

What is gender artifactualism?

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Abstract

*This is the one in a series of blog posts in which I discuss some of the concepts and terminology that I forward in my writings, including my new book *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*. So in *Excluded*, I introduce the term “gender artifactualism” to describe, “the tendency to conceptualize and depict gender as being primarily [...]*

Article

Why is this term needed?

To have a social constructionist view of gender (by most standard definitions) simply means that one believes that gender does not arise in a direct and unadulterated manner from biology, but rather is shaped to some extent by culture--e.g., by socialization, gender norms, and the gender-related ideology, language and labels that constrain and influence our understanding of the matter. By this definition, I am most certainly a social constructionist. Gender artifactualists, on the other hand, are typically not content to merely discuss the ways in which gender may be socially constructed, but rather they discount or purposefully ignore the possibility that biology and biological variation also play a role in constraining and shaping our genders. Sometimes, even the most nuanced and carefully qualified suggestions that biology may have some influence on gendered behaviors or desires will garner accusations of “essentialism” in gender artifactualist circles... [p.117-8]

Is gender artifactualism correct as a theory?

Why bother debunking gender artifactualism?

The truth of the matter is that gender artifactualism can be used to promote sexist beliefs just as readily as gender determinism can. For much of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud’s hardline gender artifactualist theories were used to pathologize queer people and to portray girls and women as inferior to their male counterparts. Similarly, contemporary feminists and queer activists are outraged by stories of intersex children being subjected to nonconsensual genital surgeries, or gender-non-conforming children being subjected to rigid behavior modification regimes, yet the justification for these procedures is founded in the gender artifactualist theories of psychologists like John Money and Kenneth Zucker, respectively. [p.145-146]

After all, if gender and sexuality are entirely social artifacts, and we have no intrinsic desires or individual differences, this implies that every person can (and should) change their gender and sexual behaviors at the drop of a hat in order to accommodate their own (or perhaps other people’s)

politics. This assumption denies human diversity and, as I have shown, often leads to the further marginalization of minority and marked groups. [p.134]

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