ORDERING GENDER: REVISITING THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract.
Psychology as a discipline has long been criticised for its reproduction of gender and other inequalities. Such a critique has been lodged both at the content of psychological knowledges as well as the practices of psychology, including the realm of academia, intervention and organisational structures. In South Africa it has been well illustrated that white males have dominated in psychology as a practice and in the production of knowledge, particularly in terms of authorship, where black and women psychologists have been under-represented. It has also been widely acknowledged that psychology, in particular the psychology of gender, has been highly problematic in the way in which it reproduces and legitimates gender difference and inequality. While debates about the sexist content of psychological knowledge have been present for a number of decades in the international context, there has been little focus on this in South Africa. The need to develop a South African psychology of gender that is both local - that is, representing indigenous experiences of gender development and identities - and critical - in that it problematises the construction of gender difference and inequality - is another challenge within the broader transformation of South African psychology. This paper revisits criticisms of the way in which psychology has theorised gender difference and presents contesting current perspectives on gender within postmodern thinking, in an attempt to take forward these debates in the reconstruction of South African psychology.

INTRODUCTION.

Gender has historically been constructed as *difference* – immutable difference/s between men and women – in both popular and academic discourse. This construction has and continues to fuel broader gender inequalities in social contexts. Furthermore, the reproduction of the binarism of male/female contributes (sometimes inadvertently) to the reproduction of heterosexism and homophobia. The construction of gender as difference is founded on such a binarism and has been theorised within "scientific" discourses which continue to legitimise, naturalise and rationalise such a construction and the inequality which it promulgates.

Psychology has played a large role in perpetuating the notion that men and women are deeply different psychical beings, with studies of gender constituting a massive

research program in the discipline (Connell, 1987; Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; 1992; Lott, 1990; Morawski, 1990; Unger, 1990). Psychology, and the social sciences more generally, have been set up as "the authority" defining "normality" in western culture (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990a; Unger, 1990). Thus the ways in which psychology has construed these differences have played a significant role in (re)producing the dominant construction of gender and consequent power inequalities. Psychology, steeped as it is in western culture's obsession with dualism and dichotomy, has had a long history of focusing on individual difference, with gender/sex difference constituting a primary focus. The discipline's continued interest in proving or disproving sex or gender differences reveals much about its broader social role/s and raises significant problems with the social dualism of masculinity/femininity.

This paper overviews some of the central ways in which psychology has reproduced gender difference through empirical and theoretical work on sex/gender difference and gender development, and attempts to unpack the way in which this has served to legitimise gender inequality.

PSYCHOLOGY'S ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEX/GENDER DIFFERENCE.
While feminists have been criticising psychology's notion of sex differences for nearly twenty years, suggesting that "the matter of sex differences was something of a red herring for feminist psychologists" (Unger, 1990:102), the focus on difference continues, albeit amidst increasing debate and murkiness as to what constitutes masculinity/femininity. Historically these differences were attributed to biology and as such were universalised, naturalised and essentialised. Most early psychological research served to "prove" this difference, framing the genders as "opposite, complementary, reciprocal, and equal" (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990c:186). The focus on difference, with the abstraction of categories of masculine and feminine, therefore served both to obscure the power inequality between men and women, and as ideological legitimation for the continued reproduction of such difference (and inequality).

Central to the traditional psychology of gender conceptualisation is an assumption of what Connell (1987) terms a "unitary sexual character" (p167). The sex/gender research in psychology was based on a central notion that masculinity and femininity exist as a corpus of traits, including characters, roles, abilities, temperaments, which are embedded in individual men and women. Thus a notion of static, stabile, unitary gender identity was evident, which of course ignored both the diversity of gendered experience across other lines of social identity (as discussed above) as well as "fixed" the individual to a singular, enduring experience of their own gender. The notion of a unitary sexual character persists in popular culture, and recent discourse analytic studies of how men construct gender illustrate that the "difference discourse", that is the depiction of gender as difference (whether biological or social), is still very central to talk on gender and serves as a rhetorical strategy in legitimating gender inequality (Harris, Lea & Foster, 1995; Gough, 1998).

