GENDER AND PSYCHOLOGY. THE ANALYSIS OF AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE UNDER THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

In spite of its mature age - gender first appeared in psychology in 1968 - the concept of gender has not been followed by a clear shift in the levels of explanation of social processes related to sex categorisation. Some of the reasons for this unhappy marriage will be presented in this paper, using social representations as an analytical framework.

In the first part of this paper some examples will be given in order to illustrate the argument that, for a long period of time, gender was more used as a descriptive variable than as an analytical concept. The discussion of this argument intends to enhance the limits of the development of scientific knowledge in psychology, such as methodological individualism and the representation of men as the subject-model of research.

The second part of the paper argues that locating gender within the framework of social representations is the necessary condition to integrate the cultural dimension covered by this concept. This discussion will be illustrated by the results of social psychological research which show that the organisation and the configuration of meanings associated with sex categories, follow the principle of symbolic asymmetry.

Finally, the integration of an historical dimension of analysis is proposed in order to investigate the construction of symbolic asymmetry in modernity and to build a consistent theoretical framework of gender social relations.

Introduction

More than 30 years separate us from the conceptual definition of gender in psychology. It is generally associated with a research on transsexuals which aimed at confirming the fact that sex and gender

> «...are not inevitably bound in anything like a one-to-one relationship, but each may go into quite independent ways [...] gender [designated] psychological phenomena [such as] behaviour, feelings, thoughts and phantasies that are related to the sexes and yet do not have primarily biological connotations» (Stoller, 1968, pp. viii-ix in Millet, 1969/1977, p. 29).

For second wave feminists, engaged at the time in a strong debate on the determinants of status, role and "character" of women (Millet, 1969/1977, p. 29), Stoller's definition of gender served the argument against the biological invariance of sex differences in favour of the cultural determinants. In a recent chapter on the history of gender, the sociologist Ann Oakley highlights the role played by her own book *Sex, Gender and Society* published in 1972, for the dissemination of the concept in social sciences and reminds us of its original purpose:

> «...to map a domain of cultural perspectives on the natural body which would help people to develop both personal and political understandings of important aspects of their own and other people's identities.» (Oakley, 1997, p. 53).

Gender has therefore emerged, in the early seventies, as a new concept clearly distinctive from sex. While sex remained a physical marker, an attribute of the body, strongly linked with biology, gender preceded sex, as it referred to 'le regard social sur le sexe'. Thus, it could be investigated by psychologists, as a mental representation, and by sociologists, as a collective representation of sex. Furthermore, gender was instrumental for the new theoretical developments that were fuelled by feminist critiques of sexism in science, the academia and society as a whole.

However, more recently, a certain number of publications in different scientific domains such as history (Scott, 1988), sociology (Oakley, 1997) and psychology (Morawski, 1994;

Unger, 1998) highlighted the prevalent confusion of gender with sex, enhancing the theoretical relevance of gender.[1]

In a recent research on the ambivalence of these terms for the general public Pryzgoda and Chrisler (2000) refer to the blur of sex and gender in the media and emphasise the responsibility of researchers to clarify their own understanding of the terms. As stated by these authors, while people may feel more confortable using gender they are thinking about sex. The concept of gender is thus stripped of its analytical potential to remain a mere classifier which elicits comparisons between women and men. But since classifications and comparisons are not neutral, such use of gender fuels unreflectively the same processes that were associated with sex - polarisation, essentialism and differentiation (Bem, 1993). Although social sciences, in general, have contributed to the prevalence of confusion between sex and gender, this paper will focus in psychology, particularly American social psychology, for two main reasons. Firstly, because American psychologists produced an enormous amount of research on sex and gender since the 70s, which has constantly been under severe scrutiny, particularly by feminist psychologists. The first part of this paper will report briefly on this debate.

