Edinburgh Research Explorer

Gendered identities

Gendered Identities

Mary Holmes, Flinders University

9,989 WORDS (including references)

INTRODUCTION

> By 13, [Dave's] confusion about his gender seemed inescapable. At the same
> time he was playing football and hockey and building World War II airplanes,
> Dave began waking up in the middle of the night and tiptoeing into the
> bathroom to put on his mother's makeup.
>
> (Dani's T-Room.Com 2009)

> Caster Semenya's victory in the women's world championship 800 metres has
> been overshadowed by a "gender verification" test ordered by athletics officials
> amid claims that she is actually a man.
>
> (*The Guardian*, Saturday 22 August 2009: 16).

Sex and gender identity are generally expected to match, so that females are feminine
and men masculine, but this is not always the case. The young South African athlete
Caster Semenya is flat chested, deep voiced, quite muscular and square jawed, things
we associate more with the male sex, yet she has lived her life as a girl. Dave had a
penis but felt he was a woman and eventually had surgery and became Donna. There are
many people in everyday life who have a gender identity that does not fit with their sex.

Distinguishing sex (male/female) from gender (masculine/feminine) is analytically helpful, although later that distinction will be questioned. Genitals are the main criteria for deciding a baby's sex. However, in everyday life when genitals are not visible, we can still tell women from men by their hair, their clothes, by a curve or straightness to their bodies, by the way they walk and talk. These differences in appearance and behaviour are very much influenced by the social world in which we live. Gender refers to the social and cultural expectations and practices involved in acting as feminine or masculine. You recognise gender differences almost without thinking and expect that others will recognise your gender. Yet this is not left to nature and people spend time on their hair, their body, their clothes, their hobbies, in order to look and be more masculine or feminine. This is all part of the creation of gendered identities in which bodies meet social practices, but identity creation is not always straightforward.

Establishing a gender identity can be difficult, for example, for intersex people who cannot be clearly categorised as male or female. The statistics are unreliable, but it is possible that as many as 17 in 1000 people are intersex. Caster Semanya may be one. Intersex people are born with ambiguous genitalia and/or their sex determining chromosomes differ from the usual XX and XY pattern. Some intersex people may have both a vagina and a penis, others may have genitals that are hard to classify, being somewhere between a large clitoris and a small penis (Fausto-Sterling 2000). These conditions are relatively rare compared to those who are clearly sexed, but they exist 'naturally'. Nevertheless, the social confusion they cause is so acute that most intersex individuals are subjected to medically unnecessary, and often unsuccessful, surgery to

make them fit into either the male or female category. Most people find it impossible to know how to deal with others without knowing whether they are girls or boys, men or women. In everyday life, some deviance is tolerated, for example girls can be tomboys or men can be a little effeminate, but the general expectation is that females will behave in feminine ways and males in masculine ways. Intersex people and others whose gender identity does not match their body, indicate that it is not bodies alone that determine identity.

There are a range of ideas about how we learn gendered identities. The chapter begins by sketching an outline of the history and development of ideas about gendered identities. It then turns to setting out the major claims and key contributors to this field. These are grouped under the main schools of thought. Psychoanalysis is discussed first, as an influential, yet controversial account of gender identity. Its basic tenet is that gender identity is about making sense of our anatomy. Following discussion of various versions of psychoanalysis, we turn to social constructionism. This considers how gender identities are imposed on individuals by social forces and how individuals perform gender identities in accordance with social scripts. Poststructuralism, especially following Michel Foucault, offers accounts of gender identity, not as done by individiduals, but as produced by the internalising of gender norms. These ideas are extended in Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender and related recognition of gendered identities as more fluid such as in queer theory. Also important in destabilizing rigid gender categorizations are ideas about the intersection of gender with other forms of identity. In addition there are approaches that see gendered identities as reflexively created. Having discussed these different approaches their contribution is

evaluated and criticisms are outlined. The chapter finishes with an account of why some of these perspectives are still important and deals briefly with the problems attached to the concept of identity, and the challenges this poses for future understandings of gender.

THE HISTORICAL AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF PERSPECTIVES ON GENDERED IDENTITIES

The concept of gender identity refers to how we use ideas about femininity and masculinity to answer the question: who am I? Gender identity is one of the 'claims made by individuals about who or what they are in terms of *difference* from other people' (Connell 2009: 107). Up until the nineteenth century identity referred to sameness, and we still see this in our reference to identical twins. By the late nineteenth century dominant Western ideas on identity emphasised innate differences between people, especially in terms of race, class and sex. Ideas about sex and identity were most influentially challenged by Freud, as discussed below. Then, in the 1960s, American psychiatrist Robert Stoller introduced gender identity as a term, to study people who felt their anatomical sex conflicted with their sense of self. Via his work, the concept of gender filtered into sociology, especially through Ann Oakley (1972), who used it to separate out sexed biological bodies from the social aspects of femininity and masculinity.

Sociological accounts of gender identity initially focused on how gender is socially acquired, especially through socialization, or the process of learning to be a socially acceptable human. However, considerable early attention to gendered identities appeared within Symbolic Interactionism (SI), which understood them as formed through social interaction. American social psychologist George Herbert Mead was the main founder of this tradition, from which emerged 1960s and '70s ethnomethodological examinations of gender identity as a managed achievement, most famously by Harold Garfinkel and by Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (see Plummer 1991).

Poststructuralism, is a more European centred intellectual shift from mid twentieth century that shares SI's interest in examining how social norms are central in making (gendered) selves. Most prominent in this tradition is the work of French historian of ideas Michel Foucault. He examines how particular kinds of individuals are produced by the workings of power and knowledge. Discourses, or ways of speaking and thinking, backed up by institutional practices, are viewed as central in shaping individuals. Judith Butler published the most influential application of these ideas to gender in 1990. She draws on the work of the linguist J. L. Austin, and especially on his conceptualisation of performatives to explain how gendered individuals are brought into being by discourses. Butler's ideas about gender identities as fluid rather than fixed also fed into the development of queer theory. This was one response to questions about how different identities around gender, sexuality and other social categories are intertwined.

