

# Concepts in Action

*Conceptual Constructionism*

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# Gender as Analytic, Political and Interdisciplinary Concept

*Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen*

## Introduction

Gender is a term that is both ambiguous and ambitious. Sometimes it refers to a categorical *distinction* between women and men (either/or). Sometimes it designates a *distributive* difference between groups of women and groups of men (more or less of something, for instance, a capacity, attitude, behaviour, or salary). Finally, it may indicate the cultural *discourses* of gender, which work as mostly unacknowledged frames of interpretation in our perception of the world. These three analytic meanings of gender—as distinction, as distribution and as discourse—may lead to considerable confusion about what we are truly discussing when we refer to gender and gender differences. It is not unusual either in everyday conversations or in research for distributive gender differences to be interpreted through the lens of common gender discourse and understood as distinctions.

Gender has many facets and may be studied from numerous different theoretical perspectives and academic disciplines. Gender is central to division of labour and the structuring of institutions such as family, school, workplace, market and state. It is also a profound cultural system of meaning, norms, conventions, symbols and myths. It is a dimension of bodies and physical reproduction, individual identities and personal experience, social relations and everyday interaction. The impact and meaning of gender are complex, contextual, and changing over time. Moreover, the dimensions of gender are deeply entangled with other lines of difference and inequality, including age, sexuality, social class, nationality, race and ethnicity. These entanglements, or articulations, contribute to shaping the organisation, salience, and meanings of gender in various spheres of life.

What we currently refer to as gender studies emerged with the feminist movement in the 1970s, implying that the perspective has a built-in critical edge: it both interrogates how gender is produced, legitimised, maintained and changed and considers this academic knowledge a contribution to the struggle against discrimination and injustice. This engagement with social justice

raises important issues about the relationship between knowledge, power and politics.<sup>1</sup>

### Gender as Distinction, Distribution and Discourse

In everyday language, gender is a distinction between women and men, girls and boys. The distinction is based on the close-to-dichotomous anatomical differences between male and female bodies (genes, gonads and genitals) that are often considered the core of biological sex. A small number of babies are born with ambiguous genitals or intersex conditions (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Hines, 2004). There also appears to be an increasing number of people (transgender, transsexual) who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Some of these people choose to correct their bodies via hormonal treatment or surgery. Nevertheless, for many practical purposes the gender distinction works unequivocally. As Toril Moi argues from a Wittgensteinian perspective, all categories are blurred at the edges, and the existence of difficult cases does not prove that there are no easy ones (Moi, 1999: 40).

All other empirical gender differences, whether they are biological (hormone levels, secondary sex attributes, brain structure, height or muscular strength), psychological (differences in motivations, attitudes or cognitive capacities) or behavioural (differences in preferences and ways of being and behaving), are of distributive character, namely, they involve complex variation, not dichotomy. The variation within each gender group is often larger than the average difference between the two groups. Most distributive patterns depend on social and historical context and therefore are neither stable nor timeless. Because gender has many facets and different dimensions do not always

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1 References to feminist theory and gender studies are often used interchangeably, but political and philosophical issues tend to be predominant in feminist theory, whereas the term gender studies covers all types of (critical) research on gender. Because of the connection to women's liberation the field was first called women's studies, but starting in the 1990s gender studies has increasingly been used as the general term. This acknowledges both that men also have gender and may suffer from the gender system and that gender may be at work in spaces without women present. Gender studies also now includes studies of sexuality, often referred to as queer studies or LGBTQ studies.

I write this chapter from the perspective of a social researcher working with qualitative methods, situated in an interdisciplinary centre for gender studies of which I was the director for many years (1993–2009). My research topic is gender and childhood/youth studies from a perspective of social change, with a special interest in the interconnection between psychological and socio-cultural gender.

occur together within a single person's experiences and behaviour, it is also the case that a man or a woman may be 'typical' in some respects and 'atypical' in others. Distributive patterns do not only involve statistically significant differences but may also be understood within the framework of qualitative studies as gendered patterns identified in a sample.

Gender stereotyping involves interpreting a gendered distribution or pattern as a categorical distinction. This ignores the social and historical limitations of the pattern, variation within each group, and the overlap between women and men. Consequently, that which characterises a majority of women will be equated with femininity, whereas that which characterises a majority of men will be equated with masculinity—and this may well be true even in cases in which almost half of a gender group does not fit a given characteristic (Fine, 2010). The mechanism underlying this slip is that we tend to notice behaviour that confirms gender stereotypes, whereas we marginalise as exceptional behaviour that deviates from the stereotypes and overlook more gender-neutral behaviour. Because masculinity and femininity—whatever they are used to designate—neither form a clear dichotomy nor are isomorphic with gendered bodies, the result is often a conceptual confusion in which some women are viewed not as 'real' women and some men are viewed not as 'real men'.

