BLIND TO SAMENESS
Sexpectations and the Social Construction of Male and Female Bodies

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The body is what it is perceived to be; it could be otherwise if perception were different.

DAVID ARMSTRONG, “BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE”

Above all the other senses, sight makes us know and brings to light the many differences between things.

ARISTOTLE, METAPHYSICS
Acknowledgments

Although the seeds of my ideas about the social construction of sex were planted long before I met Eviatar Zerubavel, it was only after he introduced me to cognitive sociology that I arrived at the particular angle on the subject I present here. I immediately recognized that the family of concepts he discussed—particularly attention and disattention—provided a powerful way to conceptualize the social construction of sex that had not yet entered the ongoing discussion in either gender studies or the sociology of the body. I therefore owe a huge debt of gratitude to Eviatar, who became my friend and mentor, not only for his inspirational ideas and his detailed, thoughtful feedback but also for his tireless emotional support and enthusiasm for this project. He is a model of intellectual courage and passion. I would also like to acknowledge all those who took the time to read the manuscript while still in its formative stages, particularly Judith Gerson, Arlene Stein, Karen Cerulo, and Lynn Chancer. They each helped me to sharpen and broaden my thinking. In addition, my ideas about filter analysis are strongly influenced by collaborative work in progress with Tom DeGloma and would not have been possible without his insights. Sue Visakovitz provided tons of helpful editorial suggestions, and Jennifer Lawrence generously created some of the key figures. At the University of Chicago Press, Doug Mitchell made my introduction to the world of book publishing a total pleasure. I am thankful to him, Tim McGovern, my two excellent readers, copy editor Kelly Finefrock-Creed, Jeff Waxman, and the rest of the Chicago team for shep-
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In July 1976 the first class of women arrived at West Point for cadet basic training. As with all first-year students, the women were issued uniforms on their first day and required to visit the campus barber if they were not in compliance with “hair regulations.” The rules for female cadets stated that hair had to end above the collar and could not stick out more than an inch and a half from any point. Several months later, in early September, the cadets—now uniformly dressed and coiffed—attended an annual dance called the Plebe Hop. To the academy’s administrators something immediately seemed amiss. With all the major differences in dress and grooming eliminated, the students looked so much the same that the administrators were unable to visually distinguish the males from the females. As one observer described it, the sight of “mirror-image couples dancing in short hair and dress gray trousers” was so unsettling that the officials swiftly changed the rules: if the female students wanted to dance in the future, they would have to wear skirts.1

Suppose we all stopped participating in gendered grooming practices—foregoing gender-specific haircuts, makeup, and clothing, just as a start. Would there still be bodily differences between males and females? The short answer is yes, unquestionably. Some men would still have pronounced hair loss, most men would still have more facial hair, many more women than men would have prominent breasts, and the genitals would of course still exist. Taking the existence of certain biological sex differences as a given, however, there remains another equally

Introduction
important question that is often overlooked in accounts of the social construction of sex: What else exists along with sex differences? For instance, are eyes, ears, noses, arms, legs, hands, and toes “male” and “female”? Further, if a significant proportion of the body is not sex dimorphic, what happens cognitively to ensure that we almost always visually perceive male and female bodies as more different than similar, and even experience this perception as unproblematic and self-evident? Framed in this way, the key question before scholars of the social construction of sex is, not whether sex differences exist, but what else exists amid sex differences, and why do we not focus on those things in equal measure?

Although it has been well established by gender theorists that the creation and display of difference on (and through) the body is an important aspect of the social construction of gender, highlighting the ways that cultural norms shape how we present our physical differences as the objects of perception, the role of the perceiver in sex attribution is much less understood. In light of this, this book explores the question of how—by what kinds of cognitive and sensory processes—perception contributes to the social construction of male and female bodies. That is to say, I highlight the elevation of sex differences not only through gender normative practices of self-presentation and display but through social norms of selective perception. This includes both selective attention to sex differences and selective inattention to sex similarities. Previously discussed almost entirely in the context of display, the amplification of sex differences is a well-known feature of the social construction of gender. The corresponding diminishment of sex similarities, however, has essentially been ignored.

My central argument is that when we see sex, some parts of the body are noticed, and others are ignored. In fact, the proportion that is relevant for sex attribution is probably smaller than the proportion that is disregarded. As I will demonstrate, this is especially evident when we consider that dominant conceptions of sex are based only, or mostly, on visual data and therefore exclude all the information available through the other senses, much of which conveys a great deal of ambiguity. The sexes, in short, are not nearly as physically different as they typically seem, yet we are socialized to be blind to their sameness.

