

What are the Strengths and Limitations of Queer Theory for Understanding the Categories of Gender, Sexuality and Bodies

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of Queer Theory and its impact on gender, sexual behavior, and bodily classifications. The theory is believed to have originated from an article by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, initially aimed at unifying the LGBTQ+ community in response to the backlash against sexual minority rights in the latter half of the 20th century. Over time, the term "queer" has evolved to encompass individuals and communities diverging from mainstream sexual behaviors, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals, as well as heterosexual individuals engaging with Queer Theory. It challenges the binary gender structure and norms of traditional LGBTQ+ cultures, emphasizing the performative nature of gender and resisting categorization.

KEYWORDS

Queer Theory; Gender; Sexual Orientation; Bodily Classifications; Sexual Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Queer Theory is generally believed to have been explicitly proposed by Teresa de Lauretis in the journal "Differences" in 1991.

The initial emergence of queer theory was motivated by the need to prevent divisions within the LGBTQ+ community, amidst a backlash against LGBTQ+ rights in the latter half of the 20th century (Burroughs, 1986). Over time, with the expansion of advocacy efforts and deeper research into queer theory, the connotation of the term "queer" has also evolved. Nowadays, "queer" generally refers to individuals and communities outside of mainstream sexual behaviors, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals, as well as heterosexual individuals who identify with and engage in queer theory (Lee, 2019). "Queer theory" is thus based on this diverse range of identities and challenges both the binary gender structure and the norms of traditional LGBTQ+ cultures. It emphasizes the constructed nature of queer identities, resists categorization, and embraces openness and uncertainty.

With the emergence of queer theory, there has been a significant shift in the understanding of gender, sexual behavior, and bodily classifications (Watson, 2005). Queer theory provides a critical framework for analyzing and challenging traditional notions of gender binary and heteronormativity. It explores the complexities and diversities of gender, sexuality, and bodily categories, aiming to deconstruct established norms and power structures. Building upon a thorough review of queer theory and relevant literature, this article will examine the strengths and limitations of queer theory in understanding gender, sexual behavior, and bodily classifications.

2. THE OVERVIEW AND DEFINITION OF QUEER THEORY

In the late 19th century, the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" were coined and only entered into public discourse in Western society in the mid-20th century, despite the existence of same-sex desire and behavior prior to that. Homosexual and other sexual minority individuals initially lived their lives in secrecy. It was after World War II that some of them began to strive for their rights and identity recognition. In the 1960s and 1970s, the struggle for the rights of homosexuals and other sexual minorities persisted. In the 1980s, the AIDS crisis and conservative Christian ideology linked these sexual minority groups together. Conservative Christian thinking regarded the advent of AIDS as divine condemnation of homosexuality. In response to this situation, gay men, lesbians, bisexual individuals, and transgender individuals united to resist this crisis. It was during this time that many activists began using the term "queer" to encompass diverse gender identities and sexual behaviors.

Queer not only signifies the recognition that there are various ways and states of being among gay men and lesbians, but it also includes people with other sexual orientations that were previously unaddressed and undefined within the binary categorizations of heterosexual and homosexual. These diverse identities, desires, states, and orientations have gained recognition. As a result, the derogatory terms used by mainstream heterosexual-centric individuals to refer to homosexuals have been ironically self-adopted and referenced by many new-generation sexual nonconformists. In this sense, queer attempts to destigmatize through a stigmatizing approach.

The queer movement transcends the scope of feminism and highlights the unconventional forms of sexual orientations. The word "queer" is commonly used as a verb, denoting the act of challenging heteronormative structures and expectations (Lee, 2019). Furthermore, it superimposes social values onto simple indulgence of desires and connects sexual orientations, forms, lifestyles, and attitudes through games and festive celebrations, masking and avoiding social conflicts arising from diverse gender consciousness with specific life details.

