

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes**

### **Module: Family Life**

#### **Unit 5a: Sex and Gender (Summary Notes)**

## Sex and Gender

The focus of attention is going to be the process whereby gender identities are socially created. Whilst there is no specific reference in the syllabus to this particular idea, the work that you've done in relation to both family life and other areas of social life should have drawn your attention to the central importance of the concept of gender in our sociological understanding of everyday life.

### A. The difference between Sex and Gender

1. There is a long history of debate within various social sciences (most notably, psychology and sociology) concerning the relative importance of biological sex (considered in terms of the genetic make-up of males and females) and cultural socialisation in determining the behavioural characteristics of each sex. This debate is frequently characterised in terms of:

- "Nature" - the claim that our social behaviour is largely determined by inherited genetic traits ("IQ" for example) and
- "Nurture" - the claim that, whilst males and females are clearly different biologically, differences in temperament, intelligence and so forth are socially created.

2. Sex refers to a biological categorization (largely based upon the very scientific observation of various rude bits of the body).

3. Gender refers to the social characteristics that we, as individuals living within a particular society, attribute to people on the basis of their biological sex.

- In terms of biology, we can objectively classify people (as "male" or "female") in a way that is asocial. That is, in a way that does not attribute social - as opposed to biological - differences to each sex.
- Having said this, it's worth remembering that some societies recognise hermaphrodites (people who have both male and female genitals) as a "third biological sex".
- In terms of gender, the classification is more subjective. We attribute certain social and / or psychological characteristics to people of a different sex on the basis of the way in which our culture produces and classifies knowledge.

4. We can illustrate this idea by noting the following distinction:

- Categories such as "male" and "female" are biological categories - they refer specifically to physical differences between each sex.
- Categories such as "masculine" and "feminine" are cultural categories - they refer specifically to the way in which people believe they - and others - should behave appropriately in terms of their biological sex.

- 5. Robert Stoller ("Sex and Gender: on the Development of Masculinity and Femininity", 1968) expresses the above thus:

"Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations; if the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female", the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex".

- As a fairly basic example:

"Masculinity" might involve acting aggressively, wearing make-up, perfuming your hair, wearing trousers, wearing skirts, working and so forth (all of which men in our society either have done or still do).

"Femininity" might involve acting passively, child-rearing, wearing skirts and dresses, wearing trousers, working and so forth (all of which women in our society either have done or still do).

- In short, the significance of the above can be seen in terms of the idea that the way we label and classify something (a baby, for example) is going to have very important consequences for the way we behave towards that child in terms of the cultural expectations we have about him or her.

6. An experiment that attempted to assess the extent to which our behaviour is conditioned by the labels attached to people (an example of Polyani's idea that all "observation is theory-dependent") was carried-out by Will, Self and Datan ("Maternal behaviour and perceived sex of infant", 1976)

- They gave the same baby to different adults. Some adults were told the child was male, whilst others were told the child was female and they noted the differences in the reactions to the child. Adults tended to attribute masculine characteristics to the child when told it was male and feminine characteristics to the child when told it was female. The experiment showed how people attributed gender characteristics to a child based around their knowledge of the child's ascribed label.

7. This experiment shows that gender socialisation takes place (both consciously and unconsciously). If it did not (that is, a "gender identity" was something that simply developed naturally) then societies would not produce ways of enforcing gender differences and stereotypes.

### Summary:

1. "Gender" is a culturally-produced category. Its particular meaning differs between societies (concepts of "masculinity", for example, are different in Britain than in

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societies such as Australia or Peru). In addition, its meaning changes to reflect different stages in the process of maturation (that is, the way in which we biologically mature). "Girl", for example, is a gender category that is different from "woman", just as "boy" is a different gender category to "man".

2. Given the fact that human beings have to learn gender appropriate behaviour, the categorization of people on the basis of gender characterisation is a subjective process. The behaviour we term "feminine" in our society may not be seen as such in other societies (or, indeed, in our society at different times). This process, however, is one that follows certain culturally-defined rules - gender attributions are not arbitrary (for example, based upon whim), but evolve over time (through tradition, for example).

3. Gender - as something that is both learnt and subjective - represents a form of "ideological framework" that exists to both tell us how to behave appropriately in terms of our biological sex and, most importantly, represents a form of social control (since it lays-down normative guide-lines for people to follow).

4. As with any ideology, power is necessarily involved, since the power to create and enforce ideological frameworks is significant in relation to the way in which people of a different sex can - or are allowed - to relate to one another sexually.

- As an example of this process, we can follow Beattie ("Who Was That Lady?", *New Society*, 08/01/81) when he points out that:  
"...'girl' like 'lady' is often used for 'woman' in contexts where 'boy' or 'gentleman' would not appear for 'man'. We find Page Three 'girls' (not women) in *The Sun*. Calling a nude male pin-up a 'boy' would be derogatory.

Our tendency to call all women 'girls' is enormously significant. We stress their positive evaluative properties (especially the physical ones) and suggest a lack of power. We are to some extent creating immaturity and dependence through linguistic devices".

5. The relationship between "biology" and "culture" is difficult to specify with any degree of precision. However, it does seem that the cultural environment within which a child is raised has a very significant effect upon both its general physical and social development - one that is significantly more important than "biological heredity".