities, interrupted work histories and part-time work, Beechey (1992) argues, we would expect job equality for French women, whose work profile resembles that of men. But, in fact, though French women have had more success than British in moving into lower-level managerial positions, the degree of horizontal and vertical segregation in the two countries is not dissimilar.

What this analysis points to is the importance of understanding how women – and especially mothers – become constructed as 'inferior' workers. One factor is discourses that blame working mothers for social problems; in Britain, over a long period of time, 'being a mother and being a paid worker have been constructed as contradictory' (Beechey, 1992, p. 163). Another is educational and training programmes. Another is the role of the state in structuring the labour market, by, for example, drafting employment laws that create temporary contracts without maternity and other protections, and hence encourage the development of a two-tiered labour force.

And finally, explanations would have to consider how gender has been embedded in organisational processes. Several studies (e.g., Astrachan, 1986) have shown that men are rather more prepared to accept equal partnerships with women in their personal relationships than they are equality with female colleagues in the sphere of work. This reluctance may be reflected from time to time in outright resistance to equality for women workers. Crompton and Jones (1984) looked at three large white-collar bureaucracies, and found only one that practised overt discrimination. They did find, however, that the organisational culture of all three establishments perpetuated horizontal and vertical segregation and offered deterrents to women's promotion.

Consequences of gender segregated employment

The first consequence of gender segregation in employment is marked gender differences in earnings (see Table 8.2). Among full-time non-manual employees in Britain in April 1994, women earned on average £150 less per week than men. For manual workers, the male advantage was £99; male manual workers were paid, on average, marginally more than women in non-manual jobs.

Men boost their take-home pay by working overtime to a greater extent than women do. This does not, however, account for the male earnings advantage; non-manual women earned £150 per week less than their male colleagues, even though their working week had only 1.9 fewer hours. Even with the effects of overtime excluded, there is a male earnings advantage of £1.69 per hour for manual workers, and £3.51 for those in non-manual jobs.

These data are for full-time workers only. Part-time workers – predominantly women – have poorer prospects, greater insecurity and lower hourly rates, than full-time colleagues; during the 1980s, the hourly pay of part-time women workers fell from 81 per cent to only 75 per

Table 8.2 *Earnings and hours worked by women and men, April 1994: adults in full time work, whose pay was not affected by absence*

	All women	All men	Manual Women	Manual Men	Non-Manual Women	Non-Manual Men
Average gross weekly earnings (before tax or other deductions) (£)	262	362	182	281	278	428
Proportion whose gross weekly earnings were:						
less than £170 (%)	23	8	53	11	17	5
less than £300 (%)	71	46	94	65	66	31
Average hours worked per week (hours)	37.6	41.6	40.1	44.7	37.0	38.9
of which overtime hours are:	0.9	3.3	2.1	5.6	0.6	1.4
Average gross hourly earnings (excluding overtime pay and overtime hours) (pence)	688	865	445	614	742	1093

Source: Department of Employment (1994) *New Earnings Survey 1994*, London, HMSO, Part D (tables D86, D87, D92, D93).

cent of that of their full-time counterparts (McDowell, 1992), thus placing them at an even greater disadvantage compared to men.

Secondly, gender segregation in employment contributes to women's vulnerability to poverty. In 1994, well over half of full-time women manual workers, but only 11 per cent of their male counterparts, earned less than £170 per week, placing women disproportionately among the low-paid. The earnings advantage enjoyed by men in employment is likely to be carried over into old age, since women's occupational pension entitlements are generally less than those of men. The gendered concentration of poverty is not a new phenomenon, as Lewis and Piachaud (1987) point out; but now, as at the turn of the century, women make up the majority of the poor.

The third consequence of employment patterns relates to the impact of the economic recession and of restructuring. While women in general lag behind men in earnings, the last two decades have seen a widening of inequalities within each sex. McDowell (1992), for example, emphasises that full-time women at the top and at the bottom of the earnings hierarchy have closed some of the earnings gap between themselves and their male counterparts; on average, during the 1980s, the hourly earnings of full-time women workers rose from 72 per cent of men's to 76 per cent. At the same time, within each sex, there was a widening of differentials; the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. According to Bruegel's (1994) analysis of London living standards during a similar time period, the distance between winners and losers among women has been greater than that among men. Direct racial discrimination, and the vulnerability to unemployment that comes from a concentration in manual work, she finds, have combined to place the majority of black women firmly among the losers.

