The Present State(s) and Future Direction(s) of Gender. Troubling the Binary Beyond Nature Versus Nurture

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Abstract: The purpose of this conceptual essay is to offer perspective on the present state and future direction of gender and sexuality issues and scholarship in education. It is important to invoke the qualification of “perspective” to acknowledge the contested and complex nature of gender and sexuality as subjects of inquiry. Indeed, satisfactory definitions remain elusive, or perhaps a more accurate assertion is that they are illusory. It has become cliché to note that gender is a fundamental organizing principle, and to expound on social constructivism. That said, it remains quite the case that gender and sexuality as concepts have profound material consequences in questions of identity and especially their lived experiences.

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questions of identity and especially their lived experiences. As Ridgeway (2008) rightly notes: “The driving force behind gender as a distinct system of difference and inequality is gender’s deep-seated role as an organizing force in social relations. Sex categorization, which is the routine process of labeling others as male or female, is a fundamental cultural and cognitive tool that people use to frame an even more fundamental human activity – relating to another, be it in person, on paper, on the Internet, or even in imagination” (Ridgeway, 2008, 267).

In short, sex and gender are generally conflated in daily social life as well as in the realm of education. Such reductionist and binary conceptions defy the less convenient and more complicated reality of identities. Connolly (2002) asserts: “An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being (...) Identity requires difference in order to be, and converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (Connolly, 2002, 64).

One of the fairly recent changes that have occurred since gender and sexuality first became disciplinary spaces is the invocation of the plural, “genders” and “sexualities” as both assertions and defining characteristics. The binaries (i.e. male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) have given way to fluidity and continuums. This has arguably opened countless possibilities for definitions, expressions, understandings, lived experiences and study of these subjects. They have legitimized the variations present in social life – at least in many quarters – with great benefit to people for whom the dualism of gender and sexuality were caustic and violent, denying their very existence or defining them as inherently impossible and threatening to the dominant social order. Many have suffered great loss or even death at the hands of people who seek to maintain a dominant hegemonic arrangement.

I would further assert that those of us who identify materially and socially as male or female and heterosexual have also benefited from this change because our expressions of gender have wider possibilities. In this regard, we could be speaking about boys being allowed or encouraged to play with dolls or girls being supported to play football. These would seem to be foolish examples if not for the fact that even these benign behaviors are often met with ridicule or violence. If we are to make further progress on our work around genders and sexualities than we must recognize that the question of what toys a child is allowed to play with, while less consequential, is nonetheless a part of the same arrangement that sanctions
violence and murder of those who transgress gender and sexual binaries that secure a bigger project.

Foucault (1978) has written extensively on social transgression and discipline, interrogating the ideologies that rely on repression to maintain a certain social order for which binaries are essential. He notes that such “operates as a sentence to disappear, but also to maintain an injunction of silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know. Such was the hypocrisy of our bourgeois societies with its halting logic” (Foucault, 1978, 4-5). Yet, where there is repression, there is also resistance. Indeed, he goes on to say, “It was forced to make a few concessions however. If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, if was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit (…)” (Ibidem).

This essay could occupy more pages than are available if I were to attempt a credible Marxist analysis of what is happening in gender and sexuality. Suffice it to say that there is an enormous collective agenda, and a growing collective resistance in play, with greater or lesser success depending on time and context. The tensions and debates between essentialist and constructivist voices are alive and well in both Academe and the broader societies in which we operate. It seems to me that educational institutions operate as a nexus wherein scholars or practitioners trained by them are tasked with preparing successive generations to operate as reproducers or challengers of the status quo.

So, like gender and sexuality, education is a concept conducted and enforced through physical and metaphorical spaces. For instance, even though mundane objects such as toilets are not inherently gendered, they are nonetheless physically installed such that one is expected to choose which of the rooms containing them is allowable to enter (depending on ascribed identities) and how to conduct oneself in using them there. The same can be said about our schooling. Perhaps the dualism of speaking about an idea or a physical place is part of what interferes with us making greater progress on the issues. They are part and parcel of the same thing, and our current understanding of that thing is called “cultural” and will continue to be so until the next big transgression breaks it open.

Chodorow (1978) describes another example, the family, which is essentialized as the primary formation of social order that comprises the
broader one we refer to as society: “The family division of labor in which women mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself. The engendering of men and women with particular personalities, needs, defenses, and capacities creates conditions for and contributes to the reproduction of this same division of labor. Thus the fact that women mother inadvertently and inevitably reproduces itself” (Chodorow, 1978, 12).

One of the seminal figures in writing on gender and sexuality, Judith Butler, was interviewed by a collective of fellow scholars (Breen, Blumenfeld, et al., 2001) about her writings for a special issue of the International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies. The format of that article involved a list of questions generated by the collective to be sent to Butler and responded to via email. Butler responded to a challenge about how she treats questions of nature versus culture in the areas of gender and sexuality. “My view in Bodies that Matter (1993) was that there is an insistent materiality of the body, but that it never makes itself known or legible outside of the cultural articulation in which it appears. This does not mean that culture produces the materiality of the body. It only means that the body is always given to us, and to others, in some way. I believe that I wrote there that it is important to affirm the materiality of the body, but added the caveat that the very form that that affirmation takes will be cultural, and that that cultural affirmation will contribute to the very matter that it names. So it seems to me much more like a conundrum than a strict ‘divide’ (Ibidem, 12).

