NEITHER MAN NOR WOMAN: BERDACHE – A CASE FOR NON-DICHOTOMOUS GENDER CONSTRUCTION[1]

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Abstract: How many genders are there? The notion that gender is inevitably dichotomous is strongly challenged by the historical and contemporary existence of the berdache status in many North American societies. A preliminary conceptual framework for the analysis of sex/gender systems is proposed. The berdache status as understood in the English-language ethnographic literature is summarized. The traditional characterization of the status (e.g., institutionalized homosexuality or transvestite) are criticized and alternative categorizations of – "male" and "female" – berdaches, as third and fourth genders, are presented. Considered in this light, gender as a dichotomous classification system is seen to be a cultural construct. The implications of this conclusion for feminist theorizing are explored.

Résumé: Combien existe-t-il de genres? Cette notion de genre inévitablement dichotomique est remise en question par l'éxistence à la fois historique et contemporaire du statut berdache au sein de nombreuses sociétés nord-américaines. L'article propose un cadre conceptuel préliminaire pour l'analyse des systèmes sexe/genre.

On y résume d'abord ce qu'est le statut berdache dans la littérature ethmographique de langue anglaise.

Les réprésentations traditionelles du statut (telles l'homosexualité institutionelle ou les travestis) sont critiquées; par contre, on propose des catégorisations alternatives de berdache «male» et «femelle» comme troisième et quatrième genres.

À la lumière de cette argumentation, le genre comme système de classification dichotomique apparâit comme étant-une construction culturelle.

Les implications d'une telle conclusion sont examinées dans l'optique de théories féministes.

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Introduction

> How many genders are there? To a modern Anglo-American, nothing might seem more definite than the answer that there are two: men and women. But not all societies around the world agree with Western culture's view that all humans are men or women.
>
> — Williams 1986:1

The existence of the North American Indian berdache status(es), I will argue, represents one such exception.[2] After outlining a framework for the consideration of sex/gender systems, I will describe the berdache status as understood in the English-language ethnographic literature. Next, I will look at the traditional characterizations of this status and explain why they are inappropriate. I will then propose that (''female'' and ''male'') berdaches be viewed as gender statuses distinct from men or women. Finally, I will suggest some implications of this for sex/gender studies and feminist theorizing.

The existence of two sexes and of two genders is largely taken for granted as ''irreducible facts'' within our Euro-Western cultural tradition (Kessler and McKenna 1978:vii). Like our other basic and often related dichotomies, this pair of dichotomies is pervasive. In our mythology (e.g., Adam and Eve) and in our everyday social interactions, from the first question we ask about a newborn to the ways in which we conceptualize the universe, a (gender) dichotomizing framework is discernible.[3]

Most feminist research on sex/gender issues takes the basic gender dichotomy for granted. Some call for a blurring of dichotomous views of men and women by adopting a synthetic view of secondary dichotomies (e.g., Hein 1984, Ortner 1974); some argue for revalorization of women and those things that are associated with them (an example can be found in Hein 1984), some argue for more integrated, interactional relationships between individuals and groups (both inter- and intra-gender) based on ''feminine'' traits of ''caring'' (e.g., Whitbeck 1984).

A careful consideration of the preponderance of feminist and sex/gender research reveals that it is not really about the construction of sex/gender systems but about the construction of the Euro-Western and dichotomizing sex/gender system. While interesting and even politically fruitful (to some feminist agendas), the feminist bipolar and ethnocentric perspectives are forced to construct their (sometimes utopian) horizons out of a criticism of the limits of *our* patriarchal system. By overlooking the sex/gender systems of other societies (both historical and contemporary) researchers almost

inevitably fall into the trap of perceiving and conceptualizing the world with just two types of human beings.

Pre-feminist and non-feminist conceptions of the world had one basic type of "human" (i.e., man) and a secondary deficient (see Donchin 1984 for discussion) "not fully human" (see Frye 1975 for discussion) inferior "female man" or "other" (de Beauvoir 1940). Feminists, by contrast, have tended to conceptualize two types of full humans living in this world.

I intend, by the use of ethnographic example, to indicate the possibility and the reality of a world with more than two types, in the hope that this will serve to get beyond the dichotomizing conceptions of sex and gender within (universalizing) Euro-Western thought. To that end, I shall begin by making some necessary analytical distinctions. I will then endeavour to show that not only are our understandings of "man" and "woman" cultural constructs,[4] but to show that the number of genders itself is a cultural construct.

