



## COMMENT

Received 11 May 2015 | Accepted 12 Jun 2015 | Published 11 Aug 2015

DOI: [10.1057/palcomms.2015.18](https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2015.18)

OPEN

# Gender studies and interdisciplinarity

Kath Woodward<sup>1</sup> and Sophie Woodward<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT** In this article we consider the example of gender studies as an interdisciplinary field, and argue that gender studies, and women's studies, from which gender studies developed, has a distinctive engagement with interdisciplinarity. By thinking about the trajectory of women's studies, feminist thinking and gender studies, we suggest that this has always been an interdisciplinary field of study. We trace both the shifts and continuities in thinking between different iterations of feminist thinking to consider the three core fields of: gender, sex and sexuality; intersectionality and activism; theory and methods. The article aims to open up debate over what the constructive possibilities are of a focus upon gender, and what the relationship is between theory and activism. This article is published as part of an ongoing collection dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, UK <sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK  
Correspondence: (e-mail: [kath.woodward@open.ac.uk](mailto:kath.woodward@open.ac.uk))

## Introduction

Gender studies form part of a significant shift into interdisciplinarity in academic fields more widely, which is reflected in the issue-based calls of funding bodies, special editions of journals and the growth of interdisciplinary research fields. Gender studies are an integral part of this interdisciplinary movement that offers theoretical and methodological advantages in understanding multiply constituted social worlds and addressing pressing global problems, such as the dynamics of migration, uneven global power geometries and climate change. Not only are most of the big issues in the contemporary world underpinned by social divisions including those based on sex and gender, but also the issues addressed by sexual politics are often a key motor of activism and change. Gender studies are distinctive in their engagement with interdisciplinarity, which have developed through a synergy between thought and activism. This field of research and study draws upon the tradition of women's studies and feminist theories and activism, rather than being merely part of recent trends and fashions, in a shift to interdisciplinary theory, which goes beyond multi- or trans-disciplinary approaches. Gender studies have grown out of the need to address some of the big issues in everyday life as well as on the global arena of international politics in which cultural, economic, political and social inequalities are played out (Woodward, 2014). Gender awareness has become integral to disciplinary fields as diverse as history, literature, science, sociology and economics, as well as emerging as a field of studies, which goes much further than the mainstreaming of gender. Sexual politics and gender studies have more recently engaged with some of the dilemmas, which have been presented by diversity policies, for example, European Union equality policies, which might be seen to have gone beyond gender or in which gender has been marginalized (Agustin, 2013).

## Women's studies, feminist studies and gender studies

It is increasingly more usual to describe the field of study to which gender and gender relations are central as "gender studies" rather than "women's studies", which reflects an historical, chronological shift as well as intellectual connections and the growth of empirical research in the field. Although gender studies are relatively recent in the academy, most work in this area builds upon the growth of the women's movement as part of the identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s (Woodward, 1997) and the development of Women's Studies Centres in North American, Australian and European countries. All these centres were characterized by emancipatory aspirations that sought to provide robust empirical evidence and scholarly bases for political change, in particular by putting gender, and in the 1970s and 1980s, more specifically women onto the political agenda and into discourse.

Feminist studies, especially feminist theories, remain central to the field, although gender studies, like women's studies are marked by diverse, and sometimes overlapping intellectual traditions and movements, which also manifest changing times, not least in the shift from the liberal, Marxist, socialist and radical strands of the women's movement to the wider inclusion of black feminism, ethnicization, racialization, and issues of bodies and corporeality, disability, sexuality, class defined and geographically located inequalities.

The shift towards gender studies also reflects a widening intellectual base, including psychosocial as well as psycho-analytical theories, poststructuralist, postcolonial studies, critical studies of masculinity, queer studies and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) critical race, critiques of whiteness, ecological feminism and materialist feminism and technoscience

studies. It is a broad church, but it is also a field that is hotly contested.

