Summary and Keywords

Within the field of communication studies, critical cultural scholarship examines the interarticulation of power and culture. Drawing from critical theory and cultural studies, this research offers analysis of texts, artifacts, practices, and institutions in order to understand their potential to promote or preempt equality and social justice. Critical theory, which has Marxist origins, uses theory as a basis for critiquing and challenging systems of domination or oppression. The field of cultural studies focuses on social formations with a particular emphasis on media texts and the reception practices of audiences. Both critical theory and cultural studies emphasize the important interrelationship between ideology, or structures of belief, and the material conditions in which people live. Critical cultural research examines discourse and representation, including language and visual culture, as well as social relations, institutional structures, material practices, economic forces, and various forms of embodiment.

Central to critical cultural scholarship is attention to the construction, regulation, and contestation of categories of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and class. A significant branch of critical cultural studies examines how ideas about gender and sex develop and circulate, asking how and why some constructions of gender and sex become normative and gain hegemony—or, cultural privilege—in a particular context. For example, such scholarship might critique the idealization of certain performances of masculinity and the attendant devaluation of femininity or other subordinated masculinities; or, this research might consider how particular iterations of masculinity or femininity may be counter-hegemonic, operating in opposition to prevailing ideologies of gender and sex. Critical cultural approaches also emphasize the intersectionality of gender and sex with other categories of identity. For instance, ideas about masculinity or femininity can rarely be separated from assumptions about race and/or sexuality; as such, prevailing ideologies of gender and sex often reflect the presumed normativity of whiteness and heterosexuality.

Keywords: gender, sex, culture, power, subjectivity, hegemony, ideology, intersectionality, heteronormativity, feminism, feminist, critical theory, communication and critical studies
Introduction

The study of gender and sex factors centrally in a number of subfields within the discipline of communication studies, including interpersonal communication, organizational communication, intercultural communication, rhetorical studies, and media studies. Traversing both social scientific and humanistic perspectives, these subfields use a variety of methods for studying gender and sex. Within humanistic traditions of communication studies, a number of scholars deploy critical cultural approaches for analyzing gender and sex. While critical cultural scholarship illustrates an approach deployed by many scholars of communication, this approach is neither exclusive to nor exhaustively representative of communication studies as a field.

In the field of communication, scholars of critical cultural studies offer analyses of texts, artifacts, and practices in order to understand how they shape and are shaped by the cultural contexts and social formations from which they emerge. Beyond simply studying culture, critical cultural studies aims to intervene against social and political forces that promote injustice or inequality. The phrase critical cultural studies reflects the complex interrelationship between the broad and interdisciplinary fields of critical theory and cultural studies. The complexity of this relationship can be seen, for example, in the various ways with which scholars annotate the phrase critical cultural studies, sometimes deploying punctuation marks, such as a hyphen (critical-cultural studies) or slash (critical/cultural studies), or using a conjunction (critical and cultural studies) to call attention to the productive tensions between these fields of study. Critical cultural approaches to the study of gender and sex have remained diverse in their particular methods of analysis and objects of study. What unites this body of scholarship, both within the field of communication studies and beyond it, is an interest in examining the cultural construction of differences and intervening against the creation of social inequalities.

The Foundations of Critical Theory

The term critical theory broadly describes an interdisciplinary range of theories aimed at sociocultural critique. Such theories challenge the notion of objective knowledge by arguing that historical contexts and social processes always shape understanding. Scholars typically link the first use of the phrase critical theory to the Frankfurt School, a group of intellectuals whose work derived from Marxist thought and also illustrated the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis. These scholars, including Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, and Hebert Marcuse, were associated with the Institute for Social Research, which was founded in Germany in 1923. They argued for the capacity of theory to reveal and intervene against structures of domination. Horkheimer defined critical theory in contrast to traditional, empirical forms of theory, which endeavored to explain or understand phenomena without offering critique of them (Horkheimer, 2002). More than aiming to generate new knowledge, critical theory strives to produce theoretical frameworks that may allow for the emancipation of humanity from various
forms of oppression. In particular, the Frankfurt School focused on class-based forms of domination in capitalist societies.

