

FOUNDATIONALISM OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical review of two research papers related to the social construction of gender and sexuality. It is argued that social constructionist approaches and their theorization of gender are untenable and contradictory with its relation to biological foundationalism. Introduction of gender as an analytical category is quite problematic in theory and practice. Gender category complicates the theory rather than clarifying it. A straightforward definition of gender will not solve the theoretical problems as well as practical implications. Social constructionist approach presumes reality as constructed, but this construction does not occur in a vacuum. Every construction is based on some concrete foundation. Without foundation, construction becomes impossible. A social constructionist approach to reality neglects this very fact. It criticizes foundationalism, but then itself is entangled in it.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Social construction, Foundationalism.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we have critically reviewed two research papers about the social construction of gender and sexuality and the respective implications for research design. We have separately reviewed both the articles. First, we have provided a summarized overview of what is said in each article. Then, we have provided our critique of what is argued by the authors.

First paper "The sociological construction of gender and sexuality" presents multiple constructionisms and their relation to sociology [1]. These are historicism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and materialist feminism. Historicism examines "construction of sex" and problematizes the assumed dichotomy of male and female. It traces that "opposite sexes emerged during the 18th century" and biological differences got relevance with social positions. Historicism investigates the historical construction of sex, sexuality, sexual identities in the light of contingent historical "frameworks of thought and practices." Not only sexual identities are socially constructed but also their desires. Sexual experiences and meanings attached to sexual desires and acts vary from time to time. The overall focus of historicism is that it emphasizes the "contingency of sexuality as it is currently organized" [1].

Ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism also reject the dichotomy of maleness and femaleness. Biological or bodily attributes have meaning and significance due to social interactions. A person's sense of self is the outcome "routinized and managed interaction with others within shared communities of understanding" that set norms for gender performance. Sex is socially constructed as a moral imperative within a society. Gender is "doing" in accordance with social norms. This "doing" is structurally imposed. Sexuality is a social aspect rather than an inherent drive.

Materialist feminism also holds that social structures are contingent. Gender and sexuality are the outcomes of these contingent social structures. Here, men and women are considered distinct classes. Sexuality is not an expression of any essential natural drive.

In response to the critiques selected by the author, the following assertions are made:

- Social constructionist perspectives are anti-foundationalist and social constructionist epistemology is not in search of inner truths;
- Inequalities in gender and sexuality are examined by social constructionist perspectives especially materialist feminists;
- Self-formation is an ongoing interactive process, and essence of self is the outcome of this process.

Our critique is that social constructionism can be criticized for its determinism. When it is said that sex, gender, identity, personality, and orientation are socially constructed, in the process of interactions of social agents, freedom of the subject is undermined, and there remains no place for individual unique actions. Nothing exists outside the discourse, and the discourse deals with the social discovery of construction and identification of social changes. There remains no rationale for intervention. One major confusion that arises from social constructionism is that whether social construction is celebrated or criticized? When it is empirically proved that some object, idea, practice, or relation is socially constructed, what is the purpose of this endeavor? What is the point in saying that sexuality is socially constructed? It is evident that there are cultural meanings of sexuality, but it is ridiculous to say that sexual expressions of the body are appropriated by a given "dominant" ideology or discourse. If subjectivity and sexuality are constructed "through the interplay of discursive practices, institutions, disciplinary regimes, and biopower" as argued by Foucault, then the target of change is practices and institutions. However, what if these very practices and institutions are themselves socially constructed? [2].

Suppose the gender roles prevailing in most (or all) of the Muslim countries, causing harsh realities of gender inequality for women, are socially constructed within the set of certain gender discriminatory beliefs and ideologies, and these beliefs and ideologies are socially constructed too. Then, what social constructs will be considered bad and thus to be changed? What is the legitimacy of thinking the otherwise social situations, outcomes, and constructs? Why cannot one say that women empowerment, gender freedom, gender justice, gender equality, and even the modern woman are social constructs, thus not real? Why do we pursue gender equality so vehemently? If subjectivities and identities are constructed (even partially) by the subject, then this subjectivity problematizes social constructionism. Human is free in their actions according to the given situations. It is true that institutions and social settings affect individual decisions. Social constructionism seems to operate within the bounds of structure. It must be called "structural construction" rather social construction. To impose or export such ideas and constructs to other societies negates social construction. It seems that social constructionism imposes the very discipline that it tries to contest.

