

Review of: "Sex Reassignment and Gender Misfits"

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Although the author claims their relationship to the identity of 'female' as being only a rather functional thing, this essay reads as a deeply personal existential therapeutic exercise; in Babler's parsing (or "dismantling") of the issues of gender identity, roles and transition, ***

There were several points made by the author which felt like 'core truths':

1 - "There is however no phenomenal what-it-is-like to be a woman."

2 - "There is... reason to believe that for many it is not their bodies but their assigned sex roles in which they are not at home."

3 - "for many the problem is not lack of fit with their sexed bodies but lack of fit with their social environment" - the medical vs social debate considered within disability activism.

4 - the challenge that a medical transition model "implicitly endorses the assumption that some personality traits, preferences, and aspirations are inherently masculine or feminine."

The author makes a further comment, which I found particularly powerful - "it provides stability for systems of rigid sex roles"

5 - Finally, although on page 4, the author cautions "the real possibility that the growing acceptance of gender transition will not... loosen sex roles but instead entrench them" there is a more optimistic prediction that "when social conditions change for the better, gender misfits will be less inclined to seek transition." I agree, as this is such a great time of social transition; fluidity and the blurring of boundaries are becoming ever more normalised. Indeed, in the "thought experiment" of pages 5 and 6, Baber envisions a time when gender will be seen very differently; gender designation or identity will no longer matter in the ways it currently does.

In the abstract of this essay, Baber challenges that gender transition "may make gender more salient and perpetuate sex roles that harm..." yet, goes on to use the term "gender misfits. It would seem that to brand oneself a misfit in such a way is, in itself, to perpetuate harmful, polarised sex roles. Perhaps the author could be looking for ways through which to

transcend such roles?

On page 4, Baber acknowledges a potential great tragedy; the idea that dare not speak its name, lest it hamper the genuine progress being made for trans individuals: “misfits who beat the system by transitioning are not culpable.”

Baber argues that we ought to “repudiate the assumption that some psychological traits are inherently gendered.” I wonder if it might be more appropriate to *challenge, investigate or deconstruct* this assumption - indeed, there is significant research and theory around such questions, from various fields, which suggests a less clear-cut position.

In the abstract of this essay, Baber argues that “gender is not intrinsic to persons.” However, in the first section of the text, she states “Gender is intrinsic”; some clarification would be encouraged on this point. In due course, a differentiation is made between gender identity and expression; traditionally, sociology has described gender as *performative*; the expression rather than the identity referred to. Perhaps it is the identity aspect of gender to which the author refers in section one. However, when Baber states “gender identity is an experience of what it is like to be male or female...” there is a sense that this *must* refer to the gender one considers oneself to be rather than biological sex; I wonder whether this statement is unpacked sufficiently?

Further, when Baber argues “Some psychological traits are strongly gendered”; I wonder if it would be more correct to argue that some psychological traits are *assigned* to artificially polarised gender categories? In page 4, Baber states: “the medical model assumes that a range of psychological characteristics are inherently gendered rather than traits that happen to fit current, local sex roles”; perhaps the connection made with the social-model of disability could be made more clear?

On the questions surrounding gender vs sex, I would recommend Judith Butler, who takes a social constructionist view, arguing that the idea of ‘sex’ may be just as constructed as that of ‘gender:’

“If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”

[Judith Butler, ‘Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity’, (New York: Routledge, 1990), in James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views*. p.15.]

Beilby and Rhodes Eddy argue, in “Understanding Transgender Identities,” for a broadening of the idea of ‘sex’, which could encompass each individual’s perspective on their own sex and *encompass* the concepts currently ascribed to ‘gender’.

[Paul Rhodes Eddy & James K Beilby, ‘Introduction in Understanding Transgender Identities’, p. 14.]

I wonder if this broader concept of ‘sex’ could preclude the need for the idea that one should be designated ‘misfit’.

In conclusion; this is a rich essay containing a great deal of insight and vision for a future when outmoded ideas of sex and gender no longer constrain or harm in the ways they currently can. There are a few small points of internal consistency which require attention but, once this is done, it is a great piece of writing.