

Blowing Away the Line in the Sand: Perceiving Sex and Gender Complexities

Keshia Snook, SCS Independent project 2015

Grenfell Campus

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Abstract

Sex and gender are terms that some scholars, the media, and the public frequently use interchangeably although they have very different meanings. This research, with the help of a few scholars such as Bornstein, Butler, Davis, West, and Zimmerman, explores why people continue to use these terms interchangeably even when sometimes they know the difference. In addition to analyzing secondary research I surveyed a sample of post-secondary students from Grenfell Campus, Memorial University and non-post-secondary educated people from my hometown community of Lourdes NL, in order to see if further education alters views about sex and gender categories. I found that further education does indeed alter views about sex and gender differences and, as well, that when people do understand the difference, they do sometimes not want to stand apart from the majority consensus and articulate it.

Introduction

Sex and gender are frequently used terms and yet when we employ them, we often use them in the wrong place. Although the concepts of gender and sex have distinguished differences, some scholars, the media, and the public continue to use them interchangeably. Sex is defined as the biological make up of a person, whereas our

gender is culturally constructed. One's gender does not have to match their sex. Much of Sociological research in the area of sex and gender contends that the failure to realize the distinction between these two concepts had and continues to have serious social and intra personal consequences. My research is interested in exploring the ramifications of this and in probing the question of why is it that so many people persist in not making the distinction between sex and gender categories. As well, my research probes the meaning of such views and asks why people continue to hold on to them despite being exposed, through various media, to a variety of perspectives on gender and the meaning of gender roles. As part of my enquiry I surveyed a sample of post secondary educated people and non-post secondary educated people in order to see if further education alters views about sex and gender categories.

Research Significance

This topic is personally significant because I am interested in the way that people from my hometown think about sex and gender. I grew up in a family that upheld traditional values about the social roles men and women. My mother and father for example view sex and gender as one and the same. They think that if you are a man you embody a male role; men are considered hardworking and outdoor loving "Mr. Fix its", whereas women are cleaning, cooking, laundering, clothing fixing machines. This research is important to me and for the people of my home community, and elsewhere, because it considers those who did not fit the "feminine female" or "masculine male" roles set out for them. These and other sex and gender expectations alienated, marginalized, and oppressed them because they were social boxes into which these people did not or could not fit. Growing up I shared my parent's view of sex and gender,

because that is what I was taught, but my post-secondary education experience caused me to rethink these concepts and to later wonder if my experience, including my shift in thinking, is similar for other students. In other words, because my own notions of sex and gender were transformed through education, I wanted to find out how typical my shift in perceptions about sex and gender was and if this change had a root in formal education.

Personal Reflections Living in a Rural Community

Growing up in a community where the majority of people quit school early in life in order to earn money to support their large families had a large impact on shaping my family's views and my own personal views. My parents, I now see, had a binary perspective on women and men's social roles, particularly their division of labor. They view gender as sex; if you are biologically a male your gender is man and if you are biologically a female your gender is woman. They did not know that you could break the two notions apart. Although my thinking about notions of sex and gender began to change once I started University, it was very difficult to make my parents understand the perspective I had gained. They simply could not understand what I was implying. While they are gradually beginning to understand that men and women's traditional roles have changed, to the point that my father now washes dishes and my mother carries in wood from time to time, they still have a way to go.

A perfect example of how my mother does not understand the fluidity in gender roles is when she saw a picture of my 17-year-old biologically male cousin and said "my goodness, he looks more like a girl every time I see him. He even got his eyebrows plucked and shaped with a hoop in his nose." Comments like this one uphold a dualistic

notion about sex and gender. I told my mother that I was jealous of his eyebrows and wished mine were like that. She did not say a word. My mother, just like many other people, could not see outside this box that society created for men and women which as a major influence on people from my hometown community.

