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TOOLBOX

What is Gender?

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Girls and boys, women and men, of course! Certainly, but is it so simple? Not all women are like each other, nor are all men. Different ways of being and behaving often cut across the gender divide. It is also a common observation that men and women may appear and behave in ways that do not match the different cultural expectations of what is seen as appropriate in relation to biological classifications. So to what degree does gender belong to the body, to the self-presentation - or to the eyes of the beholder?

The question arises because gender has many facets. It is a dimension of bodies and physical reproduction, individual identities and personal experience, social relations and everyday interaction. It is central to divisions of labor, to the structuring of institutions such as families, schools, markets, and states. Last, but not least, it is also a forcefull frame of interpretation in our minds that imposes

hierarchical dichotomies on differences that are actually much more varied and distributional. The personal, symbolic, social relational, and structural dimensions of gender are deeply entangled with other lines of difference and inequality, such as age, sexuality, social class, nationality, and racialized-ethnicity. These entanglements contribute to shape the organization, salience, and meanings of gender in specific contexts.

1. Gender as category and gender as distribution

A source of confusion is that gender as a concept is used to signify two quite different things: a categorical difference (meaning either/or) and a distributional or statistical difference (meaning more or less of something). The only close-to-dichotomous observable gender trait - often named as the core of biological sex - is genital difference.

However, even here it is also the case that a small number of babies are born with ambiguous genitals or intersex conditions (Hines 2004; Fausto-Sterling 2000). All other gender dimensions -- whether they are biological (hormone levels, secondary sex attributes, brain structure, motor performance), psychological (differences in motivations or cognitive capacities) or behavioural (differences in preferences, and ways of being and behaving) -- involve complex variation, not dichotomy. In most cases the variation within each gender group is bigger than the average difference between the two groups. Even if, on average, boys grow to be taller than girls, some girls end up taller than some boys. If we understand those tall girls as "masculine" and the shorter boys as "feminine," we are actually imposing cultural stereotypes on biological variation.

Difference in height is one of the largest average gender differences, whereas measured psychological gender differences are all very small. Seen together, the huge amount of research dedicated to measuring psychological gender differences confirm only few clear results (Hines 2004, Fine 2010). Some of the reasons for this may be that gender traits are highly situational, that they tend to increase from childhood to adulthood, and that they are very difficult to measure in unbiased ways by (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). It is also largely unknown to what degree measures of psychological gender differences are actually related to the gender differences found in brain structure or whether the measures depend on learning and experience or some mixture of both.

Some behavioural differences have been connected to prenatal exposure to androgen, especially play patterns (choice of play mates, rough-and-tumble play),

but new research has also made this less conclusive than was believed to be the case just a few years ago (Hines 2004). Even the biggest gender difference in cognitive skills – that boys perform somewhat better in visual-spatial tasks -- seems to have disappeared in Swedish children after the 1980s, parallell with girls access to playing football and legos (Emanuelsson and Svensson, 1985). The reason may be that at that point, girls had started to play football and with legos (but with new market-based gender segregation of childhood we have seen the last decades, this gender difference may very well reappear).

The whole idea of a one-way causal route from biology to behavior is today questioned by new biologial and medical research documenting the remarkable flexibility of the human brain, the contextual contingency of bodily processes, and the ability even of genes to adjust their effects to individual life circumstances (Hines 2004). Thus, almost all gender differences are distributional rather than dichotomous or categorical, most gender traits seem to be socially influenced and changeable over time, and they do not come in neat and one-dimensional packages in the person. A boy or a girl may be "typical" in some respects and "atypical" in others. So what is gender if what we see as "masculine" and "feminine" traits can be found in both girls and boys? Questions like these have led gender researchers to conclude that divisions and hierarchies of gender do not follow from the difference between women and men. It is rather the opposite: social and discursive practices that maintain a gender split and gender hierarchy create the idea of fundamental dichotomous and categorical gender difference and thus also contribute to producing differences socially and psychologically. These assumed fundamental differences then legitimize differential treatment of men and women, and help shape subjective experience of different gender identities. Gender is thus constructed as a difference, and empirical variation in its many dimensions becomes reduced to a simple dichotomy (Magnusson and Marecek 2012).

