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Beyond gender identity?

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This paper focuses on the continuing significance of gender identity as a category of analysis within the field of gender theory and research in education. I begin by considering contemporary discussions of the limitations of research relating to gender theory and research in education. Following on from this, I explore some contemporary theorising on the category of gender within educational research in order to highlight ongoing debates that I perceive in the field. Finally, via a discussion of school toilets and gender performance, I consider how theoretical discourses relating to space and architecture might further develop the utility of gender as a category of analysis within education.

Keywords: gender identity; Dillabough; Paechter; toilet; female masculinity

It is time now to get beyond gender ‘identity’ – both the fluid and the stable – not to repress particularity, but in the true spirit of social analysis in education feminism ... Clearly, identity analysis as a conceptual tool (if we wish to call it that) cannot be used to situate the range of issues which need exploring, particularly if we wish to sustain an emphasis on gender equity in education. (Dillabough 2001, 26)

In the quotation above, Jo-Anne Dillabough exhorts readers to get ‘beyond gender “identity”’. This quotation is part of a broader discussion of gender identity in a chapter entitled ‘Gender theory and research in education: Modernist traditions and emerging contemporary themes’. This paper responds to this exhortation, in the negative. It is an argument for the continuing significance of gender identity as a category of analysis within the field of gender theory and research in education.

I commence with a discussion of this piece, among others, as I believe it has proved influential in this field. This influence is marked by its recent reprinting in Madeleine Arnot and Mairtin Mac An Ghaill’s (2006) *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Gender and Education*. This reader is advertised by Routledge as ‘bringing together classic pieces of gender theory’ and Dillabough’s is the first piece in the reader, following the introduction. It is my perception that such readers can be significant in influencing debate within specific fields of inquiry. Consequently, while Dillabough’s original article is now quite old, I think Dillabough’s piece has ongoing relevance to contemporary debates in gender and education. It is also worth noting that the chapter is one that I find very useful in exploring different theoretical trends within gender theory and research in education with postgraduate students.

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The chapter by Dillabough is written in quite a polemic style, and this piece attempts to respond in a similar genre. I begin this article by considering some of the limitations of research relating to gender theory and research in education that have been identified by Dillabough and others. Following on from this, I explore some contemporary theorising on the category of gender within educational research in order to highlight ongoing debates that I perceive in the field. Finally, via a discussion of school toilets and gender performance, I consider how theoretical discourses relating to space and architecture might further develop the utility of gender as a category of analysis within education.

Gender equity versus gender identity

In this section I want to demonstrate that within the field of research in gender and education there is something of a binary that I am describing as gender equity versus gender identity. Within this binary, emancipatory research is often associated with the notion of gender equity. Post-structuralist research with an emphasis on deconstruction of identity is sometimes characterised as less emancipatory. For instance, Becky Francis (1999) has argued that '[f]eminism is a political project with emancipatory aims' (p. 385) and that these 'emancipatory concerns are dismissed by post-structuralists as a modernist truth narrative which should itself be deconstructed rather than developed' (p. 385). However, the relationship between post-structuralism and emancipation is by no means straightforward. For instance, Francis suggests that some 'post-structuralist feminist' research is embedded in feminist and emancipatory foundations, and that consequently such studies aren't 'any less worthy or useful because they do not conform to "pure" post-structuralist positions' (p. 390). In fact, for Francis, post-structuralists might take heart from their refusal or incapacity to adopt 'pure' post-post-structuralism, because in so doing their work retains emancipatory remains.

In a slightly different vein, Renold, in her recent study of boys negotiating non-hegemonic masculinities in the primary school, is optimistic about the potential of post-structural and queer theories to 'challenge/deconstruct' oppositional gender traps (2004). It is also worth noting that while Renold expresses some concern that the boys she studied 'reported little or no concern for the girls, women and "feminine" values they were repudiating' (p. 261) that 'any gender equity programme ... needs to focus upon gender relations' (p. 262). So, for Renold, post-structuralism, gender equity and deconstruction usefully inform one another.

By contrast, Valerie Hey (2006), in her article 'The politics of performative resignification', flags 'some unresolved tensions in working with a radically deconstructivist approach' (p. 441). Rather than turn away from such an approach, she goes on to argue that 'the next task for the feminist sociology of education is to work with/in the promise of performativity, to take up the question of articulating a theory of the psychosocial formation in terms of the "different" materialities of class, sexuality and gender' (pp. 453–454). For Arnot and Mac an Ghaill (2006), queer activism (and I presume theory) is constituted as 'a shift away from challenging structural inequalities and power relations between relatively given or fixed sexual/gender categories to deconstructing the categories themselves' (p. 9). I think this last brief description is interesting because it suggests that queer activism/theory is more interested in deconstruction than in inequalities and relations of power. Together, these allusions to deconstruction and equity issues indicate for me a productive point of tension within the field of gender

studies in education. There is a sense that deconstruction and post-structuralism are one step removed from questions of power and equity. And I read Dillabough's (2001) piece as an extension of this argument.