The members of the Frankfurt School were particularly interested in how media and mass culture give rise to knowledge and belief. Adorno and Horkheimer introduced the concept of the culture industry to explain the efforts of commercial media to shape the consciousness of their audiences in ways that accord with dominant ideologies, or systems of belief (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1997). This critical perspective assumes a hierarchical, top-down control of media and, consequently, of culture, which is understood as both commodified and ideologically significant. Members of the Frankfurt School thus developed a rather pessimistic, or at least ambivalent, attitude toward mass culture, which they conceived as aiming to manipulate largely passive audience members. In fact, the Frankfurt School understood commercial media as not merely affecting its audience members but as composing, or constituting, them in line with dominant belief structures.

This perspective resembles arguments made by a theorist not directly associated with the Frankfurt School, Louis Althusser, whose work has affected both critical theory and cultural studies. Also influenced by Marx, Althusser considered the relationship between ideology and human subjectivity, arguing that ideology functions primarily to constitute individual people as subjects with both conscious and unconscious understandings of their position in the world. While Marx emphasized the determining role of economic forces, Althusser argued that individuals and society were affected by a combination of determining but relatively autonomous forces, including economic, political, and cultural ones. Such overdetermination operates primarily through ideology, which Althusser understood as constituting all social realities (Althusser, 2001).

Althusser used the term interpellation to refer to the process through which social forces produce a person’s subjectivity; as if responding to or answering a “hail,” individuals unconsciously accept identities that preexist them and thus become interpellated into various identity formations. Althusser also posited the existence of repressive state apparatuses (RSAs), which include government, law enforcement agencies, and the military; and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which include educational systems, religious institutions, families, and mass media, as integral to the construction and regulation of social formations. While RSAs overtly use state power to maintain the dominance of the elite over working-class people, Althusser understood ISAs, not unlike Adorno and Horkheimer’s construction of the culture industry, as playing an active but often unnoticed role in reinforcing dominant ideologies.

Although it originated with Horkheimer, the phrase critical theory now operates primarily as an umbrella term to describe a range of theoretical and critical perspectives—some of which have little or no direct relationship to the Frankfurt School. These theoretical frameworks include semiotics, postmodernism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism, transnationalism, race/ethnic studies, and queer studies. Within communication studies, this diverse array of theories shares a common interest in analyz-
ing the relationship between communication, culture, and consciousness based on an understanding of social realities as constructed by symbolic systems and practices.

The Foundations of Cultural Studies

Critical theory, with its origins in Marxist theories of culture, was crucial to the development of cultural studies, a field most often understood as originating in England at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), with such scholars as Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams (Agger, 2014). Similar to the phrase critical theory, the term cultural studies has taken on a variety of meanings and uses that extend well beyond its origins in the CCCS. Although scholars often use the phrase British cultural studies to describe the origin of this field of inquiry, it should be noted that the members of the CCCS were influenced by a wide and international range of sources, including but not limited to the Frankfurt School and other Continental philosophies, and that the traditions of cultural studies have continued to developed internationally. As such, cultural studies—like critical theory—has overlapped and intersected with a number of other fields, including semiotics, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, critical race studies, and queer studies.

Lawrence Grossberg and James Carey have played essential roles in bringing cultural studies to the United States, contributing to but also challenging some of the foundational concepts of the Birmingham School and playing an especially important role in the development of critical/cultural approaches within the field of communication studies. Once a student at the CCCS, Grossberg steered the importation of cultural studies to the United States, focusing his early work on popular music and various forms of youth culture (Grossberg, 1986). Carey foregrounded the importance of communication in the study of culture, arguing that communication itself is culture. Highlighting the need to study not only the content of messages but also their form, Carey articulated a ritual view of communication as a process through which culture is given shape (Carey, 1992).

