

Special Section: Sex or Gender?

Technical Commentary

JUST WHAT ARE SEX AND GENDER, ANYWAY? A Call for a New Terminological Standard

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Abstract—*The terms sex and gender have come to be used as synonyms in the social sciences literature. However, nothing has been gained by the use of the term gender except confusion. This article identifies five meanings for which social scientists often use the terms sex or gender and proposes a distinct term for each of those five meanings. The terms proposed are (1) sex: to refer to the biological function; (2) biologically sex-linked: to refer to traits or conditions that are causally biologically related to being male or female; (3) gender-linked: to refer to traits or conditions that are causally linked with maleness or femaleness but are culturally based as opposed to biologically based; (4) sex- and gender-linked: to refer to traits or conditions that are causally related to both a biological component and a cultural component; and (5) sex-correlated: to refer to traits or conditions that are related to being male or female without asserting a causal relation to either biology or culture (because we do not wish to make such an assertion or cannot do so confidently). It is hoped that adopting a terminological standard will reduce the confusion resulting from nonspecific language use.*

As I read the literature, I find that when an author uses either the term *sex* or the term *gender*, I am usually at a loss for its intended meaning. We in the behavioral sciences use the terms *sex* and *gender* in at least five distinct ways. It is unfortunate that it is rarely clear which meaning of the term is intended. The purpose of the present article is twofold. First, I wish to draw attention to the lack of terminological clarity as it currently exists and the difficulties presented by this lack of clarity. Second, I wish to propose a standard vocabulary for each of the meanings to help solve the problem.

Sex, as the word is commonly used in the journals, can mean one of at least five things:

1. Sexual intercourse and related behavior.
2. Traits or conditions that are causally biologically linked with the condition of being male or female and are often carried genetically on sex chromosomes.
3. Traits or conditions that are causally linked with maleness or femaleness but are culturally based rather than biologically based.

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4. Traits or conditions that are causally linked with both a biological component and a cultural component.
5. Traits or conditions that are linked with being male or being female but for which no claim is made for a causal relation with either culture or biology (because the author does not wish to make such an assertion or because no causal relation is known).

The term *gender* is used increasingly to mean each of the latter four meanings above. Thus, the terms are becoming synonymous and losing what unique meaning they originally had (described below). This lack of technical specificity causes confusion, for both authors and readers. For example, if an author is investigating "the relationship between sex and mathematics performance," it is unclear whether the investigation concerns sociocultural issues (such as differential treatment of boys and girls in school), biological issues (such as the heritability of mathematical aptitude), or other issues (such as whether self-reports of the frequency of sex are related to math performance).

This confusion can be remedied in one of two ways. Either authors can explain the theoretical beliefs underlying their use of the words *sex* and *gender* in everything they write, or they can adopt a common vocabulary which will make clear what the authors mean.

The former suggestion has the merit of increasing clarity, but it also increases the wordiness of publications and still leaves each author with his or her own definitions of *sex* and *gender*. Thus, I favor the latter suggestion. I propose that we adopt a vocabulary standard such that when a researcher speaks of a "gender difference," we all understand automatically what the researcher's theoretical position is. There is nothing radical in this suggestion. Professionals in all fields define their vocabularies so that they can speak to other professionals and understand each other. I devote the remainder of this article to exploring the histories of the words *sex* and *gender* (and their derivatives) and then suggesting a distinct technical term for each of the five distinct meanings.

