

Introduction

In module 4, you learned about inequality as it applied to race and social class. Gender and sexuality are also statuses that are used to determine how you will be stratified in society. Most societies are male dominant and most societies provide preferential treatment to heterosexuals. In this module you will learn theories that discuss how much of sexuality and gender is biologically determined and how much is socially determined. You will also begin to learn about social institutions and how they meet the needs of a society. You will learn about theories that explain why institutions work the way they do and how this can both harm and benefit a social structure.



Hijras of India¹

Sex and Gender

The terms [sex and gender](#) [Video, 2:22 mins] are often used interchangeably, however they mean two very different things. Sex refers to biological differences that include chromosomes, hormones and genitalia that distinguish males from females.

[Gender](#) [Video, 3:35 mins] refers to the social and cultural expectations for behaviors based on biological sex. Gender is behaviors that are identified as masculine or feminine.

Historically, we have had two classifications for gender.

However, since gender is learned, we have many more actual gender expressions, the external manifestations of gender.

Cisgender refers to those whose gender expression matches their biological sex. [Transgender](#) [Video, 2:20 mins] refers to those whose gender expressions do not align with their biological sex.

Essentialists argue that gender is actually biological and should be defined by the categories of male and female. This approach argues that the behaviors develop out of biological drives rather than socially constructed categories. Constructionists argue that there is no biological basis for gender. This is the nature vs nurture argument that you learned about in module 1.



The Function of Gender Inequality²

Sexuality

[Sexuality](#) [Video, 4:11 mins] is another term that is often used interchangeably with sex and gender although it has a unique

meaning. Sexuality refers to the orientation that an individual has toward sexual desire and behavior. Heterosexuals are attracted exclusively to the opposite sex. Homosexuals are attracted exclusively to the same sex. Bisexuals are attracted to both sexes and Asexuals are attracted to neither sex. This list has grown since the assigned textbook was published, which illustrates the fluidity of social understanding around sexuality. The newest identification is Demisexual. This refers to a group of people that are asexual in the absence of intense emotional commitment. Demisexuals can be hetero-, homo- or bi-sexual. Sexuality has become [less binary](#) [Video, 18:11 mins] in its definition. In fact, Queer theory argues that any classification of sexuality is limiting and outmoded.



New York Gay Pride Parade³

How is Gender Learned?

While Essentialists argue that gender is biologically motivated, most sociologists are constructionists. Therefore, they argue that gender is learned through the socialization process. This takes place primarily within the family, the school, with peers and from the media. The process is known as [social learning](#) [Video, 1:37 mins]. Imagine that you are walking across campus and see friends with their new baby. You peek into the stroller and see a baby dressed in blue. You are likely to say “oh what a handsome little boy”. If the baby is dressed in pink, you will comment on the pretty little girl. If the baby is dressed in green, you might ask the parents “What did you name the baby?” The name John tells you the baby is a boy while Jill tells you it is a girl. These are just two examples of how families socialize the baby to know gender norms from the moment the baby is born. The school continues this process as boys and girls are treated differently by teachers and by the institution.



Which one is a boy?⁴

Think about your high school experiences. Did you have a football team? Were the players all male or mixed sexes? Or did you have two football teams, one for boys and one for girls. Most schools, even after [Title IX](#), have only boy's teams. Girls must be allowed to play, but peers put pressure on girls to participate in passive activities while boys participate in active ones. As such, there is little demand for girl's football teams. Finally, the media participates in this socialization as well. The vast majority of roles in television shows and commercials are heteronormative. This means that

they are heterosexual, Cisgender characters. We see the same focus in print media. The next time you are out shopping compare the cover of a man's magazine to that of a woman's magazine. Cover photos of men highlight some aspect of physical prowess or financial success, like a well-defined six pack or tailored business suit. Cover photos of women highlight physical beauty.