The Birmingham School of cultural studies has drawn on, contributed to, and diverged from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in a number of ways. Both schools of thought have generated critical analyses of asymmetrical power relations and examinations of the relationship between what people believe and the material conditions in which they live. Further, both critical theory and British cultural studies have insisted on interdisciplinary analyses of culture and society that aim for not only studying these phenomena but also intervening against perceived injustices and systems of domination. Akin to Horkeimer’s description of critical theory as having emancipatory aims, the Birmingham School differentiated itself from other forms of cultural studies that deployed empiricist or positivist approaches to understanding cultural practices without judging or critiquing them.
While the work of the Frankfurt School often focused on the efforts of elite groups and institutions to maintain power over others, the field of cultural studies has frequently placed emphasis on the agency and activities of audience members, including those outside of dominant social groups. Rather than understanding the culture industry as representing only the collaborative efforts of governmental and business forces to reproduce prevailing belief structures, cultural studies has examined how power shapes and is shaped by the complex interactions between the production and reception of media texts and cultural artifacts. The emphasis on reception poses particular challenges to the Frankfurt School’s tendency to characterize audience members as passive, framing reception itself as a form of production in which audiences give meanings to the texts they encounter.

For example, Hall referred to the fields of structural linguistics and semiotics—which, respectively study language and other kinds of signs—to call attention to the distinction between the ways that texts are encoded with meaning by those who produce them and decoded by those who receive them; such interpretive distinctions owe to factors including the subject position and agency of the receiver, as well as the context of reception (Hall, 1980). Hall’s argument derived from the claim that the relationship between ideas (signifieds) and the symbols with which they are represented (signifiers) is always arbitrary and constructed; Hall used this insight to contend that texts may be polysemic, which is to say that they may have different meanings for different audiences and in different contexts. Hall also highlighted the capacity of audiences to offer oppositional or negotiated readings of texts, engaging in reception practices that challenge preferred readings and the dominant ideologies they support.

Cultural studies scholarship has also made use of the work of Althusser, as well as borrowing from the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan. Althusser’s theories about ideology and interpellation characterize human subjectivity as resulting from social and cultural processes. For Althusser, no essential self exists outside of ideology and culture because it is ideology that produces the subject. Lacan, who also deployed theories of structural linguistics and semiotics, further critiqued essentialist understandings of the self, arguing that an individual’s unconscious is a product of cultural forces and symbolic practices (Lacan, 1977). Both Althusser and Lacan have afforded cultural studies scholars a vocabulary for thinking about the ways that humans unconsciously internalize aspects of their culture and develop ideas about their subjectivities that are not completely their own.

Some cultural studies scholars, however, have critiqued Althusserian and Lacanian models of subjectivity for a lack of engagement with the idea of agency. Many such critics have turned to the theoretical work of Antonio Gramsci to counterbalance the Marxist underpinnings of both the Frankfurt School and Althusser. Gramsci used the term hegemony to define power in contradistinction from the Marxist emphasis on domination (Gramsci, 1999). Central to Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony was his argument that social groups do not win hegemony over others through coercion or force but through negotiations and articulations aimed at gaining consent. As such, Gramsci’s theories recall
Althusser’s emphasis on the role that ISAs play in shaping both individual and public consciousness, rather than focusing on the repressive or coercive actions of the state. For Gramsci, mass media enable the reproduction of dominant ideologies by suggesting that such beliefs are commonsensical or natural. As such, certain beliefs, norms, and values—typically those associated with the ruling class—become idealized and gain cultural privilege, often winning the acceptance of even those who may be injured or oppressed by them.

This theory attenuates Marxist theories of domination because it conceives of hegemony as never monolithic or static but as constantly requiring adaptation and renewal. Gramscian theory claims that hegemonic structures often maintain their position of privilege by coopting or absorbing that which may appear counter to them. At the same time, however, this theory of hegemony makes room for the possibility of resistance and social transformation, and many British cultural studies scholars have taken particular interest in studying subcultures and the oppositional reception practices of those who have been subordinated and marginalized.

