

The Genesis and Evolution of the Concept of Gender

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Abstract

The concept of gender became a hot topic of discussion among the sociologists and feminists in the 20th century. However, this concept is not a 20th century phenomenon, as its roots can be traced back to the fourteenth century. In the early 20th century, psychoanalysis and sexology explored the complex relationships between sex, sexuality and gender. But the emergence of a new group of feminist thinkers in 1990s such as Thomas Laqueur, Elizabeth Grosz, and Anne Fausto-Sterling problematized the sex/gender distinction claiming that both sex and gender are socially mediated concepts. Contemporary approaches—including queer theory and masculinity studies—further complicate binary frameworks of sex and gender. Recent scholarship suggests that sex and gender operate within dynamic developmental systems shaped by biological, cultural, and environmental forces, thereby challenging rigid polarization and advocating an integrated analytical model.

Keywords: Sex, gender, sexuality

INTRODUCTION:

Dr Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language (1785), defines gender as referring either to the grammatical practice of classifying nouns as masculine, feminine or neuter; which could also mean 'a sex'. Traces of these old historical usages of gender are still implicit in the modern usages of the term. It was John Money who introduced the terminological distinction between biological sex and gender as a role in the year 1955. But this distinction earned a great deal of popularity as feminist movement embraced Money's idea in the 1970s.

The Key Concepts

A number of concepts are integrally related to the term of gender which one should have at least the working idea about before starting an in-depth analysis of the concept. In the following few paragraphs, an attempt has been made to provide working ideas of a few such terms and concepts.

Gender

The original use of the term "gender" can be traced to its use as a grammatical term referring to the classification of nouns into three categories of masculine, feminine and neuter. The Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology (2000) traces its etymological origin to the Old French word "genre" (modern "genre") which was derived from the Latin word "genus" which bears the meaning of "birth", "family" as well as a "nation"(191). However, the term has also been used to refer to the human state of being a male or a female, and, this particular use of the term "gender" can be traced as back as to the

fourteenth century even though this use of the term gained popularity mainly in the twentieth century (Mitchell, 2011, p. 617). The development of feminist ideals in the late twentieth century brought a further change in the meaning of “gender” and it has been generally accepted that while the sex of a person is a matter of biology, h/er gender is a matter of culture (Edgar, 2008, p. 139). This point is very clearly illustrated by the feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling in the following words:

Feminists argued that although men’s and women’s bodies serve different reproductive functions, few other sex differences come with the territory, unchangeable by life’s vicissitudes. If girls couldn’t learn math as easily, the problem wasn’t built into their brains. The difficulty resulted from gender norms—different expectations and opportunities for boys and girls. Having a penis, rather than a vagina is a sex difference. Boys performing better than girls on math exams is a gender difference (2000, p. 4).

Since gender is a matter of culture which is dynamic in nature, the ways of living it are highly fluid. Moreover, it is constantly reshaped and redefined by its sociocultural milieu as well as its individual interpretation and expression (Essed, Goldberg, & Kobayashi, 2005, p. 1). Gender itself possesses a great transformative quality as it acts as a constraint on different activities of people and their free-will, but at the same time, it also serves as an instrument offering people the opportunity to challenge, contest, resist and redefine different cultural and social practices. While humanity is both sorted and categorized by various discursive labels such as class, race, family, socio-economic conditions etc., gender appears to interact with all these at various levels to produce “a wide variety of outcomes” (ibid).

Although various human sciences, especially, the medical sciences have been interested in the study of gender, the practice of gender critique owe its origin to the second wave of the Feminist Movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. Feminist thinkers point out that since gender is a cultural construct, it is subject to change and modifications— an argument which entails that the notions of the hitherto fixed categories of femininity and masculinity should also be revisited from a vantage point of cultural construction. Thinkers like Michel Foucault proposed the new dimension of power as a defining factor in the relationship among culture, power and gender even though his view gave rise to new debates and disagreements within feminism itself. Many feminists, especially the European feminists, felt the need of historicizing gender analysis and in order to accomplish this goal they first embraced Marxist philosophy whose insistence on the historically constructed nature of all relations—cultural as well as social— appeared to be of the same wave length as that of feminism. But later feminists soon discovered a chink in the armory of the Marxist model of economic determinism for its inability to convincingly illustrate the cultural constructedness of gender. So they turned gradually to structuralist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories which they found capable to shedding light on the cultural dimension of gender construction in varying degrees. Even though sharing the common competence of explaining the cultural constructedness of gender, the differences among the three theoretical traditions were no less striking. Feminists who aligned themselves with the Structuralist theories considered gender as “the product of universal cultural laws and conventions, of the “grammar,” as it were, that frames linguistic and cultural expression” (Carter, 2010, p. 298). On the other hand, in Poststructuralist theory, the notion of the existence of all metanarratives, such as universal cultural laws, is discarded. Moreover, it holds the perpetual processes of cultural and linguistic production as responsible for the creation of meanings and identities. The obvious outcome of such a view is that for Poststructuralist feminists gender ceased to be a given Symbolic entity and they shifted their focus to gendering as a practice which they believe is responsible for producing gender identities throughout history. Thus, for them gender is no longer a fixed, unchanging category; rather it becomes for them a fluid category

