

Gender (In)Difference in Gender (Un)Equal Couples. Intimate Dyads Between Gender Nostalgia and Post Genderism

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Published online: 13 June 2017
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Abstract This essay revisits Erving Goffman's question regarding the connection between couple relationships and gender construction, expanding upon it by examining the ambivalent relationship of couples towards gender (in)difference, in which the latter is constitutive of their formation. On the one hand, couples exploit the (in)equality of their gender composition, while, on the other, they systematically ignore it in order to establish individualized personal relationships. The article culminates in a sociological diagnosis of this ambivalence, with statistical inequalities between men and women emerging as an aggregate effect of millions of small dyadic entities, each searching for their own relational meaning. How might they reconstruct their sexual inequality in view of the fact that gender is losing its relevance? Meanwhile, what used to be thought of as homosexual and heterosexual relations are losing their meaning as gender relations.

Keywords Gender · Microsociology · Social theory · Couple relationships

In sociology, it is generally agreed upon that gender difference is socially constructed (Butler 1990; Lorber 1995; Badinter 2006). However, an issue which remains quite controversial is the question of how significant gender categorization is for modern societies. One of the two classic extreme positions in this matter has its roots in the sociological tradition of differentiation theory.¹ This theory suggests that a meritocratic society, strongly determined by organizations, predominantly

¹ This tradition began in the works of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel. It observes a devaluation of collective memberships (such as gender, ethnicity, and class) in societies marked by advanced division of labour and individualism.

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classifies by merit and devalues the significance of any ascriptive criteria (e.g., Luhmann 2012/13). From this perspective, existing gender stereotypes and inequalities are mere evolutionary relics, waiting for their decline. The opposite extreme is represented by the (more recent) gender studies which often presume an “omnirelevance” of gender difference (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987: 137), taking the visual salience of gender as grounds for assuming that social processes cannot help themselves but to take gender into account.

Studies in sociostructural analysis, trying to mediate between these theoretical polar opposites of gender difference as a relic or as an unavoidable component of social processes, find evidence supporting both positions—historically, the relevance of the gender distinction has diminished in jurisdiction, educational establishments and the labour market, but at the same time there is a persistent continuity of economic inequality and inequality in power, concerning carrier opportunities, private households, the media, etc. (for a current review see Rusconi et al. 2013). Various societal fields can be distinguished according to the extent to which they make recourse to gender difference and by assuming a general “contextual contingency” (Heintz 2008) of the meaning of gender. The question, then, is under which (situational, organizational, field-specific) conditions the distinction on the basis of gender is emphasized or successfully inhibited. In this regard, formal organizations in particular appear to be *comparatively* ‘gender neutral’ (Weinbach and Stichweh 2001), while smaller social ‘systems’—such as interactions and families—are suspected of continuously reproducing gender.²

This essay focuses on couple relationships. It aims to show that the general sociological diagnosis of an *ambivalent* relation of modern societies to gender difference holds especially true for these small social entities. Thus, I am revisiting an issue initially brought up by Erving Goffman 40 years ago (1977), namely that of the intimate connection between couples and gender construction. This connection is implied as a tacit premise whenever we speak of ‘couples’. We tend to think of couples as dyadic relationships with two characteristics: First, couples are strictly defined as dyads *excluding third parties*, in contrast to, e.g., generational relationships, sibling relationships or friendships (it is possible to have more than one friend, sibling or parent). Second, when we speak of couples, we implicitly mean *gendered couples*, i.e., men and women (or men and men, women and women). However, does this common-sense assumption of the gendered couple still do justice to the current state of individualized intimate relationships? This article suggests that the issue raised by Goffman warrants some theoretical refinement: What is the sociological connection between a dyadic social relationship and a dyadic classification of people? What are these “twos” all about? Moreover, these questions should be opened up for empirical investigation: Under which conditions are dyadic relationships in fact ‘gendered’ relationships? Do intimate relationships, differentiated by gender, actually *differentiate* by gender?

² The reason for this is that small social systems are confronted with the face-to-face visibility of gender, while formal organisations have an easier job abstracting from ascriptive criteria in favour of the formal qualifications required for a position.

My reflections proceed in six steps. I begin by examining gender difference within a theoretical framework of inequality and go on to consider it as the *constitutive inequality* for couples (1). I carry on by systematically establishing the reasons why we might regard the two-person relationship as the production centre of gender binarism (2). I then demonstrate that, as an engine of individualization, this relationship is simultaneously a key site for the development of gender indifference. Relationships formed because of the gender distinction require their own ways (that differ from those of formal organizations) of disregarding gender, in order to make themselves as personal as possible (3). I then aim to show, through a historical retrospective, that the gender distinction inherent in couples is linked with gender's elementary relational meaning in a precarious way, as evident in the nineteenth-century construction of the category 'homosexual' as the 'other' of the gender-unequal relationship (4). Conversely, in the early twenty-first century, the distinction between homo- and heterosexual is beginning to dissolve, while various attempts are being made to reconstruct 'heterosexuality,' including pornographic and political invocations of difference. Research on inequality is an example of this: statistical inequalities between 'men' and 'women' as population groups are, to a great extent, an aggregate effect of the search for relational meaning within millions of small social units that are attempting to maintain their gender inequality in view of the circumstance that, over time, gender distinctions are losing significance (5). The concluding section focuses on a number of hopeful signs that these efforts to maintain gender inequality are failing—as the significance of intimate relationships as gendered relationships begins to diminish (6).

Multiple Inequalities in Couples

A common sociological approach to couples is to ascertain the social inequalities between their 'ends' (Goffman). In more and more countries and social milieux, an unequal distribution of income, power and prestige is taken seriously and politically fought under the banner of 'equality'. However, more challenging than the identification of this social problem is the adequate definition of a *sociological* problem: How must inequality be conceived of if one does not wish to refer to statistical population groups but rather to couples; i.e., to social systems which are autonomous in their own production of meaning. Three adjustments appear to be necessary:

If we wish to properly assess the specific form of inequality practised by couples, we must first establish on which *level of emergence* within a micro/macro-continuum couples are to be found. Rather than just *one* form of inequality, there are numerous divergent types. Dyadic social relationships are neither concerned with the distribution of goods between social classes nor are they an expression of formal hierarchies within organizations. Dyadic social relationships are not, as in the case of groups, centred on authority and temporary trust in leaders, nor are they merely a matter of single interactions and their fragile gestures of dominance. They are biographically enduring. On each of these levels of emergence 'inequality' means something different. And there is little overlap between many of these forms of

inequality. You can give someone her notice very gently, be arrested despite an elite background, lose authority within groups precisely because of your interactional dominance, and so on. It is true that there are ‘loose couplings’ (Goffman 1983) between such forms of dominance, but it is equally true that we cannot straightforwardly derive them from a particular factor—such as social background, physical strength, eloquence or income. Our first adjustment must be to recognize that we cannot assess social inequality in couples by means of statistical averages of population groups, averages calculated by *observers*. Instead, we must reconstruct social inequality by examining small social units that define *themselves* as such.

