Resistance to Conventional Gender Roles

For most people, gender socialization by the family, the school, and the mass media is compelling and it is sustained by daily interactions. A minority of people, however, resists conventional gender roles despite the tremendous pressure placed on all of us to conform to convention.

For example, transgendered people defy society’s gender norms and blur widely accepted gender roles. About 1 in every 5,000 to 10,000 people in North America is transgendered. Some transgendered people are transsexuals. Transsexuals are people who want to alter their gender by changing their appearance or resorting to medical intervention. Transsexuals believe they were born with the “wrong” body. They identify with, and want to live fully as, members of the opposite sex. They often take the lengthy and painful path to a sex change operation. About 1 in every 30,000 people in North America is a transsexual.

Homosexuals are people who prefer sexual partners of the same sex, and bisexuals are people who prefer sexual partners of both sexes. People usually call homosexual men gay and homosexual women lesbians.

We do not yet understand well why some individuals develop homosexual orientations. Some scientists think the reasons are mainly genetic, others think they are chiefly hormonal, while still others point to life experiences during early childhood as the most important factor. We do know that sexual orientation is not a choice. According to the American Psychological Association, it “emerges for most people in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience; [it] is not changeable.”

In any case, sociologists are less interested in the origins of homosexuality than in the way it is socially constructed, that is, in the wide variety of ways it is expressed and repressed. It is important to note in this connection that homosexuality has become less of a stigma over the past century. Two factors are chiefly responsible for this, one scientific, the other political. In the twentieth century, sexologists -- psychologists and physicians who study sexual practices scientifically -- first recognized and stressed the wide diversity of existing sexual practices. Sexologists provided a scientific rationale for belief in the normality of sexual diversity. However, it was sexual minorities themselves who provided the social and political energy needed to legitimize sexual diversity among an increasingly large section of the public. Especially since the middle of the twentieth century, gays and lesbians have built large communities and subcultures, especially in major urban areas like New York, San Francisco, and Toronto. They have gone public with their lifestyles. They have organized demonstrations, parades, and political pressure groups to express their self-confidence and demand equal rights with the heterosexual majority. This has done much to legitimize homosexuality and sexual diversity in general.

Yet opposition to people who don’t conform to conventional gender roles remains strong at all stages of the life cycle. The treatment of intersexed infants – babies born with ambiguous genitals because of a hormone imbalance in the womb or some other cause – illustrates how intolerant most people are of deviations from conventional gender roles. Intersexed infants are born with a penis shorter than 1 inch or a clitoris longer than half an inch. About one in 2,500 children is born with such a condition. Doctors and parents typically rush to assign the sex of intersexed infants by operating and then, at puberty, administering hormones. Most intersexed infants are assigned the female sex. This is done because there is a terrible stigma attached to people with ambiguous genitalia. Most children and adults are raised to think that only two sexes
are “natural” and that anyone who does not conform to this dichotomy should be forced to do so. However, as the anecdote at the beginning of the “Sexuality and Gender” chapter suggests, such operations are sometimes unsuccessful and result in serious psychological problems. If the demand for gender conformity were not so rigid in our society, it would be possible to allow intersexed babies to grow up without reconstructive surgery until they reach puberty. Then, once they understand their own sexual identity and preferences, they could decide their sex for themselves or they could remain as they are. Some intersexed people -- as well as pediatricians, geneticists, and sociologists -- are now recommending precisely this strategy. They urge the changing of social norms rather than the mutilation of infants and forced sexuality. In a like manner, antipathy to homosexuals is so strong among some people that they are prepared to back up their conformist and traditional beliefs about sexuality with brute force.

In sum, most people strongly believe that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation, just as they believe that there are only two “natural” sexes, male and female. And many people feel so strongly about these norms that they are prepared to act violently to back up them up.