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Cyborg Liberation:
Donna Haraway's
Cyborg
Feminism as an
Emancipatory
Model of Identity

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ABSTRACT

Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg is a radical archetype for emancipatory self-construction that models conscious reshaping of socially imposed identities. The cyborg represents the plasticity of our socially constructed identities: our ability to transcend the limits of prefabricated identities and overwrite oppressive, socially imposed roles. Understanding social construction through this lens gives social workers and clients the conceptual tools to deconstruct rigid identities—particularly those of gender identity—imposed by society. These identities are the subject of active political contestation; they are the product of economic, social, and cultural relations and institutions. The concept of the cyborg provides an emancipatory model that denaturalizes and destabilizes rigid essentialist binaries and instead recognizes the chimeric multiplicity of the individual.

Keywords: cyborg, social construction, identity, gender, feminism

In this paper, I turn to Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1984) as an emancipatory model for rethinking the social constructions of gender and identity. Haraway's concept of the cyborg model as a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self can help social workers reconceptualize gender identity and wider notions of the self in our era of hyper-reality.¹ The cyborg model can facilitate exploration of gender identity and deconstruction of socially imposed² notions of self. This framework critiques the mainstream, hegemonic³ assumption that gender is binary, static, and essential, and instead highlights gender's dynamic existence throughout cultures and histories (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020). Identities are not merely collective fantasies; they are ideological products of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social, political, cultural, and economic institutions and discourses. We must become cyborgs with respect to our collectively constructed identities and begin the process of modifying them to better serve us, embracing notions of the self that are inclusive and liberating.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Gender is a flexible, superstructural identity that is the product of cultural and socio-economic relations (Storm & Flores, 2019). In the social construction of both gender and race, dominant groups forcibly use visible physical features, such as skin color and primary or secondary sex characteristics, to create socio-economic and political hierarchies that mediate the relations of economic production and access to consumption (Federici, 2009; Fields & Fields, 2009).

1 Hyper-reality: when a simulation becomes as real or more real than the reality it is simulating; coined by Jean Baudrillard.

2 An example of hyper-reality is social media. Refer to: J. Morris (2020). Simulacra in the age of social media: Baudrillard as the prophet of fake news. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 45(4), 319–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859920977154> for further information on how social media can blur the division between our real and virtually simulated selves.

3 Hegemonic: ruling or dominant in a political or social context.

Within these boundaries, the exploitation of those identified as women has played a central role in the process of capitalist wealth creation. According to Silvia Federici, women have been the producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist commodity: labor-power. Federici (2009) stated that “Women's unpaid labor in the home has been the pillar upon which the exploitation of the waged workers, wage slavery, has been built, and [is] the secret of its productivity” (p. 7).

The strict gender binary, established by heteropatriarchal capitalism,⁴ is not simply a fabrication; it is an ideological apparatus whose function is to create a clear material division between the oppressor and oppressed. Those deemed women by society were transformed into second-class citizens during Europe's long transition from feudalism⁵ to capitalism. Throughout this transition, women were economically disenfranchised, and their work was largely restricted to unpaid domestic and reproductive labor, making them dependent on men for their survival (Federici, 2009, pp. 28, 73-75). Cisgender, heterosexual men of all classes benefited from the expansion of the patriarchal domination of women and violently policed perceived deviations from the social-sexual hierarchy. Same-gender relationships and non-binary gender expression threatened their authority by offering alternative ways of living that reduced gender inequality and disrupted the strictly drawn lines created to reinforce asymmetries of power and wealth, further incentivizing heterosexual men's monopoly of domination.

A MATERIALIST DECONSTRUCTION OF THE IDEOLOGICAL BINARY OF GENDER

Members of the LGBTQI+ community, especially transgender and nonbinary people, threaten the heteropatriarchal order because they

4 Capitalism: social, political, and economic system created and controlled by wealthy straight men who benefit from both the exploitation of workers and the oppression of women and sexual minorities.

5 Feudalism: a political-economic system in which the vast majority of land is owned by a small group of aristocratic elites and worked by a large class of economically self-sufficient serfs, who are tied to the land and pay a portion of the profit from their economic surplus to the elite in return for protection in the form of rent (Nicholson, 2018).

transgress, blur, and ultimately destroy the clear-cut, historically constructed gender roles used to maintain oppression and inequality. This has led to the historical marginalization, persecution, and silencing of these groups by heteropatriarchal capitalist societies (Storm & Flores, 2019). Those who are materially and ideologically invested in patriarchal supremacy use violence, discrimination, exile, ex-communication, shame, stigma, and cultural-historical erasure as tools of oppression to maintain the system of inequality from which they benefit (Federici, 2009). The gender nonconforming person threatens the dualistic categories established by the patriarchal socio-economic conditions of industrial capitalism.

During the modern era, nations in the imperial core saw a shift from an economy fueled by industrial production to one driven by technological consumerism, resulting in the emergence of new social forces that have greatly aided the cause of LGBTQI+ liberation. The entrance of women into the U.S. workforce post-World War II and the shift to a service, knowledge, technology, and finance economy altered the material conditions upon which the heteropatriarchal nuclear family was established (Chafetz & Hagan, 1996). Material incentives to maintain the strict binary-gendered divisions of labor gradually diminished as the economy shifted from the manual labor of industrial and agricultural production to the immaterial labor of the neoliberal⁶ economy that arose after World War II.