My best friend's mother also still holds on to traditional values of men's and woman's roles as separate and distinct. She holds on to values that her mother passed down to her and fights to keep them. Her daughter and I have tried telling her time and time again that there is no set role that a man or a woman should have to fill. And yet she was enraged when her daughter told her that she went out to shovel while her boyfriend stayed inside to cook supper. She demanded that it was my friend's job to cook supper and her boyfriend's job to shovel the driveway. To further this example, my friend's mom tends to her husband's every need. She cooks for him, brings his meals to him in their living room and washes the dishes, before asking him if he needs anything else before she closes her kitchen. She is also from a rural community on the Port au Port Peninsula.

Methodology

As part of my thesis, I have created a survey that asks respondents a series of questions about how they understand gender and sex. My questions (see appendix) ranged from "is there a difference between Gender and Sex?" to "Do you think that if one is born a female, they should "act" like a woman and if one is born a male they should "act" like a man?" to even "when talking to a new mother about their baby do you ask them what the baby's sex is?" My survey targeted residents of my hometown community of Lourdes and undergraduate students at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University.

Lourdes is a small community of approximately 500 people located on the Port au Port Peninsula on the West Coast of Newfoundland. It is primarily a fishing community and contains many more non post-secondary educated people than those with a post-secondary education. The lack of -post secondary education makes this community ideal for my research in that I seek to find the differences, if any, that education brings to understandings of sex and gender differences. My other research site, as mentioned above is, Grenfell Campus, which is located in Corner Brook Newfoundland, a small university community of approximately 20 thousand residents. Here I have interviewed students from a cross-section of faculties .The results of the questionnaire will be analyzed in light of contemporary and leading research, primarily sociological, dealing with theories of sex and gender.

Literature Review

Much Sociological scholarship in the field of sex and gender helps to explain the differences between the two concepts, and yet there are many scholars who fail to use a language that recognizes the differences between the two concepts. Some of the scholars that consider matters related to my topic are Kate Bornstein, Judith Butler, Candace West and Don Zimmerman, Simone de Beauvoir, Dona Davis, Mary Holmes, and Pierre Bourdieu. Their theories and interpretations have together helped me to better understand our social relationships to sex and gender and the power that these constructs hold for us. Their writings have also helped me to explain what I mean when I talk about sex and gender differences and how not understanding the difference between the two generates further complications.

The above reflections on binary ways of thinking, drawn from my experience of growing up in a rural community, do not distinguish the difference between sex and gender and, in fact bury the two notions into one. This way of thinking starts at birth, when we are placed into either the male or female category. One writer who draws a clear picture of this social construct is Kate Bornstein. Bornstein, a male-to-female transgender person who has done a great deal of gender advocacy work, says it is all about the penises. She states, “the Doctors look down at a newly born infant and say “it has a penis, ‘it’s a boy’ or they say, it ‘doesn’t have a penis, it’s a girl’”. (Bornstein 22) Bornstein says that based on this penis or lack of it we are assigned our gender. If we have a penis they swaddle us in a blue blanket or if we have no penis we are swaddled in a pink blanket so people can clearly use the correct pronouns and correct adjectives that our culture says are correct for male and female. Bornstein agrees that we seem to be intent on using the pronouns deemed correct by our culture, for identifying maleness and femaleness. The first question a person usually asks when a woman gives birth to a child is “is it a boy or a girl?” Right from the beginning it seems, we need to place that infant in a certain box. We use terms like handsome for a male and pretty or beautiful for a girl. Bornstein, like many, points out that sex begins with a biological premise but ‘in our culture, once you’ve been assigned a gender, that’s what you are and for the most part, its doctors who dole out the gender assignments, which shows you emphatically that gender has been medicalized”. (Bornstein 22)

Bornstein provides a few terms that are important for understanding gender constructions. Gender, she maintains, is one of these extremely important terms, and involves our asking, “who am I? Am I am man or a woman or what? It’s a decision made

by nearly every individual and it's subject to any influence: peer pressure, advertising, drugs, cultural definitions of gender, whatever". (Bornstein 24) Along with gender identity, Bornstein analyzes gender roles, gender attribution, kinds of sex and the notion of sex without gender.

Related to a dream she once had, Bornstein presents a scenario of society drawing a line in the sand and people having to pick which side of the line they belong on and remain there. "Once upon a time", she writes, "someone drew a line in the sands of culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, "On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman." It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away. Simple. (Bornstein 21) The absolute nature of this choice summarizes the thinking about sex and gender that I grew up with. Many people are forced to stay in either male or female categories, which can cause problems in our society.

Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman's *Gender Outlaw: The Next Generation* demonstrates the trouble people who do not identify with their "appropriate" gender struggle with in their day-to-day life. One contributor to this collection, Telyn Kuslik who identifies as a mixed gender person, writes of her personal experience with people asking her what pronouns she prefers and if Telyn identifies as a man or a woman. Telyn states, "I am uncomfortable in identity-based spaces such as a women-only spaces or trans-only spaces, in part because I feel that identity categories are not necessarily the most relevant to the mission of the spaces". (Bornstein, 56) This shows the problems that these sex and gender categories are creating for people who do not fit. Before starting my post secondary education I would have said this person would have to either pick male or

female, man or woman, but now I see the problem that this binary thinking creates for us all.

Another important scholar whose work broke ground in gender studies is Judith Butler. As one of the earliest contributors to Queer Theory her work on gender positions, and gender as culturally con/instructed, maintains that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result”. (Butler 25) This idea of performativity has helped further my research. She states “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitutes the illusion of an abiding gendered self”. (Butler 519) Upholding a readable and intelligible gender performance, says Butler is fundamental. If one does not “perform gender,” in a way that is culturally intelligible, “you are marginalized and a social outcast”. (Butler 528) Performing ones gender is the most important thing of all in our society. The avoidance of marginalization and social stigma is one reason why many people do not go out of their way to learn the difference between sex and gender. Not understanding the difference leaves people feeling uncomfortable. And yet, according to Butler, gender is something we ourselves create. She states,

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand

the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.
(Butler 531)

My fieldwork for this project informed me that the concerns about marginalization and stigma is one reason why many people do not go out of their way to learn about or practice the differences between sex and gender. And yet, according to Butler, gender is something we ourselves create.

Butler in *Undoing Gender* states that gender “is not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has’”. (Butler 42) Rather, according to Butler, “gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine or feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic and performativity that gender assumes”. (Butler 42) Butler continues on to say that there are a lot of gender regulations. The regulations of gender are enforced by norms, which are not necessarily legislated. This furthers my research into exploring why people get gender and sex wrong. If one understands gender as different then sex they will understand that there is no gender regulations. A male can do whatever he wants, and a woman can do whatever she wants.

Another important contribution to our thinking about sex and gender categories is West and Zimmerman’s work on *Doing Gender* 1987. Doing gender “means creating difference between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential or biological”. (West and Zimmerman 137) They state that gender is performative, similar to that of Butler’s work. Gender, for them is a master status that is performed or “done” in every situation we enter. It is ongoing and emergent and vital. West and Zimmerman’s concept of sex is that of a determination made through the

application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons of male or female” (127), whereas gender is socially constructed. If the differences are so clear and obvious, why do we continually mix them up?

What is it that makes us want to privilege sex to the extent that we allow it to define our social characteristics, our habits, our interests, our occupations, and our symbol system, including our language? West and Zimmerman discuss, for example, gender marked nouns in professions like Doctors and Nurses. They point out that if we refer to a doctor who is a woman, we say woman doctor, but if it’s a male doctor we just say Doctor.

Another significant scholar who had an impact on understandings of gender and sex is Simone de Beauvoir. Her early work, *The Second Sex* paints a clear picture of how women are depicted as “the other sex.” She views the term “female” as “pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex” (de Beauvoir 41). For most of us hearing the word male or female evokes the conclusion that one is a woman or that one is a man and that they therefore have a penis or a vagina. Beauvoir states that “ males and females are two types of individuals who are differentiated within one species for the purpose of reproduction”(de Beauvoir 41) so then this is why is it so hard to see everyone as a human beyond their sex. Given that we are all of one species, why do we have to put labels on ourselves and have to fit into these gender/boxes boxes that society creates. Social and economic power, as we shall see, play a large role in maintaining this structure.