Its Gramscian leanings further meant that the Birmingham School of cultural studies did not share the distrust toward mass culture that often characterized the work of the Frankfurt School; instead, British cultural studies has insisted on blurring the imagined and often arbitrary lines between “high” and “low” culture, offering a broad understanding of culture. The Birmingham School also took seriously all forms of cultural engagement, including the practices of various subcultures or marginalized groups, arguing that artifacts of popular culture play a significant role in shaping the worldviews and identities of those who use them and can be deployed as oppositional or counterhegemonic resources.

The influence of semiotics enabled the Birmingham School to develop a complex understanding of texts and textuality, contending that various kinds of cultural products, practices, and institutions can be “read” as texts and insisting on the interrelationship between symbolic and material registers of experience. Mass media have occupied a particularly central place in such textual analyses, which typically involve close readings of individual texts, as well as intertextual readings that identify relationships between seemingly discrete texts.

Also central to the vocabulary of cultural studies is the term discourse, which may be described as a collection of ideas or statements that can be traced through various texts but cannot be attributed to a single author or speaker. Although discourse itself cannot be tracked back to a singular source, the study of discourse, or discursive formations, is most often understood to originate with Michel Foucault. For Foucault, discourse represents a distributed form of power that helps to constitute not only knowledge but also subjects and their social worlds. Referencing a range of cultural phenomena including cultures of discipline and surveillance, as embodied by institutions such as prisons and practices such as confessinals, Foucault (1977) figured power as circulating through everyday structures of regulation and relation. Foucault conceived of power as not only
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repressive but also productive and as central to the construction, or fashioning, of subjectivity. The study of discourses has typically involved a decentered and intertextual analysis of a variety of symbolic artifacts and practices.

The emphasis on texts and textuality has generated a great deal of critique within the ongoing field of cultural studies, with many scholars arguing that cultural criticism should attend not just to texts themselves but also to their production within a particular political economy and their reception by audiences. The former may involve attention to the institutional, industrial, and economic contexts in which texts are produced, while the latter may involve ethnographic methods, or participant observations of audience members engaged in reception practices. As such, cultural studies scholarship has addressed these three distinct but interrelated areas of analysis—texts, political economy, and audiences—in order to understand the complex process through which cultural artifacts are produced, disseminated, and consumed. At the same time, however, scholars, such as Grossberg, have maintained that the field of cultural studies should be not simply interdisciplinary but antidisciplinary, remaining open toward all methodological approaches to studying culture—including textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, ethnography, and more—and committed to the possibility of multimethod approaches, however challenging they may be (Grossberg, 2010).

Although the historical development of British cultural studies cannot be separated from the field(s) of critical theory, not all uses of the phrase cultural studies refer to critical scholarly practices. Some traditions of cultural studies, including ones that preceded and have followed the Birmingham School, study cultural practices and contexts without offering critique of them. As such, the use of the phrase “critical cultural studies” foregrounds that fact that such criticism derives from theories of power and offers judgments about its objects of study—at the same time that this criticism relies on the theoretical understanding of all reality, including that of the critic, as socially, culturally, and historically constructed and contingent. Some scholars have suggested that the use of the term critical in conjunction with the phrase cultural studies is unnecessary given the critical aims of cultural studies in its inception with the Birmingham School (Striphas, 2013).

Both critical theory and cultural studies attend to the important role that mass culture and media play in shaping the beliefs and identities of their audiences. While critical theory’s Marxist underpinnings led this field of inquiry to emphasize the relationship between ideology, power, and class, the Birmingham School marked a cultural turn, moving toward the study of symbols and meaning-making practices. While class-based domination was an initial focus of both the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools, critical cultural studies has expanded to consider multiple aspects of identity including gender and sex, race, sexuality, colonialism, age, and ability. The theoretical dimensions of critical cultural approaches should be understood as part of a political project to counter oppression.
Feminist Cultural Studies