My argument is for non-duality in our treatment of genders, sexualities, and identities more generally. Boal (1995) observes, “Artifacts are congealed ideologies” (Idem). As such, our physical bodies are artefacts of culture in the sense that we present ourselves and are interpreted by others through the lens of culture. But, this is not the same thing as asserting some post-modern idea that we don’t exist. Butler appreciates these distinctions and offers that it is a conundrum rather than strict divide, and that framing allows space for holding seemingly conflicting understandings.

As a scholar of Pro-Feminist Men and Masculinities Studies, I continue to examine binary gendered arrangements not because I believe in them, so to speak, but rather because they continue to vex and reproduce as a highly organized and collectively enforced lived experience.

In the Introduction to Men’s Lives, Kimmel (2001) describes masculinity in terms of a “Social constructionist” perspective: “...the important fact of men’s lives is not that they are biological males, but that they become men. Our sex may be male, but our identity as men is developed through
a complex process of interaction with the culture in which we both learn the gender scripts appropriate to our culture and attempt to modify those scripts to make them more palatable” (Kimmel, 2001, XX).

So, like Butler, Kimmel encourages a broader view of masculinity through a socio-cultural lens. He is not inherently rejecting a genetic lens, but even interpretation of biological phenomena are culturally mediated, figuring with Butler’s comments about the conundrum of sorting through these tensions. One of the phenomena that can help us achieve greater clarity about any particular identity is to view them at their margins and intersections with other identities.

For instance, there are a variety of ways in which each man “fails” to achieve the masculine hegemonic standard. One of the most interesting intersections from my perspective is between masculinity and disability. Men with disabilities (especially visible physical ones) face the most striking pressures because their demographic qualities are in a sense the most distant from the standard. After all, physical and mental potency are hallmarks of quintessential masculine identity. Physical or mental disability thus becomes a prominent mitigation of hegemonic masculinity, insofar as it creates a quite tangible barrier to achieving the masculine ideal.

Gerschick and Miller (1994) conducted one of the very few studies of the convergence of masculinity and disability identities. They interviewed 10 men who had physical disabilities. Their focus was on how these men navigate gender identity in light of being disabled. The authors were able to identify three responses men with disabilities may have to this standard. They are: Reliance, or adoption of the hegemonic standard; Rejection of the standard; and Reformulation, or a modified conception of masculinity which incorporates a more favorable view of disability. Several combinations of the three responses were observed in the participants as well, further illustrating the relational character of identity.

Taking up Foucault’s earlier point about repression, the recent proliferation of anti-discrimination legislation and so-called Gay Marriage rights in Western countries illustrates that dominant ideals of identity are not inevitable. In the United States, for instance, the Supreme Court recently ruled that Gay and Lesbian citizens could not only enjoy the same rights of marriage as heterosexuals, but that individual States are no longer allowed to ban them or decline to recognize legal marriages conducted in other States. While this was received with great celebration (or anger and futile resistance by some), within 24 hours the emboldened activists
who championed this hallmark achievement began planning for legal action to end discrimination against those who identify as Transgendered or even Agendered.

Parallel to this is the question of words and language, which is another artefact of culture that, when defined in mainstream dictionaries serve to rigidify social phenomena. When a new word is accepted and included in such resources, it can entrench progressive (or repressive) social achievements. For this reason, it is a notable accomplishment with many implications that the term, “Cisgender” has recently been accepted into the Oxford English Dictionary. The OED defines it as “Designating someone whose sense of personal identity corresponds to the sex and gender assigned to him or her at birth; of or relating to such persons. Contrasted with transgender.” (Green, 2015; OED, 2015). By creating and receiving official acceptance for such a term, those whose gender and sex differ from those assigned at birth receive de facto legitimacy within the same dominant social and semantic arrangement. The machine of society is thus constrained from undoing that legitimacy. While it would not be impossible, the momentum is strongly in favor of a more fluid construction of gender. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) speak to this within the field of Organizational Studies by arguing that “while gender is constitutive of organizing processes, this relationship is not simple or causal. At the root of our communicology of gender and work is the assumption that gender is a complex, fragmentary, ongoing, and contradictory accomplishment that unfolds at the intersection of communication and organizing. Any model that attempts to make sense of gendered organizing processes necessarily must address these complex relations” (Mumby, 2004, 21).

They remind us that social struggles for legitimacy and justice are also non-linear phenomena. Rather, they “(…) suggest that a dialectical approach to power and resistance requires attention to dynamic power relations as played out in disjunctive and contradictory ways through everyday communicative practices (Collinson, 1992; Mumby, 1997). Framed in this manner, discourses are neither inherently dominant nor resistant, but become part of complex struggles amongst different interest groups” (Ibidem, 24). So, in regard to gender and sexuality, the struggle takes place in both the intimate micro-level space as well as the broader, global macro-level space simultaneously. Our language and social conventions guiding how we understand our own and others’ genders and sexualities are dynamic and non-linear, but it seems to me that gender and sexuality justice are mo-
The Present State(s) and Future Direction(s) of Gender

ving in a forward direction nonetheless, and this is good for men, women, and everyone else in between and beyond. Our disciplinary and educational spaces will need to get with the new program if we are to achieve and maintain our own legitimacy as scholars and teachers. Are we prepared to do that? I suppose it depends on who and what we mean by that.

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References