A scholar that sheds some light on social and economical power is Pierre Bourdieu. His work on *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* states that

the field of Power “ stands in opposition to the usual view of hereditary transfer as a direct or indirect transfer of forms of power or privileges from one individual or group to another and particularly from father to son.” (136) It is helpful to see sex and gender through the field of power, particularly when considering these constructs in light of the social division of labour.

In this regard, Dona Davis adds an important perspective to my study by shedding light on where my attitudes towards sex and gender began and their relationship to the traditional Newfoundland division of labour. In the discussion of my findings, it was important to consider how female and male gender roles have been traditionally constructed based on the unique demands of this culture. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, many men “worked at sea on boats and women worked on the land in their households.” (Davis) This division of labour created a social difference between men and women. It helped to create the concept of men having physically hard jobs and women having lighter jobs. This research helps to explain some of the attitudes I grew up with in exploring how women who did not work in the house or men who did not go out to sea were breaking with traditional Newfoundland values and were consequently seen as outcasts.

Mary Holmes, in *What is Gender? Sociological Approaches*, prefaces her analysis of sex and gender with a scenario about a person named Chris.

Chris got up and went to the bathroom. Leaving pajamas on the floor and turning on the shower, Chris stepped into the water. It was not a hair-washing day, so after a quick rub with the soap it was time to get out and dry off. After toweling and applying hair putty to the new short haircut,

Chris dabbed on some moisturizing lotion and went to get dressed.

Nothing special was happening today so jeans and a T-shirt would be fine.

The only choice really to be made was between basketball boots or sandals. (Holmes 1)

Holmes says that when someone reads this paragraph they can either assume Chris is a male or a female. Chris uses moisturizer and “real men do not use moisturizer or that women are less likely to have short hair”. (Holmes 1) We have pre-established norms that provide us with firm concepts of what a “male” or “female” should use or do. We are “shaped into being feminine or masculine by powerful social structures”. (Holmes 40)

Discussion

In my sex and gender surveys of non-post and post secondary education respondents, I have found information that expands my understanding of how people conceive of the differences between sex and gender. Keeping the work of the preceding scholars in sight, in this section I apply what I found to their considerations and findings. Here I analyze the responses I received to the questions I posed. I have organized my surveys into non-post secondary educated respondents and post secondary educated respondents as well as the level of education obtained by each respondent from each group, along with the age category following each respondent.

The first question I asked my participants was, “is there a difference between Gender and Sex? Of my post secondary educated respondents 6 out of 35 did not think there was a difference between sex and gender. They thought that the concepts could be used interchangeably. The remaining 29 students responses were similar, that “sex is the

biological designation given shortly after conception – male genitalia or female. Gender is a choice that one makes concerning life style”. (3rd year student 2015) The 29 students that this response represents made a distinction between gender as socially constructed and sex as biological. One student stated, “gender is given at birth but you can change your “sex” to that which you prefer”. (Under 24) The other 6 students responses were a little different. One student said that “ gender and sex can be used interchangeably and both refer to male or female, but gender is more open in my opinion; I may consider myself male even though my sex is female”. (4th year 2015) Even though this student said that there is no difference between gender and sex, their example indicated that they see gender as more open to interpretation.. They did understand gender as fluid and open to interpretation. This understanding relates to West and Zimmerman’s concept of “doing gender”, in that they acknowledge gender as a social construct. According to that response, one can be female yet act like a male--- or in other words, do gender. Another student said that they “think that although many people choose to identify with a gender other than their own, this does not mean their gender changes” (2nd year 2015) whereas yet another student understood that it “could mean intercourse but in this context I take gender and sex to mean the same thing”. (1st year 2015) My participants’ concepts of gender and sex for the most are very similar.

