Emotional Gender Essentialism

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Feminism has long harboured both ssentialist and anti-essentialist factions. The former have sometimes stressed women's difference as implying moral superiority (Daly, 1973; Gilligan, 1982), while sometimes inclining to separatism and exclusion of trans women, regarded as impostors or worse (Raymond, 1979; Leidholdt & Raymond, 1990). On the anti-essentialist side, a long tradition of liberal or egalitarian feminists stretches from Wollestonecraft and J.S. Mill to Shulamith Firestone (1972), Betty Friedan (1963), and Elizabeth Spelman (1988) among others. Many feminists have rejected the binary conception of sex or gender, including radical gender abolitionists such as Robin Dembroff (2021), trans feminists like Talia Bettcher (2017; 2020) and critics of the pseudo-science of sex differences (Jordan-Young, 2010; Fine 2011; Saini, 2017). All have stressed that even if they are empirically sound, and whether genetic or culturally constructed, sex differences cannot justify the discriminatory social uses for which they provide a pretext.

A debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism has also figured in emotion theory, with Ekman (2011), Ekman & Cordaro, (2011), Griffiths (1997), Griffiths & Scarantino, (2011) on what might be construed as the essentialist side, and psychological or social constructionists on the anti-essentialist side (Averill, 1980; Russell, 2003; Barrett, 2017; Mesquita, 2022).[1]

In this talk, I explore the role of essentialism in both debates, and its relation to emotional gender stereotypes still prevalent in Western culture. Is some form of essentialism sustainable in either debate? And should we take emotional gender essentialism seriously?

Essentialism and Biological Kinds

Let me first step back to ask: What is meant by 'essence'? For Aristotle, essence is τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι – the *what it is to be* [some specific thing]. In a strict sense it refers to the necessary and sufficient condition for being a thing of that kind. This has historically been understood in either of two ways. In the Empiricist tradition, essential properties follow analytically from definitions. Since Saul Kripke's reconstructions of proper names for individuals and kinds, however, they more often taken to be necessary but empirical and a priori (Kripke, 1980). *Water is H_2O* is a necessary truth, yet since it had to be discovered, it is not a priori. Neither is it analytic: 'water' is not synonymous with 'H_2O'. Even such a strict kind, however, can be "interest-relative" (de Sousa 1984). For while H_2O identifies a natural kind for a chemist, the existence of different

[1]For a fuller range of references and a discussion of further issues, consult (Mun, 2016).

isotopes of oxygen making up a molecule of (regular or "heavy") water entails that for a physicist water is a mixture of regular and heavy water, $H_2{}^{16}O$ and $H_2{}^{18}O$.

Biological kinds, however, don't fit the model of Kripkean essentialism. For virtually no kind of biological entity or process (in which I include psychology) can be defined in terms of necessary or sufficient conditions.

Essentialism need not, however, be committed to the view that sex is a natural kind in the strict sense just defined. One proposal for identifying some classes as natural kinds, despite lacking necessary and sufficient descriptive properties, was introduced by Richard Boyd (1999). His "Homeostatic cluster concept theory" (HCT) has been influential, particularly among those who want to vindicate the traditional—and intuitively paradigmatic—view of biological species as natural kinds. While virtually no biological kind admits of strict necessary and sufficient conditions, it is still possible to make scientific use — probabilistic prediction, explanation, systematic causal inference — of such kinds. Charlotte Witt has pointed out that "it does not follow simply from the fact that gender is determined within and by a social context that gender essentialism is false." (Witt, 1995, p. 325). More positively, Theodore Bach has defended the application of HCT even to kinds that are socially constituted:

> While it is true that the real kinds fashioned by human activity generally exhibit less stability and have less crisp borders than the kinds fashioned by laws of nature or genetic and biological mechanisms, there is nonetheless sufficient property clustering or "clumping" to make these kinds suitable objects for scientific study. (Bach, 2022, p. 3).

In another paper, Bach has argued that this applies to gender: "gender kinds are natural kinds with a historical essence and also that members of a gender kind possess a common teleological function." (Bach, 2012 p. 232). One thinker who has availed herself of this device (regarding sex, though she is not interested in gender) is Kathleen Stock. While conceding that many of the key properties of sex are not strictly necessary or sufficient conditions, she writes that "abandoning orthodox biology-based understandings of 'woman', 'man', 'girl' and 'boy' deprives language-users with [sic] immensely valuable tools to analyse and explain the material and social world." (Stock, 2022, p. 27). She argues that sex can be adequately identified in terms of the normal human organism's disposition to produce large or small gametes. Human gametes are unequivocally dimorphic. There are no mid-sized human gametes. The reproductive anatomy and physiology of males and females is shaped by the teleological requirements of gamete production. In that respect sex qualifies as an HTC-type natural kind. The developmental path leading to the actual production of gametes can be disrupted, and Anne Fausto Sterling has argued that we should recognize at least five sexes (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). But Stock argues that intersex individuals present no problem for the sexual binary. We no more need to recognize other sexes than we need to revise our concept of the human body plan because some persons have been born without arms.