The move towards gender studies in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century has not been welcomed by everyone who works on gender issues. For example, Braidotti (1994) pointed to the way in which gender studies could be seen as taking over women's studies and feminist achievements and de-radicalizing the women's movement by suggesting a postfeminist world where men's studies and masculinity were more important areas of research. Gender studies do offer recognition of the importance of critiques of masculinity but the extent to which, for example, gay studies and a male-dominated agenda has replaced feminist activism and a motor for progress remains central to the debate. Gender studies have, however, put masculinity up for debate and critique, and demonstrate that men as well as women are gendered. Nonetheless the move towards gender studies, especially through its associations with postmodernist, post-structuralist and some psychoanalytic approaches can be seen as having involved a retreat from politics and activism. The shifts in the transmission from women's studies to gender studies also reflect changes in the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality have been woven into interdisciplinary studies. There remains a tension between "mainstreaming" and the suggestion that battles have been won in relation to gender equality and the expansion of gender studies as an important interdisciplinary field of research. A consequence of this "mainstreaming" and assumption that many feminist battles have been won can be seen in the language used to describe fields of social inequalities and policies are de-gendered. For example, in the seemingly gender-neutral discourses of policy that refer to parents and parental leave rather than acknowledging the specificities of maternity and its embodied actualities. Similarly, in the context of health and well-being, there is a trend towards neutralizing gender difference through the use of generational categories such as teenagers or children. For example, eating disorders are perceived as a teenage problem, without regard to the gender differences in relation to differential experiences of adolescence. Gender studies need to acknowledge and address the material and enfolded differences as well as equality.

Women's studies always aimed at crossing disciplinary boundaries and challenging subject compartmentalization, which, it has been argued, needs to be dismantled and broken down to both study and undertake research and combat oppression (Klein, 1995). Crossing the boundaries and thinking creatively about disciplinary intersections has been expanded to generate different ways of explaining and of acting upon the social relations, differences and inequalities, which include sex, gender and sexuality. Some research centres focus upon gender and sexuality, such as Birkbeck in London, or politics of gender, such as the London School of Economics, whereas others emphasize more gender studies as part of interdisciplinarity, for example, in the United States at centres such as the University of California, Berkeley and New York State. Interdisciplinary gender studies constitute a broad church (Richardson and Robinson, 2015).

In this article we consider this interdisciplinary focus across three dimensions, which are at the heart of the project of gender studies: the relationship between sex, gender and bodies, including how sexuality is implicated in these debates, the intersection of different structures and forces of inequality and finally the relationship between activism, theory and methods.

## Sex, gender and sexuality

Gender studies have as their foundation an engagement with the sexed body and with the interrelationship between sex and gender, which at times are inextricably entangled. Gender has

become the preferred term for referring to social difference, partly because of its wider scope and remit than sex, which has been assumed to be biological and anatomical and to challenge the apparent limitations of biological reductionism (Moi, 1999). However, there is a case for the inclusion of sex and gender as part of the explanatory framework of sexual politics. Gender studies have taken over from women's studies in the academy for a number of reasons, not all of them liberatory. Women's studies and feminism not only put gender into the agenda but also offered new ways of understanding gender as a social, cultural and political process and structure through which societies are organized. Although many earlier accounts suggested a division between sex as anatomical and biological and gender as the social and cultural manifestations of sex, there are strong arguments for sex as shaped by cultural forces and made through social practices. One of Butler's major contributions to gender studies and to the study of social relations and the operation of power across disciplines is her critique of sex and sexuality as well as gender as performative. Sex, as much as gender, is produced by the processes and practices through which it is defined and classified. Butler's (1990, 1993) work has generated questions and debates about the materiality of sex, the fluidity and the transgressive properties of sex, gender and sexuality. Debates within gender studies about the nature of sex and gender invoke the need for interdisciplinary approaches as well as drawing upon a range of disciplines and theoretical frameworks.

Gender studies have incorporated studies of masculinity (Connell, [1995] 2005, 2014) and interdisciplinary approaches have stressed the possibilities of transformation of traditional stereotypical masculinities (Hooks, 2004). Gender is not just about women, as has so often been the case in the promotion of policies of equal opportunities in neo-liberal democracies in recent times. Men are gendered too and the interrogation of hegemonic masculinity raises challenges to power structures in a vast range of social, economic, cultural and political systems where traditional, seemingly gender neutral norms are called into question. However, challenges to an essentialized category of 'woman' have led to a marginalization, and even absence, of some of the critiques of structural oppression such as patriarchy, which was a key concept in second-wave feminist critiques of the operation of power at all levels.

