FEMINIST GENDER THEORY SUMMARY

Introduction

In the course of background reading on feminist gender theory for my PhD (awarded Sept 2012) it seemed that a lot of the concepts could be useful to XY-women in gaining a broader view of their life situation and in reducing the focus on biological divisions. I then discovered that my colleague Lih-Mei Liao, Consultant Clinical Psychologist at UCLH’s Middlesex Centre (adult intersex clinic) had in fact recommended this.

In an article (Liao 2003) she suggested that the psychological formulation of XY women’s difficulties (e.g. distress about the non-disclosure of crucial aspects of their condition or non-discussion of the implications, and about discussing atypical genitalia with sexual partners) should take account of dominant ways of conceptualising sex and sexuality in society. These ‘dominant ways of conceptualising’ are of course the strict division of people into two sexes based on biology (dimorphism - two forms), the sanctioning of only two genders (a binary system) based on sex, and the favouring by society of a sexuality that is ‘appropriate’ to one’s sex and gender, i.e. a heterosexual sexual orientation. She recommended that psychotherapeutic intervention and information delivery within a feminist-discursive framework could be helpful by drawing on alternative and subordinated discourses, allowing exploration of meanings of aspects of the condition, and challenging notions of normality.

Lih-Mei was not involved in my study, but her words spurred me into compiling a few pages that I feel may be interesting and helpful to you.

The introduction of ‘gender’

The concept of gender, as opposed to sex, wasn’t introduced until the 1970s. Robert Stoller, a psychologist who worked with individuals born with ambiguous genitalia, was the first to point out a distinction between sex and gender. He posited four concepts: sex, gender, gender identity and gender role (Stoller 1964, 1968). Although the term ‘gender role’ soon faded from view in feminist circles, Stoller’s other three concepts were quickly appropriated by feminists.

Following Stoller, feminist scholar Ann Oakley (who supervised the PhD of one of my two supervisors) suggested that gender is not a direct product of biological sex. She defined sex as the anatomical and physiological characteristics which signify maleness and femaleness and gender as socially constructed masculinity and femininity (Oakley 1972). Masculinity and femininity are defined not by biology but by social, cultural and psychological attributes which are acquired through becoming a man or a woman in a particular society at a particular time.

From the 1970s onwards there was much discussion about sex and gender, and whether men and women’s bodies have natural (given by Nature) differences that pre-determine a specific gender, which in turn leads to a corresponding sexuality (sexual orientation).

Anne Fausto-Sterling’s landmark ‘Five Sexes’ article then pointed out the inadequacy of a two-sex system for conceptualising intersex (Fausto-Sterling 1993) and Sue Vice pointed out that Freud had suggested humans could have ended up divided into more than two sexes, perhaps following various psychological drives (Vice 1998). Had this happened, much of the medical intervention in intersex, and the associated stigma, might not have occurred?

‘Sex’ is an idea, as much as an anatomy?

Try to forget, for a moment, all that you know about sex and gender. You are living in the period prior to 1800 when religion had not yet been replaced by science as the main ‘explainer’ of our world.
At that time there wasn’t even the concept of ‘sex’ as we know it. There was thought to be a single type of genital structure or anatomy, one that was exteriorised in men and inverted in women (in whom it could even ‘pop out’ sometimes, e.g. in the case of shepherdesses being stressfully pursued by shepherds!). And the difference between men and women was considered in a vertical, hierarchical fashion, rather than the polar, oppositional way that we now have. God was at the top, then men, then lower down were women, then animals etc. As Thomas Laqueur puts it, “If the social order was a manifestation of God’s plan for mankind then there was no need to appeal to biology to explain why women could not preach or inherit property.” (Laqueur 1990).

Looking back, and using the more recently introduced terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ with hindsight, we could thus say that before 1800 it was gender (i.e. how men and women appeared in the social realm) that was more foundational than people’s sex (their genital anatomy). But by the late 19th century male and female bodies had come to be seen as opposites, rather than two arrangements or layouts of the same components. After 1800 bodies are being thought of in a different way, as the foundation and guarantor of certain types of social arrangements. And this is some 100 years before scientific ‘discoveries’ are brought to bear to support it. As Laqueur puts it, “No one was much interested in looking for evidence of two distinct sexes until such differences became politically important. This new view has endured into recent times, with sex being said to act as a regulative ideal, operating to exclude or pathologise those whose anatomy does not fit its normative parameters (Lloyd 2007).