Analytical Distinctions

The following analytical distinctions form the basis of my subsequent analysis and very significantly inform and direct the perspective presented. It might be useful to understand my perspective as one which views sex, gender, the number of sexes and the number of genders as constructed. These definitions vary considerably from those in some of my source material, leading to necessarily different conceptualizations and conclusions.

Folk Classification: The concept of folk classification is central to my analysis. The use of the folk classification concept is an attempt to avoid imposing or applying "external" (ethnocentric or anthropologists') cultural categories when talking about some aspect of the social reality of a given social group. This social group may use different categories to talk about the same phenomenon, and it is precisely these categories, their taxonomic structures and other organizing models, that are referred to as folk classification. "The growing evidence indicates that environmentally uniform physical elements are classified differently by societies" (Martin and Voorhies 1975:87). One popular and often cited example of the variability in folk classification systems are the many Inuit distinctions for different types of snow.[5] That skiers (or Montreal pedestrians for that matter) have significantly large repertoires of similar distinctions is an equally valid example of a folk classification model.

Recent criticism of (and retreat from) extreme relativism in folk classification studies notwithstanding,[6] the notion remains both productive and insightful. The "folk" (i.e., social group) can be defined as any community

with a high degree of overlap in cultural category designations.[7] Significantly, the "folk" may be sociobiologists, anthropologists or feminist writers[8]

Sex: From an essentialist perspective, sex is viewed as the determinant of the biological, social and psychological make-up of a male or female. From a more recent feminist perspective, sex is distinguished from gender as the biological dimension in defining and constructing what it is to be male or female. In both versions, sex consists of what one is born with. But, at this point, distinguishing that which is biological from that which is not remains contentious and therefore sex should be understood as a folk classification system which divides humanity into two or more categories (e.g., male and female) on the basis of both biological *and* cultural criteria *in the belief that the criteria being used are biologically determined or "natural."*

Gender: By contrast, gender has typically been used to refer to the psychological, social and cultural elements in the constructions of males and females (Stoller 1968). Herein gender classifications will be viewed as folk classifications dividing humanity into two or more types based on what *are believed to be non-"natural," i.e., cultural elements.* One might note that at this point androgyny exists only in theory and fiction.

Sex/Gender System:[9] This is the folk classification of both gender and sex categories. The system varies in its construction from culture to culture but invariably (i.e., cross-culturally) contains a minimum of two sexes and two genders.

Gender Attribution and Sex Attribution: According to Kessler and McKenna (1978), gender attribution, or "assigning" a gender, is the act of deciding whether someone is a man or a woman. In keeping with the preceding definitions, I must expand the definition to include other genders that are neither men nor women (as defined by folk classifications). Gender attribution is made on the basis of numerous and redundant morphological (e.g., breasts and beards) and cultural (e.g., hairstyle, clothing, posture) elements. In this way Western gender assignments tend to coincide with Western sex assignments. As such is not necessarily the case in all societies, sex and gender attribution are analytically distinguished. Following Kessler and McKenna, *gender attribution* precedes and defines *gender role* and *gender identity*, although there is dynamic interplay between the three. It should be clear from this, that neither a person's sex nor gender are simply innate.

Gender Role and Gender Identity/Sex Role and Sex Identity: One's gender role is the sum of all behaviours that a person engages in to indicate to others or to the self that one is a man, a woman or some other gender. Gender role is the outward (public) manifestation of one's gender identity, and gender identity is the personal experience of one's gender role (Kessler and McKenna 1978). The concepts of sex role and sex identity should be distinguished here from gender role and gender identity as sex and gender

do not necessarily have a one-to-one relationship. The study of gender (and sex) identity is primarily the focus of psychologists. My focus here is sociocultural and is thus more closely related to gender (and sex) roles and gender (and sex) attribution.

Female/Male – Woman/Man: The terms female and male are used to designate two most common varieties of *sex* assignments. The terms man and woman represent the two most common *gender* assignments. All are folk classifications and are not necessarily universal or paired.

Intersex: This is a person with genitalia that are neither typically male nor female. The term itself implies a "middle" position which should not be assumed. The folk classifications hermaphrodite and Nadle (Hill 1935) fall into this category.

