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WORKING PAPER – PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT AUTHORS PERMISSION

Introduction

Hello my name is Muireann O’Dwyer. I’m a third year PhD Candidate in UCD. My work crosses many disciplinary lines, engaging in debates in sociology, political science, law, economics and political theory. My thesis focuses on the new economic governance architecture of the EU that emerged in the aftermath of the crisis which began in 2008, and, I would contend, continues today. For the purposes of this paper, my thesis will serve as something of an explanatory example. I will begin this evening by discussing some of the theoretical background to my work, theory which impacts directly on tonight’s question. Firstly I will outline (in a somewhat circumscribed way!) the concept of intersectionality, and explore what that means for posing, and attempting to answer a question such as this. Following from that I will outline the relationship between gender and language – and discourse in particular. I will finish by highlighting some of the ways in which I use these two theoretical frameworks to do my research. I’m obviously more than happy to discuss my research further after!

My central contention of this paper then is as follows – to understand what this thing called gender is, we need to maintain an awareness of the ways

in which gender operates as a social concept – as a system of ordering the social world, and not simply as a question of individual or group identity. While obviously identity is a key component, gender has gone much further, and it is now fair to say that everything, and not just bodies or individuals, are gendered.

Some background ideas

1. Gender versus Sex - this is a pretty well established distinction, and one that usefully points to the interaction of gender and culture. “One is not born, but rather made a woman” as de Beauvoir tells us. Setting to one side the current debates over the biological “fact” of sex, it is clear that gender itself is not reducible to biological difference. We see this through anthropological work, which has identified the variety of ways in which gender has been performed in different geographic or temporal spaces. Speaking to a philosophy group, I’d have to point to Aristotle’s views on women as an example of our understanding of gender has changed over the years.
2. I use the word “performed” intentionally there. To view gender as a performance is to understand the interaction of both the individual performing, as well as the wider culture, in the creation of gendered identity. To follow Judith Butler in use of the concept of performativity, this means that to call gender a “social construct” is neither to rob it of power, nor to erase the agency of all of the people performing gender. Performativity captures both the structure and the agency at play – we perform gender ourselves, but we do so within an already gendered environment.

3. Discourse – Language – Knowledge. It is perhaps unsurprising, but still ironic, that in the fields of discourse analysis and studies of language there is a lack of consensus over where to draw the distinctions.

Throughout this paper I will use “discourse” to refer on-going dialogues, involving multiple actors. Discourse is shaped by language, and so much of what I say concerns language also. Finally, both language and discourse shape “knowledges” which I will explore later.

Intersectionality

Critics of earlier feminist work, and indeed of accounts of feminism, have pointed out that “women” and “men” are not homogenous categories, and have argued that other aspects of social relations and other dimensions of discrimination need to be included in feminist analysis. To avoid such inclusion leads to essentialism, which means that research and theory can only ever be applicable to limited number of women, of a certain race, class or sexuality (amongst other categories). Essentialism requires an assumption of universal traits and erases the subjectivity of experiences. Feminist theory cannot simply speak to the experiences of a select group of women, as these interactions create many different contexts and experience of oppression. Much early feminist work fell into this trap, of attempting to make universal claims about women and women’s experiences. This led to criticism, starting from Black feminists (Crenshaw 1991 and Collins 1999) in the United States and non-western feminists (Mohanty 1988 and Spivak 1999).

Crenshaw is often credited with coining the term intersectionality. In her seminal work, she highlighted the experience of black women as existing at the intersection of both race and gender, and showed how that experience was shaped by both identities in a way that went beyond simple combination - that is, the experience of a person at the intersection could not be explained derivatively from experiences of people in either category (Crenshaw 1991). It is clear that intersectionality is influenced by postmodern feminism - the attack on the idea of a unified subject fed into the destabilisation of categories such as woman, lesbian or black (Benhabib 1995). This insight clearly has profound implications for attempting to describe what “gender” is.

Intersectional feminism does not seek to order these dimensions of discrimination in any type of hierarchy, or simply to add class, sexuality or other analysis to feminist analysis. It requires a much more complete rethinking of feminist work. It is not about, for example, adding gender analysis to analysis of race, but rather it’s about seeing race as gendered, and gender as racialised. The fragmentation of the subject generated by an intersectional approach forces the researcher to focus on the structures of power, and of discrimination and oppression, in a much more comprehensive way (MacKinnon 2013). This can be done through a focus on the experiences of those who exist in various intersections, or on the margins between the standard categories (Collins 1999) or it can influence the way in which institutions, structures and processes are analysed. In particular, it requires sensitivity to the complexity of gender as a concept itself, and so attention to how it is deployed, by whom and for what purpose, becomes an essential step in feminist analysis of content and discourse.

Finally, it should be clear that intersectionality is not a content specialisation - it is an epistemological approach to doing research that frames how questions are asked, how findings are interpreted and how claims are evaluated (Hancock 2007). Crucially, intersectionality calls into question the way things are, and is focused on how structures and distributions of power interact to form different sites of oppression. It is an investigation of how things are, rather than who people are (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013).