This confusion may also arise in research in which gender is used as a variable and average differences between women and men are circularly explained by 'gender'. This systematically ignores how the meaning of survey or interview questions posed may be different for women and men because of their different positions in the social order and different frames of interpretation. As the Norwegian psychologist Hanne Haavind once wrote (before the legalisation of gay marriage):

If women and men on average express the same degree of satisfaction with their marriages, are they then satisfied with the same things? Have the women and the men who have used the scale for self-measurement compared themselves with others in the same gender position in marriage as themselves, or have they assessed their satisfaction in comparison with those in the other gender position?... The method misses the significance of the fact that women are married to men, whereas men are married to women.

HAAVIND, 2000: 165, translated from Norwegian

Here, it is important to note that focusing on only gender difference tends to limit the analysis of gender to one that is an individual characteristic only. However, gender can also be described as a social relation and an entity of

meaning that emerges in processes of interaction. We do not always understand the dynamics of a classroom or a workplace more clearly by being aware of small average differences in cognitive skills and behaviours. This perspective calls attention to the dynamics of power and negotiations in social constructions of meaning. It also opens up towards understanding multiple forms of femininity and masculinity (inflected by dimensions such as social class, age, or racialised and ethnic status) and the hegemonic position that a particular type of femininity or masculinity may attain in a given context (Halberstam, 1998; Connell, 2000).

Gender is empirically present both in bodily appearance and experiences and in the patterning of social structures, interactions and identities. However, gender is also a forceful frame of interpretation in our minds. Such gendered discourses are applied not only to people but also to non-human things such as colours, nations, ships, bombs, and tornadoes (Scott 1988). Gender as a frame of interpretation may involve double standards and attributions in which behaviours are interpreted and valued differently according to a person's sex. When a boy performs well in school, his performance is often considered the result of intelligence, whereas if a boy performs poorly in school, he might be considered lazy or merely bored. When a girl performs well in school, her performance it is often deemed the result of her dutifulness and hard work, whereas if a girl performs poorly in school, she might be considered to lack intelligence (Walkerdine, 1990). Such double standards and attributions seldom work on a conscious level; they slide in as taken-for-granted dimensions of ways of thinking about and practicing gender. In the 1980s-era debate about the problems experienced by girls in school, the proposed solutions focused on individual changes, such as finding ways to strengthen girls' self-confidence. When the problems boys experienced in school came into focus 20 years later, the analysis and solutions were framed in a structural way: the school system did not meet the needs of boys and therefore ought to be changed (Öhrn, 2000).

What appears to characterise gender as a historical discourse is the tendency to split and *dichotomise* phenomena into two distinct groups, with the resulting dichotomy read as a *hierarchy*. Things defined as feminine tend to be viewed as secondary or even inferior to things defined as masculine. Simone de Beauvoir writes in her landmark 1949 book that women are perceived and treated as 'the second sex' (Beauvoir, 1989). According to de Beauvoir, men represent the universal human, the unmarked category of mankind, whereas women constitute a special gendered sub-category whose gender explains their deviation from universal humanity. This way of thinking may persist even in situations in which women have achieved positions of power or girls' educational achievements exceed those of boys. Thus, there is no automatic

connection between gender as it is present empirically in the world and gender as a frame of interpretation. However, interpretive models of gender interact with gender in the world as symbolic gender enters into experiences and practices related to gender. Gender in our heads and gender in the world thus continually feed into one another.

### Sex and Gender

The degree to which measures of psychological gender differences are actually related to gender differences found in genes, brain structure and hormone levels, or whether such measures depend on learning and experience or a mixture of the two (Hines, 2004; Fine, 2010), is largely unknown. The whole idea of a one-way causal route from biology to behaviour has been questioned by recent research documenting the remarkable flexibility of the human brain, the contextual contingency of bodily processes, and the ability even of genes to adjust their effects to individual life circumstances (Rose, 2005; Keller, 2010). This does not mean that gendered patterns of behaviour are a mirage or that the patterns that do exist have no biological basis (even if we do not know exactly what that basis is). The point is that there is no clear or straightforward connection between the near-dichotomous dimensions of anatomical sex and the complex, multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of gender differences and gendered patterns of behaviour.

