

Chapter 2

Feminist and Queer Theories: The Response to the Social Construction of Gender

One of the obvious trends seen in our interview study was that the responses regarding gender roles, gender identity, and sexuality became more nuanced and elaborated, as one moved from the straight to the gay/lesbian to the transgender interview participants. Gay/lesbian and transgender participants were more likely to have thought about the socially constructed and embodied aspects of gender and sexual identity, about the dynamic interactions between gender and sexuality, and about their own strategies for self-constructing their gender and sexual identities in the context of living in a social environment that defines and enforces norms of gender and sexual behaviors and appearances. Gay/lesbian and transgender participants were also more likely to have read literature from women and gender studies authors about the nature of gender and sexual identity. While some of these differences were undoubtedly due to the greater self-selection of these latter participants into our interview study, this greater awareness of the complexities gender and sexuality also reflected sensitization to issues of gender of sexuality resulting from being in some way gender non-heteronormative in a heteronormative society.

The motivation for feminist and queer theories was to create an intellectual and even moral basis for the challenging of heteronormative assumptions, beliefs, and enforcements that acted to socially subordinate women to men and to discriminate against those who deviated from traditional heteronormative gender and sexual identity. In this chapter, we consider the development of and conflicts between feminist and queer theories in their understandings of gender and sexual identity.

Feminist Theory and Essentialist Conceptualizations of Gender

Feminist theory addresses the cultural/historical context and biological premises of gender, as well as the issues of sexism and the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression. Gender has many functions and many theories that support

its agency. As Hawkesworth (2006) notes, feminist scholars have defined gender in numerous contexts, from an attribute to a type of social organization and as an ideology to sex roles, power differentials, and analytic categories. Gender is key to how we identify people, organize relationships with others, and develop meaning through natural and social events. Harding (1986, p. 18) states, “gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes.” Hausman (2001) goes on to say that gender is really an “epistemology” for knowing and understanding the operation of culture in defining identities, where one’s perceptions and experiences of the world are attributed to a socially constructed narrative based on one’s belonging to one gender category or the other. As Stryker (1994) notes “bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact...Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we are fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy” (p. 249–250).

Gender was traditionally assumed to be based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy (Hausman 2001). From birth, humans are categorized as male versus female based on their external genitalia. Consistent with essentialism, those born male are supposed to act masculine and be sexually attracted to women, while those born female are supposed to act feminine and be sexually attracted to men. Society then uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices to enforce adherence to these gender roles (Connell 2002).

Garfinkel (1967) goes on to say that gender is looked at as being only two categories, male and female, that are exclusive and biologically determined from birth. Garfinkel (1967) notes that since this gendered binary socialization is viewed as being “natural,” it is thus not questioned and therefore no “choice” is needed. This is similar to gender being theorized in a way that denotes its utility as part of a “reproductive arena” (Connell 2002), where the woman is the “egg-producer,” while the man is the “sperm producer” (Smith 1992). If we look at essentialism from a biological and evolutionary perspective, then the role of male and female is to procreate. The woman is the “egg-producer” and the man is the “sperm producer” (Smith 1992). In doing so, this leaves out the utility of sex for reasons of pleasure and sexual acts between the same sex. As Barrett (1980, pp. 62–77) notes, “a conception of sexuality that reduces the erotic to reproduction.” This type of exclusive essentialism also reinforces the traditional gender role schema. The woman will thus take care of the children and the man will “bring home the bacon.” Though this may be the traditional way of looking at gender roles, Connell (2002) debunks this by mapping out of the historical roots of gender roles and how gender roles can change based on the needs of the culture and in some respects could be conceptualized as being “situational” (Thorne 1993).

