



Gender: concept, category and more (a theoretical confusion).

Nohemí Roque Nieto, MSE.

Ph.D Student in Education, program enrolled at the PNPC-CONACyT at the Institute of Education Sciences of the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos. Mexico

Augusto Renato Pérez Mayo, Ph.D.

Department of Studies of the organizations and Sociology of Organizations

Faculty of Accounting, Management, and Informatics,

The Autonomous University of the State of Morelos (Cuernavaca, Mexico)

The corresponding author: renatomayo@hotmail.com

Abstract. The confusions that have originated from the gender category are explored and described. A confusion that arises from the feminist academy in the distinction as to how the biological bodies of human beings become social, and therefore, every social interaction is sexed. The gender category has been widely divulged in the last years, but while doing it, its use has become freer and less rigorous, identifying it with feminine, women, feminist movements and social movements of women. Underlying theoretical and epistemology are proposed. Theoretical essays that borrow categories of social analysis from conceptual schemes are revised, but these are decontextualized when using them for theorizations of gender. Difficulties arise in the theoretical categories of sociological character and of political science such as social construction and power, they are transported without epistemic mediation or specification to the language of other disciplines, mainly psychology or anthropology.

Keywords: Gender; Gender Category; Gender Theory; Concept; confusion; feminist academy.

Introduction

What is gender? What is the category of gender? What do we understand by gender? These questions and their answers arise every day, in Mexico, and in other parts of the world (Spain, Holland, England, United States, Germany, among others) in publications, in informal conversations, among activists of the contemporary women movement and intellectuals. They all seem to have different answers, and each answer is impregnated with a political and/or emotional charge. For many, within or outside of the academic institutions, the word “gender” promotes controversy and sometimes it even provokes a visceral response that may even cause confusion to whoever reads or listens to it.

Perhaps, one of the characteristics of the world today is the fluency and facility with which words reach male and female readers through specialized publications. New problems which give rise to concepts and categories that are rapidly transmitted by the mass media converting them into realities. Along the pathway, these -the words- are transformed, impoverished and/or become cliché. At the same time, social pressure makes them necessary to utilize even when the people who use them have no clear conscience on what they are talking. Consider these prefaces to start analyzing what happened to the gender category.

Some elements become clear when someone uses the word gender: on the one hand, when referring to a population differentiated by sex, that is to say, women and men, even though many times it is the female population which is being talked about. On the other hand, in some way it is assumed that men and women are not identical and exchangeable and, in a very widespread meaning, the chances of exercising freedom are -in general terms- lesser in a female population. A third meaning, not excluding the previous ones, says in relation to the socio-cultural meaning of gender, that distinguishes from the biological connotation and corporal concept of sex or sexual difference.

Thus, inquiring first in the gestation process of the category and in its disclosure. Second, delving -as much as

possible- in the main theoretical-methodological perspectives about gender, trying to define the premises, the explanation potentialities, as well as the limitations of each stance.

The origin of the doubt, the confusion

The gender category bursts onto the academic-political stage towards the middle of the sixties among English-speaking university feminists. With this category reference is made to the distinction between sex, and therefore, to the set of phenomena of corporal origin, and the very diverse socio-cultural ordinances built collectively from such bodily differences. In Spanish, the concept as such starts to be used in the early eighties, arising from the translation of texts originally written in English. Some feminist theoreticians tend to provide clarifications on the difficulties of translation, given that there is no word equivalent to gender in English and to *Geschlecht* in German which already contains the reference to socialized sex (Lamas, 1986).

The appearance of the gender concept is produced when there already is a set of investigations and reflections about the social condition of women; upon introducing the concept, a theoretical organizer of the findings and new knowledge about to be produced was sought, that will distance itself from the uncritical usage, and historically impoverished, patriarchate category and that would allow to exit the empirics in which many of the research reports had fallen. Nevertheless, the purpose of creating a unifying category of the diversity that accounted for the empirical evidences, the different disciplinary slants, and the epistemological and theoretical methodologies that lead to the explicit conceptualizations of the gender category.

As in any social movement, the feminist movement, from its start, has been permeated by very different strains and conflicts about its goals and objectives, strategies and tactics, forms of external and internal actions that have given rise to founded argumentations of the distinct competing postures as may be noted in the readings of Lamas, Connel, and Gutierrez Lozano, to mention just a few. As a consequence, much of the thought produced responds more to the political controversy, within the movement or with the critics and outside spokespersons -antifeminists or not- rather than to the epistemological and theoretical-methodological debates properly said about the substantive and problematic aspects. So that to the originally mentioned confusions are added other problems when the gender category, with its distinct meanings already in the scope of the debate among the diverse slants of feminism, expands its use and application.