The distinction between biological and social gender—sex and gender,<sup>2</sup> in English usage—has performed important political work in feminist theory, but it has also been an issue of heated theoretical debate in the past few decades. In the 1960s, the distinction came into use in the English language,

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2 There are different reasons for the inconsistency in the use of the term “gender” either as a general category or as covering only socially constructed aspects. One is that unlike modern English, not all languages have two words for sexual difference. The French term “sexe”, the Norwegian “kjønn”, the Danish “køn” and the Swedish “kön” cover both the biological and social aspects of sexual difference in a single word. This was also the case in English before the 1960s, when “sex” was the general term for sexual difference and “gender” was merely a grammatical term. Since the 1990s, gender has gradually taken over from sex as the general term (Nicholson, 1994: 80; Moi, 1999: 31; Cassin, Apter, Lezra and Wood, 2014: 376). After the sex/gender division gained influence in gender studies, Swedish gender researchers introduced the term “genus” to designate social gender in Swedish, and this term has achieved a more general use, including in Swedish politics. Consequently, the original Swedish word “kön” is now associated more with biological gender and sexuality. Danish and Norwegian gender researchers have not followed suit and continue to prefer the integrated term “kjønn” or “køn”.

with 'sex' referring to the biological differences between women and men and 'gender' referring to psychological identities and cultural attributions (Cassin et al., 2014: 375). This distinction between sex and gender soon spread to the international community of feminist researchers. In her influential essay 'What is a woman?', the literary scholar Toril Moi analyses the development of the terms within feminist theory: 'Gender may be pictured as a barricade thrown up against the insidious pervasiveness of sex', she writes (Moi, 1999: 15). The point is that when sex is perceived as pervasive, the difference between male and masculine or female and feminine disappears. The result is indeed a case in which distribution is interpreted as distinction.

During the nineteenth century, gender difference increasingly became understood in terms of reproductive biology. Previously, gender worked primarily as an axis of divisions of labour along with the distribution of power, authority and privilege. With an enhanced division between public and private life in the nineteenth century and the rise of modern medical science, the difference between males and females came to be understood as fundamental, dictated by their biology and inborn psychological capacities (Laqueur, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Thus, biology was from then on used to naturalise and justify social gender norms. Women were reduced to their biological reproductive capacity and the consequences this was assumed to have for their mental capacities (Rosenbeck, 1987; Moi, 1999). This gender polarisation emerged in the historical period that introduced a completely new view of human beings based on the ideas of the European Enlightenment. Women were viewed as not fully human, but instead as a subgroup defined and confined by their bodies.

Although the more extreme version of this biological determinism dissipated during the first decades of the twentieth century as women gained access to education and the right to vote, observed gender differences and gender hierarchies were still largely explained and justified by biological difference. Thus, when the second feminist movement emerged in the 1970s, there was an urgent need to build an argumentative barrier, as Moi notes, to refute biological arguments that could be used against expanding women's rights. The response to this need was to separate the concept of social and historical 'gender' from the concept of biological 'sex'.

It was not the feminists, however, who invented this distinction. In 1963, the psychiatrist Robert Stoller, who worked with intersex and transsexual patients, introduced the concept of 'gender identity' as something related only to the psychological experience of belonging to one sex or the other (Moi, 1999: 22). The concept of 'gender role' was conceived in the same period and was used in Talcott Parsons' work on the nuclear family. When feminist scholars started to use the sex/gender distinction in the early 1970s (see, for instance, Oakley,

1993), however, they emphasised not psychological gender identities or the functional order of the nuclear family but the conflict, power and suppression inherent in the gender order. In 1975, social anthropologist Gayle Rubin published the important essay 'The traffic in women', in which she used Stoller's categories for feminist purposes and viewed sexuality and bodily sexual difference as the 'raw material' for the production of gender:

... a "sex/gender system" is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied.

RUBIN, 1975: 159

According to Rubin's definition, gender is always oppressive because it is shaped by patriarchal power systems: the social organisation of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality (Rubin, 1975: 179, 204; see also Moi, 1999: 24).

In the following decades most gender research was based on this distinction between sex and gender, but eventually the idea of a biological 'nature' working as a universal, mute and passive matter was challenged. The sex/gender distinction may have helped women escape biological determinism, but it still provided a biological foundationalism for cultural gender dichotomies in which biology was assumed to be an unchangeable and neutral 'coat rack' for different cultural gender garments (Nicholson, 1994: 81–82). Drawing on Laqueur and Foucault, Linda Nicholson argued that our conceptions of the body are also always cultural and historical. She mentioned the distributive character of most biological differences, which do not fit into a binary model of sex. Judith Butler (1990) argued that our ideas of biological sex—and, indeed, the conception of heterosexuality as natural—should be regarded as an *effect* of the gender system, not its foundation. Butler also suggested that the materiality of the body is not universally given, but instead are produced by 'materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense' (Butler, 1993: 10). From a sociological perspective, Pierre Bourdieu wrote in 1990 (in the first draft of *La domination masculine*) that the sexed body should be regarded as a social construction produced by the symbolic violence in gender domination, employing his concept of habitus as learned bodily dispositions.<sup>3</sup> Another

