



The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies

Queer Theory

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Queer theory grew out of a transdisciplinary intellectual movement that started in the late 1980s, when many scholars, especially those from humanities-oriented disciplines, began to theorize about sex, sexuality, and sexual identities in ways that especially challenged dominant scientific and cultural assumptions. Although scholars had used the term *queer theory* prior to 1990—especially Gloria Anzaldúa, who had used the term several times in the 1980s—many see the birth of queer theory as coinciding with the queer theory conference organized by theorist Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990. That event was followed by a special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* that de Lauretis edited from the conference proceedings. This work was quickly accepted and expanded upon by many academics, especially feminists who were eager to challenge notions of gender as part of an essential self, and scholars in gay and lesbian studies who were able to use queer theory as a fresh lens for examining the social constructions of what were widely considered to be normal sexual identities and natural sexual acts.

Queer theory, despite its name, does not involve a singular theoretical view or a set of propositions related to gender and sexuality. Rather, it is a collective term that engages multiple, and sometimes conflicting, viewpoints about sex, gender, and sexuality. *Queer theory*, much like the word *queer* itself, is an often-contested term that is used in different ways by multiple scholars and activists. Although the lack of agreement about what queer theory means might be a limitation in some theoretical camps, it is often viewed as an advantage by queer theorists who see different viewpoints or perspectives as allowing for different insights about how gender and sexuality can be understood, analyzed, or enacted in cultures. Often queer theory is used as a tool to examine power and power relations, especially the political nature of sex, gender, and sexuality. Queer theorists also tend to explore gendered and sexualized practices that are constructed as deviant in cultures, including those that might be constructed as heterosexual in nature. Queer theorizing resists the categorization of people, even by objective—scientific means, into gendered or sexualized categories, especially binary categories such as man—woman or heterosexual—homosexual. Context is important, especially how geography, history, and cultural climate help to characterize or even constitute viewpoints.

Queer Theory's Activist and Intellectual Backgrounds

Many scholars point to the appeal of queer theory being that it is both an intellectual and an activist endeavor. Adding to this activist-intellectual synergy is the coterminous adaptation of the word *queer* by both academics and activist groups such as ACT UP or Queer Nation in the early 1990s. Queer Nation's parade chant of "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!" took a pejorative word that had been used for decades to abuse, shame, and even create notions of deviant sexual identity and behavior and reclaimed it as a tool for gaining awareness and questioning sexual and gender categorization. Similarly, queer theorists were using the word *queer* to disrupt the comfort others felt with the status quo of understanding sex and gender. These activist uses of *queer* faced opposition from people who claimed that using the word was nonproductive or that it conjured up painful memories of being bullied or abused. Still, the use and reuse of *queer* continued to find new purposes: to serve as a catch-all identity marker for those who are not heterosexual, as a commercialized term used to market or otherwise commodify sexual identities, and to name or rename departments or academic units.

Queer theory is unique in the sense that—in both its street activist and scholarly forms—it relies less on building or protecting a specific identity label than on critiquing heteronormative values and assumptions. As that implies, most queer studies embrace poststructuralist theory, especially deconstruction, as well as ideological theories. Early pioneers in queer theory include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, and David Halperin. Many of these scholars were influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, who is often considered a primary scholar for paving the way for queer theory. In 1993, Duke University Press started its Series Q line of books, indicating that queer theory was becoming legitimized as an academic field of inquiry. Annamarie Jagose developed a primer on queer theory that was published in 1996, further cementing queer theory's role in academic studies.

As queer theory gained traction, scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson noted that race and class were not addressed in queer critique and that this ignorance dismissed the implications of queer intersecting with racialized or classed identities. As a response, he developed *quare studies* to examine the experiences of QPOC. Other scholars, such as José Esteban Muñoz, examined what it meant to disidentify with different aspects of identities and even counteridentities—especially for those who came from different identities that are typically constructed as marginalized. Scholars also started to use queer theory to explore colonialism. For example, Scott Lauria Morgensen examined how White colonization of Native people in North America often involved the murder of two-spirited people, who were viewed by invaders as sexual and gender deviants, first. Queer theory continues to expand to critique social understandings of nationality, ability, religion, and other socially constructed identities.

Using Queer Theory

Queer theory has been used in many ways by scholars, artists, and activists: as a tool for critique; to reexamine historical viewpoints; for coalition building and activism; to inspire art; and, more recently, as a form of social scientific inquiry.

Queer Critique

Queer theory has primarily been used as an analytical tool for critiquing the creation of categories for sex, gender, and sexual identities. These critiques are often aimed at fictive texts including movies, television programs, or novels; cultural discourses about policies, actions, notable current events, and the people involved with them; and intellectual ideas, especially theories of gender or sexuality as they are developed by the sciences. Often queer critique can involve a number of texts or discourses. For example, Lee Edelman argued that queers are often socially pitted against children because people fear mortality (represented by the threat that queer people make to procreation) and crave a continuity of the self (represented by people's offspring). To make his argument, he drew from news coverage of the case of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was murdered in 1998 in Wyoming; readings of films from Alfred Hitchcock; and psychoanalytic theory. Such a blend of texts and scholarly approaches is not unusual in queer theory.

