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Theories of Gender

What is the 'transgender problem'? Who's 'problem' is it?

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Those who stand outside mainstream cultural norms are often perceived and portrayed as pathological or as having a specific "problem". However, defining a situation as a problem involves a value judgement [Haralambos 1980:404], in that the problem is only defined in relation to particular individual or cultural norms. The individual being so described may have no sense at all of having a problem, other than experiencing discrimination or marginalisation. Like homosexuality, transgenderism has been pathologised and problematised, and has been largely perceived as an individual rather than a social issue. The major problem that the wider society seems to have in dealing with people with transgender issues is that their existence blurs or confuses the neat little labels and categories that most people, through socialisation, "know" to be "true".

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Classifications may lack any kind of objective reality or naturalness, but they make it very easy to deal with people according to a culturally prescribed format. There are ways of dealing with people that are prescribed by culture; by talking to children in a different way than would be used to talk to adults, by using the eyes and voice in different ways depending on whether we are talking to a male or a female and depending on whether a male or a female is doing the talking, by having different ideas of personal space for a woman or a man. When asked to describe a person, most people will make it immediately clear that the person they are talking about is male or female. Transgender people shake up these neat categories and confuse people by blurring their established modes of dealing with people. This causes people to have to think very consciously, rather than being able to act on a formula so well-known that it is virtually unconscious.

People who identify as transgender have acknowledged that they feel uncomfortable with, and do not want to live as, the gender they have been arbitrarily ascribed on the basis of the genitals they possess. For this they are often vilified and shunned, and classified as unnatural or pathological. To place this in context, however, the lessons of history demonstrate again and again that the first people to challenge particular social roles and customs have always been vilified and shunned. Yet once the changes have themselves become established the custom that has become replaced becomes ridiculous.

Dissatisfaction with the feminine role and the systemic/societal limitations of being female led to the advent of feminism; feminists were vilified and despised almost everywhere. Yet now young women find it hard to believe that their mothers believed they had to stay home with their babies and young children lest the children become damaged through deprivation of a full-time mother, and simply did not see themselves of having the option of working without damaging the mental health and stability of their children. ("It is important to note that this lack of belief and understanding between generations also serves an important social function").

All of this has much to do with Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Hegemony means that a large number of people (a society) agree to believe the same things, and that they agree not because they are coerced or tortured into it but because their consent is mobilised. In other words, they come to believe, through socialisation, that their particular system or way of living is natural, right, and the only way to live, and they will defend their cultural way of living to the death. The beliefs of a culture always operate to suit the interests of those who hold power, however, and when one idea no longer serves an economic or social purpose that suits the powerful, the belief changes, as shown in the example above.

Cultural hegemony works very much on a Parson's theory of functionalism and Durkheim's notion of social facts. What this means is that our binary system of gender serves a function - it is an organising and regulating principle that keeps society in order - and that while it may not be a natural law, it has certainly become a social fact. Social facts are beliefs that the majority of people believe to be true. Durkheim introduced the notion that social facts became just as axiomatic as natural laws; that for instance, that gravity kept us anchored to the earth (natural law) and all people are automatically masculine or feminine, depending on their genitalia (social fact). The sky is blue (natural law) and all people will be heterosexual based on the genitals they are born with (social fact). What remained and remains unexplored is the fact that social facts are usually natural fictions and that hegemony is the only thing perpetuating them.

The culture/nature and nature/nurture debates seem quite likely to continue ad infinitum and ad nauseum. It has never been satisfactorily reconciled that our society can say with pride that we have defeated nature (genetic engineering, both human and animal, for instance) and yet condemn other people for being unnatural by defying notions of gender, which, rather than being natural, exists only in the realm of social fact.

Free will versus biological determinism

Theories of human free will and freedom from the tyranny of instinct and biology have existed for thousands of years. Free will theories state that human beings are far above the level of animals; so far above, in fact, that the constraints of the animal kingdom cannot contain us. We can reproduce or not reproduce, choose between life and death, live among others or in solitude, and choose any sexuality that is available to us. However, theories of free will never seem to have explored the notion of freedom from culture or the right of the individual to practise freedom from culture.

Biological determinism is a theory that also dates back thousands of years, although it has gone through numerous guises and stages. Religion is generally a form of determinism; few religions have given human beings the option of choice, or have offered only a limited choice between behaving only in accordance with the tenets of the religion, or being punished. It is this choice of forced choice masquerading as free will that maintains the rigidity of our current binary system of gender.