When I posed this same question to my second group, the non-post secondary educated respondents, more people stated that there were no difference between gender and sex. Out of 25 surveys, 6 people said there was a difference between gender and sex but one person did not clearly understand my use of the word sex, as I had intended it for the purpose of the questionnaire, and responded, “gender is what you are, male or female

and sex is an act of love.” (Grade 11 age 50-74) The other 19 respondents who did not distinguish between the two notions generally conflated them: “either male or female is gender or sex, we act like a woman because we are born female and we act like a man because we are a man.”(Grade 12 age 50-74) Simone de Beauvoir would argue with this perspective in that she maintains,, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (Simone de Beauvoir 14)

The next question that my survey asked was “what do you think our gender is determined by”? Out of the 6 respondents of post secondary educated people who said that there was no difference between gender and sex, they all had the same view that the “body parts you are born with determines what your gender is. This is because of my religious views”. (1st year under 24) Religious views are thus important to a lot of people and some respondents even thought that religion was an important indicator of how sex and gender should be determined.

Another respondent stated, “our gender is determined by our sexual organs”. (1st year under 24) This is when Bornstein and Butler would argue that our gender is determined strictly by our culture and not our biological make up. According to Butler;

Gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. (Butler 1990)

Whereas respondents who identify a difference between sex and gender make assertions such as,, “society has preconceived notions about what gender is and what category people should fall under but your personal gender is determined by how you feel”. (3rd

under 24), every student had some conception of gender as being associated with what you feel.

Another important finding from my student cohort was that perceptions of sex and gender had a lot to do with the generation in which you grew up, ““I think it has a lot to do with the generation someone is from”, said one informant, “the older generation is less accepting (I find) than someone younger. Also I think it has to do with religion and so called gender roles”. (3rd age 25-49) Bornstein mentions “gender roles are collections of factors” (Bornstein 26) that “send signals of membership to a given gender.” (Bornstein 26)

When asking non-post secondary educated respondents “what do you think our gender is determined by”, their responses had a lot to do with religion and how their religious upbringing played a large role in determining gender. The teachings of the Catholic Church are important to the lives of many from Lourdes, as well as elsewhere. Practically everyone from Lourdes is Catholic, and they hold strict views in terms of seeing the world through interpretations drawn from the Bible. One respondent states that gender is “determined by our upbringing. For me as a woman, my mother made me wash dishes, sweep the floors, clean the house while the boys (my brothers) went out and got to have fun. I feel that church was really important on how we viewed ourselves”. (grade 11 age 50-74) Another person simply stated that the difference was “in clothes, such as boys wear pants and girls wear frilly dresses.” (grade 10 age 50-74)

West and Zimmer acknowledge that many people confuse the terms sex and gender. They then explain what they call ‘doing gender’ which means that gender is something we socially and culturally create. If a person does not accept the gender that

our society places them in, they are seen as social deviants. Doing gender creates differences between men and women. West and Zimmerman also found that how a person does their gender should appear natural and they are judged if they fail to uphold this 'rule.' The Lourdes respondents thus perceived that our gender is primarily determined by what we wear and our upbringing. Beauvoir states that it is not our upbringing that determines our gender, it is how we feel, and "no biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society". (de Beauvoir 330)

One of the most important questions in my survey for shedding light on why people still think that gender and sex are the same came from the question "are gender and sex different terms? Or do they have the same meaning for you?" I received some different results from this question that in turn led me understand why this lack of distinction still goes on in contemporary society. Focusing first on those respondents who said that there was no difference between sex and gender, one respondent under the age of 24 said, "they do feel synonymous to me usually because most people use them interchangeably and I understand what they mean but when I consider it, I go with what other people say that they are interchangeable". (1st year under 24) Even though this person can distinguish between sex and gender, because the majority of people do not understand the difference, they feel that they should not stand apart from how these concepts are commonly viewed. Several other students provided a similar response. Even though in their response to the first question they said sex and gender are the same, in this question they state that they know there is some difference but because everyone else uses them interchangeably, they should too. Another student stated that she knew that

they meant different things, but “it is hard to distinguish the two meanings from each other, though I know they are not the same”. (1st under 24) Students who said that there was a difference between sex and gender tended to say “see question number one” for their response to this question, where they had already explained the difference and what it meant to them.

For the non-post secondary educated respondents their response to this question was very similar of question one. They said that it was important to know that gender and sex are similar. One person even stated, “this question and question number 1 are the same. If I didn’t think that they were different in number 1 I am not going to think they are different now, because they are not different. God made you male or female and that’s it”. (grade 11 50-74) I did not get much information from my Lourdes participants on this question but I got much more in-depth answers from students.