3 Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital have inspired many feminist thinkers (see later in this chapter). However, the publication (Bourdieu, 1998, including the prior version from 1990) in which Bourdieu specifically addresses gender never became an important text in gender theory. Judith Butler (1999), Toril Moi (1991) and Bourdieu-inspired feminists such

critique originated from the emerging field of feminist science and technology studies, opposing the view of the Western philosophical tradition in which nature is viewed as passive matter that humans can control and dominate. Haraway held that ‘the “body” is an agent, not a resource’ and suggested viewing it as an active, meaning-generating ‘material-semiotic actor’ (Haraway, 1988: 594–595). From the phenomenological perspective, Toril Moi developed Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that the body should not be understood as a reified thing but as ‘a situation’ related to a person’s lived experience and subjectivity. In contrast to Butler and perhaps Bourdieu, Haraway and Moi did not contest bodily structures as facts, but as facts with no absolute meaning: ‘... the relationship between body and subjectivity is neither necessary nor arbitrary, but contingent’ (Moi, 1999: 40, 114). The meaning of a body can be decided only in a historical analysis of individual women or men. Like Gayle Rubin, Moi finds the concept of gender no less reductive than the concept of sex because myths of cultural gender identities may work just as deterministically as fixed ideas of sex.

### Equality and Difference—Gender, Power and Politics

A different way of discussing the meaning of the concept of gender is to frame it as a political question of gender equality and gender difference. Is the goal of feminism to make women and men equal or to dispose of the hierarchical relation between them? Is it the dichotomy or the hierarchy of the gender order that is the source of evil? Carol Patemann coined the problem as ‘Wollstonecraft’s dilemma’ (Pateman, 1989: 196–197), after one of the first European feminists, the British Mary Wollstonecraft, who published *A vindication of the rights of woman* in 1792. The dilemma operates such that *either* women can insist on obtaining the same social rights as citizens as men but thereby take men’s lives and values as models and become like them, *or* women can insist on gaining respect and recognition as women and mothers, with the consequence that they will not attain recognition as full citizens. Thus, the tension between equality and difference is a product of the contradiction between

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as Lois McNay (2004) and Lisa Adkins (2004) have disregarded it and typically relegated it to a footnote. It is dismissed partly as a simplistic structuralist account with no understanding of the complexities, contradictions, ambivalences and gradual changes that characterise gender in modern society (Moi, 1999: 286; Adkins, 2004: 191–192; McNay, 2004: 189, note 4) and partly for kicking in doors that had been opened long before by feminist scholars whom Bourdieu apparently had not read (Moi, 1999: 283, note 21).

universal human rights and gender polarisation that first emerged in the late eighteenth century.

The various feminist responses to Wollstonecraft's dilemma rely on different conceptions of gender, power and knowledge, and these positions may be understood both genealogically and theoretically. Iris Marion Young identifies a tension between a 'humanist position' favouring equality and a more 'gynocentric position' favouring difference (Young, 1985). The humanist position—which ties back to Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Simone de Beauvoir—views women as human beings whose potential is inhibited and distorted by a society that allows self-development only for men. Women's confinement to femininity is what impedes the development of their full human potential. Thus, the primary vehicle of women's oppression is the idea of femininity as an essence, which does not have a parallel in a similar idea of masculinity (Young, 1985: 173). There is no celebration of gender differences in this position. The feminist political project here involves individual freedom: women have an objective interest in challenging the cultural mind-set both in themselves and in others that reduces their freedom. Gynocentric feminism disagrees that the problem is that women are not allowed to fully participate in humanity/being human. Rather, it lies 'in the denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalised and authoritarian masculinist culture' (Young, 1985: 176).

