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Gender, Sex, and Sexuality
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What does 'gender' mean? Using Butler's ideas of performativity alongside ethnographic examples illustrate how gender is differently enacted around the world.

INTRODUCTION

The understanding of gender and its function in life can vary by individual and culture, but in all socio-cultural contexts, gender consistently plays a significant role. In this essay I will detail the definition of gender and delve into Judith Butler's perspective on gender performativity, specifically how her understanding of gender aligns with various peoples around the world and their respective systems of gender. By providing and discussing multiple ethnographic examples with regard to how they view gender, I will then illustrate a more in depth understanding of gender expression and gender performance globally, as well as how modern takes on this have changed significantly from the past due in large part to Euro-American influence.

WHAT IS GENDER?

Unlike the biological sex of an individual, which is often conflated with this term, gender can be defined as an intersection of masculine, feminine, and neutral behaviors and expressions enacted within a particular society and culture that work to create and oftentimes place a label onto an individual's identity (Seymour-Smith, 1986; Vivanco, 2018). Gender can then be understood as a social construct, one that not only impacts how an individual view themselves but also how the society they reside in views and, as a result, treats them.

Gender identity, especially in Euro-American countries, is restricted due to the emphasis placed on strict binary norms within the culture. Ellemers (2018) notes how people will unconsciously categorize others into these binaries, that usually being male or female, and that this immediate labeling of others will "seemingly justify" (278) the "social implications of

gender” (278) roles and therefore the inequality that comes with. This aspect of inequality that exists within the gender binary is reinforced and rewarded through stereotypes perpetuated in the media and within home dynamics, meaning that those who fail to conform to the gender expectations placed upon them will face being discriminated against and outcasted (Ellemers, 2018; Yaseen, 2017). In this way, it can be easier to comprehend the degree to which gender functions within society, and how it interacts with everyone both on a personal and systemic level.

JUDITH BUTLER’S UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER & GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Judith Butler, a well-known and respected queer theorist, examines and discusses gender in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, in which she presents the concept of gender performativity in opposition to the concept of gender expression (Butler, 2006). Butler (2006) thoroughly explicates how gender is perceived and enacted throughout life: each individual is socialized to behave in a particular way from birth depending on their biology, and because of this, gender becomes more of an actual performance, even if it’s not one we are aware of taking part in. Gender can therefore not necessarily be an expression since there is “no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender,” it is “a regulatory fiction... created through sustained social performances” (Butler, 2006: 192). However, because each individual gender performance is created and built up as an established pattern of behavior throughout a lifetime, gender performativity often feels natural and requires little effort to sustain or even recognize (Butler, 2006; Yaseen 2017).

While Butler’s ideas regarding gender have become much more mainstream and normalized in recent years, especially within the younger generations and the queer community, these concepts remain difficult to digest for some (*The Cut – It’s Judith Butler’s World*, 2016). The popular argument against Butler’s claims and those similar to hers usually circle back to the concept of biological, or genetic, determinism – the belief that human biology determines who and what we are, as well as why we fit into the gender binary (Bogardus 2020). This can also work to defend and act as the reasoning behind social difference, and consequently social inequality, as it pushes the blame onto natural and biological differences. Biological determinists see no real merit in the arguments Butler and those like her present in the discussion on gender, despite the claims being rooted in and supported by the analysis of how various cultures handle

gender and gender performance (Bogardus 2020). Bogardus (2020), a biological determinist, very recently made an effort to tear apart multiple arguments surrounding gender as a socio-cultural construct, including Butler's; He concludes that these theories are not strong enough to support their claim, and that sex and gender are interchangeable terms that are naturally determined at birth and overall widely accepted within society (Bogardus 2020). Butler's ideas, it seems, may still require more comprehensive discussion within the wider community in order to clear up the misunderstandings and misgivings about gender performance.

