

Katy Fox

# Society, Sexuality and Gender Relations

## A Perspective from Social Anthropology

Social anthropology is the study of human relations that exist within different contemporary cultural contexts. It usually proceeds by taking a general issue, and complicating as well as explicating it by confrontation with a very specific ethnographic context. In the process, the complexities of human experience and meaning-making processes of being-in-the-world are revealed, and the limitations of general, universalising statements and theories are run home.

How do the terms 'sex', 'gender' and 'sexuality' relate to each other? 'Sex' usually designates the specific genetic and hormonal makeup of individuals that places them in the category 'female' or 'male'. However, there is space for variation even in this biological dichotomy, as individuals often do not fit neatly into either category, for a variety of reasons, including atypical chromosomal patterns, transsexualism and intersexuality. The term 'gender' is used to refer to a much broader range of variation in how people in societies all over the world understand the social and cultural roles, values and behaviours of socially male or female persons. 'Gender' is a relational category, and is ideally not just a euphemism for 'women'. Note also that gender leaves more space for thinking about a person as

more or less female or male, usually indexing behaviour. 'Sexuality' designates (1) sexual desire, as an aspect of human nature; (2) sexual acts and practices within social relations that may be characterised by hierarchy or inequality; (3) sexual orientation which

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relates to one's personal identity. Thus, 'sexuality' bundles desire, practice and identity in various ways in specific contexts. I suggest that we need to closely examine what we mean by these three terms in order to recognise that they are not transhistorical 'things', but products of particular social, political and economic histories and therefore subject to ongoing cultural and legal interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

### Producing sexuality within historical contexts

In European societies, we tend to think about gender as natural and universal,

but it may be useful to consider that due to our entanglements within our own society, the state apparatus, and our dominant types of knowledge construction, this may be a naturalisation, thus rendered invisible through familiarity and power. The political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably *produces* what it claims merely to represent, and creates differences between categories of people, authorising certain subjects and practices and delegitimising others.

Michel Foucault's influential work *The History of Sexuality* argues that the aim of establishing new moral codes was not to *abolish* all forms of sexuality, but encourage those forms that were seen as *productive*, fostering health and procreation.<sup>2</sup> Seeing gays as a group is now taken for granted, but before the eighteenth century the question whether homosexuality is a function of heredity

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or of upbringing would not have been asked at all.<sup>3</sup> It was simply not seen as being a fundamental part of the person's *identity*, but instead as an *action*, something the person *did*. The creation of legal frameworks, then, effectively changed the way in which questions about identity and personhood were framed. Many forms of sexuality were cast as harmful and the stated aim became fostering 'health' and 'purity of race' (e.g. through anti-sodomy laws and anti-miscegenation laws). A mixture of ideas on population growth, venereal diseases and heredity created the idea that many forms of sexual conduct were dangerous. This perspective is, I would like to suggest, not incompatible with a specifically Western post-Enlightenment engrained view that regards the mind/reason as imperatively checking and repressing emotions, desire and the body within the order of society. The historically widespread idea that women are biologically and mentally inferior, more emotional types of beings than 'rational men' – stems from this ethnotheory, and has had a wide range of implications in gender relations throughout history.

One example of how political contexts acted on and overtly politicised sexuality is nineteenth century Victorian Britain.<sup>4</sup> During this period, educational and political campaigns were launched to encourage chastity, to eliminate prostitution, and to discourage masturbation. Morality crusaders attacked obscene literature, nude paintings, music halls, abortion, birth control information, and public dancing. Within the context that women had no legal persona (e.g. no right to ownership), it may be of no little importance that clitorodectomy was a widespread practice.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, power issues regarding women and their perceived dangerous sexuality became apparent in the 19th century around diagnoses of 'hysteria'.<sup>6</sup> Zavirsek shows how the medicalisation of women across Europe helped to justify the gendered division between public and private realms in the nineteenth century, among the institutionalisation of psychiatry and the pathologization of sexuality.

