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Transgenderism: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Transgender Identity/Transgenderism , a relatively new branch of feminist criticism with current theoretical orientation on the nature of gender identity problematical the binary division of identity into Masculine and Feminine. The two options of feminist thinking as essentialist approach and postmodern social constructionist approach do not include this new pattern of approach which questions the validity of these two strands. Another similar branch of thinking is Queer approach, representing another socially oppressed group which suggests that individual experience varies from stereotypical ,traditional, binary divisions. The encounter between feminist approach with Queer approach sparked rift & confusion and transgender approach provides a golden mean. This inclusive approach enables better comprehension of the complexity inherent in the demarking of identity, gender, and empowerment.

Introduction

Transgender theory is a newly emerging theoretical orientation that encompasses the unique experiences of transgenders. Although previous essentialist approaches viewed social identities as fixed within the person, feminist and queer theories locate social identities in the conflict between social- and self-determinants. These approaches are incomplete for social work practice. If someone's social identity is understood as being fixed or essential within the person, it can validate and justify sex, racial, class, and other differences as being ''natural,'' which can ultimately reify the multiple systems of oppression.

At the same time, questioning and destabilizing all social identities disintegrates the individual's sense of core self within a socially oppressed group, even though such an identity can be the basis for personal empowerment and empowerment to oppose social oppression. Transgender theory encompasses and transcends feminist and queer theory by explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity, along

with the dynamic interaction and integration of these aspects of identity within the narratives of lived experiences. Starting from feminist and queer theory approaches, this article discusses the evolution of transgender theory as an important next step to a more complete and inclusive understanding of gender and sexual identity.

Definition: Transgender: A term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. Transgender is a broad term and is good for non-transgender people to use. "Trans" is shorthand for "transgender." (National Center for Transgender Equality).

Gender Identity: An individual's internal sense of being male, female, or something else. Since gender identity is internal, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

Transsexual: An older term for people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth who seeks to transition from male to female or female to male.

Queer: A term used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and, often also transgender, people. Some use queer as an alternative to "gay" in an effort to be more inclusive.

Transgenderism can be defined as the breaking of gender roles and gender identity and/or going across the boundaries of gender to another gender (Green, 2004).

Similar stands: Transgender and Transsexual

Though these two strands share a lot in common, they have their own features. Transgenders typically express gender identities outside traditional hetero-normative definitions, but may have little or no intention of having sex-reassignment surgeries or hormone treatments (Bornstein, 1994). Transsexual individuals can be either pretransition/operative, transitioning/in the process of hormonal and surgical sex-reassignment, or posttransition/operative (Hird, 2002).

Transgenders differ widely in their degree of belief in the fluidity of gender identity. Some accept such fluidity only to the extent that one can switch between two otherwise separate, essentialist, and pure gender categories, whereas others believe that an embodied gender identity is still highly malleable.

Transsexualism is defined as innate and biological, not chosen, therefore deserving of both social and legal recognitions. Conversely, transgenderism is thought of as learned, freely chosen, and socially determined, therefore not deserving of legal recognition (Wallbank, 2004). The transgender experience thus challenges heteronormative assumptions of the nature of gender, sexuality, and identity in ways that cannot be fully addressed by feminist and queer theories.

Feminist Theory and Essentialist Conceptualizations of Gender Feminist theory address the cultural–historical context and biological premises of gender as well as the issues of sexism and the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression. 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.

As Stryker (1994, pp. 249–250) stated :

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're fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy.

Gender is 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 or female on the basis of their external genitalia. Consistent with essentialism, those who were born male are supposed to act masculine and be sexually attracted to women, whereas those who were born female are supposed to act feminine and be sexually attracted to men. Society uses multiple methods of positive and negative reinforcement, including legal, religious, and cultural practices, to enforce adherence to these gender roles (Connell, 2002). Feminism challenged male social dominance that was based on the gender binary by questioning the supposed ''naturalness'' of the subordination of women in social relationships because of the purported physical superiority of the male body over the female's supposedly more fragile and vulnerable body.

