Gender as analytic, political and interdisciplinary concept

Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen, Centre for Gender research, University of Oslo
September 2016, word count: 7993

Gender is an ambiguous and also an ambitious term. Sometimes it refers to a categorical distinction between women and men (either/or). Sometimes it designates a distributive difference between groups of women and groups of men (more or less of something, for instance, some capacity, attitude, behaviour – or the salary they get). And finally it may refer to the cultural discourses of gender, which work as mostly unacknowledged frames of interpretation in our perception of the world. These three analytic meanings of gender – as distinction, distribution and discourse – may lead to much confusion about what we are really talking about when we refer to gender and gender differences. It is not unusual – neither in everyday life conversations nor in research – that distributive gender differences are interpreted through the lenses of common gender discourses and taken as distinctions.

Gender has many facets and may be studied from a number of different theoretical perspectives and academic disciplines. Gender is central to divisions of labour and to the structuring of institutions such as the family, schools, workplaces, markets, and states. It is also a profound cultural system of meaning, norms, conventions, symbols and myths. It is a dimension of bodies and physical reproduction, individual identities and personal experience, social relations and everyday interaction. The impact and meaning of gender are complex, contextual, and changing over time. Moreover, the different dimensions of gender are deeply entangled with other lines of difference and inequality, such as age, sexuality, social class, nationality, race and ethnicity. These entanglements, or articulations, contribute to shaping the organisation, salience, and meanings of gender in different spheres of life.

What we today refer to as gender studies emerged together with the feminist movement in the 1970s and this implies that the perspective has a built-in critical edge: it both interrogates how gender is produced, legitimised, maintained and changed, and considers this academic knowledge a contribution to the struggle against
discrimination and injustice. This engagement with social justice raises important issues regarding the relation between knowledge, power and politics.¹

**Gender as distinction, distribution and discourse**

In everyday language gender denotes women and men, girls and boys. The distinction is based on the close-to-dichotomous anatomical difference between male and female bodies (genes, gonads and genitals), often considered the core of biological sex. A small number of babies are born with ambiguous genitals or intersex conditions (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Hines 2004). Today there also seems to be an increasing number of people (transgender, transsexual) who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, some of which choose to correct their bodies by hormonal treatment and/or surgery. Still, for many practical purposes the gender distinction works unequivocally in most cases. As Toril Moi argues from a Wittgensteinian perspective: all categories are blurred at the edges and the existence of difficult cases does not prove that there are no easy ones (Moi 1999, 40).

All other empirical gender differences – whether they are biological (hormone levels, secondary sex attributes, brain structure, motor performance), psychological (differences in motivations, attitudes or cognitive capacities) or behavioural (differences in preferences and ways of being and behaving) – are of distributive character, they involve complex variation, not dichotomy. The variation within each gender group is often bigger than the average difference between the two groups, and most distributive patterns have turned out to be dependent on the social and historical context and are therefore neither stable nor timeless. Since gender has many facets, and different dimensions do not necessarily occur together in the experiences and behaviour of a single person, it is also the case that a man or a woman may be "typical" in some respects and "atypical" in others. Distributive patterns do not only

¹ References to feminist theory and gender studies are often used interchangeably, but political and philosophical issues tend to be predominant in feminist theory while the term gender studies covers all sorts of (critical) research on gender. Because of the connection to women's liberation the field was first called Women's Studies, but from the 1990s Gender Studies has increasingly been used as the general term. This acknowledges that also men have gender and may suffer from the gender system, and that gender may be at work in spaces without women present (Rosenbeck 1992). Today Gender Studies also includes studies of sexuality, often referred to as queer studies or LGBTQ studies.

For my own part I write this article from the position of being a social researcher working with qualitative methods, located in an interdisciplinary centre for Gender Studies of which I was the director for many years (1993-2009). My research topic is gender and childhood/youth studies in a perspective of social change, and with a special interest in the interconnection between psychological and sociocultural gender.
refer to statistically significant differences, but may also be understood within the frame of qualitative studies as gendered patterns identified in a sample.

Gender stereotyping involves interpreting a gendered distribution or pattern as a categorical distinction. This ignores the social and historical limitations of the pattern, variation within each group, and the overlap between women and men. As a consequence, what characterises a majority of women will be equated with femininity, and what characterises a majority of men will be equated with masculinity – and this may well happen even in cases when almost half of a gender group does not fit in (Fine 2010). The mechanism behind this slip is that we tend to notice behaviour that confirms gender stereotypes, we marginalise as exceptions behaviour that deviates from the stereotypes, and overlook more gender-neutral behaviour. Since masculinity and femininity – whatever they are used to designate – neither make up a clear dichotomy nor are isomorphic with gendered bodies, the result is often a conceptual mess where some women are seen as not "real" women and some men not as "real men".

