

Spice and Dice: Profusions of Gender in a Postmodern World

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My career as a professor of psychology and women's studies at Penn State, Brandywine has always been focused on the theme of this conference: Women: Evolving Roles in Society and Family, and my feminist roots go back to the days when, as a car hop at the local drive-in, I fantasized with my co-worker how women could join together and make all the difference in the world. Somehow my dream has never been realized, but interesting things are happening all the same.

My Title is **Spice and Dice: Profusions of Gender in a Postmodern World**

What am I hinting at in this title? Emanations of my conclusions..?? That there are a lot of exciting transitions going on, and how it all turns out, (as if it ever will) is up for grabs. Pulsating, oscillating, and random occurrences cloud our visions of the future. But regardless, like it or not... there is no returning to the status quo that we once thought we understood-.

This speech has been my companion for months, now, and each day as I read the newspaper, engage with friends and family, check out the social media, tweet, watch TV, and participate in conferences such as APA, I am increasingly aware that the changes I have seen and wish to discuss are unmistakably in the air. Opportunities and challenges that have been realized or recognized in recent decades strike us as strangely familiar and at the same time, at odds with existing stereotypes. Our task is, as postmodern philosopher and queer theorist, Judith Butler, described it, is the need for a "new legitimating lexicon for gender complexity."

In the short time I have to present, I wish to briefly describe some of our traditional notions of gender, and how and why these ideas are being undermined by current trends in the broader society. My talk is focused primarily on 21 C. North America; and although I am speaking of general trends, I must also recognize the diversities of social groups that constitute our continental identity.

We don't all participate equally in this transformation of our gendered lives. I have also left aside the extremely complex reverberations of these shifts among the rest of the world's diverse cultures. What do these changes mean for traditional Muslim communities, for example, where gender segregation has been the rule for hundreds of years?

There are many ways to describe gender...

It is usually defined as a socially constructed process beginning in infancy, by which males and females acquire personal and social characteristics that define them as separate groups of people. The stereotypes we all hold regarding differences between women and men are based on the ways our upbringing has created them.

Cultural differences among various groups may create somewhat varied notions of masculinity and femininity. For example, within some ethnic groups, kissing and hugging among male relatives is customary, while in others, a handshake will do nicely. (And is it 2 kisses or 3 for greetings in Belgium?)

Across the world we do not find cultures where there are no distinctions made, although there are those in which a third gender is identified, as, for example, Fa'afafine among the Samoans (a respectable title for someone who is a male who takes on certain female characteristics, interests and family roles.)

Gender is centrally affixed to certain bodily characteristics, one's "sex" as it is called and reproductive capacities.

Why is it that masculinity or femininity is acquired? There are two groups of explanations: "Nature" and "Culture".

Nature:

First, is Evolutionary theory... Darwinian ideas of survival of the fittest, and variable strategies of reproductive success. For evolutionary theorists such as David Buss, culture is a thin veneer over thousands of years determined by biological necessity. For such theorists, the major building block of gender identity has to do with the capacity of males to impregnate countless females, and the heavy investment of females in their relatively few offspring. From these cross purposes, the gendered characteristics and the social strategies of women and men arise -- those that are cooperative and those that are competitive.

There are many critiques of this brand of evolutionary theory -- suffice it to say that much of it is argued backwards, from present sexual mores to ancient history. Many alternatives to the simple story of rapacious males and cautious females have been suggested.

Recently, with the rise of neuroscience and the latest technical toys, claims have been made that male and female brains are innately different. Our genders bespeak the hard wiring of our brains.

A stunning rebuttal of such claims can be found in the book, *Delusions of Gender: How our minds, society and neurosexism create difference*, author: Cordelia Fine, demonstrates "how old myths, dressed up in new scientific finery, are helping to perpetuate the sexist status quo." This same argument that can be made against evolutionary theorists of gender. Fine believes that the basis of these claims for male and female brains develops because gender stereotypes influence researchers. Her investigations rebut the idea of differences in the hard-wiring of the brain. Rather she shows how profoundly culture influences the way we think about ourselves as gendered." Whether we are brain scientists or beach bums we are suckers for gender stereotypes.