Social construction

The notion that men’s and women’s mode of operation in society is governed by their biology is known as ‘biological essentialism’ and has been hotly contested by many feminist theorists. The arrival of the concept of gender enabled the social components of our sexual make-up to be formulated.

Concepts of the ‘social construction’ of gender, and even sex, may be particularly helpful to intersex people in enabling their situation to be seen through a less essentialist lens, thus allowing some degree of re-conceptualisation. Simone de Beauvoir’s original feminist ideas could well prove inspirational for XY-women. In Le Deuxieme Sexe she famously stated: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir 1949), or, as Toril Moi puts it, “A woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her.” (Moi 1999). XY women might be said to fulfil de Beauvoir’s paradigm in a rather more concrete sense than most women.

Of particular note are the works that appeared in the early 1990s on the social constructionist aspects of gender (and sex) operating in intersex medicine. A pioneer article in what might be termed the recent de-medicalisation of intersex was Suzanne Kessler’s 1990 article revealing how clinicians claiming to uncover an intersex baby’s ‘real sex’ actually rely on social factors in their decision-making (Kessler 1990, 1998). Prior to her interest in intersex, Kessler (with McKenna) had drawn attention, in 1978, to the presumption that biological markers (genitals) are unequivocal under clothing; with male and female being cultural events that are ascribed via a ‘gender attribution’ process (Kessler and McKenna 1978). In other words, you look at someone and make a judgment of their sex or gender based, on the genitals that you presume they have under their clothes (their so-called ‘cultural genitals’).

Morgan Holmes discusses how medical practices obfuscate social interests and suggests that intersexed children are often made more intersexed by surgery (one assumes she means that surgical feminisation of an XY child moves the child further away from male end of spectrum than its chromosomes might otherwise have dictated). The difference between intersexed and not intersexed, she points out, can be only a few millimetres (in length of the phallus, i.e. clitoris/
penis) so maybe no one is truly intersexed, but we are all, in our infinite differences from each other, intersexed (Holmes 2002, 2008). And Cheryl Chase, founder of the Intersex Society of North America, points out that a phallus can change from being a small penis to being a large clitoris, without any actual change in its dimensions, merely as a result of redefining its owner as female rather than male (Chase, quoted in Holmes 1995).

**Sex and gender as a political idea**

Materialist feminists question the very existence of gender categories, arguing that ‘women’ and ‘men’ are social categories defined in relation to each other rather than on the basis of a pre-social biological essence. Some have even gone as far as to suggest that the chain of influence works in the opposite direction, so that rather than gender being a social expression based on sex, sex itself is a product of society and culture. Christine Delphy suggests that gender creates anatomical sex, and that sex has no inherent social implications until transformed by a hierarchical division of humanity into two (Delphy 1992 [?2002]). There are parallels here with the pre-1800 situation, in which, Laqueur suggests, ‘gender precedes sex’. And Delphy claims that recognizing a difference is a social act, as opposed to the differences being a self-evident fact, and she calls into question the very existence of the categories. The container (the category itself, sex) should be treated as a variable, like the content (gender); and as a social product (Delphy 1993).

Thus materialist feminists postulate a Marxist class-like relationship, with patriarchal domination causing a social division rather than following from pre-existing sex differences. Patriarchal society is said to take certain features of male and female biology and turn them into a set of gendered characteristics that serve to empower men and disempower women, and which are then presented as natural attributes of males and females. Hence a (power-based) hierarchy is said to precede division. Men and women exist as socially significant categories because of the exploitative relationship that binds them together and sets them apart (Delphy and Leonard 1992).

Monique Wittig, following Delphy, even argues that those such as lesbians, who opt out of social relations that make us men and women (heterosexual relations and the male/female marriage contract) are thereby not men and women (Wittig 1992). This somewhat restrictive view has been criticised, but on a theoretical level it opens up the interesting idea of XY CAIS individuals with internal testes who are attracted to men being classed as women, where XX-female lesbians are not.