Most early British cultural studies did not foreground gender as a mode or object of analysis and did not directly address the gendered dimensions of power. In response, a number of feminist scholars associated with the CCCS, including Dorothy Hobson, Angela McRobbie, and Janice Winship, called attention to the ways that the Birmingham School marginalized femininity in its inaugural studies of culture, expanding cultural studies beyond its focus on class to include analysis of texts and reception practices directly tied to such issues as identity, the body, and sexuality (University of Birmingham, 1978). As such, the emergence of feminist cultural studies began as both an extension and critique of British cultural studies. For example, McRobbie’s ethnographic analysis of working-class girls and their engagement with conventional norms of femininity argued that these girls faced multiple forms of oppression related to both class and gender inequality, and McRobbie’s work analyzed the various strategies through which these girls enacted subtle forms of resistance. Likewise, Winship examined the ideological significance of photographs of women in a popular British magazine, encouraging resistant readings of these images that could challenge the subordination of women. This feminist intervention into the early work of the CCCS paralleled critiques made by such scholars as Paul Gilroy and Hazel V. Carby, which argued that British cultural studies did not sufficiently account for race (Taylor & Francis & University of Birmingham, 1982).

Critical cultural approaches to the study of gender and sex, which have developed from early examples of feminist cultural criticism, have a political charge to them, aiming not only to understand the categories of gender and sex but also to counter inequalities that structure them. Although scholars like Hall and Grossberg have argued that attention to textuality alone is never sufficient, the analysis of representations of gender has maintained a privileged position within much critical cultural scholarship based on the understanding that symbolic practices impact, and are impacted by, the material dimensions of existence. For example, feminist cultural criticism has examined textual representations by women, textual representations of women, textual representations (presumably) for women, and the reception practices of women.

Attention to texts produced by women has aimed to redress the absence of women’s voices from various canons, including literature, film, music, art, and so on. Such work not only functioned to recover works that have been neglected but also to identify tactics and practices that might be identified with or connected to women’s subjectivities and experiences. For example, certain threads of this scholarship have drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis and its feminist appropriation by such figures as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous to argue for the importance of women’s writing and speech for creating conditions of possibility and engendering social change (Biesecker, 1992).

Feminist criticism of representations of women has typically addressed the prevalence of sexism and the domination of women in patriarchal, or male-dominated, society. This critical work has identified a number of salient themes within mediated representations of and public discourse about women, including the objectification of female bodies, the si-
lencing of female voices, the association of women with the private sphere, the subordina-
tion of female bodies and subjectivities to male ones, and the devaluation of the category
of femininity itself. The critical emphasis on the objectification and concomitant sexualiza-
tion of female bodies owes a great deal to a form of critical theory that developed along-
side the work of the CCCS. The “Screen” tradition, which was associated with a British
scholarly journal of the same name, developed as a theoretical framework for studying
the cinema. Influenced by Althusser and Lacan, screen theorists framed the cinema as an
apparatus akin to Althusser’s ISAs, which functions to construct subjects—or, subject po-
sitions—through its mechanical and formal properties.

Although screen theory and the work of British cultural studies often existed in tension
with one another, Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytic work on the male gaze has had signifi-
cant impact on feminist cultural studies (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey argued that in Hollywood
films, the camera operates to masculinize the spectator, positioning audiences to look as
heterosexual male spectators might look and treating female bodies as objects of that
gaze whose images connote “to-be-looked-at-ness.” This process of objectification oscil-
lates between a kind of sadistic violence toward female bodies that voyeuristically con-
sumes their images and a fetishization that transforms the female body—or, more precise-
ly, body parts—into nonthreatening objects of pleasure for the viewer. As such, some cul-
tural critics have interpreted the male gaze in Foucauldian terms as a disciplinary tech-
nology, or a form of power that aims at constituting and regulating the body.