Some gender scholars have claimed there are actually between five and twenty biological sexes, while others have suggested that, in an ideal world, there would be only one gender. My approach is not to argue that there is “really” only one sex but to show that there may be
one sex or there may be twenty, depending on the particular lens one uses to perceive the human body, what details one considers relevant, and why. That said, I cannot deny the number two has unique—and uniquely distorting—cognitive properties. Binaries invite oppositional logic, rigid thinking, and disproportionate attention to differences (and therefore disproportionate inattention to similarities). Any number beyond two, on the other hand, is inherently multidimensional, does not lend itself as easily to bifurcation, and forces us to contend with more ambiguity, making the cognitive and perceptual work of categorization much more apparent. In light of this, I am committed to unsettling the binary opposition between male and female, not to make the point that sex sameness is the more empirically correct view but to promote a more complex, flexible-minded understanding of sex.

For the most part, in this book, I use the term *gender* when referring to normative cultural discourses about maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity, and the term *sex* when discussing bodily differences. Ultimately, however, one of the key implications of my argument is that the sex/gender distinction is a false dichotomy, based on the mistaken idea that what separates sex from gender is that sex is purely biological. Sex is also a sociocultural product. Looked at one way, the sex/gender distinction was meant to capture that fact—to acknowledge the cultural dimension of maleness and femaleness—but because of its conceptual structure, it partitions off a terrain of “sex proper” that is defined as purely biological. Vital to our understanding as they may be, biological contributions to the study of sex are certainly not the entire story.

Further, while sex attribution is my case, I also have a broader agenda, which is to present a general sociological theory of sensory perception. Just as Simone de Beauvoir analyzed gender as a case study in phenomenology, I propose that gender, particularly as it manifests as a cognitive schema for seeing human bodies, is a powerful case study in social perception. The fact that our perceived reality is constructed is pretty well-worn territory. I am much more interested in what I see as the next question, which is to examine the *mechanisms* of social construction. As a result, I mostly restrict my focus to the *how* questions of the social construction of reality. Building on perceptions of sex, I argue that the social construction of visual perception is a key mechanism of the social construction of reality in general, and that attention and disattention are among the primary sociocognitive processes involved. I make this argument in part by showing that some notion of selective sensory attention underlies five of the major concepts scholars
have previously developed to describe the social construction of reality (frame, schema, habitus, perspective, and thought style).

Distilled to a generic sociological principle, the point is that we always see things through one or more lenses, or filters, that shape and package the world around us. More specifically, there is always “excess” visual information that, while equally real and technically perceptible, remains unnoticed because we are primed—whether by language, social expectations, prior experience, or social norms—to focus on other details. In short, we visually attend to what we have learned is salient, sometimes even to the point that social forms of salience totally obscure the logic of the biological information.

Consider the familiar concept of the “opposite” sex, which implies the sexes are not just different but different to the greatest degree possible. While some amount of biological difference—which we might think of as complementarity—is required for sexual reproduction, Raymond Birdwhistell’s research analyzing sex differences in nonverbal communication proposes that humans are actually one of a number of “weakly dimorphic” species. Genetically speaking, males and females are in fact 98 percent identical. Yet the cultural notion of “opposite” sexes expands that 2 percent difference to 100 percent. Indeed, when we pointedly attend to the specificity and complexity of human bodies, it becomes immediately evident that it is social, not biological, logic that leads us to see male and female bodies as “opposites.” Only by social measures are we more different than similar.

Following Erving Goffman, I conceptualize perception as an active social process. However passive the role of the audience may seem, the perceiver constantly makes “inferences” and interprets the information provided by the performer, since these signs are never sufficient in and of themselves to define the situation. As human beings, in Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk’s words, we simultaneously sense and make sense of what we perceive. “To see, for example, entails more than opening our eyes to allow light passively to bounce off our retinas. We must actively perceive that which is seen and thus make sense of somatic experiences. . . . In this way, sensing and sense-making are necessarily conjoined, codetermined, and mutually emergent in active and reflexive practices in which we are both the subject and object of the sensations we perceive or, for that matter, fail to recognize.” The concept of perceptual work both foregrounds those aspects of sensory perception that make it an active cultural pro-
cess and connects the sociology of perception to conceptual models in other sociological subfields that highlight the interplay of cultural constraint and agency in seemingly personal processes, as exemplified by the concepts of identity work, body work, memory work, autobiographical work, and emotional labor. More broadly, what underlies the concept of perceptual work is the idea that sensory “objects” are never self-evident and require interpretation and meaning construction by the perceiver. This insight has a long history in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, perhaps most famously illustrated in Howard Becker’s study on marijuana use, in which he argues that perceiving and interpreting the effects of marijuana are far from purely physiological, since socially learned reflexive work is required to understand how the otherwise “vague impulses and desires” should be experienced and interpreted.