As feminism began to open up spaces in androcentric psychology, where women were invisible both as object and subject of knowledge-production, the role of the social was introduced. But feminists and others continued, by dint of habit and imperative of the

"science", to study difference. A new discourse of social learning theory, "socialisation", a focus on gender roles, gender stereotypes, began to emerge. These new discourses, while stimulating a reconceptualisation of gender, were still unable to contextualise gender within broader social processes and power relations. Furthermore, much effort was now made to "prove", and it appeared very easy to do so, that differences between men and women were minimally evident – rather they have a "now you see them, now you don't" quality (Unger, 1982, cited in Unger, 1990:107). Connell (1987:170) concludes that the main finding "from about eighty years of research, is a massive psychological similarly between women and men in the populations studied by psychologists". While this finding should spell the death of notions of a distinct unitary sexual character and a seamless difference between male and female subjects, this has not happened. Rather the notion of polarised and oppositional genders continues to be central in the work of social scientists, culture and social policy (Lott, 1990). The pervasiveness of the dualism of gender has to be seen in the light of the huge amount invested in gender difference, which makes it difficult to refute it completely (Connell, 1987).

The ambiguity of the "evidence" on gender difference did however lead to some revisioning of theoretical work. For example, the introduction of the scalar model, with the notion of a continuum between masculinity and femininity became popular with a wide range of inventories developed to measure gender in this way. The notion of a continuum allows for a more dimensional analysis, more space for movement, and less rigidity between the polar unitary accounts of masculinity/femininity. Nonetheless, wherever one is located, so shall one be gender-fixed. Besides producing very little new understanding of the psychosocial processes involved in gendered subjectivity (Constantinople, cited in Connell, 1987:174), these scales perform a reifying function by constructing people as objects – reducing the gendered self to a score (Connell, 1987). Bem's androgyny scale, for example, arguing for an integration of the feminine and masculine for a "whole" healthier self, appears to disentangle femininity and masculinity from the feminine and the masculine (body), yet still proposes a unitary self ("in the figure of the androgyne") (Butler, 1990b:328). The model prescribes a combination of the two dualistic sexes, thus reproducing the legitimacy of gender categorisation, rather than challenging it (Wetherell, 1986; Unger, 1990). Furthermore, the model of androgyny was ironically (and predictably) biased towards "masculinity", with masculinity scores strongly predictive of androgynous behaviour, and the very construct itself based on individualist, male-centred values (such as independence, self-containment, instrumentality) (Morawski, 1990).

Assumptions about a unitary, fixed and stable gender, residing somewhere inside of us, whether determined biologically or created socially, are similarly evident in most theories about the development of gender identity (another area where psychology has reigned as "expert authority"). Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, for example, which provide a very complicated story of gender identity development, and have been for many feminists the hope for analysing gender development within patriarchal culture, still "tells a story that constructs a discrete gender identity and discursive location which remains relatively fixed" (Butler, 1990b:329). Butler illustrates that a theory does not have to be essentialist in order to arrive at this point, as in feminist psychoanalytic theory which criticises claims of essential femininity or masculinity (for

example, Mitchell, 1975) but still posits an outcome which is fixed (not only by the age of 6, but also within the cultural prescriptions of sex, gender, desire).

Similarly Chodorow (1978) uses object relations, together with a critique of unequal parenting in patriarchal societies, to speak of the development of a unitary woman's sexual character which prepares all women for motherhood (Connell, 1987). Although she locates the roots of this development in western industrial capitalism, her work reads as an assertion of essential enduring differences between women and men at a global level, and may be used as a way to legitimise these divides (and inequalities) in spite of her desire to challenge social power relations (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1992). Furthermore, in suggesting a change in parenting through the integration of masculine and feminine qualities, she subscribes to an androgynous schema which, as pointed out, is based on an acceptance of a universal dualism of masculinity and femininity, and a "normative model of a unified self" (Butler, 1990b:328).