Childbirth and Childcare

The conception, bearing and raising of children is an area of human activity that may appear to be driven by biology: humans, like other animals, reproduce; and women, like other mammals, bear the growing infant. But in the case of human beings, all behaviour surrounding reproduction – from the decision to have intercourse, to contraceptive knowledge, from the taboos and obligations surrounding pregnancy, to the manner and place of birth – is meaningful in social (rather than biological) terms.

In all societies it is women who give birth to children, but the implications can and do vary dramatically. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, as changes in economy and society re-shaped the lives of women and men, the identity of 'women' and of 'mothers' came substantially to overlap. By contrast, in some tribal societies – where fertility is the responsibility of everyone, and where men are thought to play an important part in life-creation – the notion of motherhood is a more peripheral part of women's identity (Moore, 1994).

The social conditions surrounding childbirth and childcare have changed dramatically in Western societies in the past century, in ways that are important for gender relations. Among the most significant changes are, first, the availability of more effective means for preventing or terminating unwanted pregnancies; better fertility control, combined with a shrinking ideal family size, mean that the proportion of women's lives typically devoted to pregnancy and early infant care has been dramatically reduced.

Second, while women today spend less time in pregnancy and breastfeeding, the care of children has come to be defined in a far more rigorous way; mothering involves responsibility not only for the physical maintenance of children, but for detailed attention to their psychological, social and intellectual development. One illustration of this is the concern that emerged in the 1980s with what is called 'pre-conceptual care'; young women are urged to behave, to eat, to exercise, to cultivate their minds and their bodies as if they were already mothers months – or even years – before they conceive. While fatherhood is high on the public agenda in Western societies today – and while the prevailing view of the 1950s, that fathers should hold themselves at a distance from the messy world of childhood, has greatly reduced appeal – it is still mothers, nevertheless, who take the greatest responsibility for childcare. Motherhood is seen, in a way it was not in the past, as a full-time occupation as well as a lifelong identity; and mothers may be expected to lavish as much 'care' on two children as they might have provided for six in pre-modern times.

Third, the most dramatic increases in the 'workload' of mothers have occurred during the same period that women's paid work load has accelerated. A demanding form of motherhood sits uneasily with the feminisation of the labour force. Some Western countries have accommodated this, to an extent, by extensive programmes of nursery provision, afterschool programmes, and schemes for parental leave; others have not. In England and Wales, in 1988, day-nursery places were available for only 2 per cent of children under the age of five, and most mothers in paid work had to rely on informal arrangements with family members, neighbours or friends. In the absence of adequate childcare arrangements, guilt and exhaustion are often the concomitants of the conflicting demands placed on women as mothers and workers.

medicalisation

A process of increased medical intervention and control in areas that hitherto would have been outside the medical domain.

Fourth, in Western societies in the course of this century, pregnancy and childbirth have become increasingly **medicalised**. There has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of babies born in hospital (from 15 per cent in 1927, to over 99 per cent in 1990), and a proliferation of reproductive technologies for monitoring pregnancy, for intervening in childbirth and for care of newborn infants. In some respects, medicalisation has made childbearing safer for women and their babies (though medicalisation has also brought new dangers in its wake – Oakley, in Stanworth, 1987). But it also provides a prime example of the ways in which women's lives and bodily processes have become more closely regulated by professionals, the majority of whom are men.

Fifth, and finally, although most children are born to married women in their twenties and thirties, the past decades in some countries have seen a marked increase in births to single women; in the UK, in 1990, live births outside marriage represented 28 per cent of all births but 80 per cent of births to women under twenty years of age. Many of these

autonomous motherhood
Single parents who, either by choice or circumstance, have taken on independent responsibility for caring for their children.

women are in a continuing relationship with the father of the child; others are not, and will bring up the baby alone. A much larger category are the growing numbers of formerly-married women who, following divorce or separation, are caring for children on their own. There has been an increase in '**autonomous motherhood**', involving women who – by choice or circumstance – have assumed independent responsibility for bringing up a family.

