

KEY CONCEPT: GENDER

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Concept origins

Gender, here referring predominantly to socio-cultural dimensions of females and males as opposed to their physical sex characteristics, is a relatively recent conceptual category in academic **discourse**. Originating with the introduction of the term ‘gender role’ by Money (1955; Money *et al.*, 1955) and ‘gender **identity**’ later by Stoller (1968; Green, 2010), its subsequent popularisation was due to its take up by feminism as a powerful conceptual tool (Haig, 2004; Germon, 2009). Gender stereotypes were (and continue to be) framed in terms of binaries or polar opposites, such as dominant/submissive, rational/emotional, or active/passive, one pole of which would be predominantly associated with masculinity and the other with femininity. The flexibility of such associations varies socially, culturally and historically (Mead, 1935, 1949), but worldwide such gender binaries have been repeatedly found to limit gender expression and support discriminatory norms (Naples *et al.*, 2016). As such, gender is of strong relevance in education, particularly given education’s socialising function and its role as a potential agent of social change.

Current status and usage

As a concept, gender (rather than sex, here linked to **sexuality**), as Haig (2004) has pointed out, has become the predominant term in research in education and the other **social sciences**, arts and **humanities**. In particular, the processes of gender socialisation in education have attracted significant feminist and wider cross-disciplinary interest (Helgeson, 2016; Naples *et al.*, 2016). In these social processes gender roles, norms and their behavioural expression are learned and perpetuated (Chodorow, 1978) in ways specific to the host **culture**, through various primary and secondary socialising agents (such as parents, **teachers** and

the media). Building particularly on Foucault's ideas, as well as on **psychoanalysis**, Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) work on gender has impacted considerably on contemporary academic debate (Brady and Schirato, 2011). Discarding the gender binary and any naturalisation of sexual identities, Butler situates gender as a cultural 'performance', which articulates contested **power** relations. The traditional performance of gender reinforces a **hegemony** of a heteronormative social order, and may be thus regarded as a disciplinary practice. Given the inherently unstable and contested nature of gender, performances that fall outside of these norms create 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1990) and can attract sanctions both from within and beyond educational circles. Prominent among the contemporary gender debates in British education is the rise in attainment rates by girls and young women in **school** and higher education. Unsurprisingly, the common response is not so much celebration of female achievement but the emergence of anxiety about failing boys (Marchbank and Letherby, 2014). In education, the task of developing Butlerian type questioning has been taken forward by a significant number of writers in rethinking a critical edge for education (e.g., Davies, 2006; Nayak and Kehily, 2006; Vlieghe, 2010; and Giuliano, 2015).



When a child is born (and now often before this happens), one of the first questions posed is: 'Is it a girl or a boy?' This deceptively simple binary choice, which seems to offer just two fundamental categories of being, traditionally resulted in a stereotypical biologically based answer: 'He is a boy'; 'She is a girl'. Key differential markers in reaching this decision might include the possession of a vagina or penis, chromosomal differences, and other biological characteristics. The results would be generally clear and unambiguous. However, this is not always the case. Some children are born intersex or with medical conditions (e.g., Klinefelter syndrome, Turner syndrome) that can raise doubts over a simple binary attribution of sex. Estimates of the prevalence of such births vary, from 1.7% for the compound range of births being cited by Fausto-Sterling (2000), down to 0.018% for those strictly defined as intersex by Sax (2002). Irrespective of the size of these numbers, they problematise any simple binary classification according to biological sex. Gender, however, complicates the picture further. Alcoff (2006, p.146) argues that gender is 'formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices, and **discourses**', and goes on to note that the dynamic socio-historical context

is one in which 'we are both subjects of and subjected to social construction'. Culturally and historically determined as stereotypes, femininity might typically include dependent, emotional, passive, graceful, nurturing, empathising and submissive characteristics, while independent, rational, competitive, active, systematising and confident ones would be ascribed to masculinity. These are not mere stereotypes: the language of gender is a language of hierarchy and **power**. It is a core aspect of patriarchy, a social system under which men dominate women and gender roles are reinforced (Marchbank and Letherby, 2014). Thus, those attributes more commonly associated with males and masculinity attract higher valuations than those associated with females and femininity. This all impacts on and is insidiously reproduced through the world of education (as well as in work and **society**); for example, with gendered subject choices, encouragement towards particular careers, future domestic arrangements, and so on (Dyhouse, 2006; Jackson *et al.*, 2011; Fineman, 2012).