Efforts to consider how different (marginalised) identities intersect with gender emerged primarily out of second wave feminist movement. Throughout that movement there were ongoing debates about the necessity of women being unified in their struggles versus the importance of recognising differences between women. One intellectual product of this was feminist standpoint theory, which argued that having a particular identity produces particular knowledges. Since the 1980s this perspective was especially strong in examining how Black women's experiences 'were shaped not just by race, but by gender, social class, and sexuality .. [and] interconnections among systems of oppression'. By the 1990s the term intersectionality had become common to describe this (Collins 2009: 21).

There are many continuing attempts to understand intersectionality within processes of globalization and individualization. Some deal with the particular complexities of gender identities within postcolonial societies such as India, Australia and New Zealand (for example Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*). However, the post 9/11 world has been particularly concerned with relationships between gender and Islamic identity (see below). Generally, globalization and individualization processes are argued, by theorists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, to characterise the current age as reflexive modernity. Theories of reflexivity suggest that identity development no longer follows tradition but is a project of self creation which involves people thinking about the kind of person they want to be and trying to be that person. The details of these broad intellectual currents will now be examined, starting with psychoanalysis.

MAJOR CLAIMS AND KEY CONTRIBUTERS

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis has been central in elaborating how gendered identities are formed. The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, argued that identities emerged as a result of our early experiences of relating to our parents (or parent figures). He thought that theses relations were shaped by the social taboo on incest, which was fundamental in creating an ordered, civilised society and directing the sexual drive into 'normal' femininity and masculinity.

Freud proposed that there were a series of stages involved in achieving a masculine identity which culminated in the Oedipus complex. Growing children learn that the difference between girls and boys is having or not having a penis. Still attached to their mothers, boys begin to fear that their fathers may castrate them (and they will thus lose the centre of their pleasure) as punishment if they continue to try and compete for their mother's love, which the incest taboo forbids them to enjoy sexually. The Oedipus complex sees them realise that they must transfer their love for their mother to other members of the opposite sex, and learn to identify with their father and thus become masculine.

Freud tells a less complete story about the Electra complex through which feminine identity is acquired. For girls, the realisation that they do not have a penis is thought not

to precipitate a clear break. Noticing their lack of a penis is said to make them envious of boys and angry with their mother, who they realise has not provided them with a penis and cannot. Girls continue to struggle over their attachment to their father, on which the incest taboo places limits. They come to identify with their mother in the hopes that by learning to be feminine like her, they will attract a man who will provide them with a penis substitute – a baby. As part of accepting their femininity they supposedly move from a clitoral centred sexuality to a vaginal one.

French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan, has more recently reinterpreted Freud's account of gender identities to explain the ongoing difficulty women supposedly have with their sense of sexuality. Lacan argues that gender identity is achieved by the child entering society through the acquisition of language. Masculinity and femininity are subject positions integral to language and therefore acquired with it through splitting. For girls the process of splitting, of disconnecting from the mother and separating conscious from unconscious thought, is supposedly more precarious because they realise that they are already castrated.

A key variation to psychoanalytic accounts of acquiring gender identity is Nancy Chodorow's (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*, which argues that women learn femininity from their mothers and therefore learn that being feminine means mothering. The 'reproduction of mothering [is] a central and constituting element in the social organization of the reproduction of gender. …. Women as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother' (Chodorow 1978: 7). Girls can retain their pre-oedipal attachment to their mother, they can be like their mothers and

learn how to be feminine from them. According to Chodorow, the result of these differences is that girls have less of a separate sense of self and focus on relations to others. In contrast, boys develop gendered identities and resolve the Oedipus complex by detaching from their mother in order to be able to reattach to other women when they grow up. Boys have to learn to not be like their mothers in order to be masculine. They form a masculine identity principally through separation and therefore through a 'denial of relation and connection' (Chodorow 1978: 169). Thus independence from others is central to men, whereas relations with others are central to a woman's sense of self. Other psychoanalysts are more pessimistic about feminine identity.

For French scholar, Julia Kristeva feminine identity is impossible because the symbolic ordering of meaning is patriarchal and the 'feminine' is an otherness that cannot be named. Kristeva sees femininity as closely linked to the maternal, but as existing within what she calls the semiotic (Kristeva 1982). Kristeva uses the term symbolic to refer to formally organized systems of language, whilst by the semiotic she refers to extra-linguistic bodily rhythms which express drives: instinctual impulses that push us towards satisfying our desires for sex, death and so on. The symbolic and the semiotic are inseparable parts of the signifying process through which meaning is made.

Kristeva conceptualises femininity not as an essence but as constructed by processes beyond language, which devalue it. She speaks about this devaluing in terms of abjection, a psychoanalytic concept defined as 'the subject's reaction to the failure of the subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject's corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries' (Grosz 1989: 70). Abjection is a fear of becoming an object

of disgust by breaking bodily boundaries. Someone can thus become a non-person, as Kristeva explains with the help of anthropologist Mary Douglas's ideas about pollution as crucial to maintaining social divides. Bodies that lack firm boundaries tend to be thought filthy, as are fluids like sweat and milk that leak out beyond bodies and become 'matter out of place'. Menstrual blood is particularly problematic, according to Kristeva, because it represents women's otherness and danger. Faeces is also polluting because it is a reminder of potty training as key to the exercise of maternal authority. This authority acts upon the body through prohibition, rather than paternal or symbolic law which operates partly via separation from the maternal and the bodily. In Freudian (and Lacanian) terms identity is about separating oneself from the bodily and the motherly. Ideas about pollution accentuate the divisions made between bodies (as feminine disorder) and language (as masculine order). Excluding the maternal and the bodily is thus core to systems of meaning.

