Born This Way: Thinking Sociologically about Essentialism

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Abstract

"Born this way" has become a rallying cry for many LGBTQ people, and a succinct slogan for the political logic behind mainstream US-based gay and lesbian equality activism in the late 2000s. This short phrase—"born this way"—invokes the idea that sexual orientation is an innate, essential part of a person that cannot be changed or acted upon by others. Following this logic, homosexual people and their relationships must be incorporated as a valid part of the social fabric and be afforded the same state-based rights and benefits as heterosexual people and their relationships. Such an understanding of homosexuality as an innate essence stands in contrast to much sociological theorizing that situates sexual identity categories—as with all identity categories—as social constructs that emerge and shift across particular political, historical, and geographical contexts. In this essay, I argue that sociologists need to find ways to think empirically about this essentialist logic. I pose the question, what cultural work does "born this way" logic perform in everyday interactions around social difference, and how does it shape popular, academic, and legislative ideas about such differences? I offer a comparative analysis of the use of essentialism as an explanatory framework for social difference in four cases—race, gender, sexual orientation, and weight. I unpack the ways in which invoking "born this way" as a frame or strategy can be used *both* to discount the possibility of social interventions into inequality and to make a claim that inequality can only be alleviated through social interventions. Within this analysis, I further explore how social constructionist critiques of biological determinism are taken up or dismissed. I end with ideas for an empirical agenda that highlights the variations in social reactions to different identity-based claims of biological essentialism and illustrates the importance of using an intersectional lens when examining the social outcomes of such logic.

In 2011, the Lady Gaga song "Born this way" debuted on the airwaves. An anthem advocating freedom of expression, the song soared to number one on the Billboard charts and went on to be one of the best-selling US singles of all time. Beyond its place in musical history, "Born this way" has become a rallying cry for many LGBTQ people, and a succinct slogan for the political logic behind mainstream US-based gay and lesbian equality activism in

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the late 2000s (Walters, 2014; Weber, 2013).[1] This short phrase—“born this way”—invokes the idea that sexual orientation is an innate, essential part of a person that cannot be changed or acted upon by others. Following this logic, homosexual people and their relationships must be incorporated as a valid part of the social fabric and be afforded the same state-based rights and benefits as heterosexual people and their relationships. This declaration of the imperviousness of sexual orientation to external forces accompanies the demands of gay and lesbian organizations for civil rights, such as federal and state protections for same-sex marriage and employment protections. Highlighting the impact of this particular frame, heterosexual people who view homosexuality as immutable are more likely to consider same-sex couples to have families such as their own when compared to those who attribute homosexuality to mental illness or parental upbringing (Powell *et al*., 2010).

Such an understanding of homosexuality as an innate essence stands in contrast to much sociological theorizing that situates sexual identity categories—as with all identity categories—as social constructs that emerge and shift across particular political, historical, and geographical contexts. The idea that identities are contingent and mutable more closely aligns sociological thinking with some previous incarnations of gay and lesbian politics, such as gay liberation in the 1970s (Epstein, 1987) and queer politics in the 1990s (Gamson, 1995). The primacy of “born this way” as a mainstream political strategy in the 2000s reawakens the long-standing debate between social constructionism and essentialism (for an overview, see Epstein, 1987). At the heart of these debates is the question of the truth of identity—is it an ahistorical essence located in the body or mind? Alternatively, is it a mutable construct produced by external societal and historical forces? While such questions can appear to be mere quibbles of epistemological stance, the degree of cultural salience of the divergent answers offered by scientists, scholars, and laypeople shape societal ideas about normalcy, equality, and citizenship, and the legal and interactional treatment of marginalized groups.

In this essay, I argue that sociologists need to think empirically about essentialism. To this end, I pose the question, what cultural work does “born this way” logic perform in everyday interactions around social difference, and how does it shape popular, academic, and legislative ideas about such differences? I offer a comparative analysis of the use of essentialism as an explanatory framework for social difference in four cases—race, gender, sexual orientation, and weight. I unpack the ways in which invoking “born this way”

1. When writing about sexual orientation activism, it is typical to use the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) acronym. However, as most empirical data on the cultural work of the “born this way” logic focuses on homosexuality specifically, I will focus my discussion in this essay soley on gay and lesbian politics.

as a frame or strategy can be used *both* to discount the possibility of social interventions into inequality and to make a claim that inequality can only be alleviated through social interventions. Within this analysis, I further explore how social constructionist critiques of biological determinism are taken up or dismissed. I end with ideas for an empirical agenda that highlights the variations in social reactions to different identity-based claims of biological essentialism, and illustrates the importance of using an intersectional lens when examining the social outcomes of such logic.

