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VI. Redefinition Reviewed: What ‘Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender’ Can Offer Today

Rose CAPDEVILA

Although I became familiar with Rhoda Unger’s work a decade ago while I was a postgraduate student, I only recently came to read ‘Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender’ (1979). Coming to it almost 30 years after it was published, and being already familiar with her later work, of course, provides one with a somewhat different point of engagement. In a sense, I cannot help but see the paper as the first steps taken on the road to a prolific, distinguished and influential career that has contributed much to feminist psychology. Yes, inescapably, the paper is the product of a particular time and of a particular matrix of debates, being, as it was, part of a wider move in feminist writing to problematize the relationship between gender and sex (see also Kessler and McKenna, 1978). It probably falls most neatly into the tradition that Wilkinson, in her review of five feminist challenges to mainstream psychology, identifies as the ‘Mismeasure of women’ (1997). Indeed, Unger herself in 1996 grouped the paper primarily as a criticism of method, along with those of Weisstein (1993[1968]), Sherif (1979) and Wallston (1981).

While one could suppose that this might consign the paper to the drawer marked ‘of historical interest’, I would argue that this would be a serious under-estimation of the role the arguments proposed in the paper play within current feminist endeavours, particularly pedagogical ones. Whereas those who have a broad knowledge of feminist scholarship might feel that we have moved beyond some of the points raised by the paper, I would contend that a substantial audience remains who might gain much from its reading. As a university lecturer, the audience to which I refer is that made up by undergraduate students. Year upon year, students arrive full of enthusiasm and, at the first opportunity in their research methods workshops, they unthinkingly and unquestioningly include

gender as a variable in all variations of data collection with nary a rationale or explanation. Most of these students would struggle to get their heads around more recent presentations of feminist theorizations and analytics in psychology that have moved away from such fundamental and important critiques of the mainstream. That is to say, I believe this paper provides a stable bridge that can take one from mainstream psychology to the very questions that I, and I suspect many of my feminist colleagues, struggle to make relevant to students in our teaching.

There are a number of points where, without a doubt, the paper shows its age. At the time the 'psychology of women' was a relatively new field (e.g. Miller, 1976) and still relied heavily on 'the master's tools' and, thus, positivist discourse. As a result, terms such as 'individual differences', 'variable', 'stimulus' and 'subject', uncommon these days in much, particularly European and post-structuralist, feminist psychology, are not problematized. The suggestion that many sex differences, never mind sex categories themselves, might be social constructions was then relatively radical. Thus the sex/gender distinction on which the paper focuses resonates far more strongly with the nature/nurture debates that have plagued psychology from its inception than the essentialist/constructionist approaches that, while emergent at the time, are more prevalent today.

Nonetheless, I would argue that the paper did, and does, a number of jobs and it does them very well indeed. Part of the reason it is able to do this is because it does play by the rules of mainstream psychology. Billig (1990) has argued that social psychology, unlike many other disciplines, often argues explicitly against common sense. In this way, psychological writing is expressly directed at an audience with whom the author is always having an argument about validity. In its challenge to established scientific tenets, 'Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender' undoubtedly performs this task. It is carefully referenced and well documented and thus 'does' or 'performs' academic psychology very well. To be precise, it very much follows the model for 'fact making' in psychology (Smyth, 2001). Moreover, its publication in a prestigious and widely read publication such as *American Psychologist* allows it to be positioned within mainstream discourses, while retaining the legitimacy of marginality. This in itself is no mean feat!

The main argument, and in a sense hope, of the paper is that the conceptual newness of the term 'gender' will make its use less likely to produce physiological explanations for psychological differences between males and females. The success of this venture is uncertain. Certainly, gender is a much more widely used term (see Haig, 2004). However, a recent experience highlighted for me the uncertainty of the beneficence of this outcome. When I asked students in a seminar recently about the sex/gender distinction, they appeared somewhat perplexed by my question. For them, using the word 'sex' in this way was simply an outdated way of saying 'gender'. Thus, while gender may well have become a more prevalent term, this rise appears to have corresponded to a demise in the use of the term sex. Unger explicitly states in the paper that 'the substitution of gender for sex is not the solution to this problem. Both terms – appropriately

defined – are necessary parts of our psychological vocabularies’ (1979: 1093 original).

