

Transgender Identities

Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity

Edited by Sally Hines and Tam Sanger



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Introduction

Sally Hines

Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity emerges from, and speaks to, recent sociological considerations of 'transgender.' The term 'transgender' denotes a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of 'man' and 'woman.' 'Transgender' includes gender identities that have, more traditionally, been described as 'transsexual,'¹ and a diversity of genders that call into question an assumed relationship between gender identity and presentation and the 'sexed' body.

This introduction serves three purposes. First it seeks to provide a historical and political context to recent sociological analyses of transgender. In the section titled 'Transgender Debates: Reflections and Futures' I frame some of the central ways in which transgender debates have developed and changed over time. I consider the different ways in which social analysis has problematised a medical understanding of gender diversity as pathological: beginning with ethnomethodology in the 1960s and ending with a discussion of the emergence of 'transgender studies' as a distinct field of scholarship in the late 1990s. Such theoretical considerations intersect with shifts in political and social movements around gender and sexuality. Thus I move on to address the relationship between transgender and feminist and lesbian and gay movements; looking at how trans movements have productively affected these political sites. I end this section of the introduction by considering the impact of theoretical and political developments on law and policy; addressing particularly recent legal interventions around gender recognition in the UK. Each of these areas is extensive and each deserving of full-length discussion. These themes are taken up in the subsequent chapters, which are outlined in the last part of this introduction.

In the second part of the introduction I turn my attention to 'a sociology of transgender.' I sketch out what such an approach may entail; considering what sociology has to bring to transgender studies, and moreover, what transgender studies has to offer sociology. The final part of the introduction provides an overview of the four parts of the book, and outlines the main themes and arguments of the forthcoming chapters.

TRANSGENDER DEBATES: REFLECTIONS AND FUTURES

Theoretical Developments

Sexual historians have illustrated how medicine took an increasingly dominant role in understandings of sexuality during the nineteenth century (Weeks 1977; Foucault 1978). Alongside homosexuality—and a range of other non-normative sexual acts—practices that we now discuss as transgendered were separated from heterosexuality and classified as deviant. The ‘naming’ of gender diverse practices during the first half of the nineteenth century produced distinct ways of thinking about gender diverse individuals. Prior to this, cross-dressing and cross-living practices had been understood as fetishistic behaviours and described through the terms ‘sexual inversion’ or ‘contrary sexual feeling,’ which were applied to non-heterosexual acts (Ekins and King 1996: 80). Studies by Hirschfeld (1910) and Ellis (1938) were seminal in distinctly classifying gender diverse practices. Their work was significant in separating practices of gender diversity from those of sexuality. Moreover, practices of gender diversity were distinguished from each other. In particular, ‘transsexuality’ was isolated from ‘transvestism.’ The work of sexual reformer Harry Benjamin was instrumental in distinctly categorising transsexuality and in positioning surgical reconstruction as the appropriate ‘treatment’ for the ‘transsexual condition’ (Benjamin 1953). As surgical techniques of gender reconstruction developed during the 1960s, access to surgery widened. Speaking to such medical developments, this period witnessed the growth of research into transsexuality from the fields of sexology (Benjamin 1966), psychology and psychiatry (Money and Green 1969). Here, dysfunctional socialisation was identified as the ‘cause’ of transsexuality. Significantly, gender was conceptualised independently of biological ‘sex.’

Throughout the 1970s the term ‘gender dysphoria’ replaced that of ‘transsexuality’ in medical and psychological writing. Locked into the notion of ‘gender dysphoria’ is the idea of the ‘wrong body,’ which suggests a state of discord between ‘sex’ (the body) and gender identity (the mind). In matching the gendered body and the gendered mind, surgery was (and still is) positioned as a route to gendered harmony. Here a further shift in understandings of gender diversity is witnessed. Rather than a privileging of the ‘sexed’ body, the mind is seen to hold the key to a coherent gendered ‘self.’ The site of pathology was thus transferred from the body to the mind.

