

Challenging Gender Boundaries

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Editorial

It can be said that the concept of gender has always had to do with the construction of boundaries and overcoming them. Or, put otherwise, that gender is a concept which generates boundaries and norms (symbolic, social, and material) but simultaneously has the potential to transgress them and configure multiple scenarios.

Since Gayle Rubin's essay of 1975, awareness has grown that there is no necessary relation between the biological sex of individuals and their social gender positioning neither in terms of identity nor, even less, in terms of access to power. What exists is instead a sex-gender system, or an ecology of material and symbolic elements "by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (Rubin 1975: 157), thereby constructing the social boundary between masculinity and the femininity as we know them.

A nature of the sexes does not exist, therefore, but rather a nature of gender practices (Poggio 2006) or the modalities – socially created, recognized, and sustained within so-

cial relations – which establish identity, feelings, expectations, relations and the power positionings appropriate to and between men and women. These are consequently not the essential properties of bodies, but rather their manifestations that we assume to be natural and which orient the social action of individuals as sexed subjects: a gender order (Connell 1987) which creates and establishes the boundaries of the symbolic and material practices suitable for maleness and femaleness, assigning them to different power positions.

Accordingly, gender is not the socio-cultural expression of the natural differences between the sexes, but rather the social and discursive device with which those differences are produced. It simultaneously works as a frame of intelligibility – that is, it furnishes the means with which to understand the identity of the other – and a disciplinary regime – that is, it furnishes the rules about what that identity *must* be (Butler 1990). It establishes the subjectivities to which it is socially allowed to appear as coherent and natural, and those to which it is not so allowed because they lie outside those boundaries (Marte 2008). It is therefore by making constant reference to the dichotomic boundaries of gender in our relations with others that we make ourselves intelligible as sexed subjects because “gender norms [...] establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression” (Butler 1990: xxiii).

When these boundaries are crossed, therefore, “the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself” (Butler 1990: xviii). Hence, the normative character of gender identities does not develop solely along the axis of the man/woman relation, but also does so *within* femaleness and *within* maleness, legitimating some gender performances and sanctioning others. The loss of intelligibility is not a purely theoretical occurrence; rather, it is the precondition for the concrete articulation of power relations between and within the genders. It is this that confines at the margins of citizenship – understood in the broadest sense – those who do not conform with or challenge the dominant models and that denies rights and agency in the public space to the plurality of human experiences.

However, it is precisely in the social, discursive and interactional character of gender identities that is possible to find the key to overcoming their dichotomic boundaries.

Because these are not boundaries established by nature, they depend on how and to what extent individuals accept, legitimate or challenge the ways available to live maleness and femaleness. They therefore depend on the practices embodied in the everyday lives of individuals, as well as on how they construct discourse and knowledge about them. We therefore have the possibility (and perhaps also the responsibility) to transform the dominant models into multiple experiences able analytically to account for, and socially give space to, the excess of embodied subjectivities and the innumerable modes of traversing gender boundaries.

Whilst it is undeniable that there exists a gender order made up of norms, constraints and social expectations, it is equally true that “the social world is never simply reproduced. It is always reproduced by practice”. Hence, “it is possible for social practice to move gender orders in different directions and create different connections between bodies and social structures” (Connel 2002: 71).

The authors of the contributions to this special issue – selected from among the papers presented at the second national conference of the Centro di Studi Interdisciplinari di Genere of the University of Trento, entitled “Crossing Gender Boundaries”, took up our invitation to reflect on and critically discuss the importance of the concept of boundary/ies in gender studies, both to evidence its normative and/or discriminatory aspects and to suggest new lines of inquiry able to challenge them and take account of the different crossings. They do so by starting from an array of disciplinary perspectives testifying to the fact that the complexity of the gender dimension requires its exploration using a multiplicity of analytical approaches and that, therefore, gender studies themselves are the outcome of a continuous traversing of boundaries, from which they also draw their interpretative richness.

A first aspect whose discussion we considered crucial for the questioning of gender boundaries and their trespass concerned the theoretical lenses used to interpret their complexity, because – as the papers by Risman, Castiello and Monceri show – every theoretical perspective is not only a lens of analysis but also a tool with which to transform power relations. The paper by Barbara Risman provides, from a feminist perspective, a critical survey of the sociological debate on gender in the United States, the pur-

