

## Queer Theory: Origins, Evolution and Application

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### ABSTRACT

Thus, this chapter gives a brief history of queer theory, its assumptions and use, and various fields of study. Having originated at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, queer theory seeks to unsettle fixed gender and sexual identities by subverting the conventional oppositions like male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Derived from post-structuralism and cultural feminism in alliance with psychoanalysis, queer theory sparked more from Foucault, Butler, and Sedgwick on how power relations and institutions regulate sexual identity. The current chapter discusses how Queer theory displaces fixed identitarianism where gender and sex rate as sui generis stressing heteropatriarchal assumptions that regard heterosexuality as homosexuality's antithesis proffered as a natural orientation.

Thus, besides making theoretical interventions, queer theory has functioned as the influential framework of cultural, social, and political discussions. They include literature sociology anthropology and education, which offers relevant aspects of the analysis of identity, resistance, and justice. The chapter also expounds on how queer theory relates to present activism in this regard especially in movements that aim at subverting the oppressive structures instead of wearing them. Thus, turning queer theory is an empowering tool in academia and activism as it provides innovative ways of reading and challenging the regulatory norms of society. This chapter is set within these parameters with a focus on indicating that queer theory remains an important lens through which continues to address current questions of gender, sexuality, and power.

**Key Words:** *Queer theory, Deconstruction, Performativity, Queer Spaces, CaseStudies*

### INTRODUCTION:

Queer theory can be described as a queer critical perspective that aims at transforming the prevailing social norms about gender and sexual orientation. Coalescing in the last quarter of the twentieth century in direct reaction to the perceived inadequacies of both the "feminist" and gay and lesbian studies – queer theory plants questions about the multiple facets of praxis that demands conformity to activist identity categorisations. Essentially, queer theory seeks to resist and challenge structures of dualism as well as fundamental and often powerful divisions of masculinity/femininity, homosexuality/heterosexuality, and nature /culture.

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Thus, queer theory disperses ‘categories’ like ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’ as artificial constructs since it denies the wholeness of the identity and the desire. Instead, it refers that these categories have been socially created and culturally governed hence they can be criticized and reconstructed.

Queer theory is an offshoot of post-structuralism and has assimilated elements of feminism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. Most of its main concepts and ideas have been developed through the works or influenced by such great scholars as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in “The History of Sexuality” (1978), Foucault’s theorisation of power and sexuality disproves the discursive construction of sexuality as an intrinsic, biological attribute of sexuality. Instead, he said sexuality is rooted in institutions such as medical law and education that define what is normative or pathological. In “Gender Trouble” (1990), Judith Butler went further in her assault against fixed gender identity claiming that gender is not something one ‘is’ but something that one ‘does’ For Butler, gender is performative – constructed through the act of performances which conform with cultural expectations. This idea counters the concept of gender as fixed, and innate, as it supposes that genders are changeable and are not inherent.

Not only has the queer theory provided theoretic insights, however, it has greatly influenced the modern social, cultural as well as political context. Drawing on the epistemologies that involve the challenge of the norms that define a people’s existence, queer theory offers new ways of comprehending sexuality, gender, and power. It has thus arguably become an important antidote for challenging hetero-sexism –the discursive regime that posits heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of sexual orientation while disregarding the rights and existence of the lesbian gay bisexual and trans (LGBTQ+) person. Queer theory has also been applied in activism, especially in movements which consider assimilation into mainstream queer politics as a strategy. While categories of queer theory, often demand entry into mainstream structures, queer activism leans towards the total transformation of these structures.

The value of queer theory is in such impacts as the reflection of power through norms and categories that result in subversion of oppression systems. Thus, it gives some key to understanding how the process of constructing identities takes place and how the constructed identities can be destabilized and re-

imagined. This has implications for the present socio-political climate, especially where issues of gender and sexuality and resulting rights, for example, the queer community are more assertive. The negation of dualism and normality that forms the basis of Queer theory enables the greatest inclusion on the levels of identity beyond the binaries.

Queer theory, as an important theoretical perspective, has a complicated historical timeline and various theoretical and applied developments; therefore, the goal of this chapter is to present chronological, theoretical, and practical overviews of queer theory studies. It starts with an account of the history of queer theory, relating it to feminism, postmodernism, and gay and lesbian theories. This will be followed by an analysis of the major principles of queer theory such as the rejection of heteronormativity, performativity of gender and the consideration of space and time. The last section of the chapter will therefore discuss how the concept of queer has been adopted in different fields such as literature and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and education among others. When discussing these topics, this chapter is intended to give the reader an understanding of the development of queer theory, and how it has revolutionized the various academic disciplines and social justice issues.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

The queer theory originated from the historical social movements such as the gay and lesbian movements of the 1970s and the post-modernist movements of the 1990s. The field of the so-called Queer theory, which has investigated how sexual and gender categories are constructed as opposed to natural, emerged from the interaction between critical theory with social activism in the 1980-1990s. Among these are Michel Foucault who provided an academic basis for critical understanding of power, sexuality, and the body.

