

The Construction of Gender Research in Sweden: An Analysis of a Success Story

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The contributions to the fall 1997 issue of the American-based feminist cultural studies journal *differences* (1997, 9:3) were to give strong repercussions on the discussions among scholars based in women's/gender studies. Asking uncomfortable questions about the history, future and location of women's studies, the contributions to this special issue addressed questions that later would be referred to as the 'identity crisis' in women's studies. In this issue, some of the contributions explicitly linked the preceding success of women's studies with the said identity crisis, a connection furthermore underlined in the title to the final article of the issue: Bidy Martin's "Success and Its Failures" (Martin 1997, 102). Here, Martin explains that a problematic bluntness had accompanied the successful institutionalisation and disciplinisation of women's studies. Having "carved out" not only a "proper object", but also "specific analytic practices" and "key political problems", she writes, "Women's Studies has lost much of its critical and intellectual vigor". Indeed, she continues, women's studies has been safeguarded from challenges or change by "the piety with which they are repeatedly invoked and the familiarity they have come to enjoy" (Martin 1997, 102–103). And guest editor J W Scott explains: "'Women's Studies on the Edge' [the title of the issue] ... connotes identity in crisis, a loss of certainty, of bearings – an indeterminate sense of the future" (Scott 1997, ii). Consequently, bringing up questions of the content, object and aim of women's studies, this issue of *differences* brought together many aspects of the discussion about the identity crisis

in women's/gender studies. The most widely disseminated contribution from the issue, though, was Wendy Brown's "The Impossibility of Women's Studies". Here, Brown points at the intellectual and theoretical limitations of women's studies and explains, simply, that she finds "no there there" (Brown 1997, 82). After the poststructuralist critique of the category 'women', she writes, women's studies lost its object, core and aim, while postcolonial theory, queer theory and critical race theory went somewhere else.

It is often stated that the debate about feminism's reflections over the past, present and future begun with the call to take differences into account, formulated by black, Third World, anti-racist, gay and lesbian, queer and postcolonial feminists as they critiqued the exclusionary practices of feminist scholarship and the un-reflected point of departure in feminist knowledge production of a white, western and heterosexual woman. In alliance with the postmodern critique of universalism and its concomitant deconstruction of feminism's subject, these interventions came to provoke a serious crisis in feminist theory. Some feminists pointed to a failure of such a project to be emancipatory and expressed scepticism over the struggles that all of a sudden were taking place *within* feminism. A major part of the discussions came to focus on the (lost) transformative potential in feminist work. It is interesting to note that the contributions to this debate produced a vivid intellectual exchange around conceptions of

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feminism's subject, object, mission and aim (Butler 1994; Wiegman 2000; 2002). However, from a Swedish perspective, I find it even more curious that, at the same time as the identity crisis in women's/gender studies was discussed in a wide range of scholarly contexts, Swedish gender scholars created and mediated a story of feminism in Sweden in terms of a *success*.

In Sweden, an institutionalization of feminist ideas in public policies, state regulations and academic practices has taken place.¹ This development has generated, but is also itself generated by, a discourse in which the Swedish nation is projected as an equal, just and good country and marketed as a "champion of human rights and gender equality" (Hellgren and Hobson 2008, 400; Carbin 2010). Notions of gender equality are positioned in the core of a discursive national project and developed out of a notion of a "we" based upon a narration of a shared history and future (Manns 2009; Bhabha 1993) in which ideas of modernity and equality are contrasted against a "them", situated in past times or other cultures (Tuori 2004; Arora Jonsson 2009).

I agree with postcolonial and critical feminist scholars who find it necessary to intervene into this production of a story of a feminist success in Sweden, and locate my analysis in such a tradition of scholarship (e.g. Edwards 2007; Siim and Skjeie 2008; Hellgren and Hobson 2008; Borchost and Siim

1 Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari have demonstrated that a dominant form of feminism has been institutionalized through the following five spheres in Swedish society: legitimated scholarly practises (gender studies/research); popular culture (media feminism, popular science); welfare-state bureaucracies (gender equality state policies); organizations with their point of departure in a critique of male dominance (women's shelters etc.); feminist NGO's (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005, 82, my translation). When I use 'feminism' in this article, I refer to the production and circulation of feminist ideas within and between these spheres. When I talk about 'gender research', I refer to academic practices of knowledge production, that is, both forms of gender research integrated in to different subject areas and gender research within autonomously organized units (ie. gender studies units).

2008; Carbin 2010; Yang 2010). Here, I inquire into the construction of gender research in Sweden as a success, through analysing inclusions and exclusions in the narration of the field's recent history, in the understanding of key terms and in the production of proper objects, which also involves processes of disciplinarization.