Second, we have to specify in what *respects* inequality pertains within couples. An obvious simplification from a macrosociological (and political) perspective is to reduce inequality to the unequal distribution of economic or other forms of power. We are quick to think of ‘inequality’ in terms of socioeconomic differentials, rather than, for example, the huge age gap between medieval spouses (Labouvie 1997). But when sociology examines personal relationships, whose modern meaning lies in the unqualified recognition of individuality (Luhmann 1986), it finds itself confronted with their tremendous complexity. Inequality in this context may take multiple forms. There may be variations not just in income and professional prestige or involvement in child-rearing and contribution to housework, but also age and life experience, height and eloquence, health and attractiveness, sexual desire and faithfulness, and so on and so forth. Once again: as ascribed to individuals, all these parameters may diverge, and they are likely to do so, rather than all of them being to the advantage of *one* partner. It is because of this that the associated ‘status incongruities’ are such a time-worn topos of popular culture, such as the discrepancy between individuals’ verbal pre-eminence in public and their power within the home. Those in couple relationships are masters of different *domains*.

By way of illustration, let’s consider Mr and Mrs Miller. During the courting phase of their relationship, he put more effort into the relationship than her (not least because she was two centimetres taller than him). But in line with *her* ideal of a man and *his* ideal of a woman, he was three years older than her, and because of this minor temporal and occupational edge (and his proclivity for a technical profession) he was earning more money than her when she became pregnant. While he is involved in parenting their two children, she is in charge and jealously guards her monopoly on motherhood. She also does significantly more than him within the household, and makes up for this by sporadically compelling him to do certain tasks within her system of domestic organization and exposing his incompetence to guests. He, meanwhile, cultivates this incompetence in order to spare himself unpleasant tasks. From time to time he tells misogynistic jokes when socializing with his mates, while she discusses his intimate behaviour with her best girl-friend. Both are generally faithful: parity prevails with respect to affairs. He has some minor sexual fetishes, and she has a special knack that makes her sexually dominant. Her libido is greater than his, and though he suspects as much she avoids confirming his suspicions since she requires the fiction of equal passion. He hit her once during an argument, while she threw a beer glass at his head. She is socially dominant because he married into her circle of friends. She is far more verbally gifted than him and constantly interrupts him, while he is a better listener and makes her laugh.

He has adjusted himself to her peculiarities, while she is still trying to train him after twenty years of marriage. Overall, Mr and Mrs Miller get on well. If you were to ask them, they would tell you they have an equal relationship.³

How can this be? Because inequality in couple relationships takes multiple forms, the procedures through which couples *ascertain* their inequalities are also complex. It is, for example, an open question which criteria couples deploy just to measure housework within their relationship and within which framework such work is subject to relations of exchange in the first place. Jean Claude Kaufmann (1998) and Cornelia Koppetsch (1998) have pointed out that here it is not the exchange of equivalent output but unequal gift exchange that sets the tone in loving relationships. The gift has a symbolic value. It is intended to generate gratitude and a need to reciprocate, to bind the other to the meaning of the relationship and renew their sense of commitment. Its special mode of functioning does not demand equivalence but, in fact, inequality. It is devalued if it is immediately paid back in kind. The code of love renders many things convertible: the performance of housework or paid employment, but also the care of the sick, gifts, kindnesses, declarations of love, guilt feelings, mental cruelty and caresses. While the outside observer, striving to be objective—with the aid, for example, of time budget studies (e.g., Künzler 1994)—discerns persistent inequality in the division of housework, *within* their relationship couples develop a far more complex perception of incommensurable dimensions of inequality. For couples, particularly if they are unconditionally committed to equality, *comparability* is a habitual problem. According to which criteria—time, inclination, effort—should measurements be made in such cases and how should they be combined? Couples are highly complex compensatory arrangements; they are, so to speak, *‘machines for the conversion’* (Hirschauer 2007) of multiple inequalities that generate reserve currencies of a highly idiosyncratic nature. When establishing such currencies, these relationships must draw autonomously on their own resources, every bit as much as they do when constantly striving to ensure equal exchange or estimating and readjusting their respective contributions through conflictual conversations. The crucial thing for couples is whether they feel that parity prevails between their occupants or whether one or both of them see good reasons for separation.⁴

In terms of the inequality of output, then, and in line with our second adjustment, couples essentially *consist* of fragile attempts to strike a balance, with the two ‘ends’ (Goffman) of the couple *accepting* inequalities that are not amenable to comparison, or *negotiating* matters of equity. If sociologists measure such social constructs from outside with just one reserve currency (such as income or hours of work), they theoretically overestimate those phenomena that number themselves, simply

³ This case is an ideal–typical (and thus anonymous) construction on the basis of interviews with couples within the ongoing research project “Gender Differentiation and De-Differentiation of Parenthood,” which has been running since 2013 within the framework of the “Un/Doing Differences” research group at the University of Mainz, funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft).

⁴ It could be highly illuminating for family research to consult divorce statistics for the reasons given by separating couples. Probably, one would find dominant accounts (such as exploitation and adultery), more idiosyncratic currencies, and completely fragmented reasons for discontent, some of them not even clearly articulable.

because these are easy to measure. But they will fall far short of the complex *self*-observation found in couples.

Third and finally, from a sociological perspective it is crucial to underline that couple relationships all entail reference to *one* form of equality or inequality that is *constitutive* of them, namely their participants' gender affiliation. Couples are *doing gender* (West and Zimmerman 1987). When it comes to couples, people have a pronounced gender class consciousness. This is something we cannot overlook sociologically, but we must turn it from a mere *resource* for the generation of variables into a *topic* (Zimmerman and Pollner 1971) if we wish to understand which inequalities couples produce. It is at this point that things become truly complicated from a sociological point of view—at least if we eschew any tendency to regard dyadic togetherness between men and women, as simply a fact of nature. Because what we seek to understand here is a construction replete with tension. The gender-unequal couple is, on the one hand, the institution most central to the reproduction of gender difference (it produces the primary meaning of gender distinctions). On the other hand, from a comparative historical perspective, gender distinctions can “be practised in a modern way, that is as a non-distinction” (Luhmann 1988: 66), particularly in contemporary couple relationships.