### **1. 1 Early Influences**

Foucault’s work done in “The History of Sexuality” is seen to be one of the most primer works in queer theory. Foucault (1978) established that sexuality is not biological but has a historical connotation which is portrayed through power relations. He has been very helpful in demythologizing essentialist discourses of sexuality through his account of how modern society has sought to control and classify sexual acts as aspects of power. Instead of focusing on sexuality and identity,

it moved to a critique of the discursive and institutional politics of sex and power enabling and constraining our knowledge of ourselves.

On the same note, early attempts at gay and lesbian critiques conducted in the 1980s were some of the initial elements of queer theory. Eve Osofsky Sedgwick one of the foremost pioneers of gay and lesbian studies, shifted focus in the discipline for a purely literary and cultural analysis of the representations of same-sex desire. Some of her work was published in her book “Epistemology of the Closet” in which Sedgwick looked at how Western thinking partitions individuals based on sexual preference and by doing so sustains the homosexual/heterosexual binary that supports the larger system of dominance (Sedgwick, 1990). Sedgwick’s work became important for challenging binary thinking and erasing the rigid distinction between hetero and homosexuality as the sexual orientation is constructed socially and culturally.

## 1. 2 The Emergence of Queer Theory:

“Queer Theory” as a definite title was used for the first time by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990, at the conference that aimed at uniting scholars who worked in the field of sexuality studies. De Laurites (1991) has named the strategy of existing queer theory to defy heterocephalous suppositions and to express the assimilationist trend in gay and lesbian studies. More importantly, her critique of gay and lesbian politics as being insufficiently critical of the category of identity signalled the official launch of queer theory as an independent field of study. Another influential work that was published the same year as Queer Times was Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble”, which also helped to construct queer theory based on the deconstruction of gender norms. Gender performances were proclaimed by Butler (1990) as a set of rules on how every subject performs his or her gender and reacts to the gender performances of the other. Butler’s contributions to the queer theory about sexuality extended it beyond mere sexuality to include, a critique of gender binaries and the normalizing practices that regulate it.

## 1. 3 Early Critiques and Expansions:

When queer theory emerged, it had critics inside of it. Warner (1993) drew the sense of a more flexible approach of identity that went beyond identity politics, where the claims of such politics were based on the stable categories of sexuality and gender. Warner called for a queer critique that counters the methodological

quarantine of the politics of recognition and one-dimensional anti-assimilationism support. At the same time, intersectionality became a historically contextualized and greatly expanded concept within queer theory. Through intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) made societal queer identities cognate by race, class, as well as gender. She pointed out that in her framework one could not discuss the experience of queer people with other kinds of oppression. Therefore, queer theory came into being from a cross-over between critical theory, activism, and the prior theories regarding gender and sexualities. Advancing from the works of Foucault and the initial framework supplied by Sedgwick, de Lauretis but especially Butler, expanding through Warner’s critiques as well as including Crenshaw’s intersectionality – queer theory persists in problematizing the assumptions about identity and power.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

**Queer theory can be said to have several theoretical underpinnings:** Queer theory intervenes in and navigates the gender and sexual systems of a society and provides others means of comprehending identity, desire, and space. In its essence, queer theory works to expose the heterosexual and binary gender underpinnings of the current ways of thinking and practices.

## 2. 1 Deconstruction of Normativity:

Mainly, queer theory has addressed heteronormativity as a societal assumption that heterosexuality is the only correct form of relationship. Heteronormativity was challenged by Rich (1980) in her idea of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ which means that heterosexuality is compulsory and comparable to race. In this vein, Rich’s work provides the groundwork for queer theory’s more sweeping challenge to how institutions over-naturalize heterosexuality and assign it primary status in society. As such queer theory challenges those paradigms providing new ways of analysis of desire and identity. Halperin (1995) takes it further by pointing out that because queers exist and are sexual, they necessarily exist outside of gay/straight and male/female binaries, and therefore queers always deconstruct traditional sexual and gender categories.