Even though I very much agree on the importance of making excluded or marginalized voices heard, I also think that such studies do not self-evidently engage with the dilemma of power relations in feminism. In fact, through their ambition to complete or correct history, such studies might leave the power relations intact, not acknowledging the close relationships between power and knowledge (Foucault [1977] 1980). This study, therefore, does not aim to correct history, but to analyse the practices of dominance that take place in gender research in Sweden. My approach is much inspired by what Chandra Mohanty has described in terms of pedagogies of dissent: "who we are, how we act, what we think, and what stories we tell become more intelligible within an epistemological framework that begins by recognizing existing hegemonic histories. --- Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces." (Mohanty 2003, 195)

Studies of dominance are, however, always interpretations. To grasp this particular construction of dominance, I make a case study of a booklet, produced and distributed by the Swedish Research Council, the largest public funding council in Sweden. With Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey (2000, 11), I understand the analyses in this study as "*indicative* indices to the wider processes" I set out to explore. Therefore, the theme I have chosen for my analysis is not meant "to be read as the *only* or the *most* important example[s]" (Franklin, Lury and Stacey 2000, 11). Instead, this case is used as an indicator of this construction

of dominance, with the hope that the analysis will direct the attention to significant dominant tendencies, strategies and aims within feminist knowledge production and through that produce what Franklin, Lury and Stacey call “heremeutical vectors”, offering routes to further analyses (2000, 11). In my selection of the material for this article, I have paid attention to the *authorization* of texts, a status that they are rendered based on the context of their production/use in different institutional settings of significance for the subject area. The Swedish Research Council, that produced and distributed the booklet that is analysed in this article, is not an innocent publisher, nor a neutral distributor of proper knowledge, but also construct the text that is distributed so that it is heard and authorized as “proper” or as “originating the terms” (Ahmed 1998, 18). My study takes issue with this process of authorization, by pointing at the constructed character of the knowledge displayed as authorized through the text, and by understanding the accounts presented in the text as agential, which means that I understand the accounts displayed as productive instead of only descriptive (Ahmed et al. 2000, 9; see also Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 1999).

Inclusions/exclusions: Narrative constructions

In 2003, on commission by the Swedish Research Council, professor Britt Marie Thurén² wrote the booklet *Gender Research – questions, conditions, challenges*. The aim of the booklet was to inform about gender research, its history, key concepts and debates, and it was targeted for a scholarly circle of readers in Sweden. The booklet is presented as a product by the Expert Committee for Gender Research, a committee at the Swedish Research Council with a particular responsibility for gender research in Sweden. The

2 In 1998, Thurén became the first professor in gender studies in Sweden, at Umeå University.

overall presentation of gender research in the booklet can be understood as an official version, supported by strategically and structurally influential actors for the further institutionalization of gender studies (i.e. the largest public research council, and, by extension, the Swedish government).

The booklet is written in an open and inclusive style and refers to various disagreements between gender researchers around eg. how patriarchy can be understood, and of the importance of being aware of “the dangers of naturalization” in analyses of gender, etc. (13). At the same time, the booklet produces firm statements concerning the relationship between women and men and explains things like that there “also exist universal features concerning gender” (13). It is a contradictory writing style that makes it difficult to pin-point what kind of knowledge that is produced in the booklet, and that displays a gap between what is said and done: issues that are brought up for discussion are first explained as multi-faceted, varied, and complex, but the complexities are subsequently erased through a final, narrow and often firm statement that contradicts them. The basic line of argument in the booklet is the idea that sex and gender are more closely related than gender and ethnicity, sexuality, age and/or class, and that gender research is exclusively occupied with studying sex and gender. Studies of sexuality are acknowledged, but identified as an activity that takes place within queer or sexuality studies. This might not seem very radical, but it has an impact on which objects/agents that become included in respectively excluded from gender research, with far-reaching implications.

In its presentation of the recent history of gender research, the booklet refers to the connections in the Swedish context between gender studies/research and other branches of study. Here, the discipline of women’s studies is explained to be focused on “women” or “femininity”, and research on equal opportunities is related to studies of “injustice”, while queer

studies are described as focused on “sexual orientation” (18). Gender studies/research, in return, is presented as a continuation of women’s studies, but expanded through the inclusion of a study of men³:

Gender studies or gender research is the overarching denomination of the whole field. ... It equals what earlier was called women’s studies but signals that the field of knowledge is as much focused on men as it is on women and not a particular level or sphere in human life, but everything that can be related to gender in any way.” (17)ⁱ

