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Identity as a phenomenon of individual self-determination based on queer studies theory

Tożsamość jako zjawisko samostanowienia jednostki w oparciu o teorię queer studies

https://doi.org/10.25312/2391-5145.18/2023_02al

Abstract

On the one hand, identity concerns the way in which an individual considers and constructs themselves as a member of specific social groups: nation, social class, cultural level, ethnicity, gender or occupation. On the other hand, however, it is related the way in which the norms of these groups make each individual think, behave, position and relate to themselves, to others, to the group in question and to external groups understood, perceived and classified as "otherness".
According to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, queer theory questions the naturalness of an individual's gender identity, sexual identity and sexual acts, arguing that they are fully or partially social constructs and hence individuals cannot be described by such general terms as 'heterosexual' or 'female'. Queer theory therefore challenges the common practice of categorising people to make them 'fit' into one or more specific, pre-defined categories.

Keywords: identity, sexual orientation, gender, heterosexuality, homosexuality, queer, LGBT, social roles

Streszczenie

Tożsamość dotyczy z jednej strony sposobu, w jaki jednostka uważa i konstruuje siebie jako członka określonych grup społecznych: narodu, klasy społecznej, poziomu kulturowego, etniczności, płci, zawodu, z drugiej jednak strony – sposobu, w jaki normy tych grup sprawiają, że każda jednostka myśli, zachowuje się, zajmuje pozycję i odnosi się do siebie, do innych, do grupy, do której należy, i do grup zewnętrznych rozumianych, postrzeganych i klasyfikowanych jako inność.
Podążając za tezami Michela Foucaulta, Jacques'a Derridy i Julii Kristevej, teoria queer kwestionuje naturalność tożsamości płciowej, tożsamości seksualnej i aktów seksualnych każdej jednostki, twierdząc, że są one w całości lub częściowo skonstruowane społecznie, a zatem jednostek nie można opisać za pomocą ogólnych terminów, takich jak *heteroseksualny* czy *kobieta*. Teoria queer podważa więc powszechną praktykę dzielenia opisu osoby tak, by „pasowała" do jednej lub kilku konkretnych, zdefiniowanych kategorii.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość, orientacja seksualna, płeć, heteroseksualizm, homoseksualizm, queer, LGBT, role społeczne

Introduction

When analysing the issue of identity as a phenomenon of individual self-determination based on the queer theory, one can discern that subsequent psychological, sociological and anthropological research findings complement one another in explaining the complexity of human identity and the way in which individuals defines themselves or are defined by others.

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether an individual's identity as an expression of self-determination is ontologically grounded in the biological and psychological or rather the social and cultural sphere, both of which have strong arguments in favour of and are sometimes juxtaposed as opposite poles on the spectrum of human personality.

The contemporary concept of society understood as a pluralistic conglomerate of individuals is not free of stereotypes, social roles and broadly understood normative vision. Therefore, it is important to consider how individual identity affects this conglomerate and how it interacts with the rest of society.

While studies of the LGBT+ community focus on analysing how behaviour is defined as either 'natural' or 'unnatural' compared to heterosexual behaviour, queer theory seeks to encompass any sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories[1].

When it comes to the definition of human identity, it is regarded as a sphere that requires a broad and multidimensional perspective, which takes into account the uniqueness of each individual. This concept also encompasses gender identity, a term that has been in use since the 1950s and 1960s. In recent years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the

[1] L. Downing, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008.

issue of the impact of psychosexual identity on the pluralistic community of democratic states. The analysis presented in this paper is based on the research of the American biologist and sexologist Alfred Kinsey, limiting its scope to American culture and indirectly to analogous phenomena in Europe. However, it is often the case that the debate takes on an emotional or ideological tinge, drifting away from the scientific domain, which is the only one that can provide a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensionality of the topics analysed[2].