**Cultural mediation and discourse**

As described above, materialist feminists emphasise social structural relations, treating men and women as social groups founded upon unequal, exploitative relationships. Post-modern feminists, on the other hand, emphasise cultural factors, seeing ‘men’ and ‘women’ as discursively constructed categories. Human beings experience their world through the senses and interpret what they see, hear etc., using the brain. This ‘making sense of things’ is mediated or influenced by cultural/sociological notions. Sociologists debate whether there is such a thing as an unmediated knowledge of the world, coming straight from things in the outside world into our understanding of those things. Perhaps all knowledge is filtered by cultural assumptions and created as a result of discourse (language).

Discourse analysis follows from the 1970/80’s ‘turn to language’ in sociological thought. There was a challenge to the assumption that language provided a set of unambiguous signs with which to label internal states and describe external reality. Language was re-conceptualised as
productive, i.e. that it constructs versions of social reality and achieves social objectives. The focus shifted away from the individual and his or her intentions, to language and its productive potential. So in post-structuralist or post-modern models, language constitutes rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of society, experience and the individual's sense of self. Human beings are said to have no fixed essence; you construct who you are through discourse. There is no 'I' (and no body?) prior to (in the absence of) language and discourse.

The most influential version of the concept of discourse is that derived from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, discourses are anything which can carry meaning (languages, images, stories, scientific narratives and cultural products) but are also things we do; social practices such as the marriage ceremony. Discourses are not a reflection of an already ordered reality; instead they are that with which reality becomes ordered. They are the means by which differences between people become produced. For Foucault, discourses are 'normative', carrying with them standards for behaviour, defining what is proper and improper. Discourses are said to be historically variable and to be tied up with power. The emergence of certain discourses of sexuality are inter-dependent with social power exercised by medical, judicial and religious communities. But wherever power is exercised, a resistant discourse arises which is empowering for different groups of people.

From a Foucauldian perspective, all forms of knowledge are constructed through discourse and discursive practices, including scientific knowledge. It can be argued that even scientific/biological knowledge comes to us through a filter resulting from the scientist's position as an interpreter influenced by sociological concepts, from their use of language etc. Moira Gatens writes that, “the anatomical body is itself a theoretical object, for the discourse of anatomy is produced by human beings in culture” (Gatens 1996: 70). In this way a pre-1800 knowledge-system based on religion determined that a one-sex arrangement was the basic truth.

This post-modern form of theorising recognises the mediated nature of our relation to the world, through the ideas, concepts and so on, by means of which we make sense of it. It also recognises that these meanings can vary according to context and over time. Such theories reject notions of a coherent unified self, capable of rational reflection and agency, in favour of a model of the self which is fragmented, constantly in the process of formation, constituting itself out of its own understandings. The theorizing of gender in response to these strands of thought comes to emphasise the process whereby subjects become gendered as a process in which subjectivities form in relation to the meanings that people have available to them. The concept of discourse gives a role to subjects in the making of themselves as gendered, via the appropriation of discourse.

Performativity

A number of post-structuralist feminist theorists, influenced to different degrees by Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray (a French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst), have sought to theorise the body and its relation to difference and gendered subjectivity (sexually specific personality), resulting in concepts of subjectivity as embodied performance.

Influential feminist scholar Judith Butler, for example, attempts to theorise the ways in which 'bodies are materialized as sexed' in the light of a critique of heterosexism, and bringing attention to a performative aspect of gender (Butler 1990).

Butler no more accepts sex as a natural (given by Nature) category than gender itself. “There is no recourse to a body that has not already been interpreted by cultural meanings, hence sex could not qualify as a pre-discursive anatomical facticity” (Butler 1990: 8). Our understanding of material, anatomical differences is mediated through our cultural frame of meaning. Rather than gender following from biology, for Butler, our gender norms are seen as structuring biology. We view biological factors as requiring a binary division into two sexes, male and
female, because of a socially constructed gender to which *heterosexuality* is central. Heterosexuality, of course, requires a binary division into male and female. For Butler, then, it is the “epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality” (Butler 1990: viii) which drives our division into male and female, and which itself structures our understanding of biology.