## 2. 2 Performativity and Identity:

Performativity as the poststructuralist philosophy of Judith Butler is a fundamental concept in queer theories’

analysis of identity. Butler (1993), in “*Bodies That Matter*” posits that gender is the creation of a subject that is disciplined by a set of norms. Thus, it will be more accurate to deem gender as a process of constant construction that results from daily performances that meet the expectations of a given society. This concept challenges the existing ideas of maintaining the proper identities and their stability, revealing how these identities are built regarding power relations and discursive practices. Furthermore, queer theorists such as Halberstam, (2005) have taken on extending and criticizing temporal modes. Like the notion of queer time by Judith Halberstam for the concept of queer temporality that navigates outside of the structured ‘time regimes’ based on the procreative timeline of straight marriage and family, it suggests different timelines or life cycles for queer existence.

### 2. 3 Queer Places and Spaces:

Queer theory also examines how and/or places are configured by and against structures. According to Bell and Valentine (1995), queer space is areas that are resistant to conventional social formations and personality structures. About the favelas, discos abertos operate as spaces that do not conform to heteronormativity and offer spaces to sexuality that is marginalised. In the same manner, Jon Binnie (2004) discusses the extent to which urban spaces contain elements of queerness through community and activist works where queer people can change and queer the public space, so as not to be writing within erasure to dominant epistemologies.

### EVOLUTION OF QUEER THEORY:

Queer theory as an area of sociology has chosen to embrace as many views as possible since its formation this has helped in enriching it by adding new perspectives. Especially significant to this process are critical race theory, disability studies, and, most notably, feminism to let queer theory work through intersectional subjects and types of oppression.

### 3. 1 Expanding the Scope:

A new aspect of the queer theory that was introduced was the “queer of colour critique”, which incorporated race and ethnicity into sexual identities. According to Ferguson (2004), in the early stages of the elaboration of Queer Theory, the latter largely omitted colour queer people and their lives and experiences. The major critique of Ferguson is to point out that race, class, and

sexuality are co-constituted structures of power that require an understanding of the intersections to evaluate the full spectrum of queer existence. Combining queer theory with critical race theory, Ferguson broadens the field to include racial and sexual minorities and calls on scholars to think about how different scripted minorities interrelate.

In the same way, global queer theory as a theory arose to respond to the problem of Western-centric conception of sexuality. Gopinath (2005) in her article, insists on the necessity to consider a queer theoretical framework which is at once postcolonial, and transnational since it seeks understanding queer sexualities outside the Anglo-American context in relationship to global power formations. This perspective underlines that Queer needs to go beyond the contexts of Western culture and the United States specifically as it must address colonial histories, migration, and globalization as the shaping forces of queer experience in different cultures.

### 3. 2 Queer Theory and Disability Studies:

A combination of Queer theory and Disability studies has also led to the development of what is referred to as “crip theory”, which seeks to explain how the society builds and polices the able body. McRuer (2006) argued that queer theory’s category of compulsory heterosexuality has much in common with the ‘compulsory able-bodiedness,’ which dominates and marginalizes disabled bodies just as heteronormative regime marginalizes queer ones. Crip’s theory argues against these norms asserting a new seam of epidemiologically enabled body imagery – Queer and Disabled.

### 3. 3 Feminism and Queer Theory:

Analyzing the interaction of Feminist theory and Queer theory, it is possible to point out that these theories have conflicted, as well as cooperated. These are the tensions discussed by Hemmings (2011), especially regarding the early queer theorists who accused second-wave feminism of essentializing gender and sexuality along binary categories. However, queer theory has also drawn from the knowledge of feminism, especially in the areas of destabilization of hetero-sexism and hence the construction of gender.

In our attempt to stage a dialogue between queer theory and feminism, the latter as introduced by Grewal and Kaplan (2001) does the trick. It acknowledges the existence of queerness and the constant changes in one’s



gender and sexuality while keeping an ear to the ground for patriarchy and gender oppression as raised by feminism. Smerged in queer feminist epistemology, two theoretical paradigms are mutually beneficial in both revealing how gender and sexuality pertain to power and identity.

#### **APPLICATIONS OF QUEER THEORY:**

Queer theory has provided misleading theories to different fields that helped in influencing discourses in literature, cultural studies, Sociology, education, activism, and law. Queer theory in turn subverts these ordinary reflections and provides counter-discursive descriptions of identity, power, and subversion in these domains.

#### **4. 1 Queer Theory in Literature and Cultural Studies:**

In literary studies, queer theory provides a method for performing a “queer reading” of texts – or for reading aesthetically subversive elements of texts Sedgwick (1993). Applying Sedgwick’s ideas in ‘Tendencies’ one can learn how it is possible to discover the repressed or oppressed sexualities in literature and look at the characters, the plots, and themes from the queer perspective. The readings queer reveals the scope and possibility of desire and identity in texts and challenges conventional approaches to literature.