Secondly, because in this debate the relevance of social representations theory for the understanding of processes related to the social construction of sex, is rarely recognised. The chapter on *Gender* in the latest edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* includes some references to particular aspects enhanced by European social psychological research on "gender belief systems". Nevertheless those aspects raise many doubts in the authors' minds and the social representations approach is ignored:

> «*Accepting the position that gender operates dynamically at multiple levels, where does one enter the system? How does the investigator or theorist decide on a starting point for analysis? Answers to these questions clearly differ, depending on one's frame of reference. For those following the tradition of individual differences, the*

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[1] Institutional feminism and the media, on the other hand, ignoring the scientific debate, have adopted gender as another word for sex in more or less normative ways. In the *Platform for Action* adopted in the IVth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, for example, gender replaced sex throughout the whole text. Ambiguities raised by this usage can be seen in the following quotation: *"Collect gender and age-disegreggated data on poverty and all aspects of economic activity and develop qualitative and quantitative statistical indicators to facilitate the assessment of economic performance from a gender perspective;"* (p. 46)

point of embarkment is typically one of looking for sex differences in some trait or ability measure. From a more social psychological perspective, the investigator will consider the interaction context...In a more complex analysis, one can attempt to judge several balls at once, trying to chart the interplay between persons, situations, and social structures.» (Deaux and La France, 1998, p. 800-801).

According to this text, social psychological approaches are reduced to only two levels of analysis (Doise, 1982) – the individual and the interindividual. Furthermore the consideration of higher levels of explanation is more viewed as a risk («*more complex...several balls at once*»), than as an effort to broaden theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, the polarisation between individuals and social interaction on one side, and social structures on the other, disregards the idea of the «thinking society» (Moscovici, 1981) that is particularly relevant for the study of social knowledge (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995).

Gender and Psychology: The unhappy marriage

The chapter by Deaux and LaFrance (1998) previously quoted raises another interesting question. Although psychological research has used gender to classify individuals for a long time, the examination of gender as «*a social psychological phenomenon*» (Deaux and LaFrance, 1998, p. 788) only recently gained its place in a publication of mainstream psychology such as the *Handbook of Social Psychology*. In the previous edition of the *Handbook,* research on this domain was reported by Spence, Deaux and Helmreich (1985) in a chapter whose title referred to sex-roles. The very slow evolution of gender from term to concept in American psychology is also reflected on the arbitrary use of sex and gender. Some examples from articles published in the 80s:

> «*While this* [the distinction between sex and gender] *appears to be a useful distinction, we use the terms interchangeably in this chapter.*» (Williams and Best, 1986, p 259, note 1)

> «*There are no ready conventions for the use of the terms "sex" and "gender" in psychology. My preference is to use "sex" to refer to the biological assignment of males and females and "gender" to refer to all other characteristics assigned to males and females...*» (Morawski, 1987, p. 63, Note 1)

However, in the late seventies Unger (1979) had proposed a distinction between sex, as a variable located in the individual or those with whom the person interacts, and gender, as a social label that is independent of characteristics originated in the subject. In her argument in favour of gender research, she pointed out some of the limitations of the sex differences approach:

> «*The questions of sex differences... obscure the origin of such differences... Examination of sex differences obscures the examination of sex similarities...Analysis based on sex differences tend to imply a trait view of psychology that obscures the situational determinants of behaviour.*» (Unger, 1979/1998, p. 1119)

But the discipline of psychology did not seem ready to question the position of sex as an explanatory variable, as noted by Carolyn Sherif (1979) in an article published at that time:

> «*It goes without saying that a person's sex is considered an independent variable, not a dependent one, despite the fact that everyone and no one knows what that means.*» (Sherif, 1979/1998, p. 65)

Confronted with the profound changes that had occurred in American society Carolyn Sherif reflected, in this article, on the prevalence of sexism in psychological research and the academia. She identified the association of the scientific status of the discipline with experimentalism and the faith in the objectivity of the ways of seeking knowledge as the main obstacles for the removal of basic assumptions that introduced bias in psychology The sexist bias that had been highlighted, both in theory (Shields, 1975) and in methodology (McKenna and Kessler, 1977) by the young generation of that time, didn't seem to have produced great changes. As she put it:

> «*Older psychologists had no doubts that it [the variable called sex] contained 'biology'. Modern psychologists follow suit, add culture, or subtract biology as well.*» (Sherif, 1979/1998, p. 66)

Research of this period could be called «*la psychologie sauvage de la différence des sexes*» (Hurtig and Pichevin (1986, p. 9) since it raised more problems, as the authors stated, than offered explanations. In fact, the question put by Carolyn Sherif in relation to sex, may also be put in relation to difference – «*How much difference makes a difference ?*» ask Hare-Muskin and Marecek (1990a, p. 24). As a result, the scientific knowledge about social relations based on sex did not differ very much from common knowledge about women and

men. Binary, dualistic thinking characterised both views, as well as the idea that women are all alike and different from men. And the reason for this difference was to be found, if not in biology, in any case in other permanent causes, such as traits, behavioural orientations or subjective identities.