Butler posits that if gender does not follow automatically from sex, then there is no reason to assume only two genders (Butler 1990). Questioning the linkage between sex and gender leads to a speculation that sex may be a product of scientific discourses, and may thus be as culturally constructed as gender (the influence of Delphy is seen here). Butler says that the body does not have a pre-given, essential sex and that bodies become gendered by means of a continual ‘performance’ of gender. She cites drag as mimicking ‘real’ women then goes on to suggest that if gender is a construction then there can be no ‘original’ gender for the drag artist to parody, so that drag highlights the imitative structure of gender itself (Butler 1990).

In other words, she explores the way in which certain transgressive performances may subvert the binary logic of gender, the rigid division between masculine and feminine. In focusing on those performances that parody aspects of femininity and masculinity she suggests that gender cannot be thought of as having some essential basis; there is no original ‘authentic’ femininity or masculinity located in male or female bodies or in our inner selves. In *Bodies That Matter* she explains that this performance is not casual or ad hoc but that we are constrained into gender. She also now (in that book) shifts her focus towards the materialisation of sexed bodies, in answer to accusations from other scholars of having denied (in earlier works) materiality or the reality of the body. She argues that as an effect of power, sexed bodies are forcibly materialised through time. This is said to occur via a linguistic *performativity* which is citational in nature, making pronouncements (e.g.”It’s a girl!”) with reference to existing normative conventions.

So, for Butler, physical sex differences are marked and formed by discursive practices, a productive power that demarcates and differentiates bodies. Sex ‘is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ ’ (Butler 1993: 2) and ‘far from being chosen, femininity is an effect of the forcible citation of a norm’ (Butler quoted in Lloyd 2007: 63). Gendered subjectivity is thus acquired through the repeated performance by the individual of discourses of gender. Allied to this is an internalised social surveillance or disciplining, that individuals apply to themselves (Foucault 1976-1984).

Talking about gender as a performance can suggest an actor on a stage, an agent or subject who is formed prior to the acts and who engages in them, maybe choosing which acts to perform. Butler is at pains to resist such a construal. There is, she argues, no doer behind the deed. The doer becomes formed from the doing. Her account, as is Foucault’s, is an account of the formation of subjectivity. We become subjects from our performances and the performances of others towards us. The gendered performances in which we engage are performances in accordance with a *script* which provides us with ideals of masculinity and femininity that render certain behaviour appropriate and others not. Subjectivity is a process of submitting ourselves to socially constituted norms and practices.

**A return to ‘the body’**

Following on from the emphasis on the social determinants of gender, and then the turn towards *language* or *discourse* in conceptualising sexual identities, there was a return in the 1990s towards acknowledging the body, or *corporeality*, as having been neglected or negated. The Foucauldian approach had treated the body as an ‘inscriptional surface’, a surface given meaning through discourse. Feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz claim to distrust the representation of bodies which disregard their materiality, thereby enabling the dominance of reason and consciousness (Grosz 1994). These feminists align themselves with an approach originating in the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an associate of de Beauvoir and proponent
of a philosophical line of thought known as phenomenology, which sees the body as *lived experience*, as a corporeal ground of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty challenges dominant neo-Cartesian\(^1\) models of subjectivity, by highlighting the *a priori* coincidence of consciousness and the body, that is, abandoning the mind/body dualism in favour of the notion of a *body-subject*. We experience things *through* our body, not in a separate relationship to it. He challenges the notion of the human subject as being made up of two modes of existence, the mind and the body, which extricates consciousness from its *embodiment* in the world. He employs the concept of *corporeal schema* or *body-image* to describe the middle space between the Cartesian mind and body.

Feminists such as Rosalyn Diprose, Moira Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz, Vicki Kirby, Gail Weiss and Elizabeth Wilson have built on this phenomenological concept, and on psychoanalytic theories, to derive the notion of *imaginary bodies*. Our identities are formed as ways of giving significance to particular body forms. Gender is “biology-as-lived”. This is a potentially useful move in feminist thought as far as XY-women are concerned because it is all too easy for an over-emphasis on gender to mask a banishing of the intersexed body to the realms of shame and stigma. The challenge is to enable XY-females to integrate the male aspects of their bodily make-up into their sense of self in a more satisfactory way than has hitherto been the case.

