

GENDER IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

The scope of a definition

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Gender in Psychoanalysis

The scope of a definition

Le genre en psychanalyse

Périmètre d'une définition

Vincent Bourseul

Abstract:

Gender calls into question psychoanalysis by forcing it to discuss some of the criticisms that have been leveled at it. But the point that current discussions have reached is not always satisfactory. In drawing on queer criticism, can the modern day emancipation of gender be integrated into the epistemological field of psychoanalysis? What are the coordinates for a possible definition of gender in psychoanalysis? This article traces out some points of articulation for the theoretical discussion to which gender gives rise, so as to try to offer a possible definition of it on the basis of what it questions in psychoanalysis.

Résumé:

Le genre questionne la psychanalyse en l'obligeant entre autres, à discuter certaines des critiques qui lui sont adressées. Mais le point où en sont les discussions à l'heure actuelle n'est pas toujours satisfaisant. Appuyée sur la critique queer, l'émancipation moderne du genre peut-elle être intégrée au champ épistémologique de la psychanalyse ? Quelles sont les coordonnées d'une possible définition du genre en psychanalyse ? Cet article trace quelques points d'articulations des discussions théoriques que le genre occasionne, pour tenter d'en donner une possible définition à partir de ce qu'il questionne dans la psychanalyse.

Keywords: gender, psychoanalysis, epistemology, queer

Mots-clefs: genre, psychanalyse, queer, épistémologie

Plan:

What Does Gender Do to Psychoanalysis?

Abraham, Horney and Deutsch

The Scope of the Dialogue and Ethical Questions

Towards a Possible Definition of Gender in Psychoanalysis

In order to broach the coordinates of a possible definition of gender in psychoanalysis, or, in other terms, the relationships between the concepts of psychoanalysis and gender, we need to find a port of entry whereby we can accommodate, within our theoretical field, this

notion which, on the face of it, lies outside this field. We could start off from an historical study of the relationships between psychoanalysis and the sexual questions that have emerged from the sexual minorities. All of this would no doubt allow us to take up the thread of the debates

that have been under way since the beginning of psychoanalysis, which Freud himself engaged in and which others engaged him in. We could also try to respond to the questions that sometimes appear on the basis of “questions of gender”, such as: is psychoanalysis homophobic¹ or homo-friendly²? Is psychoanalysis a “feminist theory manqué”³? But gender is not a psychoanalytical concept, so how is one to proceed? In the past, some writings testified to the interest that certain analysts took in considering a kind of “outside” sex (Weininger⁴, Horney⁵) which today we can interpret afresh as falling more or less under the heading of gender. Historically speaking, the discussions between gender and psychoanalysis first got under way with questions that touched on transsexualism, intersexualism (Stoller) and homosexuality. This articulation between the interest in gender and transsexual questions has been maintained in the present day psychoanalytic field.⁶ However, since Stoller⁷, within the broad “psych-” field, gender has remained linked to the notion of “gender identity” which we find to be rather narrow and static when compared with the interest that gender holds on the epistemological plane in general, and in psychoanalysis in particular. So, let us look again at a few reference points in order to move forward in relation to what the notion of gender has done to psychoanalysis, which will be sure to open up for us a few present day and historical considerations in our field, so that we may attempt a formulation of a possible definition on the basis of the ethical considerations that philosophy relays with psychoanalysis with respect to the subject and the truth of sex.