Ian Hacking (1999) notes that "primary use of 'social construction' has been for raising consciousness" [3]. In this sense, social constructionism becomes mere popular activism instead of a coherent epistemology. Gender, sex, sexuality, identity, subjectivity, and so on are argued to be socially constructed, hence to be abolished. It will be interesting to

assume a situation. Suppose a newborn baby is thrown on the island and that baby is alone there and fortunately coming to age. Now how that person's sex or gender will be determined? How that person will determine or perceive his/her gender or sex? To which group he/she will identify himself/herself when he/she comes in contact with a couple of (our socially constructed) man and woman? It is quite possible that one can construct one's "own sexual consciousness without any social input" [4]. Now consider again the definition of gender: "Gender is socially constructed." This means that gender exists only in society, no society, and no gender. However, why should we say "socially constructed" if it constructed at all? The emphasis on social gives the impression that it may be constructed otherwise, but that is not the case. Second, it is not real because it is constructed. Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [5], assert that "reality is socially constructed" and reality is defined as "a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition." Here, contrary to popular feminist social constructionism, social construction is not anti-foundationalist.

The second paper by Kanaak tries to provide guidelines for research in gender. It criticizes the emergence of spontaneous sociology, focusing the concept of gender adopted by researchers in research designs [6]. Spontaneous sociology occurs when every researcher uses his own definitions of the concepts and in this way deviates from the scientific discourse to the commonsense view. Commonsense approach to knowledge does not lead to actual knowledge of problems. The initial reason for this non-scientific articulation of constructs is that the research variables are to be answered by the common respondents who do not indulge into theoretical interpretations of the reality. Variables are constructed for the non-scientific community, and for this reason, variables are defined in common and simplistic terms keeping in mind their comprehension level. However, this devaluation and simplicity of variables take the researcher away from actual scientific theorization. On the other hand, if scientific technical terminology is included in the inquiry, then it becomes unrealistic for the respondents to understand and respond. Thus, the research design becomes dilemma between scientific and common sense. This is the dilemma of research design that Kanaak highlights with a specific example of gender [6].

The current standard of gender operationalization in the research designs of "spontaneous sociology" is that gender is treated as a single measurable variable with only two possible classifications of male and female. Moreover, in this operationalization, gender concepts also taken as inclusive of sex and sexuality. This operationalization reflects a common sense and foundational understanding of popular gender discourse in which gender is based on biology. This trend is inaccurate and incomplete. Hence, the problem of reconceptualization and reframing of gender become inevitable.

This reconceptualization of gender (for operationalization in research design) is "founded" on these "anti-foundationalist" assertions:

1. Biology is not the foundation of gender, but gender is a socially constructed concept.
2. Gender is not single but multidimensional variable.
3. Third assertion made by the author is the active nature of gender. This means gender is dependent variable instead of independent.
4. Gender is amorphous.

These four assumptions are then explained by the author in detail with implications for research design. Here, we critically examine these assertions.

First assertions mean that foundation is rejected. This anti-foundationalism rejects any final justification or base for values and goals. Every goal and value is equal because every goal is interpreted subjectively. This suspension of foundation will logically lead to a rejection of even social construction in favor of subjectivity because nothing can be made the foundation. Hence, guidance and problem solving is meaningless in anti-foundationalism.

The second assertion is the logical outcome of the first assertion because when the two standard foundational (biological) categories of male and female are rejected then the multiple and multivariate categorization of this concept becomes possible. In statistical terminology, gender does not remain a "discrete" variable but becomes a "continuous" variable. The reason is that every new construction will have equal weight and there can be innumerable social constructions from male to female. This is evident from the ever-expanding array of gender constructions such as homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, straight, gay, lesbian, hypersexual, queer, and trans and mixture of all these.

The third assertion, again, is the logical and necessary result of the former first and second assertions. Interestingly biological foundation is rejected, but the social foundation is inevitably accepted for the theorization of gender; thus, it does not entail anti-foundationalism in the strict sense of the term. Since society and social forces constantly evolve and change therefore social constructions and hence gender also becomes active or fluid. No construction of gender is final and ultimate but the latest. This fluid nature of gender leads to the performance of gender and it is assumed that performance is always active. This gender performativity is self-evident and not directed to any goal due to active nature of social construction and rejection of permanent foundation.