In opposition to the androgynous schema, some feminists, including feminist psychologists, have motivated *for* difference, and within the radical feminist/cultural feminist mould, have glorified women's difference to men. They have argued for a "specifically alternative feminine subject", who defines herself in relation to others, and is rooted in a primary maternal identification (Butler, 1990b:328). Similarly cultural and ecological feminists have called for ascendance of the feminine, for a world organised by feminine values and characteristics (nurturance, care, equality, democracy), rather than masculine ones (aggression, violence, competition, colonisation, authoritarianism). While the strategy of reconstructing traditional femininity in a positive paradigm, revaluing femininity, has a political function (much like the Black Consciousness Movement), the reproduction of the dominant discourse on difference and the humanist essential self is evident (Weedon, 1987). Women are viewed as the embodiment of a female unitary self, and the notion of an inevitable female-male polar divide is perpetuated.

Hare-Mustin and Maracek (1992) argue that these two opposing lines of inquiry have lead to two incompatible representations of gender: one that sees few differences between males and females (what they call beta bias); and one that sees huge differences, and often idealises or legitimates these differences or calls for a reintegration of the difference (what they call alpha bias). They suggest that both have their inherent problems: alpha bias in exaggerating differences and therefore providing justification for differential, unequal treatment of men and women; beta bias in de-emphasising difference, thus allowing for the obfuscation of "women's special needs" or for redressing the inequality. They maintain further that both schools of thinking - at some level adhere to and reinforce the notion of difference, and therefore perpetuate an essentialised, universalised, dichotomised notion of gendered subjectivity.

Feminists have become increasingly wary of the very question "is there a difference?" in the psychology of gender (Unger, 1990). Clearly the need to prove difference has been linked to the prerogative of legitimating the status quo of male domination. But in feminist psychologists' critiques of the "difference debate", one cannot help but notice that much energy is spent on emphasising a lack of difference. Somewhere in the writing, in spite of the critique of liberal humanism, seeping in between the lines is an

irresistable insistence on women's equality to men and the consequent de-emphasis of difference. The danger in what Hare-Mustin and Maracek call the beta-bias (that is, undermining the difference between men and woman) is that existing inequities will be ignored. There are other insidious dangers – one is almost led to believe that one should throw up the task of theorising gender altogether, for after all it only accounts for 5% of the variance in social behaviour (Lott, 1990). In this way, the apparent lack of gender difference (based on characteristics, behaviour) serves to obscure gender difference in location and access to power. Once again we face the invisibilising of the huge differences that still do exist between men and women, notwithstanding the multiplicity of forms they take. Acknowledging that gender and difference is culturally constructed, is constantly shifting and changing, and always mediated by other inequalities, never a unitary, fixed process or identity, should not constitute a denial that gender difference *is there, is here*, in all its slippery manifestations.

Another area where psychology, together with psychiatry, has played a particular role in affirming the notion of immutable difference between genders has been in the pathologisation of those who do not "fit" in the prescribed gender/sexual identity. In this respect, the social reproduction of a rigid matrix of relations between sex, gender and sexuality (see Butler, 1990a), involving deterministic relations between biological sex, socialised gender identity/roles and sexual attraction for the opposite sex, is closely guarded by psychological and medical "science". This concern is well illustrated through the psychological diagnostic category of "gender disorder" and historical attempts by these "sciences" to institute behavioural (e.g. desensitization programmes for gay and lesbian people), medical (e.g. hormones) and surgical (sex change therapy) procedures to "treat" such "disorders". In the South African context, a shocking example of such interventions in contemporary history has been the expose of the SADF's dealings with gay men (see **Mail & Guardian**, July 28-August 3, 2000).

Feminist psychologists assert that new ways of theorising gender are emerging in psychology, particularly those informed by poststructuralist, deconstrutionist, and social constructionist theory. Clearly these are voices among many others who are questioning the theoretical problems inherent in the Enlightenment notions of identity, and gender difference.

RETHEORISING GENDER DIFFERENCE: OFFERINGS OF FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURALIST THINKING IN MOVING BEYOND THE BINARISMS IN PSYCHOLOGY'S THEORIES OF GENDER.

