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Sex/Gender Research

"Agenda science" or "gender nonsense": Gender research is often criticized. Now, a report shows what it achieves - and how the natural sciences ignore it.

BY ANNA-LENA SCHOLZ

Something about this field seems different from particle physics, virology, or macroeconomics. It's like it's shrouded in a mist that obscures clarity. This field: Gender Studies. In German: Geschlechterforschung. On the far right: "Agenda Science". Somehow unclear what it's really about.

This week, the Science Council - the highest body advising the federal and state governments on science policy issues - presented an expert opinion. It's titled "Recommendations for the Further Development of Gender Research in Germany." At its core, the 150-page document contains the following conclusion: The natural and technical sciences as well as medicine, a considerable part of German research and teaching, have hardly opened up to gender research so far - and have thus systematically decoupled themselves from a field of research for decades.

In such lifelike fields as health or informatics, in areas like architecture, urban planning, mechanical engineering, there is a lack of basic knowledge in this country about how the respective findings affect men and women. And how to methodically incorporate such a gender perspective into scientific work at all.

According to the Science Council's expert opinion, the human being is not a "genderless being". Disciplines that do not open up to this fundamental insight simply cannot achieve that "adequate level of complexity" that one would expect from leading sciences.

"A significant discourse"

DIE ZEIT: Hello, Professor Hänsch! You are a biologist at TU Braunschweig. And spokesperson for the natural science and mathematical faculties in Germany. Are you interested in gender research?

Robert Hänsch: Yes! A significant discourse. I see with my children, two daughters, how important the topic is.

ZEIT: Ah, yes?

Hänsch: In biology, over 60 percent of our students are now female. The ratio is not yet so balanced for professorships in the natural sciences. But we're catching up significantly.

ZEIT: So much for equality. But what about scientific research, does gender play a role there?

Hänsch: In Braunschweig, a junior professorship for Gender Studies was just appointed in an interdisciplinary consortium, including physics. Similar initiatives are also known to me at other universities.

ZEIT: And the substantive debates of gender research?

Hänsch: Of course, I am aware of the current and fundamental debates. As a natural scientist, it is, in my perception, a dynamic and increasingly complex discussion.

Gender Studies, Gender Gaga

"Gender" is a buzzword, it flickers through our present. Through politics, administration, culture, media. And through universities. The Berlin mayor is against "gender language" in administration, while the Green Youth loves the "gender star". There are "gender debates", "gender medicine", "gender equality".

What does this "gender" actually mean? And what does it have to do with science?

In English, a distinction is made between sex, which refers to biological gender, and gender, which describes social and cultural gender identity. The German term bundles these two dimensions. And that's what it's about: What is a man? What is a woman? Are there more than two genders? What do we mean by "gender" - is it about physical characteristics, and if so, which ones exactly? Primary sexual organs, hormones, genes, the brain? Is our gender perception learned, culturally shaped, historically grown, changeable? What follows from all this? For education. Schooling. Nutrition. Medical treatment. Car seat design. Programming artificial intelligence. How does gender shape art, literature, film, architecture, machinery, clothing, furniture? What are the implications for law, taxes, politics, addressing the climate crisis?

That doesn't sound too exciting. Yet, in public perception, it turns into "voodoo science". Or: "Pseudoscience". Or: "Gender Gaga". These disguises are particularly evident in the far-right AfD: The aim of the subject is a comprehensive "social transformation" through gender quotas, gender stars, and "state feminism". It "cannot be ruled out", as the parliamentary group leaders Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla put it in a paper last week, that the "extensive university and financial expansion of gender studies and thus their political agenda will be further advanced".

Zero point something

The Science Council's expert opinion now shows how gender research is institutionally anchored. Currently, there are 50,300 professors in Germany. 173 of them are dedicated to women's or gender research, which is 0.3 percent. Mostly, these professorships are located in the social and humanities sciences; in the natural sciences, there are only 14 in total, and in medicine, eleven professorships with a designated gender focus. In non-university research, such as the Helmholtz Association or Max Planck Society, the field is hardly established.

Besides professors, doctoral students, postdocs, and research assistants also conduct research and teach at universities. Even those who do not identify as "gender researchers" can consider this perspective. "Gender" is then understood as an epistemic category, like a

keyhole through which one looks at the world. One does not ask: What is a heart attack? But rather: How does a heart attack manifest in a female versus a male body? (Because the symptoms are different.)