Antiracist or postcolonial feminism is not included among the branches that according to the booklet are connected to gender research. However, further ahead, the booklet describes the emergence of a focus on “diversity”, in social and human sciences, which is explained as having developed out of the critique of western ethnocentric feminism by non-western and U.S black feminism, and “the postmodernist critique of meta-narratives” (73). The focus on power within gender research, the booklet explains,

implied that [gender research was] sensitive to other principles of hierarchization, such as race, class and ethnicity... as all connected in some ways. That this is the case is generally accepted within gender research today; yet most of the work still remains to be done regarding the role of the different connections and the question of what shapes them. (73, 74)ⁱⁱ

Notably, the above-mentioned U.S black or third world feminist scholarship on this topic, or the work concerning this by antiracist and postcolonial feminists in Sweden from the mid-80s and onwards, become examples of issues that the producers of booklet find relevant to exclude from the recent

3 All quotes from the booklet, in this article, are translated by me. The quotes are also appended in Swedish in the endnotes to this article.

history of gender research.⁴ Further ahead, the booklet briefly discusses intersectionality, and explains:

This is an important concept because hybridity increases in the postindustrial society. Is this analytically unmanageable? No, but we must select which axis or which axes we want to put in focus in each individual case, and gender researchers must obviously focus particularly on the gender axis. (93)ⁱⁱⁱ

Here, intersectionality is understood as an additional tool and gender is foregrounded as a prioritized category. The potential in the notion of intersectionality to conceptualize the existence of multiple power orders is not mentioned. The entwinement of ‘race’/ethnicity, sexuality and gender is reduced to “hybridity”, global capitalism and transnational power asymmetries are collapsed into the vague “postindustrial society”, and the white, western, heterosexual subject (woman or man) is left unmarked and unproblematized.

In the booklet, terms such as “identity”, “multi-culturality”, “experience” and “hybridity” (75, 76) are pointed out as key words in gender research. I understand these as terms indebted to postcolonial and antiracist theory. Yet, the only research areas that are acknowledged in the booklet, aside of a focus on sex roles, women, and equal opportunities, are research on men and masculinities and queer studies (18). Any references in the booklet to the work by antiracist, third world, black, and postcolonial feminism on the connections between ‘race’/ethnicity and gender, are few and brief. As I discuss further ahead in this article, sex and gender are given a very central position in the booklet. By contrast, the omission of antiracist and postcolonial feminist contributions becomes remarkably present in its absence.

4 For a discussion around this, see for example Liinason 2011: 97.

The prioritization in the booklet of sex and gender and the marginalization of 'race'/ethnicity and class, involve a separation where particular objects (sex and gender) and theoretical framings of specific kind (structuralist or poststructuralist feminism) become included in constructing the recent history of gender research, while other objects (eg. 'race'/ethnicity) and other theoretical frameworks (eg. postcolonial feminism) become excluded from the research area. The study of "sexual orientation" (18), in turn, is acknowledged but appointed to queer studies, which involves a separation between the studies of sex/gender, and sexuality. Here, the booklet dispenses proper objects to the particular branches of research, which I will discuss further in this article. At this point, however, I find it interesting to compare the identity crisis in feminism on the international arena – created by tensions between different understandings of feminism's subject, object, mission and aim – with the strong regulatory practices that take shape in the booklet's production of gender research in Sweden, where critical interventions to the production of western, (hetero)sexual feminism do not even seem allowed to enter the stage.

Scholarly analyses on the construction of a story of a feminist success in Sweden show how this success is shaped by a white, heterosexual, middle-class construction of femininity, based on the ideas of complementarity and harmony between the sexes (Mulinari and Nergaard 2004; Eduards 2007). The reiterated narrative of a successful development in Sweden concerning issues like gender, gender equality, women and men can be understood as constructed through references to a shared culture, and a common past, present and future. As furthermore explored by among others Maud Eduards, harmony based on an articulation of complementarity between the sexes has been the primary working model for Swedish feminists since the end of the 19th century (Eduards 2007, 13–31, 243–294; Siim and Skjeie 2008; Hellgren and Hobson 2008; Borchost and Siim 2008). It still constitutes a core value in the Swedish context. Eduards writes: "There

is a strong and continuously sentient faith in the value of a natural body order, which is built upon a heterosexual and harmonizing logic, with the family in the centre. A proper woman is accommodating, both in the home and in politics" (2007, 278). It is possible to understand the formation of the success story of feminism in Sweden as a performance of a national project. To perform the nation is an issue of narrating a story which will attract listeners, more concretely, a collective of listeners who find the story compatible with their common culture; It is established through the ideas of a common past and a common future, myths through which the re/production of the nation is developed (Bhabha 1994, 4; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). The inclusion of particular groups/objects and the exclusion of others from the gender research community make it possible to create a narrative of feminism as a story of success, through the production of a story that feeds in to the national project of complementarity and harmony between the sexes. Issues that do not confirm the story of a feminist success are effectively excluded from the narrative, as noted by Paulina de los Reyes, Irene Molina and Diana Mulinari, who write that,