3. CHALLENGING BINARY GENDER CONCEPTS

In traditional gender concepts, there is a strict categorization of gender identities. Based on one's biological characteristics, individuals are classified as either male or female, and their biological sex determines their social gender and corresponding sexual orientation. Thus, the gender domain employs a binary thinking approach that exhibits clear boundaries. This division of male and female genders excludes, alienates, and opposes alternative classification methods (Young, 1997).

Consequently, many individuals who cannot identify with their assigned biological sex and social gender, or who experience sexual desires beyond societal norms, often struggle to find a sense of belonging and recognition. Due to power dynamics, these marginalized groups also face inequality and discrimination in society (Beloso, 2017).

Queer theory disrupts the traditional division of gender, deconstructs the binary structure of gender, and provides a theoretical foundation for advocating for new forms of gender freedom and equality. Scholars of queer theory, such as Judith Butler, challenge traditional notions of gender. They aim to denaturalize gender and deconstruct its binary structure, questioning the fixed understanding of sex/gender and acknowledging that sexual identity or desire is not limited to either/or categorizations.

Queer theory moves away from the mainstream framework of gender identity and sexual desires, rejecting fixed identity labels. Butler's theory of "gender performativity" asserts that gender is not singular or permanent but performative, variable, discontinuous, and processual. It is constructed through repeated behaviors that continually give it new forms and meanings (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

This perspective undermines the theoretical foundation of gender classification and heteronormative systems that rely on "naturalizing" and "fixing" gender. In the heteronormative system, the relationship among sex, gender, and sexuality establishes a powerful foundation. It posits that one's biological sex, determined by reproductive organs, dictates social gender characteristics and sexual desires exclusively towards the opposite sex. For example, if someone is born with male reproductive characteristics, their assigned biological sex is male, which then determines their gender identity as male and restricts their sexual desire and behavior to opposite-sex individuals.

According to this theory, gender and sexuality are not innate, biological, or inherently fixed constructs; rather, they are socially constructed and contingent upon historical contexts (Lee, 2019). The goal of queer theory is to empower individuals to openly express their gender and sexual orientations, free from the constraints imposed by traditional gender norms and heteronormative systems. Only by attaining freedom in gender expression and sexual orientation can individuals authentically embody their identities without burdens or societal pressures. Whether it is a boy who embraces wearing skirts and living as a girl or a girl who undergoes a gender transition to become a man, there should be no barriers, prohibitions, or criticisms. People should have the liberty to embrace their true selves without impediment."

Under this advocated perspective of gender, gender is no longer fixed. People's desires and gender identities are liberated, and they gradually break free from the confines of traditional gender viewpoints. They gain the courage to freely express their gender and desires, showcasing their individuality and emotions. In summary, queer theory brings about significant changes in the concept of sexual identity based on sexual orientation and desire (Nagoshi & Nagoshi, 2013). Its existence challenges the relationship among biological sex, social gender identity, and sexual desires. Therefore, within queer theory, concepts such as transgender, drag, and transsexualism hold particular importance. The first three challenge the classification of gender identities, while bisexuality challenges the categorization of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and lesbianism due to its ambiguity between various identities. Currently, some queer individuals even refer to themselves as "bent straight lines," signifying the gradual breakdown of the binary structure within various classifications. With the blurring of categorical boundaries, we may witness the presence of more diverse orientations in the future.

4. EMPHASIZING BODILY POLITICS

Foucault's theory of power is one of the foundational theories of queer theory (Green, 2007). According to Foucault (1980), sexuality is a process through which human subjectivity is constructed, wherein authoritative discourses have played a significant role in shaping the sexual subject and their desires. The body is subjected to power. "Power disciplines the body, and the body constantly escapes this discipline, which in turn triggers adjustments in power and another round of discipline." In order to maintain its efficacy, power needs to extract time and energy from the bodies of resistant forces, using methods such as training, punishment, and surveillance to render the body powerless to resist. However, the body cannot be completely subdued; it retains agency and seeks to break free from the discipline of power.