GENDER AROUND THE WORLD: ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLES OF GENDER PERFORMANCE WITHIN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Perhaps the most influential and most likely to be embraced or recognized are Euro-American gender binary beliefs and stereotypes, as they are often viewed as the default, or accepted norm, in many societies (Ellemers, 2018; Ridgeway, 2011). Ridgeway (2011) examines the complex relationship within American society between the personal perception of gender identity and the culturally defined behaviors and expectations set within that environment. The particular set of social relations in American society create and reinforce a strict gender binary, one that is constantly being perpetuated through the media and things like the film industry with the performance of exaggerated gender stereotypes (Ellemers, 2018; Ridgeway, 2011). This performance is perfected over time as children are raised to believe and to contribute in this act, both at home and in the social sphere, but this binary system promotes and normalizes division and inequality on the basis of gender (Ellemers, 2018; Ridgeway, 2011; Yaseen, 2017). Thus, as Yaseen (2017) has noted, the aspect of the feminine is almost always viewed as inferior to the masculine, and the functionality of this inequality therefore serves to maintain class structure and institutionalized oppression. It should be noted as well that those who challenge the clear boundaries established will likely be rejected and dehumanized both socio-culturally and politically within those countries (Ellemers, 2018). A 2017 research study in Germany actually considers how gender variance is present among adolescents and shines a light on the possibility of gender identity being perceived as much more fluid in during this time; The study also addresses the negative mental and emotional effects societal prejudices have against these individuals, especially when they experience this discrimination in their formative years (Becker et al., 2017). Butler's theories on gender performativity, especially when considered in societies

such as this that cultivate and emphasize a perspective on gender so significant to the innerworkings of that society, present a rather disconcerting question: what would these individuals' gender performances look like if they were never socialized to behave a certain way? In fact, what would this type of society look like without its reliance on the gender binary? Regardless of what the answers to these questions could unveil about both Euro-American society and gender identity, Butler's claims on performativity seem to hold serious credence after understanding the depth to which society has created, developed, and instituted what it has deemed over the years as acceptable behavior for people based on their appearance at birth.

Of course, there are various other cultures around the world – specifically those not limited to a divisive male and female gender binary – that can provide some insight into alternative forms of gender performativity, such as the two spirit traditions from indigenous American cultures. Though the exact interpretation of this varies by group, the general consensus is that two spirit individuals are born with both masculine and feminine spirits, meaning they often fulfil the roles of both genders on the day to day (Lang, 2011; Sheppard, 2013). Sheppard (2013) illustrates how the Navajo people are recorded to have had an exceptionally fluid and dynamic perception of life and how people fit into their given roles, which can be reflected in certain creation stories as well and not just in the Navajo culture. Furthermore, two spirit people were not only respected and seen as natural, taking part in important spiritual and economic jobs, but transgender individuals, known as *nahleehi*, were also recognized as valid and important parts of the community (Sheppard 2013). Lang (2011), who considers the Navajo as well as the Wenatcha and the Shoshone peoples, mentions that gender and gender performativity in the eyes of the Native American cultures was much more associated with economic roles in life than in personal perception of identity or sexual preference. Sexuality, in comparison, was not often viewed as variable and heteronormativity was still the accepted norm even if other expressions of sexuality were tolerated at times (Lang 2011). Having said this, it is vital to address the fact that some of this is conjecture to better understand the cultural reality of the past for these native groups and that in present day, many of these cultures are actually hostile towards queer identities despite their history with gender variability (Lang 2011; Sheppard 2013).

In Native Hawaiian culture, particularly in pre-Christian times though some are trying to reclaim this aspect of their culture today, there exists a third gender called Mahu that takes on both masculine and feminine qualities (Lauria 2017). This brand of gender performativity is,

similarly to the Native Americans, seen as a completely natural occurrence in which these individuals held and carried out a vital role in their community (Lauria, 2017; Sheppard, 2013). Lauria (2017) mentions that gender is understood and enacted through the division of labor and occupational roles, though the Mahu were entrusted with passing on cultural traditions to the younger generations. In any event, the idea of a link between biology and gender performance, such as in biological determinism, seems less and less likely considering that the distinct male and female gender binary is not consistent within global cultures and that even the ways in which performativity is taught differs by place and by people.