For instance, Dillabough's argument that *certain types* of research are problematic and not 'in the true spirit of social analysis in education and feminism' (2001, 26), echoes Francis' (1999) concern that 'post-structuralism is, according to many feminists, unable to engage in theorising, or work for, social change' (p. 387). In her chapter, Dillabough canvasses many different trends within gender theory and research in education. But one of her principal arguments appears to be that research focused on gender identity might have lost its way. She suggests that 'an emphasis on gender identity rather than equity *per se* has emerged, in part as a response to larger transformations in social theory and the evolution of education within the humanities and social sciences' (p. 15). This argument is developed via an historical analysis of different trends within this field of inquiry, in which several categories of researcher are identified including social and cultural reproductionists, post-structuralists, post-colonial and standpoint theorists, and, post-Fordists.

Before commencing her critique of post-structuralism, Dillabough reminds her readers that 'it is important to remember that there remain education feminists who argue that there is a continuing need to examine the relationship between gender identity both as a *category of analysis* and as a coherent narrative which is shaped, in part, through educational *forces*' (p. 16, emphasis in original). Dillabough would, I think, see herself as this type of education feminist; someone who is focused on exploring gender identity as a category of analysis, while simultaneously arguing the value of focusing on a coherent narrative of the category of gender.

In her analysis, Dillabough argues that post-structuralists

...are more formally entrenched in assessing the shifting nature of gender identity in schools... [and post-structuralists] argue that we need to get beyond viewing gender as a core element of selfhood and instead examine the equity implications for education policy of understanding multiple positions on identity. (Dillabough 2001, 16, original emphasis)

In her characterisation of the field of post-structuralism in education, Dillabough expresses concern at a shift 'away from the 'sociology of women's education' and political and pedagogical concerns with gender equity (as pragmatic issues) towards a broader theoretical concern with the formation of gender identities and novel *gender theories* of education' (p. 17, emphasis in original). While affirming that post-structuralist theorising has been effective in identifying how language regulates the lives of pupils and teachers, Dillabough wonders where such work might 'take us in challenging difficult problems of gender relations in schools such as "bullying", "homophobia", "school violence", "critical literacy" and the lack of more open democratic school structures' (p. 19).

My concern with Dillabough's critique of post-structuralism is that such claims perform the task of creating a problematic binary: authorising certain types of research, while simultaneously denigrating research that is too preoccupied with gender identity. This binary is underpinned by an assumption that only certain types of research might somehow tackle bullying or homophobia or school violence. For Dillabough, it appears that such challenges are beyond post-structuralism and its 'novel *gender theories*'. Dillabough goes on to articulate her vision for the future of research on gender in education, arguing for:

[R]esearch which embraces the best of both theoretical worlds – modernist and postmodernist/poststructural theories – will be, in my judgement, the most useful in moving forward. But in so doing, we should avoid consumer-oriented and trendy ‘pick and choose’ approaches that ultimately possess limited theoretical integrity and analytical cohesion. Educational research needs to wrestle with the tensions in feminist theory and attempt to resolve them. (Dillabough 2001, 25)

Dillabough’s vision for the future of educational research on gender might be seen as part of a broader political project relating to what constitutes serious research in the field of gender and education. Those who concur with Dillabough might conclude that researchers who continue to utilise ‘novel *gender theories*’ are not engaging in important political and pedagogical concerns. I am sympathetic with the notion that not all work on gender and sexual identity is equally valuable, theoretically or politically. But I also think that similar claims could be made about work focusing on gender equity in education.

What is more interesting to me, in the context of this discussion, is how different sorts of research are broadly characterised within this field of inquiry. Or rather, as Christel Stormhøj (2000) notes in her research paper, ‘Feminist politics after post-structuralism’, it is costly to ignore the political investments of the terms through which gender identity is constructed (p. 12). Dillabough’s focus on the value of sustaining gender as a coherent narrative within educational research (2001, 16) seems linked to her desire to move away from research that insists on focusing on the instability and fluidity of gender (p. 25). For her, these ‘contradictions pose serious problems for the groups in whose name we struggle, [when] our purposes are merely absorbed into an academic and political culture which is no longer relevant to the people it is meant to serve’ (p. 25). For me, insisting on coherence is potentially problematic because it runs the risk of reinstating a heterosexualising frame for thinking about gender (Stormhøj 2000, 12). I would argue that in my research on sexuality, gender and education – an insistence on instability and fluidity is crucial, and, that these contradictions continue to have theoretical, political and practical relevance (as I will demonstrate in the sections below).

One aim of this article is to wrestle with the assumption of the usefulness of a sustained emphasis on gender equity *when such a project is construed as taking precedence over a continued interrogation of the notion of gender identity within the field of education*. My problem is not with gender equity *per se*. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate that educational research can continue to benefit from an interrogation of gender identity, in all its particularity. I would also argue that calls to move beyond gender identity are untimely and inequitable, given that feminist theory in education has only recently begun to seriously grapple with issues pertinent to subjects whose lives are profoundly and often injuriously impacted by the instability of gender identity (here I am thinking of people who identify as transsexual, transgender, genderqueer and intersex). Further, I will argue that research on gender equity may be diminished if it fails to seriously interrogate gender identity; these two lines of inquiry should continue to fruitfully inform one another.

I also want to reiterate that this article is not a defence of all research conducted in relation to sex, sexuality and gender identity¹ in education. In the following section, I go on to consider some recent research relating to the notion of gender identity, within and outside education. I also consider some of the strengths and weaknesses that I perceive in this body of knowledge.