This mess may also arise in research when gender is used as a variable and where average differences between women and men are circularly explained by "gender". It systematically ignores that the meaning of survey or interview questions posed may be different for women and men because of their different positions in the social order and different frames of interpretation. As the Norwegian psychologist Hanne Haavind once wrote (at a time when gay marriage did not yet exist):

*If the group of women and the group of men on average express the same degree of satisfaction with their marriages, are they then satisfied with the same things? Have the women and the men who have used the scale for self-measurement compared themselves with others in the same gender position in marriage as themselves, or have they assessed their satisfaction in comparison with those in the other gender position? (...) The method misses the significance of the fact that women are married to men, whereas men are married to women.* (Haavind 2000,165, translated from Norwegian)

A point here is also that the focus on only gender difference tends to limit the analysis of gender to being only a characteristic of individuals. But gender can also be described as a social relation and an entity of meaning that emerges in processes of interaction. We do not necessarily understand more of the dynamics of a classroom or
a work place by knowing about small average differences in cognitive skills and behaviors. This perspective calls attention to the dynamics of power and negotiations in social constructions of meaning. It also opens up toward understanding multiple forms of femininity and masculinity (some inflected by dimensions such as social class, age, or racialised and ethnic status) and the hegemonic position that a particular type of femininity or masculinity may attain in a given context (Halberstam 1998; Connell 2000).

Gender is empirically present in bodily appearance and experiences, as well as in the patterning of social structures, interactions and identities. But gender is also a forceful frame of interpretation in our minds. Such gendered discourses are not only applied to people, but also to non-human things such as colours, nations, ships, bombs, and tornadoes (Scott 1988). Gender as a frame of interpretation may involve double standards and attributions where behaviours are interpreted and valued differently according to the sex of the person. When a boy does well in school it is often considered to be the result of intelligence, whereas if he does poorly, he might be considered lazy or just bored. When a girl does well in school it is more often seen as the result of her dutifulness and hard work, but if she does poorly, it may be attributed to a lack of intelligence (Walkerdine 1990). Such double standards and attributions seldom work on a conscious level; they slide in as taken-for-granted dimensions of ways of thinking about and practicing gender. When debating the problems girls experienced in school in the 1980s, the proposed solutions focused on accomplishing changes in individuals; for example, finding ways to strengthen girls' self-confidence. When the problems boys experienced in school came into focus 20 years later, the analysis and solutions were framed in a structural way: the school system did not meet the needs of boys and ought, therefore, to be changed (Öhrn 2000).

What seems to characterise gender as an historical discourse is the tendency to split and dichotomise phenomena into two distinct groups, and the tendency to read this dichotomy as a hierarchy. Things defined as feminine tend to be seen as secondary or even inferior to things defined as masculine. Simone de Beauvoir writes in her landmark book from 1949, women are perceived and treated as "the second sex" (Beauvoir 1949/1989). According to de Beauvoir, men represent the universal human, the unmarked category of mankind, whereas women make up a special gendered sub-category whose gender explains their deviation from universal
humanity. This way of thinking may continue even in situations where women gain positions of power or where girls exceed boys in educational achievements. Thus, there is no automatic connection between gender as it is present empirically in the world, and gender as a frame of interpretation. However, interpretive models of gender interact with gender in the world as symbolic gender enters into experiences and practices related to gender. In this way gender in our heads and gender in the world continually feed into one another.

**Sex and gender**

It is largely unknown to what degree measures of psychological gender differences are actually related to gender differences found in genes, brain structure and hormone levels, or whether the measures depend on learning and experience, or some mixture of both (Hines 2004; Fine 2010). The whole idea of a one-way causal route from biology to behaviour has been questioned by recent research documenting the remarkable flexibility of the human brain, the contextual contingency of bodily processes, and the ability even of genes to adjust their effects to individual life circumstances (Rose 2005; Keller 2010). This does not mean that gendered patterns of behaviour are a mirage or that the patterns that do exist have no sort of biological basis (even if we do not know exactly what that basis is). The point is that there is no clear or straightforward connection between the near-dichotomous dimensions of anatomical sex and the complex, multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of gender differences and gendered patterns of behaviour.

