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Beyond Gender Binaries: Issues of liminality, categories, and equalities

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Aims and objectives

- Aims and objectives: To outline some ways of looking at moving beyond gender binaries.

- The diverse groups known as non-binary or gender-queer include: *'…people [who] have a gender which is neither male nor female and may identify as both male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the very idea of only two genders'* (Richards et al 2016: 95).

- Acknowledgements: Trans scholars who inspired me, all research contributors; ESRC (funded PhD and subsequent research), Diane Richardson, all other relevant networks and people.

Structure

- Research methods
- Gender theory
- Categorisation and its discontents
- Intersectionality
- Equalities
- Citizenship
- Concluding thoughts

Research methods

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Transgender Politics research (1996-2004, ESRC funded)

- Interviews with people who identified as transsexual, transgender, or androgynous (24+) circa 1997

- Participant observation of gender-diverse communities subsequently

Indian gender diversity research (2003, Leverhulme funded)

Equalities in local government in Northern Ireland, England, and Wales (2007-2010, ESRC funded)

- Interviews with local authority officers (at different levels, different services) and partners in voluntary/community organisations (37)

- Participative Action Research, Action Learning Sets in each of the 4 case study areas (40)

- Interviews with key national stakeholders and councillors (20)

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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, gender identities that were other than cisgender were:

Male/genderqueer (1), transman (1), genderqueer (2), questioning/unsure (diagnosis of intersex condition at puberty) (1)

- Also web-based research carried out in India and interviews in Colombia at same time – acknowledgments to Dr Ahonaa Roy and Camilo Tamayo Gomez

Gender theory

'Transgender and transsexual people who envisage going beyond the gender binary system to allow for longer-term fluidity, third-sex or androgynous identities form a significant minority within the wider trans communities.' (Monro 2000: 36).

'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)

Categorisation and its discontents

'Capitalism demands specialization and categorisation for most efficient operation and is inextricably intertwined with patterns of social organisation beyond the realm of the strictly economic' (Donald Hall 1996: 101)

Intersectionality

'Trans people [in the USA] change genders in relation to androcentric, middle-class, white-normative, and heterocentric cultural narratives…These dominant narratives shape the institutional meanings attached to different social positions'

(de Vries 2015:6).

Madonna, trans woman, murdered in Brazil in 2102 – image Leach (2012)

Equalities

'…full transgender inclusion would appear to entail fundamental changes to the current system of sex and gender categorization, which could be framed in terms of rights and social inclusion' (Monro 2003: 449).

'…gender identities outside of the binary of female and male are increasingly being recognized in legal, medical and psychological systems and diagnostic classifications in line with the emerging presence and advocacy of these groups of people' (Richards et al 2016: 95).

Citizenship

'…a citizenship-based social model of transsexual and transgender health must be developed, including treatment, where necessary, based on client autonomy and choice.' (Monro 2000: 34).

'The majority of healthcare professionals appeared to categorise gender and sexuality in a binary system (which assumes that there are only male and female persons and that they are each attracted to the other), but others took more inclusive views.' (Fundamental Rights Agency 2016: 75-6)

Concluding thoughts

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Social theory can be used to support gender diversity

- For policy makers and practitioners, there are challenges in including the full range of diversities – including non-binary – and addressing intersectionality – but it is a hopeful time
- For activists, tensions remain between different rights claims, but its useful to pull in theory e.g. universal AND differentiated models of citizenship
- For academics, much territory still to be explored – but ethical praxis that benefits trans people is CRUCIAL
- For all of us – ethical praxis, acceptance of difference, commitment to justice…

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