subject to changes and modifications. Like the Poststructuralist theory, psychoanalytic theory also stresses on the fluid nature of gender. Its practitioners like Freud thought of gender as a product of Oedipus complex which was thought to be the factor behind boys acquiring an active, masculine subjectivity and girls a passive, feminine one (Carter, 2010, p. 299). Psychoanalytic theory has also inspired some thinkers to posit the unconscious as a disruptive psychic force revealing the impossibility of a fixed or fully stabilized gender identity, which, in its own turn, is indicative of the possibility of a political change in the notion of traditional gender identity.

In addition to various human and social sciences, gender has also been the focus of attention in literature where its study continues to grow and develop (Lieske, 1996, p. 253). In the analysis of literary works, critics often focus on the relationship between sex and gender, exposition/projection of gender biases as well as on the ways in which gender identities of various characters are constructed within texts. With the evolution of the theories of reading and writing in the last few decades, critics have also begun to analyze how the activities of reading and writing are also gendered acts.

In the course of development of gender as a category of analysis, the contributions of the historian Jaon Wallach Scott, and the film and social theorist Teresa de Lauretis have been quite significant. As a young and development field, gender theory run the risk that the very term of ‘gender’ “might come to signify either too much or too little” (Lieske, 1996, p. 253). In the absence of a comprehensive theoretical backdrop provided by Scott, or the knowledge of the diachronic and synchronic use of the term provided by Lauretis, there was every danger that the term gender might have reverted back to its original meaning to imply women or femininity. However, there also existed an opposite chance when the term gender would have become so amorphous that nobody would be able to offer a concrete definition of it.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a concept that came to the limelight mainly as a result of Freudian psychoanalysis. It has been a general practice to conflate the term ‘sexuality’ with genitals (Srinivaasan, 2008, p. 310) although Freud looked at sexuality as a superordinate term with the genitals constituting merely one aspect of it. In his path-breaking work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud not only brought sexuality to forefront of academic and scientific discussions but also widened the boundaries to sexuality to include “infantile sexuality, polymorphous perversity, the function of symptoms (all of which represent the sexual life of the subject), and the sheer diversity and deviations that pertain to object choice” (ibid, p. 310).

Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking work *The History of Sexuality* had a revolutionary impact on western perception of sexuality. His work inspired a host of followers and their research on sexuality illustrated how as a response to the predilective focus of sexology and psychoanalysis to sexual deviances, normative sexuality got itself inextricably linked with reproductive imperatives. This link of sexuality with reproduction entailed its linkage with nature and finally with heterosexuality. According to Foucault, this connection of sexuality, nature and heterosexuality is a part of “endeavour to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not Procreation” (Foucault, 1990, p. 36) . Foucault maintains that the meanings of sexuality are socially constructed, especially the ways in which the body is loaded with essentialist meanings. Gagon and Simon has aptly remarked:

“ . . . we have allowed the organs, the orifices, and the gender of the actors to personify or embody or exhaust nearly all of the meanings that exist in the sexual situation. Rarely do we turn from a consideration of the organs themselves to the sources of the meanings that are attached to them, the ways in which the physical activities of sex are learned, and the ways in which these activities are integrated into larger social scripts and social arrangements where meanings and sexual behaviour come together to create sexual conduct” (Gagon & Simon, 1974, p. 5).

Besides psychoanalysis, queer theory, since its origin in 1970s, has placed sexuality as the centre of its concern and believes that it is only through this category that other political, social and cultural phenomena could be appreciated in the proper light. Instead of looking at sexuality as a natural or medical fact, queer studies regards sexuality as a meaningful activity or achievement that continually undergoes negotiations and dissemination (Edgar, 2008, p. 277). As sexuality has traditionally been linked to one’s sexual identity, queer theorists have placed crucial attention on the recovery and propagation of gay and lesbian sexuality besides posing fundamental questions about the political nature and coherence of the socially and culturally endorsed categories of heterosexuality.

Traditionally, sexuality has been the site of many peculiar and, at times even bizarre ideas. It has been ascribed with different significances in different societies in the history of the human civilization. Ann Oakley (1975) has pointed out that within Western culture sexuality is thought to be active only in males while it is expected to be latent in females (p. 107). Societies and even experts also used to hold onto certain quite generalized ideas about male and female sexuality. It was commonly believed that women were less likely to demonstrate sexual deviations like homosexuality, transvestism, fetishism etc. because of their relatively weaker sexuality. Again , the relative strength or otherwise of sexuality between men and women were thought to be a matter governed by biology which ensured that its strength always remained constant.

