

# The Analytic and Institutional Space of Transdisciplinary Gender Studies

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Presented 23/05/13

5<sup>th</sup> Christina Conference on Gender Studies

University of Helsinki, Finland

# The Analytic Space of Gender Studies

- A narrower focus! Gender Studies as a field name: some implications for, and debates surrounding, the content and viability of this area of study.
- From 1998-2008 I was the first tenure-track, and tenured, faculty member in the Department of Gender Studies at Indiana University. The Department had not long been christened “Gender Studies”: hotly debated at the time.
- No longer the case: In 2012, Robyn Wiegman refers to the “standing ovation” the term *gender* has recently received “as the critical means to rejuvenate the optimism once signified by *women* in the field inaugurated in that name” (p. 10).

- It is by now a widely-accepted argument that “women” is an unstable, fractured, and contested category of identity -- one that is inextricably bound up with questions of race, class, sexuality, and nationality.
- So what about the term “gender”? Wiegman (2012, 2002) and others (Hemmings, 2005; Lee, 2002) warn against a familiar “progress” narrative in the field positing “gender” as a category of identity that will transcend the limitations of “women.”
- There are two core arguments against this progress narrative:

- 1) “Gender” is not more coherent than “women”: it too fails fully to “capture” or explicate the identities it purports to represent (and this is an expanded list: e.g. women, men, LGBTQ identities) (see especially Weigman 2012, 2002; Brown 1997); and
- 2) The reading of poststructuralist theories that has given us “gender” as a *superseding* category is problematic: it simplifies 1970s and 1980s women’s studies scholarship as fixed and narrow -- as uniformly naïve and essentialist in its focus on women and on sexual difference, in contrast to scholarship about socially constructed, mutable, and capacious *gender* (Hemmings, 2005; Weigman 2012, 2002).

- This critique of a progress narrative from women to gender is compelling and important in a number of ways
- Particularly compelling is Weigman's argument against realist referentiality altogether in our naming practices for the field. Citing the recognized inadequacy of the category "women" as a key theoretical achievement for women's studies, Weigman (2002) argues not so much for or against name changes, but rather in favour of resignifying the "women" in women's studies to allow for "a rigorous pursuit of [its] incoherence as a problematic that animates the field" (p. 140).

- However, I believe a strong case can be made for the field name “Gender Studies,” if the choice is between Gender Studies and Women’s Studies (“Feminist Studies”:institutional politics that are beyond the scope of this short presentation).
- I argue that the progress narrative is problematic not only because of its failed attempts fully to represent or “capture” gendered identities, but also because of its relatively narrow focus on a particular, post-structuralist version of identity construction. Weigman challenges the presumed coherence of gender identity representations or rubrics, offering the important argument that any identity category will always be incommensurate with its socio-political expression (Weigman 2012). I agree with Weigman, and, I would like to challenge narratives of identity “construction” within the field from a different angle.

- It is a mistake, I believe, to construe the field's objects of study as, primarily, identities (*gender* is said to signal a more expansive and inclusive list); and, it is a mistake to assume that post-structuralist theory is, necessarily, primarily about identities and their mutability (*gender* thought to be is a flexible framework for identity construction, as opposed to *women*, which is a fixed and essentialist identity category).
- Instead, I argue for “Gender Studies” as a field name because it marks an analytic space that signals attention to 1) the *production* of a range of gendered identities, and 2) formations and dimensions of social life that are gender-coded. Understood thus, gender is not an identity category: it is, rather, a fractured and diverse social formation. Nor is gender incoherent: it is powerfully structured (if not given or fixed).

- The remainder of this talk will explore what I think are problematic tendencies in the field to view both gender and post-structuralist theory in terms of identity construction (that is, a particular, and I think narrow, conception of identity construction).
- I do so through a critical analysis of a frequently cited and provocative article by Wendy Brown (1997), “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies.”
- I then close with a (very) brief consideration of Gayle Salamon’s (2010) ideas re., what it would take for the field to engage more fully with transgender studies. Interestingly, Salamon uses Brown as a springboard to scope what might be *possible* – not impossible – for the field, and she offers a reformulated set of ideas about identity construction.



- Brown (1997) argues that Women's Studies is not intelligible as a field because "women" and "gender" never stand alone in social life: they are always entailed in complex and varied processes of subject formation involving the equally non-discrete categories of "race, class, nation, and so forth" (p. 93).
- For Brown, identity categories cannot simply be "intersected" because they are not separable from each other or from the forms of power that produce subjectivities. Nor is the problem solved by specifying subjectivities in greater detail, "e.g. mapping the precise formation of the contemporary 'middle-class Tejana lesbian'" (pp. 93-4).

- The proliferation of highly specific categories of identity veers towards positivism and simplistic models of social power, even as it excludes persons who will “feel misdescribed by such descriptions even as they officially ‘fit’ them” (p. 94).
- According to Brown, if gendered identities cannot be made to cohere as bounded “things” in social life, then neither “women” nor “gender” can stand as the foundation of a field of study.
- Brown notes that in the wake of post-structuralism, *every* field faces challenges in attempting to secure its boundaries and “fix” its object(s) of study. But for Brown, *insurmountable* problems of this sort appear in fields “organized by social identity rather than by genre of inquiry” (p. 86).

