

Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach

Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna

Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1985 (originally published in 1978 by Wiley, New York). xv + 232 pp. \$10.95 (paper)

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The thesis of this book is that gender is a social construction. This comes as no surprise to anthropologists, who long have looked at gender roles and the symbolization of sex as part of culture, i.e., as socially learned. However, the authors take this further than many anthropologists would care to go. They claim that several genders can exist in a culture or that gender is a gradient. Using transsexuals and the institution of the berdache to support their argument, they deny that there is any biological basis to gender. A careful reading of the literature on transsexuals and the berdache indicates just the opposite. Transsexuals wish and strive to become the other gender, not some third gender in between. The information on the berdache has been taken from M.K. Martin and B. Voorhies (*Female of the Species* [Columbia University Press, 1975]) who suggest that third genders may have been acknowledged in some North American Indian societies where the transformation from the sex at birth to the opposite gender was not complete. However, there is considerable difference between a third gender, which would be a "normal" category equivalent to the other two, and an anomaly. I question Martin and Voorhies's interpretation of the berdache as a third gender, and therefore I do not see it as supporting the argument of this book. Interestingly, many of the societies that have recorded cases of berdaches include a two-gender opposition among other kinds of symbolic oppositions—male:female::winter:summer::hard substances are to soft substances, etc. Room for flexibility within and between categories does not necessarily indicate the presence of a third category.

Another point at which anthropologists will part company with the authors is in the short shrift they give to reproduction as determining gender roles (p. 165). Dealing as we do with societies in which fertility is a central concern and in which the institutions concerned with reproduction, marriage and kinship, form the basis of much social and political action, we are unlikely to dismiss it for being as socially irrelevant as the authors do. In most societies, a woman or man is not even an adult until marriage, and then not fully adult until children are born. Anthropologists do not need to be reminded of the economics and politics of reproduction.

This book makes a plea for breaking away from a restrictive view of gender roles. This is commendable. But I have not been convinced that multiple genders are necessary or even possible. In my view, gender differences are for the most part culturally constructed but are attached to the sex difference. We are a two-sexed species and, for better or for worse, a two-gendered one as well.