

What can a queer perspective contribute to our understanding of gender and sexuality?

The word queer has historically been used to signify something strange (Sullivan, 2003: v). Thus, a queer perspective, true to the origins of the word, queries perceivable hegemonic norms surrounding social identity constructions, such as gender and sexuality (Ettelbrick, 1989), in order to provide a reformative standpoint for those that are excluded from these conventional ideologies, i.e. those that may be considered strange. A queer perspective is often taken as a deconstructive political movement to liberate marginalised identity practices from within mainstream categorisations and binaries in recognition of the fluidity that can surround expressions and desires based upon gender and sexuality (Sullivan, 2003). For the purposes of this assignment, 'gender' will be taken as the symbolic and cultural expressions that the sexed body produces, establishes and assumes (Butler, 1999: 11) to assert its' masculine-feminine standpoint. Whilst 'sexuality', will be defined as the dispositions and practices which are expressive of an individual's sexual desires (Valocchi, 2005: 751) and erotic attraction (Leckey and Brooks, 2011). Taking these definitions into consideration, this assignment will explore the contributions that a queer perspective presents to our perception and understanding of gender and sexuality in contemporary society.

Whilst some feel that a queer perspective is unclear and too broad, others feel that it is more useful and inclusive (Barker, Richards and Bowes-Catton, 2012). Feldman (2012: 73) claims queer perspectives were designed to challenge identity politics, and offer a comprehensive way of characterising those whose sexuality and gender expressions place them in opposition to the norms we are socialised into (Epstein, 1996). Once historically used as a slur and insult to demean those who did not conform to the hegemonic, heteronormative ideals that underpin most ideologies within society (Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2012), the term 'queer' is now believed to have been reclaimed with a sense of pride as an umbrella term for all individuals whose identities are not encompassed by mainstream ideologies (Jagose, 1996). Queer perspectives are said to object normalisation to such a degree that they even question the notion of 'normal' in itself (Warner, 1993). It is

thought that the practice of social labelling operates as a mechanism of social control, in so far it segregates one from the other (McIntosh, 1996: 34-35), thereby creating the identity binaries on which queer perspectives have been built (Callis 2012; Seidman, 1996). In this respect, it could be argued that binaries are therefore created to identify and reinforce a 'norm', and from it, the 'other', hence why a queer perspective utilises these hegemonic constructions to contribute to our understanding of gender and sexuality (Valocchi, 2005).

A queer perspective challenges the heteronormative, hegemonic conceptualisations surrounding the hetero-homo binary attributed to sexual identity (Feldmen, 2012), as well as the masculine-feminine binary associated to gender (Butler, 1999). It articulates an objection to the politics and theory based on homosexuality, which it contends essentially perpetuates the heterosexual and the resulting heteronormative assumptions within society (Seidman, 1996). For example, it is generally assumed that most individuals are heterosexual, i.e. attracted to those of the opposite sex to themselves (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015), and as such, any deviation from this generalised norm requires disclosure to affirm the correct identity (Sullivan, 2003). This is explicitly evident in the common celebration of homosexuals 'coming out' (ibid), which is not an achievement or requirement usually attributed to heterosexuals. Similarly, individuals in homosexual relationships are often translated to a butch-femme identity label, which is thought to essentially mirror heterosexual couplings, thereby reflecting heteronormative ideologies (Jeffreys, 1998). In this light, Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2012: 4) claim that a queer perspective surfaced to critique normative imperatives, and as an assertion to celebrate sexual and gender diversities outside of these hegemonic norms. Further to this, Sullivan (2003: 119) writes that presuming or accepting that the normative is normal does not make it so, and as such, for example, heterosexuality may not be any more 'normal' than any other sexuality. This ideology reasserts Warner's (1993) claim that queer perspectives question the foundations of heteronormativity, but could also call consideration as to why society has the need to create such binaries, which essentially act as identifying labels to the individual. Butler (1999: xxviii) provides a response to this consideration perhaps, by suggesting that the epistemic regime of presuming normativity produces and reifies a categorical level of ontological security

within contemporary society, thereby establishing a sense of psychological order from which a more tangible understanding of gender and sexuality can be gained.