Gender identity in education

In an article in *Gender and Education* entitled 'Masculine femininities/feminine masculinities: Power, identities and gender' (2006), Carrie Paechter undertakes a detailed examination of contemporary terminology relating to gender. I have chosen to examine this piece in the context of this article in order to consider another researcher's ongoing preoccupation with interrogating gender as a category of analysis within educational research. As the title of the piece indicates, Paechter sets out to analyse the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' and associated relations of power. The task is a worthy one, as terms related to gender are still very difficult to pin down; as Paechter notes, 'we know that these are slippery terms and to some extent have to live with that' (Paechter 2006, 54). To my mind, part of the difficulty of getting 'beyond gender identity' relates to this continual striving to understand what we mean by 'gender' when we use it as a category of analysis.

The central problem with which Paechter is trying to grapple is 'understanding how individual identities relate to dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity' (p. 253). Drawing on R.W. Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity, Paechter concurs with Connell's contention that we cannot talk about hegemonic femininity (Connell 1987, in Paechter 2006, 256) because, she argues,

...there can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world for oneself and others so that power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things. Hyperfemininity, on the other hand, is a powerless position, one that is defined by the absence of the power inherent not just in hegemonic masculinity, but, by virtue of the patriarchal dividend and the dualistic construction of masculinity and femininity, all masculinities. (Paechter 2006, 256)

I find it difficult to accept that *all* femininities are rendered powerless *relative to all* masculinities. In her study "'Other" boys', Renold focuses on 'the experiences of boys who choose not to cultivate their masculinities through hegemonic discourses and practices' (2004, 247). In this study, Renold draws, in part, on Paechter's earlier (1998) work to consider how masculinities are the subject of complex relations of power, and compellingly demonstrates that masculinity is no guarantee of patriarchy. This research undermines the claim that all masculinities, regardless of their configuration, necessarily accrue a 'patriarchal dividend' that is denied to all femininities. This claim will be further interrogated later in this paper when I consider some trans women's experiences of the space of the public toilet. To my mind, such a claim lacks nuance.

My unease with Paechter's use of Connell's hegemonic masculinities has resonances in Moller's (2007) critique of Connell's own use of this conceptual device. For Moller,

Connell's model of a hierarchy of masculinities, within which there is a hegemonic form, operate[s] as a theoretical and/or methodological mechanism with which to whittle down the diversity and complexity of human subjects until they can be understood in black and white terms as having a discernible place in the system of gender. (Moller 2007, 267)

Paechter mobilises the notion of hegemonic masculinities in her discussion of power, identities and gender because she perceives gender as operating in systematic ways. Once it is possible to discern how this system operates, it is possible to account for what she perceives as an unequal hierarchy in which:

Femininities are not constructed in the ways masculinities are; they do not confer cultural power, nor are they able to guarantee patriarchy. They are, instead, construed as a variety of negations of the masculine. (Paechter 2006, 256)

I am not convinced by this systematisation of gender, and share Moller's concern that research that deploys Connell's use of hegemonic masculinity tends to 'occlude those techniques and tactics of masculine power that do not quite make sense as dominating or oppressive: to see power as only domination' (Moller 2007, 266).

Paechter's move to argue against the notion of hegemonic femininities can also be contrasted with other feminist researchers working with Connell's notion. For instance, Schippers insists upon the theoretical value of mobilising the notion of hegemonic femininities when studying racially and economically diverse groups of men and women, within and outside educational contexts. She

...offers a definition of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity that allows for multiple configurations within each, and that can be used empirically across settings and groups. The author also outlines how hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity are implicated in and intersect with other systems of inequality such as class, race, and ethnicity. (Schippers 2007, 85)

For Schippers, this argument entails an insistence that:

...gender inequality is not simply the unequal distribution of resources, power, and value between women and men, but also between those who embody intelligible gender and those who do not. And gender hegemony, as conceptualized here, explains how masculinity and femininity ensure and legitimate those relations of domination as well. (Schippers 2007, 100)

In the context of this article, this discussion of the theoretical utility of the notion of hegemonic masculinity suggests the ongoing significance of debates relating to how the category of gender identity is mobilised, within and outside educational research. It is apparent that Moller, Paechter and Schippers are endeavouring to understand how relations of power relate to notions of gender identity, but it is also clear that there is continuing disagreement about how the category of gender is theorised in these debates.

While Schippers asserts the value of extending Connell's notion of hegemonic femininity in order to better undertake research on gender inequality, Paechter insists that the notion of hegemonic femininities be rejected in educational research (Paechter 2006, 253). Both authors cite R.W. Connell and Judith Halberstam as significant influences in their analysis of gender. In a different register, Moller critiques those who would deploy the notion of hegemonic masculinity because he believes that it 'conditions researchers to think about masculinity and power in a specific and limited way' (Moller 2007, 268).