In film and media studies, queer theoretical framework has also been used in the critical interpretation, especially on matters to do with gender and media representation. Richard Dyer (2002), hence, in his publication ‘Media, Gender and Popular Culture’, said that while gender and sexualities are consistently on display and are reinforced by film and media, it is also possible to find a degree of opposition. Queering media analysis means how scholars try to see how representations that provide and destabilize norms offer vicarious possibilities for identities, desires, and gender workings.

#### **4. 2 Queer Theory and Gender and Sexualities Studies in Sociology and Anthropology:**

In sociology and anthropology, Queer theory has been utilized to examine ethnographies to investigate the existence and routines of queer people. Weston (1991) conducted research where queer ethnography was used to understand how queer subjects construct their identity within social worlds. My chosen author’s work

demonstrates how people and their experiences queer the categories and defy binary logic well-known to social scientists.

Queer theory has also played its part in appreciating the relations of kinship and family. In *Disrespectfully Quoted*, Butler (2002) offers a critique of what she considers to be the limitation of the prevailing theories of kinship that dignify specific heterosexual arrangements that do not respect the diverse forms of union and the ties that individuals have with one another. Thus, gender and sexuality that underlines queer perspective reshapes kinship as a loose, non-blood related, and queer different from the heteronormative focus on biological reproduction and the nuclear family model.

#### **4. 3 Queer Theory and Education:**

Queer pedagogy has had a role in education, especially in the encouragement of the adoption of queer theory in mainstream curriculum and classroom settings. Britzman (1995) in her paper has discussed and coined the concept of queer pedagogy which poses heteronormative challenges to educational texts and practices by raising urgent questions about gender and sexuality. As for queer pedagogy, it involves critical analysis of the identity and challenges to students’ conformity to the stereotypes.

On the same wavelength, Pascoe (2007) also discussed how schools can provide the aspects of the LGBTQ community or perspective. Her work is on the need to offer queer perspective to educational reform in particular curriculum policies accommodating sexual and gender minorities. Queer theory, therefore, underpins the attempts to combat exclusion in schools and create equality so that children have equal chances of becoming successful learners, motivated citizens, and effective contributors to society.

#### **4. 4 Queer Activism and Politics:**

Queer theory has been a significant part of the contemporary activism of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans, queer, and intersexuals since the 1990s and thus it supports the political movements that necessitate radical social transformation and decline the assimilationist approach. Shepard (2010) describes how queer theory helps activism by challenging the gay / lesbian movement to avoid mainstream goals of same-sex marriage. However, queer activism acknowledges intersectionality and speaks against oppression in all its forms including racism, and sexism among others in

addition to its advocacy for equal rights of individuals within the queer community.

Queer theory has also incorporated the study of law, with an emphasis on sexual rights, especially concerning the marriage and anti-discrimination. Spade (2011) uses a queer lens to raise a pertinent argument by positing that litigation for marriage equality is somewhat irrelevant because of the continued marginalization of queer persons even within existing structures of justice. According to Spade, what is required is a fundamental transformation of the law beyond a 'rights' model of approach which targets the deficiencies of queer and marginalized people only.

### **CASE STUDIES:**

Queer theory has played a major role in matters about social movements' debates and media portrayal. However, through critical case analyses, we can understand how queer theory applies and theorizes on 'matters of concern' proximate to gay marriage activism, queer spatiality configuration of queer urban districts, and queer media representation.

#### **5. 1 Case Study: Marriage Equality Movement:**

Queer theory has been one of the agents through which marriage equality has been debated. Another scholar Warner (1999) made similar remarks pointing to the error of the mainstream gay and lesbian politics, which centers on same-sex marriage because the legitimized form of union is marriage. Warner is quite critical of queer in its advocacy for marriage equality where he argues that such a move poses a threat to those who are outside the so-called conventional relationship structures. However, what replaces such a framework, queer theory cautions against the endorsement of marriage as the normal way of partnering while questioning the presuppositions of this framework.

#### **5. 2 Case Study: Queer Spaces in Urban Settings:**

It is also critical to note that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have been very much affected by the issues of regeneration and urban development. Hanhardt (2013) looks at how queer places become gentrified and how queers are pushed out of the areas that they once inhabited. This study shows as cities have emerged and redeveloped queer spaces function as has been places of togetherness and queer resistance, they have been subject to their removal because of capital. Queer theory is interested in the relationship between space politics

and identity that seeks to know how spatial changes impact on queer subjects; queer space is a valuable cultural and political territory that must be saved.