Gender is both an empirical category and a theoretical conceptualization, which facilitates greater understanding of social relations and divisions as well as describing them. Sport is an example of a field that is underpinned by a binary logic of sex, in which traditional masculinity has been particularly valued: often literally, financially more highly rewarded and valued. Gender binaries have been challenged in the public space occupied by elite athletes and the governing bodies of sport, like the International Olympic Committee and at more local levels of routine sporting practices. For example, debates about gender verification testing in sport demonstrate well some of the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary capacities of gender studies that have been invoked in the ever more desperate attempts by sporting bodies to provide a scientific classification of sex (Woodward, 2012). Testing currently involves a range of ever more complex, trans and interdisciplinary tests in pursuit of some kind of stability and draw upon a mix of disciplines that include medical science, genetics, psychology, anthropology, cultural geography and sociology.

The example of sport highlights the ways in which how sex and gender are understood, categorized and lived is always in relationship to bodies. Interdisciplinary thinking has been generated within gender studies by the pressing need to move beyond some of the limitations of biological reductionism and essentialism and the suggestion that the social practices and

cultural systems of gender derive directly from the anatomical, biological and genetic inheritances of sex. Interdisciplinary approaches also need to be necessitated through the exploration of some of the interrelationships between biology, genetics, bodies and social systems. Gender studies have been most creative and productive in embracing mathematics, science, psychology and technology to understand how sex and science and technology are enmeshed, for example, in Haraway's (1997) work on technoscience and Franklin's (2013) research on genetics.

### **Intersecting structures of oppression**

Gender studies demand an understanding of power relations and thus of politics within and beyond government, as well as of the social, economic and cultural processes that are the subject of arts, humanities and social science disciplines. The structures of oppression and the processes through which economic, social and cultural forces intersect in different contexts, both actual and virtual and within systems of governance. The processes of racialization and ethnicization and class-based divisions intersect and gender studies highlights the need to make sense of these processes and particularly to why it is necessary to understand them together, rather than as separate, discrete forces. Feminism engages with pressing social inequalities, which endure, even if they demonstrate and are underpinned by temporal and spatial particularities. Contemporary international societies remain marked by gendered inequalities (UN Women Reports, 2015) and the focus of gender studies upon power relations makes this interdisciplinary field of enquiry even more significant in the twenty-first century. Far from living in a postfeminist world, empirical evidence suggests that inequalities persist, and that we need the feminist and gender studies tradition of engaging with empirical, quantitative evidence. As Connell (2009) argues, there is substantial statistical evidence of gender inequalities, including most pervasively, the exploitation and oppression of women worldwide. However, big data demands analysis as well as description. Gender has been put into the discourse of the classificatory systems of data collection in different ways but United Nation's evidence, especially following the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 and the 2010 UN decision to prioritize gender issues (UN Reports, 2015; UN women, 2015) and to eliminate violence against women (UN Violence Against Women, 2015), raised important questions about the collection of data as well as their interpretation. When gender is on the agenda, the collection of evidence raises questions about the interconnections between public and private spheres, which has long been a concern of feminist critiques. Gendered inequalities operate in the apparently private arena of the home (Violence Against Women, 2015), but it is only through an interdisciplinary approach, which brings different critiques and diverse analyses that the interrelationship between the personal and the political can be understood and, most importantly addressed.

Another significant aspect of the analyses of big data on international social, economic and political divisions and inequalities relates to the relationship between disciplines. Feminist critiques have developed possibilities for theorizing intersection of different power axes (Hill Collins, 1990) that have been adopted by gender studies more widely to explain complex processes through which different groups of people become disenfranchised and resist oppression. Activism and resistance demonstrate diverse connections and disconnections, for example, between classes, sexes and ethnic groups. The shift towards intersectionality presents opportunities for overcoming some of the perceived limitations of focusing upon gender but also offers challenges. Contemporary activism, for example, as expressed on social media and other Internet forums demonstrates the

contentious nature of debate in relation to priorities about the power axes that intersect to generate social divisions. How important is gender in these intersections? We argue that gender, although changing, remains a key determinant of inequality in contemporary global politics.

