

Queer STS: An Introduction

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Abstract:

This contribution will give a first introduction to the term 'queer' and how it is relevant to science and technology studies (STS). In a broader sense, 'queer' stands for questioning hegemony and the labeling of identity; most popular is its use in the context of sexuality. Similarly to the emergence of the gender studies from women's studies, queer studies emerged from gay and lesbian studies. The latter managed to trigger an academic discussion of sexuality as a category of differentiation structuring social relations. However, as the critique of heteronormativity shows, gender and sexuality have to be seen as interdependent concepts in order to fully understand their part in social structures (Hartmann & Klesse 2007, Degele 2008). The critique of heteronormativity emerges from queer theory and is an analytical perspective exposing heterosexuality not only as regulating individual sexual relationships but social relationships in general (Jackson 2005). As social structures are also reflected in science and technologies, mechanisms of heteronormativity can be made accessible to change by critically examining where the gender binary and a heterosexual norm are used as solid constants determining 'scientific' results and thus perpetuating their structural impact on society.

After a period of slow reception of queer theory in German speaking academia (Degele 2008), it meanwhile has been well established in the humanities, especially in literature, film and cultural studies (Namaste 2007), and more recently entered social sciences. This contribution will give a general introduction 1) to the term 'queer', 2) to the history of queer theory and 3) its objectives, and will give insight into 4) how a queer perspective is relevant to science and technology studies (STS).

1. Queer: defining the undefinable

Defining 'queer' as it is used in the context of queer theory is rather impossible – the act of defining leads its meaning *ad absurdum*. Dictionaries offer a number of expressions that give an impression of what the term stands for. According to The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language (2009), 'queer' as an adjective means "deviating from the expected or normal", "odd or unconventional", "of a questionable nature or character; suspicious", "fake" (slang), "feeling slightly ill", "homosexual" (offensive slang) and "of or relating to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, or transgendered people". As a noun, 'queer' is used "as a disparaging term for a homosexual person" or denotes a "lesbian, gay male, bisexual, or transgendered person" in general. As a verb, to 'queer' means to "ruin or thwart" or to "put (someone) in a bad position" and is used in slang only. Overall, these meanings seem to suggest that 'queer' expresses something ambivalent – particularly when used in slang, 'queer' bears a negative connotation. However, an additional note in the dictionary entry explains that 'queer' is a reclaimed word: 'Queer' has a long tradition as an offensive reference to gays and lesbians. By defining themselves as 'queer', lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender persons reclaimed the word and thus subvert its derogatory meaning (see also Jagose 2001, 97). However, the term has not automatically become neutral: Its meaning depends on the respective context and on the attitude of the person using it.²

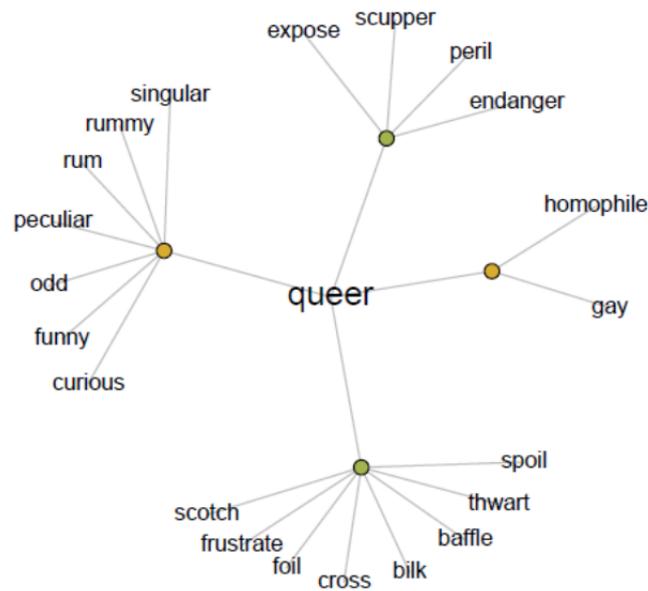


Diagram 1: Meanings of 'queer'.
 Source: www.visualthesaurus.com [06-05-2012]

In the context of queer theory, the whole spectrum of meanings of 'queer' was embraced, negative connotations were critically addressed as a result of homophobia – or more generally: as marginalization of otherness – and subverted. At first, the perspective of queer theory was focused on sexuality but meanwhile has widened to mechanisms of normalization and marginalization in general.

