

Title: Charlotta Stern on Gender Sociology's Problems
Episode: 37

Transcript

[Music]

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: When sociologists explain why men and women have different careers, different interests, and different priorities, they rely on socialization as an explanation. But is that explanation complete? Today I'm talking to sociologist Charlotta Stern about this question. We'll be discussing her paper *Undoing Insularity: A Small Study of Gender Sociology's Big Problem*, and her book chapter *Does Political Ideology Hinder Insights On Gender And Labor Markets*, published in *The Politics of Social Psychology*, edited by Jarret Crawford and Lee Jussim.

Because of audio problems, Charlotta and I had to record this interview in two parts, so you'll notice a small change in audio quality in the middle of the episode.

We jump directly into a discussion of Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* and the chapter on gender in that book. If you're unfamiliar with *The Blank Slate*, it's an argument against what Pinker considers three pernicious ideas one of which is the idea of the blank slate—the idea that the mind has no innate content.

There's a chapter in the book on gender, in which Pinker differentiates equity feminism from gender feminism. Equity feminism is a moral doctrine of equal political and legal rights. Gender feminism in his words is “an empirical doctrine committed to three claims. The first is that the differences between men and women have nothing to do with biology but are socially constructed in their entirety. The second is that humans possess a single social motive — power — and that social life can be understood only in terms of how it is exercised. The third is that human interactions arise not from the motives of people dealing with each other as individuals but from the motives of groups dealing with other groups — in this case, the male gender dominating the female gender.” He then describes the many ways in which men and women are similar, but also points to areas where evolutionary psychologists have shown they're different, showing that gender feminism doesn't hold up in the face of this evidence. So here's my conversation with Charlotta Stern.

Chris Martin: Some of you who are interested in gender came from reading Steven Pinker. What motivated you as a sociologist to read Steven Pinker?

Charlotta Stern: That's a good question. I guess it was all the fuss that he caused at least – and I'm not sure really what brought Steven Pinker to my frame of awareness. But I heard so much about it and it's such a provocative title (*The Blank Slate*) for a sociologist. So you kind of feel like you need to look into what's his take on the world so to speak.

So I did. I read Steven Pinker and I was – for a sociologist, it was kind of challenging especially, I think, the chapter (in *The Blank Slate*) on gender. But as soon as I started reading and thinking and you're dwelling in it and you're like thinking, like oh, this is really – ha, I didn't know this. No one ever told me about these kinds of issues before.

Chris Martin: Right.

Charlotta Stern: So it's a little bit upsetting and you're like, "Ha! My world view suddenly started changing." But I got over it, right? So I started thinking like this is really interesting stuff and then I started reading some more and just like for my own entertainment, sort of. Yeah, and so that's how it all started or at least that's how it started for me.

Chris Martin: OK. So we're talking about *The Blank Slate* here. What year did you read that? Do you recall?

Charlotta Stern: I think a couple of – perhaps a year or two after it was published. So, it had had time to get on the top list of books and stuff. I was around I think in – and Steven Pinker was active on YouTube and he was here and there.

Chris Martin: OK. So you took those insights from Steven Pinker and you decided to take on *Doing Gender* by West and Zimmerman, one of the most influential articles in the sociology of gender. So for our listeners, can you describe that article?

Charlotta Stern: So *Doing Gender* was published in the 1980s and it's one of these articles that have changed the field of gender sociology I feel in that the argument that we're doing gender is so fundamental in our everyday existence. So the minute we're born, we're treated differently as women or men and we're sort of stuck in this role of being your gender. In everyday interactions and when you meet new people or in any kind of social interaction, you're re-creating your gender so to speak and that's what *Doing Gender* sort of means is that you can't really escape, always kind of portraying your gender. Is that? Yeah.

Chris Martin: I mean I've read the article and that's how I would probably phrase that. I guess the gist of it is that you often effortfully do things that are appropriate for your gender.

Charlotta Stern: That's right.

Chris Martin: So other people observe you when they are – the idea is reinforced that those things are appropriate for your gender.

Charlotta Stern: And if you deviate too much, people are going to sanction you for not being appropriate for your gender.

Chris Martin: Right.

Charlotta Stern: So yeah, and it's very influential. I think in my department, we've had courses called Doing Gender at a graduate level. So it's a very sort of common notion I think in gender sociology that this is something that's regarded as like key insights on human interaction.

Chris Martin: Right. I mean the article is somewhat unclear on whether these behaviors are consciously or unconsciously motivated.