### Activism, theory and methods

Gender studies have emerged from the activism that has long characterized women's studies and associated feminist politics and gender studies in part grew out of the identity politics of the 1980s and 1990s. Theory and practice are widely enmeshed in sexual politics more broadly in gender studies: acting and explaining are part of the same project. Feminism does not just seek to explain social inequalities but also to campaign to redress these gendered inequalities. Activism includes struggles aimed at legislative change, in which different aspects of inequality intersect, for example, as expressed in the UK 2010 Equality Act, which encompasses an ever expanding range of sexualities as well as diverse sources of social exclusion, including generation, ethnicization and racialization, and human rights campaigns such as those against people trafficking and Female Genital Mutilation. Activism worldwide generates very different positions, not least with the growth of and the recognition of cultural diversity.

Sexual politics can be located within and in relation to diverse political traditions, which include those of socialism and liberalism, as well as having their own distinctive structures. Gender studies constitute a contested terrain of often strongly conflicting positions, which are disputed within the pages of academic journals and in the academy and in the democratic space of activism, including virtual spaces of the Internet and social networking sites. One of the defining features of much contemporary feminist and LGBTQ activism is the possibilities of Internet-based campaigning, such as the signing of online petitions, Websites that encourage people to relate stories of sexism (Bates, 2014), through to feminist Website and blogs. Cyber space offers both opportunities for women and a range of socially excluded groups to be heard as well as being the site for additional sexist abuse (Penny, 2014).

Gender studies offer scope for innovation in methods as well as having established a tradition of mixed methods in response to social change. The development of gender studies as an interdisciplinary field retains the dynamism of different and often very productive conversations, across generations, empirically in terms of lived experience and theoretically through intellectual dialogues (Woodward and Woodward, 2009). There are connections and disconnections, between policies and practices, which are differentially inflected across time and space. For example, there may be consistencies in the lived experience of gender relations in different parts of the world, but there are also significant divergences. Transformations are temporal and spatial change and encompass intergenerational as well as interdisciplinary dimensions of gender studies.

Along with the big data already discussed, which highlights the scale of gendered inequalities globally, feminist approaches have often been dominated by qualitative approaches, which highlight the lived experiences of those inequalities. Earlier feminist work, which sought to foreground women's stories emerged in a wide range of disciplines, such as history (Rowbotham, 1975), sociology (Oakley, 1979) and anthropology (Moore, 1988, 1994) emerged as a useful strategy to highlight the ways in which women's experiences had been excluded from dominant historical and social narratives, by suggesting ways in which the stories of the disadvantaged and dispossessed could be put into discourse and made audible and visible. Qualitative methods have continued from the feminist tradition of highlighting the

importance of lived experience through to gender studies, where these methods allow the description of lived experience and of excluded voices, as well as an understanding of how dominant structures are the means through which exclusions and inequalities are perpetuated. These methods are present both in academic-based studies and also in popular activism, which increasingly occupies cyberspace, as manifest in the Everyday Sexism campaign (Bates, 2014). The Everyday Sexism campaign started as a Website inviting women to send in their stories of everyday sexism and harassment, and developed into a Twitter feed as well as a book. This project bridges the qualitative method of women having their stories heard as well as the accumulation of a huge collection of these stories (50,000 stories by December 2013). When placed together, these stories highlight the links between individual incidences and structural inequalities that academics within the field of gender studies are seeking highlight and redress.

The interdisciplinary nature of gender studies means not only that scholars can draw upon the distinctive methods of particular disciplines but also they are well placed to create new approaches, including mixed methods. By starting with questions about what shapes gender relations and how sexual politics shape experience and social, economic and political relations, gender studies demand robust empirical evidence, including statistical, quantitative data as well as qualitative, ethnographic, critical, discursive and psychosocial approaches that seek to understand some of the ambivalence and contradictory aspects of sex, gender and sexuality.