### Considering the ethnographic record<sup>7</sup>

In the contemporary Melanesian ethnographic record, it becomes clear that gender more generally is not regarded as an



Hirjas in India (© urikrishna)

ascribed identity, but as a performance. The eminent anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has shown that personhood is thought of in very different terms in the Melanesian context: rather than resembling the Western ideal and practice of an autonomous, independent subject that is largely 'finished' when entering social relations, the Melanesian person comes into being *through* his or her relations with other people, and the social fabric mutually constitutes persons.<sup>8</sup>

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Anthropologist Serena Nanda has carried out research with *hijras*, an institutionalised third gender role in (northern) India, which is 'neither male or female', containing elements of both.<sup>9</sup> The *hijras* are commonly believed by the larger society to be intersexed, impotent men, who undergo emasculation in which all or part of the genitals are removed. They adopt female dress and other aspects of female behaviour. They traditionally earn their living by collecting alms and receiving payment for performances at weddings, births and festivals. Although their role requires *hijras* to dress like women, few make

any real attempt to imitate or to 'pass' as women. Their female dress and mannerisms are exaggerated to the point of caricature, expressing sexual overtones that would be considered inappropriate for ordinary women in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. They use coarse and abusive speech in opposition to the Hindu ideal of demure and restrained femininity. Nanda reports the following, commonly told story among *hijras*, which conceptualises them as a separate, third gender, and which connects them to the Hindu epic known as Ramayana: *In the time of Ramayama, Ram... had to leave Ayodhya and go into the forest for 14 years. As he was going, the whole city followed him because they loved him so. As Ram came to... the edge of the forest, he turned to the people and said, 'Ladies and gents, please wipe your tears and go away.' But these people who were not men and not women did not know what to do. So they stayed there because Ram did not ask them to go. They remained there 14 years and snake hills grew around them. When Ram returned from Lanka, he found many snake hills. Not knowing why they were there he removed them and found so many people with long beards and long nails, all meditating. And so they were blessed by Ram. And that is why we hijras are so respected in Ayodhya.*<sup>10</sup>

Not all of Nanda's informants were born with hermaphroditism (intersexuality), even though many of them did claim

that they 'had been born this way'. The practices around being a *hijra* can be linked to Hindu cosmology. The *hijra* confer fertility, prosperity, and health on the infant and family, and they hold the power to both bless and curse at weddings and births, so families regard them ambivalently. Some anthropologists have suggested the interpretation that the eunuch-transvestites, themselves characterised by sexual ambiguity, have ritual functions at moments that involve sexual ambiguity. Even though there is a certain aspiration towards sexual asceticism exists, *hijras* do engage in same-sex relationships. However, the term *hijra*, which is of Urdu origin and the masculine gender, has the primary meaning of hermaphrodite. It is usually translated as eunuch, never as homosexual. Unlike in the context of Western cultures, in India sexual *object* choice alone does not define gender.

Similarly, Swarr and Nagar's article on experience of women in same-sex relationships in India and South Africa clearly argues that the vocabulary and assumptions developed in Western academic contexts do not necessarily do justice to these women's experiences or speak to their concerns.<sup>11</sup> In the West, it may be a common idea to expect a homosexual preference to be life-long, exclusive, and even genetic in origin. It has been argued that this view on homosexuality is a relatively recent cultural phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> One of the limiting assumptions of Western feminism is to view lesbianism first and foremost in terms of 'desire', as an *external expression of inward feeling*, intimately linked to how we tend to imagine the psychological makeup of a person. However, in Third World contexts, or non-middle class Western contexts, this can be overshadowed by needs. Western theorising of sexuality has focused on the *individual* authoring her own destiny, as unit of analysis and as empirical category, but in many parts of the world, local ideologies do not separate individual from family, clan or community and the personhood involved implies shared resources, status and survival strategies. Far from being viewed as 'private' practice, it may be more useful to view sexuality, in this context as emergent in conjunction with contemporary processes such as development, neo-colonialism, or neoliberalisation that reshape the world and persons in unexpected ways.

