

## Does the use of binary indicators reify difference and inequality?

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### 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.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality | Sexed bodies | Heteronormativity | Degendering

### Article:

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 and 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), 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 and Reskin, 2002, Williams, 1992), which partially explains the devaluation of paid female labor and domestic work (Eisenstein, 1979, Glenn, 2002, Hartmann, 1976, Hochschild and 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 and 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.<sup>1</sup> 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).

Should feminist scholarship cease using binary categories?

Given our knowledge of the damaging effect of binary categorizations, which are used to embellish differences, rank groups hierarchically, and do not comport with our lived experiences, should feminist scholarship cease using such categorizations? My response is no. Notwithstanding the above critiques, there is ample evidence that our sexed bodies continue to have vast implications for our lives (e.g., Butler, 1993). Sexed bodies are imbued with cultural significance and valued in ways that designate “appropriate” behaviors (Collins, 2000, Collin, 2005, Connell, 2005, Foucault, 1978, Goffman, 1977, Lorber, 1993, Lorber and Moore, 2007). As such, social perceptions of male and female bodies denote the ways in which we “should” be treated.

Kane (2009), for example, finds that parents use dichotomous gendering schemas that rely heavily on traditional notions of masculinity and femininity when discussing how they formulate their child preference. This reliance reinforces binary gendered outcomes, including gender-based interactions between the parents and children. Elliott and Aseltine (2012) demonstrate how these dualistic cultural ideals influence parenting strategies of adolescent and teenage children. Because parents recognize the sexualization of female bodies, they often monitor clothing and limit the freedom of movement of their teenage daughters in order to “protect” their sexual vulnerability.

Research on the pervasiveness of heteronormative expectations is not limited to its presence in parent-child relations. Women commonly struggle to achieve equal treatment in the workplace because they are assumed to be less competent and less committed to work than men (Hochschild and Machung, 1989, Kennelly, 1999, Stone, 2008). This discrepancy is especially prominent in occupations dominated by male-bodied persons (Paap, 2006). Rabe-Hemp (2009),

for instance, finds that female police officers often explain their effective use of empathy, verbal communication and avoidance of force by relying on stereotypical notions of femininity. Women officers also report using particular grooming strategies to emphasize their feminine attributes and physical attractiveness in order to minimize negative interactions that are expected given their presence in a male-dominated position (Rabe-Hemp, 2009). Court practices, often heralded as the benchmark for rational objectivity and justice, also reveal a continued reliance on binary understandings of the sexed body. Gathings and Parrotta (2013) find that attorneys and defendants exercise gendering to incite sentencing leniency. By using gendered narratives that emphasized male bodies as providers and responsible workers and female bodies as non-disruptive and nurturing, defendants “fittingly” contextualized their criminal actions to court personnel and actualized lighter punishments.

Even in research explicitly using a queer theoretical perspective, which seeks to reveal and deconstruct discrete categorizations, reliance on binary classifications is prominent. Schilt's (2010:3) interviews 54 transmen citing that they are in a unique position of living on “both sides of the gender binary.” During the interviews, Schilt notes that her participants often describe their early lives as feeling born on the “wrong” side of the binary. She also finds that many men report looking at women's mannerisms as a way to learn how they should behave post-transition. This observation (and subsequent imitation) suggests that the respondents view women and men's behaviors as distinct. This latter point is also emphasized in the work of Rupp and Taylor (2003). Based on their observation and interviews, they argue that drag queen performances challenge binary notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (see Rupp and Taylor 2003: 117); however, their data actually appears to uphold these binaries in so far as the performances exaggerate what it means to be female-bodied and feminine, thus reproducing sex and gender differences.

While queer theory helps raise significant questions about the appropriateness of relying on binary categorizations to explain our social world, many people continue to act as if persons have only one sex, gender and sexuality, that all of these constructs are congruent and that they remain stable over one's life (Lorber, 1996, Lucal, 2008). Even among those who recognize the flexibility of sex, gender, and sexuality, existing binary classifications are commonly used to describe emotions, attitudes and behaviors. Although sociologists recognize prevailing groupings as rooted in unequal power relations, their persistence underscores the import of categorical distinctions and dominant ideas about their relation.

Given the prevalent reinforcement of heteronormativity, I argue that feminist scholarship must continue to investigate sexed and gendered outcomes using our existing binary framework. I also contend, however, that we must *simultaneously* call for degendering social change. In other words, I recognize the need for socio-political movement that dismantles discrete categories. Indeed, it is necessary for genuine social equality and parity. Nonetheless, the need to recognize our lived experiences as arranged by and through these existing dichotomous distinctions is equally important. Although gender and sex categories are socio-cultural constructions (re)inforced through structural, organizational, and interpersonal relations, they are socially consequential. In order to understand the static *and* changing ways in which our sexed bodies are gendered and gendered bodies are sexed, we should continue to use binary categories in feminist scholarship.

## Acknowledging the tension

As reviewed in the previous section, recent research on gender relations clearly indicate that we continue to prescribe a binary understanding of gender on a binary understanding of the sexed body. In other words, using indicators, such as male, men, masculine, and female, women, and feminine, remain critical in revealing the (re)production of sex and gender disparities and/or signifying more equal treatment. I recognize, however, that commitments to social justice, which often argue for dismantling hierarchical classifications and unequal treatment, and commitments to obtaining knowledge about (un)equal treatment through the reliance on existing hierarchical classifications pose contradictions. I can appreciate that questions will be raised: Does use of existing binary categories exaggerate differences? Does relying on binary categories reify differences? (How) Can we aptly examine gendered processes and outcomes using existing hierarchical categories and concurrently dismantle existing gender classifications?

