WS 320-4: Special Topic - Disciplining Sex: Perspectives on sex from biology, psychology and feminist science studies

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Tues: 10:30-2:20

Since Ann Oakley's 1972 distinction between sex-as-nature and gender-as-culture, a central concern of feminist theorizing has been the development of a distinction between sex and gender, with what might arguably be termed a strategic emphasis on the latter term in the pair:

Feminist theory defines sex only as the biology of a person – whether he or she is anatomically male or female. A central task in contemporary feminist theory... is to distinguish conceptually between sex and gender so that expectations of sex [now, more properly, gender] roles can be altered if they are not perceived to be biological. (M. Humm, 1995, The dictionary of feminist theory.)

However, during the same period, from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, theorizing in evolutionary biology and neuropsychology have been more focussed on sex than on gender, in relation to such things as selection and fitness, energy, strategies, and cognitive and affective differences. As a result, the two bodies of knowledge – feminist theorizing on gender, and biopsychological theorizing on sex – seem close to unbridgeable.

In this course, we will explore the usefulness of tools that have been developed within feminist science studies in building such bridges, through discussion of a series of readings on such topics as bioepistemology and situated knowledges, normal science and the pursuit of difference, and gambling for existence.

Required readings:
Other readings will be on reserve at the library.

Course requirements and Grading Structure:
Attendance and participation 5%
Analysis papers (4, 1,000-1,200 words each) 40%
Journal exercises (2, 1,000-1,200 words each) 20%
Midterm examination 25%
Application paper (1,700-2,000) 10%

Prerequisites: 60 credit hours.

The Department of Women's Studies encourages clarity of thought and expression and good writing. Students will be evaluated on these skills in all courses given by the Department.