The heteronormative gender norms of the 20th-century imperialist, capitalist system are becoming irrelevant in the world of virtual hyper-realities (Turkle, 1997; Kendall, 1998). While heteropatriarchal ideology remains an oppressive and exploitative force, emancipatory spaces have emerged, allowing new modes of resistance and means to live outside the dominant ideological structures. New avenues have emerged for people to actualize their fluid, visionary identities in resistance to the binary mode existent in heteropatriarchal ideologies and institutions.

⁶ Neoliberalism: an economic system in which a society's needs are met by capitalist markets and privately owned firms; it emphasizes the privatization of state institutions, the deregulation of capitalist markets, the globalization of production, and government austerity (Harvey, 2005).

The internet has increased the visibility, interconnection, and organizing capacities of the LGBTQI+ community. A new cyber body politic has emerged, a rhizomatic collective that is deconstructing the ideology of binary gender and forging new relationships with gender identity and fluidity in cyberspace.

CYBORGS AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

The cyborg is a metaphor for an emancipatory model that deconstructs socially imposed identities. Relating to oneself in a cyborg-like manner entails an epistemological shift away from previously dictated identity and towards a non-dualistic, boundless, chimeric identity in which once-rigid borders are permeable and the self becomes a bricolage. While previous understandings of identity required static roles, a cyborg is an ever-unfolding dynamic being that contains change, flexibility, contingency, and multiplicity. Cyborgs exist not just outside of the binary of man and woman, but also beyond that of human and machine.

In *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1984), Donna Haraway proposed the cyborg as a collective archetype that can symbolize the construction of our intersectional identities in postmodern society. Haraway defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction,” adding that “social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (Haraway, 1984, p. 1). The cyborg is a subject without an original identity, unity, or natural essence; it transcends existing binary categories (Graham, 1999). Haraway (1984) stated that “The cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense... An origin story in the 'Western,' humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity...The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden;⁷ it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (p. 2).

Cyborgs recognize and embrace the artificiality of identity and as a result are able to reconstruct and manipulate it, creating selves that exist

⁷ The Garden of Eden was the birthplace of humanity in the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), a utopian place where God created Man from dust (Genesis 2:7). In the Bible we come from dust, and we will return to dust (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

outside of the oppressive social structures that seek to define and limit them. Cyborgs invalidate existing systems of oppression by displaying the fluidity, mutability, and multiplicity of identity. Through recognizing the artificiality of gender identity, we have become “excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body” (Haraway, 1984, p. 7). For Haraway, a shift of perspective towards a cyborg-like understanding of identity development “might better enable us to contest for meanings, as well as for other forms of power and pleasure in technologically mediated societies” (Haraway, 1984, p. 5). One of the important facets of cyborg-like identities is that the self can be constructed through engagement with technology, media, and the hyper-reality of virtual space.

Cyborg politics are organized around affinities as opposed to rigid identities, giving the individual far greater agency in the development of the self and new ways of connecting politically with others. As Haraway (1984) writes:

It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective— or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity... Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. (pp. 5-6)

Haraway's affinity politics is superior to identity politics because it fully embraces the multiplicity, partiality, and intersectionality of human identities, whereas identity politics capitulates to the prefabricated, socially imposed identities given to us by systems of oppression and inequality.

CYBORGS AND THE SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

The cyborg archetype proposed by Haraway is an excellent lens through which social workers can explore identity development with

clients in our postmodern, technologically mediated world. Haraway's framework encourages clients to become active agents in the social construction of their own identities. Technology has given us the capacity to deterritorialize our oppressive, socially imposed identities and reconstitute them toward emancipatory and inclusive ends. The internet has expanded our ability to connect with others outside of our local communities and their particular political, economic, and social hierarchies, increasing our capacity to learn new information that can change our perceptions and understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Today, many privately nonbinary or transgender people are a couple of clicks away from content that can inform and affirm their sense of self. In our postmodern world, we have an opportunity to help our clients contest oppressive social constructions and reconstruct their identities in both the virtual and physical realms.

CONCLUSION

Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg can help social workers by giving them a theoretical understanding of how socially imposed identity is a tool of subjugation while also celebrating the fluidity and opportunity inherent beyond those walls. The cyborg is a revolutionary archetype that avows the contradictions at the core of the subject. It can help social workers relate to the alienating contradictions of socially constructed identities such as gender and race while simultaneously championing the political agency of the subject and the liberating potential inherent to the self-directed construction of identity.

The cyborg is a postmodern cyber *Übermensch*⁸ that goes beyond social roles imposed by patriarchy and racism, and embodies the will to self-create and self-define. Cyborgs are engaged in the political struggle of self-determination and self-emancipation. It is integral that social workers recognize that social constructions are not illusions or fantasies but instead are active sites of political contestation. The cyborg myth can encourage us to better help our clients understand and navigate

8 Beyond-Man: a concept in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche which theorizes a subject that creates and lives by their own values outside the repression of reactionary social values (Nietzsche, 1883).

conflict produced by socially constructed gender identities and norms produced by our heteropatriarchal, capitalist society.

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