

## **The Five Sexes and the Five Sexes Revisited. SO108**

In the articles *The Five Sexes* and *The Five Sexes Revisited*, Anne Fausto-Sterling is challenging the long held idea of the two-sex system and the heteronormativity of that construct. She says, “it should be noted that success in gender assignment surgery has traditionally been defined as living in that gender as heterosexual” (Fausto-Sterling 22). The author proposes the five-sex system where sex is viewed as a continuum as opposed to a rigid two-sex system (Fausto-Sterling 21). She does this by showing that the arguments and assumptions made by the medical community and other members of society are faulty.

In an effort to emphasize her disagreement with the established sex discourse, she confronts the legal and state reinforcement of the parallels of man and woman because it serves their interests. The legality of the two sex system is important because it serves to inform things like draft registration and marriage decrees (Fausto-Sterling 20-21). She disagrees with their essentialist argument that the two sexes are the only ones considered natural (Fausto-Sterling 21). Sterling uses the constructs of true hermaphrodites, male pseudohermaphrodites, and female pseudohermaphrodites to expand the discussion of sex categories and their natural progression (21). According to Sterling, “a person’s wish to conceal his or her original sex cannot outweigh the public interest in protection against fraud” (23). This evidence illustrates the point that the medical community’s distinction that intersexuals are not natural is not based on scientific principles but more on the desire to meet societal expectations.

Sterling also uses her disagreement with the proposal that intersex children and those with some gender ambiguity are not normal to build her argument against the two-sex system. She takes support for her distinction that gender ambiguity is normal from the study by John Money that stated, “intersexuals may constitute as many as 4 percent of births” (Fausto-Sterling 21). Although this evidence was somewhat disputed as being too widespread a number, she answers her critics and strengthens her argument by conducting research that yielded the result “for every 1000 children born, seventeen are intersexual in some form” (Fausto-Sterling 20). Anne Fausto-Sterling also cites Plato’s discussion of the three sexes to question the medical community’s proposal of two sexes (23). Plato’s assertion is important because it gives a historical timeline that illustrates disagreement with the rigidity of the man/woman construct by one of the world’s first intellectuals (Fausto-Sterling 23).

Doctors and other scientists have determined that gender ambiguity is not normal by saying that they fall somewhere between the chromosomal determination of male as being XY and a woman as being XX (Fausto-Sterling 19-20). Fausto-Sterling turns that argument on its head saying, “chromosomes, hormones, the internal sex structures, the gonads and the external genitalia all vary more than people realize” (20). This information is quite convincing because it shows that even people considered normal chromosomally, have some variation in their makeup that lends itself to some women having facial hair or deep voices (Fausto-Sterling 20).

In addition, the author confronts the reasoning of the medical community for gender assignment surgery. They have long asserted a correlation between being not having assignment surgery and emotional distress (Fausto-Sterling 23). Physicians Dewhurst and Gordon say, “it is a tragic event which immediately conjures up visions of a hopeless psychological misfit doomed to live

always as a sexual freak in loneliness and frustration” (Fausto-Sterling 23). Sterling identifies the cases from the years 1930 to 1960 of intersex children who did not suffer emotional distress because of lack of surgery (Fausto-Sterling 24). She says, “there is not a psychotic or a suicide in the lot” (Fausto-Sterling 24). Sterling further argues that the gender assignment surgery rather than not correcting ambiguous genitals is what causes the psychological problems that the doctors described (23). As a convincing piece of evidence, she looks to the first hand experience of Cheryl Chase to describe the emotional perils of having the surgery. Chase states that “many “graduates” of medical intersex corrective programs are chronically depressed” (The Sciences 3). This is in direct contention with reasoning of the medical community. Fausto-Sterling further cements her argument against criticisms by John Money by proving that a patient, John Colopiano, who Money cited as being a surgery success, had actually rejected the sex to which he was assigned (20-21).

The author also argues that a two-sex system serves to enforce a structure of power and differential treatment based on sex. As a result, intersex children or those with ambiguous genitals disrupt the tradition of raising children as male or female (Fausto-Sterling 24). Suzanne J. Kessler states, “in the everyday world, gender attributions are made without access to genital inspection... what has primacy in everyday life is the gender that is performed, regardless of the flesh’s configuration under the clothes” (Fausto-Sterling 22). In a society where there is power system that ranks males over females, true hermaphrodites would make it difficult to assign that power (Fausto-Sterling 22).

Both of the articles were very well written and very important to the discussion of intersexuals and gender reassignment surgery. If I had written these articles, I would have attempted to include more first hand experiences from people of the intersex community. Their personal testimony would help to bring the issue from a medical perspective to a human level. I would have also included more empirical evidence from scientific studies that support my arguments. Having said that, the time in which these article were written must be taken into consideration. At that time, many people of the intersex community were afraid to question or step forward and tell their stories. This would have made access to first hand information on their lives very difficult to acquire. Overall, Anne Fausto-Sterling sought to challenge the reigning two-sex system as the standard of normal and also proposed the five sexes as being on a continuum.

#### *Cited Sources*

- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. "The Five Sexes." Alpert Medical School. 1993. 01 Mar. 2009 HTTP:.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. "The Five Sexes Revisited." Alpert Medical School. 2000. 01 Mar. 2009 HTTP:.