Moving to the Culture arguments, of chief importance is **Social learning theory as an explanation of gendered development.**

Briefly, Rewards and punishments from infancy, as well as the propensity to model the behaviors of those around one, heavily orient our gendered lives.

On a more general level, Cultural influences, from the media to our immediate milieu affect our ways of being.

For reasons no one can quite understand, the big wedding is bigger than ever. Average cost for a wedding is \$20,000 today (with great variations -from Chelsea Clinton's \$600,000 wedding to simpler festivities for 1/20 of the cost.) As with so many of our holiday habits, from tree trimming to turkeys; piñatas to pumpkins, we don't really know why we do them. These acts serve as proof of the powerful cultural tides that carry us along without our knowledge or commitment. And so it has been with our gender formations.

Of late, gender theorists suggest that rather than thinking of two stable categories, we consider gender as performances within diverse settings. Thus gender is not as solidly fixed as we have believed. Rather, gender is relational, and interactive.

People are capable of diverse ways of behaving and their habitual ways of responding are neither ingrained, necessary or signs of normalcy.

Taking seriously these ideas, we can accept that the nature and significance of gender labels is open to change.

Today I wish to argue that gender as a powerful labeling device is in a free fall of decline: In contrast to the thousands of years in which this distinction, based, primarily on whether or not one could bear children, the new era only began 50 years ago. The binary is breaking down and as a result a zone of liminality is expanding.

The younger one is, the less this is earth-shattering news. This inter-generational shift suggests that gender means something different for each member of an extended family. These differences have significant consequences for family relationships— harmonious or acrimonious, and thus, for family therapy.

How and why is this happening?

The beginning of this revolution can be marked as 1962 (literally 50 years ago) when the birth control pill became widely available on the market. The pill put women in control of their own reproductive choices for the first time in the history of the world. This invention allowed for an amazing shift in power and choice for women, as well as advantaged male partners, who also were invested in controlling family size.

A second major influence on gender involved a range of social justice movements: civil rights, student protests, anti-war demonstrations, and the "Sexual revolution" "make love not war" from Woodstock Rock to StoneWall Riots.

1972 is the popular historical marker for the second wave of feminism in the U.S. (The first wave of feminism reached its climax on August 26, 1920, when the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified, enfranchising all American women and declaring for the first time that they deserve all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.)

The feminist revolution was mostly about liberation, with a special emphasis on recognizing the structural elements of society that kept women in their place. It emphasized liberation from strict gender rules and roles. An emphasis was on making women aware that they had equal rights in terms of all aspects of work, love, marriage, politics, etc. This was the purpose of the famous Consciousness Raising Groups. These combined with Gay Rights, and people "Coming out of the closet."

A few years ago, I was teaching an advanced Feminist Theory course. One day the discussion turned to the topic of love and relationships. Of 8 students in class, 2 of them, a woman and a man, said they didn't care about the gender of the person they might fall in love with. Neither of them seemed to have a strong notion of what their sexual orientation was. Neither indicated that they were gay; rather what they were teaching me was that gender was not really the deciding factor in who they might want to have an intimate relationship with.

The simple notion that one is either a heterosexual, a homosexual, possibly a bisexual or an asexual may be misguided.

Certainly a constancy of partner choice is modal, but not true for many people across the life span.

Not only are intimate relationships open to sexual experimentation and change, but there is greater open engagement in sexual activity with friends and near strangers, among teen agers and young adults, anyway.

The important point that I would wish to stress is that while there seems to be equal access to pleasurable sex without a relational commitment of any kind, women are still, in a sense “getting screwed.” The playing field is not exactly equal. Women have achieved some gains, in terms of enjoying casual sex, but they are expected to provide pleasure to men; however, they should not expect it in return.

