

Special Issue: Article

Contemporary Feminist Contributions to Debates around Gender and Sexuality: From Identity to Performance

Erica Burman

This paper reviews current feminist debates around gender and sexuality in relation to their relevance for group-analytic theory and practice. The long and contested engagement between feminists and (varieties of forms of) psychoanalysis highlights major areas of convergence of theoretical and practical concern: in particular around the attention to and construction of both gender and sexuality, and the relations between these. Contemporary feminist debates have shifted emphasis to discuss gender and sexuality as plural, fluid and situated, rather than as fixed identities. This attention to the 'performative' character of gender and sexuality has opened up new horizons for feminist analysis, which have attracted considerable attention within psychoanalytic circles. Group analysis, as a socially situated theory and practice, shares key political and intellectual premises with these feminist analyses, and so has much both to gain and to offer from this engagement.

Key words: psychoanalysis, masculinity, femininity, identity, performance

Feminism And Therapy: An Uneasy Alliance

This review of the ways feminist debates connect with group analysis focuses on the fruitfulness of contemporary discussions of gender and sexuality, rather than dwelling on the longstanding tensions that inscribe the relations between feminism and psychoanalysis (although the consequences of this shift from that history

are noted later in the paper). The plural form *feminisms* indicates that feminist debates are diverse. What they share is the commitment to interrogating, challenging and transforming gendered attributes and positions as a relevant subjective and structural axis of human differentiation. My description of 'feminisms' or of 'feminist' analysis names a set of *debates*, rather than a coherent or consensual set of themes. Although an attention to 'gender' is often assumed to be concerned with women, more recently feminist researchers have focused on men and masculinity. Gender is seen in this work less as an individual, fixed attribute (e.g. masculinity or femininity) than as a relationship whose perceived and actual historical qualities are sites for analysis and intervention.

Feminist discussion related to therapy initially focused on highlighting the relevance of attending to gender and gendered inequalities within therapeutic contexts – in relation to gendered forms of expressions of distress and the ways gender oppression produces distress. Such analyses gave rise to the establishing of women-centred and women-only forms of provision (cf. Ernst and Maguire, 1987). Since my focus here is to evaluate the contribution of feminist theory for group analysis, it lies beyond the scope of this paper to review the debates over the relationships between forms of feminist politics and therapeutic practices (but see Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1985; Seu and Heenan, 1998; and Taylor, 1990 for a range of perspectives). It seems to be generally acknowledged that there can be no easy synthesis or unitary description of 'feminist therapy', or even identification of someone *as* a feminist therapist, owing to the complexity and diversity of both feminist orientations and therapeutic frameworks (cf. Heenan and Seu, 1998; Marecek and Kravetz, 1998). Indeed feminist-identified therapists appear in practice to draw on a variety of both feminisms and therapeutic reference-points which makes the formulation of specific characteristics of feminist therapy difficult (Burman, 1995). More recently, the increasing influence of postmodern perspectives, along with the wider circulation of black, working-class and lesbian critiques have thrown the unitary female subject of second wave feminism – one model of what it is to be a woman – into question (see also Hird, 2003). Efforts to formulate specifically feminist approaches to therapy have largely been supplanted by more a general focus on how gender intersects with other axes of subjectivity (such as 'race' and class).

Approaching Gender/Sexuality

This brings us to gender and sexuality, as two seemingly simple and separate notions; yet each is complex, profound and profoundly contested – in terms of definition, relation and function. Freud's achievement in creating psychoanalysis was to acknowledge how important these were in producing our sense of who we each are, and how we live our lives. Feminist psychoanalysts have taken seriously the emotional and psychic significance of the long-standing, and still largely prevalent, arrangement whereby children's early care is provided by a woman, or small group of women (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976). In group analysis, perhaps due in part to an ambivalent relationship with its psychoanalytic heritage, there is comparatively little explicit and sustained discussion of questions of gender and sexuality (apart from Conlon, 1991; and more recently Rose, 2002, alongside my own efforts – Burman, 2001; 2002), although gendered qualities are widely attributed to group-analytical concepts and phenomena (e.g. Elliot, 1994). Yet, as apparently universal axes of structural difference, these largely assumed and uninterrogated notions of gender, gender differences and sexual identities figure hugely in all our lives. They circulate as key resources within all group-analytical therapy and organizational work.

