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The Origin of “Gender Identity”

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In his 2022 documentary *What is a Woman?*,” the conservative commentator Matt Walsh says that the New Zealand sexologist John Money “coined the terms ‘gender identity’ and ‘gender roles’” (Folk, 2022, 53:05). That is half-right. Money did coin “gender role,” in a 1955 paper in the *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital*:

The term gender role is used to signify all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively. It includes, but is not restricted to sexuality in the sense of eroticism. (Money, 1955, p. 254; see also Money et al., 1955, p. 302, fn. *).

As soon became apparent, Money’s capacious definition of “gender role,” which includes sexual orientation, collapses things that should be kept distinct (Zucker & Bradley, 1995, pp. 2-3).

Money was peeved when the *Oxford English Dictionary* once credited the British writer Alex Comfort (author of *The Joy of Sex*): “Alex Comfort borrowed the term from the works of John Money who coined and defined it” (Money, 1995, p. 19); quoted by Goldie (2014, p. 137). However, Money did not coin “gender identity” and never claimed he did.

The misattribution of “gender identity” to Money is quite common. In his bestseller *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*, Colapinto (2000) writes: “Fifteen years after joining Johns Hopkins, [Money] was already widely credited as the man who coined the term *gender identity* to describe a person’s inner sense of himself or herself as male or female” (p. 25). Other examples include the entry “John Money” in *The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (Swarbrick, 2014) and Money’s obituary in the *New York Times* (Carey, 2006).

As Haig (2004, p. 93) notes, “gender identity” first appeared in 1963, in papers given by the UCLA psychiatrists Robert Stoller and Ralph Greenson at the 23rd International Psycho-Analytic Congress in Stockholm:

Gender identity is the sense of knowing to which sex one belongs, that is, the awareness ‘I am a male’ or ‘I am a female’... The term ‘gender identity’ was arrived at in joint discussions of a research project on this and allied problems by Greenson and Stoller during which many of the formulations in this paper were worked out. (Stoller, 1964a, p. 220)

Gender identity refers to one’s sense of being a member of a particular sex; it is expressed clinically in the awareness of being a man or a male in distinction to being a woman or a female. (The term was formulated in collaboration with Stoller, whose presentation deals with another aspect of this subject.) (Greenson, 1964, p. 217)

Although Stoller is often credited (e.g. “Gender identity,” 2023), Greenson is not; these quotations make it clear that “gender identity” was a joint endeavor.

In Stoller’s book, *Sex and Gender*, “gender identity” as earlier defined became *core* gender identity, a phrase he had used in his 1964 paper (p. 223):

Almost everyone starts to develop from birth on a fundamental sense of belonging to one sex. The child’s awareness—“I am a male” or “I am a female”—is visible to an observer in the first year or so of life. This aspect of one’s overall sense of identity can be conceptualized as a *core gender identity*... (Stoller, 1968, pp. 29-30; see also Stoller, 1964b, p. 453)

Given that Stoller’s book famously drew a distinction between *sex* (male and female) and *gender* (“the amount of masculinity or femininity found in a person,” p. 9), it is ironic that “gender” in Stoller and Greenson’s “gender identity” could have been replaced by “sex.” According to Archer and Lloyd, “It would be more appropriate to call it sex identity” (2002, p. 67, fn. 1).

“Gender identity” anticipates the trend in scientific writing of using “gender” as a synonym of “sex” (Haig, 2004).

In a 1973 paper Money discussed “gender role,” “gender identity,” and “core gender identity,” writing “I shall tell what I know of the history of these terms” (1973, p. 397). With respect to “gender role,” Money emphasized that he was “certainly the first person to define it in print” (p. 397). He reproduced his own definition of “gender identity,” without saying how the phrase originated:

The sameness, unity, and persistence of one’s individuality as male or female (or ambivalent), in greater or lesser degree, especially as experienced in self-awareness and behavior. Gender identity is the private experience of gender role, and gender role is the public expression of gender identity. (pp. 398-9)

To express the interdependence of gender identity and role, Money subsequently used the unlovely acronym “G-I/R” (1985a, p. 74). Notice that Money’s definition of “gender identity” is not the simple and straightforward one given by Stoller and Greenson. At least Money credited Stoller with “core gender identity” (1973, p. 399), although without giving a citation.

Twelve years later, Money attributed “gender identity” to another UCLA academic, the psychologist Evelyn Hooker:

Gender identity, to the best of my knowledge, was first proposed by Evelyn Hooker. I recall its appearance in an exchange of correspondence I had with her in reference to her homosexual studies. (Money, 1985b, p. 282; see also Money, 1994, p. 166)

The original clear definition of “gender identity” as “the sense of knowing to which sex one belongs” has now been lost. WPATH’s latest *Standards of Care*, for example, defines “gender

identity” as “a person’s deeply felt, internal, intrinsic sense of their own gender” (Coleman et al., 2022, p. S252). If “gender” here means “sex” then this would approximate Stoller and Greenson’s definition, but it doesn’t. WPATH’s glossary entry for “gender” gives three options, none of which is sex: “gender may reference gender identity, gender expression, and/or social gender role, including understandings and expectations culturally tied to people who were assigned male or female at birth” (p. S252). WPATH does not say which of these is the operative meaning in the definition of “gender identity.” Clearly “gender” in WPATH’s definition cannot mean “gender identity,” because then the definition would be circular. It also seems unlikely that people have a “deeply felt, internal, intrinsic sense of their own” gender expression or social gender role, especially since these are heavily culturally inflected.

The previous *Standards of Care* is perhaps a little better: gender identity is “a person’s intrinsic sense of being male (a boy or a man), female (a girl or woman), or an alternative gender” (WPATH, 2012, p. 96). “Gender” is not defined; instead WPATH gives some examples of “alternative genders,” including “transgender” and “eunuch.” Unfortunately, the glossary entry for “transgender” uses both “gender” and “gender identity,” introducing a circularity twice over. (Earlier versions of the *Standards of Care* did not attempt a definition of “gender identity”; see also Matte et al., 2009, 49.)

“Gender identity” has gone from being well-defined to being ill-defined. A topic well-worth investigation, but one that takes us far beyond etymology.

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