According to the Science Council, the problem is not that there is no gender research at all. It also does not demand that everyone should become a gender expert now. The criticism is that the field is "insufficiently" institutionalized, and the insights gained are repeatedly lost. Therefore, it recommends more permanent professorships, interdisciplinary programs, and a general "intensification" of collaboration across all fields, especially in technical disciplines and medicine. Internationally, the importance of such research has already grown - "Germany is noticeably lagging behind in this development."

An exemplary career

Behind these findings are life stories. Take, for example, the story of Anelis Kaiser Trujillo. She is 50, until recently, was a professor at the University of Freiburg; her position was not made permanent. Her voice carries a gentle Swiss accent as she recounts:

"Once, a student told me he had no interest in 'this out-of-touch gender crap.' In the end, he said the seminar changed his life because he understood so much. There's significant demand among students. My seminars, such as 'Gender and Technology,' are always full. I work at the intersection of neuroscience and psychology. There's no such thing as a typically male or typically female brain, but our perception of gender identity and our neural networks correlate with each other. Such interdisciplinary research is demanded everywhere, by universities, politics; everyone wants to flaunt it. But for someone like me who works in several fields, I don't really belong anywhere. No one feels responsible; no one advocates for making positions permanent. In physics, biology and computer science, there are one or two handfuls of people across Germany who are also qualified in gender studies". Only two professorships are tenure-track. My teaching experience is lost. Sometimes I think: Only rich countries can afford the privilege of giving up decades of accumulated knowledge so easily. For decades, every female researcher who enters has to justify anew why she should exist. In Canada and the USA, there are many specialized Gender Studies programs. Colleagues from the natural sciences often think I'm a professor of equality. Throughout my career, I've struggled with this misunderstanding, even at my faculty: Gender research is not knowledge. It's ideology. Indoctrination."

Feminism or Science?

The eternal misunderstanding. The Science Council addresses it in its expert opinion: "Gender research as a scientific field on the one hand and equality policy on the other hand should be fundamentally distinguished despite points of intersection and useful cooperation." It even explicitly warns against "interweaving" the two aspects.

Yet that's exactly what has happened over the decades.

It started in the sixties. We protested, the stuffiness under the gowns, the personal is political. Number of female professors in 1980, before they weren't even recorded: 5 percent. Female students: 36 percent. Even the first wave of feminism at the end of the 19th century fought

for access to educational institutions. Now, during the years of revolt, it was about the question: Who researches and teaches, what is our canon of knowledge?

During this time, women's studies emerged. It saw itself as feminist, it wanted to be political. The few women at universities fought for fundamental rights: to even be present in science. To have a say in what is taught. Not just Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, but also Karoline von Günderrode. Not just Napoleon, but also Olympe de Gouges. Not just the male world history, but also the female perspective.

"Women's movement," it sounds so grand. In reality, it was just a few individuals. They always had to do two things at once: research the history of genders - and create a position for themselves. Thus, for the field to emerge, what the Science Council now warns against had to happen: systematically interweaving scientific work and equality policy.

Today, 27 percent of all professorships are occupied by women. In the humanities and social sciences, where women's studies originated, there are significantly more. A success. And a heavy burden. Where a woman conducts gender research - she must have an agenda! A professor of feminism, so to speak.

At the edge of collapse

The Science Council only skirts around this sore point: Does the feminist ethos historically inscribed in the field sometimes tip into ideological blindness? Does the small disciplinary community remain too insular? Historian Margit Szöllösi-Janze, chair of the working group that prepared the expert opinion, says they discussed the "tension" between activism and research and marked it but could not delve into it. There's only this sentence: "Pursuing an emancipatory-enlightening goal does not contradict the status as science."

That's brief. So brief, it sounds a bit like a defensive spell: Away with the ideology accusation, poof, poof! Such reservations are not likely to be dispelled this way. Yet, the theoretical core lies precisely here - a core that is relevant to all subjects and faculties: namely, that our entire world knowledge is always "situated" (as biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway puts it). The human who produces this world knowledge at the university always resides on the drafty edge of their own perception. Of their own mind, their own body - and their own discipline. Engaging in gender research entails risk. Not only the risk of never obtaining a permanent professorship. But also of coming under fire from authoritarian regimes. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán banned Gender Studies a few years ago. In Canada, a student attacked the professor of a Gender Studies seminar with a knife two weeks ago. According to the police, the motive was hatred towards perceived gender ideology.

The Science Council undertakes nothing less than a reversal of burden of proof. It releases gender research from the stress of legitimization - and shifts it to the other disciplines. In the light of this expert opinion, the disciplinary rigor of the natural sciences becomes an intellectual
flaw.