"Identity is not understood as a foundational issue, based on fixed, God-given essences – of the biological, psychic or historical kind. On the contrary, identity is taken as being constructed in the very gesture that posits it as the anchoring point for certain social and discursive practices. Consequently, the question is no longer the essentialist one – What is national or ethnic [or gender] identity? – but rather a critical and genealogical one: *How is it constructed?*" (Braidotti, 1997:31,emphasis added)

In the poststructualist framing of subjectivity the "real" nature of male and female cannot be determined (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1992), rather the very notion of gender becomes evidence of dominant notions about what constitutes gender, sex, sexuality, femininity, masculinity. We can deconstruct the concept of gender, as I have tried to do

here, the way in which it has been used in the social sciences (such as the psychology of gender), and in so doing learn much about the social construction of gender discourses and gendered subjectivity.

A number of contemporary theoretical fields including queer theory, poststructuralism, and feminism have spurred a challenge to the conceptual binarism inherent in the concept of gender. As already evident in the critique of mainstream gender/sexuality theorising, postmodern theory has opened up a way of moving beyond binary opposites of male-female to acknowledge multiple genders, with multiple sexualities. As mentioned, in line with Michel Foucault's influential work on sexuality, many have begun to theorise the way in which sexual identity and practice, including the identities of heterosexual and homosexual, are socially and historically constructed and therefore ever-changing (for example, Rubin, 1984; Vance, 1984; Weeks,1985; Tiefer, 1992; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993; Richardson, 1996) .

These works facilitate the understanding of gendered/sexed/sexualised subjectivity as socially constructed, in relation and in opposition to dominant discourses on gender, sex, sexuality, which are set up within a network of prescriptive representations and relations with each other. As human beings, within the dominant discourses which prescribe "gender identity", we are sexed, in that we are named male or female (based on presumed "real" biological differences); we are gendered, in that we are named male or female (with a whole range of prescriptions about dress, behaviour, roles, etc. to go with that); and we are sexualised, in that we are named heterosexual (usually assumed, unless proven otherwise) or homosexual (based on our sexual intimacies or desires with/towards other gendered, sexed, sexualised subjects or our own identifications). As with the broader poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity, we understand ourselves, including our bodies, as both subjected to the dominant discourses on gendered subjectivity, but also as active subjects who are constantly reinterpreting ourselves, sometimes in resistance and rebellion, to "others" and the dominant discourse. Thus we may position ourselves in multiple ways to the dominant discourses on sex, gender and sexuality; may shift and change in relation to these discourses over time and in different contexts; may resist and reproduce these subjectivities, in often contradictory and apparently confusing ways.

Central to the construction of gendered subjectivity is the body, as vehicle for the inscription of masculinity and femininity. Postmodern theorists caution against the view of the body as a passive vehicle, but acknowledge the body-subject as both subjected to and active in resisting discourse. Significant in this respect are the different inscriptions on the male and female body, which are particularly evident and visual in contemporary globalised capitalism with its powerful consumerist culture. These inscriptions are enacted through disciplinary practices which are historically and contextually bound. Moreover, different status is embodied in masculinity and femininity, with a woman's body inscribed with an inferior status (Bartky, 1990).

Historically, in western society at any rate, the regimentation of the female body, has been particularly evident, given that "men act and women appear" (Berger, 1972:47), through the social objectification of women. Much emphasis has been placed on women's body size and shape, facial characteristics, manner of dress, presentation and

movement. In all of these areas, prescriptions for the construction of "ideal femininity" are set up, and women are expected to work at creating "the image", unattainable for the vast majority of women. Feminists have also illustrated how in contemporary western society, the ideal image for women is so slim that it is reminiscent of adolescent girls, which is seen as reflecting and reproducing women's powerlessness in male dominated society (Coward, 1984; Bartky, 1990). In reading such imagery, it is important to remember that bodily regimes are culturally and historically constructed (for example, slimness in women has not been viewed as beautiful in many African cultures), and that the gaze is clearly moving onto the male body within the global economy, with the increasing emphasis on male consumerism and shifting images of masculinities. While some feminists have argued that men's bodies and sexuality have been "exempted from scrutiny ... because a body defined is a body controlled" (Coward, 1984:229), contemporary work is illustrating that men are no longer exempted from the "the look". Connell (1990), for example, in his case study of a "champion sportsman", illustrates how the male body is appropriated by "hegemonic masculinity", such that it may be an obsessive focus in the lived experience of some men. A quote from a local magazine **True Love** (Ngudle, 1998:74), in an article on what women think of men's dressing, is illustrative of a changing discourse on masculinity and the male body: "The new man takes a lot more time in front of the mirror and defines himself through this clothes". But clearly male and female bodies are still inscribed differently, and unequally in contemporary society.