Within the own women's movement, it is employed as a synonym of feminism, and from the point of view, experiences and interests of women. Gender perspective is said when it refers to a perspective of women and, in general, from a group of certain women; or to the position of feminists or to a certain aspect within the movement. In recent years, in the social analysis and bureaucratic codes, it substitutes the sex variable. Each time it is more frequent to find statistical tables in which instead of "sex" "gender" is said. The indiscriminate and imprecise use of the gender category is evident as a synonym of women, or men and women relations of inequality and conflict, a more or less subtle attempt to subdue and lead to the disappearance of the conflict of classes and the specific processes of exploitation, in the current conditions in of the globalized and globalizing capitalism. But let's not loose sight of an attitude which is present more often in academic media, of men and women who seek to understand the content and the heuristic value of the gender category, to be up-to-date in the debates to see the lights that could comprehend the processes. They seek to systematize by granting its own rationality to the proposal of gender.

Rubin for example, raises the need to do the same exercise with some theories as Marx did with the classical political economy. For this task he retrieves two theories in which being a man and being a woman are central: the kinship of Levis-Strauss and Psychoanalysis. This allows the union of areas of social organization and subjectivity, proposing that in the first would be the last determinants of the second. For this reason, for Rubin, gender is then a social construction that transforms the biological sexuality into products of the human activity (1989). This organization will take place from the definition of social through the organization of kinship, which when dividing "men" and "women" into marriageable and non-marriageable produces objective and subjective heterogeneities according to social requirements. The men constitute the desiring beings, whereas the women are beings wanting to be desired.

In search of the concept or category of gender

All the previous confusions force us to revise the conceptualizations behind the category of gender used by social scientists or philosophers of science. There are two fundamental stands. Those who consider gender as an attribute of individuals, as opposed to those who consider it as a social organizer, a historical and collective construction. In the first underlies the idea that society is just the sum of the individuals who make it up. Gender is therefore an attribute or characteristic that allows the classification of individuals. On the other hand, gender is a dimension of society, that which arises from a reality, the existence of sexed bodies, a category or subsets from which there is a probability to produce other body or bodies (Ayús Reyes & Eroza Solana, 2007). In other words, the old tension individual-society, that worried the classics so much makes itself present in the conceptualization of gender or if it is preferred of the systems sex/gender (Lamas, 1999).

Theoretical review

In the seventies, the word gender is adopted as a synonym of the word woman and in that sense, gender becomes a concept associated with the study of issues related to women. In the eighties, gender not only makes reference to women, but also implies a global vision of women dealing with their reality, along with the object of visualizing the condition of women in their social life, economic, political, academic, etc. In the nineties, gender is employed as a category of analysis to identify the social relations between men and women in order to accommodate the differences, needs and life conditions. To do this Lamas points out that gender is a set of practices, beliefs, representations and social prescriptions that arise between the members of a human group in function of a symbolization of the anatomical difference (Lamas, 1999).

It is also proposed that "...the masculinity or femininity of people, resulting in the sexual differences being treated as an explanation instead of the analytical starting point..." (West, Lazar, & Kramarae, 2000). Gutiérrez Lozano assumes that gender or its dichotomy is a social construction. Harding, mentions that it is an analytical category that has as its function to explain the generalization of social life, expressed in the generic symbolization, the structuring of social life through gender and in the generation of individual identities of gender (1996).

In this sense, Luke (in Carrington & Bennett, 1999) mentions that gender is a construction in which subjects participate as agents of their own socializing practices, and constitutive of fragmented identities and diverse practices that may be defined as routine pedagogies, institutionalized or not.

Other proposals state that it is a set of ideas, beliefs, social representations and attributions constructed in each culture drawing on sexual differences as a base.

These characteristics have translated into inequalities and marginalization for most women and in the subordination of their interests as a person, to those of others. It is important to point out that gender affects both men and women, that the definition of femininity is made in contrast to that of masculinity, consequently gender refers to those areas- ideological as well as structural- that include relations between the sexes.

Even though it may seem complicated to utilize the gender category, with a little bit of practice it is soon learned. At the beginning, it is necessary to think if it is about something socially or biologically constructed. For example, if it is said that menstruation is a question of gender, there is a need to reflect: Is this constructed or biological? Obviously, it is something biological; then it is a question related to sex and not to gender. On the other hand, if we affirm that women who are menstruating cannot shower, it makes us think that this idea does not have to do with biological questions, but with a cultural assessment, and therefore it is gender.

