

Thoughts on Gender in the 21st Century University Environment

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Generation Zed: “fluid” and “ambiguous” are watchwords

Gender is not (or shortly will no longer be) a binary, with humans simply categorized as male or female. In addition, gender and sexuality are not the same thing, although they are sometimes conflated as such in research.

Being “male” or being “female” can be sometimes mistaken in a similar way to sexuality within the wider culture’s need to set up sexual and gender binaries and force “choices” for the benefit of the majority culture’s hetero-generative “normality.”

In May 2017 a small band of researchers at Bournemouth University organized a workshop on “Gender and Sexuality in the 21st Century.” The participants’ openness to a discussion on sexuality, gender, and emotion began to expose this latest generation’s “ambivalence,” even “dissonance,” regarding concepts such as “gender” and “sexuality.” (These attitudes and terms also had been reported by participants in a large national survey by the CDC in America [[CDC 2016, Report: “Youth Risk ...”](#)]).

Headlines in the press are particularly beginning to unravel the traditional binary around gender amongst the general public:

- ***“27% of California adolescents say they are viewed as ‘gender non-conforming’*** ([UCLA Newsroom, December 2017](#))
- ***Singer Sam Smith comes out as non-binary: ‘I’m not male or female’. “Many non-binary people don’t identify as either male or female and use the pronouns they or them instead of he or she”*** ([BBC News, March 18, 2019](#))

- ***“The gender-fluid generation: young people on being male, female or non-binary”*** ([The Guardian March 23, 2016](#))
- ***“Unimaginable a decade ago, the intensely personal subject of gender identity has entered the public square”*** ([“The Gender Revolution,” National Geographic, January 2017](#))

With the progress made in supposed acceptance of the equal rights of gay and lesbian citizens, particularly in Western cultures over the last half-century, it is easy to assume that feelings of unease, even ‘dissonance’ around issues of sexuality and gender have been left behind us. Nonetheless, it seems from not only the CDC study, but reports at the workshop and elsewhere, that this is not the case.

What were the thoughts, feelings, responses from our gathered group of interested parties at Bournemouth’s Workshop on Sexuality and Gender in the 21st Century? A few highlights from their responses follow:

WHAT MYTHS ABOUT YOUTH AND SEXUALITY ARE YOU AWARE OF?

- “It’s a phase, you’ll get through it”
- Gender and sexuality are fixed or binary
- Labels both empowering and constraining
- People merge sexuality and gender
- Squeezing or narrowing sexuality and gender instead of embracing spectrum of possibility

HOW IS BEING OPEN ABOUT SEXUALITY AND GENDER TODAY DIFFERENT OR THE SAME AS BEFORE?

- There is a language available to allow fluidity
- Greater space to try or be open to different experiences
- Having to permanently fight the myths remains
- Being able to explain – having a language to articulate position/place is so important
- Access to a gender identity clinic, so important in decision making
- More accepted? People perhaps have greater understanding
- Internet as a rich resource and open space
- Acceptance of family is critical, response too can have an impact

HOW CAN WE INCREASE GENDER AWARENESS IN EDUCATION?

- Training concerning language, terminology, increasing understanding and appropriate signposting
- One or two key members of staff as a safe ‘place’; key contacts who are well educated
- Increasing opportunity for recording and dealing with individuals in order to better understand pressures faced by those facing identity issues around gender and/or sexuality.

How does this change our attitudes and even our definitions of gender in the university workplace?

We suggest that it may be time to redefine the terms by which measurements are made concerning gender in the university workplace. Vocabularies need to reflect more precisely the cultural changes in gender that are taking place both within and outside of the university.

A university workforce's gender make-up that is rigidly defined by what is now an antiquated binary of male/female does little to provide the best service to its staff or its aspirations for equality. The university's needs to address changing attitudes of the increasing numbers of employees and students expecting fluidity around gender issues at a university. This will surely reflect what the youngest generation of students are expecting.

Some helpful hints:

- Don't assume that because of birth-gender an employee completely identifies as totally male or female. Some may choose to be identified as gender-fluid and be addressed by alternative pronouns, for example.
- It isn't always the birth-gender female who automatically takes up the childcare or parent-care role in a partnership. More and more birth-gender males are taking up this role. The role also may be carried out by someone who identifies as female, or someone who identifies as male. Also, it is important not to assume that childcare by a dyad is one female, one male. Parents can be made up of two birth-gender females or two birth-gender males, or two identifying females or two identifying males.
- Single gay men have traditionally been expected to provide care for ailing parents, much the same as single birth-gender females.

When we were researching older lesbian and gay citizens living in rural Britain ([Fenge, Jones & Read 2011](#)), we frequently were confronted with, "There aren't any in our village!" Sadly, sometimes the result of this inability to acknowledge difference was one of the causes of several reported suicides. This is mentioned hoping that the concepts of gender fluidity and ambiguity are not swept under the rug in a similar way here. The university has the opportunity to be amongst the first to recognise the changing climate of what gender means and how gender is being redefined, particularly by today's youngest generation as well as forward-thinking academics.

Further reading:

Jones, K. (2018) ["How AHRC-funded Film RUFUS STONE Inspired a Project on the Next Generation."](#) *AHRC Web* April 2018

Jones, K. (2017) ["True confessions: why I left a traditional liberal arts college for the sins of the big city."](#) *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 17 Issue: 1, pp.43-51, DOI: 10.1108/QRJ-09-2016-0057