pose being to propose a theory which, by interpreting gender as a social structure, can simultaneously comprise different levels of analysis – individual, interactional, and institutional. It is, in fact, only through a feminist imagination able to take account of boundary-setting and subversion strategies at these three levels that, according to Risman, we can create a society beyond gender in which the latter is no longer the ‘guardian’ of the boundaries that block access to full equality among individuals. Through a similar critical revision of post-structuralist African-American, post-colonial, queer, and science and technology studies, Titti Castiello, invites us to reflect on the epistemological meaningfulness of the notion of boundary in feminist studies by exploring the nexus between identity and knowledge processes. Interrogating in particular the notions of intersectionality and diffraction, Castiello introduces us to the notion of the post-human subject as a perspective with which to disrupt the boundaries within which the human has traditionally acquired form – race, class and gender – and to conceive an ethics-politics of differences that does not make positioning on the margin the resource sufficient to create collective identity, but instead assumes the liminality of all people and the power relations that allow some subjectivities to ‘count’ and prevent others from doing so. Also devoted to how certain identitarian configurations ‘count’ to the detriment of others is the paper by Flavia Monceri, in this case through critical discussion of the construction and superseding of the notion of citizenship in response to the increasing complexification of contemporary societies. Monceri problematizes the notion of citizenship by jointly discussing the cases of disability and gender differences as concrete examples which test a notion constructed from a specific model of citizenship as the prerequisite for access to rights and participation. Using the tools of political philosophy, Monceri critiques the politics of difference by showing how policies intended to promote the inclusion of people at the margins of the social community have been transformed into instruments with which to stabilize the boundaries of identities that transgress the dominant norms without achieving the objective of a plural citizenship.

A second aspect highlighted by this special issue in order to interrogate the boundaries of gender concerns the intersections between gender identity and sexual identity. In the social construction of gender, in fact, a fundamental role is performed by the paradigm

of obligatory heterosexuality, understood not so much in terms of sexual practice or model of desire as in those of the *grand narrative* that stabilizes sexual positions by defining the boundaries of the male and female, and in so doing precludes the legitimate existence of all other possible positionings, among them homosexuality. Drawing on empirical research materials, the papers by Irene Pellegrini and Laura Parolin and Manuela Perrotta test heteronormative institutional narratives against the concrete experiences of individuals. By means of the narrative analysis of 24 biographical interviews with gay men and lesbian women, Pellegrini examines the link between homosexual desire and gender identity, exploring how individuals' narratives intersect with the dominant repertoires on both sexuality and gender models, often struggling to free themselves from distorted and negative models and thus produce new collective representations. Parolin and Perrotta, instead, through analysis of empirical material gathered using a variety of tools (documentary analysis, ethnography, interviews), explore how the Italian biomedical reproductive discourse and practices invite a rethinking of so-called 'reproductive citizenship'. In particular, Parolin and Perrotta analyse how non-heterosexual sexualities are subject to a process of 'othering' in the debate on assisted reproduction techniques in Italy, but also how the embodied experiences of individuals challenge obligatory heterosexuality and its boundaries.

Work is a third area in which the papers in this special issue test the boundaries of gender. In fact, work settings, as well as the labour market, are prime loci for exploration of both how the dominant models of maleness and femaleness are reproduced – together with social inequalities – and how they are unhinged. The paper by Roberta Nunin concentrates on wage differentials in Italy and Europe. By critically discussing the ecology of symbolic and material elements that cause such differentials (primarily, occupational segregation and the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes), Nunin identifies *ad hoc* legislative production, greater involvement of the social partners, and investment in awareness-raising as means to overcome the boundary which prevents the achievement of effective equality between men and women in workplaces. Shifting from a macro level of analysis of gender dynamics in workplaces to exploration of the practices responsible for their production, the paper by Attila Bruni discusses, through analysis of

ethnographic data on hospital work, the practices used to affirm and reproduce maleness, as well as the practices of resistance and symbolic trespass enacted by women working in blatantly male-oriented professional contexts. In this process, Bruni argues, maleness takes the form of a repertoire of practices available for enactment by both men and women, thereby suggesting that it is gender practices, not people, that traverse boundaries.

The special issue concludes with two papers which, although they take very different disciplinary perspectives, examine the connections between public space and private space, and the often laborious negotiations required to manage the boundaries between those two spheres. The paper by Francesca Vianello investigates the split between the public and private spheres in the experience of migrant family helpers from central-eastern Europe. It dwells in particular on the reorganization of the 'double presence'. Using the concept of seclusion as her theoretical compass, Vianello describes the manifold strategies with which migrant women handle the overlaps among the public space of work, the private space in which they work, and the trans-local private space in which they lead their private lives. She shows how these continuous crossings redefine both the boundaries of gender and the practices of double presence. Finally, from a feminist literary criticism perspective, Silvia Camilotti analyses the book *Piccola guerra perfetta* by the Albanian writer Elvira Dones, which recounts the experiences of three Albanian women against the background of the war in Kosovo. Camilotti's analysis explores the material and symbolic boundaries that mark the experience of the protagonists as both women and Albanian Kosovar women in times of war. The house in which the protagonists are confined, the identitarian cages in which they are contained until violation of their bodies by ethnic rape, convey the mosaic of painful negotiations between space for the self and public space.

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