

Sexuality and Gender



In what ways are gender *differences* related to persistent gender *inequalities*?

A wealth of social research has established that the lives of women and men in all societies are significantly different. Identification as male or female is one pillar of an individual's self-identity. However, the relationship between women and men is not just one of difference, but also one of structured social inequality. This question asks you to consider both of these debates – on gender difference and gender inequality – as part of a single answer. This means you will have to look for the links between them in this chapter.

A good place to begin is with the section 'Gender and biology: natural differences?' on p. 601. This considers the long-running debate about nature and nurture in the development of gendered identities. In everyday life and some branches of psychology, the argument that differences between women and men are attributable to hormones or chromosomes is widely held. Sociologists have concentrated instead on the large amount of evidence suggesting that such differences are the product of social, rather than physiological, factors.

The chapter discusses two contrasting accounts of gender differences which lead to femininities and masculinities. Gender socialization theory (pp. 602-3) accepts that there are biological differences between women and men and that gender differences are learned social roles built upon these biological differences. However, the second account, social constructionism, sees gender as a wholly socially constructed phenomenon (pp. 608-10). You will need to rehearse these arguments, pointing out how they account for gender differences.

In the next part of the essay you need to link gender differences to issues of gender inequality. One way to go about this is to discuss theories which seek to explain gender inequality. Functionalist theories (pp. 614-5) accepted a biological basis to learned gender roles, seeing this as broadly functional for society as a whole. Some feminist approaches focus on social and cultural attitudes but also tend to adopt a gender socialization approach (p. 616), though some radical feminists see women's role in biological reproduction as the basis of all social inequality. The feminist approach that most closely follows a social constructionist approach is that of Walby (pp. 618-9). She theorizes gender inequality as the product of changing social relations in six spheres and you could make much of this thesis in your discussion. The central argument of Walby's thesis is that gender inequalities cannot be explained and accounted for by reference to the essential nature of women and men, as inequalities are inevitably social and their patterns change over time as societies themselves undergo change.

In concluding the essay, you will need to return to the original question and provide a considered answer to it, which is consistent with the argument you have made throughout. As will be clear, there is no agreement amongst the sociologists you have discussed. This leaves you with two main tasks. First, you should briefly summarize the approaches you have considered. Second, you will have to weigh up the evidence you have presented to say which account of the relationship between gender difference and gender inequalities you find most convincing.