Given the grip that gender and sexuality have in our lives, it is important that we take these concepts seriously. We need to subject them to analytical scrutiny, rather than allowing them to figure implicitly, or presuming some shared understandings in their taken-for-granted character. Since, within current social arrangements, we are all in some way sexed and gendered, there is a reflexive or countertransfereential character to any discussion of gender and sexuality. Each of us approaches these questions from our own histories and opinions – and the fact that it is rare for anyone not to have fairly elaborate and pronounced opinions on these matters is surely an indication of how important they are. Nevertheless just because our views about gender are strongly elaborated does not mean that they are always accurate, justifiable or even relevant to others. Even those accounts of gender and sexuality that circulate widely are no more reliable (see e.g. Coward, 1982). Moreover since 'sexual difference' tends to be regarded in most psychoanalytic work as the prototype for other differences (e.g. racialized or classed differences), there is a heavy burden carried by discussions

of gender and sexuality within psychotherapeutic debate. Often this is both inadequate and unhelpful (Leary, 1997).

One of the benefits of current feminist debates (that are informed also by the 'postmodern' turn) is that they may offer some fruitful ways forward. The work of the philosopher Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 1997) has provided the impetus to dramatically shift feminist debate, and the implications of this current of thinking for our understandings of gender and sexuality form my main focus here. (Their implications are more extensively taken up in Katherine Watson's paper on queer theory, this issue.) Briefly, much feminist discussion of gender and sexuality now treats them as *plural* (rather than singular); as *performed* (rather than an expression of some inner, stable identity) and as *intersecting* (whereby gender intersects with, rather than provides the foundations for, sexuality; and each of these interacts constitutively with other social axes of difference such as age, class, racialized position, etc.) While Butler is not the only exponent of these ideas, her emphasis on performativity has been particularly influential.

Rather disconcertingly perhaps, an effect of this analysis has been to *displace* the emphasis on gender within feminist debate, and to focus instead on the ways in which 'race' and class positions and sexual orientation (now recast as fluid rather than static and enduring) produce particular and specific forms of gender. This attention to specificity and intersectionality has been especially useful in exploring how received notions of women's gendered positions and sexuality, far from being separate from wider political discussions, function in relation to understandings of citizenship and national identity. These issues are already, of course, concerns of group analysis. Antiracist feminists such as Yuval-Davis (1997) have indicated how concepts of gender and nation function in relation to each other, with the control and regulation of women's sexuality and reproduction being an important feature not only of all religions and cultures but also of state structures.

Gender As Performative

How does all this enter into group-analytic practice? One key application emerging from current feminist thinking is that we need no longer think of feminism, sexuality and gender as each separate or single entities. Instead, feminisms, genders and sexualities are seen as multiple, shifting and also mutually informing. The

implications of this shift are profound, for they both expose and throw into question the ways modern, Western thought has been structured around specific but linked sets of binary oppositions: male:female; reason:emotion; culture:nature. It has been a long-standing theme of feminist discussion to highlight how all these binary oppositions are gendered (and also 'raced', since they map on to the white / black polarity elaborated under western imperialism). However, if we destabilize (or within current parlance, 'trouble', 'unsettle' or 'queer') the gender:sex binary then new interpretive and political possibilities emerge.

How? Perhaps the key feature of the move to performative approaches is that they question the concept of identity that underlies all those binary oppositions. Many feminist approaches of the 1970s subscribed to these binaries too, in the familiar description of sex as biology, with gender as social role somehow laid over this biological basis. This was certainly useful in drawing attention to the arbitrary character of gendered qualities and associated social arrangements. But it left intact a conception of biology as the bedrock difference between men and women. This became the starting point for dominant feminist conceptions of sexuality. That is, sexuality – as erotic investment, psychoanalytically speaking with aims and objects – was seen as *an effect of gender*. That is, establishing oneself as male or female, or recognizing that one is a boy or a girl, was seen as both logically and developmentally prior to acquiring or establishing one's sexual orientation, as attracted to someone of the 'same' or 'different' 'sex'.