My intention here is not to resolve these differences, but rather to highlight the productivity of continuing conversations that wrestle with the slippery notion of gender identity. Significantly, for my study of gender and school toilets later in this paper, I also want to highlight Schippers' argument that *men and women who embody 'intelligible gender' have more power than those who do not*. Clearly, there are complex and ongoing arguments still to be had about how relations of power are distributed between femininities and masculinities, and between male bodies and female bodies, and between bodies that are intelligible and unintelligible within the

framework of existing categorisations of gender. Such discussions will also be informed by issues of race/ethnicity, class, space and place, religion and nationalism. What is apparent, in juxtaposing these three articles, is that the notion of how gender identity is constituted is central to these researchers conceptualisation of research related to gender. Following on from this identification of the ongoing significance of debates relating to gender identity as a category of analysis, I now turn to a more detailed discussion of Paechter's attempt to grapple with questions of the masculine and feminine in relation to female embodiment.

Female masculinity/masculine femininities/feminine masculinities?

The concept of 'female masculinity' advanced by Halberstam causes some disquiet for Paechter. Part of her rationale in further investigating this notion is because it is 'a concept that is growing in frequency of use' (2006, 57). In Halberstam's analysis, there is 'a model of female masculinity that remarks on its multiple forms but also calls for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies' (1998, 9). For Halberstam, such a theoretical movement is able to 'explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity' (1998, 9). For Paechter, this mode of gender analysis constitutes a particularly disturbing trend in which she perceives gender theorists '[d]istancing oneself from stereotypical femininity ... [as] a claiming of power' (2006, 256). Consequently, Paechter draws the conclusion that

While much of dominant masculinity positions the men who personify it as sexually desirable, its opposite, the nurturing, home-focused, childbearing woman, is the outside of sex, beyond the desire of both men and butch lesbians ... The dualistic relation between masculinity and femininity, whether claimed by males or females, positions both extreme and normative femininity as without power, and, indeed, as pathological. (Paechter 2006, 257)

This analysis of Halberstam's female masculinity sees any incarnation of female masculinity as, at least symbolically, involved in the pathologisation of 'its opposite' – the stereotypical or normalised feminine. I am unconvinced by Paechter's contention that all formations of masculinity necessarily result in femininities being construed as pathological and without power. Those who adopt or are attributed butch identifications might also construe such an analysis of female masculinities as particularly problematic. How might childbearing/rearing butch lesbians be classified within such a framework? Are nurturing and butch identities antithetical? Do we really know that butch women don't desire a 'nurturing, home-focused, childbearing woman'? Are these identifications fixed to certain types of subjects? On reading this piece by Paechter, I wonder what is the theoretical utility in insisting on such dualistic relations of gender and power? Is it theoretically robust to embrace dualistic thinking in an attempt to 'break through the dualistic relation and have a more equal construction' (p. 262)? Does one dualism cancel out another?

It would appear that the substance of Paechter's piece comes down to an insistence that '[g]ender is thus centrally concerned with who one considers oneself to be, not how one appears to others' (p. 59). For Paechter, this way of thinking may be problematic in 'separation of mind and body', but useful insofar as it 'provides something relatively solid and unchanging onto which we can hang descriptors' (p. 259). This theoretical move is underpinned by a desire for a 'discourse in which "man", "woman" ... is

the noun, the solid term, with “masculine” and “feminine” as qualifiers’ (p. 61). In Paechter’s argument, such a configuration is an important reversal of Halberstam’s notion of ‘female masculinity’ (1998), because it ‘treats masculinities and femininities as truly multiple, and as ways of “being a man or woman, boy or girl”, rather than central to our whole existence’ (Paechter 2006, 261).

It would appear in the quotation below that Paechter might share some similarities with Dillabough insofar as she is arguing the utility of thinking beyond the masculine–feminine binary. For Paechter:

Once we understand that not all masculinities are entirely masculine, or femininities feminine, we may be able to think of ourselves as humans who construct our identities in various ways, some of which are related to ideal forms of masculinity and femininity, and some of which are not ... In doing this will we free ourselves, both as researchers and as individuals, from binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity that constrain both what we can think and who can we be. (Paechter 2006, 262)

While Paechter hopes her analysis will free us from binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity, Clegg notes that Paechter draws on binary conceptions of gender in order to argue that she has masculine attributes (Clegg 2008, 213). Paechter describes herself as ‘not a masculine woman’, though she does enact ‘significant masculine attributes’ (naming a combative style of argument as such an attribute) (Paechter 2006, 262). For Paechter, these categories constitute ‘part of what it is to be the person who is me’ (p. 262) and ‘being male or female (or something else entirely) ... has little bearing on how that person then proceeds to construct her or his femininity or masculinity’ (p. 262). Similarly, Clegg, drawing on Paechter, argues that ‘[i]dentity as man or women, or other, appears to be a case of who one thinks one is and relates to the sense of self rather than the mobile discursive concepts of self which vary across situation and context’ (Clegg 2008, 212).

What is disturbing about these understandings of gender is the rendering of agency as located principally in the self. The fundamental argument I have with Paechter’s reading of the category of gender is that it places too much emphasis on the individual’s ability to free themselves from the constraints of gender. Her position that gender is ‘something fairly definite and constant over time (even for those who change gender during their lives this is not a day-to-day or situationally adjusted matter)’ (Paechter 2006, 259) fails to underscore the role that normalising categories of gender can play in dehumanising certain performances of gender.