How is gender currently defined, at once in psychoanalysis and in the disciplines that enter into dialogue with it? First of all, we may observe that the psychoanalytical approach often tries to assign sex and gender when it is a matter of saying what gender is. The relationship between sex and gender finds itself practically undone, to the advantage of a re-composition of sex. This is what we can read

from the pen of Houari Maïdi⁸, who describes how the usual employment in psychoanalysis of the term “sex” clearly shows itself to be an incapacitating one when it comes to the introduction of gender, given how strongly sex seems already to make us hear something of the order of gender here. To pursue this same line, we may indicate the point of opening offered by Claire Nahon⁹ on the basis of “trans-sexuality”, which sets out various useful possibilities by which the sex / gender opposition might be broached, approaches that are especially useful for our attempts at a circumscription of an object that is indeed rather troubling. However, yet again, gender remains “outside sex”. We do not manage to grasp it without this cleft. In a slightly different vein, Colette Chiland¹⁰ continues to voice concern over the articulation between words and reality, with “gender” seeming to give rise in her analysis to issues that the psychiatric nosography would do well to define in order to ensure a firmer grasp of its content. Once again, gender illustrates an unease associated with sex from which it would be almost detachable at the end of its deconstruction. This can be spotted with much greater clarity given that the psychoanalytical approach struggles to perform analyses that are as comfortable and efficacious as sociological analyses, notably when these analyses are engaged in a more direct manner in the interplay of demarcations.¹¹ Thus, disconcerted by an approach that is necessarily partial and hard to conceptualize, the approach of psychoanalytical theory sometimes takes a detour in order to ask: “does the subject have a gender?”¹² This does not offer a definition of gender in psychoanalysis, but we do move forward by handling the notion of gender in our epistemological field, and there we find a place for the clinic. On this same path, Juliet Mitchell¹³ has offered us an interesting reading of Winnicott in order to extract from his reflections some elements that bear on gender, from the point of view of the unconscious, on the basis of a consideration of transference in analysis. So it is that, little by little, over these last years, the

possibility of finding a rightful place, function, and definition for gender has opened up in psychoanalysis.

What Does Gender Do to Psychoanalysis?

Gender translates something of sex by allowing us to appreciate the gap between the anatomical and the psychical, between the genital and the social, and between assignation and affirmation. When Freud takes up the maxim “anatomy is destiny”¹⁴, the supremacy of the biological domain seems to be imposed as the only possible interpretation. And within this conception there is then imposed the supremacy of sex over gender, which would pre-exist it and would be superior to it within a hierarchical relationship. This reading runs completely counter to what gender gives rise to and reveals with respect to the processes of social and cultural constructions that ground it, clarifying by the same stroke what is likewise a social construction of sex, which has been stripped of its naturalness or its genitality, but which has not for all that been desexualized. Going beyond the categories that queer criticism promotes does not necessarily imply going beyond the naturalness that might be present in each of these categories, which can then circulate, without being constantly called into question. This formulation by Freud and other propositions from psychoanalysis in general are critiqued and charged with collaborating with the system of sexual norms that queer criticism tends to denounce in its extension of the critique from the various feminist currents.¹⁵ Patriarchy and phallogentrism (as social and political organizations) are sometimes singled out to assert that psychoanalysis promulgates – whether willingly or despite itself – a conservative ideological conception of sex (including the supremacy of the phallus, castration anxiety, penis envy in girls, masochistic passivity in women). We are not going to carry out a study of these criticisms here. But we do consider that the propositions from the different psychoanalytical theories, as

well as the approaches of psychopathology and of clinical psychology that stem from them, call for criticism, and that, by definition, the moves of protest and affirmation linked to “questions of gender” are the sign that a new knowledge is emerging on the sexual that concerns psychoanalysis. None the less, we would formulate a nuance that strikes us as important. The “anatomical” aspect of the maxim is not the “biological” aspect that, in Freud, remains a model of inspiration for the living being. The anatomical dimension cannot be thought of here as something that embraces the human body as an expression of nature. That would be to commit a mistake with respect to the way that the biological dimension is approached by Freud, which enables us to hypothesize that this reprise of “anatomy is destiny” actually says a great deal more than we could circumscribe, even by the critical approach that it gives rise to. Thus, we are being invited to read afresh, with this clarification of gender, that which appears to us to be the main lines of tension that account for the interactions between psychoanalysis and other discourses.