This does not mean that gendered patterns of behaviour are a mirage or that the patterns that do exist have no sort of biological basis (even if we do not know exactly what that basis is). The point is that there is no clear or straightforward connection between near-dichotomous dimensions of biological sex and the complex, multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of gender differences. Gendered patterns -- with or without a biological basis -- inform cultural norms and expectations about what is seen as typically feminine and typically masculine. Statistical gender distributions do not apply at the individual level, and this means that if a child exhibits behaviour typical of his or her gender, it is not possible to decide whether this is connected to a genetic disposition or to the child having

learned to tune in to what he or she understands as the right way to mark himself as a boy, or herself as a girl, in this particular context.

2. Gender patterns

Distributive gender patterns are found both on structural, symbolic and personal levels all though they may vary both between and within societies and social contexts

Structural and symbolic gender

When we look at a photo in our daily newspaper of a meeting, for instance of prime ministers, we immediately see that gender constitutes a social structure: many men and very few women are in the photo. The few women may have difficulty in making themselves seen behind the tall men, but they also try to blend in by dressing in a way that does not make them stick out too much. Other gender structures may be that men and women are unevenly distributed in terms of education and occupations, that women own and earn less than men, that they hold fewer leading positions in the workplace, that they do more housework than men in most families, or that (in most cases) acts of physical violence in the family are carried out by men against women (Connell 2009). Even if the situation is changing (and has, indeed, changed considerably over the last few decades, especially in the global North), a certain gender structure so far seems to reproduce itself in new costumes: the more money, status or power, the more men we see, and the fewer women. The Norwegian psychologist, Hanne Haavind, once expressed this persistent structural gender pattern in this way: 'When women do the same as men, they are paid less, and what women do more frequently is paid less than what men do more frequently, no matter who does it' (Haavind 1981).

The prevalence of such gender structures will also gradually form the cultural meaning of gender: the symbolic content of gender and the general discourses we understand gender by. When almost every prime minister we see appears to be a middle-aged man in a dark suit and a serious expression on his face, these meanings are attached to the idea of what it takes to become and be a prime minister. It becomes normal and natural that men hold the leading positions in our society, while women work part-time in order to take care of the home and family. Thus, the culture of political and public life become 'masculinised', but is perceived as neutral and necessary to handle such jobs. It becomes a part of our 'figured world' that it takes a man to be a true leader, and if a woman takes that position we observe her closely to see if she really can handle it. She has to prove

that she has the competence in spite of her gender, whereas the gender of a man adds to our expectation and trust in his competence. Thus, symbolic gender will have consequences for the further development of structural gender, and vice versa.

Different cultures have different norms for what counts as desireable masculinity and femininity. However, also within the same culture there will often be several ways in which one can be masculine or feminine. Different social classes, ages and ethnic groups, for instance, will often have different ideas about what a real man/boy or a real woman/girl is. While a decent income, the latest computer model and a powerful position at work may be important elements in successful masculinity in some social circles, physical power, having a lark, or being good at sports may be what counts in others (Willis 1977, Frosh 2002). Within a society there will be ongoing symbolic struggles between such masculinities to gain hegemony, for instance by ridiculing or morally criticising each other. Some become dominant, while others are subordinated or marginalized (Connell 2000). What Connell calls "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphazised femininity" within a specific culture are those forms that are most honoured or desired, and they do not need to be the most common forms. In fact, many people live in some tension with, or distance from, the hegemonic gender models of their own culture.

The fact that several models of masculinities and femininities may exist in the same culture also show us why not all men have the same status or feel equally superior to women. But the fact that we are often much more worried about subordinated men than about subordinated women shows that the existence of hierarchies within each gender group does not abolish the hierarchy between genders. Men and boys with a subordinate position within the male hierarchy will often be very careful to avoid being positioned below women.