This is a point reinforced by Bronwyn Davies in her discussion of subjectification and the film *The Crying Game*, where she notes that

...the work that is done both in constituting ourselves and being constituted by others as viable subjects, and also the work that is constantly needing to be done to maintain our access to the desired positioning of viable subject. (Davies 2006, 435)

To my mind, a significant proportion of people do not experience gender as something constant over time. On a day-to-day basis they find that their sex, gender and sexuality are often simultaneously being interrogated. Consequently, the binary between masculine and feminine is not one from which they can be distanced because their gender identity is not just about ‘who one considers oneself to be’ (Paechter 2006, 259), but is often mediated by how one appears to others. For some, gender identity is something that is a matter of public interest and debate, and, as I will demonstrate

below in my discussion of sex and gender in relation to the space of the toilet, constituting ourselves as viable sexed and gendered subjects is a project that constantly needs work.

I am also partially sympathetic with Paechter's critique of Halberstam. I agree that it is possible to read Halberstam's work as a reification of female masculinity, at the expense of other versions of femininity. But such a critique of Halberstam does not lead me to concur with Paechter's grammatical reversal toward what she perceives as a more flexible and equitable 'masculine femaleness'. Reversing the terms that Halberstam employs inevitably creates its own problems.

In conversation with Vicki Kirby (Kirby 2006), Judith Butler, reflecting on her work on gender and identity, argues that the relation between the body and discourse

...is one in which the discourse cannot fully 'capture' the body, and the body cannot fully elude discourse. This formulation was meant to open up a space of slippage in which neither theories of natural determinism, nor accounts of cultural constitution could claim a unilateral or prior place to one another. (Kirby 2006, 145)

By juxtaposing her configuration of 'masculine femaleness' as 'a more flexible and equitable way for us to understand gender' (Paechter 2006, 261), Paechter endeavours to reconstitute the solidity and priority of sex, not open up a space for slippages between bodies and discourses. Depending on the context, both Paechter and Halberstam offer valuable insights into the ways we can understand the relationship between the body and discourse. Following Butler, one might also argue that both theorisations of gender are problematic insofar as they both argue that their particular version of gender identity should be construed as the more liberatory, whereas each version might be liberatory for some, but not for others.

Daily prescriptions for sex and gender

In order to argue the ongoing significance of gender as a category of analysis, I now turn to the space of the public toilet (or restroom).² Toilets are often perceived as, well, toilets. We all need them for our daily ablutions; and therefore they are there. They need to be functional, accessible and safe spaces. I want to go beyond this utilitarian view of the toilet. Public toilets are significant in terms of this article, I argue, because they are part of the everyday performance of gender identity, and every day they confound and disturb many users. Dillabough argues, '[i]ronically, most poststructuralists were hoping to do away with gender as a category of analysis, but it seems to loom large in most of their work' (2001, 18–19). My understanding of post-structuralism's relation to gender identity is not that gender is something I want to do away with, but rather that it is something I can't do without, and definitely something that I cannot avoid, or be freed from, even if, sometimes, I might wish that I could, single-handedly, eschew gender binaries.

The importance of continuing to theorise the category of gender is somewhat more eloquently stated by Gayle Salamon in her discussion of transgenderism and the rhetorics of materiality:

To theorize gender, to ask after the ways in which bodies inhabit different sexes and genders and what social structurings make those inhabitations possible, is not to suggest that any of those categories are incidental or meaningless. How we embody gender is how we theorize gender, and to suggest otherwise is to misunderstand both theorization

and embodiment ... It is undeniable that queering gender is not only theoretical work. But it is also surely the case that those everyday instances of embodying transgressive gender that might at first seem far removed from academic discourse are performed with a complexity and a self-awareness that are rendered invisible if we understand them as simply opposed to a theorizing that is unnecessarily complicated and complicating ... (Salamon 2006, 378)

In other words, Paechter's 'not masculine' body (Paechter 2006, 262), Halberstam's 'female masculine' body, and this author's tall and hirsute body might influence our theoretical interpretations of gender. This is not to argue an essentialist connection between embodiment and theorising, but rather to concur that there are connections to be made between embodiment and theorising; and while they are not predictable, they are still significant. I think that moving beyond gender identity potentially renders this complexity invisible.

In order to further interrogate some of these complexities, the toilet is a useful point of departure. Following Grosz' theorisation of architectural spaces, I consider toilets as 'a medium through which other forces like gravity, produce their effects: it is inscribed by and in its turn inscribes those objects and activities placed within it' (Grosz 2001, 164). In other words, toilets don't just tell us where to go; they also tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don't belong. I therefore consider the space of the toilet using a post-structuralist theoretical perspective that sees space, architecture, sex and gender as things that are relational, and thus constantly renegotiated. Such a framework enables a consideration of some of the ubiquitous assumptions that underpin school toilets and the implications these have for all members of the community on a daily basis.

In reflecting on the architecture of the toilet, it is pertinent to consider how each visit one makes to a public toilet draws upon familiar understandings of gender, sex and sexuality. As David Valentine notes, in his short essay 'The categories themselves':

In contemporary social theory, 'gender' and 'sexuality' are (like all categories) heuristics that generally and respectively describe the social meanings by which we figure out who is masculine and who is feminine and what those gendered bodies do with one another or feel about one another in a realm we call sex. (Valentine 2004, 215–216)

In drawing our attention to the heuristic role played by categories of sexuality and gender (and one could include sex in this list as well), Valentine makes it possible to see how *broad understandings* may be complicated and/or reinscribed by the categories we commonly employ. Symbols on toilet doors take for granted that bodies fit into two neat categories, and then proceed to sort them based on this presumption – a presumption rarely questioned in the production of toilet signage.