The role of gender in defining one's identity

The category of gender has been introduced into public debate relatively recently to signify the possible configurations of sex and, accordingly, sexual desire, shaped through the influence of a particular culture. In order to clearly define the issue, it is necessary to adopt a specific terminology in order to avoid misunderstanding related to the overlapping of the different categories in question. As a matter of fact, sexual identity can be analysed in terms of at least four variables, including: biological sex; what one identifies as sexual identity; gender identity of a psychological nature, related to the acceptance or non-acceptance of one's biological sex; gender role, related to the sexual behaviour that society promotes and expects of the individual; sexual orientation, defined by the object of an individual's sexual desire[3].

Gender identity is one of the basic elements in the process of constructing one's sexual and personal identity. This process is dynamic and influenced by the culture to which one belongs, and defines how one perceives oneself in relation to society[4].

At the moment of birth, based on the external sex organs, each person is assigned one of two sexes: female in the case of the vulva or male in the case of the penis and testicles[5]. This classification is based on purely anatomical criteria, whereas gender identity represents each person's perception of themselves as male or female, or sometimes as belonging to categories other than male or female. Not everyone who is born with female genitalia grows up feeling female, just as not everyone who is born with male genitalia grows up feeling male[6].

Gender dysphoria is a concept that denotes the affective and cognitive discomfort with one's assigned gender and ia mismatch between one's sex (assigned at birth) and one's gender identity. It applies to all people who feel that they belong to a gender other than the one assigned to them based on their anatomy, or who do not feel that they belong to either the female or male gender, or whose gender identity is fluid, fluctuating between

[2] S. Epstein, *A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality*, "Sociological Theory" 1994, Vol. 12(2).

[3] J. Butler, *Critically Queer*, [in:] S. Phelan (ed.), *Playing with fire: queer politics, queer theories*, Routledge, New York 1997.

[4] A.I. Green, *Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies*, "Sociological Theory" 2007, Vol. 25(1).

[5] Cf. R. Piprek, J.Z. Kubiak, *Historia badań nad determinacją płci*, "Kosmos" 2020, No. 68(4).

[6] Ibid.

female and male. The gender expressed by an individual goes beyond the one assigned to them at birth[7].

Biological sex and gender in cultural terms

Contrary to popular belief, gender and biological sex are two different aspects, which do not always coincide. On a cultural level, biological differences between the sexes are perceived as strongly corresponding to deep and immutable gender differences. For example, if an individual is born female, they are considered a woman and are expected to be polite and hospitable. This enforced conformity is referred to in the literature on the subject as psychological essentialism, a view that perceives gender as based solely on biological differences between men and women[8].

What society expects of all of us becomes our way of being; our identity is rooted in the characteristics attributed to the group to which we belong. According to this perspective, gender can be attributed to men and women as social beings, embedded in a normative and relational context[9].

In cultural terms, being male does not mean being of the male sex, just as being female does not mean being of the female sex. Identifying oneself as male or female much more often depends on one's experiential sense of self and perceptions of the world, including what one has learned based on social relationships with others[10].

In a society (for example, American society) where the concept of binarism is strong and dominant, gender roles can be understood as a set of patterns of behaviour and responsibilities expected of a person occupying a particular social position. The roles of men and women in society should, according to some, coincide with the gender assigned to them at birth[11].

Gender identity is in fact a more complex concept than just tickinh the M or F box on a birth certificate or other documents, and can go beyond binary stereotypes. Although the international scientific community does not unanimously agree on the subject, it is possible to think of it as a spectrum combining the two extremes of male and female gender.

How is then the 'gender spectrum', which refers to the question of identity, defined in queer theory studies?[12]

– Cisgender describes a person who identifies with the gender corresponding to their biological sex.

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[7] S. Bogusławski, *Mała encyklopedia medycyny*, PWN, Warszawa 1990, p. 920.

[8] D.A. Snow, P.E. Oliver, *Social movements and collective behaviour*, [in:] K.S. Cook, G.A. Fine, J.S. House (eds.), *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston 1995.

[9] Ibid.

[10] D.J. Terry, M.A. Hogg, *Group norms and the attitude-behavior relationship: A role for group identification*, "Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin" 1996, Vol. 22(8).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Cf. J. Spade, C. Valentine, *The kaleidoscope of gender: prisms, patterns, and possibilities*, Pine Forge Press, 2011.

