

Queering Bem: Theoretical Intersections Between Sandra Bem's Scholarship and Queer Theory

Brandon Balzer Carr¹ · Ella Ben Hagai¹ · Eileen L. Zurbriggen¹

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Abstract Sandra Bem revolutionized psychology with her research on gender, androgyny, and gender schematicity, which culminated in her book, *The Lenses of Gender*. Her work also provides a model for how to cross interdisciplinary lines to enhance scholarship and reach political goals. We analyze similarities and differences between Bem's scholarship and scholarship in *queer theory*, a theoretical movement in the humanities that analyzes discourses that construct man/woman and straight/gay binaries. There are important overlaps between Bem's lenses of gender (biological essentialism, gender polarization, and androcentrism) and the ideas of many queer theorists. There are also several interesting differences between Bem's ideas and queer theory: attention to the intrapsychic processes that make up gender, the extent to which individuals can be liberated from gender, proliferating versus contesting gender, intersectionality, and epistemology and methodology. By assessing the similarities and differences between Bem and queer theorists, we show that the two complement each other, affording a better understanding of gender and sexuality. Additionally, both Bem and queer theory lend insight into feminist and queer activism. The theoretical and political advances that can be made by integrating Bem's ideas and those of queer theorists serve as examples for why it is worthwhile to cross disciplinary lines.

Keywords Gender roles · Queer theory · Feminism · Sexuality · Poststructuralism

✉ Eileen L. Zurbriggen
zurbrigg@ucsc.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, University of California, 1156 High St., Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA

Introduction

The process of becoming a feminist or queer psychologist is often rooted in multi-disciplinary entanglements (Herrmann and Stewart 1994). Many of us gain our training not only in seminar classes in psychology departments but also in multidisciplinary gender and women's studies classrooms or through our own self-directed study of feminist and queer theory. Through these experiences, a deep engagement with ideas from de Beauvoir (1942/1974), Rubin (1984), Foucault (1978), hooks (1981), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), MacKinnon (1987), and Butler (1990) inspires many young psychologists to integrate feminist and queer perspectives into their research (e.g., Tate 2012). Feminism and queer theory are also political projects (Warner 1993), and as such rely on an ongoing exchange between activists and scholars whose research examines socio-political processes such as colonialism, neoliberal policies, and technological advances (Liu et al. 2015). The budding queer/feminist psychologist may, therefore, find it useful to cross intra-disciplinary as well inter-disciplinary lines (as advocated by, for example, Moane 2003 and Stewart and McDermott 2004), both of which may be challenging. Thus, students of psychology who have been influenced by feminist and queer theories and are committed to queer politics can benefit from role models within psychology to guide them through the process of crossing disciplinary lines.

Sandra Lipsitz Bem is such a role model. In her theorizing, especially in her book *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (Bem 1993b), she drew a blueprint for how to cross disciplinary lines, formulating theory that can integrate ideas from poststructural feminist and queer theory into psychological research. She also served as a model for how to integrate political activism and scholarship, beginning as early as 1972 when she and her husband Daryl Bem were featured in the first official issue of *Ms. magazine* in an article titled *A Marriage of Equals* (Bem 1998, p. xi).

In this paper, we explore the ways Bem's work serves as a bridge between psychology and queer theory. We first describe the intellectual roots of queer theory and common themes found in queer theory texts. We then note some of the intersections between Bem's theories and queer theory, and continue with a section highlighting how Bem's work differs from and expands on queer theory and how queer theory complements Bem's work. We conclude with a discussion of implications for political activism and inter/multi-disciplinary scholarship.

Queer Theory

The term *queer* has multiple meanings in Western culture. It is often used as an umbrella term for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), as well as for other sexual minorities whose sexual identities do not fall under the category LGBT, such as pansexual and asexual people (Sullivan 2003). Queer is also used to imply a critique of categorical thinking in terms of sexuality, such that someone might identify as queer in order to signify that they view their sexuality as fluid across time and context (PFLAG 2015). Queer has also been used to critique an organization of sexuality that centers gender. For example, people who are abstinent or practice bondage, domination, and sadomasochism (BDSM) may also identify as queer to signify that their sexuality is non-normative in some way, even if it is normative in terms of gender orientation (Barker et al. 2014). Using the term queer also constitutes a reclaiming of a heterosexist slur and the trauma that it represents (Queer Nation 1990).

Queer theory is a Western, academic field of inquiry that includes a set of theories and analyses predominantly dealing with questions of gender and sexuality; foundational texts include Foucault (1978), Sedgwick (1990), de Lauretis (1991), Halperin (1995), Butler (1990), Fuss (1991), Duggan (1992), and Warner (1993). Queer theorists are primarily concerned with destabilizing the binary oppositions between gay/straight and men/women (Duggan 1992; Fuss 1991). For example, Butler (1990) argued that the men/women binary gains its coherence through the *heterosexual matrix of intelligibility*, which is the normalization of common sense assumptions that link together biological sex, gender, and desire. To destabilize this linkage, queer writers make visible the multiplicity of sexual acts, practices, and identities that make the binary between straight/gay identities nonsensical (Halperin 1995; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993).

Historical Roots of Queer Theory

Queer theory is closely related to and draws heavily from third wave and postmodern feminist thought (Sullivan 2003). The major intellectual currents influencing queer theory are social

constructionist theories of gender and sexuality and poststructural feminist thinking (Butler 1990; de Lauretis 1991; Foucault 1978). In addition, U.S. political projects such as ACT UP (<http://www.actupny.org/>) and Queer Nation (<http://queernationny.org/>), which aim to resist and dismantle social forms of exclusion based on sexuality as well as gender, class, and race, have played a role in motivating theorizing done by queer theorists (DeParle 1990; Harris 1991; Sullivan 2003). In the following sections, we will further describe important intellectual currents influencing queer theory and suggest three common threads running through many of these works.