#### **5. 3 Case Study: Queer Representation in Media:**

Society's homosexual characters depiction are among the biggest advances in popular culture I have witnessed in my lifetime. Miller (2016) analyzes how the TV and movie industries gave more room to queer characters in recent years but how these characters were portrayed is still often stereotyped or one-dimensional. Nevertheless, improvement has been seen over time, however queer theory puts a focus on how queer people portrayals should be scrutinized so that it is not a reiteration of stereotyped perceptions but a progressive representation of queer lives.

### **QUEER THEORY: FUTURE DIRECTIONS:**

Queer theory is constantly growing and developing; therefore, it can be applied to new fields like digital media and environment, and artificial intelligence. These developments add to the theoretical repertoire and bring new questions and opportunities for queer work.

#### **6. 1 Queer Theory and Digital Media:**

The digital media has emerged as a new space where queer people can create the formation and organizations that they want. Gray (2009) notes that the development of what has been referred to as 'digital queer spaces' through social media facilitate the formation of a collective identity, organizing and engagement in queer politics besides offering an opportunity for identity formation to those who may be geographically or socially isolated. Such spaces present the nonconventional opportunity to articulate queer existence and unity, which also extend beyond structural architecture. Marwick (2013) extends how social media affects the creation and representation of queer sexualities. These include Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter; wherein certain aspects of self-expression and identity can be contested and reconfigured in a much more overt manner. However, these platforms also suggest several problems, connected with the fact that corporate algorithms risk limiting the representation of queer identity online by offering more conventional images of queer subjectivity.

#### **6. 2 Environmental Queer Theory:**

One of the discussed and rather promising transdisciplinary frameworks is the combination of

queer theory with environmentalism called “queer ecologies, which Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (2010) have explained as the investigation into the ways through which dominant environmentalism discursively constructs sexuality, nature, reproduction, and purity. These queer ecologies disrupt the histories by providing critiques of both the naturalization of heterosexuality and environmental discourses. This approach not only redefines the relations of people with environment but also emancipatory environmental ethics where the ethics of sexual and gender and ecological diversities are integrated.

### 6. 3 Queer Theory and AI:

Similarly, there is scope for applying queer theoretical paradigms in developing contexts as well as in the emerging field of AI. Carly Kocurek speaks about “queer AI”, with a focus on how the AI systems can reinforce or disrupt the masculinity-femininity binarism and hetero-patriarchal logic, in 2018. Queer theory also provides ethical questions because it refers to the construction and application of artificial intelligence systems concerning non-normative sexualities. according to Kocurek, the emergence of AI technologies creates a space to challenge the conventional definitions of identity to promote pluralism and openness of digital spaces. However, this also presents the need to be careful to avoid AI reiterating prejudice or any sort of bias.

### CONCLUSION:

Queer theory has developed from its early roots in the latter part of the twentieth century as a radical critique of heteronormativity and binarism in gender and sexualities to a diverse and burgeoning paradigm. Although queer theory originates from the writings of Michel Foucault, the subsequent studies by other theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have broadened a field’s scope, and it became critical in addressing questions to race, class, disability, and postcolonial discourses. This is evident in areas of literature, sociology, anthropology, education, and media studies where it challenges or employs normalcy and other essences of identity and power relations.

Thus, the development of queer theory brings up several issues for further research and practice. Several exciting areas of study have already been identified such as digital humanities, artificial intelligence, and the environmental humanities where queer theory can be

applied. For example, digital queer existence and the digital identities’ construction with the help of artificial intelligence give new contexts and opportunities to think about the effects of technological advancements on queerness. Further, the application of queer theories within the environmentalism context particularly via the lens of queer ecologies rethink the interaction between sexuality and the environment beyond the normalcy of heterosexual environmentalism.

Therefore, queer theory’s resilience is in its constant focus on critical disassembling of power and normativity, fight for justice, and alternative approaches to the social world. But it remains an important instrument in subverting oppression and unfair treatment of women, people of colour, people with disabilities etc. Researchers and social justice advocates are urged to go on employing and adapting queer theory in creative and context-sensitive manners to produce a lasting effect on sundry scholarly fields and cultural practices and assist in the envisioning of a culture that embraces and empowers all identity subjects. Thus, queer theory ably maintains its function as a source of progressive thought beyond the confines of the academy, and as a way of usefully engaging with the ongoing fight for justice.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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