Evolution of the Concept of Gender

The concept of gender that entered the vocabulary of the common people in the 1970s was used as an analytical category to mark the ‘line of demarcation between biological sex differences’ (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 56). At the same time, however, the term was also used to refer to the ways in which the biological sex differences were thought to exercise a bearing upon the behaviours and competencies of people. The history of feminism reveals that the contemporary concept of gender is an outcome of the confrontation between second-wave feminism and ideologies of naturalism that subscribe to the view above. (Osborne, Gender, 2001)

Although the concept of gender became popular in the 1970s, the active theorizing of gender as a concept and category has its roots embedded in the influences of psychoanalysis and sexology (Mitchell, 2011, p. 618). Besides psychoanalysis, sexology and feminism, recent theoretical practices like masculinity studies, queer theory, and, transgender theory also contributed significantly to the knowledge base of gender as a concept. Among these fields of study, sexology have dealt extensively with the question of gender and from its pseudo-scientific analysis of sexual behaviour, it reached the conclusion that biological sex, gender, and sexuality constitute a complex imbrications because of which it is impossible to analyze and study any one of them by excluding the other two. Noted sexologist Jean Finot’s (1856-1922) suggestion that gender is shaped by environment through various forms of cultural conditioning had a deep seated influence on gender conceptualization and had become one of the central theses of gender theory in the course of its development, mainly in the hands of the feminists,.

Although the existence of the concept of gender is closely dependent on the sex/gender distinction, this very distinction has been called into question as well as problematized by a section of thinkers since the 1990s. Tom Laqueur (1992) has pointed out that up to the late nineteenth century western anatomical thinking was based on the one-sex model that had been dominating the anatomical sciences for two thousand years and that this model understood woman as “man inverted” and their reproductive organs as decidedly inferior to the male ones (p. 236). One interesting outcome of this one-sex model, Laqueur points out, was the idea that there existed two genders, but only one sex (p.8). Again, in her article “Experimental Desire: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity” Elizabeth Grosz (1994) advocated for a change in thinking about sex and gender and suggests that gender theorists like Butler should refocus their attention from the instability of gender to the “instabilities of sex itself, of bodies themselves” (p. 140). The standpoints of both Laqueur and Grosz reflect their belief that like its counterpart ‘gender’, ‘sex’ is also a social construction. A new light on the subject was shed by Anne Fausto-Sterling in her book *Sexing the Body* (2000) where she dealt with sex, sexuality and gender as part of a developmental system. She argues that scientists create truths about sex and sexuality that ultimately becomes embodied. People start to view their bodies as sexed from the perspective of the scientific ‘truths’ about sex and sexuality. What is more important, however, is that behaviours taken to be illustrative of gendered and social norms stem actually from their connection with sexed bodies. That is why she advocates that both sex and gender should be seen as products of nurture and nature and observes that these categories cannot be understood properly by excluding either of them from the frame of consideration. She further elaborates her argument in the following words:

First, we need to stop looking for universal causes of sexual behavior and gender acquisition and instead learn more about (and from) individual difference. Second, we need to think harder about how to study sex and gender as part of a developmental system. Third, we need to become more imaginative and specific about what we mean by the word environment. At the moment I think we are pretty clueless about the environmental components of human sexual development, but the idea provided by Fogel and others— that behaviors go through periods of instability (when they are more easily changed) and stability (when they seem fixed)—is helpful (p. 246).

In fact, a survey of the recent writings about the concepts of sex and gender seems to imply quite strongly that feminism’s distinction of sex/gender has been rather too polarized. It has been argued that the meanings attached to sex differences are themselves socially constructed and, are, therefore, subject to changes and modifications (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 57). Societies located in different temporal and geographical axes have been observed to ascribe different meanings and consequences to the biological differences between man and woman. Recent developments in Gene Theory also suggest that biology plays a role in shaping certain behavioural characteristics of men and women. Moira Gatens argues that since the male and the female bodies carry quite different social value and significance, it is obvious that these values and significances exercise a marked effect on male and female consciousness as well (1996, p. 9).

Conclusion

Thus, the concept of gender has evolved considerably over the decades. Beginning as a grammatical category in the old French, it has metamorphosized in the 20th century with the development of feminist philosophies in Europe and America. Its evolution over the decades has transformed it into a highly dynamic concept and scholars have noted how the ways of living it are also equally fluid. People, culture

and emerging philosophies have constantly reshaped and redefined this concept which is well testified by the individual interpretations and expressions of gender.

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