Box 8.3: Making babies

In modern societies, medical science provides the dominant cultural categories through which pregnancy and childbirth is understood. Emily Martin (1989) argues that the terms used in obstetrical discourse are reminiscent of Fordist production. Indeed, she suggests that childbirth, like factory labour, is subjected to time-and-motion study – so many minutes allowed for this stage of labour, so many minutes for that. One consequence is that mothers' active involvement in childbirth tends to be devalued and that of the obstetrician, glorified. Barbara Katz Rothman contends (1987, p. 161) that in spite of campaigns and movements to reclaim some control for women over birthgiving, 'the pattern in hospitals remains the same. Doctors deliver babies from the bodies of women. The women may be more or less awake, more or less aware, more or less prepared, and more or less humanely or kindly treated, but within the medical model the baby is the product of the doctor's services.'

The trend towards autonomous motherhood reflects the increasing capacity of women (and men) to leave marriages where they are unhappy, to have a sex life outside marriage, and to bring up their 'illegitimate' children. On the other hand, in the context of lower earnings and lower occupational opportunities for women, and cutbacks in public provision, autonomous motherhood often also means an increase in poverty and hardship. The rise in the number of lone mothers, and the meagreness of the support many receive from fathers or from the state, has contributed most in the postwar period to the '**feminisation of poverty**' (McLanahan *et al.*, 1989). Women not only bear the children, but they carry a disproportionate share of the cost of bringing up the next generation.

feminisation of poverty
A pattern of increasing concentration of poverty among the female population.

Popular Culture and the Mass Media

Ever since the second-wave women's movement in the 1970s triggered off a new interest in the analysis of gender, the mass media and popular culture have been a focus for this research.

content analysis
The analysis of the content of communication; usually refers to documentary or visual material.

Content analyses measured the frequency of portrayals of women and men in particular roles or situations. They often produced alarming evidence of the cultural invisibility of girls and women, especially in the public sphere. One such study (Grauerholz and Pescosolido, 1989) examined all the titles for young readers in the catalogue of children's library books. Over the period from 1900 to 1984, there were three male characters for every one character who was female; this gender imbalance was particularly marked in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The bias toward males in children's literature was most pronounced among adult and animal characters; within these categories, male characters continued to become more prominent right into the 1980s.

Studies of magazines have raised questions about the place of popular culture in shaping conceptions of masculinity or femininity. Women's magazines – even those as different as *Woman's Own* and *Cosmopolitan* – display a strong concern with personal relationships (especially with men), and with physical appearance and the cultivation of beauty and style. This is apparent not only in feature articles but also in their advertisements and their advice columns. Men's magazines, on the other hand, tend to represent specialised interests. They tend to be concerned with sports and hobbies (computers, fishing, cars, and the like) or with business and finance, or with sex. Even the general men's magazines such as *Esquire* have few articles on interpersonal relationships. In the magazines, it seems, femininity is defined by appearance and relationships with men, masculinity by a single-minded pursuit of projects (including sex) and an indifference to relationship (Renzetti and Curran, 1989, pp. 114–17).

According to Ferguson (1983), who looked at women's magazines in Britain between 1949 and 1980, such magazines promote a cult of femininity that locks women into subordination. Ferguson's argument is all the more interesting, of course, because women's magazines are one of the few areas of popular culture in which women are often (as editors and managers) in controlling positions.

More recent approaches to popular culture, however, have taken issue with the kind of analysis represented above. Content analyses may often obscure the complex processes by which meaning is produced. They obscure, for example, the heterogeneity of the audience; different groups of readers and watchers find different meanings in the 'same' magazine or television programme. They deny the range of pleasures available from popular culture. In an alternative to Ferguson, Winship (1987) points to the pleasures that women get from their magazines, and insists that women (or men) may still produce oppositional readings of the forms of popular culture they enjoy. Research based around content analyses fails, finally, to recognise that meaning comes in part from the social context of its reception: the controversy surrounding a television programme like *Murphy Brown* will influence the possibilities that people see in it, while the reading of romance novels provides a basis for community and conversation for women readers, rather as football does for a great many men. In short, the impact of popular culture and the media is now recognised to be more complex, more differentiated, and more ambiguous than simple content analyses might suggest. Gender may be a part of virtually all media productions, but they are subject to a variety of readings or interpretations.