The distinction between biological and social gender – coined in English as *sex* and *gender*2 – has done important political work in feminist theory, but has also been an issue of heated theoretical debate in the last few decades. From the 1960s the distinction came into use in the English language with "sex" referring to the biological

---

2 The inconsistency in the use of the term "gender", either as a general category or as only covering socially constructed aspects, has different reasons. One is that not all languages, like modern English, have two words for sexual difference. The French term "sexe", the Norwegian "kjønn", the Danish "køn" and the Swedish "kön" cover both the biological and social aspects of sexual difference in one word. This was also the case in the English language before the 1960s, when "sex" was the general term for sexual difference and "gender" only a grammatical term. From the 1990s gender has gradually taken over for sex as the general term (Nicholson 1994, 80; Moi 1999, 31; Cassin et al. 2014, 376). After the sex/gender division gained influence in Gender Studies, Swedish gender researchers introduced the term "genus" to designate social gender in Swedish, and this term has today attained a more general use, including in Swedish politics. As a consequence, the original Swedish word "kön" is now more associated with biological gender and sexuality. Danish and Norwegian gender researchers have not followed suit, and continue to prefer the integrated word of "kjønn" or "køn".
differences between women and men, and "gender" referring to psychological identities and cultural attributions (Cassin, Apter et al. 2014, 375). This distinction between sex and gender soon spread to the international community of feminist researchers. In her influential essay "What is a Woman?", the literary scholar Toril Moi analyses the development of the terms within feminist theory: "Gender may be pictured as a barricade thrown up against the insidious pervasiveness of sex", she writes (Moi 1999, 15). The point is that when sex is seen as pervasive, the difference between male and masculine or female and feminine disappears. The result is indeed a case where distribution is interpreted as a distinction.

During the nineteenth century gender difference increasingly became understood in terms of reproductive biology. Before this, gender worked primarily as an axis in divisions of labour along with the distribution of power, authority and privilege. With an enhanced division between public and private life in the nineteenth century and with the rise of modern medical science, the difference between males and females came to be understood as fundamental, dictated by their different biology and inborn psychological capacities (Laqueur 1990; Fausto-Sterling 2000). Thus, biology was from now on used to naturalise and justify social gender norms. Women were reduced to their biological reproductive capacity and the decisive consequences this was assumed to have for their mental capacities (Rosenbeck 1987; Moi 1999). Furthermore, this gender polarisation emerged in the same historical period that introduced a completely new view of human beings based on the ideas of the European Enlightenment. Women were seen as not fully human, but as subgroup defined and confined by their bodies.

Even though the more extreme version of this biological determinism dissipated during the first decades of the twentieth century, when women gained access to education and the right to vote, gender differences and gender hierarchies were largely explained and justified by biological difference. Thus, when the second feminist movement emerged in the 1970s, there was an urgent need to build an argumentative barrier, as Moi notes, to refute biological arguments that could be used against expanding women's rights. The answer to this need was separating the concept of social and historical "gender" from the concept of biological "sex".

It was not the feminists, however, who invented the distinction. The psychiatrist Robert Stoller, who worked with intersex and transsexual patients, had in 1963 introduced the concept of "gender identity" as something that concerns only the
psychological experience of belonging to one sex or the other (Moi 1999, 22). The concept of "gender role" was conceived in the same period of time and was used in Talcott Parsons' work on the nuclear family. When feminist scholars started to use the sex/gender distinction in the early 1970s (see, for instance Oakley 1972/1993), the emphasis was, however, not on psychological gender identities or the functional order of the nuclear family, but on the conflict, power and suppression inherent in the gender order. Social anthropologist Gayle Rubin published the important essay "The Traffic in Women" in 1975, in which she used Stoller's categories for feminist purposes and saw sexuality and bodily sexual difference as the "raw material" for the production of gender:

...a "sex/gender system" is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied. (Rubin 1975, 159)

In Rubin's definition gender is always oppressive as it is shaped by patriarchal power systems: the social organisation of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality (Rubin 1975, 179, 204; see also Moi 1999, 24).