Indeed, a key theme of the epistemology of the past few decades has been the discrediting of the idea of a raw perceptual “given,” completely unmediated by concepts. This growing agreement that perceptions are always at some level conceptions is also becoming visible within cognitive science; for instance, the new field of social cognitive neuroscience aims to relate brain mechanisms to the typical concerns of social psychologists, challenging the presumption that scientists are not interested in culture or the social world. One common critique of brain mapping is that it is reductionist, looking only at brain matter and wiring. Yet at the same time, the field is becoming quite inclusive of things like culture and nurture—particularly when they show up as visible differences in the brain. However, recent social scientific research on imaging technologies (which is how neuroscientists typically study perception) shows that brain scientists are often not very self-reflexive about the interpretive work involved in visual perception—the complexities of “seeing” and “not seeing” when reading brain images, as well as how the cultural contexts of visuality and disciplinary boundaries influence how interpretations circulate and are received. This research points out that a comprehensive understanding of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and positron emission tomography (PET) images requires an account of the environment of production and reception of such images, and more generally that social scientists offer a sophisticated understanding of the norms, patterns, and conventions involved in perception—what Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk refer to as the “sensory or somatic order.”

For example, there is an emerging collection of research beginning
to coalesce around a sociology of the invisible. This includes work on social norms and patterns of ignorance, denial, erasure, and disattention. When analyzing visual perception, it is essential to study what goes unseen, not because of particular properties of the stimulus itself, which brain scientists do explore, but because it is “irrelevant” to the perceiver. These spaces of invisibility have their own patterns and shapes, and complement what is seen to create social order as we know it. More broadly, cultural sociologists and cognitive sociologists are interested in the ways that norms of attention and relevance, as well as norms of inattention and irrelevance, cause us to see and not see certain social realities. A sociology of the senses therefore offers an understanding of perception that is important and distinct from traditions of research on perception in other disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience; yet there is currently no coherent, codified subfield of sociology devoted to perception.

While cognitive and cultural sociology can provide a rich conceptual vocabulary to address perceptual norms, perceptual patterns, and processes of perceptual enculturation, sociologists are traditionally less sure-footed when it comes to accounting for the role of materiality in social processes, though this has changed significantly in the last several decades with the rapid growth of the sociology of the body and embodiment. Although I do not focus on the neuronal aspects of visual processing, a key thread of my argument in chapter 2 and throughout the book is that social scientists need to develop better metaphors and conceptual systems to capture the interaction of biology and culture, and I propose filter analysis as one promising possibility.

When using the term filter I specifically have in mind a mental “strainer,” or “sieve,” through which visual stimuli pass before they are consciously perceived, letting in culturally approved details while sifting out the culturally irrelevant. This approach, which directly engages with the body’s fleshy materiality by seeking out this “perceptual residue” or “bodily excess,” avoids lapsing into overly textual and disembodied accounts of the social construction of the body. This has been correctly identified as a limitation of many theories of the social construction of the body (and sex in particular), especially those rooted in queer theory and poststructuralist philosophy—for instance, Judith Butler’s argument that sex is always already gender. The filter metaphor provides a more grounded approach to analyzing the social construction of the body by highlighting those features of the materiality of bodies that are normatively disattended.
In trying to capture the process of sex attribution, I faced a methodological challenge shared by anyone who studies these taken-for-granted processes informing social life: How to examine a perceptual process that is largely automatic and subconscious, and that most people believe is self-evident? My solution to this problem was to bring together two groups who represent extreme cases in relation to the visual perception of male and female bodies. I adopt the perspective of “outsiders,” people who either do not participate in visual sex attribution or do it very differently, and “experts,” people who are unusually self-conscious and deliberate about sex attribution.

I chose to interview blind people because, given the centrality of visual information to sex attribution among the sighted, their narratives provide access to a perceptual experience of sexed bodies that is totally different in sensory content from the typical sighted experience. Drawing on twenty-seven in-depth interviews, I highlight the primary cues blind people use to attribute sex, as well as several distinctive features of the nonvisual process of sex attribution (including salience, speed, and diachronicity). What I found, in brief, is that while blind people are unable to perceive certain sex differences that seem visually obvious, the sighted are equally unaware of many sensory aspects of sex that are obvious to blind people. Their rarely foregrounded nonvisual modes of perceiving bodies thus bring to light aspects of the process of visual sex attribution that we may otherwise take for granted as sighted people, and clarify the extent to which our dominant understanding of sex is specifically “sex seen,” as opposed to “sex sensed” more broadly.