Transsexual: A person is a transsexual when the individual's gender identity and gender assignment conflict. The term only has meaning because we make gender attributions for everyone.

Transvestite: A transvestite is a person whose gender assignment and gender identity are in correspondence with each other but are both in contrast to the gender association of the clothes that this person wears. This category is highly contextual and, therefore, relatively ambiguous and difficult to apply.

Heterosexuality, Homosexuality and Bisexuality: These categories relate to one's (choice of)[10] sexual partners. The choice lies, respectively, between different gender partners, same gender partners and "either" gender partners. These terms traditionally imply two genders, as well as one-on-one sexuality.

The term bisexual most explicitly implies two dichotomous gender categories and is, therefore, culture-specific. An appropriate alternative term, which would incorporate the possible variations, would be "multisexual." Sexuality, it should be noted, is an element of variable importance in different sex/gender systems. Gender attribution of each partner must logically precede the labels of sexual practices (or preferences).

The critical or sensitive reader might think that the preceding presentation of "analytical distinctions" sounds itself very much like a folk classification model. Inasmuch as the notions are shared by some, it is. The framework outlined is intended to facilitate comparisons of different sex/gender systems and is itself subject to revision as "evidence" and "anomalies" dictate. The berdache will now be considered in the context of the preceding framework.

The Berdache Status

The berdache has been characterized in many different ways by different authors. This multiplex depiction is doubtless a reflection, in part, of the great variation that characterizes the role. I will briefly sketch a basic consensus regarding this role as interpreted by several authors, before discussing the more controversial and interesting theoretical views.

The berdache is a person who is usually male but sometimes female or intersexed.[11] This person assumes as least some of the occupations, dress, and other behaviours associated with the "other" (or different) sex, at least some of the time. This type of person is labelled by Native American societies with a title distinct from "man" or "woman," and the berdache has a recognized and accepted social status which is frequently rooted in mythology. They often serve a meditating role between men and woman; a position afforded by their distinctness and special spirit. This distinct and even unusual status also affords the berdache special spiritual power as the mediator between the spiritual and physical worlds. Sexuality is variable (Collander and Kochems 1983; Martin and Voorhies 1975; Bolin 1987; Williams 1986; Kessler and Mckenna 1978).

State of Research and Documentation

Williams discusses the state of research on the berdache (1986:3-14). The documentation on the berdache has been, until recently, largely hidden away as a peripheral topic in ethnographies or in early explorers" and missionaries" accounts of what was presented as the base immorality of the savages. There are a number of reasons for the lack of information. Historians have typically shown a basic lack of interest in the internal organization of Native societies. Furthermore, historians and more recently ethnohistorians have tended to consider men killing each other to be of far more importance in understanding the past than the history of sexuality and sex/gender systems. Homophobic Western attitudes have led to voluntary, and even mandatory censorship, such as the 1975 decision of the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association which voted "not to endorse research on homosexuality across national borders" (cited in Williams 1986:13). According to Read this "is indicative of the persistence of [homophobic] Western attitudes . . . though it [homosexuality] is probably as prevalent as witchcraft [it] is morally distasteful" (ibid.).

Additional reasons for the lack of knowledge available on the berdache status include: missed references; "extinct" societies; inhibitions of anthropologists about discussing sex and sexuality and native inhibitions about discussing such matters for reasons of secrecy or, amongst some Christian

natives, out of fear of embarrassment and the self-conscious desire to suppress the "shameful" traditions of the past.

Range and Distribution

Collander and Kochems find the berdache institution to be present in 113 societies in North America, north of Mexico, as recorded by anthropologists and others since the time of contact. In many societies the evidence for the status is either missing altogether or ambiguous. A complete absence of the institution is only explicitly reported for nine groups. But even these instances are on shaky ground because numerous cases of explicit denials of the berdache status have been reported for societies in which the status is known to have existed (1983:444-445). Furthermore, the presence of the very similar "soft man" status amongst the Chuckchee of Northern Siberia (Bogoras 1907) points to the possibility that the berdache status was brought to America by the first people to come across the Bering Strait. If this is correct, the implications for antiquity and distribution are enormous. Combined with the reasons delineated above, it seems likely that berdache status was even more widespread than currently acknowledged: "We cannot assume that berdaches were completely absent from any Native American culture, and we need to question statements that suggest its nonexistence" (Williams 1986:4).[12]

Sexuality

Berdaches, without recorded exception, had sexual relations only with non-berdaches. Otherwise, they were not restricted. Non-berdache women and men could have sex with men, women and berdaches. Sexuality, in general, was highly variable.