In contrast to Kristeva, French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray questions Freud's understanding of women's identity and sexuality as defined around lacking a penis. Irigaray recognizes women's autonomy and sexual specificity (Grosz 1989: 100-1). She argues that Freud's phallocentrism tries to capture women within a logic of sameness, rendering them as not like men, and as inferior to them. She proposes the possibility of thinking about bodies differently, so that the feminine is no longer divided from, but instead related to, the masculine (Irigaray 1985). Her view is that women's sexuality, and therefore subjectivity, is plural. The two lips of women's genitalia constantly touch and thus pleasure is always available to them. This multiple and active sexuality does not fit the dominant phallocentric model of sexuality based on men. Therefore women's

subjectivity is presently inexpressible and/or excessive in relation to patriarchal ways of thinking. Women remain outside discourse, but their excess can be a basis for agency, for making active choices. For example, more women are taking on paid work and thus entering 'the circuits of production'. At the same time, contraception and abortion allows potential freedom from constant motherhood. These possibilities emerge because of changes in women's social position that mean they have begun to take on 'that impossible role: being a woman' (Irigaray 1985: 83).

The Social Construction of Gendered Identities

Social forces play a key role in shaping gender identities. Although bodies and biology are important, sociologists argue that gender identities cannot be reduced to some biological essence like having a womb, vagina, or a penis. Essentialist ideas still have a lot of currency and many people still believe that gender identities are naturally formed, being based on physical and genetic differences between the sexes. For example men are thought to be 'naturally' stronger, more aggressive and have stronger sex drives. However, an overview of the science tends to indicate that in fact the sexes are overwhelmingly similar, with few physical and psychological differences and these minor (Connell 2009). Thus the social basis of gendered identities requires explanation.

One explanation of gendered identities is that boys and girls are socialized differently from birth (Oakley 1972; see also American sociologist Jessie Bernard's book, *The Female World*). People have different expectations of girls and boys and these

expectations are reinforced by social institutions like the family, the school and the workplace. The most crucial gender socialization takes place within the family, according to Oakley (1972). Parents, particularly mothers, fuss over girls and treat boys as though they are more robust and independent. Whether children recognize and conform to a gender identity by about four years old, or whether they learn it each time they are rewarded for 'appropriate' behaviour, their family will have a profound affect on how gender identity develops. However, she also notes that children compare their parents to others around them, so they quickly learn how men and women are expected to behave in their society, even if their parents do things differently.

School is also a key agent of gender socialization. Prior to the 1980s there was considerable concern over girls underperforming at school because readers, textbooks and teachers tended to reinforce gender stereotypes of boys as active, competent leaders and girls as passive followers. However changes were made on the basis of this kind of research and girls began to outperform boys, so concern shifted to why boys were not doing as well at school. Now, there are efforts to focus more on the similarities between girls and boys (see Skelton 2006).

The ongoing construction of gender identity continues in the workplace. For example, employers and managers often reinforce common notions of gender by choosing men to do jobs supposedly requiring strength and women to do jobs involving serving or nurturing others. This wrongly assumes that women are always physically weaker and that men are not good at nurturing. It also puts women into jobs where they are especially prone to pressure to be (sexually) appealing (Adkins 1995). Despite the many

political and social gains that women have made there are social constraints as well as personal choices.

Symbolic interactionism understands self and identity as formed through interaction with others. A major figure in Symbolic Interactionism, Chicago sociologist Erving Goffman (1979), argues that gender is an illusion maintained by its performance in relation to others. He notes the importance of gender displays: events indicating the identity, mood, intent, expectations, and relative relations of actors. Goffman (1979: 1) is suggesting that gender as 'the culturally established correlates of sex' is not natural but merely something considered socially relevant in interactions and therefore signalled to others at the start (and end) of those interactions. If we meet someone of ambiguous gender we find it almost impossible to know how to interact with them and will look for clues to help us. Displays are these cues, including things such as men standing when women enter a room or opening doors for them. Displays also involve certain styles which identify gender, so that women and men have different hairstyles, different gestures and wear their clothing differently. Goffman is critical of how most gender displays signal and reinforce the idea that women are socially inferior and make that inequality seem 'natural'. He analyzed advertisements in magazines to illustrate this idea, showing how they portrayed larger men in protective poses looking down on smaller women, who were represented as passive and childlike. So prevalent are these displays that we come to mistake these socially created scripts for gender for something natural. To Goffman and other Symbolic Interactionists, gender is merely a role that we perform in conjunction with others, following social expectations. Like actors we add our own interpretation of the role.

Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) are also part of the Symbolic Interactionist tradition, but understand gender not as play but as something we must continually work at as we interact. People will 'do' their gender differently when with their grandmother, than with their sexual partner, for example. We have to manage our presentation of femininity and masculinity according to the social expectations of different audiences and this may involve considerable work, like lifting weights to build 'manly' muscles or spending time carefully applying make-up to look more feminine. Similar ideas are evident in poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralist approaches to gender identity focus on regulation, disciplining and performativity. Michel Foucault argues that **d**ominant forms of knowledge (medicine and science in the Western world) provide powerful ideas about what 'normal' healthy women and men should be like and people are encouraged to work on themselves in order to conform.

Judith Butler (1990) uses Foucauldian principles in her explanation of gender as brought into being by discourses, which are sets of ideas and practices. Butler is critical of conventional understandings of identity as formed by excluding otherness from one's sense of self. She argues that the gendering process begins with a newly born child being announced: "it's a girl". From that point the girling of the girl starts (and the

boying of the boy) by selecting from available meanings about gender. She describes this citation of gender norms as central to gender practices. Butler also draws on the work of the linguist J. L. Austin, and especially on his conceptualisation of performatives. Performatives are words or phrases that bring into being the thing of which they speak. For example, the utterance 'it's a girl' brings feminine girls into being.

In contrast to common sense ideas that gender is core to our identity, Butler proposes a view of gender as something that is fluid and a set of meanings that can be played around with. She suggests 'troubling' (Butler 1990) gender by questioning the opposition of the categories feminine and masculine. The most often repeated example she uses is that of drag, which she claims upsets the idea that maleness must be expressed as masculinity because it shows men can dress and act in 'feminine' ways. This questions the idea of gender as fixed.