Taking a Constructivist Turn in the Study of Gender and Sexuality

In its attempt to represent a unitary and essential category of *woman*, second wave feminism was heavily critiqued for the ways in which it masked important differences between women, especially women of color and White women (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). In response to these critiques, feminist researchers moved away from essentializing categories of *gender* and *sexuality* by examining the socially constructed nature of these categories (Hochschild 1973; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Thome 1993).

Constructivist research on sexuality (e.g., Foucault 1978; Weeks 1977) traced the ways in which the concept of sexuality has changed in the West since the Victorian period. For instance, Foucault (1978) examined changes in scientific and judicial discourses on same-sex sexual practices. He showed that in the 19th century there was a shift from seeing same-sex sexual acts as crimes against nature to being the expression of the essence of a person. He wrote: "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (Foucault 1978, p. 43). Feminists such as Rich (1980) and Wittig (1992) suggested thinking of heterosexuality as a political institution, one which works to maintain women in subordinate positions.

Poststructural Influences on Feminist Thought

In an influential article, Scott (1988) offered poststructural theory to feminists, for use as a guiding method. She wrote:

We need theory that will break the conceptual hold, at least, of those long traditions of (Western) philosophy that have systematically and repeatedly construed the world hierarchically in terms of masculine universals and feminine specificities ... It seems to me that the body of theory referred to as poststructuralism best meets all these requirements (p. 33).

According to Scott's summary of poststructural theory, discourses of knowledge, including discourses on sexuality and gender, are based on reoccurring terms, categories, and beliefs. Terms and categories within a discursive formation gain their meaning through difference. Terms are situated within a binary opposition that constructs a system of meaning. Within the binary opposition one term is dominant over the other (Derrida 1978). For instance, in the discourse of human reproduction, the sperm and the egg are positioned within a binary of subject/object, active/passive, aggressive/receptive, men/women (Martin 1991). The sperm is thus portrayed as dominant and the main agent in the reproduction process. Moreover, the cross-reference of the binary creates a system of meaning that embodies masculinity within microbodily processes (Fausto-Sterling 1979). To destabilize male and heterosexual hegemony poststructural theory prescribes highlighting the differences within categories, such as among women, as well as subverting the categories by mocking and reversing the terms within the binary schema (Scott 1988).

Main Themes in Queer Theory

Queer theory was heavily influenced by the constructivist turn in the study of gender and sexuality, as well as by a poststructuralist analysis of these two categories (Sullivan 2003). Additionally, queer activist groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation reacted to governmental neglect of the AIDS epidemic and the assimilation trend among gay and lesbian organizations through public protests and outing well-known closeted gays and lesbians in an effort to highlight their absence in the movement and force their participation in it (Duggan 1992). Their activism also influenced emerging scholarly work in queer theory (Warner 1993). Some of the common threads that run through texts categorized as queer theory are (1) dismantling of the sex/gender dichotomy, (2) destabilizing binaries of gender and sexuality, and (3) a fluid understanding of power.

Dismantling of the Sex/Gender Dichotomy

Many texts in queer theory refuse to privilege scientific discourses that create a binary between *natural facts* and *cultural facts* or *sex* and *gender* (Butler 1990). Instead, queer theorists analyze the discourses themselves, pointing to inconsistencies and moments where gender is conflated for biological sex, such as the above example of gendering the sperm and egg (Martin 1991). Unsurprisingly, queer theorists refuse the notion that femininity and masculinity are the effect of hormones and genes distributed unevenly among man and woman (e.g., Warner 1993).

Destabilizing Binaries of Gender and Sexuality

Many texts in queer theory follow Foucault (1978) in analyzing discourses. They show that as certain genders and sexualities are constructed, others are abjected (i.e., become deviant or unlivable). Moreover, queer theorists argue that because scientific discourses of gender and sexuality treat constructed categories as natural they maintain and reify sexism and heterosexism (Massey 2009). Queer readings of the discourses that construct dichotomous categories of gender and sexuality reveal the manner in which they mask the multiplicitous, unbounded, and non-static nature of the phenomena they seek to categorize. For instance, Sedgwick (1990) argued that sexual desires and acts constitute such great multiplicity that they cannot be simply categorized into a straight/gay dichotomy.

Fluid Understanding of Power

The third common theme in queer theory is the questioning of a top-down understanding of power as imposed on individuals by the state or by culture. Instead, queer theorists frame power as constituted by social categories and performed and exchanged by subjects, some of whom are in positions of power and others of whom are oppressed (Seidman 1993). From this perspective, power moves fluidly through individuals as they interact with each other across situations. The mutual constitution of social categories that are performed both by people in power, but also by those who don't hold dominant positions, reveals a dependence of the dominant on the oppressed for its own definition and authority (Sullivan 2003).

The Intersection of Queer Theory and the Lenses of Gender

In her book *The Lenses of Gender*, Bem (1993b) analyzed wide-ranging and multi-disciplinary scholarship relevant to psychological research on gender and sexuality. Her analysis led her to argue that three lenses of gender play a role in how gender and sexuality have historically been framed. These lenses include biological essentialism (i.e., gender is grounded in biology and thus immutable), gender polarization (i.e., the world is divided into male and female and the binary construct of gender is used to organize our knowledge about virtually everything), and androcentrism (i.e., men are seen as dominant to women and as the universal standard). In an exploration of these lenses Bem undertook a historical analysis of scientific discourses and discussed how they construct and naturalize gender and sexuality within a binary. Her aim was to shed light on assumptions or lenses used by scientific researchers and by all of society to render them "visible rather than invisible, to enable us to look *at* the culture's gender lenses rather than *through* them" (1993b, p. 2; italics in

original). Bem also used her own empirical research (with U.S. samples) to support these claims. In addition to a discursive analysis, Bem offered her own theory on the psychological processes related to these lenses—from enculturation to identity formation. In doing so, Bem’s thinking overlapped substantially with the queer theorists whose work preceded and followed hers, in ways that we describe below.

