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It's a Fact! Or is it? The Turbulence of Gender

Abstract: Gender categorization based on binary distinctions of male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine is a feature of many cultures and societies. These binary boxes offer certainty. They represent a traditional approach that helps keep individuals anchored in place socially, culturally, economically, or politically. But is the certainty of gender really all that certain? What about those who resist these constraints? How do different theorizations of gender help to tackle the question of human social organization? This paper looks at fundamental understandings of the gender binary system, explores theoretical views that have upset those understandings, and discusses human lived experiences that challenge them. It offers an overview of the ways in which normative gender roles have denied people—particularly women and minorities—agency, economic independence, social freedom, reproductive justice, safety, and security. As a critical analysis, it argues that enforcement of the gender binary system contributes to the perpetuation of power, privilege, and status in social hierarchies even today. It also shows that those who speak up and speak out to challenge this system, historically and in contemporary times, have radically reshaped notions of gender in their struggle for equality, social justice, and fairness.

"It could be that given his sex, he made an easy immersion into his gender role; given mine, transition out of the gender role ascribed was my only chance at sovereignty."

Dionne Brand (2018), p. 193

"There's a breathtaking power in self-determination."

Francisco Fernández (2010), p. 133

"Freedom depends on its abundance. For it to mean anything more than another layer of oppression, my emancipation necessitates the emancipation of others—even of those who have oppressed me."

Ryka Aoki (2010), p. 151

Gender is a classification system that divides the human species into two discrete categories on the basis of visible, external, physical markers of difference. Humans in different geographical and historical contexts have organized cultures and societies and constructed systems of knowledge and power according to this principle of a gender binary. Through this process, gender appears as certain, stable, and immutable. Challenges to these notions of gender are seen as threatening because to question the conceptual

framework of the gender binary is to question more than individual identity. Such challenges shake the foundations of human development and establish complexities rather than simplifications within understandings of human lived experience. The gender binary based on distinctions of male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine embeds injustice because it does not allow for and cannot accommodate different realities and expressions of gender. It is a system that excludes manifestations of otherness. It is an anchoring mechanism that keeps individuals in place within a hierarchical order—be it social, cultural, economic, or political—through control of the physical self (i.e., the body). The enforcement of this binary system perpetuates the status quo when it comes to power and privilege and denies equality, agency, and freedom to marginalized populations including women and minorities.

One of the challenges of discussing gender arises from the limitations of language—an essential system for making sense and meaning of the world. This problem is reflected at different levels of experience and thought in both academic and non-academic settings. The controversy around pronouns for non-binary individuals, for example, demonstrates this constraint. While pronouns beyond he and she acknowledge a broader spectrum of gender identities, this nod to human diversity may still bolster the normative force of gender and the oppressive force of sexist ideologies (Enke, 2016, p. 215). Similarly, when talking about theories, concepts, and social issues related to gender, it is important to clarify the meaning of terms such as “sex,” which people may use interchangeably in dialogue without differentiating among the various meanings associated with them. For the purpose of the discussion that follows, I will use “sex” to refer to physical acts of intimacy between people. When referring to visible physical differences between individuals (which some call “biological sex”), I will use the term “genitalia.” I will not use “sex” to indicate gender, and what I mean by gender will become clearer throughout the course of the analytical discussion I present here.

As a mature woman and student, perhaps the most significant area of learning for me since beginning my PhD studies in 2016 has been the complicated and turbulent issue of gender. Let me start with a personal anecdote about my experience as a mother to demonstrate the assumptions individuals confront in contending with gender. I became a Mom in June 2001, and for the December holidays that year, I used a photo of my child to create a card that I mailed out to friends and family. In that photo, I used certain props, including a hand-made baby blanket gifted by a friend and a ribbon wrapped around the baby. When I look at the photograph today, eighteen and a half years later, I realize the extent to which I was invested in the notion of gender at the time. The blanket and the ribbon I used were blue, and I relied on the colour of the items to tell family and friends that this six-month-old child was a boy. In other words, I relied on clues and codes, which I knew would be understood, to communicate to those receiving the card that my child was a boy. Before my child had the opportunity to develop a sense of who they would be, I was telling the world he was a boy, with all the assumptions embedded in and associated with that identity.