BORN THIS WAY: ESSENTIALISM AS A STRATEGY TO DISCOUNT INEQUALITY

The invocation of essentialism has a long history of use in people's attempts to account for divergent outcomes and opportunities between certain social groups. Such an argument positions group-based differentials in life chances as the result of innate differences located in bodies and minds rather than as the result of structural discrimination. Typically it is people in positions of power who make such a case in the face of a minority group's demand for more evenly distributed resources and access to opportunities. The essentialist logic of "born this way" in such a case adds a sense of inevitability to hierarchies between social groups, making it not an issue of inequality but rather one of natural abilities. This inevitability argument often is accompanied by an appeal to history and tradition—the groups in power have always been in power, suggesting such an organization of the world is the natural order of things. This justification can carry a sense of paternalism—groups deemed biologically inferior are held in lower social positions for their own good, as they would not be able to govern themselves. This position dismisses calls for policy and legal changes aimed at generating greater equality of opportunity and flattening social hierarchies, as what is natural cannot be changed.

This use of "born this way" logic to discount claims of group-based discrimination is evident in struggles for racial and gender equality. Such debates have a long history, so here I will focus only on how ideas about innate differences in intelligence have been used against women and people of color. Looking first at race, ideas about the mental inferiority of people of color *vis-à-vis* white people formed the basis for imperialist and colonialist occupation of parts of Asia, the Americas, and Africa, as well as a justification of the enslavement of particular racial groups by white Europeans (Drescher, 1990). Science of the times reinforced such beliefs by suggesting, for example, that techniques such as the now-discredited phrenology revealed innate cognate and temperate deficiencies among nonwhite populations (Prinz, 2013). Such scientific racism, propagated by white, elite men, formed the basis for

the eugenics movement, in which groups deemed to be likely to reproduce children of low intelligence and criminal tendencies (read: poor people and people of color) were involuntarily sterilized (Roberts, 2011). Similar beliefs about mental inferiority were used by white opponents to school desegregation on the basis that such a move would lower the standards of white schools (Jackson, 2005). Anti-miscegenation laws, struck down at the federal level only in 1967, further highlight this belief, as "racial mixing" was considered by many white people in positions of power to be tantamount to genocide of the white race (Gross, 2009).

While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made discrimination on the basis of race illegal, race continues to shape outcomes such as educational attainment (Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2006), employment and housing opportunities (Pager, 2007), and incarceration rates (Wacquant, 2007). Sociologists offer a structural argument, attributing continued racial disparities to the impact of slavery and forced segregation (Muller, 2012), the decline of industrial occupations (Wilson, 1996), and the impact of racial stereotypes on admission policies in educational institutions and workplace hiring practices (Pager, 2007). Policy-based interventions, such as anti-discrimination laws and Affirmative Action derive, in part, from such a perspective. Opposition to such social interventions invokes, at times, old ideas about racial differences in intelligence—a perspective that frames such policies as unfair to white workers (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Arguments that racial equality policies are futile attempts to overcome innate differences find, at times, limited academic support, such as in the contentiously received book, *The Bell Curve* (1994). The authors, psychologist Richard Hernstein and political scientist Charles Murray purported that racial differences in IQ accounted for at least some of the disparity between black and white life chances. While widely discredited within the scientific community (Fischer *et al.*, 1996), such beliefs can align with and support many people's folk theories about race, meritocracy and privilege.

Ideas about natural inferiority also emerge in the historical opposition to women's rights. As women's movements made up predominantly of white, elite women emerged in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, men in positions of power questioned whether women had the intellectual capacity to do activities historically reserved for men (Spelman, 1988). White, upper-class women were deemed by men to be naturally too delicate of constitution and mind to succeed in institutes of higher education or in the working world of men (Rhode, 1990; Smith-Rosenberg, 1986). Psychologists of the Victorian Era diagnosed hordes of educated women with hysteria, a condition that required bed rest and complete cessation of mental stimulation (Smith-Rosenberg 1986), a treatment famously recounted in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story,

"The Yellow Wallpaper," about a young mother slowly driven insane by her prescribed "bed cure." Racial beliefs intersected with beliefs about women's capacities, as white men considered black women to be physically stronger than white women, and thus made for hard labor and toil—a justification for enslaving the "gentler" sex (hooks, 1981). Women deemed "feebleminded," which typically meant impoverished single mothers, poor women of color, or women with criminal records, faced forcible sterilization in the early twentieth century (Ladd-Taylor, 1997).