Don Kulick's ethnography on *travestis* in Brazil shows how the men he worked with go to lengths to acquire feminine bodily features such as breasts, wide hips, large thighs, and expansive buttocks.<sup>13</sup> While they adopt female names and dress styles, ingest hormones and inject silicone under their skin, they are not transsexuals. They are economically and socially marginal, yet feature heavily in the local imagination and popular culture. In Kulick's compelling account about the real lives of *travestis* he goes further than reproducing the stereotypes that Brazilian people usually hold about 'transvestite prostitutes'. Kulick

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argues that they do not invert ideas and practices of male and female (counter the argument of cross-dressing as a mere carnivalesque inversion ritual), but how they clarify and distil them. He also shows how the concept of biological sex is itself a gendered notion, dependent on culturally generated notions of difference for its meaning and its ability to seem 'natural'. So, through suspending all assumptions that gender is grounded in biological sex and in focusing intently on the lives, loves and work of *travestis*, it becomes possible to get through to the ways in which gender is imagined and configured in Brazilian society.

### Conclusions, but few

Ethnographic examples ideally serve not just to lay out the exotic and unfamiliar, but to help move our thinking beyond our everyday life, unexamined beliefs. Thus, ethnography may serve to reflect on and reassess our own assumptions regarding gender relations. In Europe, gender-typed qualities – often of a taken-for-granted nature, such as, e.g. reckless courage, multitasking, nurturance, emotionality, rationality, etc. – are not innate to women and men, but neither are they merely learned through social life; they are also strategically deployed by women and men. More-

over, people use gender-typed qualities in ways that both conform to dominant expectations, thus making them appear self-evident, and that challenge powerful expectations in a creative tension between accommodation and resistance.

<sup>1</sup> *Subsidiary terms that I will not be able to discuss include 'motherhood', 'fatherhood', 'family', etc., shaped by ideals and contexts.*

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault [1990 [1976]] *The History of Sexuality*. London: Penguin.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, I am not suggesting that it is an 'either/or' question; rather, that life experiences and hormones co-produce adult behaviour. This point is made in Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) *Sexing the Body*. New York: Perseus, especially chapter 5. Note that the way in which biological models are constructed tends to locate our ideas of personhood into genetics more strongly now than, say, fifty years ago, and impacts on how we view and put normative demands on the body, health, and sexuality.

<sup>4</sup> *Or the United States in the nineteenth century.*

<sup>5</sup> While 'clitrodeotomy' is the medical term, the more commonly used term today tends to be 'Female Genital Mutilation'.

<sup>6</sup> See Gayle S. Rubin (1999) 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in: Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (eds) *Culture, Society and Sexuality*. London: UCL Press, 143-178.

<sup>7</sup> I admit that for the purposes of this short article, I have chosen very colourful examples of the extremely rich ethnographic record on gender that does also focus on gender roles closer to 'home'. The format of a short article is not conducive to extensive ethnographic analysis, and I hope the enlightened reader is tolerant of my rather superficial treatment of these cultural phenomena.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Marilyn Strathern's (1988) *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley, CA: California University Press. On the phenomenon of 'hysteria' in nineteenth century Europe, see, for instance, Darja Zavirsek (2000) 'A Historical Overview of Women's Hysteria in Slovenia' *European Journal of Women's Studies* 7: 169-188.

<sup>9</sup> See Serena Nanda (1986) *The Hijras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalised Third Gender Role*. London: Haworth Press.

<sup>10</sup> Serena Nanda (1999) 'The Hijras of India: Cultural and Individual Dimensions of an Institutionalised Third Gender Role' in: Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (eds) *Culture, Society and Sexuality*. London: UCL Press, 226-238. Quotation on page 227.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Lock Swarr & Richa Nagar (2003) 'Dismantling Assumptions: Interrogating "lesbian" Struggles for Identity and Survival in India and South Africa' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29 (2): 491-516.

<sup>12</sup> See D.L. Davis and R.G. Whitten (1987) 'The Cross-Cultural Study of Human Sexuality' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16: 69-98. Quotation on page 80.

<sup>13</sup> Don Kulick (1998) *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.