In a radical understanding, being 'queer' means to defy being labeled and submitting to a stable identity – be it in terms of gender, sexuality or other categorizations. In this sense, to define 'queer' itself seems a paradox act: an attempt to define the undefinable because every definition limits the meaning behind it (Halperin 2003, 339).

2. Historical development of queer theory/studies

The term 'queer theory'³ was coined in 1990 by the literary scholar Teresa de Laurentis at a conference in California (Halperin 2003, 339) and brought to academic literature in 1991 in her introduction to "differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies", titled "Queer Theory. Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" (Hark 2005, 286). By bringing together 'queer' and 'theory', she not only intended to open up the issues of gay and lesbian studies to a wider theoretical and more differentiated discussion on sexualities. Also, she suggested to queer what had been (and still is) understood to be 'theory' – with all its assumptions based on 'common' knowledge on the nature of sexual desire and attraction (Halperin 2003, 340).

However, the roots of queer studies go back at least as far as the Weimar Republic when the physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld found the WHK – Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee (Scientific Humanitarian Committee), hoping that medical research might help to overcome traditional morals and religion-based prejudices against 'homosexuals'.⁴ For many decades, sexuality among men/women remained a medical issue, and homophile activists tried to draw their arguments from medical research (Degele 2008, 44ff).

By the 1950s, homosexuality had become accepted as form of identity – even though the imperative continued to be "don't ask, don't tell". In this decade, homophile initiatives like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis were founded and pushed towards legal reforms and support for victims of homophobia. Another milestone of 'queer history' were the

Stonewall Riots in 1969 which are cited as the beginning of lesbian and gay resistance against systematic discrimination and marginalization (ibid, 46f.).

Similarly to the emergence of the gender studies from women's studies, in the 1990s, queer studies developed from gay and lesbian studies. The latter managed to trigger an academic discussion of sexuality as a category of differentiation structuring social relations. Just as the gender studies widened feminist perspectives from women's lives to issues of gender in general, queer studies broadened the perspective from gay and lesbian lives to the diversity of sexualities and how they are related to the heterosexual norm.

Nina Degele argues that since gender and sexuality are interdependent categories of differentiation, it makes no sense to consider gender studies and queer studies as separate approaches. In her introduction to "Gender/Queer Studies" (2008) she brings them together as part of a "science of ambiguity", indicating that questioning traditional gender roles, the gender binary in general, norms of sexual attraction, and the homo-hetero-dualism as such, causes ambiguities rather than fulfilling the common objective of science to bring certainty and clarity. In German speaking academia, for example, Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" (1990) triggered a discussion among feminist theorists. Some suspected the deconstructivist approach to dissolve the gender category and, as a consequence, to annihilate the basis of women's studies, making it impossible to address gender-related discrimination (see the contributions to the 2nd Edition of "Feministische Studien" 1993, Villa 2004). This discomfort may be the reason why, in German speaking countries, it has taken so long for queer theory to enter social sciences and other disciplines which strongly rely on the assumption that gender results from a biologically determined binary of men and women, and that heterosexuality is the 'natural' form of sexual attraction since it serves reproduction.

So, what are the objectives of queer studies and how can a queer perspective improve the quality of research if it causes so much ambiguity? This question is to be answered in the next chapters.

3. Objectives of queer theory

As already outlined in the first part of this introduction, the term 'queer' relates to issues of non-heterosexuality and in a more general meaning expresses deviation from norms or the expected.

As Nina Degele suggests, one can identify three central lines of critical thought along which queer studies argue:

- *The critique of concept and category* poses the questions of who defines who/what on what grounds and assumptions. To define or label someone or something is an act of power and produces attributions based on the assumptions of the defining party. One example would be the reproduction of biologicistic attributions related to gender in research (see Scheer et al. in this publication). This critique demands a constant reflection of the concepts and categories used in research and of the role of the researcher.
- *The critique of identity* is directed against essentialist definitions which are suggesting that attributions are permanent (and sometimes even 'naturally given') parts of identity. For example, defining someone or oneself as 'lesbian' or 'gay' in an essentialistic manner would mean to understand this label as an identity that lasts for life, excluding the option of a change in sexual desire/attraction.
- *The critique of heteronormativity* is an analytical perspective exposing heterosexuality not only as regulating individual sexual relationships but social relationships in general (Jackson 2005).