– Transgender, in turn, is an umbrella term, denoting a person who does not conform to the expectations, roles and attitudes associated with the gender assigned to them at birth.

– The term transsexual is not synonymous with the term transgender, but rather denotes transgender people who are not identifying with their biological sex and have commenced a therapy to change their body to the sex with which they identify.

– Non-binary denotes people who do not recognise the binary view of gender as being classified into only female and male genders; this definition includes both genderqueer people who identify with an individual mix of two genders and genderfluid people whose gender identity is fluctuates between male and female.

– Agender denotes people who refuse to identify with any gender.

– In biology, there is also the condition of intersexuality, referring to people whose sex chromosomes, hormones or genitalia do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies[13].

Affective orientation

While gender identity is concerned with self-perception, affective orientation concerns the gender one is attracted to, resulting from the interaction of biological, genetic, environmental and cultural factors. Affective orientation is also viewed as a fluid dimension that can potentially change over time[14].

Attraction refers to a form of desire experienced towards another person, characterised by strong physical and emotional involvement. There are different types of attraction: romantic, sensual, sexual, aesthetic and platonic. Each individual may experience none, some or all forms of attraction to persons of one or more genders[15].

Sexual orientation does not coincide with gender – these are two different aspects that can be combined in a number of ways. In this case too, there are various nuances involved that are relevant to the sociological perception of social groups and the self-determination of individuals. This issue was explored in detail by the American biologist and sexologist Alfred Kinsey[16]. Based on research he conducted in the late 1940s, Kinsey introduced the concept of continuity of the gradations between different sexual orientations and proposed a scale to be used for this purpose. Kinsey's scale consists of seven categories, where 0 tands for exclusively heterosexual orientation, 6 – exclusively homosexual orientation, 3 – bisexuality, while the remaining number any relative stages between the extremes.

The cognitive group analysed represented a diverse mix of American citizens of different age, gender, environment and background. Alfred Kinsey developed his scale based on statistical surveys, questionnaires and interviews[17].

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[13] Ibid.

[14] C.L. Ridgeway, S.J. Correll, *Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations*, "Gender" 2004, Vol. 18(4).

[15] Ibid.

[16] D. Drucker, *The classification of sex: Alfred Kinsey and the organization of knowledge*, Pittsburgh 2014.

[17] Ibid.

– A heterosexual person is someone who identifies with one sex and is only attracted to persons of the opposite sex.

– A homosexual person is someone who is attracted to people of the same sex; this definition includes lesbians and gays.

– A bisexual person feels attracted to people of both sexes, male and female.

– A pansexual is someone who feels attracted to people regardless of the other person's gender; this term includes people with fluid or non-binary identities; the different nuances of meaning between bisexuality and pansexuality are explained by the etymology of the two words, as the prefix bi- means two and in this case refers to two genders, male and female, while pan- means all and better reflects the multiplicity of identities to which the term pansexual refers.

– A asexual is someone who does not feel any kind of sexual attraction, neither to persons of the opposite sex nor to persons of their own sex, even though they are capable of experiencing deep feelings and establishing meaningful relationships[18].

Sexual orientation is not a label to be assigned and accepted for the rest of our lives, but is rather a fluid state that can change over time, even in adulthood. In fact, there are a number of psychological and scientific studies that demonstrate that prove such changes are not uncommon at all. Sexual fluidity manifests itself in both men and women, as the ability to change one's sexual inclinations is innate in humans, but according to statistics it is women who are more open and willing to accept such changes[19]. According to Kinsey, an individual's 'score' on his scale can change, even significantly, over a lifetime. For many, this can be a distressing experience, which is why it is crucial to sensitise society to the broad spectrum of individual identity. Negative role models and stereotypes often lead to stigma and even persecution, which takes a toll on the mental health of these individuals, leading to depression or even suicide attempts[20].