Second-wave feminism incorporates both positions: the fight for women's rights is also a fight for a better society. Socialist and Marxist feminists of the 1970s focused on the structural and economic power that oppressed women and on the necessity for collective actions to challenge this. In the late 1970s, the gynocentric position gained influence, partly as a result of the many new empirical studies conducted within different academic disciplines that revealed women's lives and valuable activities and contributions. Simone de Beauvoir came under heavy criticism for her devaluation of women's bodies, reproductive labour and activities and for mirroring a patriarchal culture in her idealisation of men's situation in society. The gynocentric position of the 1980s led to a somewhat exalted celebration of women as linked with nature, nurturing, cooperation and peace-loving. It was also used to engage in a more radical critique of the West's capitalist and patriarchal society not only for oppressing women but also for engaging in the gendered separation of production and reproduction. As a result, care and human relations are devalued and a destructive economic logic, oppressive to both men and women, comes to dominate society. Whereas the conception of knowledge in humanist feminism relied on Enlightenment ideas of objectivity and critical-rational thinking, the gynocentric position became more preoccupied with the subjective

aspects of knowledge production and the links between power and the construction of knowledge. Nancy Hartsock (1983) formulated the epistemology of the 'feminist standpoint', which claims that women's position and experiences in the sexual division of labour produce not only a different but also a superior understanding of nature and social phenomena.

Humanist and gynocentric feminism proposed different solutions to the equality/difference dilemma. However, neither had questioned the category of women, and it was only to a limited degree that they questioned whether women have common political interests. The notion of a universal female subject was first challenged in the 1980s by Black feminists in the US, who argued that race and class were overlooked dimensions in feminism: Black women were oppressed as much by white middle-class women as by Black men (see, for instance, Davis, 1981; and Hull, Scott and Smith, 1982, the latter with the telling title *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave*). This idea complicated the question of gender equality, gender difference, and the visions of women's collective action against oppression.

The emergence of postcolonial and poststructuralist theories in the 1990s introduced new ways to consider power, knowledge and politics. The Marxist or patriarchal concept of power as a top-down model of domination was challenged by Foucault's discursive understanding of power as something that is everywhere, something that nobody can escape, a social force that creates and regulates which categories of meaning and subject positions are possible. Both women and men contribute to maintaining the gender order through their actions and language. Thus, a crucial difference from the concept of power found in humanist and gynocentric feminism was that women were viewed neither as victims nor as angels but as co-producers of the gender order. The epistemological relativism introduced by standpoint theory was radicalised in the poststructuralist version, in which not only is knowledge entangled with power, knowledge *is* power.

From the poststructuralist perspective, the equality/difference dilemma tends to lose meaning. When the focus is on women primarily as an internally diverse group, the concept of feminist politics is challenged, whether as a struggle for gender equality or as a struggle for the acknowledgement of women's special values and identities. Because identity categories are viewed both as constituted by processes of exclusion and sites of power struggles and as internally dependent on what is externalised, any category will be internally unstable and the target of continual resignification (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1996). Thus, the approach to politics and change in poststructuralist and queer theory tends to work on the level of cultural categories and representations: normative categories of gender and sexuality must be deconstructed and destabilised

to reveal that they are neither natural nor innocent identities. The inquiries begin from the margins with people engaged in non-normative gender and sexual practices who do not feel like they fit into whatever 'we' is articulated as a norm (Stormhøj, 2013: 65). The queer perspective gives priority to non-normative sexualities because heteronormativity is viewed as inherent in the meaning of gender.

The queer perspective introduced a different understanding of gender politics, which carried great importance in an increasingly mediatised and sexualised society. However, it also created new problems. For instance, it is difficult to discern how to effectively struggle against discrimination and inequality among existing groups if all identity categories are viewed as unstable. In addition, the focus on cultural categories and borders may diminish attention to economic and material inequality and weaken the critique of a society that devalues care and interdependence (Fraser, 1997, 2009). A further issue was the claim that change must stem from people located at the margins, which tends to conceptualise the dominant norm as monolithic and undynamic (McNay, 2004; Stormhøj, 2013). The dominant norm emerged as a static background to non-normative performances, not taking into account that gender norms and practices are constantly experiencing a process of reconfiguration that may sometimes contribute to increased gender equality—for instance, when more women take up paid work and more men participate in child care (Adkins, 2004; McNay, 2004; Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006; Aarseth, 2009; Nielsen, 2017).

This brings us back to the dilemma between equality and difference in a new way: does a destabilisation of the binary structure of gender lead to fewer social inequalities between people of different genders or different sexual identities? Or is it the other way around: does increased social equality between women and men or between people with different sexual identities make the category of gender less important, constraining and exclusionary? Is it gender as experience or gender as representation that is the main problem? Or can these two perspectives be combined? I will return to this question in my conclusion, but first I will accentuate the difference between these perspectives to illustrate how the dichotomy has led to further conceptual polarisations.

### **Being, Doing, Performing Gender: Subjectivity and Agency**

Viewing gender primarily as a cultural representation or primarily as lived experience has consequences for the understanding of how gender identities and gender norms are produced, maintained and transformed. Various theories have emphasised different aspects of the process of learning gender

throughout life: gender as ways of being and relating; gender as embodied dispositions; gender as a dimension of interaction, play and negotiation; gender as a norm and a process of normalising. These approaches are also based on different notions of subjectivity and agency.