Whilst it cannot be faulted that a queer perspective critically questions hegemonic binaries, it has been noted that it is often accused of ignoring sexualities and genders that fall outside of them (Callis, 2012: 24-25), for example, bisexuals. However, as Angelides (2001) states, bisexuality is unavoidably already situated within the very nature of queer perspectives, as are other sexual and gender minorities, thus the lack of explicit reference to these identities may somewhat be excused. In any case, the alleged deficiency of focusing on other sexual and gender minorities within queer perspective is actively being addressed by contemporary theorists as is apparent in the articles and research presented in books such as *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges* (2012) and *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory* (2010). Although literature may not currently be as robust in these areas as it is on hegemonic binaries (Gurevich, Bailey and Bower (2012), due the arguments presented, it does not warrant the accusation that a queer perspective ignores sexualities and genders outside of these binaries. Further to this, unlike other perspectives, it can be argued that a queer perspective is actually growing in its movement to tackle the very notion of bringing recognition to additional minority gender and sexual identities. This is because it offers a home and a nameable identity to those that may otherwise be completely overlooked by any theoretical consideration, such as those expressed below in *Figure 1* (Gamson and Moon, 2004).



Figure 1: Minority Identities

The notion of identity appears to be critical in contemporary society and thus being able to categorise oneself through stabilising concepts such as gender and sexuality offers ontological assurance (Butler, 1999). Likewise, ambiguity of such frameworks can also undermine an individual's capacity to persevere a liveable life within society, and for society to extend an understanding acceptance to them, as has been explicitly evident in the history of trans-people (Butler, 2004: 1). Because a queer perspective is believed to be at odds with whatever is considered to be 'normal', it is not only said to be an identity without an essence (Halperin, 1995: 62), but it is also controversially labelled as a positionality rather than any form of claimable identity (Sullivan, 2003). Further to this, since the binary categories of gender and sexuality are considered to be among the primary ways in which we come to know ourselves, a queer perspective, in its aim to deconstruct hegemonic binaries, essentially deconstructs the self as well (Wilchins, 2004). A queer perspective is therefore taken to be a deconstructive strategy (Sullivan, 2003), and in its deconstruction it is thought to dislocate the understanding of identity as a self-presence and replace it as a difference (Foss, 1989). In this respect, a queer perspective leaves our understanding of identity with a spectre of non-identity within it (Foss, 1989: 102-103) and thereby labouring on the foundation of our ontology (Sullivan, 2003). By aiming to denaturalise hegemonic norms surrounding the core concepts of our identity such as those based on gender and sexuality (Sullivan, 2003), Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2012: 1) claim a queer perspective questions the importance of identities, and why practices surrounding these can be respectively normalised and marginalised. Additionally, Namaste (1996: 198) asserts that queer perspectives are also interested in exploring the borders of identities and politics surrounding sexuality and gender and therefore it is believed that a queer perspective will eventually provide a socio-political rationale for the most blatant forms of hegemonic heteronormativity surrounding gender and sexuality in contemporary society (Grosz, 1994: 113).

Wilchins (2004: 36) states that with gender, like with sexuality, we create meaning of the other by excluding everything they are not by idealising templates for what is perfectly masculine or feminine for example, and excluding whatever does not fit. However, perceptions of gender, like sexuality, are claimed to be based on assumptions of heteronormativity and therefore learning the proper way to be a sex

in relation to the other (Ingraham, 1996). Sex is typically defined as the biological identity of a person and is meant to signify that one is either male or female, whilst gender is the cultural side of the sex-gender binary whereby distinct traits are based on sex (ibid). Because gender is thereby culturally constructed through socialisation, it is not as fixed (Butler, 1999); hence why queer theorists can be optimistic about its idealised reform (Kirsch, 2000). According to Wilchins (2004: 8) gender identity refers to the inner sense most of us have of either being male or female, and is expressed through an individual's fundamental sense of being masculine or feminine within their culture. By this meaning, gender identity therefore need not be expressed or aligned with the individual's sex or sexuality, thus enabling gender to be appreciated as an established social construct in its own right (Butler, 1999). The cultural production and normalisation of perceptions of masculine and feminine according to gender are therefore the greatest of examples of this construct for queer perspectives (Butler, 2004), in so far that they can vastly differ across different societies. For instance, a man wearing anything resembling a skirt in England is most likely to be considered to be in drag due to the feminine connotations that accompany such clothing. Whilst in Scotland, the same clothing would possibly be likened to a kilt and would therefore not act as a deterrence from masculinity, thus being indicative of the gender expression as a cultural construction.

