Gender – a central dimension of diversity

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Published online on: 26 Nov 2014
Part I

Dimensions of diversity
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As we enter the twenty-first century, modern differentiated societies are characterised by fundamental social transformations. Particular mention must be given here to the progressive globalisation of economic activities, the transnationalisation of social environments, advancing individualisation and, at the same time, the resurgence of social movements and the increased digitalisation of transport, information, organisation and production technologies. Within social science debates, those processes and developments are accorded different weights and interpretations. Informed by a structural functionalist and systems theoretical orientation, one observes modern industrial societies changing to become post-modern knowledge-based or information societies (Stehr 2001); from a regulation theory or neo-Marxist perspective, one detects a transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism (Jessop 2001); and in the tradition of critical social theory, processes of cosmopolitanisation are diagnosed (Beck 2006). Notwithstanding all their differences in the interpretation of those developments, within the specialised discourses of the social sciences there is a general consensus that the seemingly rigid institutional arrangements of western industrial societies are coming increasingly under pressure such that ongoing processes of diversification are now underway, resulting in an increasing diversity of form, style and mode in relation to living and working arrangements.1

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Societal processes of differentiation and thus also diversification have been discussed ever since the birth of modern social sciences. However, it was not until 1978 that the term ‘diversity’ expressly came to light. In the lawsuit University of California v. Bakke, US universities defended their right to engage in affirmative action in favour of minorities that had experienced discrimination (on grounds of race). Crucial to the subsequent rise and propagation of diversity as a relevant notion for the social sciences were the activities of various social movements, above all the civil rights movement, the women’s and lesbian movement and also the labour movement (Salzbrunn 2012). Today, the issue of diversity features in many disparate areas of society and at different levels. The spectrum stretches from discussions at the micro level on the identity politics of individual social groups, tending to involve, in particular, women, members of ethnic minorities...
and also lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activists, to the macro level with the central axes of social inequality, for example, hierarchical gender relations, class relations or migration regimes, and also encompasses, at the meso level, approaches to diversity in the workplace in the form of organisational diversity management policies. Further, at the level of the symbolic order, discussions are taking place on the possible consequences of diversity. Indeed, many of the important positions in that discourse are included in this handbook. What is at issue in those discussions is the recognition of historical discrimination and privilege and the redistribution – primarily – of economic and cultural resources (Fraser 2007). A further area of controversy is whether diversity management policies should be seen as the appreciation or simply the economisation of the ‘other’.

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of discussions in relation to diversity and the exploration of diversification processes, diversity consultants and researchers have identified that the greatest attention has been paid to the following categories: race, gender, ethnicity/nationality, organisational role/function, age, sexual orientation, mental/physical ability and religion. Of these ‘big 8’ (Plummer 2003: 25), three are particularly prominent. In the United States, diversity is associated primarily with the category of race, whereas in Europe it is identified above all with cultural and ethnic differences (Wrench 2007: 5). However, ‘in both contexts gender remains highly associated with the term, too’ (Vertovec 2012: 296). In the debates in German-speaking countries, diversity is generally linked first and foremost with the category of gender and only subsequently with cultural and ethnic identities and, in addition, with socio-economic background. Thus, gender is one of the central dimensions with which to describe diversification processes and diversity. At the same time, gender itself must be regarded as the product of discursive processes of differentiation.

In that connection, much of the current research in diversity studies builds upon findings from gender studies showing that gender must be understood both as a process and a structural category. In other words, the category of gender is produced through specific practices of differentiation and, at the same time, serves alongside race and class as one of the central axes of inequality in modern societies. Taking that as my starting point, in the following sections I will first reconstruct the processes – identified in gender studies – by which the category of gender came to be differentiated. I will then present certain key findings from gender studies illustrating the relevance of gender as a social category in modern societies. In a third section, I will sketch future research perspectives for the gender dimension of diversity and, at the same time, propose several cautionary directives that should be taken into consideration when researching further dimensions of diversity and the interplay between those dimensions.