I'd like to turn my attention to other **family issues old and new** as Related to gender

From my point of view, changing gender roles, and the disappearance of a strong set of rules that regulate us has strong implications for family harmony. Clear cut rules from the 1950's and early 60's have been overtaken by current customs of forming and maintaining familial groups. No longer is it love, marriage, baby carriage, with firmly identified wives who are women and husbands who are men. No longer are men expected to foot the bills for their wives and children as was once expected (although this ideal is still rather alive and well for a number of people, as we shall see.)

Beyond the issues of child rearing, the instability of sexual orientation has created havoc in some families, as well. I know of several instances in which married men in their fifties and sixties have found themselves deeply distressed to discover their increasing yearnings to have sexual contact with other men. Desires to change one's sex may also be a mid-life crisis experience, for a person and for a family.

20 years ago this woman, then a man, was Captured and involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital by his wife and sister. They believed he was crazy. Today he has successfully made the transition to being a woman and is living a satisfying life as a single person. She is still Rejected by her marital family and has No relationship with her children. This is a sad fact of her life, but as she said, she “needed to be a woman”

Today, becoming transgendered is not a rare and weird aberration in the population. As one blogger put it, "Some of us see ourselves as combining aspects of male and female. Some of us have the same gender always and everywhere, some of us are fluid, and some of us change situationally or over time. "

Today around the world there is a very active medical community engaged in transsexual conversions. It is very hard to get accurate information, but in 2001 in the U. S., 1170 surgeries were performed: 740 Male to Female; 430 Female to Male. In Thailand, Iran, and the U. S. there are many places where this surgery is performed. (In Iran it is illegal to be a homosexual, so many men defined themselves as transexual to avoid punishment).

One might question why it is so important to have surgery. It seems for some, to requires bodily changes at great pain, time and cost. It suggests that the freedom to create one's own version of "gender" is not yet available.

In terms of legalizing gender shifting, the most far-reaching law was passed unanimously by the Argentine senate this year. This law allows people to alter their gender on official documents without first or ever having to receive a psychiatric diagnosis or surgery. The law would also require public and private medical practitioners to provide free hormone therapy or gender reassignment surgery for those who want it, including those under age 18.

The law denounced by the powerful Catholic Church in Argentina. "Sexual diversity doesn't depend only on a cultural decision or construction, but rather has its roots in a fact of human nature, which presents its own language and meaning."

Marriage, who may marry, and why get married are questions that relate to gender issues:

In the early 1960's 72% of people over 18 were married. The age of marriage for women was 20 and for men, 22. Today, about 1/2 of adults over 18 are married; the average age, today, is 27 for women, and 29 for men.

The right to marry a same-sex person is legal in 6 states, and is on the ballot in several more. Clearly a minority of marriages are among homosexuals, but eventually marriage will not be considered only for those of the opposite sex. .

Another radical change since the 1960's is the success of Lesbians and Gays at having their own biological children, as well as being able to adopt them. 2 million children today have parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered.

Raising children:

In the last several decades parents, teachers, and others have come to recognize the powerful impact that socialization has on creating gender roles for children. Overall, efforts to reduce differences are made. I think, though, that is important to recognize that the direction of reducing the difference has been toward greater emphasis on what have been regarded as "male" qualities, virtues, capacities, and opportunities—strength, rationality, self-determination, and courage.

I see very little movement in the other direction, that is valuing "feminine" virtues, except for parenting.

This summer (August 12) the NY Times Magazine featured a camp for people whose boys like to wear girls' clothes. "What's Wrong with a Boy who Wears a Dress? Was the cover story, with a beautiful boy wearing a lush brightly colored full dress.

Idea that if a boy wishes to wear pretty, colorful dresses, he is so endangered that he must be taken away to a safe haven.. More than what it says about these boys, it says a lot about our culture, where deeply held prejudices about being "girly" that is against girls and women still exist.

A last point I want to make about partnering in this gender fluid world is that multiple relational potentials are proliferating. Partly because of longevity and mobility and social media opportunities, people can find each other in many ways for certain periods of time.

