



Gender Identification Exercise

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Abstract:

Students must guess the gender of several people, basing their judgment purely on information supplied: occupation, relationship status, hobbies, tastes, and interests.

Details:

Resource Types	Class Activity
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Subject Area	Sex and Gender
Class Level	College 300
Class Size	
Language	English

Gender Identification Exercise

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Concept Area

Gender as a social construction,
Presumptions about gender polarized traits and activities.

Type of Exercise

In Class Exercise

Brief Description

Students must guess the gender of several people, basing their judgment purely on information supplied: occupation, relationship status, hobbies, tastes, and interests.

Explanation

One of the most important tasks in a sociology of gender course is dismantling the misconceptions that men and women are polar opposites, with instantly recognizable differences in personality traits, interests, and activities. This exercise asks students to guess the gender of unspecified people, based solely on personal characteristics. Each person has a mix of masculine-coded, feminine-coded, and neutral characteristics, so students must decide which to emphasize and which to ignore.

The assignment works best early in the semester, when students are just getting to know each other. Pass out copies to students in small groups, and give them about ten minutes to discuss the people on the list and make their decisions.

After they have made their decisions, bring the class together again for ten-fifteen minutes of discussion. Determine if there is a class consensus for any of the individuals. Which individual is easiest to identify, and which hardest? Which clues are most salient?

Where there is no consensus, ask which clues could be changed to make the person easier to identify. Would additional clues help?

When I use this exercise, consensus is often reached on #2 and #8, not because of a heterosexist presumption that all gay people are male, but because the activities (working out/hunting) are coded as masculine. Changing “working out” to “aerobics” increases the likelihood of identifying #2 as female.

#3 is usually coded female because of the “elementary school.” Changing it to “high school” increases the likelihood of identifying #3 as male.

#7 and #9 are always identified as female; the “feminine” leisure interests evidently outweigh the “masculine” occupational choices.

#10 is often identified as female because students find it difficult to believe that there are any men who are not sexually active.

The others are less amenable to consensus. #1 is sometimes coded male because of the occupation, and because the students identify UFO interest with masculine-coded science.

Changing just a few words in #4, from “goes to the Caribbean” to “takes a cruise in the Caribbean,” creates a “female” identification.

Most students will not identify #5 as “male” unless the interests in painting and piano are removed; “female” requires the subject to be unmarried, based on the stereotype that female athletes are too “masculine” to acquire heterosexual romantic partners. #6 cannot be identified without “favorite toys.”

At the end of the exercise, inform the students that there is no correct answer; both men and women can and do exhibit these characteristics. There are some percentage differences, but none significant enough to allow a general rule that “men like sports” or “women like gardening,” or anything else. Then move into a presentation on the social construction of gender.

Assigned Readings and Necessary Materials

There are no required readings prior to the exercise. The only necessary material is a printed list of the individuals for each student:

1. Architect, thirty-two years old, married with two children. Likes skiing and skating, spends occasional weekends in Vermont. Reads extensively about UFO abductions and psychic phenomena.
2. College student, a twenty-three year old senior majoring in philosophy and planning to go to law school. Gay, involved in an ongoing relationship. Is on the college debate team, likes dancing and old movies, works out at the gym.
3. Sixty-eight year old elementary school English teacher, retired, married with three children and five grandchildren. Likes gardening, Shakespeare, and Broadway musicals. Favorite musical is *Rent*.
4. Fifty-one year old real estate agent, divorced with one child. Heterosexual, actively dating but no steady relationship. Likes to travel; goes to Mexico or the Caribbean every year. Favorite TV show is *CSI: Miami*.
5. High school basketball coach, age twenty-six. Married, no children. Played basketball in high school and college, majored in physical education. Also likes to play the piano and paint.
6. Eight years old and in the third grade. Wants to be an archaeologist. Takes Spanish lessons on weekends. Favorite TV show is *Fairly Oddparents*.
7. College student, age twenty, majoring in chemistry. Plans to become a doctor. Heterosexual, involved in an ongoing relationship. Favorite movie is *The Wedding Date*.
8. Accountant, age thirty-four. Heterosexual, no steady relationship. Likes hunting, fishing, and rock climbing. Likes science fiction movies.
9. Auto mechanic, age twenty-two. Heterosexual, no steady relationship. Was on the track team in high school. Favorite movie is *Gone with the Wind*.
10. Eighteen year old college student, psychology major, plans to become a psychologist. Gay, not sexually active. Doesn't smoke or drink. Favorite TV show is *The Real World*.