[e]ven if some mandatory recognitions about the importance of class and ethnicity also exist in Sweden, traditional feminism has shown a rather small interest in these areas. The theoretical discussion [about race/ethnicity and gender], opened by Wuokko Knocke in the beginning of 1990s / ... / has to a large extent been given space outside of the main lines of feminist research. There are probably many and complex reasons to this, but it is not possible to ignore the fact that the academic practise is permeated by / ... / sex- and race/ethnic stereotypes" (de los Reyes, Molina & Mulinari [2002] 2006, 19)

In addition, in relation to the wider discourse about a success in Sweden concerning equal rights and gender equality, Zenia Hellgren and Barbara

Hobson note similar practices of inclusion/exclusion. They explain: “An open dialogue around issues of cultural conflict in Sweden has been closed because it defies the self-image of Sweden as a good society; an international defender of human rights, a paragon of gender equality” (Hellgren & Hobson 2008, 398) – despite the fact that structures of inequality and forms of discrimination are increasing in the Swedish society of today (Tuori 2004; Carbin 2010; Yang 2010).

Key terms

The relationship between sex and gender⁵ is devoted quite a lot of space in the booklet. Here, connections between biological sex and social/cultural gender are discussed departing from the idea of the gender system (genussystemet) as it was introduced in Sweden in 1988 by historian Yvonne Hirdman.⁶ In her rendition, the gender system was based on two logics: the logic of separation, where male and female spheres were kept apart; and the primacy of the male norm, where men were superior

5 Translated to Swedish, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ is ‘køn’ and ‘genus’. The translations have a slight lexical difference, and both the singular and relational meanings between the terms differ in different scholarly contexts, depending on theoretical departure etc. For the purposes of this article, I will contextualise the meanings associated with the terms in the Swedish debate, but use the English version of the terms. For an analysis of the Swedish terminology in the field, see Liinason (forthcoming 2012).

6 Together with a group of Swedish anthropologists in 1989, Thurén wrote an article in *Kvinnvetenskaplig tidskrift (Journal of Women’s Studies)*, arguing for the concept of gender as a useful notion signifying “the social and cultural aspects of the biological division of the human race in two sexes” (Gemzöe et. al. 1989, 1), but arguing against Hirdman’s structuralist conception of the male norm, i.e. taking a distance to the idea of a hierarchical sex/gender system (Gemzöe et. al. 1989).

to women (Hirdman 1988).⁷ In the gender system, women and men were described as universal, binary categories. However, due to the introduction of this conceptualisation of the gender system, the official terminology in the field changed during the 1990s from “women’s studies/equal opportunities research”, to “gender studies/research”, in names of departments, positions and courses.

In the historical overviews of gender research in Sweden, the story of scholarly feminists working in a close dialogue with the state is often presented as a mutual success (eg. Qvist 1978; Hernes 1987; Florin 2006). In this narrative, gender research is presented as occupied with investigating the possibilities for equal rights between the sexes. The interactions between the nation state and feminist work in Sweden have formed the base for a number of scholarly studies, focused on the production and reproduction of the notion of gender equality, with implications for the understanding of gender, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality (Manns 2009; Carbin 2008). In this context, the terminological shift to gender has been understood as the result of combined interests between feminist efforts and state policies, an “unholy alliance”, as it has been described (Norlander 1997), in which feminists wanted to gain public interest in and a wider support for the study of the relationship between the sexes, while the state’s interest was in developing policies based on

7 Compare with Gayle Rubin, who refers to the double meaning of “sex” i.e. both as sex and sexuality in her “Traffic in Women”. Unlike several successors, she emphasized that the sex-gender system not only denotes how biological sex is social sex or gender, but also how human sexuality is formed in certain lines – how heterosexuality is given the status of the institutionalized norm. To Rubin, gender was a product of the social relations of sexuality and reproduction, supplemented by the idea that the sexual division of labour creates male and female heterosexually, a thread later taken up by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* 1990 (cf Rubin 1975, cf Butler 1990).

the logic complementarity, harmonizing the relationships between the sexes (see Liinason forthcoming 2012). Many feminist scholars in the field did express hesitation against the usefulness of a term like gender⁸, but it nevertheless became institutionalized, relying on the ideas of a dual sex system, of compulsory heterosexuality and of sex/gender as a more fundamental social relation than sexuality, ethnicity or class.⁹

In the booklet, it is stated that the term 'gender' is very useful. According to the booklet, the negative or hesitant responses that gender researchers expressed around the term are to be understood as reactions to the deep and far-reaching *usefulness* of the term:

On the contrary, I think that people sometimes guard themselves against the concept of gender precisely because it is everything but harmless... The term 'gender' (genus) harbours a radical questioning of ideas concerning 'sex' (kön) that dominates in our culture. It may not address topical, political debates the same way that the terms 'woman' and 'sex' do. It rather changes the preconditions for those debates. /---/ The term gender also points at the fact that it is the entire society and the entire human life that is to be studied. Not

just the labour market or politics (as equal opportunity research most often did). Not only sexuality or love (as queer scholarship mainly does and as older feminist sexuality research did). Not only the production of children or the relationships within the nuclear family (that sex roles research often did). Not only people's feeling of identification with one gender category rather than the other one (as much gender research within psychology and the humanities has done and does). But all this and much more. This totality can be called the gender order (50, 51)^{iv}

In the booklet, the concept of gender is presented as if it can offer something radically new to gender research. Yet, the examples that are brought up ("the entire society"; "the entire human life") echo an ambition that had been explicit among feminist scholars already in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in which the arguments for a "holistic" perspective in women's studies scholarship were mobilised through terms like "women's aspect" or women's perspective¹⁰ (Göransson et. al. 1984, 76). The conference proceeding *Kvinnouniversitetet – vetenskap, patriarkat, makt* (Women's University – Science, patriarchy and power, Aniansson et. al 1983) described, for example, research that upholds women's perspective as a) subject-critical, b) problem-oriented and interdisciplinary and c) more holistic than conventional research because it, as it was explained, embraces "*all aspects of life*" (page 8, emphasis added). Instead of accounting for this long-term ambition in women's/gender studies, the booklet promotes gender as something radically different and profoundly useful. However, the booklet is not unique in reflecting this approach in overviews of Swedish gender research. In the more recent historiographies of the terminological shifts, the conceptual transformations quite often appear through narratives of a

8 In the debate, critique of gender was raised against its nature/culture divide and critics also questioned the need for such a term in the Swedish language where we already had a term (sex/kön) that did not mark any distinction between biological, social, cultural or symbolical orders (Åsberg 1998).

9 Hirdman was influenced by Rubin's essay from 1975, but if Hirdman assumed hierarchies between the sexes in the gender system, Rubin refused the idea of hierarchies built into the system of gender in general. Rubin wanted to give room for the possibility of egalitarian sex-gender systems, and reserved patriarchy for a particular form of male dominance (i.e older men's power over younger men, women and children). This was a conceptualisation of asymmetrical sex-gender relationships, which Britt-Marie Thurén also was influenced by (cf Rubin 1975). In addition, Hirdman excluded the double meaning of sex from Rubin's model, and developed her system assuming an unreflected compulsory heterosexuality.

10 Even though those contributions often represented "woman" as a unitary category, in some attention was also given to the various and intersecting power asymmetries within women as a group (eg. Brekke and Haukka 1980).

progress from “uniformity” in the 1970s (when the terminology involved various constructions with the prefix ‘woman’s’), to “heterogeneity” in the late 1980s (when the terminology changed to ‘gender’). These narratives overshadow and simplify the complexity in the debates surrounding the transformations in the field (see for example Ljung 2004¹¹). When analysing the content in earlier texts by feminist scholars, a different story appears. This has been described by among others Diana Mulinari & Kerstin Sandell (1999), who took an interest in reading original feminist texts from the 1970s:

Working through these texts we often wonder if the postmodern feminists have actually read these texts by radical and Marxist feminists before they, in what has turned into a mantra, attack these authors for essentialism and unilinearity. Learning from these texts we have encountered a theoretical effort to grasp the notion of experience – a notion central to all social science – in challenging and reflective ways and strongly frameworked in substantial empirical research. We neither romanticize nor idealize the intellectuals that inspired, created and developed feminist research. What we want to underline is that despite the highly politicized way of doing theory, or just because of it, feminist intellectuals provided elaborate theories,

11 In a text book chapter on feminism, Ljung writes: “Around the mid-80s, feminists started to observe that feminist theory that had been developing since the end of the 60s, did not include the conditions for all women. The earlier point of departure, the idea that the theories should include ‘all women’, ‘women in general’, was absurd. In reality, the theories were imprinted by a certain category of women, namely American and European white women from the middle class.” (Ljung 2004, 251.) It becomes quite odd to compare this narrative with the presentation in the booklet of the promises of gender, but also very obvious that both produces a narrative where the recent changes, i.e, the shift to gender, is presented as a progress, although they do this in different ways.

whose central approaches are relevant today. (Mulinari & Sandell 1999, 289)