Bem’s Lens of Biological Essentialism and Dismantling the Sex/Gender Binary

In her analysis of works by Spencer (1852), Darwin (1859/1952), and Wilson (1975) on evolutionary differences between males and females, Bem highlighted the manner in which research that essentialized gender differences was motivated by political realities. Sociopolitical processes including colonialism, restriction on immigration, and the feminist social movement triggered scientific publications that legitimized inequalities between White people and people of color and between men and women. Reading work by evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Symons 1979), Bem noted that these theorists began with the observation that men and women are different and then constructed a story on the evolutionary origins of those differences in order to not only explain the differences but also justify them by rooting them in biology. Bem, however, points to the cultural division of labor—not evolution—as the source of most differences between men and women.

The centrality of cultural understanding to our construction of differences between men and women is also highlighted by age differences in children’s ability to understand cultural and biological gender differences. According to Bem (1993b, p. 114), 80 % of 2-year-olds can identify a target’s gender based on cultural cues such as clothing or length of hair, but only 50 % of 3- and 4-year-olds correctly identify gender when only biological information (e.g., genitalia and body physique) is available. In other words, in U.S. culture children first learn to categorize gender based on superficial, socially constructed cultural cues rather than biological ones.

Bem’s argument that an understanding of gender based on cultural differences occurs prior to an understanding of gender based on biological differences is echoed in a foundational queer theory text. Butler (1990) argued that sex cannot be understood to be different from gender because we can only understand physical differences through cultural framing. Thus, sex (i.e., bodily differences) is already gendered (i.e., by cultural constructions of differences). For instance, Butler points out that the cultural methods of dichotomizing sex based on hormones, organ size, and chromosomes are in themselves partly a cultural production, so it is questionable whether sex can be assumed to represent nature, with gender representing culture. Butler (1990) concludes “It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category” (p. 7). Using Bem’s language, biological sex is viewed through

the cultural lens of gender polarization; therefore, sex categories gain their meaning through gender.

Bem’s Lens of Gender Polarization and Destabilizing Gender and Sexuality Binaries

In her theorization of gender schematicity, Bem highlighted the manner in which masculine/feminine binaries are used to categorize phenomena far removed from women’s and men’s bodies. She wrote:

In most societies, [gender] is a diverse and sprawling network of associations encompassing not only those features directly related to male and female persons, such as anatomy, reproductive function, division of labor, and personality attributes, but also features more remotely or metaphorically related to sex, such as the angularity or roundedness of an abstract shape and the periodicity of the moon (Bem 1981, p. 354).

This gender polarization of women’s and men’s bodies, personalities, and other aspects of the world is used to create meaning (e.g., create a gender norm to identify with) and police behavior (e.g., stigmatize those who transgress gender norms).

Bem claims that gender polarization has two main effects: it creates mutually exclusive scripts of how to be male and how to be female, and it defines those who deviate from these scripts as abnormal. One of the consequences of gender polarization is the marginalization of those individuals who transgress gender norms by sexually desiring members of the same sex. Bem writes about the gender polarization of the body with a strong emphasis on the gender polarization of erotic desire and sexual expression. In Bem’s words, “Males and females alike are all but required to conform to the cultural mandate for exclusive heterosexuality. This heterosexual mandate is institutionalized in a great number of social practices privileging heterosexuality and marginalizing homosexuality” (Bem 1993b, p. 147).

Queer theorists also stress the manner in which gender polarization serves to marginalize sexual minorities. For example, Fuss (1991) argued that gender and sexuality create two interrelated binary systems of man/woman and gay/straight that are grounded in another binary opposition of inside/outside. The gender and sexual binaries work to “create an insider/outsider dichotomy between the accepted and normative realms of heterosexuality and the external and perverse world of the homosexual” (LaMarre 2007, p. 25). One could argue that the marginalization and stigmatization of sexual minorities is made possible only through the definition of gender and sexuality as binaries. Queer theory’s project of destabilizing those binaries works against the

conceptualization of same-sex desire as transgressive and the prejudice and discrimination that follow from that conceptualization.

Bem's Lens of Androcentrism and Fluid Conceptions of Power

Tightly integrated with the lenses of gender polarization and biological essentialism is the lens of androcentrism. According to Bem (1993b) this lens defines

males and male experience as a neutral standard or norm, and females and female experience as a sex-specific deviation from that norm. It is thus not that man is treated as superior and woman as inferior but that man is treated as human and woman as “other” (p. 2).

The othering of woman does not occur through a violent force but through meta-messages that create a different framing of *man* and *woman* within societies. When individuals take up a male and female identity they become interpolated into the system of meaning that reifies androcentric power. As they act according to their role and identities they become a “deeply implicated—if unwitting—collaborator in the social reproduction of male power” (Bem 1993b, p. 139).

The notion of power as being fluid and as arising through interactions between individuals is also articulated by queer theorists. Speech acts, such as those in which a newborn infant is declared a boy or a girl, work to create identities that further legitimize power (Warner 1993). When individuals identify with these identities, and act according to them, they reify a web of meaning that serves to establish a regime of power/knowledge (Seidman 1993). Categorization of persons into particular categories functions as a way to govern behavior. Usually, the person cannot simply disavow the category that is used to describe who he/she is, but they can subvert the meaning of that category (Butler 1990).

Bridging Differences: How Bem's Research Differs from yet Complements Queer Theory

Thus far we have considered some of the intersections between Bem's work and queer theory. In this section we consider the ways in which Bem's work, if thought of together with queer theory, can further our understanding of the ways that the mutual constructions of sex, gender, and desire are reproduced and how they can be dismantled. We note that although Butler's theory of performativity and Bem's schema theory are similar, they differ in terms of their attention to interiority (i.e., intrapsychic processes undergirding external behavior). They complement each other, though, in that gender schema theory can be used to build on Butler's ideas by

illuminating how repetition of gendered acts can create cognitive schemas that further shape perception, memory, and behavior based on gender binaries. In the next section, we show that queer theorists' critique of the concept of liberation from gender and structures of power makes sense if one considers the importance of gender schemas to an individual's sense of self. We next address whether Bem was queer in regards to more radical uses of the term, such as contesting gender identity altogether rather than merely proliferating gender categories. We then consider the extent to which queer theory and Bem address intersectionality and conclude with a brief discussion of epistemology and methodology.