Juchitán Mexico also holds an interesting history existing beyond the binary; Known as the Muxes, these individuals represent a third gender category of men who essentially adopt a feminine gender performance (Dozono, 2017). The Muxes are, therefore, another example that shows the possibilities of performativity through natural and accepted gender variance. In contemporary society, however, this gender identity can be placed into stark comparison with modern machismo culture in Mexico, in which hyper-masculine tendencies, no matter how damaging they can be, are maintained and rewarded (Dozono, 2017).

Ocha (2012) discusses gender identity in Thailand and takes the time to assert that Euro-American language is limiting in its understanding of gender and because of this, often creates inaccurate representations of indigenous cultural beliefs, especially when describing and assessing gender performativity. These cultures do not operate within the boundaries of the Euro-American gender binary, and so using this language to describe these identities can be misleading and more difficult to conceptualize as a result (Graham, 2004; Ocha, 2012). The Kathoey would be one type of gender performance that may fit into a third gender category, even though it is often limited to the label transgender when discussed (Ocha, 2012). Ocha (2012) notes more specifically that the Thai notion of gender is fluid and complex, creating space for the coexistence of various aspects of performativity at the same time. This concept of gender beyond the binary is incredible, and even though it still has its own restrictions and certain acceptable behaviors within this culture, it presents the possibility of gender performativity existing beyond the binary one day, without distinct limits or expectations.

Unlike some of the other cultures previously explored, the Bugi in South Sulawesi, Indonesia place a significant emphasis on the physical body as it was born (Graham, 2004). Despite this, Graham (2004) thoroughly explicates the complexities within their perception of

gender multiplicity. In this context, then, even though the body is a fundamental aspect of an individual's gender identity, they are not limited in their gender performance as they still have the ability to possess an intersection of gendered behaviors (Graham, 2004). Gender systems such as this one, or the traditional Thai beliefs mentioned previously, create a harsh juxtaposition with the Euro-American gender binary, and reveal how much gender performativity is regulated within strict behavioral boundaries.

COLONIZATION AND THE INFLUENCE OF EURO-AMERICAN BELIEFS ON INDIGENOUS SOCIETIES

Due to the prolonged interference within indigenous societies by Euro-American countries over the past few hundred years, many global cultures like the ones discussed above have undergone considerable changes because of forced assimilation (Dozono, 2017; Lang, 2011). Dozono (2017) criticizes the way in which society at large will unconsciously promote and create the conditions for violence against behaviors, and thus cultures, which are deemed different because gender is too often presented within the limits of a Euro-American worldview. The juxtaposition between how cultures around the world developed gender performativity in the past, and how those same peoples are considering gender today is strikingly disquieting and it is almost a direct result of how traditional indigenous behaviors were deemed "other" and thereafter altered until a warped version of these beliefs fit into what someone else considered the norm. This can be supported with a firm look into the aforementioned cultures: the Muxes in Mexico, who thrived in pre-colonial times within a matriarchal society, only to now be condemned because of hyper-masculine and strict heteronormative binary ideals (Dozono, 2017); the Mahu in Hawaii, who were revered within pre-Christian society, and are now facing discrimination because they exist outside the currently accepted gender binary (Lauria, 2017); the two-spirit individuals in various Native American cultures, most of which today face being violently outcasted by their own communities (Lang, 2011). This list does not end here and is especially not limited to the ethnographic examples previously provided. The long-lasting effects of colonization are ever-present and have fostered prejudice against behaviors that were once admired and normalized, ergo diverse forms of gender performativity being attacked even with recent movements being made to reclaim these cultural traditions (Dozono, 2017; Lang, 2011; Lauria, 2017; Sheppard, 2013).

CONCLUSION

While the fact remains that many cultures no longer explore beyond the limits of the Euro-American gender binary like some may have in the past, the concept of gender and Butler's claims of performativity can likely be better understood when illustrated through a multicultural lens. Gender is a social construct, but one that is not consistently displayed around the world in a particular way. In fact, gender performativity can look different for everyone, even while still holding significant similarities to others in that culture because of socialization (Butler, 2006; Yaseen, 2017). Nevertheless, taking time to consider how Butler's performativity theory is reflected in a variety of cultures will help to develop a more in-depth perception of gender and the role it plays within a socio-cultural context.

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