

Reflections on the sex/gender distinction for gender specific medicine

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This paper presents a critique of the sex/gender distinction as it is employed in the recent proliferation of 'sex difference' research emerging from biomedical laboratories. Biomedical research appears to be endowed with a renewed mandate to ground such research in the genetic basis of a biological sex difference distinct from the psychosocial variance of gender. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced in the United States by Stoller in the 1960s to progress research on sexual reassignment, and it remains a specifically Anglo-American construct. In 2001 the Institute of Medicine (National Academy of Science in the United States), claimed the distinction between sex and gender to be integral to their newly articulated call for medical research to attend with renewed vigour to sex differences. Feminist and other critical social theory questions the binary form of sex as male/female; critiques its relation to the parallel binaries of mind/body, culture/nature; and opens up the notion of the non-cultural, given, natural biology of sex as the ground of culture and gender to scrutiny. The paper argues that the use of this distinction is not only of concern in theoretical terms, but also in terms of the actual implications for women and men. How biomedical researchers and medical clinicians take up positions in relation to these debates across the spectrum of medical domains has very real consequences for the phenomenological experience of illness for women, and the treatments they do or do not receive.