

Beyond Liberation: Identity Group Theory and the Regulatory Limits of Gender Emancipation

Derek Barker-Ciganik

University of Vienna, Austria

Abstract

Contemporary gender scholarship has generated powerful accounts of emancipation, recognition, and identity formation. Feminist, queer, and intersectional approaches have demonstrated how dominant social structures regulate gendered lives and constrain opportunities for self-definition. Yet an important theoretical puzzle remains insufficiently explored. Movements that successfully challenge exclusion and expand recognition frequently develop new norms, expectations, and forms of regulation governing acceptable identities, behaviours, and modes of belonging.

This paper addresses this paradox through the lens of Identity Group Theory (IGT). IGT conceptualises identity groups as social formations composed of identity narratives, regulatory mechanisms, and systems of resource allocation. From this perspective, emancipation does not eliminate regulation. Rather, it reallocates regulatory authority and restructures the identity economy through which recognition, legitimacy, belonging, status, and other social resources are distributed.

The paper argues that all identity formations possess both emancipatory and regulatory dimensions. As identities become institutionalised, they develop mechanisms that reward conformity, sanction deviation, police boundaries, and regulate membership. These processes are not unique to feminist or gender-based identities but constitute a general characteristic of identity group formation and maintenance. Consequently, tensions between freedom and regulation should not be understood as failures of emancipatory projects but as structural features of collective identity itself.

By shifting attention from the binary opposition between liberation and oppression to the dynamics of identity allocation and regulation, the paper offers a novel framework for understanding contemporary debates surrounding gender diversity, inclusion, recognition, intersectionality, and identity-based political mobilisation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the possibilities and limits of emancipation within complex and pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Identity Group Theory; Gender Studies; Feminist Theory; Identity Regulation; Recognition; Identity Economies; Emancipation; Social Inclusion.