Just like gender, sexuality is also a social construct and can equally be understood in culturally specific ways (Sullivan, 2003). A queer perspective offers great insight to both (Feldmen, 2012) as a basis to deconstruct and reform our understanding of them (Kirsch, 2000), as well as making a subsequent move to segregate the study of sexuality from gender (Feldmen, 2012). Thus, Callis (2012: 28) writes that some theorists point to a queer perspective as the culprit for the stratification of sexuality and gender. However, why this is not taken with liberative positivity is unknown as the move to separate sexuality from gender does not presuppose that one engages in sexual activity, nor that one is assigned a gender to which they must conform (Butler, 2004: 54). Historically, sexuality has been considered an effect of gender difference (Feldmen, 2012: 78) and as a practice that has the power to destabilise gender, in so far that normative sexuality protects normative gender practices (Butler, 1999: xi). Meaning that because neither are fact, and are created ideas that are expressed by acts, both require a distinct expression from which they can be

identified, thus Butler (1999) claims that gender, like sexuality, is a performance, without which, unlike sexuality, would cease to exist. Further to this Butler (2004) states that the expression of gender does not determine sexuality and gender ambiguity can therefore operate to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practices, thereby working to keep normative sexuality intact (Butler, 1999: xiv). Conversely, to the delight of queer theorists, gender ambiguity not only 'fucks' with hegemonic ideologies surrounding identity (Warner, 1993) thus bringing it increased recognition, but it also distorts heteronormative conceptions (Rubin, 1984). In this essence, significant to a queer perspective, neither gender nor sexuality are stable attributes of identity, thus are something that must be constantly revealed or restated in contemporary society in order to be affirmed (Callis, 2012).

In line with the contributions of understanding gender and sexuality from a queer perspective, Butler (1999: vii) claims that certain expressions of gender and sexuality produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion. Whilst Wilchins (2004: 131) implies that gender identification was supposed to be informative of a person's anatomical sex and sexuality, crossing such distinctions can create additional differences. In this respect these differences not only act as an expression but as an apparatus for segregation and the creation of yet more 'deviant' identities which would be adverse to the unifying objectives thought to underpin queer perspectives (Seidman, 1996). It is debated that existing strategies within queer perspectives have tended to rely upon hegemonic binaries to reinforce the notion of minorities as the other (Stein and Plummer, 1996), which to an extent can be considered to ally with the hegemonic, heteronormative ideologies they seek to destroy. However, once normative assumptions about sexuality and gender are undermined and/or the traditional focus is shown to be cultural, queer theorists recognise that hegemonic identity binaries such as hetero-homo sexuality actually become almost impossible to maintain (Sullivan, 2003: 15); thus binaries shift to more fluid concepts which are ultimately less definitive and perhaps less stigmatised, and therefore potentially more representative of identity constructions within contemporary society (Bauman, 2000).

Queer perspectives emphasise the fluidity of sexuality and gender, and even go as far as establishing fluid eroticism as an ideal (Stack, 1999). As such, queer theorists like Gamson (1996: 408) believe that the social and political organisation of ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality should also be more fluid to encompass