The fourth assertion of gender morphism is unnecessary, but it adds emphasis and validates the above explanations. It is made obvious that when biology is rejected as a base then dimorphism is automatically rejected see explanation of the second presumption.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM VERSUS BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONALISM

Under this theme, the conceptual distinctions between sex and gender are explained at the paradigmatic level. Sex is "biological maleness or femaleness," and gender is social construction of masculinity and femininity. This distinction gives the impression that maleness is something different from masculinity and femaleness is different from femininity. Masculinity or femininity, in other words, has necessarily nothing to do with maleness or femaleness. An individual of male biological characteristics can be constructed as socially feminine. It means one can claim that one's sex is male, but one's gender is female or transgender or intersex. A woman can claim that she is a man despite having a womb and giving birth to babies being impregnated by certain "biological" man or "socially constructed" woman. This claim is held true when sex is not taken as the foundation of gender construction. Biological foundationalism is rejected because it is "problematic framework." Contrary to this framework is the social constructionism in gender is the base (of sex). This framework holds that "sexual differences are actually constructed by gender". Since gender is socially constructed and sexual differences are constructed by gender, then it is quite true to say that sex or biology is socially constructed. With this foundational turnabout, foundationalism is not successfully escaped but mere a shift is made from biological foundationalism to social constructionist foundationalism. Within this shift, masculinity is socially constructed in the first place, and then maleness is socially constructed on the basis of this socially constructed masculinity. However, the author does not traverse further the ontological implications of this priority of social over biological. With this insufficient explanation of paradigm shift, the author goes to explain implications for research due to this paradigm shifting.

First implication for research design is that this paradigm (social construction) "helps us to move beyond the strictures of nature/nurture debate." This moving beyond does not mean that the debate of nature versus nurture is resolved; it simply leaves where it is. This simple move simply avoids the discussion of nature versus nurture. The researcher would explicitly acknowledge his/her "theoretical orientation" toward gender, but the only available theory is that "gender is socially constructed". Again, even this theoretical clarity indicates that the originally departed foundationalism is held in contact. This

clear acknowledgment that “gender” is socially constructed does not challenge the claim that “sex” is biologically determined. What is important here is that biological foundationalism remains plausible paradigm contrary to the initial criticisms of its incompleteness. If only “gender is socially constructed,” then what methodological advantage, we gain by making gender a base for sexual differences? The clearer implication should be that sex and/or gender is socially constructed or that we have nothing to do with biology at all. Sex is rejected as a foundation to reject the gender dichotomy of spontaneous sociology, but the persistent dichotomy of sex-gender makes this “theoretical clarity” quite ambiguous. This problematic theoretical ambiguity will remain there unless it is clearly declared that “sex is socially constructed.” Further, if both sex and gender are socially constructed, then they can be assumed as synonymous, or one of them can be rejected outright. Biological foundationalism cannot be escaped successfully until the dichotomy of sex and gender is present. The only possibility for social constructionism is the theorization that sex is socially constructed, and gender is nothing but sex; hence, using gender is unnecessary.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF GENDER

The second strategy put forward by the author is that gender “must be understood at multiple levels of meaning.” This strategy is entailed by the first foundational paradigm shift, so it is natural that this too assumes sex-gender dichotomy. Important is that if gender is base for sexual difference and hence gender and ultimately, sex is socially constructed, then there is no need for this emphasis of multiple dimensions. This is due to the fact that if something is socially constructed then social, cultural, institutional, and other dimensions inevitably be taken in consideration. Again, biological foundationalism is present in this theorization. Author emphasizes the need to theorize gender in its heterogeneity but the same could be done with the construct of sex. How can be assumed that sex cannot be understood at multiple levels and multiple positions? Indeed, sex can be understood within multiple sociocultural contexts then why another categorization of gender? Moreover, this heterogeneity and diversity make untenable use gender as an independent category of analysis [7,8]. It means the very basis of heterogeneity leads to the implausibility of gender as an analytical category on which this category is expounded. It is strange that the heterogeneity that necessitates avoidance of gender analytic is used as its basis.