If we observe what the theoretical controversies have been able to produce by way of debate, we are able to situate first of all the battle between the theory of psychoanalysis and queer theory, for example.¹⁶ We would indicate the book by Javier Saez, *Théorie Queer et Psychanalyse*¹⁷, which in its approach makes us think of the article by Tim Dean, “Lacan et la théorie queer”.¹⁸ Both of them wend their way through the theoretical psychoanalytical edifice, in particular from the 1950s onwards and Lacan’s texts, thus inscribing their analyses within the net of French Theory. No doubt by necessity, their analyses admit of an explicit or implicit continuum between the history of the homosexual movement, which in Saez is translated as “Homosexual, Gay, Queer”, as though it went without saying that this chaining up of signifiers, which certainly appeared in this chronological order, were able to respond to a universal homosexual history that would be capable of adhering to questions of gender. This concerns us because the said history of

homosexuality as a movement is also, more discretely but simultaneously, thought through afresh in a different light from that of its apparent forms of existence on the “Market” such as Michael Warner singles it out:

Gay culture in this most visible mode is anything but external to advanced capitalism and to precisely those features of advanced capitalism that many on the left are most eager to disavow. Post-Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity.¹⁹

It is as though the history of the queer were unable to correspond to the histories of the homosexualities in their diversity, whether present or more ancient²⁰, situated further back in time.²¹ Without doubt this is the sign of an historical attachment to the epistemological moment of French Theory, which tends to freeze epistemological points of correspondence with thoughts that are contemporary to it. These underlying historical and epistemological points of correspondence will have to be developed and studied in greater depth. Sadly, we will not be able to set out this work here.

The academic journal *Champ Psy*, under the editorship of Laurie Laufer and Andréa Linhares, has quite explicitly devoted an issue to this question under the title *Ce que le genre fait à la psychanalyse* [“What gender does to psychoanalysis”]. Restored to the historical context in which it first appeared in the field of the medical and the social, gender is studied here from its various angles, opening a field of study between politics and clinical practice in which we meet love and its forms of expression, desire, the body, the social bond, motherhood, women and creation.

Therefore, it is a matter of shedding light on the notion of gender that from this moment forth is part of the contemporary epistemological landscape. Psychoanalysis is a fact of culture and the studies on gender remind us of this. [...] [T]his issue tends towards a perspective of what gender allows us to think and what it does to psychoanalysis.²²

Is gender able to shed light on this primitive link to the social within the analytical practice? This is the question that is posed by Andréa Linhares:

While the notion of gender seemed to be confined, right from the very start, to the clinical practices that deal with disturbances of sexual identity, political, historical, sociological and psychoanalytical works on the subject sometimes allow us to suspect the possibility of a much wider clinical field. Is not this field, which has to do with the social and with the way in which the subject appropriates for him or herself the messages that are addressed to him or her, also the field of psychoanalysis?²³

Jean Laplanche has written specifically on the notion of gender – and he is one of the very rare psychoanalysts to have done so – by offering a new division of gender in relation to sex, one that is much more in line with psychoanalytical considerations. He makes a clear cut distinction between what Stoller contributed, refuting the division between anatomy and psychology, in order to prefer the following:

With the term “sex”, we need to designate the full set of physical or psychological determinations, behaviors, fantasies, and so on, which are directly tied to the sexual function and to sexual pleasure. Meanwhile, with the term “gender”, we need to designate the full set of physical or psychological determinations, behaviors, fantasies and forth, which are tied to the distinction between masculine and feminine.²⁴

Anatomy and the psychical are thus concerned at each step, and it is up to the feminine and the masculine to hold the historical keys of a division or a recognition of the other. This meets up with certain aspects of what Jessica Benjamin puts forward in her book *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*.²⁵ A representative of the inter subjectivity current in the United States, Benjamin dedicated a number of her texts to these questions. In particular, she sets about singling out with great care the division between feminine and masculine, a variation of which psychoanalysis (the psychoanalysis of Freud) has proposed with the feminine / masculine couple. Following Karen Horney, Benjamin resumes the critique of this approach in order to question the Oedipal turnaround of active and passive in the

girl who thereby integrates the feminine.²⁶ Then, she sets out the reading and the analyses of the works of Freud by K. Horney, J. Riviere, M. Klein, K. Abraham and H. Deutsch.

