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# Commentary on Forde

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**Author:** [Jerome Bickenbach](#)

**In Response To:** Carmel Forde's [Gender and rhetoric in category construction](#)

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In the early 1960's, sociologist Erving Goffman, writing on the logic of socially-perceived 'deviant' statuses, argued that those who seek a political solution to their stigmatized social position may find themselves confronting two equally self-defeating options: demands for integration seem to require the 'deviant' to draw attention to the stigmatizing difference, while attempts at segregation seem to legitimate, and reinforce, the labels that created the deviant status in the first place. More recently feminist legal scholar Martha Minow has argued that this 'dilemma of difference' has both a philosophical and a political-strategic dimension as it is concerned with the project of dealing with political inequality: equality-seekers will argue that most of our social judgments about the reality of human difference are grounded on spurious or contentious assumptions; yet to identify the recipients of programmes such as affirmative action, the difference has to be treated as real and categorical.

Forde in her interesting paper reminds us that this philosophical and political dilemma, which she identifies as a 'paradox' of feminism ("Women' do not want to be labeled, identified in any universal fashion, essentialized – and at the same time – they mount libertatory movements, 'feminism'.") is also a problem of definition, categorization and, ultimately, metaphysical realism and essentialism.

Must women acquire an identity only by means of a categorization of difference that is oppressive? As Forde argues, the identity is oppressive because it has been imposed by and from the perspective of men who characterized it negatively – as 'not male'. The identity essentializes a socially-constructed difference. Moreover, if Frye is correct, the man/woman distinction will remain an invidious and essentialist dichotomy resistant to deconstruction until a positive category of women is historically constructed. But, unfortunately, the historical process cannot occur without an identification, by category, of women as oppressed. Paradoxically, then, the oppressive identity must be embraced in order, conceptually and politically, to move beyond it.

Forde's solution invites us to view the paradox as 'rhetorical' in the 'closing down' sense – that is rhetoric in its repressive manifestation. The paradox presumes a conception of category that is essentialistic and 'property-based' – by which Forde means a category built out of essentialistic features of what is categorized. The alternative is a relational, and especially social-relational conception of category. The paradox dissolves if we understand the category of 'woman' as socially-created, and possessing a dynamism generated from shifting social relationships and affinities, including relationships and affinities that are chosen.

How does this dissolve the paradox? Forde writes that "we are not trying to

name ourselves, and refrain from being named, or essentialize ourselves and at the same time deny essentialism – it is not a form of self-deception, or invalidation." This is the trap of a property-oriented logic, reflecting essentialism assumptions about members in a class. Instead, she writes "If we employ a logic wherein categories are principally comprised of relations, the social categories are relationships, self-determining among persons, and are logically positive..., are non-essentializing, and yet also explanatory."

It is informative to compare this solution with Minow's. Minow is concerned with another form of human difference that has been labelled and categorized in essentialist terms – namely mental and physical disability. Advocates for persons with disabilities have had to confront the dilemma of, on the one hand, rejecting the label of 'disabled' as socially-constructed, and plainly negative (the 'not-normal'), while at the same time requiring that label to build a liberation movement. The dilemma has another dimension in the case of disability, in that there are aspects of the phenomenon of disability that are indeed properties of people and not socially constructed at all, and these real impairments create genuine needs that a civilized society should respond to. Minow's solution is to advocate for a multi-dimensional conception of disability, arguing that the category is both a matter of properties of people and relationships between people. What one is, as a person with a disability, is therefore both a collection of physical or mental traits (that can, without much harm, be viewed as intrinsic or even essentialistic) as well as relationships that, most certainly, need to be self-determined.

Minow's resolution of the dilemma of difference for persons with disabilities is closely aligned with Forde's resolution of the paradox of feminism. There are differences too that could be explored. But what I find fascinating and provocative about Forde's paper is what she has left largely unsaid about the prospects for logic, that is, reasoning with and about categories.

Andrea Nye has expressed one feminist rejection of logic as the view that logic "is the creation of defensive male subjects who have lost touch with their lived experience and define all being in rigid oppositional categories modelled on a primal contrast between male and female," or again that "logic celebrates the unity of a pathological masculine self-identity that cannot listen and recognizes only negation and not difference." If we move towards relation-based categories – or in Minow's case, multi-dimensional, or multi-perspectival categories – how will our conception of reasoning with categories change?

Forde appears to distance herself from the view that Nye is describing and instead hints that there may be a "logic of categories that are principally comprised of relations". Needless to say, more needs to be said about such a logic of categories. And I, for one, am eager to hear more being said.

## References

Goffman, Erving *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1963)

Minow, Martha *Making all the Difference* (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1990)

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