For the next decades most gender research was based on this distinction between sex and gender – but eventually the idea of a biological "nature" working as a universal, mute and passive matter was challenged. The sex/gender distinction might have helped women escape biological determinism, but it still provided a biological foundationalism for cultural gender dichotomies, where biology was assumed to be an unchangeable and neutral "coat rack" for different cultural gender garments (Nicholson 1994, 81-82). Drawing on Laqueur and Foucault, Linda Nicholson argued that our conceptions of the body are also always cultural and historical. She mentioned the distributive character of most biological differences, which do not fit into a binary model of sex. Judith Butler (1990) argued that our ideas of biological sex – and, indeed, the conception of heterosexuality as natural – should be seen as an effect of the gender system rather than its foundation. Butler also suggested that the materiality of the body is not universally given, but produced by "materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense" (Butler 1993, 10). From a sociological perspective Pierre Bourdieu wrote in 1990 (in the first draft of Le domination masculine from 1998) that the sexed body should be seen as a social construction produced by the symbolic violence in gender domination, employing his
concept of habitus as learned bodily dispositions. Another critique came from the emerging field of feminist science- and technology studies, opposing the view of the Western philosophical tradition where nature is seen as passive matter that humans can control and dominate. Haraway held that "the 'body' is an agent, not a resource" and suggested seeing it as an active, meaning-generating "material-semiotic actor" (Haraway 1988, 594-5). From the phenomenological perspective, Toril Moi developed Simone de Beauvoir's claim that the body should not be understood as a reified thing, but as "a situation" related to a person's lived experience and subjectivity. In contrast to Butler andmaybe Bourdieu, Haraway and Moi did not contest bodily structures as facts, but as facts with no absolute meaning: "...the relationship between body and subjectivity is neither necessary nor arbitrary, but contingent" (Moi 1999, 40, 114). The meaning of a body can only be decided in historical analysis of individual women (or men). As Gayle Rubin, Moi finds the concept of gender no less reductive than the concept of sex as myths of cultural gender identities may work just as deterministically as fixed ideas of sex.

**Equality and difference – gender, power and politics**

A different way to discuss the meaning of the concept of gender is to frame it as a political question of gender equality and gender difference. Is the goal of feminism to make women and men equal, or to get rid of the hierarchical relation between them? Is it the dichotomy or the hierarchy of the gender order that is the root of the evil? Carol Patemann coined the problem as "Wollstonecraft's dilemma" (Pateman 1989, 196-97), named after one of the first European feminists, British Mary Wollstonecraft who published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. The dilemma goes like this: women can *either* insist on getting the same social rights as citizens as men, but thereby they take men's lives and values as models and become like them. *Or* women can insist on getting respect and recognition as women and mothers, with the consequence that they will not attain recognition as full citizens.

---

3 Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital have inspired many feminist thinkers (see later in this chapter), however the publication (Bourdieu 1998, including the prior version from 1990) in which he specifically addresses gender never became an important text in gender theory. From Judith Butler (1999) to Toril Moi (1990/1999) and to Bourdieu-inspired feminists like Lois McNay and Lisa Adkins (2004), it is disregarded, typically in footnotes. It is dismissed partly for being a simplistic structuralist account with no understanding of the complexities, contradictions, ambivalences and gradual changes that characterises gender in modern society (Moi 1999, 286; Adkins 2004, 191-2; McNay 2004, 189, note 4), partly for kicking in doors that had been opened a long time ago by feminist scholars whom Bourdieu apparently had not read (Moi 1999, 283, note 21).
Thus, the tension between equality and difference is a product of the contradiction between universal human rights and gender polarisation that first emerged in the late eighteenth century.

The various feminist responses to Wollstonecraft's dilemma rely on different conceptions of gender, power and knowledge, and these positions may be understood both genealogically and theoretically. Iris Marion Young identifies a tension between a "humanist position", favouring equality, and a more "gynocentric position", favouring difference (Young 1985). The humanist position – with ties back to Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Simone de Beauvoir – sees women as human beings whose potential is inhibited and distorted by a society that allows self-development only of men. Women's confinement to femininity is what impedes the development of their full human potential. Thus, the primary vehicle of women's oppression is the idea of femininity as an essence, which does not have a parallel in a similar idea of masculinity (Young 1985, 173). There is no celebration of gender differences in this position. The feminist political project here is about individual freedom: women have an objective interest in challenging the cultural mind-set, both in themselves and others, which reduces their freedom. Gynocentric feminism disagrees that the problem is that women are not being allowed to take full part in humanity/being human. Rather, it lies "in the denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalised and authoritarian masculinist culture" (Young 1985, 176).