this ideal to a greater extent. It is claimed that in recent years, perhaps representative of this desire, there has been a shift in bi-activist texts and communities to a more queer influenced understanding of bisexuality (Barker, Richards and Bowes-Catton, 2012), which is arguably beneficial to both parties, as they inherently support each other. Bisexuality highlights that sexual pleasure, and therefore sexuality, is situated in practices beyond gender identity (Gustavson, 2012: 216) as bisexuals throw caution to the butch-femme binary and as such play both a stabilising and destabilising function to our understanding of identity construction (Angelides, 2001) because it is indicative of being more fluid in our desires. Bisexuality refers to a series of acts and/or behaviour that involves being sexually active with both men and women (Callis, 2012), and because it breaks the hegemonic hetero-homo binary, it is thought to be unsettling to the heteronormative ideologies surrounding sexuality (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2012). The hetero-homo binary infers that everyone has to situate themselves within one category (Halley, 1993), however with the help of a queer perspective, this binary can be reformed as a spectrum upon which individuals can fluidly locate themselves without having to restrain their identity and resulting practices which may otherwise be considered deviant. Queer theorists recognise that bisexuality, like many other minority gender and sexuality identities, are not just intermediate positions between hegemonic binaries (Callis, 2012: 32) simply because they extend beyond our current ontological conceptualisations of them. Unlike other theorists, they celebrate minority gender and sexual identities as legitimate identities, thus finally offering an affirming home to those what would otherwise be considered non-existent or deviant because their practices question hegemonic, heteronormative structures (Feldmen, 2012). In this light a queer perspective offers our surrounding socialised ideologies on what is/ is not 'normal' new considerations for our gendered and sexual identities that are more inclusive and less definitive of the diversifying practices within contemporary society (ibid).

Taking all the reasoning presented above, a queer perspective therefore acts as a liberative mechanism, under which the previously undermined can find solace and recognition (Seidman, 1996). Those once outcast as deviants from mainstream society, under this umbrella, now have a community of mutual diversity and shared understandings in which there is little shame and stigma but increased bonds that

enable the non-judgemental expression and celebration of difference (Sullivan, 2003). Queer perspectives promote tolerance to divergences that threaten to rupture the hegemonic binaries and ideologies imbedded in society (Seidman, 1996). They uncover the realisation that identities themselves are fragmented, contested and socially constructed (Cohen, 1996), to the point society is forced to recognise that we are all essentially hybrids of multiple complex identities and practices (Gurevich, Bailey and Bower, 2012) for which there can never be a distinct norm in contemporary society. The ultimate challenge for queer perspectives is therefore not just questioning the content of hegemonic identities, but questioning of the actual unity, stability and viability amongst those ideologies which perpetuate the reproduction of them (Gamson, 2012). In this context some theorists argue that queer perspectives do not actually challenge the system of meaning that underlies the political oppression they seek to reform (ibid) and that by deconstructing and subverting identity, they still do not actually reform the hegemonic, heteronormative hierarchies surrounding gender and sexuality (Wilchins, 2004). For example, because butch-femme identities are still sought to accredit individuals within homosexual relations, based on the hegemonic, heteronormative ideology that underpins our ontology (Jeffreys, 1998), their overall identity is thereby still continually undermined rather than completely accepted as being a separate entity. In this respect, some argue that the additional binaries and normative matrixes of surrounding ideologies fail to break the links between gender and sexuality that would render them as incomprehensible as queer theorists advocate (Wilchins, 2004). Thus, whilst a queer perspective can offer a great contribution to our understanding of gender and sexuality, it will arguably remain a considerable way from being its aspired revolution until our socialised ideologies are reformed by a more systematic deconstruction.

To this end, a queer perspective proposes distinctive ways of thinking about our social identities through gender and sexuality, as well as the intersection between the two (Seidman, 1996). Queer perspectives place sexual and gender differences at the centre of intellectual inquiry (Stein and Plummer, 1996), offering radical insight to the perceivable basis of our ontological securities, thus the construction of our identities. As a more inclusive academic movement (ibid), it fights for a less oppressive social world for otherwise gendered and sexual minorities that are

entangled between the hegemonic heteronormative binaries which generally dictate our practices and expressions of our gender and sexuality (Butler, 2004). Further to this, despite some debating otherwise, 'queer' is still taken as an liberative identity, a reformative culture which encompasses many variations, and a perspective that deals with the world by aiming to diminish the constraints imposed by binaries and the consequential oppression of gender and sexuality minorities (Ettelbrick, 1989). Queer perspectives highlight both gender and sexuality as fluid social constructions which they claim must be expressed and/or performed in order to be reasserted (Butler, 1999). It is this performance which theorists assert complicates the deconstruction of hegemonic binaries and thus results in the ongoing perceived imitations of heteronormative relations that currently regulate our ontological understanding of gender and sexuality. However, core to a queer perspective and its inherent belief, it poses there is no definitive norm to how gender and sexuality should be expressed or practiced and in this light it can therefore be concluded that everybody is queer to some degree or another (Halberstam, 1998: 153-154).