Gender and Sexual Inequality

You began learning about inequality in Module 4. To fully understand [inequality](#) [Video, 2:08 mins], you must also consider the roles that gender and sexuality play in social stratification. Most societies are patriarchal. Think about your last name. Are you named for your father's family or your mother's family? Most of us take the last name of our father. When women marry, there is still a strong expectation that they will assume the last name of their husband. These are signs of social patriarchy; the male domination of society and culture. Patriarchal societies typically have [sexism](#) [Video, 1:38 mins] built into the values and the institutions. Sexism is discrimination based on sex that is based on the belief that one sex, typically male, has more value than the other. This creates unequal access to power and opportunities for women. Societies are also heterosexist. This means that values and beliefs consider one sexual orientation, heterosexuality, to be superior to others. This can create a climate of homophobia and/or transphobia (irrational hatred for and fear of the LGBTQ community). This level of discrimination can lead to members of the LGBTQ community remaining "closeted" or hiding their true identities from the dominant culture.



Rosie the Riveter⁵

Theoretical Explanations for Gender Inequality

Functionalists usually argue that everything that is a universal is good for social order. Gender roles are a social universal. In other words, every society has roles that are associated with masculine and feminine, though what is masculine in one culture may be feminine in another. Talcott Parsons argued that women are more suited for the expressive or nurturing role while men are better suited for the instrumental or task oriented role. This argument is primarily based on the biological relationship between having children and being female. Young children need to be nurtured so it makes sense



Democracy should begin at home.⁶

for the parent that gives birth to be the one that is more expressive. These roles are complementary within a family and are necessary. However, inequality exists because society values the instrumental role more than the expressive role. Child rearing is seen as less of a contribution to the family than breadwinning. Conflict theory argues that men hold the majority of resources and privileges and inequality exists because men want to keep that power advantage. Gender inequality is merely an extension of class inequality. Since capitalism requires a constant supply of workers, women are relegated to domestic roles to produce those workers. Since the labor is unpaid, the production of the labor force is not an expense to the capitalists. Also, when the labor force falls short of the demand, like it did during World War II, women can be co-opted to fill the temporary need for workers. Interactionism argues that we construct and maintain gender in our daily lives. According to Harold Garfinkel, we learn gender through our interactions and have a strong pressure to conform to normal expectations. Transgendered people, for example, have to learn the new gendered behaviors when they transform even when their self-identity is embodied in their new gender. Think about the little things you do every day that are associated with gender. The way you talk, make eye-contact, sit, walk and the body language you use all take on different meanings when you are male or female. Feminist theory builds on both conflict theory and interactionism. Its primary goals are to challenge patriarchal explanations for social phenomenon and to “write women” back into scholarship. Feminism is the social movement that grew out of feminist theories.

Politics

[Politics](#) [Video, 3:18 mins] is one of the major social institutions. A social institution is a system that shapes the way groups and individuals interact. Politics refers to the institutions that shape the governing structures of a society, allocating its resources and rights among societal actors and individuals. [A standard definition of politics](#) [PDF, File Size 2.4 MB] is: the process of resolving conflicts and making distribution decisions about how scarce resources will be allocated. This neutral definition allows for all manner of processes and distributional outcomes, including extreme inequality and use of force. Any government necessarily includes a system of power and authority, which defines and enforces rights and resources allocations. Power refers to the ability to impose one’s will on another, and authority is the legitimate right to wield power. Authority can be elected, appointed or taken. While the United States is a [democracy](#) [Video, 1:49 mins] that has an elected representative governance structure, accountable to the people, other forms of government don’t require or even want democracy. An authoritarian government exists when a small number of elites hold all of the political power, and



Donkey and Elephant Straddling a Fence.⁷

these can take the form of a military authoritarian regime, or other types such as single ruling party systems with few citizen-based legitimation processes. Another form of government is the monarchy. England has a constitutional monarchy today, but prior to the late 1600s, it was an [absolute monarchy](#) [Video, 2:38 mins]. Monarchies are ruled by a King or Queen and power is based through a family as a birthright. Prince Charles, for example, will eventually become the King of England, if he outlives his mother the Queen. Prior to the marriage of Prince William, a daughter could inherit the throne only in the absence of a male heir. Now the oldest offspring of the monarch or his/her heir is considered the “Crown Prince or Princess”. Typically the oldest son of the monarch is the heir to the throne. These systems still proliferate in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world.

Power and Politics in America

Political leaders are elected in the United States. Voter turnout is higher when there is an important issue on the ballot, or during Presidential years, but generally [voter turnout in the US is much lower than other advanced industrial democracies](#).