Second-wave feminism contains both positions: the fight for women's rights is also a fight for a better society. Socialist and Marxist feminists in the 1970s focused on the structural and economic power that oppressed women, and on the necessity of collective actions to challenge this. In the late 1970s the gynocentric position gained influence, partly as a result of the many new empirical studies that were carried out within different academic disciplines making visible women's lives and valuable activities and contributions. Simone de Beauvoir was now heavily criticised for her devaluation of women's bodies, reproductive labour and activities, and for mirroring a patriarchal culture in her idealisation of men's situation in society. The gynocentric position in the 1980s lead to a somewhat exalted celebration of women as linked with nature, nurturing, cooperation and peace-loving. It was also used to maintain a more radical critique of the capitalist and patriarchal Western society, not only for oppressing women, but also for the gendered separation of production and
reproduction. As a result, care and human relations are devalued and a destructive economic logic, oppressive to both men and women, come to dominate society. Whereas the conception of knowledge in humanist feminism relied on Enlightenment ideas of objectivity and critical-rational thinking, the gynocentric position became more occupied with the subjective aspects of knowledge production, and the links between power and the construction of knowledge. Nancy Hartsock (Hartsock 1983) formulated the epistemology of the "feminist standpoint", which claims that women's position and experiences in the sexual division of labour produce not only a different but also a superior understanding of nature and social phenomena.

Humanist and gynocentric feminism have different solutions to the equality/difference dilemma. However, neither of them had questioned the category of women and only to a limited degree questioned whether women have common political interests. The challenge to the universal female subject came in the 1980s first from Black feminists in the US, who argued that race and class were overlooked dimensions in feminism: Black women were oppressed as much by white middle-class women as by Black men (see, for instance, Davis 1981 and Hull, Scott et al. 1982 – the latter with the telling title *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men. But Some of Us Are Brave*). This complicated the question of gender equality, gender difference, and the visions of women's collective action against oppression.

The emergence of postcolonial and poststructuralist theories in the 1990s introduced new ways to think about power, knowledge and politics. The Marxist or patriarchal concept of power as a top-down model of domination was challenged by Foucault's discursive understanding of power as something that is everywhere, something that nobody can escape, a social force that creates and regulates what categories of meaning and subject positions are possible. Women as well as men contribute to maintaining the gender order through their actions and language. Thus, a crucial difference from the concept of power found in humanist and gynocentric feminism was that women are seen neither as simply victims nor angels, but as co-producers of the gender order. The epistemological relativism introduced by standpoint theory was radicalised in the poststructuralist version, where knowledge is not only entangled with power, knowledge *is* power.

From the poststructuralist perspective, the equality/difference dilemma tends to lose meaning. When the focus is on women primarily as an internally diverse group, the concept of feminist politics is challenged whether as being a struggle for
gender equality or a struggle for the acknowledgement of women's special values and identities. Since identity categories are seen as constituted by processes of exclusion and sites of power struggles and as internally dependent on what is externalised, any category will be internally unstable and targets of continual resignification (Butler 1990; Hall 1996). Thus, the approach to politics and change in poststructuralist and queer theory tend to work rather on the level of cultural categories and representations: normative categories of gender and sexuality need to be deconstructed and destabilised to reveal that they are not natural or innocent identities. The inquiries begin from the margins, with people who are engaged in non-normative gender and sexual practices and who do not feel like they fit into whatever "we" is being articulated as a norm (Stormhøj 2013, 65). The queer perspective gives priority to non-normative sexualities as heteronormativity is seen as inherent in the meaning of gender.

The queer perspective opened up for a different understanding of gender politics that carried great importance in an increasingly mediatised and sexualised society. However, it also raised new problems. One was that it was difficult to see how one may effectively struggle against discrimination and inequality between existing groups if all identity categories are seen as unstable. Another was that the focus on cultural categories and borders might give less attention to economic and material inequality and weaken the critique of a society that devalues care and interdependence between people (Fraser 1997; 2009). A third issue was the claim that change must come from people located at the margins that tended to conceptualise the dominant norm as monolithic and undynamic (McNay 2004; Stormhøj 2013). The dominant norm emerged as a static background to non-normative performances, not taking into account that gender norms and practices are constantly in a process of reconfiguration and that this may sometimes contribute to increased gender equality – for instance, when more women take up paid work and more men take part in child care (Adkins 2004; McNay 2004; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006; Aarseth 2009; Nielsen 2016).

This brings us back to the dilemma between equality and difference in a new way: does a destabilisation of the binary structure of gender lead to fewer social inequalities between people of different genders or different sexual identities? Or the other way around, does increased social equality between women and men or between people with different sexual identities make the category of gender less important,
constraining and exclusionary? Is it gender as experience or gender as representation that is the main problem? Or could these two perspectives be combined? I will return to this question in my conclusion, but first I will accentuate the difference between the perspectives to illustrate how the dichotomy has lead to further conceptual polarisations.

Being, doing, performing gender – subjectivity and agency

Seeing gender primarily as a cultural representation or primarily as lived experience had consequences for the understanding of how gender identities and gender norms are produced, maintained and transformed. Different theories have emphasised various aspects of the process of learning gender throughout life: gender as ways of being and relating; gender as embodied dispositions; gender as a dimension of interaction, play and negotiation; gender as a norm and a process of normalising. These approaches carry with them different notions of subjectivity and agency.