In relying on this shorthand to communicate gender, identity, and subjectivity, and the conflation of these various meanings, I was not alone at the time, and despite the social

and cultural changes of the past two decades, I am not alone now. A Google search of the phrase “celebrity gender reveal,” for example, will produce 16.2 million links in approximately 0.36 seconds.¹ My reason for including “celebrity” in the search term is because of the impact popular celebrity culture has on the practice of social and cultural norms in contemporary times. Celebrities exert a significant impact on what consumers deem cool, fashionable, and acceptable. While some celebrities may use their fame to challenge norms, broadcast media, mass media, and the current networked reality of social media more often use the conduct of celebrities to repeat, reiterate, and reinforce normativity as the standard to emulate. One standard that celebrities and non-celebrities enact and adhere to is the gender-reveal party, an event where the gender of the fetus is revealed and celebrated. While the impending birth of a child is a joyous event, there have been recent instances of people dying when these parties go horribly wrong as parents try to outdo each other by staging bigger and more spectacular stunts (Elliott, 2019).

In essence, what these feel-good gender-reveal parties are celebrating (beyond the future delivery of a baby) are exclusionary social and theoretical constructs. These include the gender binary, the dominance of heterosexuality and marriage, the focus on sex as reproduction, and essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity. Many gender-reveal videos can be viewed online, and the number of links in the above search result illustrates the amount of time one could spend doing just that. Many celebrities use their own gender-reveal parties to market their image or brand, as well as any products they endorse. In this way, gender-reveal parties become yet another commodified item promoting consumerism and consumption; aside from building loyalty to a particular celebrity brand, they encourage purchasing and contracting products and services to host a gender-reveal party in a suitably fashionable manner.

Referring back to the terms I clarified earlier, a gender-reveal party celebrates public knowledge of a baby’s genitalia, with blue representing a child who is expected to be born with a penis and pink representing a child who is expected to be born with a vagina. These events valorize the gender assigned at birth according to the infant’s genitalia and endorse the gender attribution, role, and identity associated with boy-girl designations. Gender-reveal parties are highly gendered events. In cases where the baby is a boy, gender reveals often involve hitting, pummeling, or exploding items. By contrast, gender reveals for girls often involve glitter, the gentle popping of a balloon, the release of butterflies, and so forth. In sum, these parties celebrate social norms that have been constructed on the basis of genitalia and a patriarchal status quo that has historically marginalized and oppressed the “other,” primarily women. The challenge presented by this continuing emphasis on the gender binary is that it perpetuates the idea of an infallible, reliable, factual system that is not harmful, and is beyond question.

However, this impression of certainty is illusory. Experts increasingly recognize the gender binary as a constructed categorization that humans have developed. Despite doubts raised by experts, people still turn to existing knowledge systems perceived to be accurate, objective, and unassailable to provide evidence for their persistent belief in the gender

¹ Search results will vary. This result is based on a December 29, 2019 search.

binary system. One such field is science, and yet even science cannot provide unequivocal support for the notion of “biological sex” difference. Anne Fausto-Sterling, Professor Emerita at Brown University in the USA and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is a leading expert in biology and gender development. Her many publications include such works as *Myths of Gender* (1985, 1992), *Sexing the Body* (2000), and *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (2012). Fausto-Sterling asserts that the complexity of the human body eschews the ability to provide clear answers about biological differences and refutes the notion that sex is a discrete physical category (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 4). Rather, she asserts that the signals and functions humans categorize as male and female are enmeshed with concepts about gender and the choice of criteria that science uses to determine sex (and even the need to provide such an identification) are “social decisions for which scientists can offer no absolute guidelines” (pp. 4-5).

Another area of science adding increasing complexity to the study of gender is contemporary neuroscience, which is shattering the myth of the female brain according to Gina Rippon. Rippon is an international researcher in the field of cognitive neuroscience based at the Aston Brain Centre at Aston University in Birmingham, UK and was made an Honorary Fellow of the British Science Association in 2015 for her contributions to the public communication of science. In *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain*, Rippon (2019) explains that discoveries in neuroscience challenge the binary labels of male and female because neuroscience is providing more and more evidence of the inextricable intertwining of nature and nurture (p. xviii). That is, the human brain is a mirror and reflects the lives that individuals have lived and not just their sex. In Rippon’s (2019) words,

What used to be thought fixed and inevitable is being shown to be plastic and flexible; the powerful biology-changing effects of our physical and our social worlds are being revealed. Even something that is “written in our genes” may come to express itself differently in different contexts. (pp. xviii-xix)

In the absence of scientific certainty upon which to ascertain a physical basis for difference, the analysis of gender, gender roles, and gender norms must turn to the ways in which societies and cultures have constructed these notions and the impact of their enforcement on the lived experience of the panoply of humankind.