Queer theorists, including Butler as well as Annamarie Jagose or Steven Seidman, see identities as multiple, fragmented and constantly shifting. Sexual desires are thought to be fluid, and people as capable of resisting norms which present heterosexuality as normal and other sexualities as deviant. People can get into gender bending, be transvestites, transsexuals, or indeed refuse to take on any particular label for who they are sexually, perhaps enjoying sex with both men and women, or at least remaining open to the potential of doing so. For desire to be freely exercised, queer theorists argue that heterosexist stories about identity must be challenged. These stories distinguish girls from boys and women from men, because of beliefs that the 'natural' order is one

in which men and women are attracted to each other so that they can get together and reproduce (Butler, 1990). Change requires deconstructing, or taking apart, notions of gender and sexual identity as a core part of a unified individual self.

Intersectionality of identities

Intersectionality is an attempt to deconstruct ideas of a unified self and consider how gender is related to other forms of identity. Originally Feminist standpoint theorists, like Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins (see below), talked about women's standpoint, or Black women's standpoint. Now they consider the nature of relations between diverse groups of women and the formation of particular identities and knowledges. As work on masculinities developed, that too sought to address the variety of ways of being a man and the difference in privilege attached to different groups (e.g. Connell 1995). Lack of space prevents discussion of all these strands. For example, there is interesting work on understanding identity as relationally constituted through narratives. However, I will focus on highly influential ideas around Black women and identity.

Key writers exploring intersections between gender, race and class were African-American feminists including bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins. I here refer mostly to Patricia Hill Collins, as a gateway for learning more about Black feminist thought. For Collins (2009), it is the experience of intersecting oppressions, accompanied in the United States by a history of racial segregation, which stimulates a collective Black women's identity. Not all Black women have the same experiences, but

all must 'struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival' (Collins 2009: 110-111). As bell hooks (1989: 9) puts it:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, as gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that art of speech, of "talking back", that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.

Most feminist scholars of race/ethnicity have noted the importance of relation to others in constructing gendered identities. A key essay, especially in its connection to feminist politics, was Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 1986 piece on 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarships and Colonial Discourses'. In it Mohanty (2003: 17) argues that the feminist movement and Western feminists had forged a sense of identity partly through a 'production of the "Third World" woman as a singular, monolithic subject'. Certain analytic principles underlie these ethnocentric discourses. Firstly, third world women are seen as a coherent group with identical interests, instead of as diverse in their economic and cultural contexts. Secondly, uncritical use is made of empirical data supposedly demonstrating 'the universal cross-cultural operation of male dominance and female exploitation' (Mohanty 2003: 33). For example, Moslem women wearing the veil does not always signify the sexual control of women by men, but in some specific historical contexts has been used by women as a sign of revolution or resistance. Thirdly, and implied by the other points, third world women are represented

as eternal victims, living highly constrained lives in contrast to the self-representation of Western women as modern and in control. This 'othering' of third world women has to be challenged and third world women, in all their diversity, need to represent themselves in order for this to change. Meanwhile, Gayatri Spivak challenges Western women to unlearn their privilege as loss. It is intellectually and politically productive for white women to rethink their identity in terms of their minority position in the world and how their privilege divides them from the majority of women globally.

There are now scholars in the 'majority world', meaning non-Western nations where most of the world's population live, working on how gender identity relates to ethnic identity. Raewyn Connell (2009) is one of the few minority world intellectuals to attend to their work. Connell notes debates, including those around whether the concept of gender identity applies in other cultures. Oyeronke Oyéwùmí, from Benin, for example, has argued that gender was not relevant in pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba society, where seniority was at the centre of social organisation. Others such as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf disagree claiming that there is evidence of gender as a key aspect of social distinctions via which Yoruba identified themselves prior to colonization, even if gender patterns were different. She reminds us that cultures and identities are never static and always open to change. This theme is also evident in Latin American and Arab thinkers' concerns with gender identities, which have especially adhered around machismo and how masculine identities have been disturbed by processes of globalization (Connell 2009: 47-8) and increased reflexivity.

Gendered identities in reflexive modernity

Theories of reflexivity try to understand how people have to form their own sense of identity and make their own lives given that traditional ways of doing things have supposedly lost their hold. Reflexivity has been a way to understand the diminished impact of structure in organising people's lives and the increased importance of agency. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that women are becoming drawn into processes of individualization that compel people to take responsibility for themselves, and weaken their connections to others. In their version of the individualization thesis, women are increasingly looking out for themselves, as they gain the independence arising from having jobs that make it possible to survive without a man.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus provides some counterpoint by examining how (gendered) reflexivity is still a relational production. Habitus refers to ingrained collective practices that produce and are produced by individuals as they operate within a particular field, for example politics, law, or academia. People 'play the game' required in a field, but their feel for the game is not consciously practised, nor thought through. The practices involved are learnt and done in a habitual way, they are taken for granted. Even if people no longer rely on tradition, that does not necessarily mean a reflexive reworking of gender, and possibly 'reflexivity is better conceived as habits of gender in later modernity' (Adkins 2003: 22).

There remain constraints on how gender is done, and critical reflexivity is not separate from habit so that people weave structural aspects like class and gender into their identities, often in ways that retraditionalize gender. For example, the kind of reflexive performativity of gender that is encouraged in the workplace, say through training, often reaffirms traditional notions of femininity and women's abilities (Adkins 2003). Going beyond these problems means recognising that subjects never quite fit the norm and that practices shift little by little through time.

THE PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF PERSPECTIVES ON GENDERED IDENTITIES

Freud's psychoanalytic approach is important because he was one of the first to think about the role that bodies and the social meanings attached to them play in developing masculine and feminine identities. Lacan and other less literal interpretations furthered this by suggesting that women are not envious of penises *per se* but realise that having one means being able to enjoy social privileges and power. Lacan views the development of gendered identity as relying not on the actual penis, but the symbolic representation of the penis: the phallus. The phallus represents difference, it stands for the social and cultural value given to masculinity. Taking on masculine and feminine identities is about learning that the masculine will be privileged, and that femininity will be devalued. But there are related accounts of the acquisition of gender identity that try to get away from conceiving of femininity as lack.