Here it is worth recalling the rather confusing ways we use the term 'sex': as (often) a synonym for gender; and as an act, so that by association 'sexuality' conflates activity, orientation and identity. Butler's key intervention was to disturb the sex:gender binary, and then to reverse it, to posit sex (in the sense of sexuality) as constitutive of gender, rather than portraying gender as determining the (socially desirable) form of sexual orientation.¹ That is, she claimed that eroticism and, under current social arrangements, its social structuring or identification *as* 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' is what confirms gendered positioning (as male or female). From this she elaborates a larger discussion about 'heteronormativity' (which takes heterosexuality as the natural benchmark against which other sexualities depart) that extends beyond the specificities of sexual orientations to connect with the wider ways in which they function. Rather than maintaining a focus on the conventionally

problematized category ('the homosexual') Butler brings heterosexuality itself under critical scrutiny. Her argument in fact relies upon a close engagement with psychoanalysis, from a detailed re-reading of Freud's own texts, from which she elaborates a theory of disavowed or repudiated homoeroticism as the repressed condition for the construction of fixed, normalized and heterosexually gendered identities (see Butler, 1990; 1997). Her account is scholarly and persuasive, building on Freud's (1917) account of mourning and melancholia.

There are clear compatibilities, as well as tensions, with group-analytic commitments. The privileging of the social in the formation of the psychic positions group analysis as potentially close to current constructionist and postmodernist ideas. Even before these gained wide circulation, structuralist approaches placed great emphasis on gender and sexuality – with the claim that women are prototypical objects ('gifts') of exchange (Levi-Strauss, 1969; Rubin, 1975), and systemic approaches focused on the identified patient as the displaced site for the exhibition of wider symptomatology. But beyond this, of course, there is considerable variation within group-analytic thinking. The challenge to the notion of identity (with gendered, sexed identity as its exemplar within psychoanalysis) as something fixed (if not essential) and stable undermines some central tenets of humanist approaches. But it is important to note that problematizing notions of identity – refusing to see them as fixed – does not mean dispensing with or ignoring processes of identification; rather it precisely imports an *attention to* such processes; that is, to identifications as multiple, dynamic and shifting rather than identity as a singular, achievable endstate or goal. What we have here is a methodological orientation that is strikingly compatible with the psychoanalytic and group-analytic attention to process, and in doing so it invites us (just as Freud struggled to do) to conduct our inquiries about process without making prescriptive assumptions about what is normal or abnormal.

Psychoanalysis And Gender Roles

With these ideas in mind we can review anew the status of gender and sexuality within psychoanalytic thinking, including the forms of sociology and social psychology as the resources from which group analysis is elaborated. Psychology in particular has become a key

arena for warranting rather limited and contradictory models of gender and sexuality. From evolutionary theory, biologically determinist ideas are now burgeoning, extending ideas about 'biology as destiny' on to the newly 'mapped' arenas of the human genome. Perhaps this revival of biological reductionism should be seen as a response to the widespread suspicion of biological explanations in the last 20 years and as a response to the uncertainty engendered through the destabilization of previous gendered, 'raced' and classed regimes. Nevertheless such notions are dangerous in attempting to stifle our conceptions of human and organizational capacities for movement and change, and fix them in ever more inexorable and potentially pathologizing ways.

While socialization models circulating in sociology and psychology subscribed to the notion of roles – and, in social learning theory, 'role models' – the very concept of 'role' bolstered an abstracted, asocial model of the subject that presumed some kind of stable, enduring self. As Sayers (1986) pointed out, notwithstanding the ways they are pitted against psychoanalytic approaches, such traditional psychological theories of gender in fact presuppose some kind of psychodynamic analysis, precisely because assuming a gendered or 'sex' role relies upon some notion of identification. The same problem is thereby reinstated: how do we account for the selection of the model on which one's 'role' is based? What cultural resources inform the investment underlying that identification? These are questions that social learning theory cannot answer.

It is also worth noting the typical renderings of the relations between psychology and psychoanalysis, in terms of the ways they work to represent gender. All too often psychology is presented as the discipline concerned with establishing the normal, the typical, while psychoanalysis deals with the abnormal, the pathological. This is the politically conservative reading which (borrowing from our previous analysis) we can now unsettle or trouble (especially in unravelling bowdlerized versions of normative psychosexual models of development that enter psychology, models which originate from Karl Abraham rather than Freud). For we can see psychoanalysis as itself having a long tradition of questioning the separation between gender and sexuality, with sexuality seen as shifting rather than static. Indeed Freud's very differentiation between sexual aims and objects does significant work in this direction, as well as his description of infantile sexuality as 'polymorphously perverse' (Freud, 1905: 191). Hence there are

strong grounds from orthodox psychoanalytic accounts to portray gendered and sexed identities as fragile, complete and provisional. Members of the Frankfurt School even drew on psychoanalysis to generate an analysis of how and why these are portrayed as fixed, introducing the concept of ‘homophobia’ as a feature of ‘the authoritarian personality’ (Adorno et al., 1969).