The word *sex* in English can be traced back to at least 1312 meaning "either of the two divisions of organic beings distinguished as male and female respectively; the males or the females (of a species, etc., esp. of the human race) viewed collectively" (*Oxford English Dictionary*,

OED, 1989, Vol. XV, p. 107). This meaning has had the longest history in English. Furthermore, this meaning has had the richest history. The first, second, and third definitions of sex in the *OED* (1989) all have to do with the quality of being biologically male or female. Some examples follow:

1382 Wyclif *Gen.* vi. 19 Of alle thingis hauynge sole of ony flehs, two thou shalt brynge into the ark, that maal sex and femaal lyuen with thee. [Rough translation: Of all things having soul or flesh, two thou shalt bring into the ark, the male sex and the female.] (Vol. XV, p. 107)

1865 Dickens *Mut. Fr.* II. i, It was a school for both sexes. (Vol. XV, p. 107)

The third definition, part b, is sexual intercourse.

The fifth definition concerns the many combination words, a few of which are germane here: sex difference, sex stereotype, sex typed, sex role. Thus, the word sex has long been used referring to the maleness or femaleness of human beings.¹

Gender, in contrast, has only recently come to be used in this manner. The first definition of gender is "kind, sort, class; also, genus as opposed to species" (*OED*, 1989, Vol. VI, p. 427). The second definition refers to gender as a technical linguistic term: "each of the three (or in some languages two) grammatical 'kinds', corresponding more or less to the distinctions of sex (and absence of sex) in the objects denoted . . . discriminated according to the nature of the modification they require. . ." (*OED*, 1989, Vol. VI, p. 427). These uses of gender also trace their history back to the 14th century.

Only within the past 30 years has gender started to become a synonym for sex. "In mod[ern] (esp. feminist) use, [the term gender is] a euphemism for the sex of a human being, often intended to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes" (*OED*, 1989, Vol. VI, p. 428). Examples follow:

1963 A. Comfort *Sex in Society* ii. 42 The gender role learned by the age of two years is for most individuals almost irreversible, even if it runs counter to the physical sex of the subject. (Vol. VI, p. 428)

1972 A. Oakley *Sex, Gender & Society* viii. 189 Sex differences may be 'natural', but gender differences have their source in culture. (Vol. VI, p. 428)

Many professionals seem to have embraced this distinction between sex and gender. Grossly speaking, sex refers to biology and gender refers to environment. This distinction is reasonable. Unfortunately, this distinction was also breaking down as gender entered the vernacular.

1. The definitions I have not provided are not particularly relevant to the discussion here. However, they all are related to issues of division or biology (e.g., definition 4: "used, by confusion, in senses of *sect*"; *OED*, 1989, Vol. XV, p. 108).

Gender has come to be used as a euphemistic synonym for all the meanings of sex except sexual intercourse. As I assess the situation, this usage has come about out of some sense that the word gender is somehow more polite (or more politically correct) than the word sex. Thus, on questionnaires, I frequently see respondents asked to indicate their gender, that is, whether they are biologically male or female. This sloppy usage has become quite prevalent. University presidents have begun using the term this way: "equal rights and protections . . . regardless of race, religion, color, gender, national origin, disability, age, veteran status or sexual orientation" (Hasselmo, 1990, p. 7). Geraldine Ferraro referred to herself as "the first of her gender" to achieve nomination to the vice presidency (cited in Safire, 1984). I personally find this usage of the term to be the most damaging. No distinction between the two words is being made. In these examples, the word gender is used to refer to biological sex—whether people are male or female. I fail to see any reason to change the meaning of a word because it is more "polite." However, personal distaste aside, this usage only further obfuscates the meanings of both sex and gender. In these cases, we do not gain anything through the use of the term gender as opposed to sex. There is no new nuance of meaning nor any recently emerged phenomenon that the word gender now denotes. Under this usage, neither term has any unique meaning. Given that there are at least five distinct meanings of these terms among which we wish to distinguish, we should have five terms that have distinct meanings.

I have argued that the behavioral and social sciences need a new vocabulary standard so that we can better understand one another. I now attempt to propose and justify such a standard.

The first definition of sex I distinguished was the biological function, sexual intercourse and related behavior. I do not know what term other than "sex" could be used for this.