Gender: An Abiding Interior Essence

To understand why people identify with their gender categories, which fortify and foreclose their behavior, Butler (1990) introduced the concept of performativity. Butler refuses the notion that there is an internal psychology unique to individuals, instead emphasizing the notion of gender as performative. According to Butler:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. . . Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler 1988, pp. 519–520, italics in original).

Because Butler refuses the idea of sex or a self that motivates gendered acts, *the acts themselves* become central to the making of the self. A socially stylized action made by the body creates a sense of gender and substantiates a sense of self by those who reenact them.

Bem (1993b; 1995) agrees with Butler that social positions afford individuals different kinds of practices that provide an understanding of who they are, but she does not preclude a notion of interiority. Indeed, Bem's gender schema theory (1981) affords a space for the gendered personality. Bem's research suggests that there are individual differences in the extent to which people adopt a gendered identity and see themselves in a gender-conforming manner, and these differences can be linked to the extent to which an individual has ingrained gender norms. According to gender schema theory

sex typing results, in part, from the fact that the self-concept itself gets assimilated into the gender schema. As children learn the contents of the society's gender

schema, they learn which attributes are to be linked with their own sex and, hence, with themselves (Bem 1981, p. 355).

Thus, through processes of gender socialization, children's minds become organized in a gender congruent fashion, developing schemas that assimilate gender norm congruent stimuli and ignore gender norm incongruent stimuli.

In contrast, Butler's conceptualization of gender as performative denies interiority in order to highlight the constructed nature of gender and resist biological essentialism. This leads to vagueness in terms of how, exactly, these performatives operate. Clearly individual psychology underlies behavior, but Butler is silent on this point. Bem fully concurs with the notion that gender is socially constructed; this is one of the enduring messages of her body of scholarship. However, in gender schema theory, she extends the notion of performativity by elucidating, in non-essentializing ways, the processes that lead to gender congruent behavior (i.e., assimilation into a gender schema). In other words, her work helps to explain *why* people perform gender roles in the ways that they do.

This distinction is best highlighted through an examination of Bem's empirical work. The differences in the extent to which individuals identify with gender conforming characteristics, such as being analytic, nurturing, or independent, shape how people perceive, remember, and act. In her experiments, Bem (1993b) showed that individuals who were more gender schematic (i.e., tended to identify with gender conforming traits and roles) were less likely to comfort a crying child if they were male and less likely to speak up and articulate a dissenting opinion in a meeting if they were female. In terms of perception, gender schematic individuals were more likely to categorize a man sitting at the head of a boardroom table as the manager but did not perceive a woman sitting in the same position as the manager. In terms of memory, gender schematic individuals organized and remembered words in clusters associated with gender to a greater extent than individuals who did not see themselves as conforming to gender roles (Bem 1981). Thus, whereas Butler argued that people repeat gender norms through their speech and behavior, Bem assessed individual differences in gendered behavior to suggest that these norms can also become internalized as permanent or semi-permanent features of a person's psyche (i.e., the norms are assimilated into a gender schema). This assimilation then leads to the external behavior—or in Butler's words, “the stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990, p. 141)—that appear as inherent and inevitable gender traits.

Bem's gender schema theory, like Butler's theory of performativity, does not imply that there is an internal and innate personality that leads men and women to take on masculine and feminine roles. Rather, they both seem to agree that constraints by society lead individuals to act in a

gendered manner. Bem's discovery of the differences in behavior, perception, and memory among gender schematic versus gender aschematic people affords a thicker and richer description of the implication of gender performativity on the making of the self because it delineates the cognitive structures that underlie this process. Whereas performativity somewhat abstractly explains gender as the stylized repetition of acts, Bem adds specificity to this idea, explaining the psychological constructs that underlie and produce these acts.

Liberation from Gender and Structures of Power

Many feminist psychologists, including Bem in most of her work, take liberation from structures of power as an unquestioned political goal (e.g., Apfelbaum 1979; Unger 2000). At the end of *Lenses of Gender*, Bem argued that gender needs to be reduced to no more than anatomy and reproduction, divorcing every other aspect of gender from biological sex. Gender is argued to inevitably lead to social inequality, so societies must remove the concept of gender in order to remove the power relationships that it causes; liberation from gender leads to liberation from power. This notion that individuals can and should be liberated from power and gender is clearly appealing, but the question of whether it is actually possible is troubled by the work of Foucault (1978) and Butler (1993a), who argued that power is inherent to the development of a sense of self.

Poststructural theorists argue that individuals cannot be thought of separately from social structure and are constituted by power relations (Foucault 1978). According to Foucault (1978) “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter” (p. 94). From this perspective, unequal power relations are conceptualized as embedded in the full range of cultural and institutional practices that exist within a society; indeed, power is the very process through which these practices function. For example, relationships between buyers and sellers, teachers and learners, and sexual partners inevitably consist of power dynamics such as action and inaction, resistance and control, and knowledge and ignorance. Power is thus conceptualized as not only problematic (that being its typical understanding) but also productive because it structures society and interpersonal relationships.

Building on Foucault, Butler (1993a) introduced the concept of subjectivation, which is the idea that an individual's sense of self is constituted through social norms. She states:

The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist [gender] norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a

reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power (Butler 1993a, p. 15).

Put another way, individuals rely on cultural norms, including gender norms, to form a sense of self that would allow them to understand both themselves and their surroundings. The inculcation of gender—along with other power-laden cultural phenomena, like race—is thus one of the mechanisms that allow children to understand themselves and process information. Furthermore, that people form a sense of self through gender norms means that one cannot be liberated from the power dynamics that accompany those norms because they are fundamental to the constitution of the self. Total agency and liberation from gender norms and power relations are thus a theoretical impossibility.