As language, science, and experience show, the essential shortcoming in ascribing set qualities to gender is that a simple binary is insufficient to capture the complexity of human reality. Those living the reality of a non-binary existence have been instrumental in change-making through their insistence on the complexity of gender and their challenge to the oppressive nature of the traditional binary. One such proponent is Kate Bornstein, an American author, playwright, performance artist, actress, and gender theorist. Bornstein’s work throughout the years has unravelled the threads of gender and identified a variety of components that constitute gender. These elements are separate from genitalia and the way in which genitalia is linked to specific and restrictive gender roles and norms. The effect of Bornstein’s work has been to fashion space for a collective that lives in opposition to the normative, to allow those who do not conform to find a way of belonging (Freiwald, 2001, p. 38), and to challenge the “fiction of race, class, sex, gender, or nation” (p. 40).

If gender is a fiction, then what individuals understand as gender are in fact the cultural meanings attached to masculinity and femininity—attributes predicated on the physical difference of genitalia. Given gender's influence and impact, particularly the harm it has promulgated as an oppressive and exclusionary principle put into practice, it makes sense that gender has become a subject of intense study and been theorized in numerous different ways. Various theories explore gender as a social construction, as performance, and as a system of power relations in which the female and feminine are devalued in relation to the male and masculine. While these theories and others contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender and its complicated, contested, and controversial legacy, in my view the issue is even more fundamental. Gender operates as an ideology, and its ideological basis contributes to the imperviousness of the gender binary to sustainable systemic and structural change.

Thinking of gender as an ideology helps to explain the continuing resistance to shattering the binary despite the presence of information and proof of experience identifying its limitations. Within the structure of an ideology, adherents cling to an inherent denial of evidence in order to reinforce the belief system they espouse whether individually or as a collective. In a 1982 essay, Susan Griffin, a radical feminist philosopher, essayist, and playwright, asserts, "Always, inevitably, no matter what the ideology, the idea of the other is born. For another must become a symbol and a scapegoat for the ideologist's own denied knowledge that this ideology is not more real than reality and must bow to contradictory natural evidence" (p. 646). With respect to the non-adaptive nature of ideology, Griffin (1982) poses this question: "What if all our efforts toward liberation are determined by an ideology which despite our desire for a better world leads us inevitably back to the old paradigm of suffering?" (p. 642). Applying this consideration to gender, efforts toward liberation from this ideology inescapably revert to a paradigm of inequality and suffering because inherent in the concept of gender is the concept of the other. In the trajectory of human history, the other is consistently positioned as lesser to the white male default and always subject to the control of the default powerholders.

The effect of gender operating as an ideology is to create a carceral system. Gender imprisons people into a contained existence and embeds injustice into social and cultural organizations, which are not only resistant to change, but which become reactionary forces when threatened. The reason a gender ideology becomes a means of imprisonment is that if one does not fit into the defined category of either/both genders, then society, culture, and other institutions of authority, privilege, and power ascribe to the individual an inability to conform and view that individual as flawed. The dominant collective regards such a person as deficient, bad, immoral, unnatural, and disposable. That is, the inability to conform lies with the individual and not with the limitations of an insufficient binary model. As a result, human-constructed systems and structures seek to control, discipline, and punish those who do not belong because it is easier to discipline than to change. This reinforces the status quo and confirms the right of the privileged and powerful to assert control and domination over the bodies they deem deviant and perverse.

While the impact of the gender binary system and gender as an ideology affect all people no matter their self-identification, the limiting consequences of adhering to the

gender binary system can be demonstrated by the ways this system has limited the participation of women in society. As a result of gender ideology, women have been denied economic independence and social and sexual freedom because of dominant normative discourses and practices such as the domestic sphere, marriage, motherhood, and compulsory heterosexuality. They have been denied access to reproductive justice and experienced a lack of safety and security due to the proliferation of gender-based violence. Perhaps the most exacerbating factor has been the way in which the dominant narrative of a hierarchical gender binary has continued to deny women voice and power despite the accomplishments of successive waves of feminist action, revolution, and social justice movements and the changes they have wrought.