The context in which the booklet from the Swedish Research Council presents its view on the new potentials of the concept of gender, is one in which terminological debates around the key terms in the field had been going on for around two decades. Gender, when it was introduced, was presented as a term with a focus on the relations between the sexes. In resemblance with the earlier term ‘sex roles’ that was used in the 1960s and 1970s, gender became popular among scholars who wanted to focus on the relation between women and men and the social constructedness of sex. In the early 1980s, a few years before the introduction of gender in Sweden, a successive shift from the use of terms like ‘women’s aspect’ and ‘women’s perspective’ had taken place. Constructions with ‘sex’ (‘kön’), like ‘social sex’ and ‘sex perspective’ started to be preferred, focusing on the relation between women and men. The shift to ‘gender’ in the late 1980s, confirmed the departure from a focus on women’s material conditions to a renewed interest in the investigations of the relationship between women and men, which made it more closely linked to the earlier sex-roles research than to the critical and radical, Marxist and leftist, focus on women’s liberation in the 1970s. It was, however, in these circles of women’s studies scholars that the need for a “holistic” perspective on women’s situation had been raised. Yet, instead of giving an account of the rich and varied debates around the terminological shifts, the booklet presents gender as the promising term, through a selective and simplifying historiography.¹²

12 A justified question here would be whether the ambition to speak on behalf of all women or the whole human life, based as it is on universalist ideas, also has its limitations. However, my aim at this point, is to shed light over how the booklet constructs its version of feminism’s recent history, which means that I do not engage in an analysis of the singular meanings in the different endeavours.

In this way, the booklet establishes a progress narrative (Hemmings 2011), produced through the very lack of acknowledgement of the earlier ambitions. What first seems to be an inclusive gesture, turns out to be an exclusive practise, in which one (contested) understanding of gender is presented in a celebratory and all-encompassing way, overshadowing the similarities with earlier feminist endeavours that are not compatible with the narrative that is produced in the booklet.

Proper objects

The booklet also allocates proper objects to particular disciplinary branches. In the quote above, it is explained how different disciplinary fields 'take care' of different areas of study, such as sexuality and love (queer/sexuality studies), relationships within the nuclear family (sex roles research), labour market (equal opportunities research), etc. Thus, a separation between sexuality and gender is established as these objects are appointed specific research areas or disciplinary branches (queer/sexuality studies respectively gender research) (Holm 1993, 70; Butler 1994). Allocations of proper research objects rest upon a particular, but not necessarily uncontested, understanding of the object/s in question. Inspired by Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, Katie King discusses how the construction of an "object of nature" begins with "an idea", and how the object understood as a piece of 'reality' is created through a process of "splitting and inversion" where "the statement about nature splits apart into both a statement and an object of nature". Quoting Latour and Woolgar, King continues: "Before long, more and more reality is attributed to the object and less and less to the statement about the object. Consequently, an inversion takes place: the object becomes the reason why the statement was formulated in the first place" (King 1994, xv; see also Smith 1990, 215). Through the booklet's appointment of certain objects of

study to particular research fields – sexuality and love are, as it is described, taken care of by "queer scholarship" and "older feminist sexuality research" (50, 51) – the booklet desexualizes the project of gender research, while appointing sexuality as the proper object of queer and sexuality studies.

The Swedish word *kön* (sex) is a word with another denotation than the English word *sex* and signifies both the biological and social sex. It does not refer to sexual practises, as the equivalent English word does. In Swedish, other words are reserved for sexuality and sexual practises, namely the words *sex* (spelled the same way as in English and used in the meaning 'sexual intercourse' and, as a prefix, *sex-*, for compound words such as *sexpartner*, sexual partner), *sexualitet* (sexuality) and *sexuella praktiker* (sexual practises). Before the introduction of the term "gender", Swedish gender studies scholars used constructions with *kön* (sex), such as *socialt kön*, (social sex) and *könsteori*, (sex theory) or *könsperspektiv*, (sex perspective) (Göransson 1987; Eduards and Manns 1987; Eduards, Gustafsson and Jónasdóttir 1989). Consequently, in the Swedish context, there was already a linguistic separation between *sex* (*kön*) understood as identity and attribute, and sexuality (*sexualitet*) understood as identity, attribute, sensation, pleasures, acts, and practices, which also Butler detects as implicit in the understanding of the terms in an American context, in her 1994 analysis "Against Proper Objects". In effect, when gender (*genus*) was introduced in the Swedish context, the use of *sex* (*kön*) subsequently came to be understood as an expression of unproblematised biology, as a manifestation of male and female, hormones and genital attributes, while gender in return was used as an instrument to analyse the relational aspects of (social) sex in explanations of asymmetrical or hierarchical relations of power (Åsberg 1998, 38; Rönnblom 2003). The position of sexuality in relation to sex and gender, however, was never an issue in the debates concerning the introduction of the term gender on a Swedish arena and it was strikingly absent from the discussions. The booklet, nevertheless, *does*

acknowledge the study of sexuality, but does so only in *separating* the study of sex and gender *from* the study of sexual practises. Thus, in the booklet, these objects become located in different areas of study, which confirms and reinforces a division between sex/gender and sexuality.