The gendered subject is therefore located within discursive *power* relations, so that men and women are positioned differently and unequally in relation to power and control. Central to the construction of gender as a power relation is a process of "othering". Theorists like Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari have illustrated how difference in European modemity has long been "colonized by hierarchical and exclusionary ways of thinking" such that the those who are "different" are set up as "other" and constructed as "being-less-than" (cited in Braidotti, 1997:29-30). Following Simone de Beauvoir's classic dictum "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (1982:16), feminist poststructuralist theorists together with deconstructionists have reinterpreted this existential-humanist conceptualisation to encompass the way in which difference colludes with power inequality, thus devaluing and degrading that which is "other" to the "norm" (the "Same").

Feminists using a critical version of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory[1] have particularly drawn on the theoretical framing of woman as "other" to man, to illustrate how within patriarchy, women are always outside the "Symbolic", the realm of language and culture, which is male-dominated, androcentric, and founded on women being outside, being "Other". Julia Kristeva, for example, theorises masculinity and femininity as an aspect of language, with masculinity linked to the "Symbolic" (the rational, cultural realm) and femininity to the "Semiotic" (non-rational, challenges the Symbolic) (cited in Weedon, 1987). She argues that both aspects are present in language, and open to

1. This feminist theoretical work has often been referred to as "Ffrench" feminism (also sometimes post-Lacanian feminism). Braidotti (1997:25) however points out that using "nationalist systems of indexation for feminist theories" is both an "inaccurate and reductive" way of categorising feminist debates.

all irrespective of their biological sex, and that it is the semiotic in our language and subjectivities that holds the potential for change, for it is the repression of the semiotic, the non-rational, the feminine, that preserves the apparent stability of the subject and fixes the meaning of the Symbolic. While Weedon (1987) criticises Kristeva for an ahistorical construction of femininity and masculinity as universal aspects of language, and equating the feminine (even if not attached to women) with the irrational, the theory might be useful in facilitating an understanding of the role of the unconscious in subjectivity and of the subject "as an inherently unstable effect of language" (p91).

Central to the poststructuralist notion of subjectivity is the understanding of subjectivity as mediated through social discourse and social dialogue, as a form of negotiation and therefore as a process (rather than a self). Social actors negotiate their identity in relation to discourses, both broader institutionalised discourses, and interpersonal discursive activities (which include activities like talking and sexual intimacy, both of which are central to this thesis). It is in the *doing* of gender, or the repetition of that which is considered gender appropriate, that we constantly redefine ourselves and reconstruct ourselves as man or woman. In so doing we are also a part of the reproduction of such discourses. So that "(g)ender is created through interaction and at the same time structures interaction" (West & Zimmerman,1992:384). What is significant about this conceptualisation of the subject is the notion of repetition. Thus if the subject appears to be fixed, that is only because he or she is consistently and continously repeating the gestures of gendered subjectivity, reconstructing his or herself as man or woman, in line with dominant prescriptions of what that entails (Butler, 1990a).

Important too, is the understanding that the subject is fragmented, constituted through multiple axes of power and identity. Thus, as Walkerdine (1986:65) elaborates on women's subjectivities,"'woman' is not itself a unitary category, but relates to different positionings" which "have different histories ... and the effects in terms of power may well be differently lived". Multiple intersecting, sometimes contradicatory, locations of identity, such as sexuality, age, class, race, ethnicitiy, religion, structure subjectivity. At any one time or context, any one of our social identities may take up a salient position, but given that they are in complex relation to each other, they will also constantly shift in relation to each other (Braidotti, 1997).

Poststructuralist theories of subjectivity also bring to the subject the notion of the irrational, and the unconscious – the "split subject". The subject's interaction with representations of identity, such as woman/man, is always mediated for "they contain a sizable 'imaginary' component" (Braidotti, 1997:33). It is the intersection of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism that has allowed for the understanding of the nonrational subject and the power of unconscious identification in the construction of the subject (Hollway, 1984; Weedon, 1987; Parker, 1992).