Moodie (1994) discusses this type of situational gender role, when talking about the “men in the mines.” The men would do housework, while off in the mines, and the women would perform masculine functions required to maintain

the household, while the men were away. Connell (2002) describes the former gender roles in this cultural setting as, "Manhood principally meant competent and benevolent management of a rural homestead, and participating in its community." Due to the men having to leave their homes for the mines, the dynamic changed, and the men no longer looked at their role as running/managing the households. It was also noted that the men would take "mine wives," while in the mines, and would form intimate relationships with these other men, while away from the women. As the workers returned from the mines, they were subjected to more proletarian beliefs, a sense of strong masculinity was indoctrinated once again, and the wives were viewed as being dependents on the men, who had the qualities of being tough, physically dominant, and aggressive valued by the European system and its belief in traditional gender roles.

Feminism went on to challenge male social dominance, based on the gender binary, by questioning the supposed "naturalness" of the subordination of women in social relationships, due to the purported physical superiority of the male body over the female's supposedly more fragile and vulnerable body. Therefore, feminism helped to not only ground women in an identity but also helped challenge the hierarchical relationships between men and women (Hird 2000). Braidott (1994) goes on to say that, "In the feminist perspective, patriarchy defined as the actualization of the masculine homosocial bond can be seen as a monument denial... insofar as it has been haunted by the political necessity to make biology coincide with subjectivity, the anatomical with the psychosexual, and there reproduction with sexuality" (p. 182). Scott (1986) and Bordo (1993), for example, apply the postmodern perspective of individualism to argue for the social construction of gender and, therefore, that essentialism and the taken for granted role that "the sexed body is given" needs to be questioned. Scott states that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and the gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (p. 1067).

For example, Andrea Dworkin (1989) challenges the assumption that "The power of men is first a metaphysical assertion of self, an *I am* that exists a priori....The woman must, by definition, lack it" (p. 13). Wilchins (2002) goes on to talk about *Man* as the universal and thus women are defined "by her opposition to *Man*, by what she does not have, the Penis, and the one thing she has that *Man* does not, reproduction and sexuality" (p. 57). By arguing that masculinity and femininity are social constructs, feminist theorists are also arguing that traditionally defined gender roles were essentially artificial.

Dworkin goes on to discuss how feminist theory in labeling women as *others*, compared to men, has also indirectly defined women as *being others* and, in turn, the label itself has taken on a negative value with this difference being marked as a label of inferiority. With this difference continuing to be tied to misogynistic beliefs, the belief of being other was thus perpetrated as innate, natural, and determined. "Gender and its masculine and feminine embodiments became a focus of attention: what was horrible and objectionable about male behavior and attitudes became a function of masculine power and privilege, and what was harmful and

debilitating about women's complicity was relocated in our socialized femininity" (Zita 1998, p. 110).

While gender as a socially defined construct and its associated gender roles were actively questioned by feminist theorists, whether gender identity, in terms of an embodied male versus female identity binary, should also be questioned was extremely controversial. Hesse-Biber et al. (1999) discuss how the issue of whether the gender binary itself should be destabilized ultimately polarized feminist theory. French feminists, such as Helene Cixous (1986), Luce Irigaray (1991), and Julie Kristeva (1986), seemed to "establish the female body and maternity as foundational and symbolic sources of women's psychic and sexual difference," i.e., that an essentialist view of "femaleness" as being natural and different from "maleness" was necessary for understanding and empowering women. In contrast, poststructuralist critics, like Judith Butler (1993), argued that the materiality of the body was "already gendered, already constructed" (p. 4), such that the supposed physical basis of the gender binary was a socially derived construction of reality.

As Heyes (2007) discusses, transgenderism/transsexualism's challenge to essentialist ideas of gender identity caused feminist theorists, such as Janice Raymond (1979/1994) and Bernice Hausman (1995), to reject the idea that gender identity could be fluid. To the extent that transsexuals, in particular, were regarded as trying to assume a gender identity opposite from their born sex, Raymond and Hausman dismissed them as being complicit in reinforcing the dominant society's view that socially constructed aspects of gender were essentially linked to this gender identity. The degree and manner to which gender should be deconstructed continues to be both an issue among feminist theorists and a source of tension between feminist and queer theorists (Jagose 2009).