And often the meaning of these images is far from obvious. Is Steven Spielberg's film of *The Colour Purple* a film invocation of racist stereotypes of abusing black men, a betrayal of the lesbian sexuality that was so central to Alice Walker's book, or a celebration of the solidarity and endurance of black women? Are action films with macho heroes an attempt to mould men into one narrow form of masculinity, a way of helping men come to terms with the level of violence between men, or a format that is attractive because it allows a display of tenderness between male buddies in an acceptable (heterosexual) form? Should we see 'slasher films' primarily in terms of their portrayal of women as the ultimate victims of violence – for the way they make terror 'sexy' – or should we see them, as Clover (1992) suggests, in terms of the emerging tendency for the hero (the person who vanquishes the monster, like the film characters Ripley in *Aliens* or Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*) to be gendered female? Should we think of popular romances as books that sell women the illusion that they can be happy by losing themselves in love, or instead as Modleski (1982) argues, as providing women with psychological relief from their fears of men and a fantasy of revenge for ill-treatment? These competing interpretations demonstrate that the analysis of popular culture raises as many questions as it answers.

However, as the example of prime-time television suggests, in the midst of flux and change there are certain continuities that are worthy of remark. On the one hand, there is the appearance of new themes – including issues of gender equality; the prominence on British television of women like Kate Adie (chief reporter for the BBC), or Zeinab Badawi (major news anchor on Channel 4); the presence of Oprah Winfrey as the monarch of US chat shows or of comediennes like Ruby Wax: all these features indicate that, to a degree, television has responded to the challenge posed by changes in gender relations in recent decades.

On the other hand, a survey of American prime-time television covering the decades from 1955 to 1985, demonstrated that women throughout this period continued to be the second sex (WIFP, 1986). Two-thirds of the characters in the 20,000 television programmes surveyed were male, and over three decades there was little sign of change. Moreover, throughout the post-war period, female characters were more restricted than male characters in appearance and age. Few female characters made it on to screen other than the physically attractive, and women were much more likely than men to be thin (Silverstein *et al.*, 1986). Twice as high a proportion of female characters as of male were under 25 years of age; four-fifths of female characters, compared with a half of males, were under 35.

Nor is British television different in this respect. The Broadcasting Standards Council monitored all evening television programmes for one week in September 1993. On the four terrestrial channels, they found only 30 per cent of the speaking roles were taken by women; the more 'serious' the programme, the fewer women there were. In news broadcasts, 64 per cent of the major appearances, and 88 per cent of the minor ones, were taken by men. Not only were most of the regular reporters men; overwhelmingly, men were chosen as interviewees, experts and studio guests (Holland, 1994).

symbolic annihilation

A term used to signify how, as a result of under-representation in the media, women have been dismissed and ignored in the public domain.

When it comes to the presence and representation of women in the mass media, the phrase '**symbolic annihilation**' – used by Gayle Tuchman and her colleagues in 1978 to signify low visibility of women – still has currency today.

Sexuality

From an essentialist perspective (and such a perspective colours much commonsense thinking) a man and woman who are attracted to one another and who become sexually involved are 'doing what comes naturally'. Sexuality appears here as a universal phenomenon that reflects deep-seated sexual drives.

Sociologists insist instead that sexual beliefs, practices, relationships and identities follow social patterns rather than natural ones. Sexuality is socially constructed – and, as a consequence, almost infinitely variable. Even sexual pleasures and desires are as much a matter of culture and history as they are of bodily potential. Kissing may be the order of the day among the teenagers of *Heartbreak High*, the American T.V. Series, but the adolescents of the Trobriand Islands find far more pleasure in biting off the eyelashes of the beloved (Malinowski, 1932).

Box 8.4: Sexual scripts

sexual script
Culturally defined set of guidelines prescribing appropriate forms of sexual behaviour and ways of managing sexual encounters.

The concept of a **sexual script** was developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973) as one way of understanding the social construction of sexuality. A sexual script provides a kind of blueprint for sexual desire and sexual practice. Through socialisation, individuals internalise the sexual script, learning not only how to behave towards sexual partners, but also to desire particular things in particular circumstances, and to pursue gratification in particular ways.

But for the concept of sexual scripts to be useful, the gendered nature of scripts needs to be acknowledged. Rose and Frieze (1989) invited undergraduates at a college in midwestern America to describe in detail actions on a hypothetical first date. The respondents produced a script for men that was much more detailed than the one for women. Both male and female daters, undergraduates agreed, would worry about appearance, try to impress their partner, and laugh, joke and talk. Men were expected also to take responsibility: for deciding what to do, for picking up the date, for paying, for initiating physical contact, and for promising to be in touch. Men, the authors conclude, were the planners, the economic providers, and the sexual initiators. Women, on the other hand, were expected to be 'sexual objects and emotional facilitators'; they had to find ways to keep the conversation going, and it was their responsibility, above all, to set limits to sexual demands.