While such work may emphasize the subjugation of women in culture, other critical and
cultural work has focused more directly on the concept of audience agency, or the capaci-
ty of an individual to make choices and to think and act critically. One consequence of this
insight was analytical attention to cultural artifacts that are often described as belonging
to “women’s” genres, including romance novels, televised soap operas, and melodramatic
films. Often engaging in ethnographic methods, this research—such as Ien Ang’s study of
women who watch prime-time soap operas and Janice Radway’s study of women who
read romance novels—takes seriously these cultural artifacts, which are often dismissed as
“low” culture, and figures women as active audience members who may offer negotiated,
if not oppositional, readings of the texts they encounter (Ang, 1996).

This scholarship exemplifies a significant point of divergence from critical theory by fo-
cusing on the potential value that mass media texts may have for their active audiences.
Yet still, other critics, while acknowledging audience agency, have advised against overes-
timating the capacity of audiences to read against the grain of texts given the myriad po-
litical, economic, and cultural forces that induce them to read texts in line with hegemon-
ic ideologies (Condit, 1989). Critics have also warned against the assumption that opposi-
tional readings, absent political action, are sufficient to bring about social change (Cloud,
1989).

Debates about the relationship between discourse, including representation and signifi-
cation, and materiality have been common and long-standing in critical cultural studies.
While some scholars emphasize the role of discourse in the construction of reality, others
emphasize the importance of material relations and forces in the constitution of human subjectivity. These debates have extended to discussions about gender and sex. Some feminist scholars have argued that gender is a social and cultural construct while sex is a material reality; other scholars have argued that both gender and sex should be understood as constituted by discourse. The latter perspective—which is influenced by poststructuralism, generally, and postructuralist queer theories, more specifically—posits gender and sex not as biological givens but as discourses constituted by representations, practices, and institutions; these theories emphasize all identity formations as unstable and contingent, arguing against investment in both essentialist and normative understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality. Poststructuralist/queer theories have had a considerable impact on cultural studies, but they maintain a complex relationship with feminist cultural criticism.

In addition to addressing the construction of gender and sex, cultural criticism influenced by poststructuralist theory has also addressed the performative and regulatory dimensions of these categories of identification. The emphasis on the concept of *performativity* contends that people are interpellated into gender and sex categories that preexist them and that structure their subjectivity. In addition to theoretical contributions of Althusser and Lacan, Judith Butler’s work has influenced critical cultural theories of gender and sex as performative (Butler, 1993). Butler’s theory of performativity argues that human subjectivity is the result—not the cause—of the choices that people make every day throughout the course of their lives. Over time, these choices come to feel natural and give the appearance of a stable, core identity. As such, Butler has figured gender not as something a person “has” but as something a person “does.” In addition to the argument that gender is performatively constructed, Butler has also framed sex as a discursive construct. She argued that bodies do not preexist language and culture but are constituted and made meaningful by them, and she theorized “sex” as a category always-already constituted by cultural expectations about gender.

The framing of gender and sex as discursive categories has received criticism from some feminist cultural critics as lacking attention to materiality and the lived experiences of women. Those articulating this critique argue that cultural criticism should engage more directly with the politics of gender and embodiment, addressing the violence and exploitation that many women experience in their daily lives. Many of these critiques, therefore, call for a return to theories that foreground the importance of economic and physical forces. Beyond the Marxist emphasis on the means of production, this perspective argues that a variety of material conditions—including ones that are political, bodily, and affective—shape the production and experience of gender.

Despite their differences, both poststructural and materialist theories share a concern with the ways that gender and sex may be policed. Hegemonic norms and expectations perform a regulatory function, delimiting what iterations of gender and sex might be considered culturally acceptable within particular contexts. Thus, much critical cultural scholarship has deployed Foucauldian theories to examine the disciplinary technologies affecting both normative and nonnormative bodies and subjectivities. For example, such
technologies might include cultural expectations about diet, physical fitness, or attractiveness that circulate in popular magazines, idealizing certain bodies over others.

The theoretical account of individuals as being constituted by and subjugated to cultural norms has raised questions about agency. While some have argued that this perspective discounts the individual’s ability to act and think critically, others have claimed that theories of gender and sex as constructed, performed, and regulated allow for the possibility of resistance or opposition to social and cultural norms. According to this latter position, the act of naming and defining an individual according to preexisting categories paradoxically gives that person the tools with which to challenge and possibly dismantle those classifications.