For Chodorow, the social structure is crucial in reproducing gendered identities and this makes her work an interesting blend of sociology and psychoanalysis. She is adamant that women's nurturing capacities are an outcome of the 'sexual and familial division of labor' which makes women responsible for caring and nurturing others (Chodorow 1978: 7). Her emphasis on the way families are socially organised makes change easier to explain. For example, since the 1970s many more mothers have entered paid work and some fathers are more involved in parenting. This may enable children to see their mothers in other roles and to experience fathers as nurturing and thus to acquire broader and more flexible gender identities.

Nevertheless feminine identity remains devalued and Kristeva and Irigaray's work has value in explaining this by linking biological bodies with socially organized language. Irigaray is especially admirable in her endeavours to think about woman's identity as 'a woman, a subject with a life, sex and desires of her own' (Grosz 1989: 179). These perspectives can also offer an alternative to voluntaristic ideas which assume that actors consciously or rationally control their actions.

For Rosi Braidotti (2003: 52), Irigaray is important because she gives strategic attention to femininity not as something stable and essential but as part of 'the transformative flows that destabilize all identities'. This balances the asymmetry that has existed in sexual difference (man as the one to whom woman is compared and found lacking) and gets away from the categories of minority and majority that structure how we think about and do identities. Braidotti instead proposes that people are nomadic, travelling

through changes in the self, largely because of their desires to interconnect with other people. However, she is clear that society would have to undergo major changes for new possibilities for desire to emerge and to allow for radically new subjectivities. Such attention to the social is rare in much psychoanalysis.

Social constructionist approaches have attended to how society genders individuals. Initially focus was on learning gender through socialization processes. Ann Oakley (1972) was one of the first sociologists to explain how socialization was fundamentally gendered and provided important social analysis of how gender was learned, especially within the family. The struggles accompanying gender socialization are somewhat clearer in key literature on education. Views of gender identity formation at school tend currently to be based on ideas about how girls and boys 'play' at gender, meaning that they construct a sense of gender identity in relation to others and in ongoing and active ways (see Skelton 2006).

Symbolic Interactionism examines gendered identities as formed through interaction and is highly useful as a basis for more relational understandings of gender. It was one of the first areas of sociology to pay attention to gender. Symbolic Interactionist approaches offered a challenge to usual conceptions of gender identity as a core part of someone's self, residing somehow within them.

Judith Butler's work has been crucial in further building a non-essentialist way of understanding gender, with radical implications. Butler focuses on gender as a set of ideas and practices which constitute the subjectivity of individuals. Her work is subtly

different from Symbolic Interactionist claims that gender is a managed achievement, or something that done in interaction with others (e.g. West and Zimmerman 1987). For Butler, individuals do not 'do' gender: there is no '"doer" behind the deed' (Butler 1990: 25). Butler is trying to avoid voluntarism – the suggestion that people choose how to act, whilst still recognising agency and not assuming that discourses totally determine gendered individuals. She does this via a view of the self and subjectivity which rejects any 'real' basis to gender identity. Gender is a masquerade with no substance behind it and is only evident in terms of ever shifting discourses which set out what it means to be feminine (or masculine) in a particular time and place. Femininity and masculinity are not derived from bodies or experiences, but a set of made-up ideas about how to act feminine or masculine. However, this illusion of gender is powerful because it includes the idea that gender is at the core of our identity. Butler can help us think about how gender shapes us, but not in entirely pre-determined ways. Queer theories add to this literature by radically challenging binary ways of thinking about gender identity as either feminine or masculine and the related distinction between heterosexual and homosexual. This is part of wider tendencies to understand gender in relation to other forms of identity.

Standpoint theory and intersectionality may be accused of essentialism but are in fact trying to understand gendered identities as complex social constructions. They are not simply an individualized project of self, but about seeking for 'the connected self and the individual empowerment that comes from change in the context of community' (Collins 2009: 129). Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus brings together structure and action, in an arguably similar way to the notion of standpoint as a knowledge or point of

view determined by social position. Both sets of ideas have potential for providing ways to consider reflexivity that are less cognitive, more relational and more practice oriented. To further establish the value of these various contributions we need to turn to criticisms of the perspectives covered.

CRITICISMS

Although psychoanalysis has made a huge contribution to understanding gender, and allowed for unconscious influences on identity; Freud's story has been widely criticised (for example Barrett 1980) because it assumes that women form a gender identity based on lacking a penis and not being like men. He unconvincingly posits that girls abandon an active clitorial sexuality for a passive vaginal one because they recognise their sexual organs as inferior, which assumes that penises are somehow naturally and inevitably better (Barrett 1980: 56-7). It also understands 'active' sexuality in relentlessly masculine terms, and indeed the whole psychoanalytic model of gender identity struggles to escape from the dichotomy: man as active subject, woman as passive lack. Even less literal interpretations are limited because remaining within the logic of Freudian accounts often means that women who are not nurturing and men who are caring are often stigmatised as having abnormal or 'unsuccessful' acquisitions of gender identity. Feminist psychoanalysts have struggled with similar problems.

There are serious limitations to Kristeva's vision of (feminine) identity, despite the

welcome effort to theorize women's embodiment. She sets up a restrictive view of women as a semiotic, rather than symbolic, presence within systems of meaning. This leaves a portrait of woman passively waiting for a masculine imprint to give her meaning. It does not explain how women have managed to say anything about themselves that might resist patriarchal views of them as inferior beings. Yet feminism has managed to do this, and by using rational arguments. Kristeva (1981) is however critical of feminism for being negative. She instead advocates breaking down binary identities (e.g. feminine/masculine), but her vision of women places them in a position 'outside' the symbolic order which means they cannot achieve such a change. This insufficiently reworked version of psychoanalysis leaves her trapped within the assumptions that femininity is an inferior, castrated subjectivity (Grosz 1989: 63-7).