The differentiation of gender

The genealogy of the processes by which gender became differentiated is characterised by several different stages. The starting point for the following reconstruction of those processes of differentiation must be to consider not only the very notion of gender itself, but also the processes of differentiation between and within genus groups as sedimented and thus persistent effects of dispositive construction processes and practices (Bührmann and Schneider 2012). Consequently, although gender identities and differences between and amongst the sexes appear, ultimately, unstable, variable and historically contingent, in an empirical sense, they cannot be freely chosen or simply altered at will. Instead, they are formed through the interplay of discursive practices with existing social structures of power and dominance, which, in turn, provides the basis for possible modifications.
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The differentiation of two biological genus groups

Historical research has shown that well into the early modern period a biological ‘one-sex model’ prevailed. Only since the eighteenth century has it been presumed that the female body differs fundamentally from the male body in terms of its physiological and psychological ‘nature’ (Laqueur 1990). In this system of two sexes, man is regarded as the natural representation of all that is human whereas woman is considered to be the ‘other’, ‘special’ and ‘lesser’ form. This knowledge about the ‘natural’ order of the sexes was disseminated via encyclopaedias, journals and also literary texts to the middle-class public. As a consequence, from the nineteenth century onwards a ‘polarisation of the character of the sexes’ (Hausen 1976) became regarded as a given, according to which a woman was required to act within the family as housewife, wife and mother, and, on the other hand, a man had to act in the public sphere as the breadwinner for ‘his’ family. Whereas the masculine represented culture, rationality and activity, the feminine stood for nature, irrationality and passivity. This ‘natural’ division of labour and the resulting hierarchical order(ing) of the sexes was challenged subsequently by the women’s movement and women’s studies and, since the mid-1990s in particular, has been intensely scrutinised within the mainstream of the social sciences.

The differentiation between sex and gender

Since the 1970s, women’s studies have ascribed the observed differences between men and women primarily to processes of socialisation. In that context, a distinction was drawn between ‘sex’, understood as an inborn biological embodiment that may also be culturally shaped, and ‘gender’ in the sense of behaviours and characteristics mapped onto a specific sex (see e.g. Rubin 1975). It was presumed that in the framework of gender-specific socialisation processes individuals learn and adopt a feminine or masculine gender identity and develop certain characteristics or behaviours. Whereas some wished to recognise the psychological and physiological differences resulting from those processes, and indeed this position can be found in many diversity management concepts (e.g. Loden and Rosener 1991), others considered those differences to be due to the effects of deforming socialisation processes.

Differentiation within the genus groups

In this phase, attention turned to the differences within genus groups. Above all, discussions focused on the need to take account of the interests not only of white heterosexual middle-class women, but also of black women, lesbians and working-class women. Research showed that not all women were equally affected by discrimination. For example, in the late 1970s in the United States, members of the Combahee River Collective drew attention to the multiple discrimination of black women both as black people and as women and called for different and interlocking forms and situations of discrimination to be understood from an integrational perspective (Combahee River Collective 1982). Since the late 1980s, starting from the notion of hegemonic masculinity, men’s studies has sought to explore the differences amongst men. According to Robert Connell (1987), hegemonic masculinity – and its beneficiaries – are characterised by a dual form of dominance. First, it dominates all other forms of masculinity, in particular marginalised masculinity, considered ‘too’ feminine and thus often embodied by homosexual men, and also the subordinate masculinity of the lower social classes. Second, in order to dominate, hegemonic masculinity requires a certain type of femininity that Connell describes as ‘emphasised femininity’ (ibid.: 183). In western societies, hegemonic masculinity is embodied, as a rule, by
successful men from educated families with a Christian background holding a suitable (professional) qualification and having a wife and housewife at their side who, in turn, embodies emphasised femininity. In other words, this hegemonic masculinity continues to be based on the ‘polarisation of the character of the sexes’ popularised in the nineteenth century.

In fact, both in women’s studies and in men’s studies, efforts began in the 1980s to carry out research on an intersectional basis, that is, to examine the links and interplays between various dimensions and categories of inequality (see Lutz, this volume). In this context, the term ‘intersectional’ was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who wrote:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.

*(Crenshaw 1989: 149)*

**Questioning the practices of differentiation**

Since the early 1990s, the very practices by which the genus groups are differentiated have been subject to close investigation. In that context, recourse has been had in particular to ethnomethodological and constructivist approaches. Building on earlier research on transsexuals, ethnomethodological studies in the 1970s examined the everyday performance and, thus, production of femininity and masculinity, in other words, doing gender. It became clear that individuals are not per se feminine or masculine, but have to perform a specific gender identity in a manner that is competent and appropriate to the situation if they are to be identified as masculine or feminine (Goffman 1977). For example, in his study of the male-to-female transsexual Agnes, Garfinkel (1967) examined the practices of day-to-day performance and interactive production of gender identity. In order to understand how in interactions gender is produced as a function of sex, West and Zimmermann (1991: 15) coined the term ‘sex category’, i.e. a person’s assumed sex.