The plural words 'masculinities' and 'femininities' may also remind us that what makes something appear as feminine or masculine depends on many different items, of which none is really indispensable. It is the totality that counts, and the specific combination. Such items may be a person's biological sex, the way the person appears, for instance in clothing, manners and body language, the sexual orientation of the person, the person's abilities, interests and competences, the job or positions he or she occupies, personal possessions (a motorbike, a hair dryer, a pink coat). Biological sex neither guarantees, nor determines gender. For instance, a pink coat could easily override the significance of the biological sex if the owner were a boy.

Personal gender

Gender works through social structures and cultural symbols and norms – but it is also a personal matter and a reality for each and every one of us. Personal gender concerns the ways we fit into, identify with or protest against available cultural models of gender. Earlier personal gender was often described through the concept of "gender role" which designates the sum of norms and expectations that a given society has concerning men and women. This would then determine what kind of behaviours are rewarded, and what kind are punished. However, it is not only 'others' who tell us what we should do, we do it by ourselves in order to be comprehensible to others – and to ourselves.

This means that people actively contribute to maintaining norms and meanings of gender that may, at the same time, oppress them. While feminists of the 1970s tended to see women as victims of men's power, the perspective today has changed to seeing both as victims as well as maintainers of gendered discourses. For this reason, concepts like "gendered positions" or "gendered identities" is used more than the concept of gender role today (Davies 1989/2003; Layton 1998). The argument is that we throughout our lives develop an emotional attachment to certain gendered positions, we find them meaningful and desireable and tend to see them not only as our own inborn nature, but also feel them to be "the right way" for a man or a woman to be.

This is not just about norms, but also about ways of being: it concerns psychological dimensions such as how I relate to others, the way I experience things, the kind of emotions different situations arouse in me, what threatens or confirms my self-esteem. Such identities are informed by gender - not as a distinct and fixed gender identity, but as identities constructed through gendered experiences we have had in life. In this way gender may become part and parcel of who we feel we are, and not something we necessarily identify with explicitly. In this way cultural patterns gradually turn into personal psychology in specific ways during the course of our lives. A feeling of 'me' as a specific person with a specific life. As identities are never fixed, concluded or entirely coherent, one may also prefer to use the plural here: the feeling of 'me' can be made up of several emotional realities (Layton 1998).

Even though such gendered identities are higly dependent on the life and biography of each person, we may also see some social patterns in them, due to the fact that people living at the same time and in the same culture also share many biographical conditions. These patterns may be specific for a group, a

society or recognizable cross-culturally. Some patterns may disappear or change fast, others may be more inert.

An example of an relative inert pattern of gender difference which has been found in many cultures in the global North is women's occupation with intimate relations, and men's with competition. Research on children's friendships and social relations in Europe and the US finds that girls' preoccupation with intimacy and social relations and boys' tendency to stir up each other through performance and competition are relatively stable patterns (Frosh et al. 2002; Nielsen 2002, 2009). The pattern may be expressed in the ways children allocate attention, their choice of strategies of communication, and how they establish friendships. Girls' interpersonal interest is often expressed in dyadic friendships where they use relational competence both as a means of establishing contact and of fighting and betraying each other. When girls form friendships they often seek points of similarity, creating strings of attachments between them. Girls' groups may, at the same time, also be characterised by struggles for freedom and fights for alliances. The social life of girls seems to waver between these poles of care and attention, and (often indirect) aggression to mark boundaries and make alliances. In interviews, girls often articulates details about their complicated relational world, whereas boys tend to talk less about relations and the social processes of which they are a part.

Boys' more assertive and often more openly aggressive behaviour can be connected to their more hierarchical and competitive social life, where getting public attention and admiration from a group of boys counts more than intimate relations, and where demonstrating their superiority over girls may sometimes be a way of establishing a collective male identity. However, new research from Scandinavia indicates that the values of boys' groups have become less macho. Even if boys still tend to stick to a hierarchical structure in their groups there is more room for care and comforting each other and even for talking about feelings. Girls, on the other hand, tend today to be showing more individualistic behaviour, but in combination with relational interests. One way of trying to grasp persistent gendered patterns in children's play and friendship is thus to ask how these patterns interact with changing contexts and new social conditions and in what ways they through this may also gain new meaning.