## Studying Gender More Broadly

As feminist cultural studies has drawn attention to the experiences of women, it has also enabled a more expansive analysis of gender and sex. As a result, representations of men and masculinity have become significant objects of critical cultural inquiry as well. The critical cultural analysis of gender and sex understands categories such as male/female, masculine/feminine as relational; for example, cultural ideas about femininity exist in relation to ideas about masculinity, and the subordination of women occurs in direct relationship to the dominance of men.

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony provides a framework for explaining the cultural privilege experienced by some men and the valuation of masculinity over femininity. Critical analysis has revealed that masculinity is not monolithic and does not maintain hegemony simply by subordinating femininity. Rather, particular versions of masculinity may win hegemony over other, subordinate masculinities (just as particular iterations of femininity may be privileged over others). For example, those iterations of masculinity identified as white, heterosexual, and middle class often maintain a position of privilege denied to both women and other versions of masculinity or maleness.

Critical cultural scholars have characterized hegemonic masculinity as related to both cultural expectations about male identity, including such characteristics as physical strength and aggressiveness, and a range of practices that operate at individual, cultural, and institutional levels and that privilege some while subordinating others. For example, just as early feminist cultural criticism introduced the importance of studying so-called women’s genres, the study of men and masculinities has drawn attention to practices and institutions related to sports as an important area for analysis. Critical cultural scholarship of masculinity has examined representations of hegemonic masculinity in order to understand but also intervene against its privileged status; at the same time, other scholarship has analyzed potentially counterhegemonic iterations of masculinity that may challenge normative gender expectations. Some scholars have argued, however, that even seemingly counterhegemonic performances of masculinity may ultimately reinforce the hegemony of the masculine. For example, while mediated representations of gay mas-
culinity might challenge the heteronormativity of hegemonic masculinity, these texts may do little to disturb the privilege that men experience over women.

Some feminist scholars have expressed concern that a focus on gender, more generally, or masculinity, more specifically, risks displacing attention to the already marginalized histories and experiences of women. These critiques have suggested that some versions of masculinity studies may perpetuate the logics of postfeminism, or the belief that feminism is no longer a necessary or relevant cultural project. Postfeminist rhetoric has claimed that gender or sexual difference no longer matters in contemporary culture and that women have achieved the equality for which feminism struggled. As such, many cultural critics have argued that the study of masculinity should be grounded in feminist political frameworks, aiming to intervene against asymmetries in the ways that power is distributed between men and women (Wiegman, 2002).

The recognition of the existence of different versions of masculinity (not unlike femininity) has derived in large part from attention to intersectionality. Feminist scholars have long argued that people often experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously, as illustrated, for instance, by McRobbie’s analysis of the relationship between class and gender in her study of working-class girls. The term intersectionality, which has antecedents in 19th century-feminist writings, is credited to feminist sociologist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989). This perspective insists that various categories of identity cannot be addressed in isolation or treated as singular but must be seen in relationship to other axes of identity. The categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality (not to mention age, ability, and nationality) often overlap with and impinge on one another. Black feminist scholarship—like that of Hazel V. Carby—has argued, for example, that the experiences of women of color cannot be equated with those of women who benefit from the privileges associated with whiteness. Sexuality also impacts these kinds of differences such that the experiences of a queer woman of color cannot be equated to those of either a queer woman who is white or a woman of color who is heterosexual.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work has articulated Gramsci’s theory of hegemony with postcolonial theories in order to consider the experiences of populations that she calls subaltern. Spivak’s work called attention to the voices and experiences of people—and women, in particular—whom the logics and practices of colonialism and the hegemony of Eurocentric culture excluded. Given the centrality of language to the formation of subjectivity, Spivak has argued for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of people who were marginalized or oppressed by imperializing forces that often compelled them to speak not their own language but that of their colonizers. Relatedly, emphasis on transnational feminism has called for cultural critics to attend to the ways that the politics of gender are shaped by not only local processes but global ones as well.