The next question on the survey was “do our behaviors define our gender or our sex?” Grenfell students tended to say that our behaviors define our gender and do not affect our sex. The fact is that “our sex is biological, and we perform our gender through behaviors that we learn fit “man” or “woman””(Under 24) According to this student, and Butler agrees, gender is socially constructed. We learn about the “appropriate” way for men and women to act through social interaction, and some small town communities still hold on to these values because of the social importance of the division of labour, as outlined by Davis. Respondents from Lourdes contradict this perspective in stating, “the way you dress is determined by if you are born a boy or girl.” (50-74) For them, gendered behavior is not learned and practiced but acquired genetically or by a divine interaction.

The next two questions put to my respondents can be discussed together. The first of the two is “do you believe that everyone fits into the category male or female?” and the second is “do you think that if one is born a female, they should ‘act’ like a woman and if one is born a male they should ‘act’ like a man?” My respondents provided a range of answers for this question. The Grenfell Campus students generally felt that not everyone can or should be fit into binary categories, and the majority also said, you can act whatever way you feel like. Even though one is a male, for example, they can have feminine qualities and if one identifies as female they can likewise have masculine qualities. One student, under 24, expressed it this way: “I believe you gender and sex are the same because both are used to distinguish male from female and vice versa.” This informant continued on to provide an example from their own past, “ I grew up as what you would call a tom boy yet I am female and attracted to guys. Some may question that but our actions do not always define us”. (4yr under 24) Even though she did not distinguish between gender and sex, she understands that there are differences, which she has personally experienced. The awareness that “our actions do not always define us” is an important understanding that came through my research. Yet, a lingering question is if our actions do not always define us, why is it that we want to distinguish the difference between male and female? Every action, defines who we are regardless of whether we want it too or not.

Students who distinguished the differences between gender and sex offered responses such as, ““No. Just because someone has a penis or a good set of mammary glands does not make them a “man” or a “woman” (25-49) and, “no some people don’t identify as either. I think our sex puts us into those two categories but I don’t think were

stuck in them”. (first year under 24) Just because we are born with internal and exterior sex organs, or secondary sex characteristics, does not mean we have to identify emotionally or behaviorally with these physical manifestations. Indeed, when referring to the idea that males should act like a man and females should act like a woman, one brave student stated, “only judgmental assholes think like that”. (Under 24). Every post secondary survey respondent stated that a woman can be masculine or a man could be feminine, and that it is up to them to choose how they should act. The general consensus among the students was that we should be open to being who we are.

When I first considered the answers I might receive from non-post secondary educated people I was, based on my own upbringing, concerned that they might be closed to considering anything beyond rigid sex categories. However, many people stated that we should act how we feel. I had 6 people tell me that we should act like a certain gender role if we are born a male or female, but the rest stated that we should be true to ourselves. One person stated, “one should act the way they feel no matter what their gender.” (50-74) Another person said, “they should act like they feel and not pretend to be someone that their not.” (50-74) Then I had others who said that “god created everyone perfect, therefore if you are born a female you should act like a woman.”(50-74) The idea of traditional gender roles being tied to our anatomy still holds true in Lourdes today primarily because of the traditional division of labour that keeps the community afloat. Because the division of labour is important in rural communities such as Lourdes in order to get certain jobs done, discernable differences are created between men and women. This idea that certain jobs are for men or women in rural Newfoundland then creates social differences, based on sex, that people then interpret as natural and

“appropriate”. Davis helps to explain this by demonstrating that the division of labour is important in rural communities in order to get certain jobs done and this creates differences between men and women.