Abraham, Horney and Deutsch

What do the contemporaries of Freud say on these questions, at a time when the notion of gender is not explicitly exposed, but is perhaps already at work to some degree in its social and cultural aspects in particular? The Freudian proposition on “penis envy” is largely taken up and discussed by female psychoanalysts, notably on the occasion of the publication of Freud’s article devoted to female sexuality in 1931.²⁷ Although gender is not the direct object of these reflections, today we can read, between the lines, certain resonances of it through the way in which these questions are being posed in our modern era.

Well prior to the publication of his 1925 article on the consequences of anatomy, Freud was already being discussed quite directly in the articles of Abraham, of Horney or of Deutsch, who produced extremely important clinical observations and clinical elaborations on the castration complex in women, and its consequences for the understanding of sexual development. Freud’s article only takes on its full meaning once it has been resituated in this context of interweaving propositions, because the approach to the feminine is not absent from the analytic elaborations of the time, quite the contrary. Horney and Deutsch discuss Freud’s observations and deductions point by point based on their own clinical experience, and what they in turn put forward does not fail to feed back into Freud’s reflections. The influence of a feminine analytical thought would deserve to be developed in greater detail, but unfortunately we will not be able to go into it on this occasion. After 1931 and the article on “Female Sexuality”, other texts appear and extend the debates, such as the “Femininity” lecture in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* delivered in 1933.²⁸

Horney, for her part, published *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*²⁹ in 1939. In this book her disagreements with Freud are laid out with greater precision. She strives to open up some lines of enquiry for further work on the basis of what she had met in terms of therapeutic and theoretical dead ends, asking to revise, in her words, some of the givens of the psychoanalytical corpus. In her view, the Freudian conception of femininity deserves to be broached from a critical stance, in order to highlight the lack of consideration of the weight of social and cultural determinants over women. These determinants are seen as the complement to biological determinants that, in Horney’s opinion, are pushed too far into the foreground. Furthermore, her clinical experience as a female psychoanalyst gave her the opportunity to note that “penis envy” does not constitute a universal in the development of sexuality and that consequently it cannot, from her point of view, be conceived of principally on the anatomical factor, because its force of suggestion with respect to patients seems to correspond to other factors. It is on this basis that she suggests the following conclusion:

But since he has a primarily biological orientation Freud does not, and on the basis of his premises cannot, see the whole significance of these factors. He cannot see to what extent they mold wishes and attitudes, nor can he evaluate the complexity of interactions between cultural conditions and feminine psychology. I suppose everyone agrees with Freud that differences in sexual constitution and functions influence mental life. But it seems unconstructive to speculate on the exact nature of this influence. The American woman is different from the German woman; both are different from certain Pueblo Indian women. The New York society woman is different from the farmer’s wife in Idaho. The way specific cultural conditions engender specific qualities and faculties, in women as in men – this is what we may hope to understand.³⁰

In 1945, Helene Deutsch publishes *The Psychology of Women*.³¹ This book takes up her first

advances from 1925 and pursues her reflections further. On female psychology, she dedicates the last chapter to the psychoanalytical conception of this question in its relationships with the social condition. She develops a reading and an analysis of the history of three generations of Russian women caught in the revolutionary movement and the war of the time, which brings very much to the foreground the political dimension of the question of female psychology during this period of world conflict, in particular on the basis of their integration into the economic life of the country.³² Deutsch pleads clearly in favor of the renaissance of another way of seeing and reading social and cultural interactions, so as to bring out their psychical repercussions, whose importance she suggests needs to be reconsidered. The sociological view is invited into the discussion in an even more deliberate manner. Thus, we are tempted to say that gender does to psychoanalysis what psychoanalysis does to women. The works of certain female psychoanalysts give an account of this in an instructive critical dialogue.

