We welcome this chance to reply to Mary Hawkesworth’s article (in this issue). It is always more agreeable to respond to a critique that is embedded in a complimentary analysis. We will use this opportunity to reflect on our own writings in the context of the substantial gender theorizing that has occurred in the past twenty years but will limit our remarks to some general points and to Hawkesworth’s critique of our work. We will leave it to the other authors to respond to her discussion of their theories.

At the outset, we want to clarify the source of certain terms and concepts that we employed and that those who cite us sometimes confuse. Harold Garfinkel, the sociologist who coined the term ethnomethodology (1967), appropriated Alfred Schutz’s description of the “natural attitude” for studying the commonsense understanding of social actions (1964), including the action of “doing” gender. Garfinkel (not us) introduced the term cultural genitals. We refined and developed these concepts and tried to make Garfinkel accessible to a wider audience. We took the concept of “incorrigible proposition” from ethnomethodologists Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood (1975) (who credit Douglas Gasking).

The essence of Hawkesworth’s critique is that the four theoretical accounts of gender she discusses provide no method for practical improvement in the lived experience of women. The problem, she believes, is that these feminist theories are grounded in a functional framework that “cannot escape the spectre of biological determinism or the ideology of reproduction” (675). In addition, she fears that functionalist narratives “suggest a universal and invariant role for gender” (680) and that such claims “are self-defeating, for they signify the persistence of the natural attitude [of
gender] in [our] discourses” (682). Hawkesworth also alleges that gender theories, including ours, transform gender “from an analytic category into a causal force” and that gender is “accorded an ontological status” as process, force, determinant, or mental category (680).

Hawkesworth is concerned that functional accounts are grounded in biology and reproduction. Even if we accept that human reproduction involves the joining of a sperm cell and an egg cell, and that individuals might produce one or the other or neither, but not both, we can still ask questions. We can ask, (1) In what sense is the reproductive function necessary? and (2) If it is necessary, are there other possible ways to serve that same function besides present gender arrangements? We explicitly say on the last page of the last chapter of our book “that 'sperm carriers' and 'egg carriers' are as much of a construction as 'male' or 'female' (but) we all have to make a decision to take something for granted . . . otherwise it would be impossible to get out of bed in the morning. Our decision has been to stop here; others may wish to go on” (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 169). For example, there could be ten genders, with only two of them serving the reproductive function (a small part of the time). To imagine such an arrangement is not difficult; to have it become more than theoretical is extremely hard. However, that is true of all social and political change.

Theorizing what function gender may perform does not transform gender into a causal force. We clearly say that incorrigible propositions in the natural attitude structure perception, leading us to see two, and only two, genders. We clearly do not say that gender causes the structure of perception (or anything else). What we were attempting to do, in the ethnomethodological tradition, was to describe the interpretive practices that permit us to “see” and “do” gender, not to identify the gender-related causes of any particular set of cultural circumstances. Gender is not a mental category (in an ontological sense). Mental schemas (categories) result in seeing gender as an ontological category.

Functional analyses, especially if they are not grounded in obligatory reproduction, do not have to be “blinding” and do not have to imply a view of gender that is invariant or universal. We certainly do not claim that gender is invariant or universal, and we provide ample evidence from other cultures and from children in our own culture that there are many possible ways to experience gender. The gendered world that is produced might just as easily not be produced. Ethnomethodologists claim that while “critics are arguing about the nature of the best theory of the social world . . . ethnomethodology is concerned with the possibility that the social world can be theorized at all” (Sharrock and Anderson 1986, 105).

Hawkesworth herself has a (partial) functional interest. She feels we
should have addressed why particular cultures “cause” (her word) dichotomous perceptions of gender. Theorizing why particular cultures have dichotomous gender categories is an interesting and important academic pursuit, but change is possible without a consideration of “why.” Consider the greater efficacy of behavioral psychotherapies for some problems compared to psychoanalytic therapies. Psychoanalytic theories provide richer accounts of life-as-experienced than do behavioral theories, but if the priority is concrete change, then sometimes a blueprint for such change can come from a good description of “what is” and “how it is sustained,” without an answer to the question “why.”

Hawkesworth critiques our notion of cognitive schema as seriously undertheorized. To some extent, we agree with her. We do not say what kind of mental category gender is, and the map we provide is rather sketchy. However, it was never our intention to uncover a “gender attribution schema,” which, when followed precisely, would allow anyone to determine or display a particular gender. Although we write about how gender attributions are made, it would not be correct to say, as Hawkesworth does, that it was our goal. Our goal was to show that gender attribution is a constructive process, by describing possible ways it could be done.