The second definition I distinguished was that of traits biologically linked with being male or female. Examples of such traits are hemophilia and color blindness. For this definition, I propose the term "biologically sex-linked" traits. I admit that this phrase is somewhat cumbersome, but it is unambiguous.

In defense of this term, I note first that the *OED* (1989) defines the term sex-linked primarily as "being or determined by a gene that is carried on a sex chromosome" (Vol. XV, p. 112). Examples of this usage date back to at least 1905.

The major distinction I propose to make between sex and gender is one of biology versus culture. Thus, a person's sex is a matter of biological fact. A person's gender is a matter of cultural relativity. "Biological sex" is therefore redundant to me. However, it appears to be useful to use the modifier biological in order to make the distinction perfectly explicit.

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The third definition I distinguished was that of traits that are linked with being male or female and that have a cultural or societal basis. For example, American men are supposed to be more aggressive than American women, and women are supposed to be more nurturing than men. For this definition, I propose the term "gender-linked" traits.

In defense of this term, as stated earlier, the *OED* does define gender as a modern euphemism emphasizing the social and cultural distinctions between males and females. Furthermore, this usage of gender is already common among many social scientists.²

The fourth definition I distinguished was that of traits that are linked with being male or female and that have both a biological and a societal basis. An example might be that women are typically the primary caregivers for children. For this definition, I propose the term "sex- and gender-linked" traits.

This proposed term is my least favorite, but it has the advantage of being logically consistent with the previous terms. Furthermore, it is explicit that the trait in question is theoretically expected to have both biological and cultural bases.

The fifth definition I distinguished was that of traits correlationally linked with being male or female, but having an unknown basis (or perhaps a basis one is not interested in asserting). An example might be any serendipitously found "sex difference" for which one does not want to claim a theoretical position on biology versus culture. For this definition, I propose the term "sex-correlated" trait.

In defense of this term, I assert that often this is all we know in the behavioral and social sciences. We usually find some difference between the males and females, but do not have enough evidence to "prove" that this difference is due to genes or the environment. When this is the case, all we know is that the difference found is correlated with the biological sex of the subjects.

2. I am, however, tempted to propose facetiously the term "group sex" to refer to socially produced gender roles. Knowing that this would only engender further confusions, I have resisted the inclination.

However, it should be mentioned that researchers often have a theoretical reason for believing that a difference found is biologically based or culturally based. In these cases, the researcher is encouraged to use the terms biologically sex-linked or gender-linked, as described above. In general, the distinction I am proposing is that sex- or gender-linked implies a causal relation, whereas sex-correlated does not.

To summarize, social scientists study and write about sex, biologically sex-linked traits or differences, gender-linked traits or differences, sex- and gender-linked traits or differences, and sex-correlated traits or differences. Unfortunately, however, the vocabulary used by authors has not been standardized. This state of affairs has caused problems of not being able to understand easily whether an author is making a theoretical distinction about the cause of the particular sex-correlated difference found. A vocabulary standard has been proposed. At its core is the distinction between the terms sex and gender. Sex is taken as a biological property (e.g., maleness/femaleness). Gender is taken as a cultural-societal property (e.g., masculinity/femininity). It would be beneficial to the science to adopt the proposed terms or another set of distinct terms and use them consistently.

I have discussed the terminology in relation to traits or differences. However, the proposed terms can easily be modified when writing about other sex-correlated behaviors, attitudes, roles, and norms. I hope that the proposed vocabulary distinctions will be helpful to authors, readers, and the social sciences.

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COMMENTARY: SEX AND GENDER— The Troubled Relationship Between Terms and Concepts

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Gentile (this issue) indicates that there is great confusion among social scientists about the appropriate use of the terms sex and gender and calls for a new terminolog-

ical standard. Researchers who have been conducting studies in this area for many years can easily document examples of such confusion. For example, one of the leading journals concerned with the psychology of women and gender is called *Sex Roles*. And, occasionally, one can find a study in which rats are described as

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