Irigaray's work also has problems with the focus on women's bodies as specifically sexualized. It is arguably a form of essentialism, in danger of reducing 'women' to their biology and assuming that actions and agency come from those particular bodies. This is limiting for considering how femininity changes across history and cultures and for challenging essentialist and sexist views of gendered identities.

Although Freudian psychoanalysis tries to avoid biological determinism, it can reduce issues of identity to the biological level. It is criticised for rendering identity as solely a product of how children come to understand what it means to have a female or male body. Freud's analysis of how girls become women tends to reinscribe notions of women as 'inferior'. Lacan's re-readings of Freud are not taken to really improve on this, nor to overcome the sexism. Other psychoanalytic accounts, such as Chodorow's,

make attempts to forge more positive ways of understanding femininity, but struggle to do so because still based on most of Freud's assumptions (Barrett 1980). Despite the problems noted Psychoanalysis has gained some currency within sociology (see Elliott 2007). However, most sociological accounts of gender identity are based on different assumptions.

Sociological stories of gender as socially produced also have faults. For example, the early sociological focus on socialization gave too much attention to the early years of life, to mothers, and not enough to how children might be active in forming their own and each other's gender identities around a set of often contradictory social expectations. Symbolic Interactionism provides more complex accounts of social scripts for gender identities, but can get lost at the micro-level. For instance, Goffman concentrates too much on gender as displayed at the beginning and end of social interactions, rather than as central throughout interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Overall, constructionist views of identity tend to portray the individual as engaged in continual refashioning of the self. This implies that people can choose how to do their gender. The more sophisticated versions of Symbolic Interactionism recognize that people perform, or do, gender according to existing social scripts. However, such approaches suggest that individuals perform their gender identities in a knowing way, trying to present the best version of themselves. There remain questions about whether people are always aware of what different audiences expect in terms of doing gender, how much control they have over their performance, and whether the performance is

ever sincere. In the late twentieth century thinkers tried to address some of these questions by understanding how gender norms are internalised though discourse.

Judith Butler sometime slips from her radical decentring of the individual in thinking about gendered identities as produced by discourse. Troubling gender does not seem to involve imagining its disappearance. She notes that gendering brings into being the kind of individuals that make sense in our culture. Butler also says that gender is a matter of copying, with slight variations, existing ways of doing gender. Individuals are doing the copying, but this conflicts with her saying that individuals do not do gender, they are produced by gender discourses.

A more sociological model might focus less on discourse and more on the relational construction of gender identity. Ian Burkitt (1998) proposes that Butler's discursive reading of Foucault is limiting, especially as it relates to power. Butler argues that the view of gender identities as organised around oppositions (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual) is a fantasy, produced and regulated via laws and taboos. The performance of gender makes them look real. Butler's analysis is relational only insofar as categories (e.g. female, woman) are related discursively, and Burkitt (1998: 490) maintains that it ignores Foucault's attempt to place discourses, of sex especially, 'in the context of a history of power relations'. He argues that 'individuals are interrelated through emotional and physical dependencies as well as through discursive orientations' (Burkitt 1998: 491). Identities are not simply constructed by disciplinary and regulatory practices, but travel between people's everyday practices and official pronouncements.

Burkitt points out that it is not only the law that regulates gender relations, but other institutions like medicine and education. Therefore:

> the relations that produce gendered identities and sexual variation are not just those between signifiers in a linguistic system: they are relations between the players in a political process – for example, between classes, sexes and races, and on a more micro-level between doctors and patients, educators and pupils, and parents and children.
>
> (Burkitt 1998: 501)

Nevertheless, there are aspects of Butler's work that remain extremely useful and in particular the part this work played in establishing queer theory.

Criticisms of queer theory centre around how they can underestimate 'sedimented' gendered inequalities in their approaches to gender identity. Deconstructing identities is not thought helpful for sexual minorities struggling for social acceptance. As Chris Beasley suggests in her work, queer theory could also be more radical if it focused not just on non-heterosexuals, but also on the subversive possibilities of heterosexuality. This would require some care, because of the political need to avoid re-centring heterosexuality. However, just being gay or lesbian does not automatically mean resisting the current gender order, and gay and lesbian individuals can sometimes 'do' identities that reinforce conventional forms of gender. For example, there are very macho gay men, there are lesbians who take butch or femme roles, and there are drag queens who perform rather stereotypical versions of ultra-femininity. Queer theory

demands more complex explanations of how gender relates to sexuality and there are similar demands to consider the relationships between gender and other forms of identity.

Intersectionality has struggled to shake off accusations of essentialism and inflexibility associated with early versions of Feminist standpoint theory, but still forms an important part of debates about the complexity of identities within reflexive modernity. In order to produce some consideration of how reflexivity is gendered in slowly shifting ways, it should be understood as fundamentally part of the embodied and unconscious habits that mould action. However, these ideas have limitations in recognising gendered subjects. Changes are slow and for most women, they and those around them continue to construct caring for others as central to women's identity. Attention to habitus and entrenched routine actions makes it hard to imagine how 'sedimented' inequalities around gender and other aspects of identity can shift.

It is difficult to rely on habit, within a world that is rapidly changing. Some thinkers such as Margaret Archer, return to the concept of the 'internal conversation' (an idea key to George Herbert Mead in developing Symbolic Interactionism). We 'talk' to ourselves and imagined others in our heads and this is crucial in ongoing and reflexive constructions of identity. While promising, many of these theories have the same problems already mentioned with assuming that identity is self-consciously, and cognitively created. And indeed the gendered nature of this forging of lives, is often insufficiently explored. There is much to do to understand the combination of the mental, embodied, habitual and emotional in how gender identity is formed and lived.

This suggests it is time to assess the usefulness of the concept of identity in thinking about gender?

