

Continuing correspondence in relation to feminism and transgender issues

Dear Artemis,

I was very moved by your letter to Shona, Maggie, and Cheryl (Rodhanthy 2004) for several reasons. In the United States, at least, the acrimony between transsexual persons and mental health professionals seems to be escalating to the point where a listserv that has served as a forum for dialogue recently shut down – the conversation repeatedly stalled by anger, attack, and counter-attack. I find your letter extraordinarily thoughtful as you embody both personae, by clearly articulating the many dilemmas and oppressions you have faced, and raise profound questions about the relationship between feminism and poststructuralism.

I would just like to offer a few random thoughts. In many ways, the current travails of the transsexual community and the tangles with feminists and feminist theory resemble those of other groups' relationship to feminism over the decades – people who identify as women of colour, lesbian, bisexual, or even feminist male. Each group, in turn, for a time has been shut out, stigmatised, ridiculed, explained away, or simply rendered invisible in the larger feminist movement. It's not difficult to guess why white women, a group themselves vulnerable and de-powered, fought against being seen as 'lesbian' or a movement of people of colour, i.e., identified with doubly and triply marginalised people. Lesbians have played their part in trying to further marginalise bisexual women, while many have seen female-to-male transsexual persons as traitors to the cause and fought to keep them separate. It took many years of debate in my own community for the annual Pride March to include bi and trans in its title. In the family therapy field, it took at least a decade for leading heterosexual feminist family therapists to begin to include and acknowledge the experiences of women of colour and lesbian and bisexual persons in their writings and speeches. We are just beginning to see the incorporation of non-pathologising discussions of intersex, transgender, bigender, and transsexual experiences in the writings and speeches of family therapists, psychologists, social workers, and other mental health professionals.

I agree with you that there are many sexualities, many sexes, many genders. In western societies, there is tremendous pressure to force people, from infancy onward, into binary categories of sex, sexuality, and gender. This kind of thinking, coupled with advances in surgical technique, has given the medical field enormous power in the determination of sex and gender for intersexed infants. It also raises the possibility that adult persons wishing to live their lives as the 'other' sex or gender can do so through sex reassignment surgery (usually only after undergoing various 'required' psychological evaluations, therapy, and social tests). In some societies, it has been and still is possible to select from among three or more sex-gender-sexuality arrangements, with social approval and meaningful roles.

Personally, I very much wish that my society and yours allowed for and even encouraged multiple sexing and gendering, for social rather than genital definitions of sex and gender. The fact that sex-reassignment surgery is a possibility that has become part of everyday discourse does seem to further support the idea that we must make our gender identities and physical bodies conform to the requirements for the social label of male or female and, in that sense, to many feminists, is a capitulation to the dominant sex-gender discourse. Many feminist thinkers argue, as you imply, that to undergo surgical sex change is to play

right into the hands of those who insist on binary categories. However, I don't think most feminists, particularly poststructural feminists or non-essentialist feminists, see transsexual persons as monsters or failures or fault them as individuals or label them non-feminists for taking the surgical route. But they do (as do I) complain about the rigid and powerful sexing and gendering discourses that force people into such radical solutions.

Right now, my sense is that, in the US, at least, an increasing number of persons are choosing to enact socially their constructed sexual and gendered selves without benefit of surgery, demanding social space for new identities. Further, as other identities (e.g. transgender or bigender) become more available, more 'known', and, on some levels, more 'accepted', some persons choose to change their personal and/or their public self-descriptions. In one couple known in the community for many years as a lesbian couple, one of the partners came out socially as male, proclaiming that she had always been a 'he' and that they had always considered themselves a heterosexual couple. What changed were not bodies but words, and the presentation of their sex-gender selves to a wider community.

Just as one person's feminism is not necessarily the same as another's, one cannot make assumptions about what a person's self and public sex-gender identities mean to her. In one class I taught, I remember three students with similar stories and personal-sexual histories. As adults, one had come to identify herself as lesbian, one as bisexual, and one as heterosexual! For the teacher this was an ideal opportunity for initiating conversation about the personal-social construction of sexuality. For some that means a lifetime commitment to a consistent story. Others may change their self-narratives more than once, in part dependent on how their partner identifies. In one female couple known to me, until recently one partner identified as bisexual and the other as lesbian. The lesbian partner, with her partner's consent, decided to make the social transition to male, leaving the couple with new quandaries and choices about how to explain their sex-gender-sexuality relationship to friends, family, co-workers, and the wider community.

Personally and publicly, I identify as lesbian, feminist, and poststructuralist in my thinking – a life partner, a mother, a political lefty, a grandmother, and many other things – but underneath those public proclamations each of those identities only communicates pieces of a lifetime story. You would have to know what I mean by feminist, narrative, lesbian, mothering, partnering. Really, I believe that everyone is more or less 'trans', more or less gay, more or less 'borderline', that we all have 'multiple personalities' but that we only select particular pieces, greatly pushed and shoved by forces larger than ourselves, to create our own life narratives.

Can feminism, transsexuality, and poststructuralism offer each other anything? I certainly hope so! The transsexuality/transgender movement has done more than anything I can remember to challenge accepted and outdated narratives of gender and sex, a considerable gift to feminist and poststructuralist thinkers and to the community.

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References

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