Social Construction of Sex

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Sex vs. gender

- Sex: biological maleness or femaleness
- Gender: psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness
- The two sexes are assumed to be
  - Universal (found in all cultures throughout history)
  - Exhaustive (there’s no third sex)
  - Mutually exclusive (a person can’t be both)
- Recently, sociologists have been questioning the taken-for-grantedness of the categories “man” and “woman”
  - Do the two sexes belong to the physical world or the world of meaning?
- Two important pieces of evidence:
  - Cross-cultural variation
  - Existence of intersexuals (and our reaction to them)
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✔ Our belief in two sexes is not universal (pp. 112-114)
✔ A brief history of the sexes in Western culture
  ✔ Pre-18th Century: One sex (females are inferior version)
  ✔ 18th Century: two sexes
  ✔ 1960s: Surgical assigning sex becomes norm (“culture demands it”)
  ✔ 1990s: Hermaphrodite liberation movement (ISNA)
✔ Intersexuality illustrates constructedness of two-sex model
  ✔ Cheryl Case illustrates how sex (not just gender) is a social construct