



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif



Does the use of binary indicators reify difference and inequality?



Cindy Brooks Dollar

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Department of Sociology, 337 Frank Porter Graham Building, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2016
 Received in revised form 21 December 2016
 Accepted 30 December 2016
 Available online xxx

Keywords:

Gender inequality
 Sexed bodies
 Heteronormativity
 Degendering

ABSTRACT

Scholarship has noted the omnipresence of gender and has revealed persistent devaluation of women and their bodies. Illuminating the limitations of our existing gender order, feminist scholars have focused on the problem of gender duality. In doing so, questions about the validity of binary gender and sex categories have been raised. Calls to “undo gender”, however, are met with an acknowledgement of institutionalized accountability structures, which perpetuate gendering and reinforce sex and gender as containing discrete, dichotomous categories. While recognizing the socio-political necessity to eliminate this dualistic understanding of gender, I argue using binary indicators remains an important part of the feminist research agenda. I acknowledge the tension between these two positions but suggest that the continued use of existing binaries does not preclude calls for a degendering movement.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

The gender problem	10
Problematizing binary categorizations	10
Heteronormativity as a critical framework	10
Should feminist scholarship cease using binary categories?	11
Acknowledging the tension	11
Addressing the tension: the coexistence of two seemingly opposing standpoints	11
Conclusion	12
References	12

Social scientists have long recognized power imbalances between females and males (e.g. [Engels 1972\[1884\]](#); [Martineau 2003\[1838\]](#)) that historically relegate females as a group to a social position that is inferior to males as a group. In an effort to gain insight into gender disparities, scholars have focused on explicating the factors that cause and maintain sex-gender inequality. For example, the (re)creation of gender hierarchies is explained by the devaluation of female labor and domestic work ([Acker, 2006](#); [Glenn, 2002](#); [Hartmann, 1976](#); [Williams, 1992](#)), patterns of sex-stratified interactions ([Goffman, 1977](#); [West & Zimmerman, 1987](#)) and gendered identity construction ([Bartky, 1990](#); [Connell, 2002](#)). This work has been crucial in improving our understanding of sex-gender relations, yet it assumes our social world is

made up of distinct classifications of persons – males *or* females, women *or* men.

Contemporary feminist scholars have raised concerns about relying on such polarizing categories. Following calls to “undo” gender, some feminists have argued the need to dismantle binary sex and gender classifications (e.g., [Butler, 1990](#); [Deutsch, 2007](#); [Lorber, 2000](#)). This argument relies on a perspective that views this dichotomization as repressive, reifying, and heteronormative (e.g., [Risman, 2009](#); [Smith, 2009](#)) and posits that attaining equitable social and psychic experiences requires an elimination of categories.

Below, I review these arguments in more detail. I follow by offering a provocative, yet respectful, contingency. I submit that disassembling of these categories is required for socio-political change; however, I also argue that the use of these binary categorizations is an important part of the feminist research agenda. In making an argument, I imply gender as “a socially constructed stratification system” ([Risman, 2004](#): 430),

E-mail address: cbdollar@uncg.edu.

which recognizes its multi-level significance (e.g., Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004). I conclude by acknowledging the tension of these two standpoints and suggest a beginning point for their coexistence.

The gender problem

Unequal gender relations have been long-examined in social sciences (e.g. Engels 1972[1884]; Martineau 2003[1838]). In 1898, Gillman pointed out the unnaturalness of gender relations among the human species. She argued that male domination of social life was not due to “normal” sex differences. Instead, women were individually and collectively debased because they were largely forbidden to develop socio-economic independence (also see Gillman, 1903).

Since this time, feminist scholarship has continued to emphasize connections between the politicized relations of family and work life. Research has shown that men benefit from their privileged status (Acker, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Williams, 1992), which partially explains the devaluation of paid female labor and domestic work (Eisenstein, 1979; Glenn, 2002; Hartmann, 1976; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Extending attention beyond work and family life, West and Zimmerman (1987) identify how disparate gender relations are upheld through practices occurring in daily interaction and describe how these performances replicate gender and gender relations. Since social expectations about gender are pervasive and institutionalized, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that we are constantly subjected to gender evaluations (also see Schwalbe, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 2009). Indeed, not conforming to gendered expectations is risky in that it results in an individual's gender being questioned and perhaps delegitimized. This threat or actual stigmatization functions to (re)inforce gendered identities that often leave women feeling restricted, misjudged, and disgraced (Bartky, 1990; Chodorow, 1978; Stone, 2008).