This is an important distinction: toilets give truth to the presumption – in effect, they tell us who we are, and how to define those around us. We do not simply choose to be queer in response to the space of the toilet; rather, public toilets are an architectural feature that can make us feel queer, or cause others to police gender identity: putting the lie to the idea that we can somehow free ourselves of the gender binary. As Salamon argues in her discussion of a lesbian bar in San Francisco:

Segregated restrooms are obvious instantiations of the binary gender system, but cannot be said to be that system. The power to enforce a gender binary is not located in any one particular restroom or in the women and men who might police that territory against the

genderqueer; it is instead dispersed through an entire matrix of ‘instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets’. (Salamon 2006, 584)

Following on from Salamon, it is possible to see that it wouldn’t make sense to have silhouettes of males and females on toilet doors if these heuristics were not commonly accepted. The matrix of curriculum, popular culture, law, politics and religious beliefs, etc. that enforce the gender binary sustains the silhouettes’ power. In the process, categories/performances that don’t conform to the binary may be obfuscated or be seen as spectacle. Such a system presents dilemmas for a person such as Ash, who notes that ‘[t]he toilet that I use is not always what I identify as – it’s what I weigh up as being the safest at that time’.³

Valentine notes further that in seeking to understand relationships between sexuality and gender, there is still ‘a question that needs to be asked before we can explore that relationship: among those human experiences in which we are interested, which count as “gendered” and which as “sexual”?’ (2004, 215). Toilets, maybe especially school toilets, are an interesting case in point here, a space where sex, sexuality and gender come together; and depending on the context, different heuristics will be prioritised. For some young women, toilets are spaces for refining a heteronormative gender identity – in my single-sex high school, the toilets were utilised as a beauty parlour at lunch times (ear piercing, hair dressing and make-up application could all be tried in this space, away from the teacher’s gaze).

Others render school toilets as simultaneously sexualised spaces and spaces of violence. For instance, the movies *Get Real* (1999)⁴ and *Show Me Love* (1998)⁵ depict toilets as a location in which young people’s sexual identity is, in turn, confirmed, questioned or denied. As Kerry Mallen and John Stephens (2002) write in ‘Love’s coming (out): Sexualising the space of desire’, these two films deliberately attempt to alter spatial narratives associated with school toilets, and of public toilets frequented by school boys.

In *Get Real* a hole in a public toilet wall provides a spatial site for [students and older men] spying on illicit gay sexual encounters as well as a means for checking out a potential sexual partner. Such voyeurism is perverse as it disrupts the visual pleasure which has become intimately tied to patriarchal ideology with its structures of looking (male) and being looked at (female). This is one instance ... when looking occupies a queer space, demonstrating complicity with voyeurism, desire, and visual pleasure, and disrupting the association of the gaze with rigid gender roles. The act of looking that the characters undertake also helps to make the viewer aware of the particular quality of their own gaze. The films contrive to position the viewer in ways that focus attention on the specific nature of his/her gaze as we become witness/voyeur to the characters’ spatial trajectories across private and public spaces – bedroom, toilet, home, school. (Mallen and Stephens 2002, para. 6)

The expectations of how one should behave in the toilet are also disrupted in the climax of *Show Me Love*; here, Agnes and Elin publicly declare their love by the act of exiting a toilet in unison, a public outing that coincides with a private realisation of same-sex attraction. When they suspect Elin is not alone in the cubicle, students quickly form a crowd, banging on the toilet door, calling for Elin to ‘come out’. The students demanding her exit clearly expect Elin to be with a boy. Meanwhile, viewers share in Agnes and Elin’s deliberations on the consequences of exiting the space of the toilet in unison – they realise this performance will constitute a declaration that will not conform to the expectations of their peers. In this, we can see that public

toilets are spaces in which gender and sexual categories are maintained and dissembled. But it is also true to say that reforming expectations of what 'should' happen in the space of the toilet will not be achieved merely by relabelling toilet doors, nor by the 'odd' queer performance.

Toilets as alienating places

Many toilet users might approach these spaces with an easy familiarity. However, for some, public toilets, within and outside of schools, are a source of confusion, misrecognition and anecdotes. As a high school teacher/university lecturer/education conference attendee, I have been instructed to remove myself from the 'wrong' toilet more than once. Such instructions have come from students/peers policing my appearance (I didn't look as though I belonged), and helpfully/indignantly responding to my failure to read the signs on the door correctly. This is clearly not an isolated experience, as Annamarie Jagose notes in an interview with Judith Halberstam. Jagose notes that Halberstam is

...someone who is accustomed to, but nevertheless each and every time surprised at, being taken for a man in the women's toilets – what you refer to more economically in your book as 'the bathroom problem' – there seems to me to be an experiential and perhaps even a useful critical distinction to be made between those moments when female masculinity is actively managed and performed, as by, say, drag kings, and those moments, most frequently, as you note, in the public bathroom (but perhaps we might also include all those service industries whose measure of professionalism is the gendering of their client interface: 'A drink for you, sir?'), when gender attributions, perhaps your own, perhaps radically at odds with how you might imagine your self, kind of take you by surprise. (Jagose and Halberstam 1999, para. 22)