Queer studies question normalities and categories that establish realities in general (Degele 2008, 11) and take on perspectives of minorized/marginalized positions (Minton 1997, 347). Queer theory considers normalities and categorizations such as gender and sexuality not as pre-existent to culture but as co-emerging with it (Hark 2005, 285). This means that gender, sexuality, race, age, etc. are not naturally given categorizations but that they are a cultural product – cultural in the sense that the emergence and understanding of these categories vary depending on the cultural and historical context. Queer studies critically examine hegemonic practices and dogmata of normalities in gender, sexuality, (in)validity, race, etc. It aims to deliberately cause ambiguities where theories and institutions overgeneralize, simplify and form binaries, establish hierarchies and mechanisms of exclusion (Degele 2008, 43).

In the tradition of deconstructivist discourse analysis, queer theory not only questions norms and normalities, but is also concerned with the excluded and the non-addressed. This leads to the methodological concern to apply differentiated concepts and avoid exclusions in research questions. This also means that the choice of methodology has to make sure common assumptions are avoided. For example, our common knowledge of what ‘male’ or ‘female’ means is useless if we want to examine the meaning of gender and sexuality in the empirical field. In this sense, deconstruction is “not a method, no theory, but rather a mindset that is critical of concepts and categories” (Degele 2008, 19, transl. BH). Consequently, queer theory as a deconstructivist approach is not only a project of critique but of “the production of self-reflecting knowledge” (Hark 2005, 286).

4. Conclusion: Transferring a queer perspective to science and technology studies (STS)

What does it mean to take on a queer perspective in science and technology studies? As social structures are also reflected in science and technologies, common assumptions about the concepts and categories, e.g. mechanisms of heteronormativity, can be made accessible to change by critically examining where the gender binary and a heterosexual norm are used as solid constants determining ‘scientific’ results and thus perpetuating their structural impact on society. As the working group Queer STS shows in another contribution in this publication (Scheer et al.), examples for these perpetuations can be found among psychological studies in which the binary distinction of men and women is taken for granted as a biological constant. Furthermore, some researchers base their interpretations of results on their common (non-academic) knowledge of gender attributions. Altogether, this methodological conduct results in constructed evidence of ‘natural’ differences between men and women without questioning the categorization in the first place.

Another instance in our field of research is the re-evaluation of the way we talk about gender in engineering education. We have to ask ourselves what we mean when we describe engineering education as a gendered field dominated by men. What concept of ‘maleness’ do we have in mind when applying it in this description? We have to ask ourselves which other qualities (apart from gender) may result in the lack of diversity in certain fields of engineering education.

In general, by adopting a queer perspective, we have to reflect on the ways we, as researchers, contribute to the reproduction of e.g. gender as a binary and the heterosexual norm. We have to identify hegemonic discourses in our field of research and critically question in which ways they exclude or marginalize perspectives. We have to revise our methodology and the assumptions we base our interpretations of data on. One example for these efforts is that in some cases we shifted our focus from gender as a category of differentiation and tried to find other explanations for the phenomenon at hand. This way we could avoid the reproduction of gender stereotypes and conclusions being drawn on basis of heteronormativity.

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¹ The contents of this paper reflect views held by the working group Queer STS which is associated with IFZ (Interuniversity Research Centre for Technology, Work and Culture) in Graz. Its members are Julian Anslinger, Daniela Freitag, Birgit Hofstätter, Jenny Käfer, Susanne Kink, Anita Thaler, and Magdalena Wicher. For further information see: <http://www.ifz.tugraz.at/eng/content/view/full/6249> and <http://inviewofheteronormativity.blogspot.com/>

² A similar example is the racist term 'nigger': It usually has no offensive meaning when used among Blacks; but it automatically regains its abusive connotation when used by white people.

³ Queer theory and queer studies are often used synonymously, but I agree with Nina Degele's suggestion to consider queer studies as the methodological application of queer theory in various disciplines (Degele 2008, 42).

⁴ Due to its emergence from medicine and its original meaning, the term 'homosexual' is considered to have a problematic connotation pathologizing sexual attraction among men or women. Thus, self-imposed terms like 'gay' and 'lesbian' are preferred (Jagose 2001, 95).