Having said that, and while the main aim of the paper may not (yet?) have been realized, in the process of pursuing this aim, it addresses a number of critical points around psychology itself that I would argue are still highly relevant. First, it questions the legitimacy of using group data to justify the treatment of individuals (1979: 1092), which has lately, at least in the UK context, become ever more prevalent. One need only consider the UK government’s attempts to pass a Mental Health Act that allows for the incarceration of those identified with ‘personality disorders’ even when no crime has been committed.

Second, though not alone in this, ‘Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender’ performs a badly needed critique around the constitution of biological ‘sex’ differences. This is an important pedagogical point to which the paper gives some time. It offers a very coherent and cohesive presentation of the arguments and is an excellent tool for getting students to discuss issues around positivism. This has recently become more significant as, with the increasing popularity of evolutionary psychology, theorizations around ‘sex’ differences have, again, become more prevalent. A recent text entitled *Gender Differences in Mathematics* (Gallagher and Kaufman, 2005) takes a curious position on the very subject of its title. As Crafter (2007) has noted, while the book purports that there is little evidence of what the editors call ‘a gender gap’ in mathematical ability, much of the book is taken up with explaining this very ‘gap’ or, more accurately, the deficiencies to be found in girls’ mathematical performance. Another current instantiation of this, which at least UK students are bound to come across in their studies, would be Baron-Cohen’s (2003) proposal of a ‘male’ and ‘female’ brain. While Baron-Cohen (2005) recognizes that some women may have ‘male’ brains and some men may have ‘female’ brains, he persists in identifying them as such and has expressed some surprise, and indeed satisfaction, that feminists have not taken him up on it.

Third, and I would argue most importantly, the paper highlights the significance of engaging with these issues politically. Unger, in the second sentence of the paper, states: ‘The question of what is being studied would be of only academic interest except for the political and social implications of the results of research in this area’ (1979: 1085). In other words, what makes this work important are the implications of the processes it critiques. This is a far more consequentialist approach than has traditionally existed, and is still dominant in mainstream psychologies that tend to limit responsibility to the adherence to a series of set ethical guidelines (e.g. American Psychological Association, British Psychological Society, etc.). ‘Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender’ explicitly recognizes the power in the (re)defining of terminology. While above I mention some issues that have led me to question the beneficence of the ‘gender’ project, there are a number of indicators that it has, at least politically, had an important impact. Gender theorized as a political concept rather than a scientific one has meant that it need not always respond only to the needs of science. I must

confess, it brings a smile to my face when I read of scientists (over)using the term gender (e.g. Haig, 2004) because it represents, if not an engagement, at least an awareness of the political – a recognition that language is not neutral and science cannot be isolated from the broader context. This is an important point for those students who have only ever been exposed to mainstream positivist psychology.

In ‘Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender’, Unger argues: ‘If fewer and fewer sex differences can be unequivocally demonstrated . . . will the area cease to be an interesting one?’ (1979: 1085 original). Evidently not. Moreover, unfortunately, it would be difficult to argue that the paper has had the positive effect hoped for in terms of understandings of sex and gender. However, I would contend that this paper still serves as a stepping stone from mainstream thought to current feminist conceptualizations for those coming to these ideas anew. It is the three points presented earlier that I would argue make the paper, now as much as ever, a useful and effective pedagogical tool or introduction to feminist conceptualizations within psychology. This is particularly true for those who are unlikely to have come across these critiques within a mainstream education. In the current climate in higher education, the issues raised by Unger are, even now, relevant.

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