Stock further argues that "we need these concepts, as traditionally understood, for efficient causal explanation and prediction about these groups, as well as the formation of counterfactuals" (Stock 2022, p.41). Trans men, but not cis men or trans women, can become pregnant or get ovarian cancer. Stock also observes that since police began to record the sex of criminal perpetrators on the basis of their self-claimed gender identity, as they now do in the UK,

there appeared to be an 84% increase in the number of pedophile sex assaults by women. That, she suggests, may be giving (cis-) women an undeserved bad name. (Stock 22, p. 43). She concludes that the convenience of being able to make a number of characteristic generalizations about women, girls, men and boys is such that changing our general understanding of the terms 'man' and 'woman' must result in obscuring their "real causal effects". This, Stock contends, is "a harm which outweighs the harm of the distress of trans people who hear about [these real effects]". (Stock 2022, p. 45)

It's not clear how those harms are evaluated or on what basis they "outweigh" those endured by trans persons. The latter are hardly limited to "hearing about effects": trans persons are relegated to the status of freaks or impostors, denied the recognition of their self-identity, and many times more likely to be victims of crime (Flores, Meyer, Langton, & Herman, 2021).

In any case, Stock's practical conclusion is not the only one possible.

Bach, who argues that gender is a HCT natural kind and would presumably say the same of sex, points out that HCT kind terms may need to be refined for practical purposes. Since they are constructed for specific epistemic and practical advantage, rather than "discovered" in the way of Kripkean natural kinds, HCT kinds are not uniquely identifiable. They are certainly not picked independently of specific interests. As an example, Bach cites the case of memory: "Early uses of the category/term 'memory' and associated measurement practices by psychologists, while epistemically helpful, were not as helpful as they could have been." They were improved by distinguishing "between (at least) working memory, long-term memory, and short-term memory. A similar history of conflation applies to terms like *intelligence, jade, mass, and consciousness.*" (Bach 2022, p. 12). For the purposes that Stock has in mind, asking police to distinguish trans women from cis women in their crime statistics would solve one of the problems she raises. Similarly, the very terms she seems to object to, such as 'cervix-havers', 'menstruators', by drawing attention to the particular physiology of individuals, might be just what we need in order not to obscure the relevant facts for medical, forensic or statistical purposes.

Should we be essentialist about sex and/or gender?

Armed with the tools of HCT, we can loosen the criteria for a category or kind to count as a scientifically useful kind. Gender identity is often experienced remarkably early and intensely both by cis persons and by trans persons. Moreover, many a trans writer has testified to the profound difference they experience when navigating the social world as a woman from a man. Should we then adopt an essentialist view of sex and/or gender?

I think not. The first reason is that when we look for the list of characteristics that might constitute gender's essence, the list is sparse, contentious and, as I shall shortly illustrate, far from stable enough to draw any conclusions beyond local sociological observations.

More importantly the differences in question have no bearing on how any individual *ought* to be treated. As Charlotte Witt concludes in a paper critical of some arguments against essentialism:

> neither necessary biological attributes (if any) nor necessary psychological traits (if any) settle issues like whether or not we ought to aspire to equality with men, or what a just arrangement of power might look like, or what an ethical life is (Witt, 1995, p. 341).

To show that sex is clearly dimorphic, Stock emphasizes the single aspect of biological sex that unequivocally admits of no third: namely gamete size and type. Other features of sex, such as patterns of hormonal processes, or reproductive anatomy and physiology — are teleologically linked to gamete production, but they are not exclusively dimorphic. And yet gamete size, despite efforts by evolutionary psychologists to use it to anchor an analogy with differences among reproductive strategies (Symons, 1979; Buss, 1994)[2], has no logical implications for the sort of normative expectations that have been associated with gender.

In support of his contention that gender is an HCT natural kind, Bach lists a few supposedly well established gender differences:

> Studies indicate important population level differences with respect to: adolescent surgency, adult dating habits, prevalence of eating disorders, rates and styles of elective cosmetic surgery, prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder, performance on mental rotation tasks, intentional suicide attempts by self-poisoning, online pornography consumption, and much else. (Bach, 2012, p. 280).

Everything on this list, with the possible exception of "adolescent surgency" (a combination of sensation seeking and positive affect) is a good candidate for social causation. Bach may be right in claiming that a socially caused property cluster can support a useful HTC-type kind. But in the present context an important reservation applies: for socially caused properties, practical intervention is sometimes available; by contrast, intervening with biological properties is generally difficult of impossible. But perhaps we might appeal to HCT to defend a conception of gendered emotional dispositions as natural kinds that don't necessarily have a biological origin.