Charlotta Stern: I think that it's both. But I think in my reading it's mostly unconscious. We're not really aware of doing it, at least not lay people. I guess you could say that enlightened sociologists of course know that this is what's going on. But just in general when people go about living their lives, they are not going to be aware of the fact that they're constantly recreating gender norms, I would say.

Chris Martin: OK, OK. So you decided to take on that article by writing [*Undoing Insularity*](#), partly inspired by Steven Pinker. So tell me about that article.

Charlotta Stern: Well, it was actually, believe it or not, intended to be a blog post for heterodox.

Chris Martin: Oh, OK.

Charlotta Stern: That's how it started out and I started writing an article on why it's – why I think it is a problem that there's such a one-sided ideology when it comes to gender and with the emphasis on the labor market stuff, which is where I mostly do my research.

But as a sort of check on myself in some fashion, I decided to test the assumption that gender studies or gender sociology was insular or unable to take in new ideas by using *Doing Gender* as a sort of a baseline point because it is such an important classic in the field.

So I figured I would need to have a starting point and my starting point since I myself became aware of Steven Pinker, I figured like if I became aware of Steven Pinker and sort of the Blank Slate Challenge, right? Because it is a challenge, very much of what he – I mean even the title of the book is like *The Blank Slate* and I think the subtitle reads something to the denial of human nature, right? I mean –

Chris Martin: Right, something along those lines. I know the word “denial” is in there.

Charlotta Stern: Yeah. And so I figured like OK, so let's see. What – in the literature that sort of cites doing gender, has Steven Pinker's ideas made any impact? Basically sort of asking like, “OK. Do people now in the field talk about the potential that there are actually like biological differences between women and men?” or something along those lines.

So how do you test that idea, right? I mean it's a huge literature and I didn't really know where to start. So I started out thinking like, “How would you test that?” So I picked out the most highly cited articles for a period of years from 2002 when Steve Pinker was published and I

picked the two most highly cited articles for each year up to 2017. So I had like a sample of important, I was thinking, scholarly work citing *Doing Gender*.

So that was kind of my sample and it's a small sample of course. But it was like just a – I'm not intending it to be anything but a small sample. But I went through all the articles and I kind of coded them in terms of like did they discuss potential biological difference ideas.

I found that one did out of my sample of 23. So yeah, not much of an impact of Pinker there.

Chris Martin: Did you think about examining other articles?

Charlotta Stern: I did, especially since I got the – it started out – this whole project with the article study started out as actually like thinking of a blog post for Heterodox Academy in the beginning and then I wasn't so concerned about sort of doing a real thing. Of course I could have been more ambitious in including more articles in the top tier. But as it is, I think that it's sort of – the method is kind of – at least for the highly cited research, sort of the high profile stuff out there, I think the two highest cited is – it's not a bad method to approach what people are talking about and what people are citing.

So I'm not sure that including many more would have changed the results. However I think that having included perhaps – see, one thing that happened after I had published the report was that one of the gender studies persons contacted me and said that, you know, only using highly-cited research misses stuff that's going on underneath.

So if I were to do anything more on sort of using a similar method, it would perhaps be to look at less cited research instead to see what's going on in there because of course in the – sort of the mainstream gender studies, the highly-cited stuff might just be the mainstream and then if you want to actually study change and seeing if somehow biological difference ideas are infiltrating, maybe you should look underneath the top, so to speak. I think that would be a cool sort of future study.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I think that would be interesting. I mean one drawback of sociology in general is that sociologists rely on interview methods and surveys and especially with interview methods. It's really hard to assess how much genetic influence there is on your behavior or how much evolutionary influence because we just don't have insight into that when we reflect on ourselves. Introspection just tends to bring up these other accounts of our behavior.

Charlotta Stern: Yeah.

Chris Martin: So – but I think there has been a change to some degree. I think because of the interest in health sociology, there's somewhat better knowledge among sociologists about the influence of genes on human health. So sociologists in the US are – sociologists in training at least are learning a little bit about genes and inheritability. So that's a good development.

Charlotta Stern: Oh, I agree. I agree. I think that there was actually a study that I cited in – either in the *Undoing Insularity* piece or in the book chapter where someone asked sociologists

about beliefs in evolutionary stuff. I think when it comes to certain like health issues, I think a high percent of the questioned sociologists agreed that there was a biological influence and about half thought that it may – you know, that biological ideas made a sense when it came to gender.

So in certain areas, it's more, I think, acknowledged and in other areas, it's – you know, the hesitance of sociologists to believe in biological differences is higher so to speak.

Chris Martin: That's correct. I mean gender differences and genes in general may also just be a bigger topic in the popular press over the next few years. So maybe there will be more general public awareness of that.