In exploring the final question asked of my survey, I have, in a sense, saved the best for last. This question is important because it is one we ask of one another frequently: “When you talk to a new mother about their baby do you ask them what the baby’s sex is?” I included this question because I wondered why we feel the need to place the newly born child into one of these two boxes. I wanted to know both for my curiosity and to better understand our need to categorize people as either male or female; boy or girl right from birth. Bornstein says that it is all about the penises and never has anything to do with the vagina. We apparently need to create these directions Bornstein says, we need to create these signposts so that we have direction for how to refer to a child. She says

Definitions have their uses in much the same way that road signs make it easy to travel; they point out the directions. But you don’t get where you’re going when you just stand underneath some sign, waiting for it to tell you what to do. (Bornstein 21)

I understood Bornstein to mean that if we do not find out the sex of the baby we feel uncomfortable in referring to the baby. The majority of my respondents said that they ask because they need to know how to refer to that child and what to buy that child. We feel that they need to have pronouns so we can use it. If we do not find out the sex, we can no longer move forward in the conversation about that baby; It is both that simple and that profound.

When asking post-secondary students about why/if they probe new mothers about their baby's sex, I receive similar answers. Some students said they did this because otherwise they "will not know whether or not the child should be referred to as male or female". (Under 24) One said that "in our society everyone is labeled and without knowing what the sex is we don't know how to refer to them or treat them. (Society sucks)" (Under 24) Another respondent stated, "this is important because it helps you decide specific things the baby will need as they get older." (Under 24) Do babies really in fact "need" gendered belongings and pronouns? A few students said it was not necessary and they only ask out of habit. One student suggested that this question was absurd and strongly stated "I don't think that is a fair or safe question to answer. Why would a stranger be asking about a baby? This question is ridiculous!" (3rd year 25-49)

Asking this question to my Lourdes participants produced different types of answers. One person stated, "I think we need to know what the gender of the baby is so we can buy it gender appropriate clothes." (50-74) Another notable point about this and similar responses is that we do not know that a child's gender is going to match their sex so what is "gender" appropriate for that child or any child? Another respondent said that they were simply curious to know if a newborn is a boy or girl and they "really haven't given much thought to this question before." (50-74) A few people said, "sex ends up determining the color of the room, clothes, blankets, etc. It also determines the toys that will be bought for them which set the stage for what their sex dictates." (25-49) Contrary to this cultural process of naming and identifying, Bornstein talks about the Navajo practice of letting the children decide what gender he or she is, if it was in question, by performing a test. She said that

When the gender of a child was in question in some Navajo tribes, they reached a decision by putting a child inside a tipi with loom and bow and arrow—female and male implements respectively. They set fire to the tipi and whatever the child grabbed as he/she ran out determined the child's gender. (Bornstein 23)

Letting the child pick their gender seems like a perfect solution to sidestepping the sometimes-harmful categories we impose on others and ourselves. It lets them be who they want to be, and it does not create “disappointment” in their parents when their gender does not match their sex. I think that the Navajo tradition got it right. We too should let people decide, because it is ultimately they who have to live that life.

Findings

In relation to the literature, I have can found a couple of notable points that render my research unique. I gathered from my survey responses that generally speaking, the more post-secondary education one has, the more complex the respondent's understandings of the differences between sex and gender, whereas those living rurally, with no post secondary education tended to see sex and gender as one and the same thing. Even when they knew there was a difference, they could not articulate what the difference was. This finding is important to me because before I came to university, just like people from my hometown community, I did not understand the difference and it has taken me a while to be able to articulate it.

Another finding is that even when people do understand the difference, they do not want to stand apart from the majority consensus. This phenomenon is supported by Butler's work on gender regulations.

As an operation of power, regulation can take a legal form, but its legal dimension does not exhaust the sphere of its efficaciousness. As that which relies on categories that render individuals socially interchangeable with one another, regulation is thus bound up with the process of normalization. (Butler 2004)

One student, as I stated previously, said that he or she knows the differences but because everyone else stated that sex and gender were the same, they thought they too should say it is the same. People are scared of stigmatization, they are afraid of social rejection, even when they are correct. Potentially, if that one person stood out and said, "yes, there is a difference" to a person who states there is no difference, and explained why this difference is significant, there might be one less person using these terms erroneously, and perhaps even one fewer person living out their life in the wrong box.