Cultural beliefs about intellectual abilities and capacities continue to shape discussions about male/female differences in workplace attainment and the gender distribution of particular careers. In 2005, the then Harvard president Lawrence Summers sparked a controversy similar to that surrounding *The Bell Curve* when he suggested in a keynote speech that innate differences in mathematical abilities could account for the underrepresentation of women faculty in the areas of science, technology, mathematics, and engineering (STEM).[2] Social scientists challenge this view with structural explanations, such as organizational cultures that assume that scientists are not the primary childcare providers in their families (more likely to be a reality for men) (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013) and conscious and unconscious bias against women (Valian, 1998). Media reportage of neuroscience studies, in contrast, keeps ideas about innate distinctions in the "wiring" of men and women's brains into popular discussion (Fine, 2005; Prinz, 2013). Though unequivocal evidence of such differences in brains, and, by proxy, in mathematical and technological abilities, has not been proven (Jordan-Young, 2010), the idea that male and female brains are simply different provides an uncomplicated and seemingly scientific account for the scarcity of women in STEM fields. As with discussions of race, this logic takes support from the historical evidence that men have always dominated these fields, making attempts at policy and social change seem to be politically motivated and ineffectual interventions into the natural order.

BORN THIS WAY: ESSENTIALISM CHALLENGES INEQUALITY

Essentialist logic also can be used as a justification for the awarding of civil rights and moral dignity to a particular identity or bodily characteristic widely deemed by a society to be "discredited" (Goffman, 1963) or deviant. In this case, a claim of "born this way" is made by a marginalized group fighting against current structures of power they feel are oppressive and

2. Charles Murray, one of the authors of *The Bell Curve*, took up for Summers. In a short piece in *Commentary* entitled, "The Inequality Taboo" (2005), he decried what he viewed as "Orwellian disinformation about innate group differences," and complained that Summers, like himself, was considered a "crank" for speaking simple scientific truths.

discriminatory to them, such as federal or state laws, workplace policies, media representations, and cultural stereotypes. Positioning their identity as fixed and unchangeable, such marginalized groups provide an explanation for their existence to a world they see as pushing for their transformation or eradication. As this logic removes personal agency—one is not choosing to be different from a norm —any societal reprobation aimed at these groups becomes immoral and prejudicial. Such a position is generally accompanied by a demand for change in existing societal structures, laws, and social attitudes. Social attitudes, policies, and laws must change, in other words, because the marginalized group in question cannot.

Political activism around weight and sexual orientation provide two examples of such a usage of essentialism. The 2000s have been marked by repeated media warnings and government reports about an "obesity epidemic" in the United States (Saguy, 2013). While being overweight was once considered a sign of wealth and health (though mainly for men) (Gilman, 2004), the accepted norm has moved toward valorizing thinner and thinner bodies as desirable and healthy (Saguy, 2013). In light of this cultural ideal, obese people face discrimination in the workplace (Kirkland, 2008), as well as stigmatizing and marginalizing experiences in face-to-face interactions (Gimlin, 2002). Such discrimination comes from the dominant framing of fat as a sign of personal and moral failure (Kwan & Graves, 2013). Highlighting this association between thinness and moral worth, while William Taft weighed over 300 pounds during his presidency at the turn of the twentieth century, political correspondents a century later suggest that New Jersey governor Chris Christie would never be a serious presidential candidate for the Republican party unless he lost weight. His subsequent decision to undergo weight loss surgery is viewed by some commentators as a stark illustration of the lived impact of fat stigma in the United States (Zelizer, 2013).

Fat activism operates as a counter voice in the war against obesity and the obese.[3] Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) emerged in the 1970s, drawing on the civil rights models for gender, racial, and sexual equality of the times. Fat activists encourage people to consider their overall health rather than just their Body Mass Index (BMI)—the recognized standard that divides the normal and the obese in medical science (Saguy, 2013). Promoting slogans such as "healthy at any size," they challenge the assumption that fat equals unhealthy. Essentialist logic underlies these claims, as activists suggest that much of a person's weight is inherited (Kwan & Graves, 2013). While people can change their

3. Fat activists purposefully use the word "fat," rather than the more clinical term "obese" or the more euphemistic term "heavy," to challenge what they see as an unhealthy cultural obsession with thin bodies (Kwan & Graves, 2013).

bodies through restrictive diets, fat activists argue that such transformations are short-lived and torturous interventions into the "set point" for each person's natural and unique metabolism and weight (Kwan & Graves, 2013). To end the unfair stigmatization and discrimination against fat people, activists focus on changing attitudes about weight, reshaping ideas of what bodies are normal and desirable, and advocating for height and weight to be added to federal protection statutes (Kirkland, 2008; Kwan & Graves, 2013).

