Has the Study of Gender been Conceptually too Focused on the Category of 'women'? What is at Stake in the Analytical Categories we use in Gender Theory?

https://www.e-ir.info/2007/12/22/has-the-study-of-gender-been-conceptually-too-focused-on-the-category-of-%e2%80%98women%e2%80%99-what-is-at-stake-in-the-analytical-categories-we-use-in-gender-theory/

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Gender categorisations are an inherent part of our culture; we accept them as an essential part of our identity and use them continually. To challenge the 'truth' or desirableness of concepts such as 'woman' or 'man' is a radical proposal but one which is increasingly put forward by post-structuralist feminists and queer theorists.

I will argue that gender theory has been too focused on the category of 'women' but also the category of 'men' and all other gender groups. The categories we use to describe sex and gender are presented as highly inflexible but the first section will demonstrate that these categories are not grounded in absolute truth but in certain cultural assumptions. Secondly, I will go on to argue that the categories we use are violent in that they define some people as deviant and require us to repress certain ideas and practices. Because the categories themselves are not as stable as they might appear, we can say that this violence is unnecessary and look for ways to avoid it. I will not attempt to cover all of the wide range of critiques but will select arguments focusing on biological sex, sexuality and gender roles.

In the third part of this essay I will look at the implications of changing or removing the sex-gender system of categorisations and the practical problems this creates. I will evaluate the debate between those wishing to remove categories and those wishing to maintain them and conclude that practicality requires the traditional categories of gender studies to be kept. The final section will attempt to reconcile these two conflicting necessities of maintaining categories for practical reasons and destroying them on the basis of principle. I will argue that this conflict neither can nor should be resolved in either direction as both points of view are correct. It remains for gender theorists and activists to attempt to steer a path encompassing both by taking a more flexible approach to categorisation and making increased use of policy-based (as opposed to identity based) coalition politics.

Categories of Sex and Gender

At the heart of the issue of categorisation in gender studies is the system by which both sex and gender are perceived as binary. To make any judgements about what should be the focus of gender studies or what is at stake in categorisation, it is first necessary to re-examine this sex–gender system which is fundamental to our society. Before considering if change is desirable, it is necessary to determine if it is possible.

Science tells us that there are two sexes – male and female, marked by a variety of bodily differences. This is accepted by the vast majority of people, including feminists who use the concept of 'gender' to separate the social constructs of masculinity and femininity from the biological facts of sex. The 'fact' of two sexes is so basic that it seems ridiculous to question it. Butler (1993), however, chooses to challenge this idea by claiming that it is a social construction. She argues that the human body has always been interpreted by scientists living in a gendered world and that this context has informed their work. Butler's claims undermine the 'facts' of sex and suggest the possibility of an alternative interpretation of the body.

This idea is easy to dismiss as ridiculous (although a reminder of science's former role in ideas of racial superiority demonstrates the fallibility of scientific fact), however, Fausto-Sterling (2000) presents a practical account of how the sexed body has been socially constructed. She describes medical attitudes towards intersex babies whose genital 'deformities' can only be considered such with the pre-existing assumption that there *should* be only two, discreet and opposed sexes. This is despite the fact that around one in 100 children are born as neither standard males or females (ISNA). To take another example, so-called 'sex hormones' bear the mark of contemporary ideas about men and women. Early hormone research reflected ideas that gender difference must be a product of biology. 'Sex hormones' were named with this belief in mind, and keep the name despite extensive evidence that they are present in both male and female bodies and affect all kinds of non-sexual growth (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Fausto-Sterling's demonstration of the 'sexing of the body' leads her to conclude that sex is a scale, not a dichotomy, and that social ideas of gender have led scientists to overstate or even create sex differences in the body. If we accept this view of sex as a social construct it becomes difficult to see where sex ends and gender begins.