If, in principle, from an ethnomethodological perspective, the existence of gender difference is presumed, something which must then be produced through performance, constructivist approaches go one step further and question how the knowledge on gender differences and the category itself came into being and how they are continuously reproduced. In that context, the distinction between sex and gender itself is seen as culturally constructed. For that reason, the interest of researchers no longer focuses simply on transsexuals, who, in principle, actually confirm the two-sex system, but now includes individuals who refuse to be categorised in a particular sex. In particular, intersex people and the growing community of transgender people have encouraged thinking to develop around flexible and fluid sexual identities (e.g. Wilchins 2004). The person most closely identified with this deconstructivist perspective is Judith Butler (1990). Taking as her starting point the notion of the heterosexual matrix, she questions the two-sex system and the associated fixed categorisations of identity and, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, draws attention to the role of specialist academic discourses in the reification of sex(ed) identities. Namely, if researchers are looking to find differences between sexes or disagree on their relevance, they are, at the same time, continuing to confirm the relevance of gender as a category (see Bührmann 2010). Nonetheless, figures, data and facts demonstrate that, in practice, gender matters.
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Gender as a category of social structures

Individuals are excluded, marginalised and encounter discrimination on grounds of their sex in many different ways and to varying extents. The shocking nature of this can be seen, for example, in the latest Human Development Report of the United Nations (2013). In western societies, the notion of sex discrimination is generally associated with the oppression of women. However, men, too, can experience discrimination, for example if they do not conform to the demands of hegemonic masculinity and are considered ‘too’ feminine or not sufficiently successful. In recent years, awareness has grown that individuals can experience discrimination because they refuse to conform to the two-sex system. However, representative findings are scarce on the discrimination experienced by transgender individuals.

Discrimination at the macro level

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that, in the EU27 Member States, in central aspects of their living and working conditions, women are disadvantaged in relation to men. Admittedly, they are no longer confined to their roles as housewife, mother and wife. In recent years, the proportion of women in employment has risen continuously across the European Union (EU), with 62.4 per cent of women in employment in 2012. However, across the EU, the employment rate of women is still lower than that of men (74.6 per cent) (EU 2013a). In addition, women are overrepresented in precarious, fixed-term or part-time forms of employment and are threatened by or experience poverty or social exclusion more often than men. In 2010, some 24.5 per cent of women (62 million) were affected in that way, whereas this applied to only 22.3 per cent of men (54 million). Women aged over 65 or who are single parents feature heavily in that group. The fact that so many women are threatened by poverty and social exclusion is closely linked to their lower average earnings. The gender pay gap, that is, the difference between the average hourly wage of men and women, was 16.2 per cent in 2013. This was an improvement of 0.8 percentage points in comparison with the previous year. However, the slight narrowing of the pay gap does not result primarily from improved wages and working conditions for women. Instead, it is men’s working conditions that have changed. The proportion of men working part-time has increased, and in sectors in which large numbers of men are employed (for example, construction and mechanical engineering) wages have fallen (EU 2013b). However, the EU labour market is segregated not only on a horizontal basis, but also vertically. This is particularly evident in relation to the proportion of women in executive and board-level positions in industry. Although progress is being made across the EU, it remains the case that 86.3 per cent of board members are men and 96.8 per cent of board chairs are men (EU 2012: 5). Thus, it is men who take the important and strategic decisions in industry. The same is true – but to a less pronounced extent – in the areas of politics and academia (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2011, EU 2013c).