[Disenfranchisement](#) [Video, 0:52 mins] also reduces voter turnout. This is when people do not vote because they are barred from voting. Those that have been convicted of felonies can vote as long as they have served their time in some states. Other states deny the right to vote to all convicted felons or those on parole or probation. Other issues are less overt than laws that strip the right to vote. Elections are held on Tuesday, for example, and many people have difficulty getting the day off work. Countries that have election holidays have much higher voter turnout. Those with low incomes may lack the necessary ID to vote, including those that are homeless since IDs require a permanent address. C. Wright Mills argued that power in the US actually belongs to a power elite, a small group of people that make all of the important decisions, [establishing and funding the key officeholders](#) [PDF, File Size 572 KB. In a [plutocratic oligarchy](#) [Video, 2:59 mins], wealthy and powerful elites set the parameters for those few elected officials as they seek office and act in official capacities, usually to the benefit of the monied classes.



Disenfranchisement⁸

Education

[Education](#) [Video, 3:46 mins] is another important institution in society. During the Industrial Revolution, education became focused on training the labor force. It was during this time that the notion of compulsory education for the masses came into



Backpacks on a school bench.⁹

being. The “K through 12” system was created for all as opposed to being restricted for the children of the wealthy and socially powerful. Since that time education has expanded to include the large land grant state universities, popular financing for all through Pell grants for tuition and subsidized loans. Whether the US is living up to the Jeffersonian ideal that “an educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people” remains an open question. Education has been increasingly contested, as its price, quality and role in American society remain central to the prospect of individual and societal advancement. Education has always been linked to the labor market, but what sort of an educated citizenry is desired remains contested. Should everyone have a classical and liberal arts education, which necessarily leads to questioning authority, or as we move further into the “Information Age,” should education adapt merely to train the labor force to take computer-based competency jobs where only narrowly defined skills matters?

Tracking and the Hidden Curriculum

As you learned in module two, society reproduces itself. We see evidence of this in the school system. Tracking, for example, teaches children motivation for success. If they do well, they are placed in a group that has better access to school resources. If they do not do well, they are put in groups with less access and lower outcomes. Education also, therefore, reproduces inequality. Black and Hispanic children are more likely to be placed in remedial classes while whites and Asians are more likely to be placed in advanced classes.



Racing to Win¹⁰

Boys get more attention from teachers than girls and girls are encouraged to “dumb down” by peers when they reach middle school. Students with disabilities are likely to be educated separately and not mainstreamed. These differences reinforce the social order of inequality to young children which normalizes inequalities that exist. These values are part of the [hidden curriculum](#) [Video, 3:40 mins], a latent functional outcome of education.

Religion

Finally, religion is another important institution in society. Religion concerns itself with the [sacred](#) [Video, 2:26 mins] and the [profane](#) [Video, 2:16 mins]. Approximately 77% of US



Multiple Churches in Nova Scotia¹¹

residents claim a religious affiliation. Of those, the majority are Christian though they don't all belong to the same denomination (e.g. Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, etc.). Religion can be extrinsic (public displays of commitment such as service attendance) and intrinsic (a personal relationship to the divine). Fundamentalists are often associated with acts of hate and/or terrorism however the exact meaning of this term is one that interprets religious scriptures literally. Evangelicals are those that work to convert non-believers to their faith. Structural functionalists argue that religion shapes everyday moral behavior and gives meaning to life. Conflict theorists argue that religion promotes inequality and conflict. Symbolic interactionists argue that we must understand religion from the meaning that it gives individuals. The US is a secular nation. It has a separation of church and state. The state cannot dictate religious practices and religion doesn't control legal action. Despite this, every elected president has been a member of a Christian denomination and religion is often a discussion during the election. For example, many argued that if John F. Kennedy was elected, the Pope would run the US government.

The readings and the videos in this module have introduced you to theoretical frameworks for understanding gender and sexual inequality. They have also introduced you to social institutions, specifically politics, education and religion. You have continued to learn how personal characteristics can result in discrimination and inequality. You have learned how social institutions can promote discrimination and inequality. The following activities will give you the opportunity to apply what you have learned in this module.

Image Citation:

¹ Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

² Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

³ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/115_863466

⁴ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/154_2900380

⁵ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/140_1629302

⁶ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/140_1696049

⁷ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/140_1684014

⁸ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/140_1638616

⁹ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/300_1302413

¹⁰ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/158_2465277

¹¹ http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/167_4002966