In a way, then, I studied blind people to show that the sighted are actually “blind” too. More generally, in light of the exceptional social prominence of visual perception, sociologists can gain great insight into the social construction of reality by bracketing the visual and exploring other modes of sensory perception.

I describe these respondents as blind rather than using other terms such as visually impaired, because almost without exception, this is the word they use and prefer. As with any term, however, there are complexities obscured by the category blind. Some of the respondents never had any visual perception, while others were born with varying degrees of sight that later disappeared or significantly worsened: just over half the participants were born blind or lost their vision in the first year of life; three participants became blind between ages 1 and 10; the
remaining ten became blind at age 11 or older. Further, even within each of those groups, blindness manifests in different ways. Some respondents see absolutely nothing—one person described this as trying to see through your elbow. At the other end of the spectrum are those respondents who have a very limited amount of useable visual perception (only in one area of their field of vision, for example, or only when holding something very close to their eyes). I did not predefine who would qualify as blind for the purposes of this study, allowing anyone to participate if they understood themselves as blind. I initially thought there might be interesting differences between those respondents who never had vision or lost their vision at a very early age (and thus were never exposed to visual sex differences) and those who were sighted into late childhood or adulthood. Despite looking across these groups for patterns of variation, I did not observe significant systematic differences in their descriptions of how they currently attribute sex. None of the respondents currently had enough visual acuity to use visual information to assign people as “male” or “female” in everyday interactions.

While blind people made interesting informants primarily because they do not participate in visual sex attribution, transgender people possess varying degrees of “expert knowledge” about seeing sex. Many transgender people actively and consciously present themselves as female (if they were assigned “male” at birth) or male (if originally assigned a “female” sex). As a result, they are deeply aware of the differences between male and female bodies—as well as their underlying similarities. This is not to say that transpeople are more deliberately “doing gender” than the rest of us (with the attendant implication of falsehood or fabrication). At least in part, their elevated awareness arises because non-transgender (cisgender) people look so hard at them, and then in turn they look hard at themselves as they try to avoid drawing the focus of that disciplining gaze. This perspective gives them different sensitivities to how they attribute bodies as male or female, as well as to how, when, and why they are—or are not—“read” as male and female by others.

I use transgender as an umbrella term to capture a continuum of “differently” sexed and gendered identities that encompasses transsexuals, cross-dressers, and anyone else who self-identifies as transgender or whose gender identity does not correspond normatively with his or her birth sex. When referring to specific respondents, I use whatever terminology they used to describe themselves to me. These terms included
transsexual (twenty-seven respondents), transgender/transgenderist (seven respondents), cross-dresser (four respondents), and intersexual (four respondents). I offer the following definitions with the understanding that these are rapidly changing identity terms and always contested: Cross-dressers present as their gender “opposite,” although they usually do not do so full-time, and for the most part they rely on clothing, wigs, and cosmetics, and do not wish to physically alter their bodies (although there is variation on this point, as many male-to-female cross-dressers, for instance, do have electrolysis to remove their facial hair, and some take hormones). Transsexuals generally have an overwhelming desire to surgically alter their sex, but the degree to which they have or will act on this desire can vary. While some have already had sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), many are preoperative, meaning they plan to have chest reconstruction and/or SRS in the future. In other cases, transsexuals have no plans for surgery and intend to remain nonoperative. When people refer to themselves as transgender, either this can be intended to invoke the whole spectrum of categories I am describing, or it can mean that they wish to present as androgynous or divide their time living in two different gender roles (another more recent term for this is genderqueer, although none of my respondents referred to themselves this way). Many transgenderists take hormones and undergo electrolysis, and some plan to have, or have had, facial or chest surgery. For the most part, they do not wish to have SRS. Intersexuals are people born with both male and female sexual characteristics (genitals or gonads). Cross-dressers, transsexuals, and transgenderists can each be either male-to-female (MTF, or transwomen) or female-to-male (FTM, or transmen), which refers to the direction of their transition—from their sex assignment at birth to the sex or gender with which they currently identify. My sample includes thirty-six transwomen and five transmen. It is unclear why more transwomen than transmen responded to my study announcement. When I asked my respondents about this, several suggested that with the use of testosterone transmen can often develop an appearance indistinguishable from non-transgender men, allowing them significant leeway in making decisions about whether to publicly identify as transsexual. As a result they are more likely to “go stealth” or “woodwork” and thus would no longer be “out” as transpeople, an option not as many transwomen have.22

There is clearly much variability within the umbrella category transgender. While not perfectly distributed, my sample includes a fairly broad representation of that spectrum of lived experience. Despite this