Challenging Historical Viewpoints

Queer theory is also used to examine archival materials, historical documents, and enduring cultural discourses to better understand how sexual and gender politics have seeped into historical understanding. Whereas lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history typically seeks to understand queer people and their accomplishments or suppression over time, queer theoretical explorations tend to examine how history suppresses possibilities of queer pasts. Queer historical explorations often involve examining multiple cultures, especially when cultural assimilation is evident. Queer theory is also used to problematize notions of advancement for queer people, especially as queer cultures and practices are abandoned for heteronormative, often capitalist values. As that suggests, many historical feminist, gender, or sexual liberation movements have been analyzed through a lens of queer theory.

Coalition Building and Activism

The term *queer* has been reclaimed and used as a unifying term to unite those marked as sexual deviants or gender outlaws, just as queer theory has been used to unite people in thinking about how they can find political power. This form of connection is one that is more about affinity than it is about essence. In its ear-

liest forms, *queer's* ability to create an affective stance of unity could be seen by "Queer Nation" appearing under the cover logo of gay–lesbian quarterly magazine *Outlook*, chants and rallying cries that invoked simultaneous celebration and defiance at rallies, and organizations using *queer* in their titles as a way of marking that they offer welcome to a wide variety of people and as a way of radically asserting their difference. The claiming of queer identity, paired with an academic movement, allowed a growing sense of coalition building that involved both thought and action. Sex workers, people with AIDS, health care professionals, people who identified as not being heterosexual, and their allies were coming together and are still coming together to think and act using the queer label and using aspects of queer theory.

Art

Queer theory is also credited with the queering of method, where artistic and expressionistic forms of intellectual development are recognized as valid ways of knowing, thinking about, and experiencing queer worlds. Sometimes these works are directly influenced by queer scholarly writing, such as the science fiction novels of Octavia Butler that incorporate queer theory into fictive writing. In the early years of queer theory, a genre of film called New Queer Cinema emerged where artists including Gus Van Sant, Gregg Araki, and Rose Troche theorized about queerness via their films. Music genres ranging from queercore to queer hip-hop expand the range of genre forms. New media and the ability to create and distribute art more easily have allowed many artists to queer otherwise heteronormative art forms and to deconstruct heterosexuality in unique ways. For example, a genre of fan fiction known as slash allows the queering of characters from popular texts. This genre is queer not only because it destabilizes the heteronormative nature of most popular culture but also in that it embraces a sense of pleasure with the critique as popular characters find themselves in interpersonal and sexual relationships that defy gendered sexual expectations.

Social Scientific Scholarship

Although it would seem that many social scientific studies are about classifying and identifying specific aspects of gender or sexuality, researchers have also used queer theory as a form of critique in interpretive or critical social scientific studies as well as a sensemaking mechanism for considering what data mean. Many guides or handbooks related to qualitative research methods include sections on queer theoretical approaches, as the fluid nature of queer theory matches up well with the iterative nature of qualitative research methods.

Queer Theory's Ongoing Debates

Although queer theory has gained much traction as a scholarly approach and as an interdisciplinary area of study, it is not without its ongoing debates. Many have questioned the utility of queer theory, contending that it relies too much on textual analysis and not enough on lived experiences and everyday realities. Arguments against this viewpoint suggest that texts capture some aspect of life and the language or images that create them are what constitute queer experience. Others have argued that queer theory turns its focus to two extremes, either examining the lives of privileged White people or focusing too much on unusual or obscure cases that will probably have little resonance with their audience. In response, queer theorists have continued to try and expand areas of inquiry to include a number of intersectional identities. Along those lines, others argue that queer theory will often focus on deconstructing gender or sexuality while reifying other social identities or categories, thus belying its own deconstructionist tendencies.

Activists often note that when they try to embrace queer theory they are quickly lost in jargon and obscure writing, a problem also noted by many new students of queer theory. Academics in other disciplines have also critiqued queer theory, pointing out that it does not transfer well to application in other fields. In response, many queer theorists argue that this is one of the primary reasons for queer theory: It queers notions of conventional science and approaches academic inquiry from new perspectives. Still, many scholars reject the idea that queer theory is something new, instead contending it is an extension of literary or rhetorical criticism.

In 2012, a public debate emerged about whether or not queer theory had died, including contributions from such notable queer theorists as Michael Warner and Jack Halberstam. Although some believe queer theory has moved past its ability to serve as a form of radical critique, others argued that the idea that it was even being debated shows there is a need for queer theory. Others pointed out that queer theory has been labeled as dead before but that it still continues to be a viable and valuable tool for scholarly inquiry.

See also [Intersections Between Sex, Gender, and Sexual Identity](#); [Queer](#); [Queer Politics](#); [Sexual Norms and Practices](#); [Sexual-Identity Labels](#)

- queer
- queer theory
- sexual identity
- coalition building
- gender and sexuality
- theories
- activism

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