Between Feminism And Psychoanalysis

The history of the relations between feminisms and psychoanalysis is therefore one of historical antagonism but mutual dependence. Freud was prompted to formulate his ideas from working with distressed women, yet acknowledged he never adequately understood them (cf. his infamous comment about the ‘dark continent’ in Freud, 1905: 141) – either in terms of women’s sexuality or desire. His ideas both drew upon but also departed from the work of the sexologists who at around the same time were elaborating a science of the classification of forms of sexual preference and activities (that themselves betray something of a voyeuristic fascination with the activities they studied) (Jackson, 1987; Weeks, 1986).

Some versions of the aims of analysis presume precisely what feminists would put into question, such as those put forward by Money-Kyrle in 1971 as ‘seeing the breast as supremely beautiful, parental intercourse as supremely creative and to accept the inevitability of death’ (quoted in Holmes, 1986: 231). Equally, feminist trajectories in relation to psychoanalysis have ranged from outright rejection, portraying it as a tool for the pathologization of protest and the legitimization of gendered and sexual oppression (e.g. Millett, 1977) to sustained engagement as a key resource for conceptualizing the possibility of change, and so to explore the intrapsychic as well as social-structural obstacles to change (e.g. Mitchell, 1975).²

However as Butler indicates, many current feminist, gay and lesbian theorists engage with psychoanalysis as a key theoretical resource for the reconceptualization of gender and sexuality as historically constructed but emotionally invested positionings. Significantly, from Mitchell onwards, many have drawn on Lacanian readings of Freud (e.g. Grosz, 1990), although contemporary feminist intersubjectivity theorists, such as Jessica Benjamin, have drawn on other sources, particularly Hegel and Winnicott

(Benjamin, 1995; 1998). Within the Lacanian 'return to Freud', the shift of focus in the Oedipal drama from the penis to the phallus as its symbolic representation has been crucial. That is, questions of access to the phallus or its absence/lack become a question about power rather than anatomical genitalia (see Freud, 1905b, footnote added in 1915 on pp. 141–142). Lacan in particular elaborates Freud's insistence on the intimate connection between entering language and the instigation of the Oedipal conflict (moving beyond the mother-child dyad to acknowledge the position of the father, or third term) to highlight how questions of gender and sexuality are produced through and organized around a symbolic system. Feminists then point out that this symbolic system is patriarchal. The feminist intervention here is to consider this system as not only historically constructed but also historically contingent; that is, that our sexed and social arrangements could be different (e.g. Lieven, 1981).

In terms of current concerns, a key area of convergence between theory and practice is the emergence of a therapeutic culture that brings psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic models and concepts into wider circulation (Parker, 1997). This is alongside the popularization of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' that has inadvertently bolstered contemporary moves toward the privatization of the public sphere in all kinds of economic and cultural forums (whereby the slogan typically comes to mean that the only politics that matters is personal). A notable index of this, perhaps alongside the greater attention accorded the physical and psychological vulnerabilities of young men, as well as women, within social policy, is the increasing numbers of gay men and lesbians seeking therapeutic support. At the most practical as well as theoretical levels, it is vital that group analysts feel that their guiding intellectual frameworks adequately support them in working with such clients. Current feminist and gay and lesbian perspectives, in their sustained engagement with psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic accounts, offer major resources for this.

Sex and Sexuality, or Power, Performance and Change in Group Analysis?

So where does this leave our account of gender and sexuality? Psychoanalysis – in its multiple forms – tends to treat gender and

sexuality as linked but separate. Foucault's (1981) provocative 'history of sexuality' challenged the largely prevailing assumption that sexuality was a taboo or repressed topic until the 'sexual revolution' of the post-war period. In his close study of the 'myth of the repressive Victorians' he demonstrated how, precisely in proscribing and prescribing forms of sexuality, they were actually deeply engaged with producing discourse upon sexuality – just as much as, but in a different way from, the sexual libertarians of the 1960s. Indeed this historical approach poses some interesting questions about the shifting role or focus accorded sex and sexuality in therapeutic contexts. Is sexuality something that escapes definition (and so it is futile to try to map and catalogue it)? Debates from gender and organizational studies (cf. Hearn et al., 1989) also pose a question that is especially relevant for groups: how are gender and sexuality public as well as private? This is not only a matter of how a form of intimate experience is socially and historically structured, but also how it is continuously reproduced (often as a stable, affirmed explicit identification) through everyday interactions and activities. If group analysis is premised upon a view of the gains made possible from communication across differences, including sexed and gendered differences, then we need frameworks that help us conceptualize and attend to these differences. We can then view them as achievements, or accomplishments, rather than inevitable expressions of internally fixed attributes.