Sexuality was not considered as important an element in definitions of gender within North American Native societies as it is in Euro-Western societies. Williams (1986) argues that a person's spiritual essence was of primary importance, while Whitehead explains that North American Native gender attributions, in contrast to Euro-Western ones, foregrounded occupation and social behaviour. Choice of sexual partners, she says, was of secondary interest (1981:97) in assigning gender. Unlike Euro-American society heterosexuality was not rigidly mandatory (Firestone 1978). This is not to suggest, though, that man-woman "marriage" unions were not also the norm.

Clothing

Although, generally speaking, berdaches "cross dressed" (i.e., wore the clothing of the "other" sex), there is great variability in the literature about this. Male berdaches often wore the clothes and hairstyles of women and often imitated their voices. Female berdaches often dressed as men. Most frequently clothing choice would be contextual. Often elements of men's wardrobes and women's wardrobes were combined. Sometimes the berdache would make and wear clothing that was completely distinct from women or men.

Clothing, like many aspects of the berdache status, was variable across cultures. For example, the Pima's male berdaches took the speech and postures of women but not their dress (Hill 1938:339), while in other societies there were female berdaches who did not wear men's clothing. There were instances of individual choice in dress but most commonly the choice of clothing depended on the gender association of the task at hand (e.g., cooking, hunting) or the "marital status" of the berdache (Collander and Kochems 1983:446).

According to Landes and Lurie, becoming a male berdache is a transformation which occurred in several stages. The status was adopted gradually with the adoption of women's clothing as the final stage and the end of the process (Landes 1970:198-202; Lurie 1953:708). The label of transvestite as applied to berdaches will be discussed below.

Occupations

Berdaches usually adopted the occupations of the gender whose clothing they assumed. This was a particularly significant characteristic of their status. It is one of the most often noted traits and, like cross dressing, it is one of the most significant (Collander and Kochems 1983:447).

Another feature of the status was the very frequently cited proficiency that the berdache had in the performance of the tasks specific to the gender whose clothing s/he assumed. For example, there are many accounts of very successful female berdache hunters (Devereux 1937:515).

The berdaches tended to be very successful in their ventures and very productive. This success and wealth is attributed to a number of factors including: the productive capacities of a male berdache-to-man marriage which did not need to raise offspring (Devereux 1937:513-515; Hill 1935:274); the claim that they had superior strength; their supernatural powers and, perhaps most significantly, their ability to combine men's and women's economic activities. Without the restrictions of the sexual division of labour, the berdache had great economic opportunities (Collander and Kochems 1983:447-448).

In some societies the berdache performed special services, often at birth or death. One of the most significant roles played by the berdache was that of mediator and intermediary between men and women in cases of disputes. This follows a tenet widespread in Native American religions: Where there are polarities, there are mediators. These mediators hold the polarities together "to keep the world from disintegrating" (Williams 1986:20).

Warfare

Berdache status has occasionally been associated with men who did not want to be warriors out of fear (i.e., the berdache as coward). The male berdache was frequently, but not always, excluded from warfare, which was, on the whole, a male-only activity. On the other hand, in many societies, male berdaches did fight, but wore men's clothing at this time. Sometimes they even had particularly significant roles in the "war complex," as they had special powers (amongst the Cheyenne Indians, for instance [Hoebel 1960:77]). Female berdaches, it seems, took part in warfare to an even greater extent than non-berdache woman warriors.

Regardless of the extent to which berdaches took part in warfare, or of their specific relation to it, like their relation to other aspects of culture they were, in this respect, notably distinct from men or women.