In theory, gender should not necessarily have to follow from sex as the term describes the non-biological, socialised differences between the sexes. Yet the existence of a binary system of gender which directly mirrors that of binary sex leaves little other option (Butler, 1990: 6). Femininity and masculinity are assumed to be discreet and opposed or, at best, as opposite ends of a scale. As a result, common knowledge tells us that all people can be classified in degrees of femininity and masculinity (effeminate men, butch women and transgender people all fit onto the scale)

and therefore any prospect of radically different conceptions of gender identity is removed.

So, while sex is closer to gender than we might have thought by virtue of it being socially constructed, gender is also closer to sex through the binary restrictions placed upon it. Neither can be said to be entirely natural or unchangeable and both contain the possibility for alternative, or no, categorisations. Through this queering the ideas of sex and gender we can open our eyes to the unnecessary nature of the violence attached to these concepts.

Categorisation and Violence

Most people recognise that violence is targeted at certain groups but few would connect this to the act of categorising itself. However, when examining this social practice in detail it becomes difficult to draw a line between the category and the violence. Indeed, the two are so tightly connected that it is near impossible to imagine categorisation without some form of structural violence creating deviants, silencing dissent and prohibiting certain ideas or behaviours. Many critiques of the concept of 'women' have been raised by black and post-colonial feminists who argue that it hides internal divisions and promotes the interests of one group of women over another. Although I recognise the indivisibility of the concepts of sex, race and class, for reasons of space, I will discuss here only issues related directly to biological sex, gender roles and sexuality. These will be divided into two areas; the exclusion of those who deviate from the norms, and the internal repression of sexuality.

Deviance

There are three principal areas in which the sex-gender system excludes people. The first is its refusal to include intersex people, the second, its promotion of heterosexuality only, and the last, punishment of those who don't conform to gender roles. All centre around assumptions of normality and deviance.

An intersex person is someone without a clear sex; usually because their body contains a mixture of male and female attributes which can be present in a wide variety of ways (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). The exclusion of intersex people from the binary sex system creates various forms of violence. Most obvious are operations on newly-born intersex babies in which they are assigned a sex and their bodies altered to fit. Although this is standard medical practice (one or two cases in 1,000 births (ISNA)), intersex rights groups claim that this violates the rights of the child whose body should not be altered without their informed consent (ISNA; Cabral, 2004). Psychologically, Chase (2003) argues that the primary problem facing intersex people is that of stigma and non-acceptance. Thus the assumption of two discreet and opposed sexes exposes intersex people to both physical and psychological violence.

The binary sex-gender system has similar effects on non-heterosexual people. Sedgewick (in Clough, 1994: 146) argues that "a damaging bias towards heterosocial or heterosexist assumptions inheres unavoidably in the concept of gender". Having two discreet and opposed genders implies heterosexuality through implying the pairing of opposites in a way which a scale of sex would not (Butler, 1990). This regulates the sexuality of the majority of people, considered as normal, whilst labling those who don't conform as deviant (Foucault in Butler, 1990: 19). This is clearly damaging; in 2005, 1,359 homophobic hate crimes were recorded in the UK (Home Office) and the US gay suicide rate is 2-3 times the national average as a result of rejection and trauma (Mind).A further 'abnormal' group are those who don't conform to acceptable gender roles and suffer considerable violence as a result. Women displaying 'inappropriate' behaviour, such as excessive drinking or flirting, are often violently policed by their societies through practices such as rape (Amnesty International (2006) found that 27% of young British people consider the above to be provocation for rape), and boys who are not sufficiently masculine are frequently bullied at school. The polarity of gender we observe in society can be understood as the result of this social coercion in which the threat of violence forces people into specific gender roles.

Through the creation of normal and abnormal people, the binary sex-gender system exposes those in the 'abnormal' category to numerous forms of physical and psychological violence. However, violence is also directed at those within the categories of sex/gender.