Whatever their origins, stereotypes about sex differences in emotional dispositions seem quite robust. In a study of expectations about gender differences in emotion, Ursula Hess and colleagues found that subjects expected men and women to conform to 'the prevalent emotion stereotype [that] describes women's predominant emotional reactions to be more withdrawing (fear and sadness) and self-directed (shame and guilt), whereas men's emotional reactions are seen as more active and aggressive' (Hess et al., 2000, p. 622). And while men and women's actual responses aren't as different as the stereotypes imply, there is reason to think that the influence of the stereotypes themselves may be largely credited with the extent to which reality matches the stereotypes. As Leslie Brody has phrased it, 'Stereotypes may generally reflect reality, partially because they help to shape reality.' (Brody, 1997, p. 370). For Hess et al. found that men and women's underlying appraisals of the situations to which they responded did not differ significantly. They conclude that 'the self-reported differences may be due to the normative forces of the general stereotype rather than to appraisal differences.' (Hess et al., 2000, p. 640).

To appreciate the significance of this appeal to appraisals, let me briefly comment on its implications for the space of possible emotions.

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[2] Biologists distinguish between r-type and k-type reproductive strategies: the former, e.g., an elm, produce a large number of potential offspring with little or no support. A tiny number at best will make it. The latter has very few offspring which they expend much energy to nurture.

The Space of Possible Emotions

Klaus Scherer's research team in Geneva found that identified emotions correspond to certain points or areas in a space defined by some sixteen dimensions of appraisal (Scherer, 2008). On the reasonable assumption that of sixteen dimensions six are binary and ten admit of 10 degrees of freedom, this entails that the order of magnitude of the space of possible emotions comprises about 640 billion points. To be sure, only a tiny proportion of those points will be occupied by any frequently experienced or easily named emotion. But according to Hess,

> the actual appraisal process may differ as a function of situational emotion norms. In this context (Mesquita, Frijda, & Scherer, 1997), suggest that cultural differences can be understood as differences in the practice, or propensity, to use certain appraisal dimensions. (Hess, 2001, p. 392).

As Mesquita has stressed, we cannot rely on the equivalence of emotions referred to by the best translation of emotion words between different languages (Mesquita 2022). For each emotion word represents a way of responding that emerges from an interpretation of a situation that is tied to a complex network of cultural practices and expectations. These may have no precise equivalent in the culture to which the other language belongs. They may be situated on a patch of possible emotion space that simply fails to correspond to any that is referred to by our own vocabulary. Even if we were inclined to essentialism with regard to gender, we could not reliably understand what this actually means in terms of another cultural group's emotional experiences.

In the light of these facts, we can now appreciate how fraught must be any attempt to delineate the emotional profile of a man or a woman, let alone of a trans man, trans woman, or any of the potentially unlimited configurations that might characterize a non-binary person. For even if we can find enough properties to form a social-science type homeostatic cluster for both gender and emotions taken separately, the elusive character of both will make it very hard to pin down the specific ways that they are associated. We would be associating indeterminate emotions with unstable stereotypes—matching a shape-shifting peg to a shape-shifting hole.

Just how fickle the stereotypes themselves can be is strikingly demonstrated by Rebecca Jordan-Young's investigation of research on female and male sexuality. She found that research conducted either before and after the 1980's posited highly specific stereotypes of male and female attitudes and behaviour without ever putting them under scrutiny. But she also found that the stereotypes that were being taken for granted had radically changed around 1980 without any acknowledgement or discussion. Specifically, for example,

> As posited in the early studies, feminine sexuality looks frankly Victorian: it is romantic, dependent, receptive, slow to waken, and only weakly physical. Scientists thought of female sexual activity not as an end in itself but as a means for fulfilling desires for love and motherhood. Their picture of masculine sexuality was a mirror image of their feminine model: active and energetic, initiating, dominant, penetrating, frequent, intense, and genitally focused. Masculine sexual activity was assumed to be its own end, unsentimental and undiluted by romance. Certain activities, ties, especially masturbation

> and having multiple partners, or sex outside of marriage, were unequivocally coded as masculine (Jordan-Young, 2010, Locs.1679–1682 Kindle ed.).

In studies after 1980, by contrast, Jordan-Young found

> surprising and very important differences from the first period. In particular, masturbation, genital arousal, and sex with multiple partners came to be understood as "commonsense" features of feminine sexuality, even though these had earlier been read as clear signs of masculinization.... Perhaps more surprising... is that scientists (those who conduct research related to the theory; those who review studies for journals, funding proposals, and other publications; and those who lean on the theory for broader arguments about sex differences or sexuality) have apparently never noticed these critical changes. (ibid., Locs. 1685-1693).

In the face of such instability, the very idea of sex or gender differences and their scientific study seems to collapse.

Conclusion

To show that emotions are genuinely gendered (or sexed) in a way that does not merely reflect arbitrary and unstable stereotypes, we would need to have conceptions both of sexes or genders and of emotions that satisfied at least the requirements of HCT. But both the identification of emotions and that of sexes or genders fails that relatively weak threshold for a natural kind. The upshot is that attributions of gendered emotional dispositions to men, women, or others, besides carrying no convincing normative implications, are about as significant as astrological charts.

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