Discrimination at the micro level

Women continue to experience discrimination despite considerable research efforts, the commitment of many activists and targeted support measures – such as the introduction of gender mainstreaming as regards employment, earnings and standard of living – and also their ability to influence strategic decisions. In addition, they are increasingly exposed to sexual threats and physical violence and are disproportionately at risk of being forced into human trafficking and prostitution. Whereas in the abovementioned situations the discrimination women experience
arises because of belonging to a particular sex, at the same time transgender people experience marginalisation and discrimination because of their very refusal to conform to the two-sex system and fit in or adapt to become feminine or masculine. They are stigmatised as cross-dressers, drag queens or kings and transgender, and are continuously challenged to adopt a particular sex. Unlike transsexual people, many intersex people have been, and even today continue to be, forced to undergo cosmetic genital operations in order to ensure that their biological sex as a man or woman is unambiguous. For that reason, intersex people in particular have been calling for years to be recognised as human beings who are neither masculine nor feminine. Their demands are not focused on economic redistribution but on greater social recognition. However, in a certain way, men appearing ‘too’ feminine or women appearing ‘too’ masculine experience the same form of stigmatisation. Precisely this form of stigmatisation can be seen in the comments of Regine Stachelhaus, senior executive at E.ON (the German power and gas multinational) in 2010. In a newspaper article, she is quoted as saying:

If you believe in the idea of diversity, in other words that the success of a company depends on having as many different talents and personalities as possible working there, you do not want to have any women who act in a masculine way, hang around in shapeless trouser suits, and have super short hairstyles.

(Stachelhaus in Banze 2010)

**Discrimination at the meso level**

Recent research shows that organisations must be regarded as key locations for the production and reproduction of differences between genus groups. First, it is argued that organisations are gendered. By reason of their culture and structure, they provide continuing support for the distinction between paid employment and family work (Acker 1991). In that context, not only gender-specific task allocations and job descriptions, but also gender-specific expectations and ascriptions with regard to abilities and knowledge play an important role (e.g. Ely et al. 2003; Herring 2009). Second, it is argued that within organisations – understood as networks of social interactions and relations – by their everyday actions, individuals are engaged in doing gender (e.g. Britton 2000). From this perspective, gender is both a component and a consequence of constant processes of differentiation. Conversely, this also means that gender does not always have to be prioritised as a relevant category, and in certain situations and contexts its relevance may be surpassed, for example, by class or race. Viewed in this way, the crucial questions to be resolved can be formulated thus: When is a particular category relevant? And to what extent? And when is it not relevant? Thus, we are no longer simply concerned with ‘doing gender’ but also with ‘doing differences’ (West and Fenstermaker 2002). In diversity studies, this is precisely the issue being examined in relation to the concepts of diversity management.

**Future research perspectives**

Taking as a starting point these findings from gender studies, the task for diversity research is to examine the interplay between the different dimensions of diversity.

The need at the macro level is to identify the central processes of diversification in modern societies and to determine their relevance for and between one another. In this context, it does not suffice simply to conclude that black women experience discrimination more frequently than white women or that heterosexual men are generally less likely than homosexual men to encounter discrimination. Instead, clarification is needed of the commonalities that exist (or
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could exist) between members of the different sexes and other dimensions of diversity and whether changes can be observed in this area in recent years. Of particular interest in this connection is the finding from gender studies that gender relations are becoming increasingly differentiated and less clearly structured. Increasing numbers of men are now in precarious forms of employment and, at the same time, increasing numbers of women are achieving senior management positions. In this regard, therefore, instead of concentrating the analysis on exploring the differences between and within genus groups, it would appear more productive to adopt an intersectional approach to establish on a systematic basis the commonalities between individuals who are successful in their professional lives and those who find themselves in precarious forms of employment (see also Bührmann 2013). Taking the dimensions of diversity as a starting point, the objective then is to establish a systematic social structure analysis which allows conclusions to be drawn in relation to workforce diversity. If the specific power relations can be documented in this way, a key issue from another perspective is to examine the interventions launched by social movements to counter these existing social inequalities. What activities are successful and what is the extent of that success? What alliances can be forged? These are important questions here.

Research is needed at the micro level to establish how individuals, in fact, describe themselves and the importance they attach to different dimensions of diversity. It should not restrict itself to the question of which descriptive rules are used in particular empirical situations. Instead, what happens at the boundaries of dimensions of diversity such as gender, where those boundaries are drawn, what areas are enclosed by them and how they are justified should also be examined. A key question here is to examine how, for example, by means of the stigmatisation of certain groups as ‘other’, notions of normality and deviance are produced and, further, how those practices are supported in institutional and organisational terms.