This is what we will be concerned with in the two following sections. But let's recapitulate first: It is an inherent feature of the conceptual framework of standardized research on 'social inequality' to presuppose the existence of 'sexes' as independent variables. By contrast (and since the early works of Goffman 1977; Garfinkel 1967), microsociological gender studies examine the *differentiation* of genders itself as a case of the classification of people in society. They recommend against accepting gender classification as a common-sensical precondition for sociostructural analysis but rather to recognize it as *belonging* to social structure. In so doing, the gender composition of couples generally referred to as 'heterosexual' becomes apparent as the *constitutive* inequality for dyadic intimate relationships. This (in) equality is neither accidental nor reformable. It is in fact what people see as making up a couple in the first place.

The Reproduction of Gender Difference through Couples

Generally speaking, like other social classifications, gender binarism is culturally reproduced through the organization of social relations that are themselves undergirded by this binarism (Hirschauer 1994). This applies, for example, to the gendered segregation of sports (Müller 2009) and labour market structures (Wetterer 2002), and it is also true of forms of affiliation such as the gender-unequal couple. If the gender distinction is deployed to assign activities, form couple relationships and allocate life chances, this constantly prompts people to distinguish two classes of individuals. Such institutions uphold the thematic potency of gender affiliation and reinforce peoples' social sense of the distinction between 'genders' (Hirschauer 2001). The special catalytic function of couple formation within the process of gender differentiation is rooted in five main aspects:

1. The first is the common-or-garden sexism inherent in couple formation. It is sociologically commonplace in this context to cast aspersions on the early modern concept of love with its privileging of individuality. Researchers have revealed a regularity that contradicts this individualism: homogamy, in other words the pronounced tendency to marry or enter into couplehood with someone of the *same* class, skin colour, educational group, religion, and so on. What goes largely unremarked, however, is the astonishing fact that this tendency ceases to apply when it comes to the same *gender* affiliation. Heterosexuality means that most human couples are fundamentally heterogamous. The astounding thing about this is that the individuals that societies tend to bring into sexual contact and long-term relationships are those who do *not* understand one another's desire. It is a bit like pairing a vegetarian animal with a carnivorous plant. This elementary *disruption of reciprocity*—a constitutive problem much like that of the double contingency of interactions (Parsons and Shils 1951)—is the couple-internal motor of the production of relational meaning. We are all familiar with the cultural reaction to this, namely the great mythical narrative of the 'natural attraction' between the genders.
2. While the couple works on its constitutive disturbed reciprocity within the relationship, from outside it appears to be an institution that has put back together what was formerly divided—through classification—to form a social unit, an emphatic demonstration of the unified togetherness of the formerly separated. The most obvious evidence that the dual gender classification is inherent in intimate relations is the fact that it is *two-person* relationships that many (though of course not all) societies privilege rather than triadic, polygamous or polyamorous arrangements (Hillman 1975). *Two-person* togetherness, the occurrence of human pairings, is a manifestation of gender *binarism*, of the cultural division into two gender classes.⁵ This is vividly apparent in many tribal societies, where a binary classification that divides a community into two groups is 'healed' through two-person relationships.
3. On the other hand, in a rudimentary sense gender differentiation within the couple also bolsters the individualization of its two component parts. The gender-unequal couple is an arrangement in which a primitive individuality may be obtained from gender affiliation itself, namely by reducing the social world to a relationship in which the other is at the same time the Other, in other words is amenable to exoticization. Gender-unequal pairing thus ensures a solid base of relative individuality, which both parties may claim from one another. Such pairing renders tangible an elementary form of difference that requires no further work, that is simply given along with the other's presence. Conversely, from the perspective of gender differentiation, the stylization of gender difference also endows the formation of the couple with an elementary social purpose: to complete the incomplete, to produce dependency and complementarity.

⁵ This does not settle the precise nature of the reciprocal relationship between two-person togetherness and gender binarism conclusively. It is conceivable that the social meaning of two genders may be socially anchored in the meaning of couple relationships (rather than vice versa). It is also conceivable that polyamory will become more likely as cultural gender differentiation decreases.

4. On the basis of norms of attractiveness—males' greater height, age and income (Buchmann and Eisner 2001)—the gender-unequal couple provides opportunities to *reinforce* the gender distinction and produce more inequality. For instance, through couple formation, abstract statistical knowledge of a difference in size between male and female bodies is transformed into socially significant knowledge of a conspicuous difference in size that makes it easier to 'look up' admiringly or 'look down' protectively (Goffman 1977). The conventional age difference (of two to three years) also takes on significance because, as a rule, it is linked with education and income differentials that (as in the case of Mr and Mrs Miller) have immediate consequences for the division of labour within couples—above all for the question of who is to pursue a career and who is dominating child care.
5. On the basis of these rules of couple formation, a couple may observe itself and present itself—to itself and to the rest of the world—as a gendered relationship. Every behavioural peculiarity and every hint of specialization may be endowed with gendered meaning and ascribed to the two component parts of the relationship as a property of gender. The couple is an outstanding cultural opportunity for comparison, for describing and perceiving gendered inequality beyond abstract statistics. And it is a far older, more widespread opportunity for comparison, one better rooted in the lifeworld, than statistics are. Much of our experiential knowledge about 'men and women' comes from dyadic arrangements featuring a hypertrophic awareness of gender.

Amid this play of gender comparison and attribution to gender, sociostructural analysis has a merely secondary role. Such analysis presupposes gender just as categorically as couples do and, like them, puts its superficial observations down to gender. We might call this convenience methodological sexism, which consists in basing oneself on the construction of gender difference by those under investigation, and treating one's findings as the 'independent variable' of gender affiliation. The subsequent finding of 'sex differences' is part and parcel of observations that take gender for granted (Hirschauer 2012). But without the comparative investigation of gender-*equal* couples it is impossible to clarify which aspects of dyadic goings-on we should ascribe to gender in the first place. This is a double oversight: gender is overlooked as a *topic* of gender-unequal couple relationships while being smuggled in as an *analytical category*.⁶ Sociostructural analysis is thus part of our object of study: couples work on their gendered inequalities by a) *producing* them and b) continually *ascertaining* them through comparisons. This is the sociostructural analysis that couples themselves carry out. Sociological sociostructural analysis does the same thing but on a larger scale, and thereby garners some of the effects

⁶ This is rather like ascribing ongoing analytical relevance to the identification of lapsed Catholics and Protestants within a mixed population of religious, secularized and newly converted individuals—a case of 'groupism' (Brubaker 2004). If we reduce a social relationship that is constituted on the basis of the mutual recognition and development of individuality to its gender composition, we are analysing it like a brothel or a swingers' club—as an institution for the reciprocal use of genitalia (to put it in Kantian terms).

produced by couples, while leaving us in some doubt as to whether its gender-class consciousness matches the flexibility characteristic of couples.