- Discourses of social identity (Brown's "race, class, nation, and so forth") are incommensurable, interweaving, and differently cross-cutting.
- Therefore, Brown writes: "Women's studies... may be politically and theoretically incoherent, as well as tacitly conservative – incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable 'women' as an object of study, and conservative because it must resist all objections to such circumscription if it is to sustain that object of study as its *raison d'être*" (p. 83).

- But the slippage throughout Brown's article between "women" and "gender" is problematic for her argument, because gender is not a social identity in the same way that women is a social identity. It is, rather, a category of analysis (as well as a powerful social formation).
- Brown's argument loses conceptual clarity here, because her main objection to women's/gender studies as a field results from its attempts to *specify subjectivities*.
- The gender of "gender studies" – as well as the analytic category of gender within "women's studies" – is not coterminous with gendered subjects (e.g., women and men).

- This point is in fact crucial for Brown's argument: what she calls a model (e.g. gender studies) for grasping a particular modality of subject(ing) power (e.g. gendering) will not map onto the making of specific gendered subjects in social life, because gendered subjects are never "just about gender."
- I agree with Brown that gender "on the ground," in its specific expression via living subjects' social identities, does not exist in any "pure" form. Nor does it simply interdigitate in neat and predictable ways with other modalities of subject(ing) power in processes of subject formation.
- But Brown slips into the additional claim that gender *generally* ceases to cohere – as a model, an analytic category, and the topic or the "object of study" within women's/gender studies.

- I suggest that when one loses sight of gender as an analytic category that encompasses more than (but is integrally imbricated in) the identities of living subjects, one also loses sight of the real effects of social, economic, and ideological processes that are gendered and that provide an authorizing context for the solidification, as well as the reconfiguration, of gendered identities.
- Twenty-five years ago, Joan Scott (1988) articulated some of the core issues to consider here, in her analysis of gender “as a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (p. 42). She provides an example from nineteenth century France:

- “Attention to gender is often not explicit, but it is nonetheless a crucial part of the organization of equality or inequality. Hierarchical structures rely on generalized understandings of the so-called natural relationships between male and female. The concept of class in the nineteenth century relied on gender for its articulation. While middle-class reformers in France, for example, depicted workers in terms coded as feminine (subordinated, weak, sexually exploited like prostitutes), labor and socialist leaders replied by insisting on the masculine position of the working class (producers, strong, protectors of their women and children). The terms of this discourse were not explicitly about gender, but they were strengthened by references to it. The gendered ‘coding’ of certain terms established and ‘naturalized’ their meanings. In the process, historically specific, normative definitions of gender were reproduced and embedded in the culture of the French working class” (Scott, 1988, p. 48).

- So: gendered beliefs materialize into practices that embed these beliefs in them. In other words, just because gender is a complex construction does not mean it lacks coherence; rather, gender *achieves* solidity (not fixity) in its ongoing, patterned production through multiple ideological and institutional supports.
- Scott's understanding of gender as a constructed category is in keeping with the vast majority of scholarship that embraces post-structuralist theory. Most constructionists accept the idea that categories of gender are real – in the crucially important sense that people are compelled to live out their lives in these very powerful, and socially unequal, terms.



- But a problem with many constructionist approaches to gendered identities – one that is not, however, inherent in post-structuralist theories – is a tendency to analyze identity construction as a semi-autonomous realm of social life. Post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity sometimes do seem unmoored from specific material and historical conditions of identity production, which can leave an impression of free-floating identities.
- This problem can be traced to the work of Michel Foucault. Quite some time ago, cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1985) argued that Foucault -- following Althusser, and in his quarrel with Marx's materialist analysis of class consciousness -- rendered ideology coterminous with subject formation.

- This move allowed for a more complex, and welcome, analysis of subjectivity; but when ideology is fully equated with subject formation, the reproduction of what Marx called the relations of production is reduced to “the reproduction of labor power, whereas reproduction in Marx is a much wider concept, including the reproduction of the social relations of possession and exploitation...” (Hall, 1985, pp. 98-9).
- In a similar vein, Lynn Segal (2000) has pointed out that analyses of gender often focus on gender subjectivity and cultural imagery without interrogating the constitutive role of particular, material, and unequal social and economic relations in the production and reproduction of gender.

- So, in sum: post-structuralist accounts of gender can allow for the ideas that 1) gender is larger than identity, and 2) gender is substantively real (i.e., coherent, if not stable or uniform) – and, gender is analyzable.
- In her account of trans bodies and subjectivities, Gayle Salamon (2010) provides just such a reading of gender, and further argues that this reading is necessary if the field of gender studies is to keep pace with non-normative genders.
- For Salamon, trans bodies and subjectivities are inextricably social and, at the same time, undeniably actual. They are not self-evidently real or material, but they are indeed real and material, as they are felt and lived in the world as “a horizon of possibility” (p. 91).

- Salamon cites Brown's quarrel with the field of women's/gender studies; she aligns herself with Brown's critique of an "additive" model of identities that would ossify subjectivity.
- But rather than argue for the field's dissolution, Salamon wants to re-theorize gender in such a way that identities are understood as neither free-floating nor pre-given (Butler).
- Salamon calls for an account of "the vast cultural apparatus that authorizes gender" (p. 192), and an account of "gender nominalism, without lapsing into normativity" (p. 100).
- For Salamon, the specificities of trans identities point to the ways in which *all* identities are social, intersubjective, and lived *achievements*. I suggest that these ideas about gender studies point the way towards work in the field that is robust, and that avoids narratives of progress for identity categories.

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