The theoretical underpinnings of the notion of ‘gender dysphoria,’ which point to a ‘true’ gendered identity, were first critiqued through the ethnomethodological work of Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel’s (1967) seminal study of ‘Agnes,’ a woman born with both ‘male’ and ‘female’ genitalia, was written in collaboration with American psychiatrist Stoller. Through a focus on Agnes’ gendered speech and behaviour, the study examined how intersex people articulate their chosen gender within the constraints of

medical gendered discourse. Garfinkel critiqued the pathological assumptions that underscored medical and psychiatric thinking by showing how Agnes exercised agency in her chosen gender; resisting and managing social and medical stigmatisation. Moreover, Garfinkel linked Agnes' techniques of gender management to the wider silent 'rules' of gender:

The experiences of these intersexed persons permits an appreciation of these background relevancies that are otherwise easily overlooked or difficult to grasp because of their routinized character and because they are so embedded in a background of relevancies that are simply 'there' and taken for granted.

(Garfinkel 1967: 16)

Garfinkel's work makes an important intervention in shedding light on how gender 'rules' not only impact on intersex people, but work to structure all gendered subjects. Kessler and McKenna (1978) built on Garfinkel's work to further develop social analyses of gender diversity. By the late 1970s feminist scholarship had identified gender as a constraining mechanism and multi-faceted feminist studies were examining how gendered norms impacted upon women's experiences. As a result of feminist theory, the social sciences were increasingly conceptualising 'gender' as a social construction. Yet it was still generally assumed that 'sex' was a fixed biological determinant. Notably, Kessler and McKenna (1978) posited that 'sex' was as equally constructed as were the social characteristics of masculinity and femininity. Viewing certain body parts as essentially male or female, they argued, was a social and cultural process. This significant theoretical development drew attention to ways in which 'sex' and 'gender' were collapsed in academic discourse.

Ethnomethodology provided an important critique of the pathological positioning of gender diverse people within dominant medical frameworks. It recognised the social construction of gendered bodies, and was attentive to the subjective understanding and negotiation of gender norms. While the potentials of moving between the categories of gender are brought into being, though, it is only possible to move from one gender category to another within this analysis. As Kessler and McKenna later acknowledged, the binary framework of early ethnomethodological studies are thus limited for contemporary social understandings of gender diversity²:

What we did not consider 25 years ago was the possibility that someone might not want to make a credible gender presentation-might not want to be seen as clearly either male or female. [. . .] In other words, we did not address what has come to be called 'transgender.' Transgender was neither a concept nor a term 25 years ago. Transsexual was radical enough.

(Kessler and McKenna 2000)

Throughout the 1980s plural feminist approaches attended to the complexities of gender and to its relationship with sexuality. Whilst radical feminists have argued that sexuality is key to theorising gender—thus understandings of gender are developed from experiences of sexuality (MacKinnon 1982), other feminist writers have foregrounded gender in theorising the relationship between sexuality and gender—here experiences of sexuality are determined by experiences of gender (Jackson 1999). A different approach to the relationship between gender and sexuality has been developed by theorising gender and sexuality as distinct but overlapping categories (Hollibaugh 1989; Rubin 1989; Vance 1989; Sedgwick 1990). This framework distinguishes between gender and sexuality in order to independently theorise gender and sexual difference. Although this body of work did not explicitly address transgender, it was significant for developing accounts of gender plurality in which erotic desire does not automatically fit preconceived binary identities of either gender (man/woman) or sexuality (homo/hetero).

The development of poststructuralist feminist theory and queer theory through the 1990s brought issues of gender and sexual plurality to the fore. In taking the discursive formations of gender and sexuality as their starting point, these approaches have engaged directly with transgender. Butler's (1990) work is central here. Echoing Kessler and McKenna (1978), Butler argues against a biological understanding of 'sex.' Rather, 'sex' is socially and culturally produced. Poststructuralist feminist interventions were key to developing analytical frameworks that moved beyond an understanding of gender as a binary opposition (man/woman). Alongside post-colonial theory, this body of work brings a richer understanding of gender as socially relational; enabling a more complete analysis of 'difference' across and between gender categories. Moreover, poststructuralist work advanced feminist analyses of gender as a social experience by focusing attention on how 'gender' is discursively produced. Thus gender is understood as a central categorising device. From here on in, the gender binary is conceptualised as a social and political organising principle.

In similar ways, the development of queer theory moved forward social constructionist accounts of sexuality. Seidman (1996) traces the influence of social constructionism on lesbian and gay studies; pointing out the agenda of lesbian and gay studies to '[...] explain the origin, social meaning, and changing forms of the modern homosexual' (Seidman 1996: 9). As feminists mapped the social factors that impacted upon the experience of women, lesbian and gay scholars examined the social production of a modern homosexual identity. Queer theory, as Seidman notes, shifted the focus from an explanation of modern homosexuality to a discursive interrogation of the hetero/homosexual binary; bringing a shift from 'a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference' (Seidman 1996: 9). It is the latter departure—a politics of difference—that brought theories of sexuality into conversation with transgender.