Let's sum things up. The gender-unequal couple initially appears to be coerced by a compulsory force to reproduce the gender difference, as if it were a perpetual motion machine for gender differentiation. It produces the meaning of this differentiation and puts what has been separated back together again. It stimulates, then harmonizes, the gendered differentiation of people within society.⁷

The Nullification of Gender Difference in Couples

On the other hand, however, like other social entities (individuals, groups, organizations, and so on), couples do not always make distinctions on the basis of gender. Their gender-class consciousness is not a permanent state of affairs. That would be quite impractical; after all, people constantly make numerous social classifications within their activities. Even if we were to produce a complete (fictional) schematization of their activities in accordance with such classifications, we would still lack the means to adequately describe their objectives as practically pursued.⁸

Due to its visibility, gender is an obvious schema of complexity reduction that people reach for when encountering *unknown persons* and it is a powerfully expressive resource when individuals are engaged in couple *formation* (as demonstrated by Goffman 1977). But it is subject to two powerful limitations as couple relationships progress. First, the subsequent use of this schema comes under pressure from an individualizing semantics of love, which demands greater complexity and selectivity in the perception of persons than in the case of mere sexual attraction. If couple relationships are romanticized, they are also individualized to the greatest possible extent. This means that, alongside the sorting schema of gender affiliation, there is a requirement for a process of personalization, one that in principle transcends gender. Second, gender difference competes with familiarity-based knowledge within quotidianized couples as their relationship unfolds. The two members of the couple know too much about each other to see one

⁷ Sport appears to be the only other field locked so tenaciously into the search for the meaning of gender differentiation. During the 2011 Women's World Cup, public discourse valiantly mulled over the recognition of women's football, yet virtually no one considered mixed teams, which would bring an end to the inhibition of competition between the genders and give women the chance to prove themselves superior to men. In the world of sport, people are not yet grappling with one another in a gender-indifferent way, because sport has been mandated to spell out the meaning of gender differentiation.

⁸ The theorem of 'doing gender' has always had two disadvantages concerning the differential relevance of gender: It projected the high relevance of gender for *gender studies* onto the object of investigation, despite gender difference being only one kind of classification for members of society (alongside race, ethnicity, nation, religion, age, profession and so forth). Moreover, the conditions under which the mere background relevance of gender actually becomes a focus and a topic of interactions were not specified. Put differently, an important theoretical implication of 'doing gender' was simply omitted, namely that of 'undoing gender' (Hirschauer 1994: 676–679). The fundamental notion of a *practical doing* of affiliations and distinctions implies that people may also *refrain* from doing them. To the extent that they practically perform meaningful distinctions, they may interrupt, abstain from or discontinue this process of performance, and they may deactivate memberships within specific situations or fields.

another constantly or predominantly as a man or woman.⁹ While the individualism of the semantics of love competes with the relative randomness of sexual attraction, familiarity-based knowledge competes with the reduction of complexity by means of the gender schema. The semantics of love is part of a conceptual individualism, while familiarity-based knowledge is part of an individualism in practice.

So we are faced with an empirical question. During which phases and in which situations—over the course of a couple relationship—do its participants actually perceive one another as men and women? In the same vein, at one time or another they may view each other as significantly blonde or dark-haired, older or younger, black or white, fat or thin, disabled or non-disabled and so on. Being male or female is a more or less stable state of affairs (that is, it is subject only to the changes wrought by ageing and illness). But being a woman or man, in other words the meaningful *selection* of these categories, varies substantially: between historical periods, social milieux and lifestyles, age groups, relationship phases and social situations.

Within the structures of modern society, gender difference is thus devalored through a *dual* form of individualism. Just as the sociology of the labour market takes into account meritocratic values that permanently exhort people to disregard gender in educational and professional organizations, the sociology of couple relationships has to take seriously an individualistic ideal of love that enjoins couples to pay attention to their partner beyond gender. Couples, unlike organizations, do not organize themselves *without* but *with* distinction of persons. They cannot inhibit gender difference in the same way as organizations (that is, treat them as irrelevant) without generating a qualitatively different type of couple relationship. And this happens constantly, first in the sense of *biographical transitions* from the romantic couple, which lives out stereotypes without restraint—or must at least play with them for a time if its two members are to understand themselves as having a gender relationship—through the well-organized two-person flat and parental partnership, to the familiarity-saturated camaraderie of long-serving spouses. Second, though, this displacement in the relevance of gender also occurs through *situational shifts of gestalt*: a couple not only *consists* in the fragile balancing of multiple inequalities (as set out in part one above), it also *consists* in the long-term simultaneity of non-simultaneous relational modes. So there is always a question mark over whether a couple is in fact a ‘gender relationship’ or whether we are dealing, depending on the situation, with parents, a flatshare, a sexual partnership, a financial partnership, a friendship or a love relationship.¹⁰

On the one hand, then, the gender distinction is the driving force and telos of couple formation, but on the other hand a gender-unequal couple must always be much more than a gender relationship, namely a liaison between two unique individuals. But what holds it together? What is its relational meaning given its constitutive disruption of reciprocity? In what follows I demonstrate the crucial importance of the question about the relational meaning of couples by looking back

⁹ One indication of this is gender-indifferent pet names like the genderless ‘darling’ (Nübling 2011).

¹⁰ The gender neutral semantic of ‘partnership’ is an indicator for the growing indeterminacy of couples in terms of gender. For the historical shift from ‘companionship’ to ‘partnership’ see Leupold (1983).

to the close of the nineteenth century, when the process of gender-unequal couple formation created for itself an identity-establishing ‘other’ in order to stabilize its own cohesion. This was the ‘homosexual’.