The consideration of gender as a set of characters or roles looks to the society, from the functionalist component where the category of character or role anchors its theoretical statute. There is talk of those roles that are originated in the social division of work (Lamas, 1986). But we must not forget that in functionalism roles are a relational category, at the same time it is the entry point to the study of the social structure, or as Parsons points out... the base term of a series of structural categories, with the other terms being in ascending order collectivity, norm and value (Parsons, 2007, p.41).

Feminists who invoke them decontextualize the roles and disregard the remaining elements which give them meaning. That is to say, the concepts are employed but not the substance of the theory, given that the collectivity, norms and values do not appear in the theoretical discourse in this way of looking gender and less, therefore they are placed into a functional relationship.

These limitations are not rectified when it is said that gender is social roles and individual identity, given that in a social theory the sum of the concepts does not necessarily produce an explanation at a higher level.

A more complicated posture is the one proposed by Benería and Roldán, when they define gender as "...a network of beliefs, personality traits, attitudes, feelings, values, behaviors and activities that differentiate men from women through a process of social construction that has a series of distinctive aspects." (Benería & Roldán, 1992, p. 24). For women, gender is a category with dimensions, they do not reduce them to one or two. Now the definition, De Lauretis holds that:

The sex-gender system is a sociocultural construction and is also a semiotic apparatus. It is a system of representation that assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in the kinship structure, status in the social hierarchy, among others) to individuals within society. If the representations of gender constitute social positions fraught with different meanings, the fact that someone is represented and represents himself as a man or a woman, implies the recognition of the totality of the effect of those meanings. As a consequence, the proposal that the representation of gender is a construction of itself, being, each of those terms simultaneously the product and the process of the other, may be explained in a more precise manner: The construction of gender is the product as well as the process of its representation (De Lauretis, 1991).

This author places the concept in the area of ideology favoring one dimension, one posture: The Marxist.

Scott in 1986 proposes that gender is a constitutive element of the social relations based in the differences that distinguish the sexes and /.../ is a primary form of the significant relations of power. Gender is the primary field with which or through which power is articulated (Lamas, 1997).

This conceptualization is relevant in several ways:

1. because it conceives gender as a question of society and not only the individuals and their identities,
2. because it is a constituent of all social relationships, that is to say, it introduces corporeality in the social action.
3. And because society constructs this communication relationship and dynamic.

Gender may also be understood as a heuristic device that plays positive and negative functions in a research program (Lakatos, 1998). As a positive heuristic, gender clarifies a zone of inquiry, framing a series of questions for the investigation. Even though it is not necessary to imply an explicit methodological compromise, gender as an analytical tool identifies puzzles or problems that is necessary to explore and clarify, and offers concepts, definitions and hypothesis to guide the investigation. The idea itself of a positive heuristic is tentative; it indicates a method of trial and error to solve problems that require the collective effort of multiple studies to advance in this field.

This is certainly not the place to elaborate on the topic. But it does not appear that the theoreticians of feminism mentioned in previous paragraphs take the idea of social construction in the sense noted by the classics of sociology. In more recent years a very subjective idea of social construction has been disseminated that takes away from the social reality collectively elaborated, the objective character and coercive enforcement over the individuals. The category of social construction appears then as a psychologized concept, as the idea that everyone makes out of the things that surround him and which he has access to. Thus, a holistic category and with high heuristic value, has partially lost its content when interpreted and employed in terms of a certain common language and therefore, in a very poor manner. However, when thought from the gender point of view, the idea of a social construction may become a powerful aid if it is taken in the sense of the sociological tradition. If gender is an objective social construction, following Berger and Luckman (2001), questions about its level may be asked, that is to say, what set of social objects it includes.

Something similar to the above occurs with the ideas of power and politics. A common problem found in the reviewed literature is the issue of power relations faced by gender; from the beginning of the so called new wave of feminism onwards, it is argued that the problem of subordination of women is a matter derived from the power in society. However, in the reviewed documents, references to power are obtained from two different main areas: the one associated to the roles and to the powers and resistance of the bodies. The main Weberian principle is ignored: every social relationship has the probability of being imposed by one of the parties over the other one (Weber, 1964). And the institutionalization of power is set aside; that is to say, the problems of domination, that in this case involves a specific domination, that is built from the physical differences, and that remits us to the legitimacy, to the particular and specific forms of authority and obedience. There are other problems generated that must be solved.

In this sense, Guzmán Cáceres and Pérez Mayo propose that a confusion of terms also prevails, as to what is called gender theory and feminist theory. They discuss in respect to the principle of demarcation of Popper, as a possibility of establishing a criteria that allows to differentiate between the feminist theoretical proposals or pertaining to gender, which comply with the basic epistemological criteria and other type of proposals that respond more to political and ideological interests, or that do not contain the necessary elements to be considered scientific theories, because they constitute loose hypothesis or empirical results that are not articulated theoretically (Guzmán Cáceres & Pérez Mayo, 2007).