UNDERSTANDING GENDERED INDENTITIES CONTINUES TO BE IMPORTANT: FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Questions about gendered identities are still important within and beyond the academy. For example, feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti (2003) has developed Luce Irigaray's ideas about how sexual difference may shape gendered identities. Braidotti is sympathetic to Irigaray's early ideas about the subject as multiple rather than unified, but as nevertheless sexed. She acknowledges that feminists needed to argue against common ideas about sexual difference as naturally fixed by bodies and as justifying women's inequality. However, Braidotti suggests that thinking about people as having bodies has been key to feminist struggles for equality and for better knowledge about women's lives. She wants to put back together the separation of sex and gender to understand subjectivity in terms of the overlap between physical bodies, the material world and symbolic systems by which we represent images and ideas. For this Irigaray is useful because she enables the body to be thought about as shifting differences including race, ethnicity and religion as well as sex/gender. Irigaray thinks women need to represent the feminine in their own terms by a kind of creative imitation which will reinvent feminine identities. Braidotti calls this the 'virtual feminine', which is a 'definition of the feminist subject as a multiple, complex process'. She sees gender as

an ongoing process of becoming.

Gender identity is socially scripted, but something that we work at continuously, as the Symbolic Interactionist tradition has explored. This work is evident in our everyday lives. For example, many employers, exercise considerable control over an employee's appearance, requiring them to do very gendered 'aesthetic labour'. In one hotel:

> extensive grooming and deportment training was given to the staff by external consultants. New employees were trained *how* to wear the uniform. Such sessions also encompassed haircuts and styling, 'acceptable' make-up, individual makeovers, how men should shave and the standards expected in relation to appearance.
>
> (Witz et al. 2003: 48)

Poststructuralist ideas are still useful in examining such examples of how social norms are central in making selves. There are a host of television programmes, books and films about dressing, eating, cleaning, decorating, and looking 'better'. Cosmetic surgery and other less dramatic makeovers are big business. All these are part of regulatory regimes that are highly gendered. Dominant forms of knowledge (medicine and science in the Western world) provide powerful ideas about what 'normal' healthy women and men should be like and people are encouraged to work on themselves in order to conform. However, there are opportunities for resistance and for challenging gender systems, as suggested by Judith Butler (1990).

Butler has been one voice critical of identity politics as essentialist and anti-democratic, but Patricia Hill Collins (2009) asserts its continued importance in crafting political agendas to overcome oppression. These include fashioning self-respect for Black women and demanding the respect of others as a step towards solidarity and political change. Chandra Mohanty believes strongly that solidarity is possible and feminists can work together. At the beginning of the twenty-first century she argues that capitalism, rather than Eurocentrism is the key focus for struggles. In these struggles feminists need to rethink how the all-encompassing presence of a global capitalist system, and increased conflicts around religion and race/ethnicity 'recolonize the cultures and identities of people across the globe' (Mohanty 2003: 229).

Identities continue to be formed especially around major sites of inequality: gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and disability, to name the most obvious ones. Judith Butler (2008) has recently considered how Western portrayals of Islamic women, highlight some of the problems of thinking about gender equality in conjunction with cultural and religious identity. For example, the French have for some time been debating whether to ban young women from wearing Islamic head coverings to school on the grounds that France is a secular nation and that its public institutions should not tolerate a practice read in 'ignorant and hateful' (Butler 2008: 13) terms as denoting women's inferiority to men or acceptance of fundamentalism. This is just one example from a set of discourses in which sexual freedom is seen as a hallmark of rational secular modernity against which Islam is portrayed as 'backward'. This dehumanises Moslem peoples and make seem permissible such things as the sexually humiliating torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib jail and the wider destruction of many Moslem

populations and their ways of life. Such discourses also divide struggles for sexual freedom from the struggles of religious minorities against discrimination. Butler wishes to challenge these associations and to think about how those struggles can be reconnected around a critique of state violence. As she notes: '[w]hatever the relations between Islam and the status of women, let's begin with the proposition that it is complex, historically changing and not available to a quick reduction' (Butler 2008: 19). In order to reconnect the struggles for sexual and religious freedom there needs to be criticism of ideas of progress towards a secular modernity as the ideal path for all and a thorough indictment of the brutality of powerful states in restricting both sexual and religious expression.

Choices do play a part, but people are not entirely free to reflexively make their identity. Multiple options are available, and as Anthony Giddens has noted this includes choosing to change sex. People can also fashion gender identities in a world where sexuality has supposedly become separated from reproduction, due to improved contraception and to fertility technologies like in-vitro fertilisation. Giddens perhaps over-estimates the impact of these changes beyond a fairly small minority and tends to ignore the kind of reproductive issues crucial in shaping gender identities and relations in the majority world. These issues include AIDS, high maternal mortality, and policies aimed at limiting women's fertility such as China's one-child policy. Such policies point to the continued need for critical examinations of ideas and practices relating to gendered identities.

It remains to be seen whether gender and identity is the best partnership for examining some of the thorny issues facing women in the twenty-first century. Iris Young has suggested gender may not be a useful term for thinking about subjectivity and identity. In this she follows Toril Moi, who instead proposes the notion of the 'lived body'. Young thinks that gender is still needed as a concept to illuminate structural inequalities as they affect women and 'people who transgress heterosexual norms' (Young 2005: 13). She notes the initial importance of gender as a concept to help feminists in 'challenging the conviction that "biology is destiny"'. These challenges were then followed by attempts to understand the specificity of gendered identities (for example, standpoint theorists like Carol Gilligan and Nancy Hartsock), which were criticised for being essentialist. Enter Judith Butler, who questioned why feminists sought a theory of gender identity. This was done because feminism was based on having a subject 'woman', but Butler wanted to disrupt any idea of a stable subject to which gender was core. Butler has been adamant that bodies are not simply a product of discourse but materially constituted by the social. Yet her theorising remains tied to the sex-gender distinction rather than going beyond it (Young 2005: 15).