In regard to the issue of women and power, the consequences of enforcing the gender binary can be traced to the roots of Western Civilization in the ancient world. Mary Beard, a professor of classics at Cambridge University as well as a television personality, blogger, and social media star, demonstrates that the incompatibility of women with power and privilege is a prevalent trope in Ancient Greek drama. In *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (2017), Beard talks about power holders such as Medea, Clytemnestra, and Antigone, some of the original cultural representations of women in the Western world. Beard (2017) argues that rather than serving as role models for women as power holders, these characters of myth, legend, and drama are depicted as power abusers. Their access to power is secured illegitimately, and by exercising their illicit power, these women undertake actions that “lead to chaos, to the fracture of the state, to death and destruction” (Beard, 2017, p. 59). These women are “monstrous hybrids”—not women at all in the conceptual framework of the time (p. 59). To Beard, the inescapable conclusion of these dramatic representations is that these women must be stripped of their power and “put back in their place” (p. 59). She avers that “it is the unquestionable mess that women make of power in Greek myth that justifies their exclusion from it in real life, and justifies the rule of men” (p. 59). In other words, women, by their very nature, represent disorder, and this understanding is only one way in which gender has been employed as an oppressive regime that denies women the right to gain, hold, and exercise power. It is a contention that continues to thwart women’s political, social, cultural, and economic aspirations in the present era.

It is easy to critique the gender binary system as simplistic, unhelpful, exclusionary, and oppressive, but what can proponents of change offer as an alternative? Julia Serano is a writer, performer, activist, musician, and biologist whose publications include *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007) and *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism and Trans Feminism* (2016). Serano holds a PhD in Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics from Columbia University and has spent 17 years as a researcher at UC Berkeley in the fields of genetics, evolution, and developmental biology. She comprehends the issue of gender from a scientific perspective as well as through her own lived experience. Serano’s answer to the need for an alternative construction of gender is to refuse a definitive description and instead embrace gender as constitutive of multiple meanings. She writes about gender as follows:

It’s an amalgamation of bodies, identities, and life experiences, subconscious urges, sensations, and behaviors, some of which develop organically, and others which are

shaped by language and culture. Instead of saying that gender is any one single thing, let's start describing it as a holistic experience. (Serano, 2010, p. 87)
Challenges remain, however, as any understanding that acknowledges gender's multiplicity of meanings embodies a complexity that remains anathema to many.

In this discussion, I have attempted to delineate the challenges of understanding gender and the need to support new approaches to this identity factor. Though I have focused a single aspect of the issue, there are many other angles to explore, including the ways in which gender connects to the understanding of human desire and sexuality. No matter the obstacles to engaging in a discourse on gender, it is, in my view, a necessity. This gender ideology must be disrupted along with other vectors of human categorization including race, income, location, disability, and more. It is a matter of social justice, and justice can only be realized by overcoming resistance to different conceptualizations of gender from those who have comfortably identified as male or female throughout their lives. The challenge for academics, advocates, agitators, and resisters is to help such individuals see that the benefits of changing an oppressive system accrue to them as well. No one is trying to demolish the identities of those who are comfortable saying "I am a man" or "I am a woman," but their right to self-determination and self-expression cannot preempt the rights of others to claim, without threat to their bodies and their personhood, a variable, distinctive, and unique gender identity.

Similarly, if such individuals insist on the primacy of a simple binary model for understanding and designating gender, that is their choice, and their ideological rootedness will make it almost impossible to change their minds. However, it is the personal and social responsibility of these adherents to determine how they propose to deal with those who do not fit nicely and neatly into either of the two categories. Will their response be to pathologize, punish, and exclude these others on the basis of a physical marker that in effect designates nothing more than genitalia? Or will their response be to recognize the essential humanity of all persons and question the systems and structures that turn binary-busters into the other, the lesser, the not-valued, the discarded, the bullied, and the defiled?

This ability to explore the question of gender without confronting a personal identity struggle and without having to suffer the societal and cultural consequences of non-conformity is in fact a position of privilege and freedom. The challenge for those with such liberty and power is to exercise their critical faculties to understand the discrimination and oppression others have faced historically and continue to face. We live in a time of increasing populist authoritarianism that undermines the rights of minorities as well as vulnerable and marginalized populations worldwide. One of the most alarming ways in which the dangers of this gender binary paradigm are manifested is the continued violence inflicted on transgender people around the world, even in liberally progressive countries such as Canada (Curlew, 2019). The ability to secure and sustain the rights of all is predicated on new ways of thinking and the willingness to change embedded systems, structures, and ideologies including gender. As fundamental as the question of gender is, it is just one factor that must be confronted by the collective citizenry in each national context as they actively work to construct a more equal, equitable and just world.

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