The Birth of Homosexuality out of Heterosexuality’s Crisis of Meaning

The gender distinction is also constitutive of those dyads featuring a deviant gender composition, namely gender-*equal* couples. ‘Homos’ and ‘heteros’ share *one* ‘monosexual’ (Schmidt 2004) lifestyle.¹¹ Heterosexuality can be reconstructed by breaking it down into two cultural injunctions: 1. make a gender distinction between possible sexual partners, and 2. make the same distinction between you and your chosen sexual partner. Homosexuality obeys the first injunction, but defies the second: it makes no gender distinction between ego and alter, but instead insists on gender-equality. The both deviant and orthodox nature of this type of couple formation has helped ensure that—if they develop any kind of division of labour or specialization—homosexual couples too have long since been subjected to the majority culture’s heterosexual schema of difference. Even within relationships in which this schema of difference is evidently meaningless, it was and still is possible that one of the participants is designated the ‘man’ or the ‘woman’ (as exemplified in the terms butch/effeminate). But to the extent that gender difference as a whole is losing cultural significance, this perceptual schema is being relaxed.

More remarkable is the semantics developed towards the end of the nineteenth century as the key distinction with respect to sexuality. We do not, as with vegetarians and meat-eaters, distinguish between androphiles (lovers of men) and gynophiles (lovers of women) regardless of whether the desiring parties *themselves* are men or women. Rather than sexual taste, what we classify is a type of relationship, which we define via the gender affiliation of its two components: as same/homo or different/hetero. The very choice of terminology, then, demonstrates that this was a matter of *relational meaning*. And we can in fact learn something about the relational meaning of gender-*unequal* couples if we elucidate the history of the category ‘homosexuality’ (on what follows, see Hirschauer 2010).

This category was developed because certain sexual practices unsettled the very meaning of the distinction between genders that people sought within their social relationships. While the practice of sex between women was not taken seriously as such until into the twentieth century due to the ‘lack’ of a penis, the practice of sex between men was long incorporated into a general category of moral corruption, namely sodomy. This category covered every ‘unnatural use of the genitalia’ that was not for reproduction, whether in the shape of masturbation, sex with the same gender, sex of an unnatural kind with the other gender, with animals, unbelievers, corpses or the devil. It was because sodomy between men had taken on a new significance—due to the sharpening of the distinction between the genders during

¹¹ Not only is the choice of same-sex partners moulded by the projections of the majority culture (butch/effeminate), but we can also discern ‘calls to order’ and commitments to a prescribed sexual orientation within minorities themselves, when, for example, women in a current relationship with a male are perceived as renegade ‘fake lesbians’.

the nineteenth century—that ‘homosexuality’ was carved out from this illustrious collection of practices.

This intensified form of gender distinction was developed primarily in two registers: a natural scientific and an economic one. In his history of anatomy, Thomas Laqueur (1990) reconstructed how our early modern model of ‘sexual difference,’ which assumes a binary opposition between the organs, displaced the hierarchical model of ‘unisexualty’ that had prevailed for 2000 years, which was based on a mirror-image similarity of the genitals. Laqueur shows that the new anatomical model of difference first took hold as a *counter-discourse* to the political theories of the Enlightenment. By asserting the social equality of all people, Enlightenment theories of natural law undermined traditional attempts to justify denying women full political rights. It was only now that people began to insist on the notion that the genders are fundamentally different, a difference that consisted essentially in the woman’s specificity. In other words, contra the postulate of equality, our ‘gender binarism’ posited an *incommensurability* between the genders, and this political hypothesis was backed up with reference to the bodies of men and women. It was essential that women had incomparable bodies to prevent them from claiming the same rights.

This had consequences for how people understood gender *relations*. It was, in a sense, the conceptual antagonism between man and woman that first generated a ‘hetero’sexuality in the strict sense of the term: a physical attraction between entirely heterogeneous beings. If, as Michel Foucault (1978) stated, the sodomite was transgressive and the homosexual a special breed, the background to this is that the woman of antiquity was merely an underdeveloped man, while her modern counterpart was another special breed.

The new biological model of gender difference was, moreover, endowed with psychological and social attributes: ‘gender characteristics’. In a prominent study, Karin Hausen (1981) showed that this polarization of the specific features of gender was bound up with the structural differentiation of commercial and family life. The discourse on gender characteristics shored up the ideological project of allocating less-valued housework to bourgeois women within the new gendered division of labour. Hausen also highlights the rhetoric inherent in this discourse, which offset the contrast between the genders by asserting their complementarity. Once the ascertainment of the fundamental difference between men and women had been made, it became all the more pressing to normatively invoke their togetherness, especially after their formerly shared peasant living space had been dissolved into separate life worlds.

This unsettling of gender-*unequal* couple formation is the background against which sexual relations between men of the *same* gender were exoticized to such an extent that it triggered the development of a bespoke gender category for them. Confusion was inherent in the invention of ‘homosexuality’ because of the highly reified categories utilized by the discourse on gender characteristics that accompanied the segregation of lifeworlds. If men and women are entirely different species *and* dependent on one another in a complementary fashion, then to love men is an intrinsically feminine quality. This makes a man who has a feminine ‘way’ (and prefers men) into a third gender. The category ‘homosexual’ was created

because within this complementary mind-set a different type of desire made no sense and could not be allowed to do so. The disruption to heterosexual togetherness only diminished through contrast with the ‘incomprehensible’ nature of homosexual desire and its investigation.

It is against this background that we can begin to grasp the core semantics of our sexualities by discerning the two messages inherent in the category ‘homosexuality’. The second part of this word stands for the projection of an impossible, nonsensical social relationship upon an individually possible but ‘perverse’ sexual tendency, while the first part of the word classifies this very *relationship* (rather than classifying sexual preference). A ‘homosexual’ comes into being, then, when we transfigure the gender composition of an intimate relationship and turn it into the personal quality of a particular ‘sexual identity’. This category was invented at a point in history when the relational meaning of gender-unequal pairings had entered a precarious phase. To secure the unquestioned status of this pairing required the exoticization of an ‘other’—the displacement of a sexual practice into the intimate desires characteristic of abnormal individuals.