Many of the so called feminist theories depart from immovable assumptions: the universality of the patriarchy, the relations of inequality, the oppression that women suffer, that has diverse degrees according to each position or theory, departing from disparity to inequality until they reach the oppression that affects all the walks of life. Let us ask ourselves then if the so called feminist theories are not falling into the inflexibility that they criticize so much in their contempt to the way of doing science marked by the critical rationalism and the logical positivism, in a critical stance confronting knowledge that is static and that more than looking for empirical evidence to distort such theories, points to their corroboration in all nations and all contexts.

On the other hand, the empirical studies that are based on such theories in which the binarisms bad-man good-woman are always present, and forget to explore the deepest human subjectivity, do not look beyond the social relations of domination and utilization in which women are the losers and victims facing men or the great capitalism. It is worth considering if the scientific inquiry is not possible in the social and human fields, in which it may depart from a search

that does not have as its premise the oppression and that seeks to explore the universe of social relations that we think that do not always lead to the unhappiness and torture that the feminine existence signifies (and the masculine, according to recent studies on masculinity) given the present situation among the genders.

Finally, we must take into account the concept adopted by the United Nations, in response to the discussions for the IV International Conference of Women which holds that:

“Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a determined society in determined times considers appropriate for men and women. Besides the social attributes and opportunities associated with the condition of being a man or a woman/.../ these attributes, opportunities and relationships are built socially and learned through a process of socialization.” (UN Women, s/f)

This review of the main concepts allows a limited approach, without a doubt, to the distinct manners of defining gender and provides a detailed account of the cutbacks from which the theoreticians have thought about the differences between men and women in today’s societies.

Conclusions

In previous pages’ efforts, have been made to explore and describe some of the obscure points and several of the confusions have been expressed that the category of gender has created. The concept of Gender. Arising in the feminist academy to distinguish how the biological bodies of human beings become social and therefore, all social interaction is sexed, the category of gender has been widely disseminated in the last years. But in so doing, its use has become freer and less rigorous, identifying it with the feminine, women, the feminist and women movements.

The first great confusion appears by the different underlying epistemological theoretical perspectives. Gender is understood by the wide set of female authors, as an attribute of individuals, while for others it is a sort of social organizer. In the first aspect permeated by the methodological individualism, and for whom society is only an aggregate of individuals (Psychologists). In the second aspect with holistic character, the ones generated by sociology predominate, the political science, anthropology, and history suppose that society is more than a set of individuals. It appears when it is observed that the theoretical essays borrow categories from the social analysis arising from conceptual schemes, but which are decontextualized when used for the theorizations of gender. Thus, it is observed that concepts are taken from Weber or from Parsons, without taking into account the character that the category occupies in the thinking system of the respective author.

A third and last line of difficulties appears when it is observed that the theoretical categories of sociological nature and from political science as a social construction and power, mainly psychology or anthropology, are transported without mediation nor epistemological specification to the language of other disciplines, mainly psychology or anthropology. In this transit the character of social organizer is lost, they are individualized and reach untenable contradictions. The problem is epistemic, it is the lack of rationality inherent to these perspectives, they are only perspectives.

From an inclusion approach the gender proposal must encompass the totality of the needs of women which are multiple and differing, it must have sufficient ability to include the interests of married, and single women, of mothers, and of women who have not chosen maternity and of women for whom the relationship to other women is more important than any other. It must be directed to rich and poor women, to women of different ethnic and religious groups. It must also involve those men whose concept of themselves does not depend on the domination of women. A project of this type will encompass the most notable aspect of the relational and individualistic frameworks in which the past as well as the present is framed on the debate on the issues of women, and which will offer new perspectives to the feminist politics, and why not, also to the masculine perspective.

It is true that there is an important limitation in the investigations on men, little has been revealed on the social being and the interaction between males and the masculine perspective of men-women relationships. It is not knowing if in the present-day societies, the male life cycle is similar or different to the female, how the different male sectors build paternity, the headship of household, domestic responsibilities, the friendship between males, their loyalties and their conflicts. Research is required that give an account of the way they handle reproduction, sexuality and the work capacity in private, domestic and public environments. There needs to be a proposal in universities in the lines of investigation about: changes of gender in certain occupations, how are they accepted, and how they resist the feminization of many of them that take place nowadays, or the masculinization of other traditionally female occupations, the masculine subjectivity. Its internal part.

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