Studies of the dynamics of girls' and boys' worlds have been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes instead of deconstructing them, and for universalising gender traits that may be highly tied to western cultures and also to certain social class and ethnic groups. While it is true that a "difference" perspective may tend

to overlook variation and the social interaction between girls and boys within which such differences are articulated, it is also problematic to neglect that fact that gendered patterns exist and have salience. Gender patterns should neither be exaggerated nor overlooked. Such patterns often apply more to the "most popular half" than to others in a social class or school (Thorne 1993) - but this half is also often those who shape desirable ways of being a girl or a boy in particular settings. Thus, the patterns tend to become normative and this means that children who do not conform are pressed to negotiate their relation to this norm in some way.

3. Doing gender

The focus on gender difference - whether categorical or distributional - tends to limit the analysis of gender to being a characteristic of individuals. But gender is also a dimension of social relations created between people and shaped through processes of interaction. While the individual perspective frames gender as something we "are," the interactional perspective emphasizes gender as something we "do" (West and Zimmerman 1987). Instead of asking how boys and girls are different and how they came to be that way, it has proven fruitful to ask "how do they come together to help create – and sometimes challenge - gender structures and meanings?" (Thorne 1993:4). This perspective also calls attention to the dynamics of power in social constructions of meaning. Who, in a group of children, decides what is the right way to "do boy" or "do girl" in specific settings? This approach opens toward understanding multiple forms of femininity and masculinity (some inflected by dimensions such as social class, age, or racialized-ethnic status) and the hegemonic position a particular type of femininity or masculinity may attain in a given context (Connell 2000).

Like adults, children use gender, as well as age, as they go about organizing and making sense of shared worlds. Children as young as four have been found to engage in marking boundaries between boys and girls in their interactions with one another. This is seen in the gender-separated friendships among children in middle childhood which appears to be a relatively dispersed as well as a highly contextualized phenomenon. Cross-cultural research indicates that gender separation is the strongest and least flexible in the age span from 5 to 11 years, with boys defending the gender border more fiercely than girls. Gender segregation may be institutionalised, for instance, in schools, classes, subjects, work groups, seating arrangements, and out-of-school activities and it may be reinforced by the increasing gendering of commodities designed for children. However, gender separation is also a child-driven project, and adult intervention

to promote the relaxed mixing of girls and boys may not be very successful even though girls and boys separate more often on playgrounds than in classrooms. Children's promotion of separation between boys and girls varies with the situation. It tends to be stronger in crowded and insitutionalized settings where children watch each other, and it often dissolves in more private and personalized contexts (Thorne 1993). Boys and girls who are friends outside school may belittle or even hide this fact when they meet each other in school or are together with larger groups of friends.

Children's separation into same-gender groups may help them develop and maintain collective identity, since gender is relatively simple to enact as a dichotomy and carries important cultural meaning that children try to grasp. Barrie Thorne (1993) uses the anthropological concept of "borderwork" to describe children's active efforts to demarcate themselves from the other gender. Such borderwork can take many forms, ranging from discrete avoidance to teasing and fighting charged with feelings of thrill and excitement. In some contexts - for instance when a group of children oppose the authority of a teacher or children from another classroom - the gender border may be provisionally suspended. Gender borders tend to soften up towards the end of primary school, but the excitement of chasing games at this age also may coexist with despair if one is at risk of personally being identified with the other gender or with something that it related to love or sexuality.