Relational Meaning and the Invocation of Difference in the Twenty-First Century

The nineteenth century constructed its genders as personifications of the distinction between commercial and family life, with individuals specializing in one of these two dimensions. And this unequal division of labour fuelled couple formation. Just a generation ago, in line with this tradition, Erving Goffman (1977) stated that, if they wish to behave in accordance with the characteristics ascribed to them, women and men are dependent on one another: they are ‘essentially incomplete’. This stereotypical division of characteristics required a certain mode of pairing and this undergirded the development of these characteristics. If you wanted to be a ‘man’ then you needed a ‘woman’ and vice versa.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the cultural legacy of the nineteenth century has by no means been entirely demolished. Gender stereotypes remain potent, despite discursive open season having been declared upon them (Ridgeway 2011; Baumann and de Laat 2012). However, if we are to align ourselves with differentiation theory, little remains of the sociostructural underpinnings of gender differentiation. The successes of equalization—meaning the rise of *indifference* to gender—in education, economy and politics have uprooted gender difference on the sociostructural plane, by no means completely, but for the most part (Luhmann 1988, 1995). Today the lifeworlds of women and men are highly intermixed. This gradual realization of gender indifference, and the resounding success of the semantics of equality, constitute a challenge to gender-unequal couples. Goffman’s jigsaw puzzle for couples must now be expressed in sharper form. If the old gender characteristics have been delegitimized entirely, at least discursively, and if both components of the couple should ideally be in paid employment and involved in child-rearing and household management *on an equal basis*—then how can individuals be men and women at all in any meaningful sense? In other words: If

men and women are finally to be equal in every possible respect, then what is ‘hetero’ about a gender-unequal couple?

In view of this new cultural puzzle, the question arises as to which cultural efforts society is currently developing in order to solve it. We do not have to take Luhmann’s assumption of the evolutionary disappearance of gender difference as a (falsifiable) historical statement but we can use it as a hypothesis to observe how something, which is potentially slipping away, is maintained and reproduced. Alongside gender stereotypes, whose effects are still being felt, a series of new attempts to reconstruct gender difference seems to have appeared on the scene. These attempts include the aesthetic delegation of gender differentiation to professional gender performers in the visual media; gender marketing, which constructs gendered target groups, promising a supply of consumer products tailored to meet ‘specific’ needs (from toys to bedclothes to packet soups) or the remarkable way in which gender difference has been levelled out in working life while reappearing in the realm of leisure activities: football and body building for him, yoga and aerobic for her. Let’s take closer look at two of the attempts to reconstruct gender difference: the turbocharged visual invocation of difference in pornography (1) and the persistent quotidian defence, and the fraught political thematization of the many other inequalities found within couple relationships (2).

1. What is suspicious about the visual discourse of pornography is the coupling of permanent arousal to the highly redundant presentation of known anatomical facts. It is as if the *disregarding* of gender, as demanded by meritocracy and love-centred individualism, is being offset by ostentatious *showing off* and *staring at*. And what the organs do with one another appears to enable us to believe that the meaning of ‘being a man’ consists in an exclusive ability to serve women through ‘insertion’ (and *not* on a reciprocal and egalitarian basis).¹² In this sense, gender-unequal relationships have begun to make themselves ‘heterosexual’ via pornography. These relationships are becoming sexualized by highlighting the purely carnal motives attributed to so-called ‘homosexuals’ since the nineteenth century.

This is remarkable for two reasons. First, as a result gender-unequal couples are beginning to view themselves as heterosexual for the first time. For a very long time it was only gender-equal couples that were marked out as *sexual relationships*. Gender-unequal couples may have been ‘straight’ for scholars of sexuality and those actively engaged in sexual politics, but in their own minds they were simply normal lovers (and this no doubt still applies to most of them). Rather than having a highly specific physical interest in a type of gender, they simply embodied the culturally obvious way of entering into couple relationships. Second, the sexual specification of ‘intercourse’ is petering out over time. As recently as the 1980s there were ‘sodomy laws’ in the United States prohibiting oral and anal intercourse, and these were coupled with the wishful notion that such practices might be ascribed exclusively to homosexuals. On present-day pornographic websites, meanwhile,

¹² The gender asymmetric performance of penetrative practices is of high symbolic significance, comparable to that of asymmetric genital circumcision in other cultural contexts.

heterosexuality presents itself in such a way that terms such as “arsefucker” and “cocksucker” are no longer ways of denouncing ‘other’ sexual practices. They may refer to a man or woman. So homosexuality is losing its supposedly unique characteristics. In sexual terms, homosexuality is being subsumed into the various forms of potential stimulation that homo sapiens’ various bodily orifices happen to provide.

2. Alongside this pornographic discourse, what is striking about gender-unequal couples is their ceaseless, generally joyless but nonetheless agitated political thematization of a grievance, namely the inequality that characterizes the division of labour within the private sphere. The unrivalled discourse on inequality within the political sphere activates a schema of self-observation for those relationships in which gender-*inequality* plays a constitutive role. This discourse creates a permanent representational requirement for couples either to complain about diverse forms of unequal distribution as failures of emancipation or to justify them. The demand for equality has two consequences in couples. It renews the imperative to *make a distinction*, so that comparisons can be made in the first place. And it paves the way for failures of emancipation just as aesthetic ideals (in promotional photographs, for example) lead to physical deficiencies. And, to the extent that couples still make distinctions according to gender, these emancipatory deficiencies represent an irremediable lack. The demand for equality confronts couples with the paradox constitutive of modern gender relations: ultimate equality between the genders can never be achieved because the proposition ‘men and women are equal’ *begins with a distinction* (Luhmann 1988).

It thus seems likely that the persistent unequal division of labour within the household (tools and garage for him, textiles and bathroom for her) is one of the last couple-internal opportunities to display a significant gender difference. If there was an *egalitarian* division of labour in every respect, many couples would eliminate much of what constitutes their ‘heterosexuality’: their physical idealizations, fixated on the difference between social species.¹³ They would find themselves confronted with a cultural puzzle that most couples (still) prefer to avoid: “Why *am* I with a man?” (or a woman). They would fall back on the disrupted reciprocity with which their pairing began.

The invocation of difference in pornography and politics—the sexual and political forms of arousal—still try to extract meaning from gender difference by marking the gender-unequal couple as ‘sexual too’ and as ‘politically deficient’.

¹³ Of course, this does not mean that a man who finally performed household tasks on an equal basis, or even just extensively, would be perceived by every woman as less attractive. But we should be careful not to underestimate norms of attractiveness. It remains the case that a ‘female protector’ would have a child rather than a husband and aesthetic role-reversals—aggressive women, tearful men, tall women and shorter men, superior sportswomen, and so on—are perceived as virtually unbearable well into the most ‘emancipated’ of milieux. This does not rule out the possibility of historical change: new laws on child maintenance payments, for example, that place a greater obligation on women than hitherto to be self-sufficient following a divorce, might make a traditional division of labour, featuring time off work to raise a family and loss of qualifications, so risky that the economic ‘provider’ would lose value on the relationship market, while the ‘caring man,’ whose responsibility for children means providing time rather than money, might do very well.