The Scope of the Dialogue and Ethical Questions

As we have seen rather quickly, gender calls psychoanalysis into question by forcing it, among other things, to discuss some of the criticisms that were leveled at it. However, the point that these discussions have reached today is not always satisfactory. Admittedly, the dialogue is being pursued with some authors – with Butler in particular – and the questions have been converging in a way that allows for a reconsideration of the links between the political and the sexual. The way in which the sexual falls under the heading of “psychoanalysis in interaction” was explored in a colloquium in 2010, with some of its articles being published in the journal *Recherches en Psychanalyse*.³³ We may also mention a study day, *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve du genre*³⁴, which sought to reply, among other things, to

the question as to whether psychoanalysis possesses the means to think through gender on its own. This is an important question because it is true that the constant crossovers on these questions between different disciplines – sociology, medicine, politics, and so on – make us think that it is only by bringing these different modes of thinking and analysis together that the notion of gender allows itself to be broached. On a stricter plane, we could then say there is no possible definition of gender in psychoanalysis alone – just as is the case in any other discipline. No other discipline manages to keep a hold on it for its own exclusive use. However, this is not a very satisfying answer. There remains a sort of lack when it comes to being able to circumscribe the gender object, since in psychoanalysis the object interests us, makes us think, and accounts for the possibilities of the psychical processes, investments, and so forth. However, perhaps we are able none the less to try to hazard a definition of this notion.

Gender engages the question of sex and brings it up to date. And here we are thinking again about what “sex” draws from the psyche, from the locus, from function, from the object, and so on. In his article, *Le vrai sexe*³⁵, Michel Foucault undertakes a genealogy of the sexuated body. He explains how, up until the eighteenth century, there existed a relative tolerance for the hermaphrodite who had to determine his or her sex. Then, things changed and gender assignment as a substratum of sex was imposed by medicine, and no longer fell under the heading of the liberty of the family of the person concerned. The body subject to expert opinion shows how the “true sex” is a normative and discursive production to the extent that it is the law and medicine that ground it. Sex is no longer a choice but is prescribed by the discourses and the practices that hold the key to its truth. Psychoanalysis has sometimes been accused of being its agent when it “enjoins” the subject to push onward and develop the truth of his sex, which from our point of view represents a confusion of the truths at play in medicine and

in psychoanalysis, which actually diverge, as well as the subjects who have been shown not to be open to such rapid comparison: the subject of the unconscious is not the subject of law, nor is it the subject of medicine or of philosophy. The relationship between sex and truth in medicine and in psychoanalysis is not the same, and yet, psychoanalysis is sometimes criticized for providing a bridge between them. How is this to be understood? This is an important question that gender has effectively brought up to date over these last years, albeit in a slightly different way from how it was done by intellectuals like Foucault in his time. What value do we find in these assignations of the subject to his sex, which philosophy discusses through cultural studies and queer theory, and for what truths, which might be compared to the assignation of sex by language and sexuation, or even with the psychical consequences of sexual difference on the anatomical plane? How, from one to the other, has a bridge of political constraint been operational, one that we would not be in a position to cross in the opposite direction – and which none the less seems rather difficult to bring about if one is to believe in the truth of the obstacles that gender requires us to get round, in order to bring it into discussion with psychoanalysis? We think that this question is an important one because it engages psychoanalysis on the question of its politics and its ethics, of its politics of the body in particular – if indeed it has one. We also think that beyond this, it is the question of the existence of sex unto the psyche that is being posed, because if it exists unto the body, unto law, unto medicine, does it exist in the psychical structure outside of the objects that are dedicated to it by the intermediary of the drive? For this is to wend one's way once again through the distinction that Freud drew between the object and the drive, which we really have to look at again: they are not “naturally” but “unconsciously” determined in their relationship, and the unconscious motifs take precedence over a supposed source of excitation in the object.³⁶ The drive, being independent of its object, shall

never be able to harbor a subjective truth when it is from subjectivity that one draws avowals. The subject of the unconscious, the subject of psychoanalysis, is not a subject who avows.