In short, feminist scholarship has historically insisted that we centralize gender relations to better understand our social world. In the last few decades, however, feminists have urged us to deepen our focus – to interrogate the foundation of gender relations. In doing so, the gender categories themselves are criticized and shared assumptions about our gendered realities are questioned.

Problematizing binary categorizations

Historically speaking, science, including social science, relies on dualist conceptualizations. Yet, in the late 1970s, social scientists began questioning the validity of sex and gender binaries (e.g., Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Arguing that existing categorizations, including “male,” “female,” “man,” “woman,” “boy,” and “girl,” were socially (re)-created, scholars and political revolutionaries raised questions about the objective validity of these discrete categories. These binaries were viewed as another part of the social process.

Goffman (1977) asks us to consider why and how largely irrelevant sex-based biological differences become so important to our social life. In his writings, Goffman (1977) develops the notion of institutional reflexivity to explain how gender is performed during normalized social activities. He argues that these on-going gender practices are performed to highlight a social meaning of sex, which exaggerates biological differentiation.

Social constructionist views of sex and gender became more prominent as queer theory developed. Rather than viewing the binaries of male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual as naturally occurring phenomenon, proponents of queer theory insist that we uncover the taken-for-granted nature these concepts by troubling the assumption that sex, gender, and sexuality are congruent and static. (e.g., Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1996; Seidman, 1994). Butler (1990), for example, identifies sex, gender, and sexuality as performative practices, thus revealing the interactive and dynamic nature lived experiences. By arguing that lived experiences are more fluid than

traditionally assumed, queer theory highlights the ideological fictions of existing categories (Valocchi, 2005).

Social constructionist perspectives also expose the use of natural difference schemas, making visible how they are used to (re)produce existing links between sex and gender (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Natural difference schemas explain differences between sex and gender groups as reflective of biological, innate, or “normal” variances in the abilities and existences of women and men.¹ From a structural perspective, these schemas are seen as mechanisms by which gendered outcomes are explained. Specifically, they function to reinforce dissimilarity and justify the unequal opportunities, imbalanced valuation, and partial treatment that favors men. They also rely on a dichotomous view of sex and sex. Hence, these natural difference schemas have been challenged (e.g. Bem, 1993, Lorber, 1994). The concept of heteronormativity is often used to orient challenges to natural difference schemas and binary sex-gender classifications.

Heteronormativity as a critical framework

Heteronormativity recognizes heterosexuality as a macro-structural institution, thus, illuminating it as a socially constructed institutional arrangement. Heteronormativity is based on the belief that all persons fall into two opposing but complementary genders (i.e., man and woman). Heteronormative assumptions are widespread and reflected in various aspects of heterosexual privilege, including assumptions that romantic coupling consists of “opposite” sex partners. Chambers (1991: 8) argues that “heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency,” citing that power discrepancies become visible when viewed from an anti-homophobic perspective. Heteronormativity assumptions, then, are viewed as socio-political tools that limit persons' ability to pursue non-normative desires and behaviors. Heteronormativity is a power regime.

As mentioned earlier, given the assumptive congruency of sex and gender, binary gender categories are viewed as dimorphic and complementary (Butler, 1990). To be clear, then, a heteronormative perspective views sex, gender, and sexuality as ideologically fused (Ingraham, 1994; Rich, 1980). For example, persons who are born female and perform femininity normativity are assumed to be heterosexual because heterosexual relations are “the normative and natural form of sexual expression” (Elliott, 2012: 18).

Extant research has established that relying on heteronormativity is problematic because it does not fully appreciate actual lived experiences (e.g., Halberstam, 1998; Sedgwick, 1990). Connell (2005) notes that essentialist definitions of sex and gender often rely on overly simplistic descriptions that indicate a set of core features and designates them as either masculine or feminine. Such classifications institutionalize and legitimize sex-based differences; they also risk reifying sex and gender differences.

Feminist scholars have argued that relying on sex-gender categories without critical reflection promotes an ignorance of how heteronormativity shapes sex, gender, and sexual relations. According to Rich (1980), compulsory heterosexuality – the cornerstone of a heteronormative structure – encourages heterosexuality as natural, which functions to separate persons into discrete but necessarily paired categories, thus emphasizing difference and likely inciting conflict between men and women. Denying freedom of sexuality harms all persons from obtaining their full human capacities as productive, emotive beings. As a result of heteronormative gender arrangements and expectations, men report feeling emotionally isolated (Elliott, 2010) and women report feeling shameful (Bartky, 1990).

¹ We are aware of situations apart from this binary classification, but intersex is often dismissed as an exception to the binary “rule” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 1998). In fact, surgical procedures often are completed so that bodies are made to conform to this “opposite” sex classification.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4941935>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4941935>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)