When Bem explains the process of forming a gender schema, she is essentially pointing to the ways in which people become subjectivated, again bringing specificity (especially psychological specificity) to queer theory. As children are socialized into the idea of what it means to be a man or woman, those ideas become incorporated into their sense of self or subject position, thereby creating a gender schema. Gender thus allows people to have a self-concept and integrate external phenomena into that self-concept. Indeed, because people then go on to process new information through an acquired gender schema, they come to understand themselves and the world around them through that gender-norm congruent cognitive scaffolding. To put it another way, the notion of genderless, cultureless, or powerless information processing is analogous to the idea of accent-less speech: it cannot exist because these structures of power, gender, and culture—however oppressive—constitute the framework for understanding the self and one's social world. Despite the clear implication of gender schema theory that gender and power are endemic to people's cognitive processing, it was not until some 15 years later that Bem problematized the liberationist ideal; incidentally, this move may have been in part inspired by Butler's work (Bem 1995).

Bem ended *Lenses of Gender* with a call to remove the relevance of gender as a meaningful social category, reducing sex and gender to anatomy and reproduction. In a later article (Bem 1995), in which she outlined queer theory's aforementioned complexification of power dynamics, Bem conceded that erasing gender is likely impossible (i.e., we cannot liberate ourselves from gender) and as such, it may be more useful to proliferate gender categories (i.e., turn the volume up on gender). She wrote:

I propose that rather than trying to dismantle the two-and-only-twoness of gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by *eliminating* gender categories, we instead dismantle that two-and-only-twoness by *exploding* or *proliferating* gender categories. In other

words, I propose that we let a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire begin to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations and, through that very proliferation, that we thereby undo (or, if you prefer, that we de-privilege or de-center or de-stabilize) the privileged status of the two-and-only-two that are currently treated as normal and natural (Bem 1995, p. 330, italics in original).

Rather than creating a utopian culture in which gender does not exist, Bem joined calls by queer theorists of the time to embrace multiplicity, performativity, and carnival forms of gender and sexual expressions. By openly embracing alternative configurations of gender, people subvert (i.e., queer) gender norms, thereby calling into question their legitimacy and naturalness. This proliferation becomes a means of ending gender in its hegemonic, monolithic, androcentric, polarizing, and biologically essentialist current formation by advocating for a variegated, divergent, and idiosyncratic formation.

How Queer is Bem? Proliferation vs. Contestation of Categories

Bem's prescription for a diversity of gender identities is queer in that it advocates for a plurality of gender that embraces same-gender loving people and genders that deviate from hegemonic masculinity and femininity, but she does not take the critique of gender as far as do some in the queer community. Because it simultaneously signifies a political movement, a sexual minority community, and an academic body of work, it is not surprising that the term *queer* is used in a variety of ways by various stakeholders. Anti-identity politics that have grown in opposition to normalizing, assimilationist goals in the mainstream LGBT community have adopted the term *queer* precisely because it ambiguously defines a person or group as different from the norm without claiming a specific, fixed identity (Seidman 1993). Queer is thus used as a replacement for a sexuality or gender identity (e.g., *genderqueer*) that signifies that one does not subscribe to the idea that gender or sexuality are tangible, bounded, essential, or even existent facets of oneself. Queer theory does not reject identity—indeed, Butler (1993b) has critiqued the misunderstanding of performativity as absence of identity—but many members of the queer community do (Seidman 1993). Much of queer politics therefore rejects a plurality of identities, or even Bem's earlier goal of minimizing identity, by instead arguing that gender and sexuality are so abstract, contextual, fluid, and individualized that the very notion of a stable identity formed around these concepts is the false effect of oppressive, normalizing, heteropatriarchal, social forces (Seidman 1993). Bem's work is not queer, if queer is defined in this way. Therefore, while we have argued that there are many overlaps between Bem's scholarship and queer theory, this is an

important way in which Bem's thinking diverged from the way *queer* is conceptualized and understood by many queer activists and community members.

Intersectionality

Another way in which Bem's scholarship differed from queer theory and social constructionism is that she never took an explicit intersectional perspective. Intersectionality is a theoretical approach to understanding identity, historically rooted in a critique of the implicit racism of some feminist perspectives, which argues that social identities need to be understood in relation to, as opposed to independent from, each other. The term intersectionality is attributed to Crenshaw (1991), who explained that for women of color, the experience of battering and rape "are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (p. 1243) yet feminist and antiracist discourses fail to recognize the roles that both forms of oppression mutually play. Crenshaw's critique of White feminists implicitly marginalizing women of color by ignoring issues of race and the unique ways that race affects gender was not the first or last. As early as 1863, Sojourner Truth's speech, *Ain't I a woman?* (Stanton et al. 1881) pointed to the ways that her Black identity denied her the supposed privileges of chivalry that are given to White women and necessitated a physical strength and toughness that is typically associated with men. In 1978, the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organization, pointed to racial-sexual oppression as a distinct form of oppression—different from racism and sexism—that needed to be independently understood and resisted (Combahee River Collective 1978). Although these critiques began outside of psychology and even academia, they have now permeated the most established psychology journals, such as Cole's (2009) overview of intersectionality in *American Psychologist* and the special issue of *Sex Roles* on this topic (Shields 2008).

In its most basic sense, intersectionality is a call to analyze the differences in how one social identity is experienced across various other social identities; so for example, the differences in how gender is experienced for Black, White, working-class, middle-class, straight, or queer women would constitute an intersectional analysis. Intersectionality, however, has also been used to argue that any social identity is understood in relation to an infinite plethora of other social identities; so in this regard, taking an intersectional perspective means more than assessing the differences between Black and White women's perspectives. Instead, intersectionality is an ontological critique of the nature of identity as essential, universal, categorizable, and coherent. This intersectional perspective is not an argument that identity does not exist; rather, it is an argument that because any one identity is predicated upon innumerable other identities, identity is not a quantifiable, ascertainable concept. Although all individuals experience gender and form an identity around it, those

identities are so divergent and idiosyncratic because of their intersections with race, class, sexuality, and other identities (e.g., marital/relational status; DePaulo and Morris 2005) that any statement of what it means to be a man or woman is inherently contestable. Furthermore, the notion of a generic, universal woman or man relies on and gains its coherence through the universalization of White, middle-class, Western, heterosexual, able-bodied experience. Thus any decontextualized statement about gender is implicitly racist, classist, heterosexist, and ableist, as well as oppressive across a number of other identity dimensions not listed here.