How does the booklet conceptualise 'gender'? Early in the booklet, it is explained that:

Gender is a principle that has the effect that we in our culture, here and now, think that there are two kinds of human beings, we call them women and men and we ascribe them certain characteristics, which we call female and male, characteristics that we can metaphorically transfer onto other things, such as colours or professions (11).^v

However, even though this is not taken up for discussion in the booklet, gender could also be connected with of issues 'race'/ethnicity. As Haraway writes in "Gender' for a Marxist Dictionary", there are a lot of shared "racial and sexual meanings of gender" which "point to the interwoven modern histories of colonial, racist, and sexual oppressions in systems of bodily production and inscription and their consequent liberatory and oppositional discourses" (Haraway 1991, 130). Later on, the booklet presents its perception of the relations between the sexes. Here, it seems clear that sex and gender are connected in a particular way, and that the dual sex system, following the booklet, is based on reproduction. The booklet starts its discussion about sex/gender differences through questioning any idea of a strict symmetry between our concepts and the "real world". Here, the booklet argues for constructive overlaps or gaps between what we describe as "nature" and what we can know about it (80). Yet, the chapter, titled "does it exist something universal, in spite of all?" ends with the conclusion that:

Anthropologists belong to a group of scholars who has put a strong emphasis on the argument that gender orders look different in different societies. ... But anthropologists would also be able to point at the fact that the majority of all societies do discern exactly two gender categories, even if more can occur and even if the criteria for the division varies. And there are usually terms that group the individuals in a fairly durable way along the lines of those two categories. And the divisions usually have something to do with reproduction, so usually, it works well to translate the terms with 'woman' and 'man'. Accordingly, we have something universal here (81)^{vi}

Even though the steps are very cautious, the booklet finally reaches the point where it agrees on the existence of "exactly two gender categories", and that those are separated from each other through "reproduction". In spite of the precautionary measures, the booklet here invokes the heterosexual matrix, which is constituted by references to the dual sex system and to compulsory heterosexuality. In "Against Proper Objects", Judith Butler writes about the division between women's studies and gay/lesbian studies made by the editors to the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1994). Here, Butler shows how the initiatives to mark out a disciplinary territory between women's studies and gay and lesbian studies through the use of gender respectively sexuality, are putting a mundane sort of violence into motion. Butler refers to the reduction of sexuality to gender (which Gayle Rubin wrote about in "Thinking Sex" 1984), and writes: "Where and when a feminist analysis accepts this cultural presumption [whereby to be a sex implies having sex in a given way] feminism actively recapitulates heterosexist hegemony" (Butler 1994, 9). Consequently, the correspondence between gender and sex, and the conflation of (hetero)sexuality and reproduction in the booklet, are reproducing a complementary relationship between the sexes.

The ambitions to construct a proper object in gender research also imply a disciplinarization of the subject area. In effect, this gesture involves a domestication of the non-conformity that characterizes feminist knowledge production, through which it also has questioned conventional scholarship. In *Differences That Matter* (1998), Ahmed takes on the project of showing that feminism can make a difference precisely because it has the ability to destabilize the discourses it intervenes in. From this follows that she also acknowledges the different uses of the key objects of study as an important difference in feminism related to the desire to construct a proper object in feminism. Ahmed takes the example 'gender' and writes: "Parts of the critical difference of feminism is its foregrounding of the social relation of gender. But 'gender' itself cannot be situated as a proper object which guarantees the feminist trajectory" (Ahmed 1998, 15). This, because the implications of such an enterprise would involve a stabilization of the way particular feminists perceive the world, in which other possible ways of understanding and performing gender would be marginalized. Hence, Ahmed understands gender as an "articulated rather than isolated category [which also] means giving up the assumption that feminism itself is inclusive, or simply speaks on behalf of all women" (ibid. 1998, 15). Indeed, it is also precisely through refusing a conceptualization of feminism as all-inclusive that feminism can continue to produce transformative knowledge, instead of it being disclosed by anyone's desire to isolate proper objects, their constituencies and disciplinary locations, or by anyone's ambition to produce terms with the capacity speak on behalf of the whole human life.