There has generally been an increased focus on gender as something that is produced and maintained through practices. Instead of viewing gender as something one 'is', the processual perspective emphasises gender as something one 'does' (West and Zimmerman, 1987). West and Zimmerman's sociological version of 'doing gender' (1987) relies on symbolic interactionism in which social meaning is created in interaction. Similarly, in Simone de Beauvoir and Toril Moi's philosophical version, the philosophical distinction between existence and essence is central: it is our acts that define who we are (Moi, 1999: 55). In both versions, there is an acting subject who evolves through agency and in response to others' agency. Experiences of interaction are sedimented over time in a way that means that how a person 'does' gender also becomes an expression of who she has become through these actions, and thus in that sense, 'is'. Hence, studies of 'being' gendered and 'doing' gender could here be understood as functionally related, revealing different aspects of social processes involved in constructing gendered subjectivities. Agency and subjectivity in this case become mutually intertwined. This is also a perspective we find in the work of feminist sociologists who have developed Bourdieu's concept of habitus but placed a stronger emphasis on agency and reflexivity than we find in Bourdieu's own work. Lois McNay, for instance, understands gender as a 'lived relation' instead of as a structural location, whether in terms of materialist or cultural thinking (McNay, 2004: 175). Lisa Adkins connects modern gender detraditionalisation with gender arrangements in late modern society that contribute to increase reflexivity as 'a habit of gender' in a continuous interchange with pre-reflexive or embodied meanings connected to gender (Adkins, 2004: 192; see also Aarseth, 2009; Nielsen, 2017).

In the poststructuralist version of 'doing gender', however, agency and subjectivity are split. In Butler's account, the theory of the internal instability of norms and categories is combined with a theory of performativity, which is defined as 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names' (Butler, 1993: 2). Gender exists only as performance, and there is 'no doer behind the deed'. The instability of the category of gender, in combination with its performative character, makes the category open to change, as the norms may unintentionally be wrongly cited. However, given that these failed performances or resignifications are merely coincidental consequences of the indeterminacy of linguistic categories triggered by unconscious processes in the speaker, their effects are also undetermined (McNay,

2004). Within this particular philosophical line of thinking, subjective agency is mainly understood as unconscious defensive reactions that guard the illusion of gender.

Compared with West and Zimmerman, there is little focus on social interaction in Butler's version of doing gender. She subsequently modified her ideas in this regard (for instance, in her 2004 book *Undoing Gender*), but in her two books from the early 1990s, which had and still have a significant impact on gender studies, gender performance appears to be a rather solitary show. The relational psychoanalyst Lynne Layton holds that if identities are theoretically reduced to always and only being defensive formations, we lose not only the relational meaning and the biographical motives underlying the performance of gender but also the possibility of understanding identities as more or less conflicted and relations as more or less defensive:

What is missing from Butler's account, even in its most psychoanalytic form, is an understanding of what motivates people's relation to norms. Indeed, one reason why it is so difficult to grasp what Butler means by agency is that her system has no place for the mediating power of relationships, for longing for love, approval, and recognition.

LAYTON, 1998: 150

This also leaves us in a rather timeless universe from which the historical contingencies of subject formations and agencies are more or less absent (Benhabib, 1995; Fraser, 1997; Moi, 1999; Stormhøj, 2013). In the words of Lois McNay, the lack of a temporal dimension in Judith Butler's theoretical work implies that gender 'tends to be construed as a relatively atemporal system of dominant norms' in which the possibility of change is unmediated by praxis or agency (McNay, 1999: 102). Raewyn Connell has argued that Butler's idea of generalised categorical instability cannot take into account that in certain historical periods gender identities and relations change quickly, whereas in others, they change slowly. Nor does it explain why some people want to change gender arrangements, whereas others resist (Connell, 2009: 90).

### Realism and Nominalism

The relationship between gendered subjectivities and gender performativity can also be connected to the opposition between realism and nominalism, that is, the question of whether words and concepts refer to empirical phenomena or only to the linguistic and discursive systems themselves. This distinction is

often confused with the distinction between essentialism and constructionism, but it is not the same thing. Essentialism means viewing gender as a fixed, ahistorical and coherent essence in individuals. Hardly any feminists or gender researchers would subscribe to such an idea. Instead, the essentialism debate concerns what counts as essence and what is implied in construction (Hacking, 1999). Most social researchers are constructionists in the sense of Bourdieu or Berger and Luckmann, meaning that they think that gender, body and sexuality vary historically and culturally and that such ideas and practices have an impact on what women and men are allowed to become. This form of social constructionism typically relies on critical realist, interactionist or interpretative paradigms in which the concept of the 'reality' of gender is neither abolished nor used in a linguistically unmediated, positivistic sense.