Gender as doing and gender as difference are not mutually exclusive perspectives; when children learn to "do" gender in their families, in schools, and with peers, they also "become" gender in certain ways and this will again form their responses to new social situations. The gendered identities and behaviours that girls and boys bring with them into new settings will have an impact on how they participate in these situations. But their contributions will also be met and evaluated, implicitly or explicitly, by others, and thus never left unchanged. Studies of individuals cannot give any full account of the collective process of doing gender since something new is accomplished/created in this process. But the reverse is also true: the analysis of collective praxis does not tell us anything about the different motives of the individuals who engage in processes of meaning making, what positions they choose or get pushed into assuming, and what consequences this has for their sense of self over time. So these issues should not be framed as either/or: Gender works in a complex matrix of bodies, structures, materialities, symbols, discourse, interaction, practices, identity, desire and power.

4. Gender as framework of interpretation

Gender creates a dichotomy in our thinking: male or female, masculine or feminine. It lends its meaning to the many other dichotomies in languages. Few of us would have difficulty in assigning gender to dichotomies such as active/ passive, strong/weak, soft/hard, emotional/rational, dependent/independent, dark/light, moon/sun. Although different cultures may disagree about which side is masculine and which is feminine, what they share is the dichotomous structure and the use of gender as a framework of interpretation. They also share the asymmetry between the two sides, as the 'male' side is always seen as superior to the 'female' one.

The Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman (1988) has studied the development of gender dichotomies in Europe since Antiquity. The content of what is seen as masculine and feminine has changed, but the separation and the hierarchy persist. A quality may even switch sides, but so does the cultural evaluation of this quality. An example is the public/private dichotomy, which, in the 19th century, was connected to the autonomous public man and the dependent private woman. In contemporary Nordic welfare states the private/public dichotomy has switched to signify the productive private sector of men, and the costly public sector of women.

Male as unmarked category

What characterises gender as a frame of interpretation is thus not only the tendency to split and dichotomize phenomena into two distinct groups, but also the tendency to read this dichotomy as a hierarchy: Things defined as feminine also tend to be seen as secondary or even inferior to things defined as masculine. As Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out, women are seen as "the second sex" (Beauvoir 1949/2009). According to Beauvoir, men are seen as embodying the universal human, the "unmarked category" of mankind. This is also sometimes called the male norm: Men and boys represent the universal norm from which women and girls deviate. The American sociologist Michael Kimmel once told a revealing story about this: when a black woman looks into a mirror, what does she see? A black woman! When a white woman looks into the mirror, what does she see? A woman! When a white man looks into a mirror what does he see? A human being! (Kimmel 1996). As the story shows, it is a general trait that those who belong to the privileged group are perceived as universal human beings, while others are seen as deviant because of particularities such as gender, race, class, etc. The 'others' come to think about themselves in this way as well. The phenomenon is also called false universalism.

The male norm is, for instance, seen in many traditional theories and books on child development. The ideal child has all the positive sides we normally connect with boys (for instance, inventiveness, curiosity, courage, autonomy, straightforwardness), while the positive sides we normally connect with girls (for instance, empathy, cooperation, responsibility) are less focused, or are even seen as detrimental to the growth towards autonomy which is so important in the Western view of development. This can sometimes give rise to contradictions. For example, one minute girls may be praised for being more mature, cooperative and responsible, while the next minute, these same qualities are seen as signs of conformity and dependency on adults - and thus immaturity. Similarly to this tendency to enlarge the positive aspects of boys' behaviour compared to that of girls, there is also a tendency to see negative aspects of girls' behaviour traits (such as creating intrigues, clinging, being passive and uninventive) as part of their eternal feminine personalities, while negative aspects of boys' behaviour (antisocial behaviour such as irresponsibility, egotism, aggressiveness, violence and sexism) tend to be excused as immaturity and, thus, something they will grow out of. This way of thinking may continue even in situations where women gain positions of power or where girls exceed boys in educational achievements. Thus, there is no automatic connection between empirical gender patterns and gender as a frame of interpretation.

Gender attributions and double standards

Gender as framework of interpretation may lead to gender stereotyping. This is the case if a gendered pattern of distribution is interpreted as a categorical distinction. Here the variation within each group and overlap between girls and boys is ignored. We tend to notice behaviour that confirms gender stereotypes, to marginalize as exceptions behaviour that deviates from the stereotypes, and to overlook more gender neutral behaviour. This process may involve double standards, with behaviours interpreted and valued differently according to the gender of the person.