Queer theory argues against the representation of identity categories as authentic. Rather, identities are unstable and multiple. Queer theory's politics of difference seeks to dissolve the naturalisation of dominant identities and to challenge the pathologisation of minority identities. From a queer framework, transgender cultures are seen to rupture dominant identity categories; as I have argued elsewhere (Hines 2005, 2007), queer theory has often highlighted transgender as epitomising categorical instability. Queer theory thus embraced transgender practices as a deconstructive tool.

Throughout the 1990s trans scholars engaged with the theoretical debates of feminism, lesbian and gay theory and queer theory; providing explicit critiques of medical discourse and practice. 'Transgender Studies' is interdisciplinary (including academic fields as diverse as the humanities, arts, sociology, psychology, law, social policy, literature, anthropology, history and politics) and intertextual (often mixing academic scholarship with autobiography and political commentary). While some trans writers (for example, Stone 1991; Bornstein 1994) reflected a queer subjectivity in positioning themselves outside of gender, many trans scholars have been critical of queer theory's lack of material analysis. Reflecting this critique, Whittle states:

It is all very well having no theoretical place within the current gendered world, but that is not the daily lived experience. Real life affords trans people constant stigma and oppression based on the apparently unreal concept of gender. This is one of the most significant issues that trans people have brought to feminism and queer theory.

(Whittle 2006: xii)

In arguing for a reinstatement of materiality in analyses of transgender, Whittle's intervention is deeply political. As I suggest later in this introduction, his emphasis on 'lived experience' is requisite for a sociology of transgender. Whittle's points here are also significant in indicating how trans scholarship developed through and alongside trans politics. Indeed, the broad theoretical developments around gender and sexuality that I have outlined in this section are each tied up with shifting understandings and methods of organising within political and social movements. It is these shifts to which I now turn.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

It is unfeasible to isolate the development of theories around gender and sexuality from the politics of these social movements. Thus developments in feminist theory interweave with the histories of feminism as a political movement, while the disciplines of lesbian and gay theory and queer

theory reflect shifts in social movements around sexuality. Further, as I will address, the development of transgender studies over the last decade is inseparable from the growth of a visible trans movement.

The relationship between feminism and transgender has been far from smooth. In the 1980s, Janice Raymond's (1980) critique of trans women as servile constructions of a patriarchal medical system instigated a politics of hostility towards trans people. More recently, other feminist writers (Jeffreys 1997; Greer 1999; Bindel 2003, 2004) have supported Raymond's proposition that trans practices are inherently un-feminist. At the core of feminist discussions around trans femininity is the concept 'woman.' As Feinberg states:

The development of the trans movement has raised a vital question that's being discussed in women's communities all over the country. How is woman defined? The answer we give may determine the course of women's liberation for decades to come.

(Feinberg 1996: 109)

In addressing the marginalised histories, experiences, and social and political demands of women, the women's movement applied 'woman' as a fixed category, which was distinct from 'man.' For the most part, feminism has assumed an inherent identity, understood through the category 'woman.' 'Woman' not only initiated feminist interests and goals, it also constituted the subject for whom political representation was pursued. Questions around the position of trans women within feminism cut to the heart of discussions around the constitution of 'woman.' In problematising a unified concept of gender, trans practices challenge feminist politics of identity. Strands of radical feminism responded to these complexities by defending the category of 'woman' through recourse to both biological 'sex' and gendered socialisation (Raymond 1980; Jeffreys 1997; Greer 1999; Bindel 2003). From either basis, trans women were not 'real' women. Trans women, therefore, could not be feminists and had no place in the 'women's' movement.

Autobiographical and activist work by trans writers (Stone 1991; Feinberg 1992; Bornstein 1994; Riddell 1996; Califia 1997; Wilchins 1997) has articulated the ways in which trans people were excluded from feminist movements during the 1980s and 1990s. Riddell explicitly links the publication of Raymond's (1980) book to the emergence of a wider anti-transgender feminism; setting out the personal and political consequences of such a politics:

My living space is threatened by this book. [. . .] its attacks on transsexual women, its dogmatic approach and its denial that female experience is our basic starting point are a danger signal of trends emerging in the whole women's movement.

(Riddell, cited in Ekins and King 1996: 189)