Towards a Possible Definition of Gender in Psychoanalysis

We have seen how gender eludes, more or less, any attempt at definition, which attests to its usefulness as a category of critical analysis, such as it has revealed itself over a period that reaches back more than thirty years. In this spirit, a risk has been identified, that of possibly seeing it become fossilized³⁷ in various applications that would be tempted to reduce it to a function by which to treat data, confining it more often than not to observations on social roles between men and women, and this is a phenomenon that is even clearer now that gender is sometimes being defined as a stable concept. To the medical and psychiatric field – under the effect of the human and social sciences – gender highlights the social existence of the subject, to which its dimension of identity finds itself linked on account of being its spokesperson. In blurring the boundaries, gender planes down the line of separation between anatomical sex and denaturalized sex, as well as the line that delimits gender itself as an “outside” of the body or an extension of identity. Once it has come apart, gender makes sex come apart, and it creates sex, in a circulation that concerns the psychical processes: as a duplication of its own effects, and as an efficient revealer of everything that discourses and relations of power harbor by way of norms and constraints, gender seems to produce both one thing and its contrary. Then, gender takes its source in the locus of sex when the latter questions the lived experience of the sexuated body, in which all that is anatomical does not cover all that is biological. For, while biology sexes the body, it is very much the case that sexuation situates it in the sexual landscape by means of the intervention of language (whether this is conceived of as

performative or as signifying). Therefore, this is a spoken gender that bears the psychical processes that ground it and opens onto the fact of taking into account the social and the political in their intra-psychical and unconscious points of impact, between movements of identity and subjective moments of advent. This is produced, in our opinion, by the opening of the subversion of the sexual that psychoanalysis initiated, and whose recent theoretical productions pursue the *narrative* (represented by French Theory, by Cultural Studies, and so on and so forth). Not being absorbable by psychoanalytical theories, just as no other discipline can truly absorb it, gender is situated as a soft concept, at once on the inside and on the outside of sex, in order to reveal the depth of its field. As we have just briefly seen, it acts through the transgression of instituted forms of knowledge under the influence of desire and unconscious knowledges, reviving the question of the bond between the collective and the individual when we have to situate the subject there (the subject of the unconscious), which is what the psychoanalytical experience teaches us.

Gender is useful if it allows us to maintain this tension towards the deepening of sexual difference as an experience, and the knowledges that are extracted from it. It is perfectly useless if it is merely a supplementary variable of the

description of social relations and the roles of men and women, in any case, in psychopathology or in psychoanalysis. Gender is useful if it serves us as a subversive operator that is capable of maintaining trouble, the experience of trouble, that leads us back and exposes us to the experience of sexual difference such as it goes on being produced ceaselessly, in spite of the fact that what we make of it in terms of knowledge, as sexual identity and others besides, allows us no longer to see it at work, nor to experience it too strongly. Gender is useful if it allows us, on this path, to account for the new arrangements of sexuation and of sexual difference, in which ambiguity in particular no longer forms the object of an effort at clarification, up until its dissolution. As a consequence of this, we can put forward a definition of gender in psychoanalysis: gender designates in psychoanalysis the limit that is situated at once on the outside and on the inside of sex, the littoral or the margin of sex that is capable of revealing the depth of its field. Gender appears under the effect of the sexual. It calls into question unconscious knowledges and makes identifications vacillate to the point that they are renewed. So it is that gender creates sex in the in-between space of its intermittent trouble, at the moment of stability when it makes itself felt.

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¹Eribon, D. (2005). *Échapper à la psychanalyse*. Paris: Léo Scheer, 102 p.

²Roudinesco, E. & Pommier, F. (2002). Psychanalyse et homosexualité : réflexions sur le désir pervers, l'injure et la fonction paternelle. *Cliniques Méditerranéennes*, Issue 65, p. 7-34.

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