There has generally been an increased focus on gender as something that is produced and maintained through practices. Instead of seeing gender as something one "is", the processual perspective emphasises gender as something one "does" (West and Zimmerman 1987). West and Zimmerman's sociological version of "doing gender" (1987) rely on symbolic interactionism where social meaning is created in interaction. Similarly, in Simone de Beauvoir and Toril Moi's philosophical version, the philosophical distinction between existence and essence is central: it is our acts who define who we are (Moi 1999, 55). In both versions there is an acting subject that evolves through agency and in response to others' agency. Experiences of interaction are sedimented over time in a way that means that the way a person "does" gender also becomes an expression of who she has become through these actions, and, thus, in that sense "is". Hence, studies of "being" gendered and "doing" gender could here be seen as functionally related, revealing different aspects of social processes involved in constructing gendered subjectivities. Agency and subjectivity here become mutually intertwined. This is also a perspective we find in the work of feminist sociologists who have developed Bourdieu's concept of habitus, but with more emphasis on agency and reflexivity than we find in his own work: Lois McNay, for instance, understands gender as a "lived relation" rather than a structural location, whether in terms of materialist or cultural thinking (2004, 175). Lisa Adkins connects modern gender detraditionalisation with gender arrangements in the late modern
society that contributes to increase reflexivity as "a habit of gender" in a continuously interchange with pre-reflexive or embodied meanings connected to gender (2004, 192; see also Aarseth 2009 and Nielsen 2016).

In the poststructuralist version of "doing gender", however, agency and subjectivity are split. In Butler's account, the theory of the internal instability of norms and categories is combined with a theory of performativity, which is defined as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" (Butler 1993, 2). Gender exists only as performance, and there is "no doer behind the deed". The instability of the category of gender, in combination with its performative character, opens up for change as the norms unintentionally may be cited wrongly. But since these failed performances or resignifications are merely coincidental consequences of the indeterminacy of linguistic categories, triggered by unconscious processes in the speaker, their effects are also undetermined (McNay 2004). Since the linguistic system needs people to make it work there are some kind of agency. Within this philosophical line of thinking, however, this subjective agency is mainly understood as unconscious defensive reactions to guard the illusion of gender.

Compared to West and Zimmerman, there is little focus on social interaction in Butler's version of doing gender. She has modified her ideas of this later (for instance in her book *Undoing Gender* from 2004), but in her two books from the early 1990s, which had and still has an enormous impact on gender studies, gender performance appears to be a rather solitary show. The relational psychoanalyst Lynne Layton holds that if identities are theoretically reduced to always and only being defensive formations, we do not only loose the relational meaning and the biographical motives behind the performance of gender, but also the possibility for understanding identities as more or less conflicted and relations as more or less defensive:

> What is missing from Butler's account, even in its most psychoanalytic form, is an understanding of what motivates people's relation to norms. Indeed, one reason why it is so difficult to grasp what Butler means by agency is that her system has no place for the mediating power of relationships, for longing for love, approval, and recognition. (Layton 1998,150)
It also leaves us in a rather timeless universe where the historical contingencies of subject formations and agencies are more or less absent (Benhabib 1995; Fraser 1997; Moi 1999; Stormhøj 2013). In the words of Lois McNay, the lack of a temporal dimension in Judith Butler's theoretical work implies that gender "tends to be construed as a relatively atemporal system of dominant norms" where the possibility for change is unmediated by praxis or agency (McNay 1999, 102). Raewyn Connell has argued that Butler's idea of generalised categorical instability cannot take into account that in some historical periods gender identities and relations change fast, in others slowly. Nor does the concept explain why some people would want to change gender arrangements, while others would resist (Connell 2009, 90).

**Realism and nominalism**

The relation between gendered subjectivities and gender performativity can also be connected to the opposition between realism and nominalism, the question of whether words and concepts may be seen as referring to empirical phenomena or only to the linguistic and discursive systems themselves. This distinction is often confused with the distinction between essentialism and constructionism, but is not the same. Essentialism means seeing gender as a fixed, ahistorical and coherent essence in individuals. There are hardly any feminists or gender researchers who would subscribe to such an idea. The essentialism debate is rather about what count as essence and what is implied in construction (Hacking 1999). Most social researchers are constructionists in the sense of Bourdieu or Berger and Luckmann, meaning that they think that gender, body and sexuality vary historically and culturally and that such ideas and practices certainly will have an impact on what women and men are allowed to become. This form of social constructionism usually relies on critical realist, interactionist or interpretative paradigms where the concept of the "reality" of gender is neither abolished nor used in a linguistically unmediated, positivistic sense.