The belief that it is men's place to initiate sex, and women's responsibility to act as the gatekeepers who say how far a sexual encounter will go, is one plank in what is commonly called the double standard of sexual morality.

Gagnon and Simon's concept of the sexual script offers an insight into the ways in which sexual practice may differ across time and place, and between women and men. This approach has also been criticised: for being a-historical; for failing to consider where sexual scripts and sexual meanings come from; and for failing to consider how the sexual behaviour of women and men reflects not only the learning of cultural scripts but also the effects of differential social power.

The claim that commonsense thinking treats sexuality as universal and natural should, more accurately, be restricted to heterosexuality.

There are many forms of sexuality; in contemporary Western societies, heterosexuality is in a dominant or hegemonic position. Although many heterosexuals insist that they come by their preference 'naturally', it is noticeable that a great deal of effort is expended in reinforcing heterosexuality. States play a crucial part: by, for example, denying citizenship to known homosexuals or lesbians; by refusing to recognise the marriages of same-sex partners; by discriminating against arts projects that show non-heterosexual families in a positive light; by maintaining a higher age of consent for homosexual practice. By these and other means, Western states help to ensure the dominance of heterosexual identities and the relative invisibility of alternative sexualities.

Sexual identities are constructed, too, in more routine settings. Many workplaces, for example, allude to heterosexuality constantly in the way people look and dress, in practices of sexual harassment, in 'secret' affairs, in jokes and gossip. The sexual 'normality' of daily life in the office is, as Pringle points out (1989, p. 94), 'relentlessly heterosexual', creating difficulties for homosexual men or lesbian women who want to fit in. Rich (1984) coined the term '**compulsory heterosexuality**' to draw attention to the possibility that desire for the other sex is not merely a preference, but something that has to be 'imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force'.

compulsory heterosexuality
Associated with Adrienne Rich, this concept implies that heterosexuality is not so much the natural form of sexual preference but is imposed upon individuals by social constraints.

The suppression of alternatives to heterosexuality is of broad significance for an understanding of gender difference, gender relations and gender inequality. The culturally constructed fear of homosexuality and lesbianism – **homophobia** – functions to police the behaviour of all men and women, whatever their sexual preference. The question 'What are you, a fag?' is not reserved exclusively for erotic display between men: it may be directed at boys or men who allow themselves to enjoy 'womanly' things, who display tenderness, whose clothes or interests or occupations do not fit a macho mould. As Kinsman (1987, p. 105) argues, 'queer baiting' and the social taboo against pleasure, sex and love between men serves to keep all men in line, defining what proper masculinity is.

homophobia
Fear of homosexuality and lesbianism.

If heterosexuality as an institution shapes the behaviour of all individuals, its impact is different on women and men. In Western societies, heterosexuality incorporates a **double standard of sexual morality**. Sexual activity, even promiscuity, is seen as tolerable or admirable in boys, while – except in the context of love and domesticity – an active sexuality brings girls into disrepute. As Willis (1977) said of the behaviour of a group of working-class 'lads', 'Girls are pursued, sometimes roughly, for their sexual favours, often dropped and labelled 'loose' when they are given' (p. 146). The lads expect to be promiscuous, but promiscuous girls are despised.

double standard of sexual morality
The implicit assumption that while promiscuous forms of sexual behaviour are to be expected and often admired in men, the same forms of behaviour are seen as deviant and inappropriate in women. For example there is no male equivalent of the word 'slag'.

Since Willis wrote about 'the lads' in 1977, it is likely that more girls are prepared to assert their right to sexuality. But the double standard has by no means evaporated. From interviews in three London comprehensives, Lees (1986) documents the significance of sexual reputation in the experience of adolescent girls. To be branded as a 'slag' has severe consequences, and girls are wary about behaving, dressing or speaking in a manner that might attract this dangerous label. But the way that the term 'slag' is used suggests that it is about a girl's relationship to men rather than about sexual activity *per se*; a young woman who is unattached (sexually active or not) is more likely to be called a 'slag' than one who sleeps with a regular boyfriend. The term slag functions, Lees suggests, to steer girls into the 'safety' of steady heterosexual relationships.