Whatever type of cognitive schema gender may be understood as in a specific culture (and we leave it to others to theorize about that), we do not agree with Hawkesworth’s complaint that “it is not at all clear that one can alter gender construed as cognitive schema” (679). In a related point, she worries that a focus on the “internal” is not sufficiently inclusive and that the transformative strategies implied by our analysis (and the others’) are “utopian or impracticable” (681). By splitting the world this way, she is naturalizing “internal” and “external,” treating them as concrete locations just as others have naturalized and concretized gender. The first step in transformation comes from understanding that there are other possibilities, whether one divides them into “internal” (the possibility of a different incorrigible proposition) or “external” (the possibility of increased access to effective contraceptives for women).

Hawkesworth is correct in stating that we claim that in order to transform gender it is necessary to transform incorrigible propositions about gender. She says it will not work, that “reason is no match against faith” (679). We strongly disagree. As teachers we have seen the potency of “reason” time and again in the classroom, if reason can be read to mean understanding that it could be otherwise. Kate Bornstein calls gender a cult (1994), but even in cults there are crises of faith. The success of theoretically based “transformative strategies” in creating these crises, even when they are only implied, as in our work, is not trivial. We note here that
Hawkesworth discusses the four theories in reverse historical order and does not deal with the influence (direct or indirect) of each theory on the next, although she claims that history cannot be ignored.

When we wrote our book it was, in part, to demonstrate the problems with traditional social science work on gender and sex. The social construction of gender was a radical idea. A nonbiologically based conception of the body was not part of “women studies” discourse. Contrary to what Hawkesworth writes, the field of sex differences (not gender) “illuminat[ed] the social construction of masculinity and femininity and naively took the sexed body as given” (651–52). Once the body became problematized as part of the analysis, “gender studies” was born. Gender needed to be made problematic; it needed to be seen — as an appearance. Only then could theorists concern themselves with where it comes from and what functions it serves. In the almost twenty years since our book was published, things have changed to the extent that our work-as-critique now serves as theoretical ground for others to critique. It could have been otherwise.¹

We agree with Hawkesworth that practical change is of paramount importance. But her questions about gender theory could as easily be applied to academic discourse in general. What is the use of theorizing about anything? How will this redistribute power? The short answer is, it may not, and gender theory might not be the place to look for transformative strategies about women’s lives. However, we know that describing the natural attitude illuminates other possible realities. Social constructionists Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar wrote that “the set of statements considered too costly to modify constitute what is referred to as reality” (1979, 243). When one comes to deeply acknowledge that truth, one is forced to confront one’s own participation in this possible world and can begin to accept that change is not against what is called “nature.”

References


¹ The initial reaction to our book was minimal. Few people in the mid-1970s were likely to imagine that, in the 1990s, there would emerge a “transgender movement” due, in part, to a compelling argument of socially constructed gender categories. The many transsexuals who wrote thanking us for articulating a version of gender that they could live with testifies to the power of good theorizing.
Comment on Hawkesworth’s “Confounding Gender”

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I am grateful to Mary Hawkesworth (“Confounding Gender,” in this issue) and Signs for this chance to pursue the analysis of gender at what I take to be the very heart of the thought, that is, the confrontation between two families of arguments and motives: on the one hand, a critique of gender keyed to a rejection of the descriptive and normative validity of gender identifications, and, on the other hand, an appreciation of “positive gender thinking” in its most cogent forms. To conceive gender adequately, one must stage this confrontation in one’s mind and not terminate it—neither with “Now we’re clear of gender’s claims!” nor with “That’s a gender program we can live with!” The matter asks to be put this way, I think, not only because we stand at a certain crossroads of discussion but also because any idea of a physically conditioned humankind constitutes itself a crossroads of concrete determinacy and freedom.

I would like first to offer cautions against a number of oversimplifications that often hamper gender criticism, Hawkesworth’s included, and then delve into issues raised by the claim that my argument in Gender Thinking (Smith 1992) is phenomenological.

1. For the ordinary forms of gender thinking that are most familiar to us, it is axiomatic that humans are virtually always either “women” or “men,” that sexual reproduction mandates some sort of partnership (hence “complementarity”) between these “sexes,” and that the “sexes” have important “gender” concomitants in human character (although the instancing of gender is partly independent of the instancing of sex). Such is the dogmatic platform for a gender order. But these gender axioms set up a range of questions—compelling questions about embodiment and