The author cites three components of gender as implications of research design. These are subjectivity, social institution, and cultural understanding [6]. By subjectivity, author means that one’s sense of being male or female. This feature of gender is popular and incomplete, but according to the author, it “does not need to be abandoned.” Emphasis on this notion indicates that gender identity or one’s sense of being male and female is necessarily based on one’s biology. The second feature is also limited to the structuring of individuals in women and men only. Institutional aspects of gender are emphasized but again, it is argued that even sex can be positioned at the multivariate levels of race, class, sex divisions of labor, sexual ideologies, and other social hierarchies. The cultural element is also limited to a (biological) man and woman. Masculinity and femininity can be understood as different diverse patterns of sex rather than gender. Proposing multivariate research design author enlists the variables of “race, class, age, sexual orientation, work role, gender ideology, reproductive and marital status, personality characteristics, life expectancies, and so on.” All these variables can also be studied in the biological foundational paradigm to analyze and interpret sex. Furthermore, the social construction of maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity occurs on some distinct foundations. Social agents articulate their views and beliefs on some bases. When it is accepted that masculinity or femininity is socially constructed then it is assumed that this social construction is based on some biological foundations. Social construction cannot be based on the social construction of social construction. Moreover, when we say masculinity and femininity is socially constructed then what we actually mean with a difference to sex. The underlying problem

with this conceptualization of gender is that social construction is unconsciously considered only limited to men. Both men and women are agents of social construction, and whatever constructions occur must be respected in the social constructionist paradigm. Why is there so much emphasis on exploration and change of social realities and social constructions? In whatever pattern and hierarchy this social construction is carried out women are an equal part of this process then why only women and their empowerment is emphasized?

GENDER AS PROCESS AND OUTCOME

Third theoretical development discussed by Knaak, 2004, is that gender is a continuous process of becoming [6]. Author implicates that gender is “an outcome and effect of social forces.” Here, it is not delineated by the author how gender is a process as well as an outcome at the same time. If gender is process, then its outcome or (net) effect must be something other than gender. The author cites that femininities are produced through certain practices and maintained thus. It means the femininity (gender) is the outcome of a social process that is not exclusively a gender process. Moreover, the same thing can be said about sex (maleness and femaleness) that is viewed differently from different perspectives, time, and places. The social construction of femininity does not need to “move beyond” biological sex. Gender as a process creates a problem of identity; it becomes mere a floating sensation about one’s personal identity that has no sound base neither any certain goal. If the gender process is going on, then everyone has a temporary idea of one’s identity, and that identity will change, no one knows in what way. Hence, it is not only uncertain subjectivity but also a crisis of identity. As the author has explained earlier that gender is “active,” and this activity is going on, so it is just performance. It is “doing” and “becoming” in-itself; it has not any goal or objective because the outcome of this process is the process itself. Research implication outlined by the author is that gender should be treated as a “dependent” variable due to its “active” (ongoing process) nature. One implication of this dependent nature of gender is that every measured effect will be temporary and not suitable for personal identity. Other implication is that some independent variables (i.e. race) are fixed while others are changing (social status), but the overall effect on a dependent variable will be continuous. The question is how one’s sense of self is affected by biology and culture. How a self can ignore or overcome its biological reality? Is it sensible to claim that biology along with other sociocultural factors has nothing to do with one’s self and identity? Due to this critical role of biology, sex dichotomy of male and female is also challenged.

CHALLENGING THE NATURAL ATTITUDE

The author cites a number of studies in support of this claim that masculinities and femininities are not single but multiple, forming a continuum. The second point is that “behavior, personality, and cognition” are overlapping and “not necessarily congruent with one’s biological sex.” Interestingly, here, masculinity and femininity are attached to biological sex instead of gender as initially described by the author in the introductory debate. It gives the impression that sex and gender are the same thing as well as masculinity/femininity and maleness/femaleness. Moreover, if biological sex is also a continuum instead of fixed dichotomy, then there is no need for gender theorization. Further, when biological sex is not taken as a foundation for one’s identity, then it does not matter whether sex is dichotomous or not. Explaining the implications for research design author cites that there are “900 different situations one can be in.” This is challenge to dimorphism and gender category as well. A third open gender category is advised to be included in the research design/questionnaire to achieve empirical accuracy. Since both sex and gender are not dichotomous as argued by the author, so it can be said that the question about one’s sex or gender should be left open-ended. Thus, highest possible accuracy will be achieved.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing the two research papers, we conclude that the concept of gender as a social construct and analytical category in the sociological

analysis is very problematic. A straightforward definition of gender will not solve the theoretical problems as well as practical implications. Social constructionist approach presumes reality as constructed, but this construction does not occur in a vacuum. Every construction is based on some concrete foundation. Without foundation, construction becomes impossible. A social constructionist approach to reality neglects this very fact. It criticizes foundationalism, but then itself is entangled in it. Even in the social constructionist paradigm, if gender and sexuality are social constructs, these are to be done away, rejected, and deconstructed. Therefore, we have argued that social construction of gender actually implies its rejection, not its inclusion, in analysis and social research.

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