Gender and Discourse

Gender is itself constructed through language (Butler 2011). The establishment and enforcement of gender categories, and the hierarchy between them is also clearly a discursive practice. Language forms part of the everyday expression of gender ideologies, whether through reinforcing a binary understanding of gender, or by denigrating concepts, actions and norms that are associated with the feminine (Lazar 2007)

Building on feminist interpretations, criticism and appropriation of the works of Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci and others, the field of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary approach situated within the broader literature on critical discourse analysis. As such it is highly sensitive to the power dynamics of language and discourse. The purpose of feminist critical discourse analysis is to develop a “distinctly feminist politics of articulation” (Wetherell 1995: 141) which seeks to theorise, unpack and analyse the “particularly insidious and oppressive nature of gender as an omnirelevant category in most social

practices” (Lazer 2007: 3). As a critical methodology, this approach recognises that discourse can be the site of resistance as well as oppression, and seeks to identify mechanisms of subversion and emancipation within the discourses under examination.

This approach is of particular relevance to investigations of gender discrimination that is less overt. This type of discrimination is the operation and expression of a subtle form of power that is “substantively discursive in nature. This form of power is embedded and dispersed throughout networks of relations, is self regulating, and produces subjects in both senses of the word” (Lazer 2007: 9). In particular, this approach can uncover patriarchal power that has come to be seen as natural – the type of power, which is insidious precisely because it has become invisible. It is based on the internalization of gendered norms and gender ideology.

“Gender knowledge is an analytical concept that can be used as a framework to identify explicit and implicit assumptions or conceptions concerning gender and gender relations, and the norms which support them” (Cavaghan 2010: 18). Coming out of sociological approaches, gender knowledge has been increasingly applied to questions of politics and law (Young 2010). It begins from the premise that all knowledge is based on specific gender knowledge, produced, internalised and recreated discursively. It distinguishes between two levels of gender knowledge – collectively held, “objective” gender knowledge and “subjective” gender knowledge. It also captures the variety of gender knowledge – that is, the different gender ideologies at play. This is a key

strength of the gender knowledge approach, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of gender power where there are multiple gender regimes in contest and discourse with one another, such as is the case within the EU (Walby 2004). – E.g. the neoliberal gender regime that concerns itself with “activating the labour” of women, versus the more social democratic gender regime that seeks to remove inequality between the genders.

One of the key epistemic tools found within the theory of gender knowledge is that of boundary work. Boundary work concerns the description and focus on those key moments within a discourse where gender is perceived as relevant or not for the policy process- as such these moments define whether or not gender will be included in the debate. A focus on these key moments allows for an appreciation of how disciplinary and institutional factors construct and therefore use gender knowledge. This leads to decisions about who may/should legitimately participate. As such it is a key moment in the exercise of power of silencing and boundary drawing (Çağlar 2010). In particular, Çağlar notes that the categorisation of an issue as either social or economic is heavily influenced, and heavily influences, whether gender is constructed as key aspect of the policy process.

Combining intersectionality with feminist discourse analysis

So to bring together these two ideas, it is clear that to say something is “gendered” is not a simple statement. The work of intersectionality in unpacking the experience of gender as a lived identity intersection with a myriad of other identities, in various contexts, means that when we (and I mean I!) attempt to

use gender as an **analytical category**, or as a lens through which to examine power and power relations, we cannot fall back on the old, essentialist, understanding of gender. To bring intersectionality into critical discourse requires much sensitivity – sensitivity to the context of the discourse, who is deploying gender, why, to what effect etc.

Sensitivity to the variation – both between different contexts and by different actors, but even by the same actor in the same space.

An understanding that there is no ideal type of a non-gendered, or even of an appropriately gendered discourse. It is not a sliding scale of most to least gendered, but rather an appreciation of the different ways in which a discourse can be gendered. Not if, but how.

[cut if time is tight] For example, one theme I examine in my work is that of expertise. In the new economic governance tools, there is an emphasis on oversight and surveillance, which raises the question of standards. That then requires a benchmark for expertise in order to set, and evaluate those standards. This benchmark is imbued with masculine norms – a certain understanding of “rationality” the denigration of lived experience as data, exclusion of emotional argument etc. It’s also quite classist, quite Anglo-centric and so on. Each of these factors feed into and off of one another. So it’s not a question of these technocratic groups putting up a sign saying “no girls allowed” but rather it’s about a discursively shaped space that leads to the exclusion of marginal voices.

Conclusions

My central contention of this paper has been – to understand what this thing called gender is, we need to maintain an awareness of the ways in which gender

operates as a social concept – as a system of ordering the social world, and not simply as a question of individual or group identity. It is now fair to say that everything, and not just bodies or individuals, are gendered. The work of exploring gender then – work done by feminists of all types and none, by philosophers, activists, researchers – is to better understand the way that gender is deployed in the world around us. This paper has explored how we can do this through discourse analysis, but I don't claim that is the only way. Indeed, a primary concern should be answering the question of this panel, and coming to a more nuanced, inevitably more complex, but more useful and more accurate understanding of what is this thing called gender.

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