

Review of: "Sex Reassignment and Gender Misfits"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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The Qeios process/setup is new to me, but as I have access to the reviews (and responses) published before mine, I have tried to avoid duplicating points made in other reviews; I also have taken advantage of access to the author's responses to reviews. I am guessing that this is permissible, as an open dialog is part of the Qeios concept.

Harriet Baber's "Sex Reassignment and Gender Misfits" asks some interesting questions, but it's not clear from the paper itself to what purpose, or even which specific ideas or definitions this article is in dialog with. This makes reviewing the paper problematic. The gist of this paper, as I see it, is that "[t]he idea of gender difference as such is oppressive." (the abstract) One of Baber's responses to a review posted on Qeios offered additional insights into what the project is here:

It's a philosophy paper. I'm dealing with a semantic issue: what do the folk mean by 'gender'? what, if anything is meant by 'gender identity'--I argue nothing. And I propose distinguishing sex roles which are social norms and extrinsic, to the intrinsic traits that satisfy or fail to satisfy the norms. (June 11, 2023)

I understand that philosophy is a very different discipline than sociology (my area), so my reading carries that bias. Still, while I appreciate Baber's sentiments here, the reliance on narrow (and, from my perspective, scattershot) understandings of the meanings of gender/sex/sex roles/etc. seriously detracts from what I see as an effort to analyze how concepts of ----
----- (insert here what Baber is interested in – one of the problems is that I'm not clear what it is – "gender/sex/sex roles/identity"??) are used and understood by people subject to them. The vast "gender studies" literature that engages with the meaning, origins, implications, power, oppressions, etc. has a lot to say about the issues in the paper.

Unfortunately, the works cited in the footnotes don't refer to that literature, and instead Baber here is relying on ideas from the BBC, a New York Times book review, Wikipedia (twice), some rather marginal medical and philosophical work on gender, transgender options, and some medicalized versions of those. This seriously undercuts what I think Baber is trying to get at (I could be wrong): that the tyranny of what she calls "sex roles" and our understanding of what they are makes the identity issues confronting transgender people far more fraught and difficult.

It's interesting to read across disciplines, and perhaps I should expect to some disciplinary frustrations reading a philosophy paper, but it seems as if Baber here is trying to use social science concepts within a philosophical context, without really having a sense of the depth of thinking and (even) semantic investigation that has already been done around the concepts used here (e.g., "gender difference," "sex," "sex roles," "gender," "genders," "transgenderism," "male," "female," "gender identify," "biological determinants of sex," "femininity," "masculinity," "non-binary," "gender-fluid," "gender

norms,” “ungendered,” etc.) I would need much clearer language to understand Baber’s arguments better. For example, the paper’s pervasive use of “male and female” – generally used by sociologists to identify categories of *biological sex* – is particularly problematic, as Baber uses it also to refer to categories of gender: men and women, boys and girls. This implies that gender has some “brute fact” basis in biological sex (in my own work I have tried to problematize the simplistic division between biological “sex” and socially and historically constructed “gender”[1]).

As a sociologist, the idea that “we should . . . end gender,” seems akin to the idea that we should “end race,” or “end money” – sure, let’s end poverty and disease, too! But that’s not a semantic issue, at least not from where I see things. Gender as a concept and a lived experience – like social class, race, identity, and so on – is a result of social and historical structures that not only have shaped it, but with which gender is in dynamic interaction, including the actions and identity work being done by people who identify as transgender.

[1] I argue that biological sex, which relies on chromosome research for its “objective” basis, is just as socially constructed as gender (DOI: [10.1007/s12108-018-9396-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-018-9396-y)).