

Gender-critical: a Co-essentialism Refuting Orientation of Gender Theory

V0.3, comments are appreciated

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Abstract

Gender-critical is an ambiguous adjective qualifying an orientation of gender theory, that is a range of versions of gender theory. We claim that gender-critical versions of formal gender theory may but need not be morally problematic.

1 Gender-critical versions of formal gender theory

We assume 3G gender labels male, female and neutral as in the $3G_{\perp}$ formal gender theory (see [2] and the short summary in [6]). We also assume that a notion of biological sex is used which may or may not be transition permissive.¹ Formal gender theory is a

¹we refer to [2] for transition permissiveness as a property of a particular notion of biological sex.

framework which admits a range of different and mutually incompatible versions. Gender-critical is an adjective which may be applied to versions of gender theory. From [5] we adopt the notion of co(ntra)-essentialism on gender.

Definition 1.1. (Co-essentialism.) *Contra-essentialism (or co-essentialism for short) on gender is the conviction that gender categorization must follow gender identity (when available). Here gender identity refers to a person's subjective view/perception of their gender and gender categorization (w.r.t. some context, socially as well as in space and time) indicates which gender is supposed to be assigned to a person objectively (i.e. inter-subjectively).*

Essentialism on gender may be understood as bio-essentialism, whereas co-essentialism may be understood as psycho-essentialism. We prefer to avoid the use of the prefixes bio and psycho, however, and we will stick to essentialism and co-essentialism. An orientation of gender theory is a collection of versions of it. Co-essentialism thus specifies an orientation of gender theory, and more specifically an orientation of formal gender theory.

Definition 1.2. *A version of gender theory is gender-critical if it rejects co-essentialism on gender.*

Thus, a version of gender theory in which gender (gender categorization in the terminology of Barnes 2022 [1]) and gender identity (a person's private view concerning their gender) are considered equivalent is not gender-critical. A version of gender theory is gender-critical to the extent that a distinction is made between gender identity and gender categorization, and to the extent that gender categorization (when deviating from gender identity) of a person P is or may be used to restrict options for participation of P in activities, schemes, and events. The official RCC (see e.g. [18]) and ROC versions of gender theory may be rightly qualified as being gender-critical. The latter versions of gender theory come close to what has been labeled as the TERF (transexclusionary radical feminism) version of gender theory which is based on a notion of biological sex that is not transition permissive.

The version of gender theory which applies nowadays in Iran makes use of a transition permissive notion of biological sex and allows gender transition under strict regulations for that reason (see [17]). Nevertheless we assume that today's attitudes towards gender and transgenering in Iran may be qualified as gender-critical. Samuelson 2021 [16] intends to characterize gender-critical views but falls short to indicate any demarcation between gender-critical and non-gender-critical. Lawford-Smith 2020 [14] understands gender-critical primarily as an adjective that is applied to versions of feminism, claiming that gender-critical feminism is a natural successor of radical feminism.

2 Co-essentialism: ultimate gender identity protagonism

With gender identity protagonism we label the view that gender identity (as defined/given via/by self-identification) may in part determine gender categorization. Gender identity protagonism may come in different shapes, for instance in [3] we have outlined a moderate form of gender protagonism which is somewhat more liberal towards transgenering than a version of gender theory where transgenering is exclusively based on a transition permissive concept of biological sex (such as e.g. discussed in [17]). Ultimate gender identity protagonism corresponds with co-essentialism: there is no role left for biological aspects when it comes to gender categorization.

2.1 Gender-critical views can be both non-essentialist and moderate gender identity protagonist

Gender-critical thinking (except for the essentialist version of it) may be understood as moderate biological gender identity protagonism, which by itself give rise to an orientation within formal gender theory. Bio-logical gender protagonism may accomodate transgenering as transsexing in case a transition permissive notion of biological sex is adopted. Biological gender protagonism takes biological sex as a key axis of analysis (in feminist terms: an axis of oppression, see also [14]).

2.2 Essentialism refutes (moderate) gender identity protagonism

It follows from the above definitions that essentialism (i.e. bio-essentialism) and gender identity protagonism are mutually exclusive.

2.3 Gender-critical: critical of critical gender theory

Gender-critical is mostly used in the phrase ‘gender-critical feminism’. More generally gender-critical may be understood as an orientation within gender theory: gender-critical gender theory. At the other end of the spectrum one finds critical gender theory which adopts gender identity protagonism. The gender-critical movement operates in opposition to critical gender theory which is also referred to as gender ideology, and sometimes (manifestly incorrectly) simply as gender theory. We understand the gender-critical movement not so much as a branch of feminism but rather as the counter-activity of gender identity centered (and thereby gender identity protagonist) trans-actionism.

The idea that b-sex and gender are disparate and may vary in a flexible manner in time (adopting gender identity protagonism, in case of fluctuating gender identity) is a major

constituent of gender critical theory as described in Kogan 1997 [13]. So we find that the gender-critical orientation for gender theory stands in opposition to gender critical theory.

3 Moral contingency of rejecting co-essentialism

We believe that adopting a gender-critical orientation within gender theory is morally contingent. Gender-critical views cannot be generally dismissed as being morally wrong, neither can gender-critical views be established as morally imperative. In other words the co-essentialist view is not a moral necessity, there are defensible alternatives.

In spite of the seemingly detailed explanations we believe that the official RCC explanation of their strongly gender-critical attitude is logically defective, and unconvincing for that reason; we refer to [7] for more detail on this matter. In fact we doubt that essentialism on gender is morally defensible.²

Moral contingency of the so-called gender-critical movement is harder to establish. We understand the gender-critical movement as a political movement which promotes the establishment of laws and conventions corresponding with (strongly) gender-critical versions of gender theory. Critical gender theory as an instance of critical theory is not uncontested, not even from a decolonial perspective. From [15] we quote:

We argue that a Critical Theoretical analysis is inadequate in both cases because it reduces relations to binaries and essentialises power dynamics, which we use this article to unpack.

As mentioned in [?] we find a neo-binary feature as well as co-essentialism in critical gender theory, both of which we wish to criticize. We conclude that critical gender theory is at best morally contingent, and so, we think, is the gender-critical orientation of gender theory. The latter statement is not without risk: unfortunately the RCC support for a strongly gender-critical version of gender theory takes so disappointingly little notice of established scientific facts and of the substantial literature on gender theory that it becomes unconvincing to rule out in advance the possibility that the RCC version of gender theory (as expounded e.g. in [18]) is morally problematic. The critical remarks made by Buijs in connection with gender identity protagonism (hence with critical gender theory) do not express moral condemnation, in excess of a strong theoretical disagreement.

Gender-critical is frequently used as an accusation (see [8, 9] for accusations) in the direction of persons and groups who adopt a gender critical orientation of gender theory. In the other direction adopting (critical) gender theory (often phrased as gender ideology) is often used as an accusation by supporters of a strongly gender-critical stance.

²Of course essentialism on matters of biological sex is unproblematic.

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