A feminist theory that adheres to an essentialist, fixed binary conception of gender identity has been argued to be inadequate in addressing intersectional issues and fails to account for how a supposedly autonomous self in such a system can be empowered to resist oppression (see also, Shotwell and Sangrey's (2009) critique of liberal-individualist models). Bettcher (2010) notes how Haraway (1991) questions the universality of the experience of oppression among women, while Anzaldúa (1987) proposes that it is, in fact, the consciousness of the plurality of selves associated with multiple social identities that allows for resistance to oppression. Braidotti (1994) thus points out how, "The central issue at stake is how to create, legitimate, and represent a multiplicity of alternative forms of feminist subjectivity without falling into relativism. The starting point is the recognition that Woman is a general umbrella term that brings together different kinds of women, different levels of experience, and different identities" (p. 162). Bordo (1993) discusses two primary "currents" that have created a new "gender skepticism." The first talks about the impact of intersectionality and living in "multiple jeopardy." Having multiple forms of oppression is looked at as being very different from the experience of the white, middle class women. By saying that all women experience the same type of oppression, one devalues the experience of women who are subjected to multiple levels of oppression due to their race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation.

Shields (2008) asserts that one's identity is not just about his or her own self-identification but is also about the intersecting larger social structures and the power differentials associated with belonging to a certain group or groups. Individuals may belong to multiple socially oppressed groups, experiencing not only the sexism addressed by feminism, but also racism, classism, homophobia, etc. These intersections generate both oppression and opportunity (Zinn and Dill 1996), including opportunities for coalition building to oppose multiple oppressions. As Risman (2004) notes, "one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone" (p. 442). For transgenders, at least two identities, those of gender and of sexuality, are always intersectional, while as discussed below, feminist and queer theorists have at times tried deliberately to keep these identities separate.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is another controversial topic in feminist theory that also challenges the essentialist aspect of some feminist theorizing in favor of a more intersectional understanding. Hegemonic masculinity was an idea first proposed in reports from a field study of social inequality in an Australian high school, in a related conceptual discussion of the making of masculinities and the experience of men's bodies, and in a debate over the role of men in Australian labor politics. As first proposed, hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done and not just a set role off expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. It embodied currently the most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (Connell 1983). The term started out as being a conceptual and empirical model that then was applied to a larger context and framework. The concept was used as a way to look at patterns of resistance and crime, to explore the difficulties with gender-neutral pedagogy, and studying media presentations. It was then used on a larger scale to study men's health practices, risky behaviors, and its application to organizational studies.

Such a view of masculinity was useful for many feminist theorists to understand the basis of men's social power over women, but this version of hegemonic masculinity was also criticized for essentializing male-female differences and for reducing the understanding of gender to power relations of dominance and submission (Moller 2007). In response to such criticisms, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reformulated hegemonic masculinity and proposed a model of multiple masculinities and power relations. This model was then integrated into a new *sociological theory of gender*. Connell and Messerschmidt acknowledged that multiple masculinities may produce a static typology. They essentialize the character of men or impose a false unity on a fluid and contradictory reality. Masculinity is seen in terms of a dichotomy of the biological sex versus gender, where you essentialize male-female difference and ignore difference and exclusion within the gender categories. The concept fails to specify what conformity to hegemonic masculinity looks like in practice. There is also confusion over who is a hegemonically masculine man and also about who can enact hegemonic practices. Hegemonic masculinity can see only

structure, making the subject invisible and does not recognize the multilayered or divided individual. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note how in social theories of gender there has often been a tendency toward functionalism, that is, seeing gender relations as a self-contained, self-producing system, and explaining every element in terms of its function in reproducing the whole. They argue, instead, that the dominance of men and the subordination of women constitute a historical process, not a self-reproducing system.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) thus proposed that multiple hierarchies exist within each gender, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, leading to questioning the universalizing of all men, i.e., all men are not white, middle class, etc. Power and difference were core concepts in the gay liberation moment, which critiqued the oppression of men and the oppression by men in an attempt to deconstruct the male stereotype. The idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of homosexual men's experience with violence and prejudice from homophobic straight men.