Box 8.5: Sex and violence in the courtroom: the impact of the sexual double standard

Fictional accounts of rape and sensational reports in the media often give disproportionate attention to that small minority of rapists who attract the label 'psychopaths'. The image of rape they produce is at odds with analyses of actual rape cases in Western societies, which indicate that few rapists are seriously disturbed, that many plan their crimes carefully, and that many are friends, relatives, acquaintances or workmates of the victim.

When rape is analysed in terms of its relationship to the social construction of sexuality and to the power relations between women and men – rather than being viewed as an idiosyncratic act by disturbed individuals – then we can begin to understand its incidence and its social implications.

The incidence of rape is related to the sexual double standard through cultural expectations about male initiative – taking in sexual encounters and female compliance. Pressures on men to 'prove themselves' by establishing sexual dominance may, in turn, be reinforced by the representation of women, not as complex human beings, but as objects to be admired and 'consumed'.

But the double standard has its most pernicious impact in courtrooms. The fact that a victim of rape is a woman who is or who has been sexually active is often introduced in court, by the defendant's lawyers, to discredit her – the implication often being that women who are sexually active in one circumstance have no right to refuse in another; they are seen to have placed themselves, in some sense, beyond the protection of the law.

The belief that it is up to women to set limits on sexual encounters (see Box 8.4) often translates into the idea that if men go too far, it is women (not men) who should be blamed. As Matoesian's detailed (1993) analysis of courtroom cross-examination demonstrates, qualities that serve a woman

patriarchal

A system that perpetuates the dominance of senior men over women and junior men (*see* patriarchy).

well in everyday life are likely, in rape trials, to be deployed against her. Evidence that a rape victim is independent and clear-headed, that she is friendly and open in her dealings with men – e.g., that she 'calmly enters a man's car' – tends to discredit her testimony. Matoesian (1993, p. 223) concludes: '**Patriarchal** ideology functions as a dominational resource for interpreting the sexual reality of the incident: a resource powering and concealing the sense of what happened. If a woman dates a man, if she goes off with him to an apartment, if she kisses him and so on … then, according to the legal system, she has consented to sexual intercourse.'

The double standard constitutes a crucial part of the explanation why the proportion of convictions from arrest to judgement is lower for rape than for other serious crimes such as murder, burglary, other sexual offences or aggravated assault. The double standard – permitting promiscuous sexuality to men and forbidding it to women – has, as Connell (1987, p. 113) says, 'nothing to do with greater desire on the part of men; it has everything to do with greater power'.

The double standard of sexual morality, then, both reflects and reinforces gender inequality. Men are encouraged to show they are 'real men' by dominating and objectifying women. Women are encouraged to demonstrate their love and to enhance their attractiveness to men by curtailing their own independence. Girls and women who do not dress primarily to please males, who go their own way, who do not defer to male authority, who value the company of other women – and above all, women who publicly side with other women, whether they call themselves feminists or not – run the risk of being dismissed as 'dykes' or 'man-haters'. The supression of lesbianism functions, in effect, to put a brake upon female autonomy; through heterosexuality, Rich (1984) argues, women are persuaded to turn aside from other women, and to place men at the centre of their lives.

Rich's analysis of compulsory heterosexuality sits oddly, of course, with commonsense thinking about the impact of sexual liberalisation in the 1960s and 1970s, when changes in legislation regarding divorce, homosexuality, and abortion, and changes in sexual mores, ushered in a new 'more permissive' sexual climate. In many Western societies, the years since the 1960s have seen a greater tolerance of premarital sex, a widespread recognition of women's capacity for sexual pleasure; and more explicit public discussion of sexuality.

Many feminist writers have pointed out, however, that sexual practice continues to be structured by sexism. Consider, for example, the continued importance (in spite of the promotion of 'safer sex') of definitions of the sexual act centring on the penis and on intercourse; sensuality and alternative forms of touching tend to be seen merely as foreplay, the prelude to 'the real thing'. Or the way in which dominance and submission are often presented as 'sexy', so that inequality is eroticised and, therefore, reinforced. Or the fact – as the study of tourist operations in Britain by Adkins (1992) demonstrates – that getting and holding a good job often depends for women on being sexually pleasing to men; women's sexuality is often commodified, becoming something they provide for others, not something they do for themselves. The working-class wives studied by Rubin (1976) in San Francisco in the 1970s, often complained that sexual liberation had created another set of demands – at the end of the day, after working for pay, caring for the children and looking after the house, they were now expected to have orgasms too!