Psychoanalysis, in particular feminist, Lacanian and post-Lacanian reworkings of Freud's work, has played a significant role in the theory of subjectivity in poststructuralist thinking, even more so in theorising the gendered subject. As Weedon (1987) points out, in psychoanalysis the heterosexual organisation of sexuality and gender identity are central in the structuring of the unconscious and conscious mind.

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She argues, as others have (notably Henriques et al, 1984) that the theory of the unconscious is central to the notion of poststructuralist subjectivity. While classical psychoanalysis reduced the unconscious to an ahistorical, biologically driven psyche, Weedon argues that it is possible to conceive of the unconscious as contextual and historical (as Juliet Mitchell and others have attempted to illustrate). While there is some tension between the notion of the subject as never fixed, and yet still steeped in unconscious, unreachable desires, acknowledging the role of the unconscious and the nonrational does challenge the dominant assumption of psychology's rational, unitary self.

The unconscious is also significant in theorising the construction of dominant subjectivities through the repression of desires that are censured within the particular social regime. As such, individuals may be seen as both "the *site* and *subjects* of discursive struggle for their identity" (Weedon, 1987:97). The notion of agency and resistance is central within the feminist poststructuralist notion of the subject. The subject is active in repeating dominant constructions of him or herself as man/woman, but may also be active in resisting and defying such constructions. Subjects may take on forms of gendered subjectivity which challenge the dominant discourses. These forms of subjectivity, as with other subversive subjectivities will be policed, often marginalised as mad or criminal (Weedon, 1987), or incorporated into hegemonic culture in ways that diffuse the challenge they are making (apparent in the "watering down" of feminism in women's magazines). But in Butler's (1990a) forceful argument, it is the forms of gendered subjectivity which do not fit within the rigid categories of identity set up in heterosexist, patriarchal culture, that signify resistance and challenge to such a system.

The question of agency represents another central debate within poststructuralist thinking on the subject. As Butler (1990a) points out "agency" has usually been falsely presumed to be a) either established through recourse to some stable identity prior to discourse (as in radical feminism's notion of Woman); or b) not possible within the discursive reading of subjectivity where it is constructed as a determination. She argues instead that the question of agency cannot be answered through recourse to a prediscursive "I" (outside of the signification process), but rather is a question of how signification and resignification works. She believes that as a process, signification holds the potential for agency. The process of signification constitutes a "regulated process of repetitition", and "agency then, is to be located within the variation on that repetition" (Butler, 1990a:145). So, if the rules which govern signification can be viewed as not only restricting, but also enabling new forms of subjectivity, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity is possible. It is not a self, prior to the discourse, that emerges, but a self that is reconfigured, that constitutes him/herself by "taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very "taking up" is enabled by the tool lying there" (ibid.:145). Butler then illustrates that in a paradoxical way, the "sounds-like" deterministic discursive constitution of subjectivity, which sets up gendered identity as an "effect", as "produced", is precisely that which opens up possibilities of agency, that are foreclosed by theories that see identity categories as fixed. Thus construction does not necessarily restrict agency, but may facilitate the expression of agency, for there is no possibility of agency outside the discursive practices. For Butler the task "is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to

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repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (ibid.:148).

CONCLUSION.

In spite of decades of critique, psychology continues to play an active role in reproducing and legitimating social notions of a rigid divide between male and female. Psychological normalising discourses on gender difference serve to rationalise gender inequality as well as the oppression of people who resist traditional gender and sexual identities. The activities of "normalisation" are dramatically enacted through interventions such as behavioural therapies and surgical attempts to "cure" people of subversive desires in order to reinstate the current dichotomous prescriptions of gender identity.

It is argued that the task of reconstructing psychology in South Africa involves the challenge of reworking theories of gender/sexual identities. Such a challenge can only be met through theoretical and empirical work which allows for the diversity of not only *local* experiences of gender development and subjectivity, but also of gender development and subjectivities in all their multiplicity.

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