To explain biological determinism very simply, this theory states that who you are and what you become is determined by your biology. To provide an example, imagine that a female is born. The female has a uterus and the capacity to reproduce. Because she can reproduce, she will produce children. Because she produces children, the main focus of her life will be motherhood ... and so on and on. Because anatomy is destiny the female has no option but to reproduce. If by some chance this woman believes she has a choice about reproduction, this can be taken as evidence of a disorder. Or, a male is born. He has a penis. The penis is constructed to allow intercourse with a vagina. Therefore the male will be heterosexual and will desire a sexual relationship with a woman. And of course, every cultural force operates to ensure that the individual does not deviate from what s/he is naturally inclined to do.

According to the determinists, to desire that which is not "biologically determined" is evidence of poor adjustment, wilful selfishness, or psychiatric disorder. Biological determinism states that because an individual has certain structures or capacities these must be utilised in a "correct" way. It legitimises the existing status quo by stating that what is expected of us is commensurate with our biology, which predicts our destiny, and is therefore right. Biological determination is the clear opposite of theories of free will.

In terms of gender and theories of gender, free will versus determinism is still a major issue. This may perhaps be the crux of a whole range of issues surrounding gender. Because we are taught from our earliest stages that almost everything we are or can expect to be is determined by our sex, it becomes an integral part of the way we see ourselves and everything around us. Furthermore, because our culture operates on a binary gender system, with almost everything (emotions, professions, hobbies, mannerisms, ways of walking, talking and being) posited as either/or, our own way of choosing becomes very limited. Every possible aspect of behaviour and lifestyle becomes identified with male/female or me/not me.

While tomboyism in little girls is tolerable for a few years, and there may be giggles about a little boy who wants to own a doll or wear his sister's dresses (less likely; a boy is more likely to be sanctioned for this behaviour), any extension of these beyond the years of childhood is treated with suspicion, questioning and dismay. As stated earlier, non-conformity in relation to gender is viewed as evidence of poor adjustment, wilful selfishness, or psychological/psychiatric disorder.

Sex, gender and sexuality

It is from our notion of sex and gender that our classifications of sexuality flow. Because western culture offers only a binary system of gender composed of complementary and utterly contradictory male/female and masculine/feminine parts and roles, our sexual roles and choices tend to be equally limited. The binary system is translated into the formula that male + female [heterosexual] = good. Not only is heterosexuality "good" but it is the only choice that does not equal perversion, wilfulness, or mental-disorder/illness.

An obvious part of the problem is that the language needed to describe diverse sexualities just don't exist. Names have been assigned to male/male and female/female sexuality in the last 150 years, but these were originally created as the names of disorders (lesbianism, homosexuality). It is only in the last twenty years that these terms have been removed from the lists of psychiatrically classifiable disorders, and hence these have not been considered positive terms. However, the reclamation of such words as gay and lesbian since the 1970s has been nothing short of amazing.

The sexuality of transgendered people has never been assigned a name or set of names of its own. According to mainstream society a man and a woman in a sexual relationship are heterosexual. However, a transgender female who is biologically male having sex with a man may also classify herself as heterosexual. One of the greatest crimes that social groups tend to be charged with is that they make everything that society takes for granted difficult, and requires them to be explained - which certainly presents problems when they cannot be explained except in terms of themselves.

A further problem is that the invention of new words to describe differences means that the words can be latched onto, and misrepresented or sent-up. Language is one of the most powerful enforcers of cultural constriction. "Oh, excuse me, I forgot. We Can't call 'em girls anymore, they're women now". This was perhaps the catch cry of the paternalists who resented the changes in the status of women, making it abundantly clear that to alter language is to alter reality. Girl as a term is in no way equal to man while woman comes much closer (but, in our culture, remains unequal). It is harder to be patronising to a woman than it is to a girl. If someone is thought of as a "girl" the perception of them is likely to be different to someone who is thought of as a "woman".

Queer Theory

Gender theorists and queer theorists are now exploring the notion of using the word sexual without any necessity for defining prefixes or using existing definitions on a purely personal basis. (self-identification). There are theoretical positions for and against these notions however, some protest that language of difference must be fully reclaimed. (i.e. not seen as in any way derogatory) before it can be discarded; others believe that to use mainstream classifications at all is to remain within the constraints of mainstream culture. Much of the controversy comes from notions of identity, self-identity and definition.

Queer theory is still very new and is being constantly explored, particularly with the added facility of the Internet, by which means the

debate has quickly extended worldwide. Like post-structuralism and post-modernism, the limits of what queer theory actually encompasses has yet to be concretely defined.

There are many other theoretical issues that can be included in queer theory, and there is a great deal of exploration still to be undertaken. Queer theory, like all theoretical sets, contains its own problems and inconsistencies that will need to be recognised and worked with if it is to become a truly representative theory.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.