Referring to the sexual orientation of gay, lesbian and bisexual people as a deviation leads to stereotyping and stigmatisation. Hostility towards 'deviant' people stems from heteronormative beliefs that impose a view of heterosexuality as the only acceptable attitude. The negative perception of gays, lesbians and bisexuals results in the perpetuation of stereotypes that are often unsubstantiated and serve to reinforce a particular social concept while rejecting all individuals whose identity differs from the standard[21].

Each individual initially constructs their sexual gender identity during adolescence, primarily based on their biological sex, but also a number of other factors. In fact, what is decisive in this regard are the interpersonal relationships that are established from the moment of birth between the child and its guardians. In their relationship with the child, parents reinforce – consciously or unconsciously, through verbal or non-verbal messages – the child's masculinity or femininity. The father and mother have an idea of what

[18] Ibid.
[19] D.M. Halperin, *The Normalization of Queer Theory*, "Journal of Homosexuality" 2003, Vol. 45(2–4).
[20] Ibid.
[21] D.J. Terry, M.A. Hogg, op. cit.

a man or a woman should be, what each sex must or must not do, and they interact with their child accordingly[22].

Men and women use the same-sex parent as a model for their self-identification, which also contributes to the shaping of their gender identity, especially if the parent in question feels comfortable with their masculinity or femininity[23].

Another fundamental aspect that serves to reinforce one's identity is the perception of the opposite-sex parent, especially the willingness on the part of the child to place itself in the role of the object of love who reciprocates the feeling with equally intense love. A love in which it is not the sexual aspect that is at work, but the intensity of affection, acceptance, recognition of the parent of the opposite sex, reflects a "beautiful" image that will accompany the growing child in their relationships with others in their adult life[24].

When it comes to sexual identity, one can also speak of the concept of sexual role, which is linked to social feedback. The sexual role consists of a set of expectations that are imposed on a person on the basis of their biological sex. In our culture, there are different expectations of behaviour considered appropriate for each gender, although one can notice positive changes with respect to entrenched stereotypes[25].

During adolescence, when sexual identity is reinforced and consolidated, adolescents undergo through a period of a certain detachment from their original models of identification (parents) in order to identify – this time individually and independently – with given male and female roles[26]. In this perspective, the models shown by the mass media are particularly important, especially for those who, for various reasons, did not have appropriate identification models in adult members of their families, who could serve for them as a point of reference. In such cases, a critical judgement comes into play that allows one to scrutinise the various models proposed and to choose those that best correspond to one's inner feelings[27].

Conclusions

Sexual orientation and sexual identity are currently perceived as different concepts. The latter is perceived in terms of the acknowledgement and internalisation of one's sexual orientation, and thus includes various aspects, including self-awareness, self-determination, a sense of belonging to a given group and culture, acceptance, as well as self-stigmatisation, which have important consequences for the decision one makes in terms of social support, role models, friendships and interpersonal relationships[28].

As mentioned earlier, identity as a phenomenon of individual self-determination is not strictly grounded in ontological sense in either the biological and psychological or

[22] J. Butler, op. cit.
[23] D.A. Snow, P.E. Oliver, op. cit.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] J. Butler, op. cit.
[28] C.L. Ridgeway, S.J. Correll, op. cit.

the social and cultural sphere. Such a view would be oversimplified and may lead to the exclusion and stigmatisation of the individual's identity, which comprises a collection of multiple spheres and cognitive planes. Queer theory is based on a holistic view of the human being in all its complexity and avoids adhering to clearly defined, specific points on the fluid scale of sexuality and sexual identity.

Why, then, man and woman should not be perceived as two opposites on a continuum, with all typological variations of sexual identity, gender identity and even sexual orientation in between? The anthropological view of the individual makes use of various patterns to characterise or define these opposite poles of the continuum. Over the centuries, various approaches have been adopted to distinguishing the fluidity and complexity of gender and biological sex. In recent decades, significant progress has been made in terms of perceiving the spectrum of identity as a phenomenon of individual self-determination, as the deconstruction of gender blurs binary distinctions and helps to challenge stereotypes in an ever-changing social pluriversum, expanding the multiple and queer dimensions of gender.

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