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Gender Variance: From individual pluralities to institutionalised equalities?

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# Gender Variance: From individual pluralities to institutionalised equalities?

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# Aims and objectives

- Aim: To explore the reasons for the gaps between alternative cultural manifestations of gender diversity and the institutionalisation of gender binarism
- Objectives:
  - To map out some gender diversities
  - To introduce some concepts from sociological and feminist institutionalisms as a means of explaining the gaps between gender diversities and institutional gendering
  - Acknowledgements: All research contributors; ESRC (funded PhD and subsequent research), Diane Richardson

# Structure

- Methods
- Gender Pluralist theory
- The proliferation of non-binary gender identities
- Feminist approaches to new institutionalism
- Norms and values
- Isomorphism
- Concluding thoughts

# Methods

- Research for monograph: *Bisexuality: Identities, Politics, Theories* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015)
  - 25 in depth interviews with bisexual and queer people in the UK, plus participant observation of bi community (2012)
  - Of these, self-identified non female/female gender identities were: Male/genderqueer (1), transman (1), genderqueer (2), questioning/unsure (diagnosis of intersex condition at puberty) (1)
- Transgender Politics research (1996-2004)
  - Interviews with 24+ people who identified as transsexual, transgender, or androgynous circa 1997
  - Participant observation of gender-diverse communities subsequently

# Gender pluralist theory

- Gender pluralist theory: sex and gender are conceptualised as a spectrum, or continuum, or set of spectra/continua. This follows:

*'[a] call for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies' (Halberstam, 2002, p.360).*

- It lends itself to intersectional approaches in which identities are constituted via different social forces in interaction with each other eg ethnicity, spatiality and gender

# The proliferation of non-binary gender identities



- In UK there is increasing visibility for a multiplicity of identities such as genderqueer, third gender, multiple gender, bigender, and androgyne – and increasing numbers (e.g. in a survey 165 people (20% of sample) identified as genderqueer (McNeil et al 2012))
- This is pronounced in some subcultural spaces for example at the annual bisexual convention (BiCon)
- <http://genderfork.com/> <http://freeigbtqpia.tumblr.com/>
- BUT:

*‘A year ago, my gender identity was Not Woman. I now identify as male, but part of the reason for that is that it’s easier than identifying as non-binary. If there were more accepted genders, I would probably be ‘just masculine of centre’ (McNeil et al 2012: p. 14)*

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# Feminist and sociological new institutionalisms

- Sociological institutionalism is concerned with norms, values, and institutions:

*A synthesis of SI [sociological interactionism] and feminist gender analysis can systematically identify and track the norms as well as the symbolic and cultural factors that play an important role in gendering institutions and their practices (Mackay et al 2009: 254)*

- Gender binaried norms within powerful organisations/wider society mean that gender pluralism is marginalised or erased.....for example:

*Creating a fairer society where men and women alike can achieve their full potential is an important goal...Government has a significant role to play in promoting gender equality (Government Equalities Office 2014: p.4)*

# Norms and values: divergences between gender-diverse institutions and elsewhere

- How are different institutions normatively gendered?
  - Spaces such as BiCon are constructed to embrace gender diversity – e.g non-gendered signs on toilet doors
  - ‘Mainstream’ spaces are gender binaried with sanctions against gender diversity
  - State machinery is often gender binaried in its logics of appropriateness
  - Medical system is gender binaried – also welfare state.....
  - BUT activists are challenging this e.g.  
<http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/06/how-can-i-make-the-gender-question-on-an-application-form-more-inclusive/>
  -

# Isomorphism

- Mimetic (organisations copy each other to win legitimacy)
  - May apply to gender diversity once enough powerful institutions embrace gender diversity – but at present trend is for gender binaried mimesis
- Coercive (state forces organisations to adopt practices)
  - In UK this occurred with MTF and FTM transsexual people but not others (see Hines 2013)
- Normative (linked to the development of new rules and professional networks)
  - This *could* occur if there are changes to the WPATH and EPATH, DSM and WHO guidelines, and/or pressure from intersex activists or others e.g. [Zwischengeschlecht.org](http://www.ukia.co.uk/about.html), <http://www.ukia.co.uk/about.html>

# Concluding thoughts

- As Lovenduski (Krook and Mackay 2011) notes, criticisms of new institutionalism include:

- Underestimation of individual agency
- Overlooks power dynamics and conflicts

I argue these are valid – BUT when examining the possibilities for integrating gender diversity into mainstream society, it can form a useful tool that could be further explored (e.g. coupling/uncoupling of institutions...)

- ✓ AND the use of feminist new institutionalisms to address gender diversity forms an important complement/challenge to those approaches that imagine that ‘gender’ means only women and men...

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