Foucault pays particular attention to the agency of the body from the perspective of sex and gender. He calls for the rejection of the traditional paradigm of "sex-desire," which asserts that biological sex determines social gender and subsequently determines sexual orientation. Instead, he advocates for a paradigm of "body-pleasure." Foucault argues that biological sex, social gender, and sexual desire are all "discursive tools created by power to discipline the masses." In other words, these discourses and concepts are created by power in order to maintain its reproductive-centered dominance. However, the paradigm of "body-pleasure" allows for liberation from the concept of sex and seeks resistance through the exploration of pleasure. Because the body and pleasure are fluid, pleasure can emerge and flow freely throughout the body, countering the rigid and oppressive disciplinary power.

Queer theory seeks to challenge traditional conceptions of sex, the associated values, and the resulting social hierarchies (Burroughs, 1986). It criticizes the negating politics of difference that directly challenges the assumed foundational and unalterable self-identity. Queer theory argues that human sexuality is not natural or innate but a repetitive performative act, thereby deconstructing essentialist views of sexuality. Additionally, through the social constructionist approach, queer theory reveals the control exerted by Christian traditions behind the heterosexual regime and its mechanisms of operation, questioning the "naturalness" of heterosexuality and allowing desire to escape the confinement of identity.

Queer theory further distinguishes between sexual desire and sexual identity (Valocchi, 2005). Sexual desire is a bodily and mental inclination, while sexual identity is an interpretation of this inclination. While sexual identity is socially constructed, sexual desire cannot be fully explained by social construction, as it is unique and diverse for each individual. Therefore, queer theory argues that it is not possible to directly infer personal identity, personality, or gender political stance from individual desires since everyone's sexual desires can be idiosyncratic. Similarly, the identification of sexual identity as an interpretation of sexual desire is not fixed.

According to queer theory, the exclusion of sexual differences arises from the differences defined by social sexual identities, which are merely imagined ideals of sexual desire. In reality, sexual desires originate from individuals' physiology, and although sexual identities can temporarily accommodate some sexual desires, they cannot fully encompass them. Thus, sexuality is diverse, fluid, and not fixed, and the boundaries that distinguish sexual values in the politics of difference are nothing more than idealistic imaginations (Bailey, 2002). They cannot serve as social standards for distinguishing individuals.

The diversity and uniqueness of sexual desires cannot be fully grasped and contained by existing social norms. Queer theory astutely points out this flaw and thus challenges the politics of sexual difference in society. Queer theory focuses on self-expression and the pursuit of bodily rights for queer bodies and how bodily actions become means of resistance and deconstruction against the binary gender and heteronormativity.

5. CRITICISM OF TRADITIONAL SEXUAL MORALITY

Criticism of traditional sexual morality is rooted in the idea that it is a set of social norms that regulate human sexual behavior (Simon, 2017). These norms aim to maintain social order, regulate relationships between individuals, and ensure the normal reproduction of human offspring by imposing moral standards on people's sexual conduct. As a social consciousness, sexual morality is a response to the objective conditions of social material life and the objective existence of sexual behavior. Therefore, it undergoes continuous changes with the development of history. Normative sexual ethics, as a field of study, systematically presents sexual morality in a theoretical and scientific form.

Generally, traditional sexual morality, including its theoretical form as normative ethics, focuses solely on heterosexual relationships, considering men and women as the subjects of sexual morality. These subjects are expected to conform to specific gender roles and behaviors, and their physiological characteristics should align with specific sexual orientations or behaviors (Simon, 2017). Such subjects are recognized as qualified to receive the constraints and rights bestowed by sexual morality, and this process leads to their continual solidification.

Throughout history, individuals belonging to sexual minority groups have been unable to fit into this moral framework and have been denied the same moral rights (Lau, 2007). Transcending the individualist paradigm in sexual orientation antidiscrimination law. Dukeminier Awards: Best Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity L. Rev., 6, p.69.). They have often been seen as immoral entities and

subjected to widespread moral and social oppression, making it impossible for them to conform to the prescribed subjects of sexual morality.