Luce Irigaray has promoted the ‘sexual difference’ approach. This reacts against the feminist thought of the 1970s which said that men and women would be equal in all respects if social obstacles were removed. Women, she said, should *acknowledge* their fundamental differences from men, and form their own identity based on the mother-daughter relationship, even develop their own language, and seek a more self-referential identity situated directly in their ‘otherness’ not only from men, but from women also (Irigaray 1985). In the case of XY-females, this identity might even be a more authentic form of the androgyny favoured in different ways in the 1970s by feminists such as Gayle Rubin, Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet, who were seeking at that time to break down gender categories as a socially subversive act.

**Narrativity**

Post-modernism's turn to language and a discursive/performative construction of subjectivity is also pertinent in terms of *narrativity*. Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest among theorists and researchers in autobiographical recollections, life stories, and narrative approaches to understanding human behaviour and experience. Important in this context is Dan P. McAdams’ life story model of identity (McAdams 1985, 1993, 1996), which asserts that people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalised and evolving narratives of the self.

Arthur W. Frank, a medical sociologist, has published extensively on the subject of patients’ experience of ‘illness’ and the value of personal story-telling (Frank 1991, 1992, 1995, 1996). Vera Whisman talks, in relation to lesbian and gay life histories, about ‘choosing a story’ and suggests that the sexual self is a narrative construction (Whisman 2002). Teresa de Lauretis tells us that subjectivity is not a fixed entity but a constant process of self-production: narration is one way of reproducing subjectivity (de Lauretis 1984).

This is allied to Anthony Giddens’ concept of the ‘reflexive project of the self’ in which the existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual supplies about herself and in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if they are to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive (Giddens 1991: 54). David Gauntlett explains that a stable self-identity is based on an account of a person’s life, actions and influences which makes

\(^1\) Cartesian = based on the thought of 17th century French philosopher René Descartes.
sense to themselves, and which can be explained to other people without much difficulty (Gauntlett 2002). Mary Hern also talks about ‘narrative identities’ (citing Erik Homburger Erikson) and about exploring different options before committing to an identity (Erikson 1980, Hern 2008).

All this is pertinent to the secrecy and narrative inventiveness that many intersexed people feel forced to adopt (hiding their lack of menstruation, fear of disclosure to partners and so on) with a fear of admitting to being intersexed. Narrativity may offer possibilities for XY-women, but also represents pitfalls in constructing, and maintaining the coherence of their stories.

Endnote

We can see from what is presented above that there may not be any absolute truths about the body, and sex, and gender, because anything that’s said about them is a product of human beings situated in a particular culture at a particular time; and this includes the way that the body is explained by biologists, anatomists and clinicians. As Alexandra Howson points out, ‘the meaning of the body (including the sex assigned to it and its reliance on distinctiveness, opposition and hierarchy) is greatly determined by the interpretive framework through which it is viewed’ (Howson 2005: 56). I want to encourage XY-women to ‘think outside the box’ and engage with patterns of thought that could help liberate them, to some extent at least, from the limitations and restrictions of the dominant dimorphic, binary paradigm of sex and gender.

Recommended reading


Beasley, C. (1999) What is Feminism? An Introduction to Feminist Theory (Sage). Specifically Chapter 6 (Feminism and the Influence of Psychoanalysis), and Chapter 7 (Postmodernist/ Poststructuralist Influences).


Chapters in Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (eds) (2002), Gender, a Sociological Reader (Routledge), in which scholars who are well-known in academic circles summarise their specialist areas:

Chapter 1: Stanley, L. ‘Should Sex Really be Gender – or Gender Really be Sex’.
Chapter 3: Butler, J. ‘Performative Subversions’.
Chapter 4: Delphy, C. ‘Rethinking Sex and Gender’.
Chapter 40: Whisman, V. ‘Choosing a Story’.


Chapter 10: Jackson, S. ‘Theorizing Gender and Sexuality’.
Chapter 12: Vice, S. ‘Psychoanalytic Feminist Theory’.
Current Feminist Viewpoints (1999)²

Other works cited in the text


Hern M. (2008) *Medical Life Histories: Doctors on the Edge*. Spring term seminar (26 Feb 2008) by University of Sussex Centre for Life History Research at which Mary Hern (Brighton and Sussex Medical School) gave presentation on “how narrative methodologies can explore the journey from medical student to junior doctor”.


Irigaray, L (1985) *This Sex Which is Not One* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.).


Oakley, A. (1972) Sex, Gender and Society (Oxford: Martin Robertson; reprinted in 1984 by Blackwell)