Gender attribution means that we use different standards for girls and boys, leading to different interpretations when they exhibit the same behaviour. Unruly girls may get more on our nerves than unruly boys because we assume that boys will be boys, whereas a girl can behave herself if she really wants to (Gordon et al. 2000). When a boy does well in school it is often considered to be the result of intelligence, whereas if he does poorly it might be thought that he is lazy or just bored. When a girl does well in school it is more often seen as the result of her dutifulness and hard work, but if she does poorly, it may be attributed to lack of

intelligence (Walkerdine 1990). A number of researchers have found that teachers tend to notice if girls dominate in the classroom, but not if boys dominate (Öhrn, 2000).).

In the U.S. the SAT test, used to assess a student's potential for learning and thus an important gateway to higher education, was readjusted to close the gender gap in areas where girls performed better, but not those where boys did better (Dwyer 1996). In Scandinavia when the problems of girls in schools were debated in the 1980s, the proposed solutions focused on accomplishing changes in individuals, for example, finding ways to strengthen girls' self-confidence.   When the problems of boys in schools came in focus 20 years later, the analysis and solutions were structural: the school system did not meet the needs of boys and ought, therefore, to be changed. Gender attributions also interact with and may be modified by other categories. Ferguson (2000) found that Black boys in the US are not given the same dispensation as White boys to just "be boys"; teachers more quickly intrepreted Black boys' behaviour as threatening, consequential, and as a sign of their risk of failure.

Gender attributions sometimes emerge in the perceptions and practices of parents who consciously want to raise sons and daughters in similar ways (often by mixing the "positive" sides of both gender repertoires such as instilling self-confidence, independence, friendliness, caring for others) and who think they manage to treat their children in an equal way. But since parents tend to interpret the same behaviour in sons and daughters differently, they may end up treating them differently as well. Scandinavian parents, for instance, generally do not embrace negative gender stereotypical behaviour, but they are more ready to accept it if it concurs rather than goes against expectations related to the child's gender. Thus parents may be more likely to worry about a quiet boy than a quiet girl, and a physically aggressive girl more than a physically aggressive boy.

Hanne Haavind's study (1987) of Norwegian mothers with a boisterous 2-year-old and a shy 4-year-old demonstrates this very neatly: if the 2-year old was a girl, the parents tried to teach her to leave her sensitive 4-year old brother alone, but if the 2-year old was a boy, the quiet 4-year old sister had to learn to cope with him because that is how boys are. The parents saw their own actions as a response to the particular and unique personalities of their children and were not aware of the pattern of the gendered attributions that came into sight for the researcher when several families were compared.

5. Norms perceived as nature

What is important when considering the meaning of sex and gender is not to confuse the fact of bodily dispositions with biological determinism. We have material bodies, and the bodies we have represent limits as well as opportunities in our lives. People who are born physically disabled will be in a different situation compared to people who are not, however much the culture does to meet their needs.

What does biological sex mean for our opportunities and limitations? It will mean different things, according to the situation and how we relate to it. Biological sex is definitely important if I want to bear a child, while it may be other parts of my body that are more relevant if I want to learn Chinese or dance a ballet (Moi 1999). Women's bodies allow them to bear children, but they are not forced to do so; nor does the physical potential determine what kind of mothers they will be if they do. A mother may have a biological initial advantage in relating to the newborn infant, but nothing prevents a father from having a close relationship with his child. It will just take a little more effort to create it. Thus, humans are both biological and cultural beings in an inseparable entity. We can never say what belongs to nature and what to culture. Bodies are unthinkable without culture, but cultures are also unthinkable without bodies.

Instead of recurring arguments concerning more or less biological determination, it has been suggested by Simone de Beauvoir and Toril Moi to view the body as part of our situation in the world. It means something what bodies we are born with – as it would mean something if I were born with one arm or eyes in my neck – but what it means depends on how it is interpreted in a given culture and society, and on my own actions. Biology does not have any meaning in itself (Beauvoir 1949/2009; Moi 1999). The biological fact that girls' bodies mature earlier than boys cannot in itself explain their bodily insecurity or vulnerability to sexual harassment by men – we need to interpret the body within a specific heterosexist system to get that result.