Another finding drawn from my research is the fact that, because of the division of labour in small town communities such as Lourdes, sex and gender get really messy when we try to take them apart. The people of Lourdes who participated in my study are used to, and sometimes identify strongly with, the differences between men and women and between a "man's" job and a "woman's" job. The problem is, this creates "gender trouble", to use Butler's term, for the people who do not fit into these categories and must continue to exist in these small communities.

Interestingly, most respondents from both survey groups' stated that despite being born male or female, you can act however you want. Even my Lourdes respondents felt that *ideally*, "one should act the way they feel no matter what their gender." (age 50-74) Butler contends that gender norms become binding for us, particularly as they evolve into social regulations, however there still seems to exist a belief, according to my respondents, that we can "undo" them, or do them differently. Butler agrees that we must do so and Bornstein thinks that we should do away with these gendered categories altogether, even though this would leave us undirected for a while. The strict categories, both writers claim, create social outcasts who are symbolically annihilated from language, custom and representation. This can be seen in rural communities such as Lourdes, when a male does not want to go out and bring in wood, or a woman does not want to clean the house. When the "men's jobs" are performed by females and the "women's jobs" are done by males in these small rural communities, they are symbolically annihilated in their hometown.

Conclusion

Studying this topic has been extremely important for me. It has shown me that people from my hometown community may continue to think of sex and gender as terms that can be used interchangeably because of the strong associations between gender roles in rural communities and particular jobs. I initially thought that education alone shaped the understandings of non-post secondary educated respondents from Lourdes, in terms of their understanding of sex and gender, but the traditional and entrenched division of labour in rural communities complicates this conclusion. Nevertheless, as with my

experience, the more post secondary education one receives, the more sophisticated an understanding they have of the terms gender and sex and their social implications.

Additionally, This research has once again underscored the fact that capitalism has an obvious stake in upholding the gender/sex binary.

This research can serve as a stepping-stone for future scholars who seek to understand the difference between non-post secondary and post-secondary education in terms of shaping distinctions between understandings of gender and sex. Specifically, one key finding is that while many people distinguish between the two terms, avoidance of stigmatization often prevents them from expressing it. This study also opens the door to future research on the rural/urban differences in sex/gender understandings, and the role of traditional religion in upholding the gender/sex binary. Finally, I think it is important for everyone to know the difference between sex and gender and if this research can make a difference for just one person, I am potentially freeing someone from a box or helping someone move forward in their thinking.

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Appendix

Independent Survey 4950.

Please complete a survey to help me with my 4950 independent research thesis.

This survey is completely anonymous.

PLEASE do NOT put your name on this paper.

Participants can refuse to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Participation is voluntary. If a participant would like to withdraw after completing the survey they can contact me: Keshia Snook; ksnook@grenfell.mun.ca or my supervisor Dr. Marie Croll, mcroll@grenfell.mun.ca

All participants will sign a research consent form. Confidentiality will be respected throughout the process and all interviews will remain anonymous. No identifying details will be used in the study. My research proposal and interview questions have been approved by the Social/Cultural Studies Department, including my supervisor.

My research will be presented in our public 4950 presentations and a final copy of my project will be included with the other student projects in a volume which will be preserved in the campus library.

The questionnaires will be destroyed following the release of final grades for the project.

1.) Is there a difference between Gender and Sex? Yes or No?

Please explain. _____

2.) What do you think our gender is determined by?

Please explain _____

3.) What do you think of when you hear the term "gender"?

4.) Are gender and sex different terms? Or do they have the same meaning for you?
Please explain _____

5.) Do our behaviors define our gender or our sex? Or both? Please explain

6.) Do you believe that everyone fits into the category male or female?
Please explain _____

7.) Do you think that if one is born a female, they should “act” like a woman and if one is born a male they should “act” like a man?
Please explain _____

8.) What do you think that our perception of ourselves as males or females is based on?
Please explain _____

9.) When you talk to a new mother about their baby do you ask them what the baby’s sex is? If yes, explain why this is an important question.

10.) What age range do you fit into? Please circle.

- a.) under 24
- b.) 25-49
- c.) 50-74
- d.) 75 and over.

11.) What is the highest level of Education you received? _____

12.) Where is your hometown? _____

13.) Where do you live now? _____

Thank you for completing this survey! ☺