There is an important distinction being drawn out here between an agentic performance of female masculinity and the misrecognition of gender identity. A distinction that Halberstam relates back to a historical rendering of the mannish woman in which

...female masculinity has actually tended not to work as a category of self-identification but as something that a woman might get called – 'she's a masculine woman,' 'she's mannish' – that stops short of lesbian... the mannish woman is mythic because omnipresent and transhistorical but also mythic because she is the stereotype against whom all other lesbians are judged. I try to occupy the category of female masculinity, make myself at home in it and making it hospitable to others who have felt either left 'outside belonging' (as Elspeth Probyn [1997] puts it) or who have felt penalized by their masculinity. (Jagose and Halberstam 1999, para. 27)

The historical denigration of the idea of the mannish woman is an important element in this discussion of gender identity. It is a reminder of the ways in which certain gender attributions have been, and continue to be, used as a mechanism to perpetuate negative sexual stereotypes. In fact, 'butch' identifications have long been pathologised, from within and outside feminism. Paechter's argument that '[d]istancing oneself from stereotypical femininity ... is a claiming of power' (2006, 257) seems to obscure a reading of 'butch' identifications' association with misrecognition, and other positioning of such women as 'outside belonging'.

The heteronormative logic underpinning gender policing in the space of the toilet is well articulated by Halberstam's (1998) observation that:

The accusation ‘you’re in the wrong bathroom’ really says two different things. First, it announces your gender is at odds with your sex ...; second, it suggests that single-gender bathrooms are only for those who fit clearly into one category (male) or the other (female) ... The frequency with which gender deviant ‘women’ are mistaken for men in public bathrooms suggests that a large number of feminine women spend a large amount of time and energy policing masculine women. (Halberstam 1998, 24)

Halberstam notes further that this tendency to police gender in the restroom is particularly acute within the space of the airport, ‘where people are literally moving through space and time in ways that make them want to stabilise some boundaries (gender) even as they want to traverse others (national)’ (p. 20). If gender is policed acutely in airports (and this is also my experience of air-travel), it is also acutely policed within some schools, and at some conferences. For instance, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual conference, at least in my experience, seems to be a particularly challenging week in terms of ‘the bathroom problem’: a place where the gender-ambiguous bathroom user is not-man and not-woman, and therefore gender-deviant (Halberstam 1998, 21). My experience of AERA in San Francisco involved feeling gender-deviant by day, and feeling decidedly unremarkable in terms of gender while navigating San Francisco’s queer scene by night.

It is apparent that the policing of the toilet is one mechanism by which the gender binary is sustained. Non-conforming people may be seen as *the problem* (they don’t ‘belong’ in the toilet); a manifestation of this problem is apparent in the actions of ‘the gender police’ and their identification and alienation of those who transgress too far outside the gender binary. Such anxieties can make experiences of schooling difficult for students/parents/teachers/lecturers who may be categorised as gender non-conforming. For those whose attendance is compelled in the space of the school, toilets can become a site of persistent discrimination, harassment, and violence.⁶

In Southern England, Kath Browne (2004) has undertaken a study of what she also terms the ‘bathroom problem’ – ‘where women are read as men in toilets and as a result subjected to abusive and even violent reactions’ (p. 331). This study also coins the term ‘genderism’ ‘to describe the hostile readings of, and reactions to, gender ambiguous bodies’ (p. 331). Ultimately, Browne is not interested in seeking a resolution to the ‘bathroom problem’, but rather focuses on new theoretical tools that help others to account for the cultural practices that situate people outside taken-for-granted gender norms (p. 332). She considers how ‘the binary categories of sex and gender thus occur in context ... therefore it can be argued that just as place is (re)making (and sexing) us, it is being (re)made (and sexed)’ (pp. 334–335). Browne goes on to argue that she consciously invokes the rhetoric of ‘isms’ (in coining the term ‘genderism’) in order to ‘validate the claim to prejudice ... I wish to contend that genderism and homophobia/heterosexism are different yet related and interlocking forms of discrimination’ (p. 336). In concluding her article, Browne comments that ‘for some, “becoming” a woman, so often taken for granted, can be an agonising struggle to “fit” within particular dichotomies that (re)create everyday spaces and body sites’ (p. 343).

The analysis of genderism advanced by Browne is interesting in the context of this paper because it speaks to the ongoing significance of gender identity in the everyday practices of gender ambiguous bodies. Though I am uncomfortable with this idea of studying genderism, *not because it prevents us from considering notions of identity and equity* (one might say that Browne is very much focused on these issues), but

because too much focusing on individual's experiences of the 'bathroom problem' might quickly divert people from interrogation of how the heuristics of sexuality and gender operate within different spaces. Reiterating claims to discrimination is also, to my mind, indicative of an underlying assumption that identifying and documenting discrimination will help to combat homophobia and heterosexism. Such relations of power are, I think, unlikely to be undone.