Spiritual Aspects and Ceremonial Roles

The spiritual power and position is the most difficult aspect of the berdache's role to understand because it requires understanding of, and contextualization within, Native American religious belief and ceremonialism. A rigorous description of this spirituality is beyond the scope of this paper and beyond the scope of my knowledge. Nonetheless, it is important to note the great significance of this aspect of life, and the spirituality of berdaches in particular, to traditional Native Americans. Williams (1986), throughout his work, strongly emphasizes that the berdache's spirit, or spiritual essence, is considered to be the most salient aspect of their existence. Referring to Native American spirituality:

> They have the greatest faith in dreams, by which they imagine that the deity informs them of future events, [and] enjoins them certain penances . . . I have known several instances of some of their men, who by virtue of an extraordinary dream, have been affected to such a degree as to abandon every custom characteristic of their sex and adopt the dress and manners of the women. They are never ridiculed or despised by the men on account of their new costumes, but are, on the contrary, respected as saints or beings in some degree inspired. (Early 19th century, Peter Grant, as cited in Williams 1986:31)

These dreams or visions which "instruct" the person to become a berdache are very widely known and reported. For example, such vision experiences are described amongst the Winnebago and Iowa (Lurie 1953:70,711) and amongst the Santee Dakota and Potawatomi (Landes 1970:57,190-191). The other primary, though less widespread, factor which is widely reported as preceding the assumption of berdache status is an unusual interest on the part of a child in the work and members of the "other sex." These two factors are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive. In fact, they are often found in combination with each other, as well as with other forms of "recruitment."

Certain mythological figures could be considered to validate and, by association, valorize the role of berdache. Normally, though, the mythological figure was not a berdache, but an intersex or intersex twins born to first man and first woman (e.g., Hill 1935:273-274). Real and mythological intersexes were strongly associated with berdaches. Consider for example, the Navajo distinction, as reported by Hill (1935:273), between "real Nadle" (intersex) and "those who pretend they are Nadle." While this real vs. pretend Nadle represents an example of an application of the sex/gender distinction (perhaps third sex and third gender), it also draws attention to the difficulty of distinguishing sex (real) from gender (fake).

The ceremonial-religious role of the berdache overlaps with that of Shaman. Their responsibilities include mediation between the worlds of spirit and flesh (i.e., the physical and spiritual), healing and a general responsibility for the welfare of the whole society. Shamans are not necessarily berdaches, but berdaches are usually considered to be powerful sorts of shamans. The Mohaves believed that women shamans were more powerful than men shamans and berdache shamans were more powerful yet. The berdache's ceremonial and spiritual roles involved them in very significant ways with almost every aspect of Native life (Williams 1986:31-43).

Characterizing the Berdache

The berdache institution has been variously described as, and confused with, intersex, institutionalized homosexuality, transvestism, gender crossing or transsexuals and gender-mixing. I suggest that all of these characterizations are a result of misunderstandings of the nature of the status resulting from an ethnocentric perspective that is unable or unwilling to conceptualize more than two sexes or genders. The writers come from a culture in which the gender and sex system is rigid and dichotomous. Gender attribution into one of two categories is taken for granted. When a puzzling gender role is presented, the Western writers have tried to fit it into their own sex/gender system and conceptualizations. They search for somewhat analo-

gous categories in Western society and call it a match. The basic errors can be simply understood as ethnocentrism and can be avoided by understanding folk classification systems and the nature of the specific sex and gender construction in the societies in question. In doing so, I will hopefully arrive at a more appropriate gender attribution for the berdache.

Berdache as an Institutionalized Homosexuality

Devereux (1937) and more recently Katz (1976) are two of the people who conceptualize berdaches as an example of the institutional sanctioning of homoerotic behaviour. Devereux's belief in rigidly dichotomized gender role categories kept him from understanding that the berdache role is not synonymous with either the man or the woman gender role (Kessler and McKenna 1978:28). Katz's political agenda of reclaiming and writing Gay American history may have been the motivation for his characterization of the berdache as homosexual.

There are two reasons to reject the homosexual characterization. First of all, as outlined earlier, a berdache's sexuality was highly variable. Neither same sex sexuality nor same gender sexuality is a necessary correlate of berdachehood.

Secondly, if we accept that berdaches are neither men nor women but rather third and forth genders, then only berdache-berdache sexuality could be construed as homosexual and as noted, this did not occur. From this perspective, male berdache-man sexuality or female-berdache-woman sexuality are by definition heterosexual.

Berdache as Transvestite

Devereux (1937) uses the terms "berdache" and "transvestite" interchangeably. A great deal of the anthropological literature refers to berdaches as transvestites. There are several reasons that this is not an accurate characterization. Firstly, there are instances in which men dressed as women but were not berdaches. These cases were related to disgrace for cowardice in battle and have no relation to berdachehood (Lurie 1953:710, Collander and Kochems 1983:443). Secondly, berdaches, as stated earlier, did not always wear the clothing of the "opposite sex.' Furthermore, they frequently wore a combination of both men and women's clothing or even altogether unique clothing.