Although Bem deftly integrated sexuality into her analysis of gender, she rarely interrogated intersections with race, class, or ability, and her work often seemed to assume that gender is experienced universally for all women. When Bem explained the lens of gender polarization, she acknowledged the political motivation of eugenics for essentializing differences between races, classes, and abilities, but then she went on to point to division of labor as the universal divider of men and women (Bem 1993b). During U.S. slavery, however, labor was divided far less across gender for Black men and women, with both gender groups working in fields (Rosen 2009). Currently, the notion of a sole male breadwinner presupposes a middle-class income; sexist division of labor is thus far from universal, although women still take on the majority of caregiving tasks in both single- and dual-earner homes (Coltrane 2000; Fetterolf and Rudman 2014). When Bem argued that gender polarization creates mutually exclusive scripts for what it means to be a man or a woman, she failed to recognize the unique ways that historical and institutionalized racism have denied people of color hegemonic masculinity and femininity. For example, the disenfranchisement and criminalization of Black men, along with stereotypes about Black women as too assertive and strong-willed, have led to the dissemination of the idea that Black women matriarchs take on the man's role as heads of households (e.g., the Moynihan Report; Moynihan et al. 1967). Gender poles may be particularly distant for White, middle-class, and able-bodied men and women. Finally, when introducing the lens of androcentrism, Bem argued that not only are men regarded as better than women but masculinity is taken as the universal norm. The notion of a universal masculinity from which only women differ fails to recognize the subordinated and marginalized status of masculinities that are of color, working-class, or queer. Instead, an array of masculinities and femininities are regarded as *other* to the privileged and universalized White, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, masculine norm (Connell 1995, 2000).

Although Bem's scholarship did not account for intersections with race, class, and ability, much of her work predates the emergence of the intersectional critique in mainstream psychology, and Bem can be thought of as one of the earliest psychologists to interrogate the intersection of gender and

sexuality. Although Bem produced much of her scholarship after women of color feminists had already advanced critiques that can now be interpreted as intersectional (e.g., Combahee River Collective 1978), these ideas not only came from outside of mainstream psychology, they were not yet synthesized into the clear, unified theory that is commonly understood as intersectionality. Thus, it may be unfair to criticize Bem for her lack of intersectionality when the majority of psychology scholarship from her most productive years similarly universalized Whiteness. Furthermore, Bem was a pioneer of the gender and sexuality intersection, and she deftly analyzed the manner in which one's sexual orientation affected their gender privilege and oppression. Indeed, much of Bem's research presaged queer theory texts that similarly studied the intersection of gender and sexuality.

Although many foundational queer theory texts have not directly analyzed intersections between gender and sexuality and race, class, and ability, queer theory is grounded in the same critiques of universalism as is intersectionality. Consistent with its historical roots in poststructuralism, queer theory rejects the notion of gender and sexuality as universal. Queer theory has often used gender and sexuality as analytic tools to understand the nature of power, the self, and discourse, avoiding directly analyzing what masculinity and femininity are, in favor of elucidating the ways they are performed and institutionalized (e.g., Butler 1990; Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1990). Thus, queer theory avoids essentializing gender because its theorists are typically less concerned with explaining what it means to be a woman or man or gay or straight. Although many of the foundational queer theory texts have not directly assessed, for example, differences between working and middle class gays and lesbians' experiences, they have analyzed the effect of economic and class systems on gender and sexuality. For example, Foucault (1978) analyzed how population discourses emerged as socioeconomic changes occurred, thus leading to shifts in focus on birth rates and how sexuality was understood. Moreover, some queer theorists have directly analyzed differences between intersecting identities. One early example is de Lauretis (1991), who is credited with coining the term queer theory and who analyzed racialized constructions of gender. More recently, queer theorists such as Puar (2007), Muñoz (1999), and Ferguson (2004) specifically integrate issues of class, race, and ability in their analyses.

Although Bem's analyses generally lacked an intersectional perspective (with the exception of the intersection of gender and sexuality), her theoretical concepts can nevertheless be used to think intersectionally. Biological essentialism, the polarization of different groups, and the universalization of the dominant group are processes endemic to racism, classism, ableism, and other oppressions; Bem simply elucidated these themes in regard to gender and sexuality without attending to their racialized, classed, and ability dynamics. Indeed, the flexibility of Bem's lenses to be able to analyze not only

gender but these other social categories can be seen as an indicator of how powerful her theories really were. For example, Bem's lenses allow for an understanding of oppression as simultaneously polarizing groups, magnifying differences and inhibiting unity, and universalizing the dominant group, masking difference in a manner that erases the experiences of marginalized people. Indeed, the foundational intersectional critique that White women's attempts to unite all women against sexism erased women of color's experiences of racism can be understood as a pitfall of analyzing oppression through the polarization lens without the universalization lens.

The differences in interiority, liberation from power, and intersectionality illustrate that despite their similarities, the ideas of Bem and queer theorists are not identical, and they also demonstrate some of the advantages of integrating theories from multiple disciplines. Bem adds specificity and clarity to some of the most central processes of queer theory and queer theory questions some of the taken-for-granted goals of Bem and feminist psychology (e.g., liberation from culture).

Epistemology and Methodology

It is important to note that some of the differences between Bem and the queer theorists are not simply opportunities (i.e., different gaps in one to be filled by the other) but instead are fundamental disagreements in the nature of the real world and how to apprehend it. These epistemological and methodological disagreements are not trivial, but we hope that the potential insights into gender and sexuality that can be gained from overcoming them warrant treating them as non-irreconcilable.