People involved in multiple relationships over life span

Technology, especially the social media facilitated by the internet, has served to enhance the gender bending we have been discussing. In terms of social life, it is of paramount importance, esp. among today's youth. There are several aspects one might discuss, but to mention only a few, these forms of internet connection diverse groups to form, to share ideas, and to create new subgroups.. It allows inclusion, and exclusion. E.g. On one listserv Asexuals now find each other, support each other, and join to create a social category that has validity and strength.

Another feature of technology is that youth are given pride of place for the first time in human history.. They are the carriers of knowledge. not older generations.. The outcome is that respect for elders, and their ways of constructing the world become "old fashioned" and irrelevant. What counts is what the younger people believe and share and communicate. and this includes decreasing the relevance of gender in making social choices.

In the final portion of my talk, I'd like to address the issues that I see becoming relevant to family therapists as significant shifts in the nature of gender create conflicts and concerns in family life.

My first question has to do with the personal values and expectations that you, as a therapist, hold. What gender traditions have been central in your life? How has the world changed since you were a youth? And if you have ambivalences - which will surely be the case for many- how should these be manifested in the therapeutic process? How does what you believe become influential in terms of a therapeutic conversation? Family therapy is not only a place where conflicts created by cultures on the move, are brought, but how therapeutic practices are enacted has a shaping effect on the future. Clearly, deliberation on these issues is essential.

These major shifts in cultural life confront therapists and families with a range of difficult challenges. At the outset, where gender identity could once anchor one's sense of self and provide a road map for the future, the meaning of gender is now both clouded and contested. And within families, the confusion over gender roles may bring about tensions and disappointments. What are the rights and duties of each person in the family in terms of their supposed gender roles? What constitutes a violation? What happens if the supposed "breadwinner" and "head of the household" is now unemployed? Or if He wants to become a She? Or if he wants to change his own sexual orientation? How does the religious background of the family intersect with changing gender roles?

Intergenerational differences in understanding what is the appropriate way to act as a girl or boy will also be significant. Teenagers may defy expectations in terms of proper dress and behavior; some may play at gender bending, decide to "come out," or begin to fantasize a change of sex. How should a family deal with such issues? How are the conflicts to be resolved?

It is important to consider the cultural contexts in which a family is embedded. What are the social prejudices that persist? What is a client safe to do... or not? If there are cultural clashes, how dangerous is it to be an outlier in terms of gender or sexual identities? Violations of conventional gender performances can lead to assaults and deadly encounters, as we all know.

There are no simple conclusions to be drawn about how families should deal with such issues. Culture is not coherent and homogenous, and individual family members participate in multiple and local cultures in varying ways. The self is locally constituted in multiple cultural communities: both culture and self are heterogeneous constructs.

If we think of ourselves as multiple selves instead of one self, within diverse and local cultures, our views of gender performances must change. Instead of one abstract self, one can begin to conceptualize the possibilities of heterogeneity and proliferating identities.

Ideally therapy supports an acceptance of ambiguity and multiplicity, and helps to create relational networks to engage with and support persons and families. The therapist may work to question the certainty of social labels, and avoid using diagnostic categories of mental illness; instead therapy involves dialogue and collaborative activities to relieve gender related distress.

All is not lost, however, and this de-gendering trend is not simply a cauldron of problems and conflicts. Family therapists might also appreciate and share their appreciation of the new opportunities, and freedoms being offered.

Consider: "Melisa Ingelozzi, 25, a philosophy student at the Univ. of Buenos Aires, who describes her sense of gender as fluid. Describing the new law in Argentina, she said, "What if I don't identify with either sex? It makes invisible the trans identity."

Are we on the threshold of a new orientation entirely?

I suspect this is the case. And the new label -“trans”- will go beyond any specifics we have yet encountered in our civilization.

Change is not always obvious as we slip from one socially constructed “reality” to another. Family therapists, like the proverbial canaries in the coal mine, often can sniff the changing dynamics of family life more quickly than family members themselves. The challenge of this sea change in gender relations is potentially cataclysmic in the context of everyday family life. Sensitively responding to these contentious situations is the mission of family therapists, who can give comfort, reflection and support as family members re-evaluate what their relationships mean.