Some scholars have attempted to move beyond the language of intersectionality to conceive of the complicated interrelationships between various categories of identity. These categories do not merely intersect with one another; they may shape and be shaped by one another, one category helping to constitute another. For example, a number of femi-
nist and queer scholars have argued that the hegemony of heterosexuality has impacted cultural ideas about gender and sex. The two-sex model, which assumes that there are two natural, biologically determined sexes (male or female) cannot be extricated from heteronormativity, or the presumption that heterosexuality is the norm. The naturalization of the two-sex model not only reinforces the hegemony of heterosexuality but also places those who identify or are identified as cisgender—having one’s self-identified gender correspond with one’s assigned sex—in positions of privilege over those people who identify or are identified as transgender.

Gender normativity may also contribute to what some scholars have called homonormativity, referencing the privilege afforded to cisgender (not to mention white and middle class) gay-identifying people. Both cisnormativity and transphobia have gained increased attention in recent scholarly work, and queer scholars have attempted to disrupt the presumed continuity between sex, gender, and desire, arguing that the relationship between these nodes of identification may be arbitrary and slippery. Such scholarship has critiqued the two-sex model in favor of more fluid, unstable understandings of gender and sex and has proffered theoretical challenges to the naturalized links between maleness and masculinity, or femaleness and femininity. For example, scholars have argued for an understanding of such categories as female masculinity or male femininity, not as derivations of or deviations from normative gender and sex categories but as identifications in their own right.

This line of scholarship has also allowed for considerations of the experiences of those who identify as trans and for developing new perspectives for thinking about subjectivity and embodiment. Emerging in a complex relationship with both feminist and queer theories—as well as critical disability studies—the field of transgender studies has aimed to destabilize the presumed linkages between biology, subjectivity, and social roles and to challenge objective epistemological paradigms by emphasizing the importance of subjective, embodied, and experiential forms of knowing.

Current Trends and New Directions

New media and digital technology—including video games, smart phones, and such social media sites as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter—have become a central focus of much critical cultural studies scholarship in the field of communication. The emphasis on technology has also guided much critical cultural scholarship that specifically addresses the study of gender and sex. Such research has included analyses of representations of gender and sex on various digital and social media platforms. This scholarship has also given attention to the gender and sexual dynamics that affect the practices of people who engage with digital technologies and media at the levels of both production and reception. This work has considered not only the ways that gender and sex affect the identities of those people—not to mention industries and institutions—who make and use new technologies but also the very logics and designs of the technologies themselves. This area of study has also been shaped by recent interest in the concept of convergence, which exam-
ines the ways that various forms of mediation have become interconnected through technological, economic, and social networks.

Another recent focus within the field of critical cultural studies has been on conjunctural analysis. Scholars, such as Hall and Grossberg, have used the term *conjuncture* to define social formations as structured by a variety of intersecting and conflicting forces that often produce states of crisis and uncertainty. The study of conjunctures calls attention to the complex, contingent, and often-contradictory ways that economic, political, and cultural forces intersect and interact. Grossberg has called for critical scholars of culture to attend more rigorously to these intersections and interactions. This perspective refuses the disaggregation of the economic, political, and cultural, thereby challenging the hegemony of textual analysis within critical cultural studies. Grossberg has argued that the future of cultural studies lies with conjunctural analysis that addresses not only questions of representation and signification but also matters of production, distribution, and reception; he has encouraged critical cultural scholars to examine texts and artifacts as well as industries and institutions and to study interpretative work as well as labor practices. Conjunctural analyses of gender and sex would, hence, consider how such categories of identity shape and are shaped by a variety of symbolic and material factors and would continue to probe the complex interrelationship of subjectivity, embodiment, and social roles as they align, conflict, and intersect with various registers of identification, including class, race, gender, sex, sexuality, and ability.

**Further Reading**


Critical Cultural Approaches to Gender and Sex


References


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