These attempts at reconstruction are simultaneously linked with other persistent residues of gender differentiation. The flimsy meaning of gender-unequal pairings also has consequences for inequality of income and the division of labour in professional life. In a comment in *die Zeit* weekly newspaper (20 January 2011) Anna Marohn remarked on the (unsurprising) findings of a survey of 2000 single adults, carried out by a dating service in Hamburg, that women find men more attractive if they earn more than them¹⁴: “The survey may help smart men find surprising answers to previously unresolved questions. Why are women so bad at negotiating a decent salary? Why are they so willing to be paid less for the same work? This is in fact a selfish act, a way of ensuring they don’t end up having to choose between rich old crocks”.

What we find expressed here with such delightful post-gender irony can be stated in prosaic sociological terms as follows. Not just the domestic division of labour, but also inequality of income—mediated through norms of attractiveness—is a component of ‘heterosexuality’. Socio-economic inequality is not just a sociopolitical nuisance. It is in fact raw material for couples, for the meaning-creation centre of gender difference. They are doing *gender* while doing inequality (Fenstermaker et al. 1991).

So the gender-unequal couple not only reproduces inequalities as identified by sociostructural analysis (though it undoubtedly does so, and certainly more than labour organizations do). First and foremost it reproduces the very gender inequality that underpins it, in other words, it reproduces (a) a system of cultural ordering that enables the members of society to appear as women or men in the first place (doing gender), and (b) its own meaning as a relationship between two unequal parts (doing heterosexuality). If we ignore this ongoing cultural accomplishment (or attribute it to biology), we will fail to understand both the meaning and the persistence of socio-economic inequalities between men and women. The socio-economic inequality between these two population classes, as established by outside observers, is to a great extent an *aggregate effect* of the reproduction of millions of couple relationships between individuals of a different gender.

Thus, if we wish to comprehend sociologically the fact that young women sometimes find old crocks attractive; if, through a bizarrely unequal exchange, youth and attractiveness—erotic capital (Hakim 2010)—are converted into money and status, we must also take seriously such relationships’ extensive need for gender to have meaning: the seemingly nostalgic desire to come together as ‘man’ and ‘woman’.

Love-Centred Individualism and Gender-Blindness

Of course, highly equal couples can also generate relational meaning, but this form of meaning has to do with enhanced individualism, in other words it is becoming increasingly independent of gender. Nowadays individuals may live in a gender-

¹⁴ A third of the women had no interest in men who earn less than them; see also Buchmann and Eisner (2001).

equal or gender-unequal relationship, as seen through the eyes of an *observer*, without this necessarily being the case *for them*. A small-scale empirical study on the relationship history of same-sex couples (Meier 2003) relates the story of two women (here called Anita and Iris) who have fallen in love and begun a long-term, publicly displayed relationship, but without referring to themselves as 'lesbian'. As Anita puts it: "The fact that I am interested in a woman at all is purely down to Iris". Lesbian activists would probably assume that these women are refusing to come out and openly state they are lesbians because they want to distance themselves from a stigmatized model of womanhood. A psychoanalyst would suggest that the pair is displaying an unconscious resistance to acknowledging their sexual orientation because doing so would have negative affective consequences for them. Our *sociological* conclusion is slightly different, namely that this couple is highlighting the fact that individuals must take on a specific sexual identity only if the gender composition of their couple relationship challenges gender-*unequal* relationships. Anita and Iris are claiming for themselves an individualized love-centred relationship very much in line with the romantic tradition. For each of them, their partner has, first and foremost, a name and face rather than a gender. In forming a couple, they are demanding emancipation from the need to mark their gender affiliation.¹⁵

It is thus questionable whether these two women are in fact having a same-sex relationship at all, or whether this state of affairs, so conspicuous from *outside*, is of merely marginal importance *within* their relationship—much like the fact that they are of the 'same height' or have the 'same colour of hair'. So alongside the question, identified earlier, as to *when* couples make distinctions according to gender—only when looking for a partner and during the courting phase, only in the case of particular sexual practices or also in the context of housekeeping, conversations, starting a family, and so on—we must ask another empirical question, namely *who* is classifying according to gender with respect to couples: outsiders or those within the relationship? It would thus be quite wrong to view certain supposedly homosexual relationships as same-sex relationships. They should instead be considered a form of partner selection that disregards gender within the context of romantic love or individualized attraction, that is, as relationships that view the same gender as no obstacle to affection but are subsequently genderized and sexualized through the external gaze. Of course, gender-unequal couples also have and make use of such freedom to disregard gender. After all, to the extent that they wish to be personal relationships, they too must produce gender-transcendent relational meaning.

And in fact, at a time when gender distinctions have been culturally weakened, gender-equal and gender-unequal couples appear to be moving closer to one another in complementary fashion. While gender-unequal pairings are ostentatiously

¹⁵ As Diamond (2008) concludes in her study of the questionable concept of sexual orientation, not only are women less conscious of sexual types than men, but even the concept of 'bisexuality' scarcely does justice to their 'sexual fluidity' because it upholds the idea of marking certain lifestyles as an expression of a sexual species. If individuals subsume gender affiliation within a range of dimensions of physical attractiveness or personal affection, they are better understood as *ambisexual*; they relate to gender in an *aschematic* way (Bem 1993).

heterosexualizing themselves, homosexuals have ceased to be ‘our sexual foreigners’. During the 20th century both researchers and the general public have found more interesting objects—first transvestites and transsexuals, then intersexuals, paedophiles and zoophiles—and to the extent that this is occurring, individuals in same-sex relationships are relieved of the burden of embodying and differentiating the sexual dimension for society: by, for example, decoupling this dimension from reproduction and from its relational meaning. It is now much easier for homosexuals to be ‘faithful’ and think about starting a family. If society permits the legal valorization of their relationships, this does not mean that now, finally, men who desire men can marry men who desire men (and that women can do the same with respect to ‘their gender’), but that people no longer place such importance on what gender composition couples have. If the forms of civil union for homosexuals that have been introduced are expanded into full-blown marriage, they are no longer a special right for same-sex couples, but rather an element of an individual right to marriage that disregards gender affiliation. Who we are interested in sexually is no longer of such great interest. And this societal *disinterest* in distinguishing between genders within couples is probably the ultimate step towards homosexual emancipation, namely towards the disappearance of ‘homosexuality,’ its dissolution into gender-equal couple relationships that are permitted to cultivate relational meaning and become individualized, in other words, to ignore the issue of their gender composition altogether.