Concluding remarks

On the international arena, the identity crisis within feminism brought along a vital debate concerning the subject, object, mission and aim of academic feminism, producing significant responses in which conceptual

tools, theoretical and methodological models highlighting diversity, complexity and locatedness were presented. However, within the frame of the success story of feminism in Sweden, the critique against ethnocentrism and heterosexism in western feminist scholarship has not been given any space at the core of the field of gender research. This analysis of a booklet produced by the principal research authorities in the country shows that critical interventions to the exclusionary practices in Swedish/western feminism, such as postcolonial, antiracist, Third World, or black feminism, get defined as forms of peripheral contributions or they are acknowledged but assigned a limited reach as a sub-area to the main field, as in the case of queer studies. Hence, the construction of gender research as a success is produced through an exclusionary version of the recent history of the field, and through the solidification of key terms and proper objects, constructing a narrative that feeds in to and confirms the successes of the Swedish national project, in which gender is connected to sex and sex is understood in terms of a dual sex model (i.e. difference understood on the basis of reproduction). Critical or cautionary feminist queries have been expressed about whether the success of a feminism founded upon an idea of complementarity between the sexes is really a success or not. These interventions, though, have been met with silence, and consequently not resulted in any change of the success story, as noted by Maria Carbin in her investigation of the Swedish integration debate (Carbin 2008, 26). This lack of response is also highlighted by Ulla Manns in her explorations of lesbian studies and women's studies in Sweden, and by Paulina de los Reyes, Irene Molina and Diana Mulinari in their survey over the narration of feminism's recent history in Sweden (Manns 2008, 5; de los Reyes, Molina and Mulinari [2002] 2006). This does not mean, though, that parallel feminist discourses would not exist or that the feminist knowledge project in Sweden is not composed by multi-faceted, complex and also contradictory narratives. Instead it implies that different feminist narratives take up/are given different positions in the discourse: some become more

centred while others are pushed to the margins of the field. Above all, it means that the *story* of a feminist success in Sweden is both constructed and confirmed by the very gesture where 'race'/ethnicity is excluded from the gender research agenda, where non-reproductive sexual practices are singled out from the core of gender research and where critique against this very narrative is delegitimized and pushed to the margins.

Notes

- i "Genusvetenskap eller genusforskning är den övergripande beteckningen på hela fältet... Den motsvarar det som tidigare kallades kvinnoforskning men anger att kunskapsområdet handlar om män lika mycket som om kvinnor, och inte om någon särskilt [sic!] nivå eller sfär i mänskligt liv utan om allt som kan tänkas relatera till genus på något sätt." (17)
- ii "Genusforskningens inriktning på maktfrågor gjorde att man var känslig även för andra principer för hierarkisering, som ras, klass, etnicitet... de var alla sammankopplade på något sätt. Att det förhåller sig så är numera allmänt erkänt inom genusforskningen; det mesta återstår dock att göra vad gäller vilken roll olika former för sammankopplingarna spelar och vad som styr dem." (73, 74)
- iii "Det är ett viktigt begrepp eftersom hybriditeten tilltar i det postindustriella samhället. Är detta analytiskt ohanterligt? Nej, men vi måste välja vilken eller vilka axlar vi fokuserar på i varje enskilt fall, och genusforskare måste givetvis se särskilt till genusaxeln." (93)
- iv "Själv tror jag tvärtom att man ibland värjer sig mot begreppet genus just för att det är allt annat än menlöst... I termen "genus" ligger ett radikalt ifrågasättande av de idéer kring "kön" som dominerar i vår kultur. Den vänder sig kanske inte lika direkt till aktuella politiska debatter som termerna "kvinna" och "kön" gör. Den förändrar snarare villkoren för sådana debatter... Termen genus pekar också på att det är hela samhället, och hela det mänskliga livet, man studerar. Inte bara arbetsmarknaden eller politiken (som jämställdhetsforskningen oftast gjort). Inte bara sexualitet eller kärlek (som queerforskningen huvudsakligen gör och som äldre feministisk sexualitetsforskning gjort). Inte bara barnproduktionen eller relationerna inom kärnfamiljen (som könsrolls-

forskningen oftast gjorde). Inte bara människors känsla av att identifiera sig med en genuskategori hellre än den andra (som mycket genusforskning inom psykologi och humaniora gjort och gör). Utan allt detta och mycket mer. Denna helhet kan kallas genusordning." (50, 51)

- v "Genus är en princip som gör att vi i vår kultur, här och nu, anser att det finns två sorters människor, vi kallar dem för kvinnor och män och vi tillskriver dem vissa egenskaper, som vi kallar för kvinnliga och manliga, egenskaper som vi kan överföra metaforiskt på andra ting, som färger eller yrken." (11)
- vi "Antropologer hör till dem som kraftigt betonat att genusordningar ser olika ut i olika samhällen... Men antropologer skulle också kunna peka på att de flesta samhällen urskiljer just två genuskategorier, även om fler kan förekomma och även om kriterierna för indelningen varierar. Och det brukar finnas termer som etiketterar individerna på ett tämligen varaktigt sätt enligt dessa två kategorier. Och indelningarna brukar ha något med reproduktion att göra, så det brukar gå ganska bra att översätta termerna med "kvinna" och "man". Här finns alltså något universellt" (81).

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