The question, whether Gender binary itself be destabilized, ultimately polarized feminist theory: French feminists, such as Cixous (1986), Irigaray (1991), and Kristeva (1986), seemed to ''establish the female body and maternity as foundational and symbolic sources of women's psychic and sexual difference'' (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, & Lydenberg, 1999, p. 4), that is, 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 Butler (1993), argued that the materiality of the body was ''already gendered, already constructed'' (p. xi), such that the supposed physical basis of the gender binary was a socially derived construction of reality.

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). According to Shields (2008), 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 that are 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 the racism, classism, homophobia, and so forth.

A feminist theory that adheres to an essentialist, fixed binary conception of gender identity is 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.For transgenders, at least two identities, those of gender and of sexuality, are always intersectional, although, as we discuss later, feminist and queer theorists have at times tried deliberately to keep these identities separate.

Queer Theory and Social Constructivism

Much of the philosophical and political understandings of nonheteronormative gender identity and sexuality are derived from queer theory. Queer theory developed from feminist and deconstructivist theories that posited that ‘‘normative’’ and ‘‘deviant’’ sexual behaviors and cognitions are social constructs. The social constructivist approach was a rebellion against the ‘‘essentialist’’ ideas that developed in Western societies beginning in the late 19th century. Such essentialist ideas came to link gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation tightly within a binary, biologically based, heteronormative gender schema (Kimmel, 1996; Norton, 1997).

‘‘Queer’’ is an identity, a theory about nonheteronormative sexuality, and a theoretical orientation for how identity is to be understood. The term queer can refer to ‘‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’’ (Sedgwick, 1998, p. 208). Queer is at odds with the heteronormative, dominant schema (Halperin, 1995) and rebels against, or ‘‘queers,’’ these kinds of essentialist views by proposing that gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientations are social constructs and, therefore, open to questioning, subversion, and self-construction.

Butler (1990) made the case that gender identity is a social construction as well as the result of repeated performances of the expected behaviors of one’s sex that create the illusion of an identity inside that underlies the expression of these behaviors. In other words, there is no central self.

Although queer theory attempts to create the perspective of the queer outside the heteronormative schema, it has also been critiqued for its lack of ability to deconstruct the individual queer experience. Although the term queer offers the solidarity of a group identity, ‘‘it is [also] an identity without an essence’’ (Halperin, 1995, p. 62).

Transgender Theory: Beyond Essentialism and Social Constructivism

Tauchert (2002) agreed that an ‘‘essentialist’’ view of gender as being based on the body (e.g., femaleness as derived from the potential for pregnancy and childbirth) reinforces traditional stereotypes about gender and gender roles. Transgenderism presents special challenges to both feminist and queer theories.

As Heyes (2003) pointed out, such an essentialist view would make one’s body a proxy for identity, with female-to-male (FTM) transgenders being betrayers of their oppressed identities,

while male-to-female (MTF) transgenders, who had relinquished male privilege, still would not be considered ‘‘real’’ women.

In spite of queer theory’s advances in understanding sexual identity and oppression and in providing a voice for political challenge, many transgenders express dissatisfaction with the purely social constructivist assumptions about gender identity that are inherent in queer theory.

There was thus a need for a theory of gender identity that would incorporate both a fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that would dynamically interact with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences.

Hird’s (2002) history of theories of transsexuality similarly moved from essentialist to social constructivist to even more progressive ideas about the nature of gender identity. Hird began with theories that were concerned with ‘‘authenticity,’’ in which transsexualism was considered in the context of an assumed real, presumably biologically based and measurable, binary gender paradigm from which transsexuals were deviant. Feminist theory spurred the shift from an emphasis on authenticity to one based on ‘‘performativity,’’ in which gender identity is seen as solely an expression of learned social behaviors and cognitions (see, e.g., the previous discussion of Butler’s, 1990, ideas).

Performativity theories are based on the idea of symbolic interactionism, which challenges ideas of authenticity by not assuming that personal identity is a stable, coherent, and morphologically based object. The extent to which transsexual individuals can ‘‘pass’’ as ‘‘real’’ men or women supports the assertion that sex and gender do not naturally adhere to particular bodies.

Conclusion: Thus transgender theory envisages an identity which is beyond gender identity and socially constructed assumptions. It partakes the elements of performative theories which stress the fluid nature of personal identity. This approach emphasizes the symbolic interaction of the person through performance as the key to identity rather than preconceived notions. Thus each individual negotiates his identity from multiple social identities challenging essentialist claims.

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