Queer theory and poststructuralism are situated within a postmodern critique of positivism. Positivism relies on the notion that there is an objectively discernible reality external to the perceiver that need not be questioned (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Postmodern thinkers instead argue that no phenomenon can be ascertained without the use of a limited perceptual system and a non-omniscient, intellectually imperfect brain, meaning that any observation of the world occurs through an inherently flawed mediator: the human body (Montero 2002). Some postmodern thinkers extend this reasoning to argue that phenomena can only be said to exist in an individual's consciousness and nowhere else, so arguing for the existence of a phenomenon is pointless and merely conflates reality with the perception of reality (Montero 2002). Poststructuralists argue that because one's understanding of the world is influenced by social categories that gain their meaning through differences, we cannot see the world for what it is but instead as shaped by the categories and the meanings they have in relation to each other (Namaste 1994; Stein and Plummer 1994).

Stemming from these epistemological viewpoints, queer theorists do not aim to empirically measure and test phenomena but instead conduct *queer readings* (Epstein 2002). Queer readings typically involve reading and interpreting a literary

work to illustrate unmentioned themes of power, gender, or sexuality. For example Sedgwick (1990) conducts queer readings of ostensibly heterosexual English literary works to explain outing as a power dynamic that is paradigmatic to the homosexual subject. These readings have a lessened concern for an objective assessment of the validity of the reading or generalizability to the real world because these notions are viewed at least in part as contrived. Rigor is defined differently by postmodern thinkers (Guba and Lincoln 1994) and for queer theorists is instead achieved through the power of the queer reading to subvert norms and elucidate structures of power that go unnoticed (Epstein 2002).

In contrast to queer theory, mainstream psychology uses methodologies and epistemologies that rely on a notion of an objective reality—albeit an inaccurately and probabilistically assessed one—that is independent of an individual's perception (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The aforementioned postmodern critique and other similar critiques that predated it have informed psychology to a great degree, and it would be unfair to characterize modern psychology as purely positivist. For example, items on a questionnaire are not taken to be self-evidently objective indices of whatever they purport to measure but instead through factor analysis, discriminant and convergent validity, and test-retest reliability, are given a quantifiable level of certainty as to their relationship with the underlying latent construct—which is assumed to exist. Feminist psychologists, however, have wrestled with these critiques even further, debating the nature of the relationship between researcher and subject and the generalizability and universality of phenomena (Fine 1994; Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1988). Feminist psychology has a particularly strong history of interrogating one's subjectivity, in which researchers analyze their beliefs and experiences and how they relate to the research and participant (e.g., Langhout 2006; White and Dotson 2010). These epistemologies and methodologies are much a part of contemporary qualitative methods, which arguably integrate these ideas the most thoroughly (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Thus, although mainstream psychology relies on epistemologies and methodologies that merely acknowledge the postmodern critique of objectivity, feminist and qualitative psychology have more thoroughly embraced and responded to these critiques.

Implications

Implications for Political Activism

The primary take-away from queer theory and Bem's research on gender is that gender and sexuality are socially co-constructed categories that lead to social inequality, so in regards to activism the question becomes what do we do about these problematic categories and their omnipresent deployment? Bem is well known for the fact that she raised her

children in a manner that took seriously the activist project of deconstructing gender roles and resisting gender socialization. Bem edited her children's books to present non-normative gender presentations (e.g., drawing breasts on male characters; Bem 1983). She also often recited her mantra that,

A boy is someone with a penis and testicles; a girl is someone with a clitoris, vagina, and uterus; and whether you're a girl or a boy, a man or a woman, doesn't need to matter — or shouldn't anyway — until and unless you want to make a baby. (Bem 1995, p. 330).

Bem also modeled egalitarian—and considering their later same-sex relationships, one could argue sexually fluid—relationships through her marriage with Daryl Bem (Bem 1983, 1998). Bem's approach to social activism was thus to attempt to erase gender from her and her family's life. In addition, Bem spoke and wrote publicly about this work, attempting to use her family as a model for how children could be raised, work could be shared, and families could be organized, so her activism was not wholly confined to her family—although some have thoughtfully argued that this activism was still individualistic (Hegarty et al. 2002).

Queer theory, as already stated, was in many ways born out of activism (Duggan 1992; Stein and Plummer 1994) and there are some surprising similarities between queer activism and Bem's family-level activism. Queer activism has often emphasized mocking normative gender and sexuality. An example is the AIDS activist organizations the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence dressing in intentionally gender-bending drag (e.g., a fully bearded man in a nun's habit) that defiantly combines masculine and feminine in one gendered presentation (May 2007). Bem, in redrawing her children's books, was participating in this same gender-bending activism by proliferating alternative gender presentations within her children's home life and then speaking and writing about the process as publicly as possible. As Hegarty et al. (2002) have indicated, Bem's other projects of erasing gender roles from her children's socialization and her marriage perhaps were not as actualized as one would hope (e.g., household labor was still unevenly distributed, with Sandra doing more domestic chores and Daryl having more time for leisure). This shortcoming might be evidence for the merits of Bem's revised political goals (i.e., turning up the volume on gender). By acknowledging fluidity of gender categories and “the 2-, 3-, 4-, 5- (and so on) sidedness in each of us” (Bem 1995, p. 333) labor can be dynamically distributed variably over time and context and according to each partner's idiosyncratically gendered skills and preferences; this may be a more practical solution to navigating gender and labor in a relationship.

We agree with Bem and queer theory: dismantling androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism will

likely only be feasible if we proliferate more gender categories (i.e., turn the volume up on gender). In Bem's words, we advocate for all "sex/gender/desire 'anomalies'... to refuse to be managed, regulated, invisibilized, disciplined, and/or in any other way homogenized into the residual category of *dirt*" (Bem 1995, p. 333, italics in original) meaning we should wholeheartedly embrace a polymorphous, fluid, and idiosyncratic gender and sexuality system in order to subvert (i.e., queer) the current normative male/masculine/attracted to women versus female/feminine/attracted to men gender dichotomy. Instead we must

create such a huge new space of possibility that more and more people who now manage to squeeze themselves, however uncomfortably, into the two-and-only-two [i.e., the gender dichotomy] would begin, for the first time, to be able to *see* the shoehorn that is squeezing them, and they would then be motivated to look around for something that fit them better. (Bem 1995, pp. 333–334, italics in original).