The concept constructs masculine power from the direct experiences of women, rather than from the structural basis of women's subordination. "Patriarchy," the long-term structure of the subordination of women, must be distinguished from "gender," a specific system of exchange that arose in the context of modern capitalism. It is a mistake to treat a hierarchy of masculinities constructed within gender relations as logically continuous with the patriarchal subordination of women. The concept cannot be understood as the settled character structure of any group of men, but rather must question how men conform to an ideal and turn themselves into complicit or resistant types, without anyone ever managing to exactly embody that ideal (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The essence of Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulation is that hegemonic masculinity must be understood as the result of a dynamic process, such that there is no one "fixed character type" or "assemblage of toxic traits." This moving away from an essentializing of gender moves the understanding of hegemonic masculinity toward the realm of queer theory, where gender and related sexual identities are understood as purely social constructions. Hegemonic masculinity is now partly defined by the practices of women (hegemonic or "emphasized" femininity) and may differ in its manifestations at the local, regional, and global levels. With regard to the latter, local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are said to have a "family resemblance," rather than a necessary logical identity with regional and global manifestations. There is still, however, a need to develop the theorizing about hegemonic masculinity to better incorporate masculine embodiment as an important basis. Transgender individuals challenge purely social constructivist ideas of the bases of hegemonic masculinity. A conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity as being dynamic allows for the possibility of change, including "democratizing gender relations."

According to Wilchins (2004), "While the last 30 years have seen new rights granted to women, gays, and transgender people, this new access and privilege has still left issues of primary gender—of masculinity and femininity—remarkably untouched. Gender stereotypes appear as pervasive, "natural," and inevitable as

ever” (p. 97). In the second wave of feminism, while starting to focus on personal experience, feminism was scrutinized more for its focus on imbalances of power between males and females (Zita 1998), reflected in the concern with hegemonic masculinity. The dilemma was that an essentialist reading of gender power differentials yielded a clear differentiation of the oppressors and the oppressed. This clear differentiation might be useful for motivating the oppressed to think of themselves as a collective entity needing to fight oppression, but it also reifies the system of oppression as being somehow “natural” and does not take into account the intersectionalities of multiple oppressed social identities. This was where queer theory broke from feminist theory.

Queer Theory and Social Constructivism

Much of the philosophical and political understanding of non-heteronormative gender identity and sexuality has derived from *queer theory* with “Modernist sex ontology being challenged by the emergence of postmodern sexual theory and the development of multidimensional sexual orientation research” (Zita 1998, p. 130) that challenges the reductionist explanatory framework of feminist theory. While feminist theory readily accepted and challenged the socially constructed aspects of gender and sexual expression, feminist theorists’ essentializing of gender identity meant that the theory was limited in accommodating the idea that both gender and sexual identity might also be social constructs able to be questioned, subverted, and self-constructed (Halperin 1995). Queer theory thus developed from feminist and deconstructivist theories that posited “normative” and “deviant” sexual behaviors and cognitions as social constructs. The social constructivist approach was a rebellion against the “essentialist” ideas that developed in Western societies beginning in the late nineteenth century. Such essentialist ideas came to tightly link gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation within a binary, biologically based, heteronormative gender schema (Kimmel 1996; Norton 1997).

According to Norton (1997), “contemporary Euro-American men’s chief concern is fundamentally analogous to that of ancient Greeks and modern Latinos: the maintenance of one’s gender image as honorably masculine, and the retention of the social power and privilege that accompanies a positive attribution of masculinity” (p. 143). The fear is that, once you are able to feminize the male sex, then one would be able to form a feminization of all men, which breaks down the traditionally clear distinction between the superior male and the inferior female. Norton notes the late nineteenth and early twentieth century concerns about the working man becoming disempowered by the feminization of culture and the working man’s incorporation within capitalist systems of production. Femininity was seen as a projection of infantilization and dependency. Norton quotes Kimmel’s (1996) idea that, “The project of Self-Made Masculinity, of a manhood constantly tested and proved, {became} equated with a relentless effort to repudiate femininity, a frantic effort to dissociate from women” (p. 318). “Most terrifying to men was the