Prohibition

The prohibition of certain thoughts and practices as a result of gender categorisation is a very subtle form of violence. It is concerned with each individual's mental repression of possible behaviours and their own sexuality through the performance and internalising of gender roles. The idea that gender is 'performed' comes from Butler (1990) who claims that people have no essential gender core determining their actions or sexuality, but rather they learn these from the society they grow up in and act it out it to others.

The performance of a gender role necessarily requires that practices associated with other genders are not performed, thereby restricting each individual's sexual options. Bright (in Martin, 1993: 97) argues that penetration during sex is contentious in the lesbian community because of the construction of lesbianism in opposition to heterosexuality. A more general expression of this problem is the idea that people's sexuality does not naturally fit with the restrictions of the categories (Foucault in Butler, 1990: 19; Butler, 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2000: 207; Clough, 1994). This conflicts directly with the commonly held belief that people are either 'gay', 'straight' or 'bi' and that sexuality is fixed (Martin, 1993). Clough (1994: 146) argues that the restrictive categories of sexuality exists as

'defences against the hetrogeneity of unconscious desire.' If true (the evidence either way is severely limited) this might indicate that some, maybe all, people are unconsciously repressing some part of their own sexuality, a form of structural violence which could be removed with an end to categorisations.

To summarise, neither sex nor gender are closed to reinterpretation as both are based on a set of assumptions rather than facts. This allows us to see as unnecessary the forms of violence resulting from our existing sex-gender system and opens up some possibilities for change. From the evidence above, we can see that the categorisations we use in gender studies have violent implications directly related to sex, gender and sexuality. The binary oppositions of woman/man and femininity/masculinity cast intersex people, non-heterosexuals and non-conforming individuals as deviants. The assumption of acceptable practices within a fixed sexuality restricts people to the expression of only certain elements of their sexuality. Having made the case that the categorisations of gender theory are harmful, I will now turn to the implications of this idea – living in a non-categorised world.

Is it Possible to Create a Non-categorised World?

Many feminists recoil at the idea of destroying the category of 'women' as it is the foundation of feminism. They claim that without categories, gender theory and analysis would be impossible, gender inequality would be invisible, and gender activism would lose its appeal. The argument between this position and the deconstructivist ideas presented above revolves on a question of whether more harm is done by the removal of categories or by their maintenance.

The most common critique of the deconstruction of categories is that these categories are necessary for the very existence of genderstudies. Without the ability to generalise about groups of people based on these categories, gender theory would become 'mere empiricism' (Walby, 1993: 31). It seems that the lack of clear 'subjects' could create a level of incoherence seriously damaging to thefield. However, just because deconstruction would not be easy, it does not follow that it might not be correct. Ferguson (1993) warns that feminists should not advocate another system of oppression to replace that of male dominance; maintaining the sex-gender system could do just that. This puts the emphasis on finding a way to get round the problem but it is difficult to imagine how this might be done.

A second set of arguments centres around the issue of gender inequality. Pateman (in Phillips 1993: 12) argues that gender inequality exists and currently benefits men; it is therefore necessary for feminists to examine this problem, using gender categories to make it intelligible, in order to address it. Similarly, Ferguson (1993) raises the concern that the successful removal of gender categories would conceal existing gendered power structures meaning that

patterns of male dominance could be reified as merely human. These are serious problems for a proposal based on ideas of emancipation and certainly need to be addressed.

The final criticism of deconstruction that I will examine is that the removal of categories would inhibit political mobilisation around gender issues. A politics of difference is a much weaker mobilising force than shared identity (Stephano, 1990); rallying people to a cause usually relies on appeals to groups as well as a knowledge of who will be affected. By removing the option of categorising, gender activists would be put at a significant practical disadvantage. Again this is perhaps a reason to look for new forms of organising as opposed to dismissing the deconstructivist ideas.