This type of sexual morality and sexual ethics implicitly oppress sexual minority groups. Freedom is an inherent and sacred right of human beings that should not be violated. Individual freedom is the "axis and soul" of human rights and is of utmost importance. Queer theory advocates for sexual freedom rights, including the right to sexual autonomy, sexual expression, and the ability to protect one's own body from harm. It views intimate relationships as private affairs, excluding external interference, promoting sexual equity, and opposing sexual discrimination. These seemingly universal freedom rights, however, are not enjoyed by everyone in reality because all these rights are built upon the foundation of the heterosexual system. Only the sexual freedom rights of heterosexual individuals receive legal protection, while other sexual minority groups are deemed as morally inferior and are therefore unable to receive the necessary legal protection and support.

Queer theory aims to challenge the existing moral framework by emphasizing the freedom of association and expression for individuals with diverse sexual identities, as well as opposing sexual discrimination. The queer movement strives to secure legal rights and freedom for queer individuals, enabling them to express and develop themselves fully and enjoy the same rights as others in society.

6. THE LIMITATIONS OF QUEER THEORY

Queer theory posits that existing sexual ethics and morality are, in fact, constructed within the framework of heterosexual hegemony. Such sexual ethics and morality are inherently unequal, prompting the deconstruction of the heterosexual paradigm and questioning the binary structure of gender. Moreover, it aims to disrupt the delineation of sexual values and challenge the moral standards entrenched in traditional ethics, all in the pursuit of freedom and liberation.

However, queer theory, while challenging the binary gender structure, neglects the biological underpinnings that partially substantiate gender differentiation. Thus, from a biological standpoint, queer theory does not fully reconfigure the binary gender structure that forms the bedrock of traditional sexual morality, thereby failing to entirely undermine the status of sexual ethics.

Furthermore, although sexual ethics have negative repercussions on individuals, their positive effects cannot be disregarded. On one hand, sexual ethics perpetuate unfairness and discrimination against minority groups. Yet, these very sexual ethics contribute to the preservation of social order. While queer theory advocates for the interests of sexual minority groups, it overlooks the ramifications for the broader social fabric.

Undoubtedly, queer theory is committed to safeguarding sexual minority groups as well as all marginalized communities. It undeniably assists these individuals in resisting external discrimination and stigmatization, empowering them to rebuild their confidence. Nevertheless, queer theory overlooks the existing differences and contradictions within these groups. "There may be significant differences in the problems that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit persons face, both within and between groups, such as lesbian people and trans people, or lesbians of different racial backgrounds" (Lee, 2019). This serves to underscore the negligence of queer theory in addressing individual variances, such as race, age, class, and so forth.

7. CONCLUSION

Queer theory has had significant influence on both the academic and social spheres. Its emergence has prompted a reexamination of sexual minority groups by the general public. Queer theory has become a source of support for these groups, encouraging them to bravely challenge prejudice, discrimination, and oppression, thereby carrying profound social significance.

By boldly challenging traditional sexual norms and the heterosexual paradigm, queer theory deconstructs the concepts and principles embedded in traditional sexual ethics and morality. To some extent, it prompts individuals to rethink the sexual ethics that regulate their sexual consciousness and behaviors.

However, like a double-edged sword, queer theory has its advantages and disadvantages. While it aims to dismantle binary gender thinking, it overlooks the biological foundations of gender differentiation. Additionally, queer theory neglects the internal differences within sexual minority groups. Furthermore, in advocating for the interests of sexual minority groups, it may fail to adequately consider the broader social implications, potentially disregarding potential social issues that may arise.

In conclusion, it is essential for each individual to approach the discussion of sexual ethics and morality with an open mind and embrace a spirit of inclusivity, accepting and understanding sexual minority groups.

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