Some writers have argued that the term 'sexual liberation' is relevant only to men. But in spite of the ways that sexism and the double standard – and the greater social power of men – continue to structure sexuality, a verdict of 'no change' for women will not do. On the contrary, although full sexual equality would certainly depend upon equality in other spheres, sexual liberalisation has been important for women. As Segal (1994) points out, it was women who were penalised in earlier decades most severely for sexual activity – being, for example, the ones who were 'blamed' for pregnancy, and the ones who died from backstreet abortions. By reducing the dangers associated with sexuality, sexual liberalisation may arguably have had a greater positive impact on women's lives than on men's.

Moreover, recent work on sexuality has challenged the notion of male sexual confidence. Hall's (1991) study of advice literature for men in the first half of the twentieth century vividly exposes male anxieties about sexuality. The tendency to define men as healthy and women as pathological worked against a sympathetic resolution of male sexual problems. She raises the possibility that insecurity about sexuality may be one of the motivations that drives some men to seek power over women in other respects (Hall, 1991, p. 173). Her work suggests that the popular image of men as sexually in control, and as insistent on their own gratification at the expense of their partner, may mistake a patriarchal discourse of masculine potency for the real thing.

The discussion of sexual liberalisation and debates over how to read the sexual history of the past three decades illustrates again that sexuality is historically constructed. Earlier in the twentieth century, in Western societies, legitimate sexual activity seemed to be firmly established

hegemony
Commonly used to describe the domination of one class, nation, or group of people over others. It was extended by Gramsci to denote a more general and intellectual dominance, especially when hegemonic ideas influence people's political and cultural perceptions.

within the family; in recent decades, sexual relationships – whether one-night stands, or those involving deeper commitment – take place before marriage, alongside marriage, after marriage, without marriage, and fewer people blink an eye. Partly because the connection between family and acceptable sexuality has been effectively challenged, sexuality has become more open to commercial exploitation – as any glance at magazines and film will testify – and less significant as a means of binding people together in long-term relationships. In addition, **hegemonic** heterosexuality, though hotly defended by, among others, fundamentalist religious groups, has lost some of its taken-for-granted authority. All of these things suggest alterations in the social organisation of sexuality that might eventually lead to deeper changes in the gender order.

Summary of the Chapter

- Answers to questions about the origin of gender difference range from those that emphasise biological sources to those that stress the social, cultural and historical construction of women and men.
- The diversity of masculinities and femininities in different times and places, and among different social groups, works against the idea that there is some fixed essence or nature that all women or men have in common. The simple division into male and female sex can itself be seen as a social process, varying from one social setting to another.
- Bodies are moulded into male and female patterns by social processes that are linked to our ideas about gender. A neat division between bodies as natural and personalities as social cannot be sustained. And the boundary between what is social and what is biological is itself shifting and ambiguous.
- Gender identities are shaped by the processes, conscious and unconscious, that are set in train by contemporary patterns of childrearing. However, gender is not primarily a property of individuals, but rather of societies, of social institutions and of cultures.
- The early period of industrialisation gave rise to an ideology of domesticity that lives on in contemporary divisions of labour – by, for example, rendering invisible some important forms of work.
- In recent decades, in industrialised countries, there has been a feminisation of the labour force, but this has intensified some forms of gender disadvantage and has been accompanied by a widening of differentials within each sex. Horizontal and vertical gender segregation in employment contributes to marked gender differences in income, and to the greater

vulnerability of women to poverty.

- Childbearing is an activity that carries different meanings in different times and places. For example, the social conditions surrounding childbirth and childcare have changed dramatically in Western societies over the past century, in ways that are important for gender relations.
- The impact of popular culture on gender relations is complex and differentiated, and the meaning of texts and visual images is often ambiguous. In spite of changes in the media that acknowledge the greater prominence of women and girls in public life today, women and girls are still less visible in the popular media and more stereotyped than are men.
- Sexual beliefs, practices, relationships and desires follow social patterns rather than natural ones. In contemporary Western societies, heterosexuality is a dominant or hegemonic form of sexuality, reinforced by the state and by many routine practices. The restrictions on same-sex sexuality serve to enforce particular expressions of masculinity and femininity, albeit in a manner that is contested.

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