The persistence of the idea of individualism that characterises modern American psychology (Farr, 1995) may explain why gender became merely another word for sex in psychological research. As stressed by Morawski (1994) in her critique of the research on sex/gender categories,

> «...*difference [thus] implies individualism* [through *the equation*] *of subjectivity with individual traits*» (p. 156).

In this author's view gender studies reproduced in many ways the same weaknesses that had been identified by earlier critiques, such as the dualistic view, the reductionist bias and the neglect of gender similarities, while adding the neglect of variations within gender and the assumption of a false symmetry.

By refusing to consider the implicit theories about sex that subjects bring to the laboratory (Doise, 1984) and the influence of social settings, such as experiments, on gendered behaviour (Unger, 1990), American psychology resisted gender, to use Unger's words (Unger, 1998). The focus on comparisons between sexes produced contradictory results (Eagly, 1995) and social psychology was unable to create solid conceptual tools for the analysis of gender relations (Apfelbaum, 1997).

But the resistance to higher levels of analysis and social representations, in particular, is another aspect that European researchers can bring to this debate. Barbara Lloyd's comparison of social-role theory (Eagly, 1987) with the approach based on social representations in the analysis of gender socialisation processes is an example of this contribution (Lloyd, 1994). Some further implications of the study of gender within the framework of social representations will now be discussed.

Gender and Social Representations: The perfect match ?

The analysis of gender as a largely shared system of knowledge about sex, an "*invention of human societies*" (Hare-Muskin and Marecek, 1990b, p.4) implies a dislocation from persons to processes. In this perspective gender precedes sex and gives meaning to our own and other persons' behaviours, feelings and thoughts, as well as to objects, social settings and contexts. Thus the focus of research is also dislocated from individual/group traits to the interpretation of the ways through which people make gender in their everyday life. The research by Duveen and Lloyd (1993) on the social representation of gender in the classroom, exemplifies this perspective, as well as the methodological eclecticism of social representations theory to study the construction of gender.

If we consider the social anchoring in the analysis of the meaning and structuring of traits associated to sex categories, research findings indicate that the male stereotype is compounded in other superordinate stereotypes, such as nationality (Eagly and Kite, 1987) and the adult person (Amâncio, 1996a). I designated this effect *symbolic asymmetry* in order to locate it within the framework of social representations and also to clarify the idea of hierarchy in the discussion of the differentiation effects of sex categorisation. Hierarchy is generally defined in evaluative terms, considering the more positive orientation of male attributes in comparison to female attributes. However this neglects the fact that most male attributes stand for the model of reference for all individuals, whereas female attributes are only referent to women. In this perspective gender representations differentiate a sex-specific category of individuals from another category where sex is not a central dimension and this is certainly one of the best arguments against the conceptual equivalence of sex and gender. This specificity renders the sex label more salient in social perception and more informative in social interaction in the case of women than in the case of men (Hurtig and Pichevin, 1995; Pichevin and Hurtig, 1996).

In the investigation of the relationship between stereotypes and behaviour, research on psychological androgyny exemplifies the neglect of symbolic asymmetry in favour of evaluation. Androgyny theory initially intended to counteract the dualism of sex differences psychology and to reflect the changes produced by feminism in American society (Bem,

1993). However, the main hypothesis of psychological androgyny was criticised in later reviews by both American (Morawski, 1987) and European researchers (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1994). In fact, androgyny seemed more profitable to men, as more men than women rated higher in measures of androgyny. As a result they were also able to adapt to a greater diversity of contexts whereas, for women, the range of opportunities to express femininity remained limited. Thus, adding up the positive traits of both stereotypes does not lead to the improvement of opportunities to men and women, in the same way, simply because gender stereotypes cannot be viewed as two sides of a coin.