Now there have been a couple of interesting developments. So just before you published the article, there was an article in *Sociological Theory* called [The Genomic Challenge to the Social Construction of Race](#) and *Sociological Theory* is a pretty high impact journal. So that got out there and then in *Psychological Science*, a pretty high impact psych journal, there was an article on the gender equality paradox this year, which I think largely started as a research in the Nordic countries about how gender differences and career interests are actually larger in gender-equal countries because there's less economic pressure.

Yeah. Is that something that's a topic of discussion in Sweden nowadays?

Charlotta Stern: I don't think so actually, although it should be of course. I think that in most people – sort of in – I'm talking about the general public now, not scholars. But among the general public, I think that we still think that there's something pushing girls away from STEM fields for instance. I mean that would be like if you would read the newspapers about why aren't there more female engineers. The typical explanation would be that girls are not encouraged to do math or it's feminine or whatever.

I think that it's – I mean in that sense, sociology has been extremely successful in Sweden and in sort of spreading sort of this view of the world as there are very little differences between the genders and what differences there are, either discriminatory or socialization-based.

That of course needs change before real progress can be made I think.

Chris Martin: There was a documentary made in Norway about five or six years ago. I think it was called *Brainwashed*. I don't know the Norwegian name for it. But you can see it on YouTube.

Charlotta Stern: Yeah, [Hjernevask](#).

Chris Martin: Yeah. Yeah, that was a – I think it's still on YouTube and Vimeo. I can include a link to it. The first episode was called the "Gender Equality Paradox" and it was either that episode or a [later episode](#) specifically on gender perhaps that included an interview with Steven Pinker. Yeah, that was interesting. I don't know if that was popular in Sweden. I think it made some waves in Norway.

Charlotta Stern: Oh, sure, it did. I think it changed discourage a lot in Norway. The guy who is a sociologist, he's also some kind of comedian I believe. He approached actually Swedish television and asked if he could do something similar in Sweden and they declined the offer. So he tried to actually like develop a similar study or – no, maybe it wasn't him actually. Maybe it was another guy who did it. But nevertheless, so Swedish state television wasn't interested in doing like a Swedish version of that show unfortunately. It would have been fun I think.

Chris Martin: Yeah, I think so. I think because it's online, it garnered some interest over here.

Charlotta Stern: Sure. Yes, of course. Amongst people who are more evolutionary-inspired, that kind of stuff of course is mainstream and just like – yeah, obviously. But I'm talking to the other guys and I'm trying to think how to reach out outside of just the already committed or so to speak – I don't know what to say. The already – friendly to biological difference ideas.

Chris Martin: Right. So you also have [a chapter in the book](#) edited by Lee Jussim and Jarret Crawford. Tell me a bit about that chapter.

Charlotta Stern: It's a chapter on gender differences again. But more – so Lee and Jarret contacted me. We co-authored [a piece in Behavioral and Brain Sciences](#) about why political homogeneity is a problem in social psychology and when they approached me after that, they has said, "OK. So we now said that it's a problem. We need to sort of talk about why it is a problem and give examples of when it is a problem."

Since I've been doing sociology at work and organizational sociology and been – I've been writing stuff about gender differences in career choices and in stuff like that over the years. So I'm quite familiar with the literature on gender.

So I've figured like, OK, that would be my low-hanging fruit. I can sort of include sort of the Pinker knowledge and ask questions about gender differences that are really not asked in today's gender studies. So that's what I tried to do.

So it's really like a very kind of – the book chapter itself I think is more about trying to say like here's an area where we don't ask the right questions or at least we don't include hypothesis about whether or not biological differences could be somewhat related to differences we see today.

So I talk about gender segregation in the workplace and I talk about differences in leadership and stuff like that. Not really like – for someone who's really already sort of well-versed in biological difference ideas, I think it will be sort of very kind of – yeah, obviously.

But for those who are not, I think it's a shocking book chapter perhaps. I don't really know.

Chris Martin: Perhaps, yeah.

Charlotta Stern: But I'm thinking that it is. I mean you've been writing about taboos and just like no-go zones.

Chris Martin: Well, I published one blog post a while ago on Heterodox Academy. I think it might have been 2015, early 2016 about taboos.

Charlotta Stern: Sure.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Charlotta Stern: I see, yeah. So maybe that's why – yeah.

Chris Martin: Well, [my American Sociologist article from 2015](#) also had a section on taboos and how one reason that political homogeneity is bad for discipline is some topics become taboo topics.