The various poststructuralist positions identify as nominalist instead of constructionist in the social and historical sense. The nominalist position moves the focus of interest towards how gender is *constituted* for our minds. The claim is that the linguistic binary between man/woman or between homosexuality/heterosexuality and repetitions of those binaries in discursive practices unavoidably create gender as an essentialist category of meaning. From this perspective, there *are* no identities or essences in the world to discover or describe, only differences and borders that are composed of complex power dynamics and result in on-going social processes of inclusion and exclusion.

A problem that arises here, not least for social researchers, is that if there are only differences and no identities to study, meta-communication will tend to be substituted for communication in research and politics: we cannot speak about the world, only about *how* we speak of the world (Nielsen, 1995, 2000; Hacking, 1999; Knapp, 2005). To analyse how we speak of gender is obviously important, and feminists have made important critical interventions into mainstream science in this regard. One example is Donna Haraway, who convincingly demonstrated how biological studies of animals were based on human gender stereotypes, legitimising these gender norms as natural (Haraway, 1992). Another example is Hanne Haavind's above-mentioned intervention, in which she criticises the use of gender as a self-explaining variable (Haavind, 2000). The words we use are not innocent. When we talk about men and women or allow specific groups to embody a general category, we also contribute to the idea that gender is a given and dichotomous phenomenon. However, this point does not consider that men and women act in the world and that they carry the gendered structures of society and culture both with them and in them. If describing them—even if only in the distributive sense—automatically means essentialising them, feminist social sciences and historical studies lose ground. Gender studies can hardly survive as an interdisciplinary research field only by

offering critiques of others' use of language; it must also offer new and better descriptions of the world. Describing the world implies dialoguing with others, not only unveiling their perspectives—and that means listening to what people are attempting to say, not just how they say it. This observation applies to theories, politics and informants alike. A meta-perspective on a theory, concept or utterance is not the same as addressing the relevance or validity of that theory, concept or utterance.

To some extent, the split between nominalism and critical/interpretative realism may follow a split between the humanities and the social sciences. However, it is fully possible to conduct deconstructive work in the social sciences and to study historical ideas of gender and sexuality without viewing them solely as discursive positions. Toril Moi, for instance, takes a realist stand when she criticises the anti-realist and anti-dialogical position inherent in philosophical difference thinking. Departing from ordinary language philosophy (Wittgenstein instead of Saussure and Derrida) she claims that the meaning of words arise from what we use them for, not primarily from their oppositions to other words. This places language use in a historical context and embeds it in specific social relations, which is what is missing from Butler's early account of performativity. Thus, it is not the *word* woman that is the problem but what is claimed, directly or indirectly, regarding women and femininity in a given context. However, Moi also appears to fear certain words when she adamantly refuses to discuss gender identities in any other sense than as myths and stereotypes. In contrast to Butler, she thinks individual gendered subjectivities exist and suggests that one should study the variation in women's lived experiences. However, Moi rejects the idea that it could also be important to study social patterns, e.g., the similarities in women's subjectivities: "To speak of a generalised "gender identity" is to impose a reifying or objectifying closure on our steadily changing and fluctuating experience of ourselves in the world" (Moi, 1999: 81). The question is, what is Moi implying with the word 'generalised' here? If it means a claim regarding an essential feminine identity, any gender researcher would agree—but what about smaller and more limited patterns of similarities between certain women in a specified context (see also Bordo, 1990)? Other gender scholars from the humanities are more open to such limited generalisations of gender patterns, employing, for instance, Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances (Nicholson, 1994) or Sartre's concept of seriality (Young, 1994).

These questions hold particular importance for empirical gender studies because the ultimate goal here is seldom the study of language or of individual or literary cases of experience. For gender researchers working empirically with women and men's lives currently or historically, it is indeed often possible to

identify distributive gender patterns. Recognising such patterns is equivalent neither to essentialising cultural forms nor to imposing stereotypes on people, which ignore their freedom and agency. We can have gendered patterns even if they do not apply to everybody in one gender group, if they apply to some in the other gender group as well, or if they are limited to certain classes, contexts or periods. It is important to identify such patterns, which represent a social practice that not only is part of a social order but also provides some of the conditions for change. Thus, for gender researchers working empirically, gender in the world can neither be reduced to nor radially separated from the gender categories through which it is constituted and experienced. The epistemological space that social researchers inhabit is characterised by continuous mediation among the characteristics of the objects studied, the objects' interpretation of themselves, and the researcher's interpretation of how she interprets the objects and herself.