The various poststructuralist positions identify rather as nominalist than as constructionist in the social and historical sense. The nominalist position moves the focus of interest towards how gender is constituted for our minds. The claim is that the linguistic binarity between man/woman or between homosexuality/heterosexuality, and repetitions of those binaries in discursive practices, unavoidably creates gender as an essentialist category of meaning. From this perspective, there are no identities or essences in the world to discover or describe, only differences and
borders that are constituted by complex power dynamics and results in on-going social processes of inclusions and exclusions.

A problem that arises here, not least for social research, is that if there are only differences and no identities to study, metacommunication will tend to be substituted for communication in research and politics: we cannot speak about the world, only about how we speak of the world (Nielsen 1995; Hacking 1999; Nielsen 2000; Knapp 2005). To analyse how we speak of gender is of course important, and feminists have made important critical interventions into mainstream science in this regard. One example is Donna Haraway who convincingly demonstrated how biological studies of animals were based on human gender stereotypes, legitimising these gender norms being natural in turn (Haraway 1992). Another example is the earlier mentioned intervention by Hanne Haavind when she criticises using gender as a self-explaining variable (Haavind 2000). The words we use are not innocent. When we talk about men and women, or let specific groups embody a general category, we also contribute to the idea that gender is indeed a given and dichotomous phenomenon. However, this point does not take into account that there are in fact men and women acting in the world and that they carry the gendered structures in society and culture with them and in them. If describing them – even if only in the distributive sense – automatically means essentialising them, feminist social sciences and historical studies would lose their ground. Gender studies can hardly survive as an interdisciplinary research field only by offering critique of others’ use of language, it also has to offer new and better descriptions of the world. Describing the world implies dialogues with others, not only unveiling their perspectives – and that means listening to what people are trying to say and not only how they say it. That goes for theories, politics and informants. A meta-perspective on a theory, or on concepts or utterances, is not the same as addressing the relevance or validity of that theory, concept or utterance.

The split between nominalism and critical/interpretative realism may to some extent follow a split between the humanities and the social sciences. However, it is fully possible to do deconstructive work in the social sciences, and to study historical ideas of gender and sexuality without seeing them only as discursive positions. Toril Moi, for instance, takes a realist stand when she criticises the anti-realist and anti-dialogical position inherent in philosophical difference thinking. Departing from ordinary language philosophy (Wittgenstein instead of Saussure and Derrida) she
claims that the meaning of words come from what we use them for, not their oppositions to other words. This places language use in a historical context and embeds it in specific social relations, which is what is missing in Butler's early account of performativity. Thus it is not the word woman that is the problem, but what is claimed, directly or indirectly, about women and femininity in a given context. However, Moi also seems to fear some words when she adamantly refuses to talk about gender identities in any other sense than myths and stereotypes. In contrast to Butler she thinks individual gendered subjectivities exist and suggests that one should study the variation in women's lived experiences, but she turns her back on the idea that it could be important also to study the social patterns, e.g. the similarities in women's subjectivities: "To speak of a generalised 'gender identity' is to impose a reifying or objectifying closure on our steadily changing and fluctuating experience of ourselves in the world" (Moi 1999, 81). The question is what Moi implies in the word "generalised" here? If it means a claim about an essential feminine identity any gender researchers would agree – but what about smaller and more limited patterns of similarities between some women in a specified context? (see also Bordo 1990). Other gender scholars from the humanities are more open to such limited generalisations of gender patterns, employing, for instance, Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances (Nicholson 1994) or Sartre's concept of seriality (Young 1994).

These questions hold particular importance for empirical gender studies since the ultimate goal here is seldom the study of language or of individual or literary cases of experience. For gender researchers working empirically with women and men's lives currently or historically it is indeed often possible to identify distributive gender patterns. Recognising such patterns is neither the same as essentialising cultural forms nor imposing stereotypes on people that ignore their freedom and agency. We can have gendered patterns even if they do not apply to all in one gender group, or if they apply to some in the other gender group as well, or if they are limited to certain classes, contexts or periods. Such patterns are important to identify as they represent a social practice that are not only part of a social order, but also provide the conditions for change. Thus, for gender researchers working empirically, gender in the world can neither be reduced to nor radially separated from the gender categories it is constituted and experienced through. The epistemological space that social researchers inhabit is characterised by the continuous mediations between the
characteristics of the objects studied, the objects' interpretation of themselves, and the researcher's interpretation of how she interprets the objects and herself.