The emergence of activism around homosexuality has a similar history of the strategic use of essentialism. As the "homosexual" developed as a category of person rather than a behavior in which anyone could engage (Foucault, 1978), homosexual men and women were labeled by psychiatrists as suffering from a mental illness. The cultural stigma around homosexuality barred known and suspected homosexual people from government work, and opened them up to police harassment and arrest (Minton, 2002). Early homosexual activist groups fought such stigma by invoking homosexuality to be a deep, internal drive that, while different from heterosexuality, should be considered functional and normal (Epstein, 1987). The emergence of a more radical gay liberation movement in the 1970s challenged such a view by positioning sexual identities as fluid and constructed, a challenge to normativity that would emerge in a different form in the 1990s in queer activism (Gamson, 1995). The mixture of radical and normative challenges to the social stigmatization of homosexuality were effective in some ways, as "homosexual" as a diagnosis was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in 1972 (Kirk & Kutchins, 1992). Yet, the subsequent emergence of AIDS in the 1980s, and the labeling of it as a "gay disease," worked against the success of the 1970s gay activist movement (Gamson, 2006). Religious groups viewed AIDS as a sign from God that homosexuality was immoral, and "ex-gay" therapies purporting to cure homosexuality became more visible (Gerber, 2011). In the face of stereotypes of gay people as disease carriers and sinners, ideas of sexual orientation as fluid and contingent were not as politically effective as the concept of sexual orientation as an innate essence (Weber, 2013). Queer political slogans such as the Lesbian Avengers' "We recruit," a play on the religious fear that homosexuality was contagious, gradually gave way to claims of "born this way" (Walters, 2014).

While queer activism flourished in the 1990s, so did scientific studies into sexual orientation that looked for gay brains and the role of prenatal hormones on sexual identity development (Birke, 2002). Though, as with the scientific search for innate gender differences, no conclusive evidence has been identified, the cultural idea that gay people are "born that way" is pervasive in the late 2000s. Such an idea does a great deal of cultural work in the push for gay and lesbian equality by locating a person's sexual orientation

as fixed, whether or not she is heterosexual or homosexual. For some people, sexual orientation derives from biological, neurobiological, hormonal, or genetic sources (of the body) and, for other people, it comes from the hand of God or a higher power (of the spirit). "Born this way," then, provides a counterpoint to both moral and religious opposition to homosexuality. The inability to be changed from one's innate essence further short-circuits the pressures toward heteronormative conformity that underlie "ex-gay" therapies (Gerber, 2011).[4] Just as a straight person could never choose to be gay, a gay person could never make himself straight. As no personal agency is involved—one did not choose to be gay—the stigmatization of homosexuals becomes an act of prejudice rather than a valid moral stance.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT ESSENTIALISM

As this comparative study of essentialism makes evident, "born this way" logic can do very different cultural work depending on the historical and political context in which it is being used, and whether or not a group labels their identity as biologically fixed or has their identity labeled as such by others. In the history of the struggle for racial and gender equality, biological essentialism is offered as a justification for a particular distribution of resources and opportunities across social groups as inevitable rather than unequal. In such cases, people in positions of social power—typically white, upper-class men—oppose demands for equality by transforming unequal outcomes into the result of innate differences in intelligence and cognitive abilities. The history of the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement show how women and people of color have challenged this label of biological inferiority. Sociological research has been effective in making such challenges, as well, by critiquing the science upon which they are based (Epstein, 2007; Fisher, 2011; Jordan-Young, 2010; Roberts, 2011; Zuberi, 2003). In addition, a social constructionist perspective can illuminate the historical, institutional, and interactional processes that reproduce and maintain the ideologies that limit the life chances of women and people of color (Alexander, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Schilt, 2010; Wingfield, 2012). Thus, when "born this way" is used to discount inequality, a sociological focus on social structures and historical change can provide counter evidence that often aligns with the strategies of social justice activism.

The examples of activism around weight and sexual orientation highlight a second use of essentialist logic—a political strategy for challenging identity-based inequality and discrimination. In this case, marginalized groups invoke the idea that they were "born this way" to speak out against

4. The American Psychiatric Association officially renounced such therapies in the late 2000s. http://www.apa.org/about/policy/sexual-orientation.aspx.

the societal forces they view as invested in pathologizing their existence. When activists claim to be born fat or gay, they are rejecting social interventions, such as dieting and ex-gay therapy, designed to push people toward a valued social norm (thin/straight). As they cannot change themselves, they cannot be labeled wrong or deviant. In these activist cases, scientific studies that search for genetic or hormonal etiologies of obesity and homosexuality can be viewed as allies, as can studies that empirically document the impacts of stigma. Sociological critiques of the scientific investment in the search for the innate etiologies of difference, coupled with a focus on the structural and interactional processes that shape all identity categories (including fat and gay), can seem less useful, however, as emphasizing change over time may challenge a person's understandings of her identity as a core part of her essence. In other words, people do not necessarily feel like their identities are socially constructed and historically contingent.