These criticisms show us that accepting the deconstructivist proposals might mean a step backwards for gender theory and equality. The problem of concealing existing inequalities is the most serious as it is tied up with the process of deconstruction itself. Criticisms of incoherence and impracticality can be countered with instructions to look for other ways, but no fully compatible solutions for these problems have been proposed. While gender categorisations are harmful, the impracticality of the obvious alternative, no categories, cannot be dismissed. We are left with a problem to which there are two, correct but conflicting, answers; we should both remove and maintain gender categories to achieve equality.

Compromise

It may seem impossible to reconcile two such conflicting positions as keeping categories and removing them, but various authors have attempted it. Some strategies moderate current practices to recognise the validity of deconstructivist ideas and others seek a much more far-reaching reorganisation of gender politics. An examination of current practices demonstrates that similar ideas to these are already common in society.

Many authors suggest that a practical compromise is to not make any radical break with categorisation but to recognise and accept diversity in, and outside, a group.Riley (1988: 112) suggests that it is possible to accept the arguments against categorisation and yet to continue using categories because they are so widely believed. This approach allows some fluidity and incoherence in categorisations in an attempt to reduce their 'discipline and control' (Martin, 1993: 99). Even Butler (1990: 15) accepts that the assumption of conflict and incompleteness in a category would go far to removing its coercive nature.

Further reaching compromises draw considerably more on the deconstructivist attack on stable identity. Ferguson

(1993) proposes that we accept the 'mobile subjectivities' that constitute our identity and recognise both the flexibility and socially constructed nature of who we are. Similarly to Butler (1990), she proposes that we move towards a more coalitional form of politics where continually shifting groups form around concrete issues instead of identities. These proposals accept the idea that we are all different but also allow us to see and use commonalities and categories in a way which full acceptance of deconstruction would not.

The realistic nature of these proposals is demonstrated in that they are already present to some extent in society. Ferguson (1993: 169) argues that everyone experiences their identity differently depending on their context. In some situations one might feel principally like a woman, in others, like a student, parent, or any other group we might place ourselves in. The recognition of this can ease us into the idea of 'multiple subjectivities' mentioned above and make it easier to accept the differences between people. In terms of the need to add ideas of difference into society, Phillips (1993) claims that feminist rethinkings of equality and justice are actually remarkably similar to the way we currently view them; universalism and difference both play important roles.Practically, many non-heterosexual groups form broad coalitions in order to achieve shared goals such as challenging prejudice and providing 'coming out' counselling. All of these examples demonstrate that we are closer to compromise than might be expected.

Although academia tends to like strong argument and clear answers, most convincing in this case are those authors who advocate accepting the value of two seemingly conflicting proposals. It seems that the way forward is to accept the irony of the contradiction (Ferguson, 1993) and to try to adapt accordingly.

Conclusion

I have argued that gender studies is too focused on fixed categories and that a more flexible approach is necessary. I began by demonstrating the possibilities for change contained in the concepts of sex and gender; showing the extent to which gender is tied to the concept of binary sex and that binary sex itself is socially constructed. The categories arising from this binary sex-gender system are at the root of various forms of violence: intersex people, non-heterosexuals and gender non-conformists are classed as deviants and exposed to physical and psychological violence; and people are pressurised into conforming to the norms of their category despite evidence of flexible sexuality. I thus determined that gender categories are harmful.

However, many feminists have criticised these ideas for their impracticality. They claim that deconstruction of categories would lead to incoherence, the concealing of existing inequalities, and problems of organisation and mobilisation. In short, it would be a step backwards. Counterarguments cannot remove these problems so the need

for a compromise between two opposite but correct arguments is clear. These compromises all require acceptance of both positions, with some proposing a more extensive assault on the notion of gender identity/categorisation than others. It seems that a more flexible approach to categorisation and an increased use of policy-based coalition politics is a reasonable target to aim for.

That gender politics includes these internal contradictions need not be a weakness. The acceptance of both commonality and difference can lead us to a less judgemental society which resists both totalising narratives and overemphasis on individuality.

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Date: 2006