The convergence in the partner-oriented semantics of gender-equal and gender-unequal couples is also interesting in this context. In gender-unequal relationships, the phrase “my husband” or “my wife” (or as people sometimes say, “my man” or “my woman”) is a way of referring to the complimentary ‘half’ of a differently gendered individual (“every guy, grab a girl”). If a woman refers to “her husband” or “her man,” then this also marks the speaker’s womanhood, just as his references to “his wife” or “his woman” mark his manhood. For just as he contributes to making her a woman, she helps make him a man (“she takes him as her husband,” in other words her “man”). The heterosexual mode of reference may thus fuse one’s gender title with one’s marital status.¹⁶

If gender-equal couples are beginning to detach these terms from their heterosexual context, then what we are seeing is the abstraction and displacement of the meaning of gender categories. The abstraction lies in the fact that the expression “my husband” or “my man,” when used by a man, means the *same* as the expression “my wife” or “my woman” from the lips of a woman: namely, “life partner”. But gender categories, as ways of referring to life partners, have always featured this indifference to gender, that is, this indifference is also present when different-sex couples use these categories. “My husband/man”—whatever the empirical differences—means *the same* as “my wife/woman,” but cultural gendering obscures this when people refer to the highly individual person with

¹⁶ This is even clearer in languages such as German, where *Mann* and *Frau* are the usual terms for both “man” and “woman” and “husband” and “wife,” or French, in which *femme* designates both “woman” and “wife”.

whom they have decided to spend part, the greater part, or perhaps even the rest of their lives.

The displacement referred to above is caused by the decoupling of one's own and others' gender affiliation. If a woman refers to "her wife/woman," then this adds no confirmation of her status as woman to her own gender affiliation. She remains a female speaker in a trivial sense. The only significant issue here is that she "has a wife/woman," a female partner. Her own gender, meanwhile, remains comparatively unmarked. She merely prefers women, or to be more precise *one particular* woman, as her life partner. She happens to love a woman, without it necessarily mattering that she is one as well.

As gender distinctions lose their significance, 'straight' people too will be compelled to come to the same semantic conclusion as Monique Wittig, writing about women who love women in the late 1970s: "It would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, or live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women" (1980: 110). What Wittig was getting at here is that the category 'woman' makes sense only in relation to the category 'man'. But in a context in which significant gender categories are dissolving, the word 'lesbian' means little more than 'lover,' implying a willingness to affectively affirm another human being 'warts and all'. This encompasses gender affiliation just as it does disabilities, hair colour, accent and countless other outrageous idiosyncrasies.

The two-person relationship, in other words, is that social form that does not, like other social fields, lay claim to us only with respect to very specific occupational capacities, roles or communicative contributions, but is instead a means of withstanding the drastic individualization of late modern persons. This relationship holds up a mirror to the singularity to which we lay claim. This mirror must show a great deal more than a form of membership that lumps us together with half of humanity. The romantic concept of love states: I'm so unique in the world that just one other person, "only you" can be this mirror. This idolization is so powerful because its cultural historical backdrop is monotheism: love is religion's pre-eminent successor institution (Tyrell 1987; Beck 1990).

To the extent that this individualism has taken hold, the relational meaning of gender-unequal dyads has also changed within the social history of two-person togetherness and gender distinction. The meaning of the duality of the couple has shifted: from the communitizing demonstration of the 'reunification' of those elements separated through classification in many tribal societies, through the complimentary 'gender characteristics' of bourgeois modernity, to the mirroring of the individualized self *despite* gender difference. To put it in numerical terms: nowadays, the 'two' in two-person togetherness is no longer brought about by invoking the oneness of a primitive binary division of the people within society. It arises from the one-plus-one of individualized intimate relationships.

Conclusion

In this article, I revisited a topic initially identified by Erving Goffman (1977), questioning the sociological connection between a dyadic social relationship and a dyadic classification of people. Instead of presupposing couples as ‘hetero-’ or ‘homosexual’ I attempted to elucidate under which conditions dyadic relationships are ‘gendered’ relationships at all: Do intimate relationships, differentiated by gender, actually differentiate by gender themselves?

In the first section, I depicted the gender difference within couples as a feature to be taken seriously as the constitutive inequality of and for couples, something which is strived and cared for by most couples, at least in certain phases of their relationship, counter to the political imperatives for ‘equality’. This inequality is neither accidental nor reformable. It is in fact that which people deem as being constitutive of a couple in the first place.

The next two sections depicted the ambivalent twofold potential of intimate dyads in reconstructing and transcending gender. On the one hand, two-person relationships are a highly conservative production centre of gender binarism, on the other, they are, as an engine of individualization, a key site for the development of gender indifference. Relationships formed under the sway of the gender distinction require their own ways of disregarding gender in order to make themselves as personal as possible. On the one hand, then, the gender distinction is the driving force and telos of couple formation, but, on the other, a gender-unequal couple must always be much more than a gender relationship, namely a liaison between two unique individuals.

The fourth section turned to the topic of same-sex couples via an historical excursion. When we shift sociological attention to gender as a schema, used or not used in the (self)observation of couples, the relevant difference between ‘homo’ and ‘hetero’ is not their biological composition, but whether this composition is marked or unmarked, i.e., normalized. The gender equal couple has been markedly gendered by society: The ‘homosexual’ was needed as an exoticized ‘other’ in a certain historical phase of heterosexuality.

The last two sections turned back to the twofold potential and unstable situation of couple relations in the early twenty-first century. On the one hand, there is remarkable gender nostalgia: the gradual realization of gender indifference in law, in politics, in education and the labour market—secular degendering—induces temporary regenderings, attempts to reconstruct intimate relations with a still meaningful gender distinction—including pornographic and political invocations of difference. On the other hand, the distinction between homo- and heterosexual is beginning to dissolve, the semantics of their description is converging, the significance of intimate relationships as gendered relationships is beginning to diminish. The relational meaning of couple formation is becoming increasingly independent of gender.

Empirical research investigating this twofold potential of dyadic relationships in the twenty-first century will have to ask in which phases, moments, and dimensions couples of varying milieu, generation, and lifestyle celebrate or transcend gender

differences. It is likely that surprising combinations will abound: childless dual career couples without deep gender distinctions, gay and lesbian parents with a traditional division of labour, postgender couples falling back on genderisms when becoming pregnant, and ageing couples with traditional gender concepts but postgender practices.

Acknowledgements Funding was provided by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Grant No. FOR 1939).

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