From Foucault onwards, there is a questioning of sexuality as act or orientation; as activity or identity. The psychoanalytic lexicon around sexuality is also differentially inflected according to particular schools of thought, with the Winnicottian valorization of the role of the maternal also tending towards its de-eroticization (see e.g. Flax, 1993; Mitchell, 1988). More generally, once we historicize the role of sex and sexuality (in varieties of psychoanalysis and in culture), we open up further questions. So, for example, it has been often suggested that the 19th and early 20th century focus on sexuality as a matter for painful exploration in the consulting room has now been supplanted as a matter of clinical concern with psychic conflict about money (cf. Storck's Special Section, *Group Analysis* 2002). However, irrespective of its shifting focus and character, the central question (posed very clearly by object relations theorists) remains of how to relate to and engage with the ways we use others, as posed by the issue of sex and sexualities.

From Identity To Performance: Conceptualizing Change

A key aim of current feminist thinking on these questions is to dismantle the apparatus of pathology that surrounds discussions of sexuality and gendered oppression. Helping to ward off the social demand towards privatising sexuality (in the case of treating this as a 'personal' matter that is not suitable for public discussion) is important, and connects also with the group-analytic project. Notwithstanding the fact that it is not unique in this, matters of sex and sexuality within intimate relationships remain a source of private misery for many people – whether through their presence or absence. A further challenge for us as group analysts to consider is the point indicated from Foucauldian-influenced perspectives that taking note of, or drawing on, these perspectives does not necessarily mean prompting people to talk more about these areas of difficulty, since talking can be as much a form of regulation as is silence.

Butler's (1990) analysis of gender as performance draws heavily on Joan Rivière's classic (1929) paper 'Femininity As Masquerade'. In this sense Butler could be said to be performing the argument she puts forward in her later book *The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler, 1997) by building on, but subverting, pre-existing resources. In this she clarifies the position of the politically resisting subject as inevitably produced by, and therefore complicit within, the conditions of its own (gendered and sexual) oppression. But rather than this paralysing or preventing activity towards change, she proposes that this is the very condition that makes such change possible. At issue here is an alternative formulation of the relationship between subjectivity and power; whereby the doubled condition – of being both subject to and subject of – power relations means that we are neither entirely determined by, nor free from, determination by pre-existing political and social conditions. Power becomes something neither to seek nor to avoid, but something that is always present – however exercised.

Important broader conceptual and methodological developments arise from these debates that extend beyond discussions of femininity, gender and sexuality to analyses of change and therapeutic change in particular. Here the notion of performance currently circulating in social theory – and taken up by Butler specifically in relation to the politics of gender – becomes relevant. A focus on performance displaces the concern with identity, to instead bring to analytic attention how individuals and groups can go beyond,

challenge or transform themselves, and to explore characteristics of the contexts in which such performances are possible. While Butler draws explicitly on Rivière's (1929) psychoanalytic discussion, other approaches make direct connection with therapeutic approaches (group as well as individual) that draw on a range of other resources, but share the same focus on activity rather than identity. Lois Holzman and Rafael Mendez's (2003) account of social therapy draws on a blend of Wittgenstein and Vygotsky, for example, while narrative therapists highlight storytelling as a site for the performance or exhibition of new possibilities (see also Squire, and Bondi, this issue). The current political, philosophical and therapeutic attention to performance shares a concern with foregrounding the transformative possibilities of public/witnessed activity (crucially also including talk), alongside the correlative view that subscribing to existing/prevaling norms of what (one) is can be limiting, and prevent change. There would seem to be fruitful compatibilities here with group analysis, and the way it portrays insight, as following from, rather than producing, change (Foulkes, 1975).

Notes

- 1 Butler's intervention was along the deconstructionist lines of subverting prevailing binary oppositions by revaluing the subordinate pole.
- 2 There remain other socialist feminists who manage to sustain feminist debate without subscribing to a polarization either for or against psychoanalysis e.g. Segal (1999).

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Erica Burman is Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies based in the Department of Psychology and Speech Pathology, Manchester Metropolitan University, where she co-directs the Discourse Unit and the Women's Studies Research Centre. She is also a group analyst. *Author's address*: The Manchester Metropolitan University, Hathersage Road, Manchester M13 0JA, UK. *Email*: e.burman@mmu.ac.uk