In a study I did on gender in scouting in different cultures (Nielsen 2002) the salience of cultural interpretation of biological differences became very clear. In the interviews with the Scout leaders, the distinction between strong boys and weak girls was often considered to be a biologically given difference. However, the consequences of this observation differed. In Russia, girls were perceived as frail creatures whose health should be constantly watched. In the opinion of one of the male leaders, girls do not know how to handle an axe, while in the other countries the view was that girls certainly could handle an axe, but not with the same force and vigour as boys. When I asked the girls, some of them found the

arrangement fine as they thought it rather boring to chop wood, while others felt hampered in their opportunities to practise wood-chopping or do other things that required strength. From these girls' point of view, one could gain not only competence but also strength by regular training.

The leaders' perception of weakness and strength as determined by biological sex was so strong that it actually could override other biological gender differences, for instances related to individual variation and age. While most boys over 15 are stronger than most girls over 15, this is not the case for the younger age group I was studying. In the age range of 11-14, most girls are actually taller and stronger than most boys, because they mature earlier. The adult leaders often mentioned girls' earlier maturation in terms of their calm and responsible behaviour, but strangely enough it was never made relevant concerning physical strength. Slight 11-year-old boys would actually be seen as 'stronger' than robust 14-year-old girls, including one who had a black belt in karate. In this case we may definitely say that gender was in the eyes of the adults, and did not describe the girls and boys. A possible explanation is that the leaders had registered boys' tendency to make more of an effort in competitive situations, interpreted this according to the gender scheme of strong men and weak women, and generalised it to all boys and all girls.

People often tend to believe that the specific gender system their culture endorses is natural and even biologically founded. Why do we have this inclination to naturalise our own norms of gender? Why is the idea that sex determines gender so persistent? One reason may be the cognitive trap that comes from both sex and gender being constructed as dichotomies. Male or female. Masculine or feminine. Appereantly a perfect match! But, as we have seen, the cultural categories of masculine and feminine have a much more multi-layered structure, and even the biological categories of male-female have proven to form much more of a continuum than we might at first think.

Another reason could be related to the fact that in all known societies, structural and symbolic gender play an important role in the stability of the society. To question the naturalness of a society's gender system challenges the stability, power distribution and values of that society. This is precisely what has happened in many Western societies since the 1970s. What do we do with a family arrangement based on the division of labour between a housewife and a breadwinner when women suddenly enter the labour market? Who should take care of the children? What happens to the fraternities in male organisations when women come in and want things done differently? How can a man demonstrate his

masculinity when a woman can do everything as well as he can? Is a family still a family when the parents are of the same sex? It is easy to become confused and long the return of the good old days when a man was a man and a woman a woman, and "nature's rules" were followed. Gender arrangements are important elements of cultural identity - and thus also of emotional investment.

Perhaps the most important explanation of our inclination to see our own gender system as the natural one is that gender often plays a vital part in our personal lives. Issues of gender are important in existential matters such as family, love, sex, birth, illness and death - regardless of one's sexual orientation. It is hard to accept that the deepest experiences in our lives should be so culturally relative. We look for something more solid to explain our lives – and religion and nature are obvious candidates. When chosing religion we claim to know what is right by authority, not by arguments. When choosing nature we often confuse the concept of nature with what feels natural to us, or what we think ought to be a natural way of living. Ideas of desirable gender orders belong to the normative field. One can think of many arguments for a specific gender order – that it is just, practical, makes people happy, gives them equal opportunities, is given by God. The only thing that cannot legitimise it is references to nature, as nature is something we all share, whatever gender order we live by. Thus, we should accept that when we discuss gender arrangements we are in the field of the normative, not in the field of nature. Speak for yourself – not for mankind! There is a world of difference between saying 'this is natural' and saying 'this feels natural to me'.

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