Tension between socio-political responsibility and knowledge production is not new to sociologists, especially those who study inequalities. We understand that fairness emerges when hierarchical classifications are eradicated, but by studying group-based outcomes we may reify the very classifications that bind us to injustice. Nonetheless, revealing and understanding inequality is a required step towards moving beyond it. Awareness of inequality as a problem for democracy and equal opportunity is necessary to resolve such problems. Thus, a tension emerges when we study group differences that we may be reinforcing those group boundaries. This is a necessary risk of inequality scholarship.

## Addressing the tension: the coexistence of two seemingly opposing standpoints

Gender research often emerges from one of two seemingly opposing standpoints. Proponents of queer theory and advocates of a degendering movement promote the dismantling of binaries, while more pragmatic approaches continue to rely on existing binary constructions to measure their persistent significance in our social-psychological lives. The former perspective is generally viewed as a more progressive feminist agenda, and is therefore often prioritized. However, I argue that the latter perspective is vital to the future of feminist studies as it allows us to document static and changing relations.

Documenting the ways in which sex and gender persists *and* fluctuates permits comparative historical assessments. As mentioned in an earlier section, gender relations studies have traditionally relied on approaching sex and gender as dimorphic categories, so relying on similar measures in future research will allow us to examine the perseverance and variation of gender and gendered structures. Interestingly, the use of binary indicators may hold us accountable to meaningful change because it helps uncover the processes and consequences of (re)applying these classifications.

Still, we are left with a need to develop practical strategies to address the tension of two seemingly opposing feminist agendas. I do not offer a list of such strategies here. Literature indicates that transformative techniques are most effective and productive when they organically emerge from those most affected and involved (e.g., Ryan, 2008, Taylor and Whittier, 1995). For this reason, strategies to confront and transcend tension must be collectively established by those

of us who directly engage in anti-sexist agendas. Still, I offer us a general but definitive starting point – sincere but critical acceptance of multiple perspectives.

Encouragement and respect of multiple approaches to gender studies will underlie any successful strategy. Being tolerant of differing perspectives is necessary for feminist scholars to unite. Divides between those who continue to use and/or legitimize categories and those who continue to fight for an undoing existing categories only hinders movement towards a single goal – equitable, just treatment of all persons. Challenging sexist arrangements and practices will require a form of unity. The unity does not require advocating for a single standpoint. Instead, unity should be formed around advocating for multiple standpoints. This unity will be our impetus for evocative change.

The literature on class and racial-ethnic inequalities may be informative - or at least inspiring - in helping us move beyond the tension. Researchers studying class relations reveal the fluidity of class distinctions (Massey, 2007, Perrucci and Wysong, 2003, Wright, 2009), yet social scientists are critical of these categorizations of class (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984, Sen, 2008). Despite these differing standpoints, social scientists collectively acknowledge that class distinctions have great consequences. Thus, while acknowledging existing categories as limiting and repressive, scholars and activists utilize the categories to explain socio-economic experiences, including the suppression of a critical discourse about class (e.g., Zweig, 2000).

Research on racial inequalities similarly notes the changeability of racial categorization (Gans, 1999, Omi and Winant, 1994, Perea, 1997) and racial identities (Dunning, 2004, Gallagher, 2004, Masuoka, 2011, Roth, 2005). Yet, researchers and anti-racist commentators do not encourage us to relinquish the use of racial categories since doing so would encourage blindness towards persistent discriminatory practices. In short, although class and race are widely recognized and criticized as social constructions, we continue to use them to identify and elucidate persistent patterns of inequality and/or acknowledge growth towards fairness. We engage the categorizations as “real” in consequence. We name them as materially, socially, and psychically injurious. In doing so, we problematize them, raise questions about their purpose *and* invite the possibility to eradicate them.

Future feminist research would benefit from applying an analogous approach. We should continue to query the existence, intention, use and implications of binary categories, but we must *simultaneously* acknowledge and measure them. What is more, feminist scholars must be supportive of both approaches regardless of one's own preferred standpoint or method of study. Remembering that the intention towards social justice unites us, our collective voice will become clearer, stronger and more empowered.

## Conclusion

I argue that using binary indicators remains a crucial part of the feminist research agenda in that it helps us gauge the persistent and changing consequences of prescribing sex and gender on the body. Despite research indicating non-heteronormative principles, I posit that scholars must not forget the actual implications that hierarchal, categorical distinctions continue to have on our lived experiences. The body continues to be read as sexed and gendered and controlled in ways

that serve socio-political functions (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Negating attention to existing heteronormative binaries that shape our opportunities and interactions is a form of denial. Let us not deny that these group boundaries remain.

I have also argued that acknowledging and measuring these discrete categories does not prohibit us from critiquing them. Eradicating polarizing classifications is necessary for socio-political change because they signify group differences that encourage boundary heightening (Kanter, 1977) and result in the maltreatment of out-group members and opportunity hoarding for one's in-group members (Schwalbe et al., 2000, Tilley, 1998).

We, as feminist scholars, must remain diligent in our investigations of sexed and gendered processes and outcomes because they continue to have perceptible consequences. I submit that we can understand differential outcomes without conforming to them. By emphasizing a collective interest in how the meaning and consequences of these categories persist *and* vary, we highlight a unifying argument that could motivate socio-political and psychic improvement. True parity will likely require a widespread transformative shift in how we conceptualize and realize our social world, but in the meantime, we should not turn a blind eye to the way that existing categories continue to inform our lives. We can interrogate and critique the relationships and categories of “male,” “female,” “man,” “woman,” “masculine” and “feminine” *even while we use them*.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.