**Conclusion**

As an analytical, interdisciplinary and inherently critically concept, gender has multiple dimensions and raises intricate questions of ontology, epistemology and politics. It is not possible to set up a simple overview of positions in the field since the theoretical issues work on many and partly intersecting levels. They may also change meaning dependent on the academic field and the research questions raised. The dimensions discussed in this article have been the non-reducible, analytic meaning of gender as simultaneously both a distinction, distribution and discourse; different conceptions of sex and gender and the way they relate to assumptions about the mind-nature dichotomy; the tension between gender equality and gender difference with wider impacts on epistemology and the conception of power and politics; gender as something one is, one does or performs, and the consequences of this for the understanding of subjectivity and agency, reproduction and change. Finally, we have discussed the issues of essentialism and constructionism and of nominalism and realism as different epistemological points of departure. I have emphasised a line of division between gender researchers working with gender mainly as a representation or mainly as an experience. These two points of departure have had further consequences for the understanding of power and politics, but also for the conceptions of biological and social gender and for how the concept of gender is understood. In practice, however, gender researchers often draw on both positions but in different mixtures. For critical "realists", it is evident that gender is also a representation and that this representation plays a part in what men and women in the world can become. Gender as a frame of interpretation cannot be separated from the distributional patterns found or the way gender as distinction is employed. In this way the nominalist position may be part of the epistemological considerations of the "realists", but not their ontological foundation. Among the "nominalists", most would admit that they are not trying to describe all aspects of how gender works. Judith Butler, for instance, has in her later works tried to clarify that she of course understands that there are things that exist outside language, and that the empirical doers of gender of course have a psychological and social history that precedes the deed, but that this is not the issue she is addressing in her theoretical work (see, for instance chapter 10 in
Butler 2004). So the differences may boil down to the fact that there are many and different phenomena to study and many and different questions to ask, exactly because gender studies is constituted as a broad and interdisciplinary field. The advantage of this is that gender studies more than other academic fields have access to a broader set of knowledge and theoretical approaches and of this reason may be in a privileged position for academic and political border crossing. Instead of seeing the relation between nominalism and critical/interpretative realism as a split, it can also be put to work as a methodological challenge and possible integration.

However, the interdisciplinary character of the field implies the risk that one discipline, or a specific theory from this discipline, may in periods dominate the field, and lead to uniformity rather than to multiplicity. This may lead to a reductive approach (everybody poses the same questions), or theoretical claims with unclear limits (when claims are moved from one field of inquiry into another without asking if the object of study is the same). We may see an example of this in the debate of being, doing and performing gender, where the disagreement seems to rely on a confusion of different identity concepts and the work they are intended to do in different disciplines or in different research inquiries. Butler's concept of the subject is positioned within a longstanding philosophical dispute about whether "the subject" can be claimed to be the ultimate foundation of reason. In sociology and psychology the concepts of "subjects" do different work. In a sociological context it will often refer to shifting social and political identities. In psychology it refers to the realm of individual experience, including the experience of being "oneself" also in the midst of social and personal change. If meanings of words are what they are used for, this is not necessarily a problem. However, it becomes a problem if the meaning of a concept in one context is uncritically imported into others. If the philosophical distinction between identity and difference enters the social sciences or historical studies as a general "theory" – without Butler's reservations or later amendments – it may turn into two distinctly different methodological approaches. Then one suddenly has to choose between either studying people's identities as unitary, coherent and universal, or studying how their identities are linguistically constituted by the marginalisation of other identities. This dichotomy makes it problematic to speak of living subjects and lived identities, and of variations, relations and historical formations, because these words and their reference to social phenomena are interpreted as essentialist thinking. But the problem is rather that it is the dichotomy
of identity versus difference itself that does not fit many of the the inquiries in social sciences or historical studies. As Lynne Layton (1998) has argued, from a psychological perspective identity and difference, coherence and incoherence, or stability and change in identities and subject formations, are simply not a question of either/or. In this way interdisciplinarity may sometimes leads unhelpful theoretical dualisms. Rachel Falmagne (2009) claims that theoretical differences and tensions are productive when they are used constructively to transform reconceptualisations and selective syntheses, but not when they are constructed within a dualistic frame that stays within a particular theoretical territory and its corresponding community of scholars. Falmagne argues that theoretical tensions often signal that each account excludes important features of the phenomenon studied, which its language is ill equipped to deal with. If theoretical tensions are not reduced to a question of either/or, they can represent productive tensions for feminist scholars both to explore and to find ever-new ways to hold.

References