The lived body has the potential to reinvent debates about gender because it is about the body-in-situation. It is a concept drawn from phenomenology, which sees the mind as embodied. The concrete material situation, including relations to others, constitutes bodies but people are actors who can construct themselves in and around this situation This concept can refuse the nature/culture binary and as Linda Nicholson has proposed, can allow that gender is not just social/cultural but has embodied aspects (Young 2005:

15-17). This highlights how much recent thinking has sought to breakdown the binary categories informing the defining of identities.

One major binary around which identities are formed is nature/culture, but this has been subject to major shifts as technology has developed. Donna Haraway, biologist turned philosopher, has arguably been the most prominent voice in elaborating how the boundaries between human (nature) and machine (culture) have broken down to the extent that most of us are part-human, part-machine. We are cyborgs. Many people have technological devices in their bodies, everything from pacemakers to breast implants to plastic hip joints. Our bodies are daily shaped by technology, including bras, shoes and highly chemically engineered shampoos. We also form our identities not just by using machines like computers as mediators, but by developing relationships with those machines. Sherry Turkle (1985) provided one of the early accounts of how our relationship with computers, especially in the age of the internet, allowed for new ways of experimenting with identity. She also thinks that use of the internet makes real to people how 'identity can be fluid and multiple' (Turkle, 1995: 49). By playing online games, current versions of which include Warcraft, and by interacting in virtual worlds like 'Second Life', people can try out being different kinds of people. Virtual spaces can be used to experiment with gender. Men can create avatars, or online personalities, that are women. Women can pretend to be men. However, although people may 'switch sides' the basic structure of gender relations is not really altered. There were some options to be gender neutral, but still human, in the text based multi-user 'games' of the 1990s (Turkle 1995), but these seem to have disappeared in the increasingly sophisticated graphics-driven virtual worlds of today. Turkle is also writing before the

emergence of social networking sites like Facebook and My Space. These probably account for most of the online activity of the millions of people with sufficient internet access to utilise them. Such sites are less about pretending to be someone else and more about trying to portray a 'brand': a coherent, recognizable and likable self, often across different networking sites (Hardey, 2008). This may involve some experimentation, but is as likely to reinforce as to challenge conventional gender identities.

Gender identities are not fixed and stable. Individuals do not always fit the boxes male/masculine, female/feminine. Most social scientists emphasise the learned nature of gender identities. Psychoanalysis proposes that learning to direct sex drives into socially acceptable channels is crucial to how masculinity and femininity are formed. There are various stories of how this happens. Some argue that the emphasis on anatomy in psychoanalysis, reduces gender identity to biological difference. Sociological accounts of gender identity as both learned and socially constructed by forces outside the individual can overcome these problems. They can highlight how social norms about gender are crucial to the construction of gendered identities. However, either individuals end up seen as determined by social structures, or there is too much emphasis on individual agency in doing gender. More recent work like Butler's tries to think beyond this by seeing gender as a discourse that produces gendered individuals, through regulation and through individuals internalising social norms. Current thinking also focuses on how relations to others shape and reshape identity in complex ways. This may require seeing identity as fluid. Such a vision would collapse binary classifications of identity which suggest it is an either/or choice: feminine or masculine, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or cultural, self or other. Some theorists conclude that we must

reflexively make our (gender) identity. Questions then arise about what role traditional and conventional ways of doing gender play in these ongoing fashionings and whether more relational ways of identifying are still necessary or even indispensible, especially for groups who have been categorised as the inferior 'other'?

The problem with gender identities as a concept may lie not with gender, but with the concept of identity itself. How identities are connected to social structures is often insufficiently considered, as is how identities might be better understood as structured relations to others. From a sociological viewpoint, identities are always structurally informed, if not entirely structurally determined. Identity could be thought as a continuum of connection and disconnection from others within the social world. Gender is done (to us and by us), undone and redone and every now and then momentarily forgotten. It is thought about, sometimes unconscious or done habitually, practiced with great care in some circumstances and often felt bodily-emotionally. Most of all gendering is an ongoing process, situated firmly within the social interactions that constitute our lives. Relationality is not about how a self/other distinction defines identity, but about how gendered interactions with fellow embodied humans determine our every day answers to the question: Who am I?

REFERENCES

Adkins, L. (1995) *Gendered Work: Sexuality, Family and the Labour market,* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Adkins, L. (2003) 'Reflexivity: freedom or habit of gender?', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 20(6): 21-42.

Barrett, M. (1980) *Women's Oppression Today*, London: Verso Books.

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences,* London: Sage.

Braidotti, R. (2003) 'Becoming woman: or sexual difference revisited', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(3): 43-64.

Burkitt, I. (1998) 'Sexuality and gender identity: from a discursive to a relational analysis', *Sociological Review*, 46(3): 483 – 504.

Butler, J. (2008) 'Sexual politics, torture and secular time', *The British Journal of Sociology,* 59(1): 1-22.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

Chodorow, N. (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Collins, P.H. (2009) *Black Feminist Thought*, London and New York: Routledge.

Connell, R. (2009) *Gender: In World Perspective,* Cambridge: Polity.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, New York: Basic Books.

Goffman, E. (1979) *Gender Advertisements,* Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Grosz, E. (1989) *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

hooks, b. (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black,* Boston, MA: South End Press.

Irigaray, L. (1985), *This Sex Which is Not One*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror,* trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mohanty, C.H. (2003) *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity,* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Oakley, A. (1972) *Sex, Gender and Society,* London: Temple Smith.

Plummer, K. (ed.) (1991) *Symblic Interactionism,* Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

Skelton, C. (2006) 'Boys and girls in the elementary school', in C. Skelton, B. Francis and L. Smulyan (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Education,* London: Sage, 139-151.

Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Touchstone.

West, C. and Zimmerman, D. (1987) 'Doing gender', *Gender and Society,* 1(2): 125-151.

Witz, A. Warhurst, C. and Nickson, D. (2003) 'The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization', *Organization* 10(1): 33-54.

Young, I.M. (2005) 'Lived body vs. gender: reflections on social structure and subjectivity' in I.M. Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.