At the meso level, in light of the increasing phenomenon of workplace diversity, the processes of differentiation in an organisational context deserve investigation. From research on gendered organisations, we know that ever fewer principles of gender differentiation may be observed to qualify as comprehensive, cardinal and consistent. For that reason, it is all the more interesting to determine the locations of diffusion and, further, perhaps, to clarify whether particular types of organisation have an important role to play in the practices of differentiation. Is it the case that differences in relation, for example, to gender are produced in a different manner in commercial organisations than in universities? And, if so, does it make any difference whether these are traditional research universities or modern institutions founded in the 1960s? Another important area of research concerns the transition from gender mainstreaming to diversity management. Questions arise in this area in relation to the management of observed inequalities. If certain other groups are ‘encouraged’ or ‘supported’, does this mean that women receive reduced attention and, as a result, does the proportion of women in senior management decrease or will it, in fact, increase? This question has already been raised in relation to ethnic minorities (e.g. Schönwälder 2007). A further issue to be considered is whether and, if so, to what extent diversity management is actually of benefit to individual companies and the workforce as a whole or whether, in fact, only to certain groups. (Wrench and Modood 2000; see also Wrench, this volume). However, in this area, research is in its infancy. Finally, there is also the question whether diversity management measures do not, in fact, simply reify socially constructed differences between genus groups. Indeed, the comment by the senior executive Regina Stachelhaus is a compelling illustration of that risk.

Consequently, at the level of the symbolic order, it is important to investigate whether, and if so to what extent, specialist academic discourses have contributed to the fact that in modern societies there is a greater tendency to detect diversification processes and register the existence
of diversity. In the second section of my analysis above, I reconstructed how since the Enlightenment the conceptualisation of sex has changed considerably and, as a result, other differences have been detected. For that reason, it is essential to examine also the performative consequences of conceptual differentiation in specialist academic discourses. However, equally important is the need to clarify the social philosophical arguments by which diversity can be recognised without having to accept social inequalities.

In researching these connections and implications at the different levels, it is crucial, however, to pay regard to the following cautionary directives.

- **Intersectional perspective**: It is important to adopt an intersectional perspective and not transform an individual dimension of diversity into the master category. What is crucial is to determine the discreteness of the individual structures and their relationships between one another. This is paramount as categories are neither additive to one another nor can they be multiplied with one another, let alone reduced.

- **Transdisciplinary orientation**: Research should adopt a transdisciplinary orientation in order to profit from the findings and methods of numerous disciplines and fields of practice. The categories observed through that lens must be understood as historically constructed and, thus, by their very nature, contingent. In that analysis, it must be remembered that in different contexts categories (can) entail different impacts and effects. Connecting factors should be determined in order to permit an integrated perspective along axes of inequality that differ but, at the same time, are mutually linked by reason of societal structures. It should be borne in mind, however, that inequalities not only generate discrimination and experiences of oppression, but also create chances and privileges.

- **Dispositive approach**: It is important to regard dimensions of diversity as dispositive effects and thus not to reify existing empirical processes of diversification and their consequences and thereby, for example, reproduce affirmative recognition strategies, but instead to (re-)construct them in the sense of a ‘critical ontology of the present’ (Foucault 1984). However, it appears appropriate in that connection – on a provisional basis – to regard race, class and gender as the central axes of inequality in modern differentiated societies.

These directives have been developed on the basis of findings from gender studies. They are intended to guide research into the societal processes of differentiation, and thus also of diversification, and the consequences thereof set out in the introduction to this chapter. Naturally, in the course of that process, it is likely that they will be expanded and developed further.

**Notes**

1. Whether, in fact, the incidence of empirical processes of diversification has increased or whether those processes are simply more often observed remains to be determined. I shall return to this point later.
2. On this see also Aretz and Hansen (2003), Bendl et al. (2006), Heitzmann and Klein (2012), Koall and Bruchhagen (2005) and Krell and Sieben (2007).
3. On the notion of the dispositive (or apparatus) in the work of Foucault see Bührmann (2005).
4. Only a few men incorporate all the elements of hegemonic masculinity. However, the majority of men profit from the dominance of patriarchy.
5. For further information see e.g. www.terre-des-femmes.de.
6. In Germany, following an amendment to the law on personal status (Personenstandgesetz), it has been possible since 1 November 2011 to belong to an ‘indeterminate sex’. However, the consequences for the registration of individuals with municipal authorities, in relation to passports and also for other areas of the law, have not yet been determined.
7. I am grateful to Gertraude Krell for drawing my attention to this comment.
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References


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