In the terminology outlined, a berdache's gender assignment and gender identity are consistent with each other but are *not* in contradiction with her/his choice of clothing. The berdaches choice of clothing matches her/his gender role or is an example of the great license (freedom of choice) that

s/he (. . .) has and therefore berdache and transvestite cannot be considered synonymous.

Berdache as Intersex

Non-Natives, including anthropologists, have been so confused by the strange berdache role that they have sometimes mistaken berdaches with hermaphrodites. This term implies genitalia that are neither "properly" male or female. Berdaches have "normal" genitalia, as has been confirmed by curious and invasive whites. One possible reason for the confusion is linguistic. Natives sometimes characterize berdaches as "half-man/half-woman" or "half and half people." Combine this with Western gender construction's emphasis on physical traits – hair and body hair, breasts, genitalia – and we can understand the mistake. By contrast, the North American natives place far more emphasis on a person's spirit or spiritual essence, the physical body is secondary (Williams 1986).

Another simple distinction between the berdache and the intersex is the physical/cultural distinction. Intersex status is permanent, berdachehood is not. Even amongst the Navajo, who explicitly recognize an intersex category as well as a berdache category, there is a distinction made. Intersexes are Nadle and berdaches are "those who pretend to be Nadle" (Hill 1935; Martin and Voorhies 1975:87).

Berdachism and Transsexualism

Angelino and Shedd successfully steered away from the terms hermaphroditism and transvestism to arrive at the notion of gender crossing or transsexualism. They write that a berdache is a person who "assumes the role and status of the opposite sex" (1955:125). Whitehead, more recently characterized berdaches as "gender-crossers . . . becoming a member of the opposite sex." She considers the transsexual in our society to be an appropriate analog (1981:93,96).

While male berdaches sometimes do women's work and wear women's clothing, they do not bear children. They act as mediators between men and women, have special responsibilities and a distinct "spirit." It seems, therefore, inappropriate to assign them the status of transsexual, which essentially entails fulfilling all of the roles of the "other" sex.

At the root of this transsexual designation is the Western dichotomous view of sex and gender. There are two genders and they are "opposites." You must be one or the other. In our society, transsexuals (i.e., people whose gender assignments and gender identities do not match) often opt for surgery to establish this match. A berdache's gender assignment and iden-

tity do not conflict. The berdache's gender identity, though, *does* conflict with Euro-Western gender assignments.

Berdachism as Gender Mixing

Collander and Kochems refer to berdache as a kind of gender mixing or "movement toward a somewhat intermediate status" (1983:443). This is a much more subtle definition than those discussed above. There is certainly some validity to this notion if we understand that berdaches take on some of the behaviour and roles of men and some of those of women. But if we alternatively view this not as "taking on" behaviours of men and women, but as "sharing" behaviours with men and women, then the term "mixing" becomes invalid.

Furthermore, the distinct behaviours and roles of the berdache (for example, their special spirituality and the very ability to "combine" activities) are all elements of the berdache status which are not "mixed in" from women or men.

The concept of gender mixing is another appropriate response from a gender dichotomizing perspective which is unable to perceive this institution outside the basic Euro-Western framework. On the other hand, the notion of mixing does entail the recognition of individuals who are not precisely equal to women or men.

Conclusion

As I have elaborated, the berdache has a combination of dressing patterns and sex assignment that is shared neither by men nor women. The combination of their sex assignment and their occupational roles are also distinct. Their position in the "war complex" is often distinct from the warfare role played by people with the gender assignment of man or woman. In their sexuality, berdaches, unlike men or women, never have sexual relationships with other berdaches. Their spiritual role, although overlapping with shamanism to some extent, is distinct in that berdaches act as mediators between women and men and sometimes perform specialized services that no one else could. Their spiritual powers are impressive and unparalleled. Linguistically, natives used different referents for berdaches than they did for ordinary men and women. Finally, living traditionalist natives and berdaches consider the spiritual essence of the berdache to be distinct from men's and women's, and unique. Therefore, they should be understood neither as women nor as men. Female berdaches are a third gender and male berdaches are a fourth. But if we follow some of the mythology, the berdache was the first gender. In fact a berdache was the first human, preceding not only European arrival in this land, but men and women as well.