### Conclusion

As an analytical, interdisciplinary and inherently critically concept, gender has multiple dimensions and raises intricate questions of ontology, epistemology and politics. It is not possible to establish a simple overview of positions in the field because the theoretical issues work on many and partly intersecting levels. Their meaning may also change depending on the academic field and the research questions raised. The dimensions discussed in this article included the non-reducible, analytic meaning of gender as a simultaneous distinction, distribution and discourse; different conceptions of sex and gender and how they relate to assumptions about the mind-nature dichotomy; the tension between gender equality and gender difference with wider impacts on epistemology and the conception of power and politics; and gender as something one is, does or performs, and the consequences of this notion for the understanding of subjectivity and agency, reproduction and change. Finally, I discussed the issues of essentialism and constructionism and of nominalism and realism as different epistemological points of departure. I emphasised a line of division between gender researchers working with gender mainly as a representation and those working with gender mainly as an experience. These two points of departure have had further consequences not only for the understanding of power and politics but also for the conceptions of biological and social gender and how the concept of gender is understood. In practice, however, gender researchers often draw on both positions but in different proportions. For critical realists, it is evident both that gender is a representation

and that this representation plays a part in what men and women in the world can become. Gender as a frame of interpretation cannot be separated from the distributional patterns found or the manner in which gender as distinction is employed. Thus, the nominalist position may be part of the epistemological considerations of the 'realists' but not their ontological foundation. Most of the 'nominalists' would admit that they are not attempting to describe all aspects of how gender works. For instance, in Judith Butler's later works, she attempts to clarify that of course she understands that there are things that exist outside language and that the empirical doers of gender obviously have a psychological and social history that precedes the deed, noting that this is not the issue she is addressing in her theoretical work (see, for instance, Butler, 2004: Ch. 10). The differences may thus boil down to the fact that there are many and different phenomena to study and many and different questions to ask precisely because gender studies is constituted as a broad and interdisciplinary field. The advantage of this is that gender studies has access to a broad set of knowledge and theoretical approaches. For this reason, gender studies may occupy a privileged position in terms of academic and political border crossing. Instead of viewing the relationship between nominalism and critical/interpretative realism as a split, it can also be put to work as a methodological challenge and possible integration.

However, the interdisciplinary character of the field also raises the risk that one discipline, or a specific theory from this discipline, may at times dominate the field, leading to uniformity instead of to multiplicity. This may result in a reductive approach (everybody poses the same questions) or theoretical claims with unclear limits (when claims are moved from one field of inquiry into another without asking whether the object of study is the same). We may observe an example of this in the debate on being, doing and performing gender, in which the disagreement appears to stem from a confusion of different identity concepts and the work they are intended to perform in different disciplines or in different research inquiries. Butler's concept of the subject is positioned within a longstanding philosophical dispute about whether 'the subject' can be claimed to be the ultimate foundation of reason. In sociology and psychology, the concept of 'subject' performs different work. In a sociological context, it will often refer to shifting social and political identities. In psychology, it refers to the realm of individual experience, including the experience of being 'oneself' even in the midst of social and personal change. If the meaning of words is what they are used for, this is unproblematic. However, it becomes a problem if the meaning of a concept in one context is uncritically imported into another. If the philosophical distinction between identity and difference enters the social sciences or historical studies as a general 'theory'—without Butler's reservations or later amendments—it may become

two distinctly different methodological approaches. Then, one suddenly must choose between *either* studying people's identities as unitary, coherent and universal, *or* studying how their identities are linguistically constituted by the marginalisation of other identities. This dichotomy makes it problematic to speak both of living subjects and lived identities and of variations, relations and historical formations because these words and their reference to social phenomena are interpreted as essentialist thinking. However, the real problem here is the dichotomy of identity versus difference that does not fit many of the inquiries in social sciences or historical studies. As Lynne Layton (1998) has argued, from a psychological perspective, identity and difference, coherence and incoherence, and stability and change in identities and subject formations are simply not an either/or question. Thus, interdisciplinarity may sometimes result in unhelpful theoretical dualisms. Rachel Falmagne (2009) claims that theoretical differences and tensions are productive when they are used constructively to transform reconceptualisations and selective syntheses but not when they are constructed within a dualistic frame that remains within a particular theoretical territory and its corresponding community of scholars. Falmagne argues that theoretical tensions often signal that each account excludes important features of the phenomenon studied, which its language is ill equipped to address. However, if theoretical tensions are not reduced to a question of either/or, they can represent productive tensions for feminist scholars both to explore and to find ever-new ways to hold.

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