It is thus not the total erasure of gender that will lead to a more equitable sexual and gender system. Instead, it is the breaking of norms in order to resist the fetishistic need to have every aspect of every person uniformly align with gender congruent traits, the idea that those traits are oppositional and mutually exclusive, that the masculine ones are better and the norm, and that all of these things are a biological inevitability.

Implications for Inter/Multi-disciplinary Scholarship

Earlier, we proposed the notion that Bem's work can be a model for how to bridge psychology and poststructuralist, humanities-based theorizing. In practical terms, how might a feminist scholar ground her work in the traditions of psychology, yet still pursue an interdisciplinary intellectual project?

It can be difficult to conduct work that spans such a broad disciplinary chasm. As we argued above, disciplines within the social sciences often rely on different epistemologies than do those in the humanities. As a result, definitions of intellectual rigor and disciplinary standards of scholarly excellence can differ widely. Moreover, the challenges go beyond the epistemological to include differences in language and jargon, scholarly style (e.g., valuing clarity in writing versus a more hermeneutical approach that values creative interpretation), and projects of interest. All of these challenges can make speaking to each other and reading in other disciplines more difficult (Herrmann and Stewart 1994). As well, they can lead to feelings of marginalization if interdisciplinary work is never fully accepted by scholars both inside and outside of one's own discipline.

At the same time, however, empirically-based social scientists such as Bem and humanities-based scholars such as the queer theorists discussed above are not always as different in their theorizing or political projects as it seems at first blush. Our delineation of the overlap between Bem's theorizing and those of queer theorists such as Butler and Foucault is one demonstration of this. Bem was not deterred by differences in epistemological framings or disciplinary jargon. Through the practice of deep study of works from other disciplines she was able to enrich her own theories and move toward fulfilling her political goal of challenging society's constructions of gender and sexuality and, in particular, challenging "the supposedly natural link that is said to exist between what sex you are . . . and what kind of psyche, what kind of sexuality, and what level of personal and political power you are supposed to have." (Bem 1993a, pp. 232–233).

One reason why Bem went in this direction, we believe, is that her focus was less on the methods and practices of her discipline than it was on the questions of deep and passionate interest to her. Not to say that she was unskilled in the methods and practices of psychology; to the contrary, she was thoroughly proficient in study design and in the analysis and interpretation of the resulting data. But if psychology did not have the theories or methods to address a question of interest, she neither abandoned the question nor reformulated it to fit within her discipline. Instead, she engaged in intense study of scholarship from a broad spectrum of other disciplines: evolutionary biology, neuroscience, medicine, cognitive science, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, political science, law, history, philosophy, religious studies, literary theory and especially feminist and sexuality studies. In her own words "I increasingly came to see myself as having abandoned my disciplinary commitment to psychology per se, as having become more of a scholar in feminist studies than a feminist psychologist" (Bem 1993a, pp. 233–234) because "the ahistorical and decontextualized focus of North American psychology . . . could never provide me with an adequate intellectual base for the kind of contextualized — and politicized — theorizing about gender and sexuality that I was increasingly wanting to do" (Bem 1993a, p. 233).

Although Bem embraced an interdisciplinary approach to her scholarship and was critical of the deficiencies of mainstream psychology's theorizing, she never abandoned her commitment to empirical data. Even when she herself did not conduct the studies, she recognized the value of an evidence-based epistemology and practice, as her densely annotated book *The Lenses of Gender* attests. Bem helped to demonstrate that psychology's reliance on empirical data is not inherently conservative because it can be used to further political projects of justice and equality. In fact, her desire to conduct empirical research appears to have stemmed from a desire to better support her political projects. In her autobiography *An Unconventional Family*, she states:

at some point I started to feel uncomfortable about the fact that Daryl and I had no empirical evidence, no *data*, to back up the claims we were making in our public lectures about how much better it would be for both women and men if society would stop stereotyping virtually all aspects of the human personality as either feminine or masculine; how much better, in other words, if everyone were free to be their own unique blending of temperament and behavior, if everyone could be “androgynous.” Then the idea occurred to me: I could gather the relevant data myself. I could do empirical research on the question of whether so-called androgynous people might be healthier in some way than more conventionally gendered people. (Bem 1998, p. 141, italics in original)

Much of Bem’s subsequent work used empirical psychological data (as well as arguments and data from other fields) to support her critique of essentialist notions of gender and sexuality and the subversion of common sense ideological notions of gender conformity.

We would not wish to argue that there is one right way to proceed in order to integrate interdisciplinarity into psychological study and research. Some scholars might wish to obtain formal training in another discipline, in order to better conduct interdisciplinary research by themselves. Some might wish to build collaborative projects with scholars in other disciplines, with each contributing to the project in a way appropriate to her disciplinary expertise. For example, a psychologist who wishes to conduct empirical research might nevertheless partner with scholars from non-empirical disciplines in order to more broadly formulate questions of interest and more deeply interpret the resulting data. Others might participate in cross-disciplinary reading or research groups in order to give and receive feedback on scholarly work from different perspectives. Or one could follow Bem’s pragmatic model. She asked deep and important questions about real world problems, social change, and injustice, and approached those questions with a deep passion to improve society and make life better for us all. To achieve those intellectual and political goals, she read and studied as broadly as she could, following her questions wherever they led and looking for answers from any discipline that could provide them.

Conclusion

Our goal was not simply to show that there are striking similarities between Bem’s ideas and those of the queer theorists but also to argue for the existence of powerful synergy when theories are integrated across disciplines and even across epistemologies. Queer theory is powerful in its scope, elucidating the ways that gender and sexuality inhere in nearly every

domain of human life. In contrast, Bem’s work is clear, analytical, and specific on a granular level, elucidating the exact mechanisms and schematic processes that gender every domain of one’s life. Together, we have a more complete picture of what gender is, how it operates, and the structures that maintain it. Bem herself already amended her political goals (i.e., from erasing to proliferating gender) because of insights gained in part by crossing disciplinary boundaries. Honoring Bem’s life can take many shapes, but certainly one of them is coming to ideas from other disciplines with enthusiasm and overcoming differences in methodology and language in order to learn and practice better science and activism.

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