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Gender, Sex, And Sexualities: Psychological Perspectives

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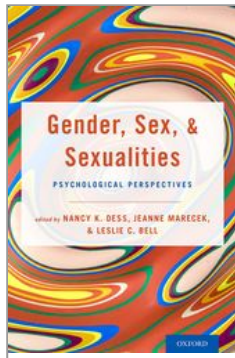
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Gender, Sex, and Sexualities: Psychological Perspectives

Nancy Dess, Jeanne Marecek, and Leslie Bell

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Introduction

Nancy K. Dess

Jeanne Marecek

Leslie C. Bell

Since its inception, inquiry into gender, sex, and sexualities has produced knowledge that has changed psychologists' ways of understanding human behavior. Much of this knowledge has had practical import, influencing law and public policy, schools, clinical and counseling psychology practice, and, in the general public, norms, attitudes, and practices related to gender and sexualities. For example, psychologists' research has played a role in Supreme Court decisions protecting women's reproductive rights, addressing workplace discrimination and harassment, and upholding the civil rights of lesbians and gay men. It has shaped public policies regarding sexual assault, domestic violence, pay equity, and educational access. Feminists in psychology have designed and evaluated educational practices aimed at closing the gender and ethnic gaps in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) participation. Indeed, many of the psychologists who study topics pertaining to sex, gender, and sexualities came to the field because they had a commitment to social change and activism.

The broad scope of psychology is one of its signature strengths. Psychologists attend to scales of organization ranging from cells to societies and to time scales from evolutionary to momentary. Accordingly, as the field has developed since the late 1800s, psychologists have organized themselves into specialties—such as perception and psychophysics, clinical, developmental, cognitive, social, comparative, cultural, evolutionary, personality, and physiological psychology. In each specialty, psychologists generated theoretical frameworks and research methods—*tools for thinking*—appropriate to the scales of organization and time with which they concerned themselves. Questions concerning gender and

sexuality have been taken up in all of these specialty areas.

During the last quarter of the 20th century, new questions about gender, sex, and sexualities were raised in Western high-income societies, and many of these became important topics of investigation for psychologists. New questions and topics often demanded new approaches to research, and scholars embraced innovations in theory, research methods, and epistemology. They generated critical reinterpretations of existing concepts and bodies of knowledge, and they raised new considerations of the ethical dimensions of research and clinical practice. Critical theory, discursive psychology, and feminist psychology have been established as vibrant scholarly endeavors. Over the same period, technological innovations enabled research that radically altered ideas about events at low scales of organization. Genes, hormones, and neurons are now regarded in a new light by researchers interested in sex and gender; paradigm shifts related to epigenetics and neural plasticity are two examples. Some scholars began to develop and use theories that mirror how life unfolds in complex, recursive ways across scales of organization and time. Dynamical systems theory and cultural neuroscience are examples of multilevel integrative approaches that are being used to study gender and sexualities. Feminist psychologists are increasingly reaching across disciplinary, international, and cultural borders, working with biologists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, philosophers, and others across the globe.

Why This Book Now?

The literature on gender, sex, and sexualities today looks very different than it did even ten years ago. The contemporary landscape includes new synergies, persistent tensions, and entirely new ideas and methods. We designed this book to welcome students—the next generation of scholars—into this dynamic landscape. The collected chapters reflect current movements, developments, and potential future directions. The book encompasses key topics—such as prejudice and discrimination, sexual desires and erotic practices, the development of gendered identities, and the emergence of nonbinary genders. Equally important, however, is its focus on *tools for thinking*. That is, the chapters provide conceptual tools to understand where psychological scholarship on gender, sex, and sexualities has been and the directions it is now taking. The chapters are written by experts who are able to provide first-hand accounts of the contemporary state of the discipline.

The goal, then, is to facilitate students' development as thinkers—enhancing their intellectual flexibility, fostering their appreciation for complexity, and preparing them to engage critically with policy debates, popular culture representations, and public discourse on gender, sex, and sexualities.

Organization

The book begins with a section entitled *Part I: Emerging Frameworks: Beyond Binaries*. The chapters in this section present current perspectives that challenge dualisms such as male/female, nature/nurture, individual/society, and heterosexual/homosexual and offer more complex formulations. The second section is entitled *Part II: Contemporary Avenues of Inquiry*. This section presents a broad range of scholarly perspectives on gender, sex, and sexualities. These chapters illustrate how conceptualizations of gender, sex, and sexualities shape the research that gets done and also point to directions for future theory and research.

The usual convention of ordering chapters from “biology” to “culture” is not followed in this book. Such an order conveys the mistaken premise that “biology” serves as the immutable bedrock upon which developmental learning, social relations, cultural worldviews, and societal structures are overlaid. As you will see, several chapters in the book present more multiplex models. Readers can devise their own pathways through the book. Instructors and students might together imagine alternate pathways and what such pathways would represent. Such imaginings can bring forward new ways of grappling with complex questions.

Appreciations

The co-editors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of colleagues Deborah Best (Wake Forest University, USA), Nicola Gavey (University of Auckland, New Zealand), Eva Magnusson (Umeå University, Sweden), Stephanie Shields (Pennsylvania State University, USA), and Ingrid Waldron (University of Pennsylvania, USA), as well as Abby Gross and Courtney McCarroll at Oxford University Press, USA. We are especially grateful to the authors who contributed chapters to the book. Finally, thanks are due for the inspiring efforts of colleagues, friends, students, and courageous activists around the globe.