I am more inclined towards the possibilities suggested by an earlier comment of Browne's, that 'deviation from the norm can reveal the commonplace as produced (Bell et al. 1994); in this case sexed bodies and sites as constantly becoming female rather than existing as such' (Browne 2004, 339). A focus on toilets as architectural spaces interests me because it continues to demonstrate the complex ways in which sexuality and gender are embodied, enacted, disciplined and imagined otherwise. In refusing to fix the 'the bathroom problem', I am also aware of the pleasure and danger that can be experienced within the space of the toilet, within and outside the school. In other words, the question of gender equity is not a priority for me in contemplating daily prescriptions of sex and gender in the space of the toilet.

Thinking differently about the space of the toilet

As indicated above, I am influenced in this project by Elizabeth Grosz' (2001) theorisation of the relationship between architecture, space and embodiment. For Grosz, 'embodiment becomes a gendered idea, but only as an attitude of endless questioning...' (p. xiii). One such question might be how buildings – which are generally seen as sex-neutral – reinscribe sexual difference. In thinking about embodiment and architecture, Grosz goes on to argue that 'women, or gays, or other minorities, aren't "imprisoned" in or by space, because space ... is never fixed or contained ... and thus is always open to various uses in the future ... Space is the ongoing possibility of a different inhabitation' (p. 9). Using this very brief theorisation of space and embodiment, I am prompted to think about the possibilities for different inhabitations of the space of the toilet within the school.

Rather than make toilets more functional, ergonomic, safe – to find a 'cure', as it were, for the 'bathroom problem' – I am working against the desire to create toilets as a sanitised and potentially sanitising space. Too much emphasis on toilet as problem, especially within the space of the school, may lead to more toilet police and greater regulation of such spaces – such as locking lavatories during class time to keep 'young people' out of harm's way (a strategy adopted in an English high school).⁷

Following Grosz, I want to imagine an architecture that is not the territorialisation of space, but rather the anticipation and welcoming of a future in which the present can no longer recognise itself (Grosz 2001, 166). But how can the architectural space of the toilet be reconfigured as part of a future that disrupts present prescriptions of embodiment? I want teachers, students, colleagues to discuss how sexed and gendered spaces intersect with sexed and gendered bodies – thus introducing a pedagogical strategy that makes toilets less familiar. A related pedagogical strategy one might undertake is to highlight space as performative. As Gregson and Rose (2000) note,

...performances do not take place in already existing locations [the toilet] ... The stages do not preexist their performances, waiting in some sense to be mapped out "by performances"; rather specific performances bring these spaces into being ... we need to think of spaces as performative. (Gregson and Rose 2000, 446)

In other words, toilets are spaces where slippages can take place, and by highlighting the potential for movement in such places (corporeal, psychic, affective, punitive, pleasurable, mundane, ephemeral, olfactory) – movements that are not only determined by gender, sex and sexualities – it may be possible to encourage young people to think otherwise about themselves via an encouragement to think differently about the familiar toilet. In adopting such an approach, the future is always unclear, which is no doubt an important point. ‘The relation between bodies, social structures and built living and work environments and their ideal interactions is not a question that can be settled’ (Grosz 2001, 150).

Conclusion

In this article I have argued the continuing importance of interrogating categories of gender identity in research and theory related to gender and education. In response to a call to move beyond gender identity, I have argued that debates about gender identity continue to be integral within this broad field of inquiry. Following on from this, I have sought to outline and critique some contemporary debates about gender identity within and outside education. In the final section of this article, I have also considered the significance of the interrelationship between embodiment and theorisations of gender. This discussion, in relation to the space of the toilet, underscores the fluidity of gender performance, its enactments, and its constraints.

In writing this article, I am also aware that people’s lived experiences of gender necessarily inform how they theorise about gender; thus, different people will have different relationships to Dillabough’s call to move ‘beyond gender identity’. As Salamon notes,

[G]ender as it is lived and embodied is, in some powerful sense, always already theorized. When a distinction is made between the theorizing and the performance of gender expression, we might do well to ask who or what such a distinction serves. (Salamon 2006, 378)

Regardless of how one distinguishes between the theory and performance of gender, each position may reveal something about the varying significance of gender identity in our everyday lives. For Dillabough, gender equity trumps gender identity because of its focus on practical questions relating to people’s everyday lives. To my mind, it is not possible to understand the challenges many people experience in their everyday lives without continuing to seriously interrogate categories of gender, sex and sexuality. Things as mundane as going to the toilet continue to be confounded by questions of identity. Consequently, I hope to underscore the continuing importance of studying the particularities of gender identity in journals such as *Gender and Education*.

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Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of some of the many problems that I perceive in research related to sexual identity in education in see Rasmussen, M. (2006) *Becoming Subjects: Sexualities and Secondary Schooling* (New York, Routledge).

2. An earlier version of this discussion was presented by the author in 2005 at the Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference, Parramatta, December.
3. See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/appetitefordeconstruction> for more information on pan toilets and genderqueers.
4. Directed by Simon Shore.
5. Directed by Lukas Moodysson, also known as *Fucking Åmål*.
6. Tara Mateik's film *Toilet Training* (2003) highlights the issues people who transgress gender norms face in gender segregated bathrooms, see Children's British Broadcasting Commission (CBBC). 2003. School gets full-time toilet police. http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/uk/newsid_1837000/1837916.stm.
7. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/club/your_reports/newsid_2747000/2747887.stm.

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