### Conclusion

We welcome debate about the theory and practice of gender and the interdisciplinary implications of gender as a means of making sense of social divisions and lived experience. Gender studies also offer a means of exploring what is involved in interdisciplinary work and the relationship between multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, which emerge from interdisciplinary studies as an established field of enquiry with its own capacities and distinct features. Gender is itself a contested category an exploration of which creates new ways of thinking about the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality. Gender is both an empirical category and a theoretical conceptualization, which facilitates greater understanding of social relations and divisions as well as describing them. A focus on gender generates different and often innovative methodologies as well as a plurality of theoretical approaches, which are directed at making sense of inequalities and at celebrating the experiences and contributions of hitherto marginalized groups.

The journal in which this article is published encourages contributions to ongoing debates, including what is distinctive about gender studies and the nature of the relationship between activism, policymaking and theoretical and methodological approaches. Gender studies are part of a developing field, which retains the excitement of interdisciplinary innovation, which characterizes feminism and women's studies, but extends this field of research by presenting engagements with pressing contemporary debates and issues. This is also a contested terrain characterized by lively debate about the relationship between gender and women's studies, between activism and theoretical frameworks and about political action and the policy implications, globally and locally of focusing on gender. Many of the tensions and contradictions of gender studies are those of interdisciplinary studies at a time when there has also been a move towards the reinstatement of single disciplines in the field of higher education suffering from financial constraints and reduced resources. Gender studies present productive possibilities



for contributions to knowledge, which are distinctively interdisciplinary and go far beyond attempts to mainstream gender into conventional disciplinary structures. An interdisciplinary journal is a good place to pursue these possibilities, address some the questions emerging from a focus upon gender and suggest new questions about social, political, economic and cultural processes and divisions.

## References

- Agustin L R (2013) *Gender Equality, Intersectionality and Diversity in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK.
- Bates L (2014) *Everyday Sexism*. Simon and Schuster: London.
- Braidotti R (1994) *Nomadic Subjects; Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Butler J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Connell R W ([1995] 2005) *Masculinities*. 2nd edn. Polity Press, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, Berkeley; University of California Press: Cambridge, UK.
- Connell R W (2009) *Gender A Short Introduction*. Polity: Cambridge, UK.
- Connell R W (2014) Margin becoming centre: For a world-centred rethinking of masculinities, NORMA, international. *Journal of Masculinities*; 9 (4): 217–231.
- Franklin S (2013) *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship*; (Experimental Futures) Duke University Press: Durham, NC.
- Haraway D J (1997) *Modest Witness @ Second Millenium. Female Man Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Hill Collins P (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge: New York.
- Hooks b (2004) *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*. Washington Square Press: Washington DC.
- Klein R D (1995) Passion and politics in women's studies in the 1990s. In: Aron J and Walby S (eds) *Out of the Margins*. Falmer Press: London, p 89.
- Moi T (1999) *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Moore H (1988) *Feminism and Anthropology*. Polity: Cambridge, UK.
- Moore H (1994) *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology*. Polity: Cambridge, UK.
- Oakley A (1979) *Women Confined: Towards a Sociology of Childbirth*. Wiley-Blackwell: London and Oxford.
- Penny L (2014) *Unspeakable Things*. Bloomsbury: London.
- Richardson D and Robinson V (2015) 4th edn. *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK.
- Rowbotham S (1975) *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Struggle against it*. Pluto: London.
- UN Women. (2015) <http://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/research-and-data/publications>, accessed 25 April 2015.
- UN Women Reports. (2015) <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WWreports.htm>, accessed 24 April 2015.
- UN Violence against Women. (2015) <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>, accessed 24 April 2015.
- Woodward K (1997) (ed.) *Identity and Difference*. Sage: London.
- Woodward K (2014) 3rd edn. *Social Sciences: The Big Issues*. Routledge: London.
- Woodward K (2012) *Sex, Power and the Games*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK.
- Woodward K and Woodward S (2009) *Why Feminism Matters. Feminism Lost and Found*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK.

## Additional Information

**Competing interests:** The authors declare no competing financial interests.

**Reprints and permission** information is available at [http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pal/authors/rights\\_and\\_permissions.html](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pal/authors/rights_and_permissions.html)

**How to cite this article:** Woodward K and Woodward S. (2015) Gender studies and interdisciplinarity. *Palgrave Communications*. 1:15018 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2015.18.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 International License. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in the credit line; if the material is not included under the Creative Commons license, users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to reproduce the material. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>