

Discussing Gender: An Interview with Dr Suki Ali



by Aisling Sweeney, second-year sociology undergraduate.

Dr Suki Ali is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the LSE. She previously taught at Goldsmiths College, the Institute of Education and the University of Greenwich. Her main theoretical interests focus upon feminist postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, research methodologies, visual culture, and theories of identification and embodiment. Her work centralises the interplay between gender, sexualities, 'race' and class and she has published work that engages these issues through research in education and family life. I caught up with her to get some of her views on the complex field that is gender.

When did you first decide to go into academia, and particularly, sociology?

I don't know that I decided to go into academia- people helped me decide. I got steered into beginning to do some teaching by fantastic mentors and supporters when I was still actually studying for my masters. In fact, somebody had talked to me about considering teaching on my undergraduate degree, and I'd never thought about it before because I was a late returner to higher education. So I hadn't considered academia as a job at all, I hadn't even considered higher education as an option for me at all. Again, that was a kind of progression of people supporting and guiding, beginning with an HND and then going on to do a degree, and then masters, and then from that, encouraging me to do a PhD.

How did you pick Sociology then?

Well, my PhD was done at the Institute of Education, and it obviously took a kind of 'Sociology of Education' approach, and it just so happened that a job came up in Goldsmiths' Sociology Department, which my work fitted very well with, so I applied for it. So I think that I became a sociologist by default. I don't mind being called a sociologist, because I don't know what else I would call myself necessarily. I've come to like what I see as the flexibility of sociology: the kind of variety of ways in which you can call yourself 'a sociologist', and I find that very appealing- but also that there are some principles about what makes something 'sociological'. It has some rigour to it.

Do you ever find it frustrating that the courses at LSE that are based on gender, so, for example, even sociology in general and particularly 'Gender and Society', are dominated so heavily by female students?

Well, you see, I find that a difficult question, because on the one hand, of course I celebrate the fact that female students are a strength, and are engaging with gender, and gender theory: I'm very happy about that. I do find it frustrating that we can't give more space to gender more generally, such that it doesn't appear to be that the gender course is only ever going to be about women, and a very narrow category of what women are, and that we take more seriously the question of gender throughout Sociology. And, that that might then encourage a range of people to take the courses, without feeling that they're going to encounter something very narrow, because it's a very broad topic, and obviously has very broad applicability across Sociology. So, I don't like to say "oh dear, what a shame it's just women", on one level, because why not? Good for them, how unusual is that to have that space? But, on the other hand, I can see that what that demonstrates is that we're missing something in the ways in which gender is understood, and is being taught.

Do you think that, at some point, all feminist theory will become postcolonial feminism, by virtue of the growing awareness of intersectionality and the western-centrism of existing theory?

That's such an excellent question- because- a) what does postcolonial feminism mean? And b) would being a postcolonial feminist automatically mean that people challenge western-centrism and engage questions of intersectionality? Well... one would hope so. But, I suspect, not necessarily. Because, we know those terms are so heavily contested, and we know that people find ways, for example, simply of working on women without being feminist, working on race without being necessarily radically anti-race or anti-racist, or engaging in critical race theory, of working on the contemporary without thinking of the historical, so... I think there are no guarantees about what anything is really named, that it's going to change the shape of the academy, or the kinds of work that is being done. Because of how, a) the strands in disciplines change quite a lot, and b) we've seen the way in which certain work gets co-opted and depoliticized, or you know, it kind of loses its teeth anyway, and loses its original purpose. Some people might find that a bit radical to say, but I've written about it elsewhere. I mean, I just think there's no guarantees about the ways in which we think it's a good thing to, for example, start teaching gender, or say that gender should be central to an analysis- we know that that there is a growing awareness of the need to think about Western/Euro centrism, and that *should* make intersectionality a given, but it doesn't necessarily produce better work or a different kind of work- that everybody agrees is a better kind of work. That's what I think is the problem- things are a bit slippery.

Do you think that there is any value in gender research or theory that has largely 'ignored' intersectionality, for example, early constructivist theory, or do you think that ignoring intersectionality renders such research invalid or outdated?

I do think there's value in looking at all kinds of research, and that doesn't necessarily follow timelines. So, I might not like everything that somebody has to say, or exactly what they've done but I might find parts of it useful, and interesting, or important, and I tend to stick with that. It's very hard also to read across time and I think about people like Edward Said defending his readings of early authors and so on and saying, "look, you know we read people in their time, of their time, and we try and get something from that, and understand it for what it is". And to simply say, "that was of its time and therefore it's value-less", I don't necessarily think is helpful. Because all kinds of work have limitations, there are all kinds of work that's contemporary that we might find completely not useful or persuasive in any way, shape or form. So I don't agree with thinking, just as a matter of 'rule of thumb', "okay if it's from the 1970s it's not going to help us".

Do you think that there is any value in gender research or theory that has largely 'ignored' intersectionality, for example, early constructivist theory, or do you think that ignoring intersectionality renders such research invalid or outdated?

I do think there's value in looking at all kinds of research, and that doesn't necessarily follow timelines. So, I might not like everything that somebody has to say, or exactly what they've done but I might find parts of it useful, and interesting, or important, and I tend to stick with that. It's very hard also to read across time and I think about people like Edward Said defending his readings of early authors and so on and saying, "look, you know we read people in their time, of their time, and we try and get something from that, and understand it for what it is". And to simply say, "that was of its time and therefore it's value-less", I don't necessarily think is helpful. Because all kinds of work have limitations, there are all kinds of work that's contemporary that we might find completely not useful or persuasive in any way, shape or form. So I don't agree with thinking, just as a matter of 'rule of thumb', "okay if it's from the 1970s it's not going to help us".

What do you think is the link between sex and gender?

First of all, does that assume that I think that there are such things as sex and gender? And secondly, that I think there is a link between them? I still think, at this point in time, it's useful to think about what was understood as a sexed body, and what are perceived to be, gender

characteristics. I think, whether you use the word gender to describe what was understood as, sort of, sexual dimorphism, like sexed bodies, and you just call them gendered bodies, I think, doesn't really matter.

To me, in a way, what's most important is to understand the importance of bodies and embodiment, and the matter of bodies, in relation to what is currently more broadly construed as questions of *gender* in contemporary societies. So whether you use words like sex for some parts of this, and gender for others, or you use gender to cover all of it, I think you just need to map out your own territory.

But do I think there's a really important connection between those things, that is being very prominently debated in relation to questions around, differences between transgender and cisgender for example, or particular kinds of anti-trans politics at the moment, and so on. Clearly those things are important, and, whether the debates have changed, in terms of, terminologies, some fundamental issues about what it is to be some kind of gendered human are still at the heart of that- whether you resist any kind of question about sexual dimorphism in and of itself, and any kind of binary, or not, embodied selves matter. Whether people feel there's a match between their embodiment and their selfhood and subjectives or not, or that current labels don't fit their embodied sense of self, or their character, or anything else. I mean, it was a device- it was a kind of way of thinking that was very helpful- for some people it's no longer helpful. The complexity, as such, and the way in which we think about construction of sex: the idea of a sexed body, means that gender is much more important. But some people still find that there is a useful link between them.

Whether the words change or not, we're still concerned about the same kinds of questions, and about how questions of difference and dissent around issues of gender (gender more broadly now, let's use that as an umbrella term to include embodiment), give rise to inequalities, and prejudices, and discriminations, as well as privileges, and advantages.

December 9th, 2015 | [Interviews](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