References:

Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S, (2012). Bisexuality and Queer Theory and Introduction, Chapter 1 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.

Angelides S, (2001). *A History of Bisexuality*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

Barker M, Richards C and Bowes-Catton H, (2012). 'All the World is Queer Save Thee and Me...': Defining Queer and Bi at a Critical Sexology Seminar, Chapter 9 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.

Bauman Z, (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge. Polity Press.

- Butler J, (1999). *Gender Trouble*. London. Routledge.
- Butler J, (2004). *Undoing Gender*. London. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Callis AS, (2012). Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory, Chapter 2 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.
- Cohen CJ, (1996). Contested Membership: Black Gay Identities and the Politics of AIDS, Chapter 16 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Epstein S, (1996). A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality, Chapter 7 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Erickson-Schroth L and Mitchell J, (2012). Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters. Chapter 6 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.
- Ettelbrick PL, (1989/2004). Since When is Marriage a Path to Liberation?, Chapter 34 in Baird RM and Rosenbaum SE (Eds.) *Same-Sex Marriage: The Moral and Legal Debate*. New York. Armherst.
- Feldmen S, (2012). Reclaiming Sexual Difference: What Queer Theory Can't Tell Us About Sexuality, Chapter 4 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.
- Foss D, (1989). *Essentially Speaking*. New York. Routledge.
- Gamson J and Moon D, (2004). The Sociology of Sexualities: Queer and Beyond. *Annual Review of Sociology*. Volume 30, pp. 47-64.
- Gamson J, (1996). Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?: A Queer Dilemma, Chapter 17 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Grosz E, (1994). Experimental desire: Rethinking queer subjectivity, Chapter 7 in Copjec J (Ed.) *Supposing the Subject*. London. Verso.

Gurevich M, Bailey H and Bower J, (2012). Queering Theory and Politics: The Epistemic (Dis)location of Bisexuality within Queer Theory, Chapter 3 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.

Gustavson M, (2012). Bisexuals in Relationships: Uncoupling Intimacy from Gender Ontology, Chapter 11 in Alexander J and Anderlini-D'Onofrio S (Eds) *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections and Challenges*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.

Halberstam J, (1998). *Female Masculinity*. Durham. Duke University Press.

Halley JE, (1993). The Construction of Homosexuality in Warner M (Ed.) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, pp. 82-102. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.

Halperin D, (1995). *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Ingraham C (1996). The Heterosexual Imagery: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender, Chapter 8 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Jagose A, (1996). *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York. New York University Press.

Jeffreys S, (1998). Heterosexuality and the desire for Gender, Chapter 5 in Richards D (Ed.) *Theorising Sexuality: Telling it Straight*. Buckingham. Open University Press.

Kirsch MH, (2000). *Queer Theory and Social Change*. London. Routledge.

Leckey R and Brooks K, (2011). Introduction, Chapter 1 in Leckey R and Brooks K (Eds) *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire*. Oxfordshire. Routledge.

McIntosh M, (1996). The Homosexual Role, Chapter 1 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Namaste K, (1996). The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality, Chapter 9 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Oxford Dictionaries, (2015). Heterosexual. [online] Available from: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/heterosexual> Accessed 31st December 2015 @ 21:06.

Rubin G, (1984). Thinking Sex in Abelove H, Barale M and Halperin D (Eds) *The Lesbian and Gay Reader*. New York. Routledge. pp. 267-319

Seidman S (1996). Introduction in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*, pp. 1-29. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Stack C, (1999). Where Psychoanalysis meets Queer Theory: An encounter with the Terrifying Other. *Gender and Psychoanalysis*. Volume 4, Issue 1, pp. 78-87

Stein A and Plummer K, (1996). 'I Can't Even Think Straight': 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology, Chapter 6 in Seidman S (Ed.) *Queer Theory Sociology*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Sullivan N, (2003). *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

Valocchi S, (2005). Not Yet Queer Enough: The Lessons of Queer Theory for the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality. *Gender & Society*. Volume 19, Issue 6, pp. 750-770.

Warner M, (1993). Introduction in Warner M (Ed.) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, pp. vii-xxxi. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.

Wilchins R, (2004). *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*. Los Angeles. Alyson Books.