The cultural impact of essentialism as a political tactic aimed at fighting against or pushing for social change is historically and contextually contingent. The Civil Rights act of 1964, for example, represented a governmental rejection of biological determinism in the realm of race—a rejection that derived from the political climate of the 1960s America (Kirkland, 2008). In the 2000s, in contrast, ideas about innateness appear to carry particular salience as explanatory frameworks for social difference and societal ills. Books about the potential genetic and neuropsychological origins of human behavior abound (Baron-Cohen, 2011; Churchland, 2011; Raine, 2013), as do criticisms of such works (Jordan-Young, 2010). Yet, the emphasis on "scientism" in the United States—the idea that science has the best and most valid answers to our social questions (Farber, 2011)—can insulate biology explanations from the realm of debate. In other words, ideas about innate differences seem commonsense—what everyone knows (whether they care to accept it or not) without the need for concrete evidence. This persistence of scientific and folk theories of innate difference despite over a century's worth of theoretical and empirical counter evidence in the social sciences suggests a need for more sociological attention to the cultural work that such beliefs do in people's everyday lives (Schilt, 2010).

In conclusion, I offer three ideas about how social constructionists might think about both the appeal and cultural work of essentialism. First, as has been argued (Epstein, 1987), we need more empirical evidence on people's understandings of what they might conceive of as their "core selves." Sociologists typically view such ideas as strategic frames, dismiss them as a form of false consciousness, or relegate such studies to the realm of psychologists (Epstein, 1987; Meadow & Schilt, 2014). To look at this question empirically is not to cede ideas of social construction. Rather, it is to consider what cultural work a "born this way" belief does interactionally and personally. Such

studies would need to consider alternative frames to biological essentialism around particular identities. If not "born this way," in other words, then what? Taking the example of homosexuality, there are people publicly challenging the idea of sexual identity as fixed (Bello, 2013; Bruni, 2012). Queer activist groups such as Gay Shame further disrupt essentialist narratives, labeling them a form of homonormativity (Weiss, 2008). A useful question to consider is where these counter narratives occur, what groups of people make them, whether they work alongside or against the current hegemonic identity narrative, and how they are taken up in positive or negative ways in public discourse.

Second, we should continue to illustrate how the intersectionality of identities such as race and gender creates divergent life experiences for people who seemingly share an essential identity, such as "gay" or "fat." For example, while gay men and lesbian women might both invoke a sense of being born gay, societal attitudes toward them continue to differ. Men face greater social sanctions for engaging in same-sex behavior, for example (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Similarly, fat women receive greater societal disapproval than fat men in many cases (Gilman, 2004). These variations in social reactions transcend questions of etiology, and show the fissures of essentialist logic in people's lived experiences. Finally, we should highlight the variation in how essentialist logic is received as a political tactic. In other words, why, in the late 2000s, does this logic appear to be more successful in decreasing stigma in the case of gay activism than it has been in the case of fat activism? Why does the concept of race as a social construct carry more cultural salience than the same idea applied to gender? Such comparative studies could demonstrate how the "born this way" logic—the same invocation of biological or psychological differences—can be harnessed by very different groups of people with divergent social outcomes. I consider this essay the first step toward such a comparative analysis.

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Kristen Schilt research interests center on sociology of gender and sexualities, the sociology of culture, and the sociology of work and occupations. A central focus of her work is finding new ways to make visible the taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality that serve to naturalize and reproduce social inequality. In 2010, she published the monograph, Just One of the Guys? Transgender Men and the Persistence of Gender Inequality (University of Chicago Press). She is currently working on a second book, entitled, "Before and After": The Sociology of Major Life Transitions. In this project, she examines how commonsense ideas about the biological origins of social differences ease or heighten inequalities for marginalized groups through an analysis of four case studies of individuals making major life transformations in identities commonly understood to be both stable and shaped by biology: weight, gender, sexual orientation, and Jewish identity. Schilt examines how biological frames are used to authenticate or invalidate the legitimacy of these transformations, drawing on participant observation of support groups, in-depth interviews with life changers, people who knew them "before and after," and the gatekeepers who facilitated these transitions. The project intersects with sociological questions about the role of science in the popular imagination, as well as how biological frames for social difference relate to inclusion, identity validation, and civil liberties.

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