



What do We Know about Gender? On the Cultural Production of Knowledge, Theory, and Gender

Michael Obenaus

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Seminar paper from the year 2000 in the subject Sociology - Gender Studies, grade: 1,3 (A), University of Glasgow (Department of Sociology and Anthropology), course: Feminist Issues in Sociological Theory and Analysis, language: English, abstract: We are born as either boys or girls, and we will be men or women. Even those who are “sexually different” are still classified male or female. There is no neither-nor, there is no both, there is no in-between. We grow into the world around us and, as we grow older, we begin to understand reality. We have knowledge of the world and we can work with that knowledge: We know what is true, real, just. We can also speak about abstract concepts, such as feelings, politics, history, and we understand each other, we know what we mean. We categorise the world according to natural, obvious criteria into discrete kinds. For instance, we are either men or women.

This essay is an attempt at tackling most of the above assumptions. All of our thinking - whether abstract or concrete - will be regarded as based on interacting cognitive, social and cultural systems, such as perception, categorisation, language, belief, etc. There are no social/ cultural aspects independent of general cognitive structures, and cognitive processes are in turn influenced by social/ cultural patterns. For most of us, this sounds intuitively dubious: Do we not perceive the world all in the same way? Are there not universal similarities in basic categories and in sensual perception? Can we, for instance, claim a cultural influence on our visual or acoustic perception?

Recent research in Cognitive Sciences 1 (e.g., psychology, psycholinguistics, language philosophy, etc.) has suggested that we may have to assume something in that direction. Categories, for instance colours, are categorised differently in different cultures. Not that items in the world actually do “look different” (in terms of properties of reflection, wave lengths of light, etc.), but culture-specific categorisations depend on the specific kinds of bodily and social interactions within a given culture. Obviously, these experiences and interactions differ between cultures, to a larger or lesser extent. These culture-specific kinds of interactions with “the world” form part of the basis for language codes, cognitive processes, social interaction patterns, concepts, beliefs, emotions, etc. I will take these assumptions as the starting point and as the basis of my argument. [...]

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