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Author Biography

Rebecca is an MA student at the University of Birmingham, exploring experiences of women in the Middle East since 1850. After securing a place on the Dean's List at the University of Colorado, she received a first class mark for her dissertation, on gender performativity, from the University of Sussex.

Paper Title and Abstract

The "Opposite" Sex: Intersexuality and the Power of the Body

Since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990 the concept of "gender" as socially constructed has been embraced by academics and mainstream society alike. The positive impacts have seen a rise in the transgender rights movement and the legitimisation of "non-binary" identities. However, despite considerable progress in deconstructing "gender" as a social construct, "sex" is still commonly thought of as a product of nature. Sex is commonly thought of as two distinct, separate and "opposite" sexes – female and male. Although other "natural" characteristics such as height, hair and eye colour are accepted to have variations between individuals, sex – and in particular, sex chromosome composition, hormone levels and genitalia - are viewed as strictly dimorphic. This paper explores the experience of intersex peoples, the ethical problem of "normalising" surgeries and the centrality of social and cultural symbols associated with the "body".

Until recently, intersex had been isolated to the margins of popular culture. Founding of the Intersex Society of North America in 1993 alongside organizations emerging in the Twenty-First century such as DSDfamilies, UKIA, OII-UK, interACT and more have brought discussions on intersex into the foreground. It is now thought that 1.7% of children at birth

do not conform to the dimorphic sex categories of male or female – equal to the number of children born with red hair. Intersex peoples are now encouraging a conversation around the experiences of being intersex through books, blogs and websites. The combination of these emerging organizations, studies and publications are giving the intersex community a voice in society.

“Normalising” surgeries have been common practice worldwide on children born with “ambiguous genitalia”. In the UK and US there are currently no laws against non-consensual surgeries on intersex peoples meaning the decision lies with individual medical practitioners. This creates an ethical problem – as Ellen Feder excellently analyses. The interventions of medical personnel through “normalizing” surgeries demonstrates how “sex” is in fact influenced by social thinking and not a product of nature. This blurs the gap between the social construct of “gender” and the natural product of “sex” encouraging discussions which explore the impact of both gender and sex being a social construction.

The impact of analysing the unnaturalness of “sex” due to medical practitioners interventions also encourages an exploration on the symbolism of the “body”. So much of an individual’s identity stems from their body and in particular the “sex” and “gender”/s associated with their body by society. Morgan Holmes explains how identities of race and disability are layered on top of an individual’s gender. Therefore, the body is of integral importance to the construction of an individual’s sex, gender/s and identity as well as to society’s understanding of identity. This paper demonstrates how exploring intersexuality aids studies of gender and queer theory as well as theories of ethics and the body.

Fundamentally, the strengthening of the voices of the intersex community will augment our understanding of gender, identity politics and power of the body.

Key Words

Intersex, gender, sex, body, identity