Charlotta Stern: Exactly. So this is very much along those lines in sort of saying that gender sociologists are so wedded to the idea that there shouldn't be any difference or very slim differences between women and men. So when they see differences, they think that there has to be something wrong. You know, either discrimination or wrongful socialization of boys and girls or what have you. But there – that there – you know, that differences cannot just be differences. They're somehow always a sign of inequality.

Chris Martin: Right.

Charlotta Stern: And I think that is impoverishing our science. I think it – since people don't really theorize about potential differences playing a role in how we live our lives, we end up perhaps creating problems where there are no problems and we definitely end up not asking questions about the potential impact of these other types of mechanisms and I think that is – that's not good for a science.

Chris Martin: Have you by chance had any conference talks or presentations where you've brought up these ideas and had pushback? How did that go?

Charlotta Stern: When this paper was first published, it created quite a stir in my department. So I was asked to do a seminar presentation in – sort of locally, which I did and it was – well, let's just say that the room was fully packed with people. So it created quite a lively interest among my colleagues.

However I think – once you start actually like presenting the evidence and talking about it in a very kind of matter-of-fact way, I have a sense that people just kind of got the – you know. So I think that I – I don't really – I mean of course I don't really know what people are talking about behind scenes when I'm not there and everything. But at least at the seminar, I found people who are interested, curious, somewhat hostile and, you know, the typical reading into what I'm saying, other stuff than what I'm actually saying.

That of course went on. But I could – you know, when you’re presenting, you can always push back and say, “I didn’t actually say that women were more stupid than –” or you know, like whatever.

Chris Martin: Right.

Charlotta Stern: So yeah, I think that it was a very civil discourse I would say.

Chris Martin: Well, that’s good.

Charlotta Stern: And I’m very – you know, so in some sense, I’m very happy and then all my invited presentations have been to friendly audiences more or less. I have been presenting it in semi-friendly settings. But it has always been quite civil. I haven’t really experienced any real – yeah, no real controversy or conflict when I’ve been talking about these issues. So maybe I’ve been lucky. But I haven’t really – but, you know, I haven’t been around too much either. So I shouldn’t – also, I haven’t been marketing this stuff at all.

Chris Martin: OK.

Charlotta Stern: I’ve just sort of mildly put it out there without sort of doing much of that.

Chris Martin: Well, the fact that you didn’t get severe pushback is quite encouraging.

Charlotta Stern: It is.

Chris Martin: I think in the US, it would vary quite a bit by department. But you’re definitely – well, you definitely hurt your chances of tenure if you were pre-tenure here.

Charlotta Stern: I have a sense that the polarization is much more strongly enforced. Also I mean there are cultural differences between Sweden and the US. I mean Swedes don’t really like conflict. So even if we have – you know, even if people hate what you’re saying, they’re not going to react to it the same way that Americans will.

Chris Martin: I see. I guess there’s a – well, I know there’s this element of not wanting to stick out too much in Scandinavia.

Charlotta Stern: That’s right.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Charlotta Stern: Yeah. We are quite a consensus-oriented culture. So people try to get along. So maybe that’s partly what’s going on.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I mean along that – that probably is a good thing.

Charlotta Stern: I don't really know. There are of course pros and cons of old cultural traits. But when it comes to saying controversial things in a seminar setting, maybe it's nicer, at least to the person presenting.

Chris Martin: Right. Well, you know, there's – academic environments are somewhat restrained. So I don't know if people would necessarily lash out at you. But they might be hostile in other ways. Yeah. Is this chapter – well, it's in Jussim and Crawford's book. But for people who don't have access to the book, is there an open source version online?

Charlotta Stern: Yeah, there is. I have a working paper out actually in – yeah, at ratio.se where I work part-time or I can send you a link if you want to put it up there.

Chris Martin: Sure. I will put that up in the show notes too.

Charlotta Stern: OK.

Chris Martin: All right. Well, it has been a pleasure having you on the show. Thank you for joining us.

Charlotta Stern: Thank you for having me. It has been quite fun.

[Music]

Chris Martin: You find links to Charlotta's webpage and her article and chapter we discussed in the show notes, where you'll also find links to the documentary and the other papers that we discussed.

The next episode of Half Hour of Heterodoxy features Lucia Martinez Valdivia, professor at Reed College, followed by Tania Reynolds, social psychologist at the Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. After that, we'll have a Thanksgiving episode with guests hosts Deb Mashek and Richard Davies interviewing author A J Jacobs, author of several books including Thanks a Thousand: A Gratitude Journey, The Year of Living Biblically, and My Life as an Experiment.

Thanks for listening.

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