A more recent theoretical approach considers the influence of stereotypes in the judgements and evaluations of the behaviour of women and men, particularly in the prescription of roles and the creation of expectations (Eagly, 1987). But my own research findings in contexts of decision-making where the position of authority was enhanced (Amâncio, 1993), as well as the level of expertise (Amâncio, 1996b), indicate that expectations guide the observer's attention in different ways according to the sex of the observed person. In fact, the behaviour of women is judged according to its deviation from the female stereotype whereas, in the case of men, judgements focus on the decision itself. The concept of role becomes therefore questionable if, as indicated by these results and in accordance with the hypothesis of symbolic asymmetry, the behaviour of women is more heavily laden by the meaning of being a woman than the behaviour of men. In this perspective stereotypes generate expectations of behaviour that are strictly located within the frontiers of sex categories in the case of women, but not in the case of men.

The distinction between a specific category in which the categorical label is a collective marker, as in the case of sex, and a category where group membership does not conflict with individual distinctiveness shapes a particular case of intergroup relations that has been highlighted by European researchers (Apfelbaum, 1979; Deschamps, 1982). In this case individual distinctiveness and social differentiation may go together for members of dominant groups but not for members of dominated groups, as shown by Lorenzi-Cioldi (1988). In gender intergroup relations symbolic asymmetry subjects women to the forced choice of either denying their identity, in order to achieve singularity, or merge in their

collective, undifferentiated identity. The only way out is the search for an imaginary "neutral" feminine identity (Amâncio, 1989, p. 8). The location of a dominant group, as the case of women in gender relations, is thus constantly reconstructed not only through the salience of group membership and the rigid boundaries that define it, but also by the conflicting identity of its own members.

In this perspective, power is not viewed as mere asymmetry, as it often is in social psychological literature (Apfelbaum, 1997), nor as a personal attribute, that men have, and women don't, as in certain feminist approaches. Asymmetry alone does not reflect the fact that the relative positions occupied by each group are not interchangeable. On the other hand, those relative positions are not imposed by the will of a particular group.

In spite of the changes in the status of women and the opportunities available to them in the last decades, the persistence of symbolic asymmetry in social thinking about sex categories points to a hegemonic social representation (Moscovici, 1988). To investigate how this *fundamental* social representation relates to others that are generated by the dynamics of social change and the diversity of contexts poses an interesting challenge to social representations theory. Let us take a look into the professional world: In organisational contexts in Austria, the prototype of a successful entrepreneur is male (Kirchler, 1997), even if direct measures seemed to indicate that gender stereotypes were fading away. Portuguese women in high status professions produced contradictory discourses about their career and the causes for their success (Nogueira, 1996) hesitating between the celebration of their individual success and the recognition of their exceptional position. French political women, particularly those of the first generation, felt marginalised and isolated and experienced great disruptions in their private lives, whereas Norwegian women in similar positions showed "serenity" (Apfelbaum, 1995, p. 81) and a sense of entitlement. If we turn to the private life, the study conducted by Patricia Roux (1999) in Switzerland shows that women recognise the prevalence of discrimination against women and injustice in the division of labour in society in general, but not in their own private relations.

How are gender representations reorganised and restructured in order to incorporate the prevalent discourse on equal opportunities, justice and rights with the also prevalent

inequalities based on sex ? The distinction of hostile and ambivalent sexism that Glick and Fiske (1996) evidenced in their study on sexist attitudes can be viewed as an effect of the anchoring of the perception of gender relations in the objective conditions experienced by individuals in their daily life.

But the investigation of the networking of old and new representations toward change or permanence in gender relations, or even the coexistence of both, has to take into consideration other social representations, such as individualism and citizenship, in order to understand why symbolic asymmetry is so fundamental. We need more research on the role played by modern science, and the modern state, in the transformation of old myths from ancient societies and great religions into common, familiar truths and realities. Social representations theory can offer the adequate framework to integrate the historical dimension of analysis that is necessary to build a consistent theory of gender social relations.

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