Masculinity and femininity, as a binary concept, are problematic. Such—substantially learned—characteristics are, of course, found in varying amounts in both males and females. Winnicott (1971) related the inter-relationship of these elements in the personality to **creativity**. Yet when femininity is conspicuous in males, and masculinity in females, social censure can result, the degrees of which vary according to social, cultural and historical factors. Inevitably this increases still further the vulnerability of these groups in education and wider **society**. The term transgender (Oliven, 1965) was introduced to recognise individuals who experienced **dissonance** between their subjectively experienced gender **identity** and their assigned biological sex. More recently, an abbreviation simply to trans has gained some currency (Killermann, 2013), particularly given its greater inclusivity. The term cisgender (Sigusch, 1991) was coined to describe the non-trans population, though it is problematic for its clustering of LGB groups in with heterosexuals. Flores *et al.* (2016) estimated that 0.6% of the US population identify as transgender. Increasing social and legal recognition of trans groups in various countries, such as the hijra in India and two-spirit Native Americans, has underscored the important **human rights** issues involved, not just for these groups, but more broadly. Currently, in Europe, only Denmark, Malta and Ireland have legislation that allows individuals over the age of 18 to self-declare their preferred gender. In other countries, where gender recognition legislation exists, various restrictive forms of expert certification are required. In education, these issues are reflected at multiple levels, including in policies, in **institutional cultures**, in curricular options, in the segregation of toilets and changing facilities, and in varying degrees of violence and bullying.

Efforts to recognise the complex issues involved and develop practice guidance are slowly gathering pace, with Cornwall (Cannon and Best, 2015) and East Sussex (Allsorts Youth Project *et al.*, 2014) being among English local authorities leading the way.



Seeing the body as a cultural situation, Judith Butler (1990, 1993; Boucher, 2006; Brady and Schirato, 2011) argues that gender and **sexuality** are contingent, assumed, and the product of identifications with figures within dominant narratives. Objects of desire are offered and substantially delimited through these same narratives, which are typically heteronormative. They thus represent varieties of **ideology** (Althusser, 1971) that are essentially hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971), disciplinary (Foucault, 1977) and oppressive (Freire, 1972). One example of gender trouble important to note here are the debates accompanying the rise in female academic attainment rates in **schools** and universities, as well as the changing gender profile of academics. Aside from the continued utilisation of the gender binary and neglect of recognising female achievement, is a narrative—something of a moral panic—about ‘failing boys’ in a ‘feminised’ educational system, which lacks adequate male role models. While this may be crudely regarded as yet a further example of misogyny (and that would be too simple a story), disaggregating of **assessment** data reveals not only significant gender effects, but that these are far less significant than either social **class** or **ethnicity** (Marchbank and Letherby, 2014). It is thus important to take such research forward in a far more nuanced way, paying due attention to issues of **intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1989; Carastathis, 2014) across the gender range. The result should offer not just greater opportunities for individual subversion (Butler, 1993), but also more transformative educational and social possibilities.

Questions to consider

1. Considering your own **identity** and **culture**, how do you express your gender and has this changed over time?
2. How has your gender affected your educational career?
3. Considering Butler's work on **performativity**, what factors contribute to (a) rigid gender performances and (b) iterations of gender with greater variability?
4. How does the design of **schools** and educational institutions impact on the gender identity and freedom of gender expression of their users?

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