Kessler and McKenna question the premise that gender is an inevitable dichotomy and argue that it is continuous. They conclude that "biological, psychological and social differences do not lead to our seeing two genders. Our seeing two genders leads to the "discovery" of biological, psychological, and social differences (1978:163). This radical perspective asserts the primacy of gender attribution and has far reaching implications for all aspects of gender or sex research.

From the evidence of the berdache, there emerges the conclusion that gender as a bipolar classification system is a cultural construct. Berdaches should be understood as third and fourth genders and the sex/gender system should be understood as a way to divide up humanity. The full implications of this sort of argument for sex/gender studies and for Euro-Western (at least) feminism and feminist theorizing remain to be seen, but I would argue that the existence of the berdache, as well as other non-dichotomous gender systems cross-culturally,[13] strongly support certain feminist models for a sexually egalitarian society. The existence of third and fourth genders serve as strong buttresses in the construction of new models of sex and gender which eschew the basic dichotomies.

Amongst the fluorescence of new feminist ideas, particularly since the 1970s, is a stream of thought which I have referred to as "Gender Proliferation" (Schnarch n.d. a). An ideal society within a gender proliferation model would not propose a "unisex" world (like that of some liberal feminist models), instead, a diversity of (gender) roles would be possible. An individual could hold "masculine" traits (e.g., objectivity, agressivity, rationality) and "feminine" traits (e.g., nurturing, responsibility, sensitivity) in any combination, including "pure" masculine or feminine. Given time, these traits would lose their gender associations and simply become gender-neutral traits to be adopted (or not) by individuals hodge-podge, mix-and-match or don't match if you prefer.

Gender proliferation is *not*, as the label might imply, specifically about adding third and fourth genders. It is about diversity. It proposes the abolition of a formula for both gender and genders, as well as the lack of a formula by which sex and gender are linked. Knowledge about radically different sex/gender systems in other societies can help inform and support such feminist models and goals for social change. This knowledge can serve to take us beyond the rigid dichotomous conceptions of sex and gender that bare central to the organization of the Euro-Western patriarchal system.

Notes

1. This paper was the winning entry of the 1991 Northeastern Anthropological Association Student Essay Competition, undergraduate category.

2. I would like to thank those who helped me in various ways while working on this paper: H. Bristol, R. Keesing and especially my insightful undergraduate friends.
3. Feminist analyses and discussions of gender-related dichotomies can be found, amongst others, in de Beauvoir (1940), Hein (1984), Ortner (1974) and Whitbeck (1984).
4. The cultural construction of "woman" and "man" has been fairly well explored in feminist writings and has been developed in cross-cultural perspective in Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and in Ortner and Whitehead (1981).
5. The number of distinctions, though, has been occasionally exaggerated due to the linguistic error of failing to distinguish prefixes and adjectives from nouns.
6. Brown (1984) and Atran (1990) each discuss "regularities" and "uniformities" in cross-cultural folk classification.
7. Keesing (1987) addresses the question of how cultural (i.e., folk) models can be portrayed as monolithic, idealized and normative.
8. Keesing (1987) discusses the questionable distinction of "folk" vs. "expert" models. A discussion of the concept of folk classification and its specific applications with respect to sex and gender can be found in Martin and Voorhies (1975).
9. My usage of this term differs from that of Rubin (1975) who coined it originally.
10. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich (1980) argues that (within a Euro-Western framework at least) there is not much "choice" involved.
11. It should be noted here that the "female" and "male" labels used here, whether they are berdaches or not, are Native American (folk) sex categories. Amongst the Navajo, the Nadle, an intersex, was also recognized (Hill 1935:273). Geertz (1983) discusses the Nadle as a third sex.
12. The berdache status continues to exist in the late 20th century. In fact, Williams' *The Spirit and the Flesh* (1986) is, in part, based on the field research he carried out in 1980 interviewing and living with "real live" berdaches.
13. These include the "soft man" of the Chuckchee in Siberia (Bogoras 1907), the Mahu role in Polynesia (Levy 1971, 1973), the Hijras of India (Nanda 1990) and the Xanith of Oman (Wikan 1977), amongst others. See Williams (1986), Nanda (1990) and Schnarch (n.d. a and b) for comparative outlines and discussions.

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