

Judith Butler and Transgender Representation in Media

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Gender Trouble by Judith Butler explains the way social norms shape our idea of gender. It explains how gender is a social construct and is something made up by humans. This essay will be about how gender is a social construct, gendered language, transgender representation in media as well as how we as a society can challenge and change certain gender stereotypes.

There is a clear difference between sex and gender identity which some people don't seem to understand. Sex is the biological sexual characteristics someone is born with, whereas one's gender identity is a way of presenting oneself to the world. Transgender people have a mismatch between their sex and gender, where their sex assigned at birth does not reflect their gender identity.

Judith Butler states that gender is a social construct. In other words it is not a physical, real or tangible thing. It is not in our nature to be gendered but is rather something we as humans have made up. Since gender doesn't come naturally to us, we use social policing as well as real policing to keep everyone in line. The idea of getting in trouble for breaking certain social norms is what keeps so many of us trapped in the boxes that society has set up for us. Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one." P.47 Butler. This means that to perform gender one must do it over and over again. That means that in every choice an individual makes they are actively choosing to either hide or show their gender.

This also means that society teaches how to be a woman. Simone believes that males are considered to be the default and women are the "other." Feeling like a woman or a man is supposed to be the goal that everyone should accomplish. The gender binary comes into play here because to feel like a woman for example one has to be everything opposite to a man. The idea of living up to a certain gender binary is similar to how everyone should live up to this unachievable moral standard to get to heaven in religious contexts.

Women are supposed to sacrifice their own comfort for men in society. The gender roles placed on both men and women are extreme and hard to achieve for both genders which is a purposeful way to keep everyone in line. If something is supposed to be "natural" then why are most people spending their whole lives not feeling man or women enough? Women are forced to put on a naturally mothering persona from a

young age, women get so good at this they don't even realize that they are doing it most of the time. Butler states that "The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination." p.6 Butler. This is why some people think that women are born naturally more nurturing because society has made them that way.

Some women might try to be extra feminine to hide how they want to actually be treated equal to men. This might be because society is nicer to you the more you fit into its gender norms, especially men are nicer to you when you have pretty privilege. This same idea can be applied to LGBTQ people where they act extra straight, feminine or masculine as a way to hide how they really feel and as a way to fit in. Gay men on the other hand might try to be extra masculine to try to blend in with other straight men. This is a common experience among most LGBT people according to this reading.

When it comes to our sex most people assume gender is tied to appearance which means that only one's body is given any legitimacy. This supports that what people see is what they consider to be real. That is why drag an example, questions cis people's reality since they are unsure what gender they are. Gender is fluid, and as an individual one can choose how to identify, because society's idea of gender is theoretical and abstract. Society ignores things that don't make sense about sexuality to keep every social norm in place, and to not disturb the peace.

In terms of gender identity, Freud says that when someone is sad they mourn the loss of who they were or who they could be. Similar to how when a close friend or family member dies people tend to carry that grief around everywhere they go. One might even start acting like the person they lost. This process is supposed to help one's mind cope with difficult emotions that are hard to process. When it comes to gender one can mourn who they used to be when they didn't yet realize they were trans and can go through a similar process. The bottom line is not being accepted as your gender or sexuality doesn't make those feelings go away but instead pushes those who are different away from everyone else.

Language is heavily gendered. This can be proven as to how one uses gendered language in everyday conversations. Like when a woman gets married and takes her husband's last name. Just the act of being given away in marriage shows that women

are nothing more than objects for men to keep and use at their will. The woman's identity is tied to the man.

Men hold all the speaking authority and still do now. That is why women usually use placeholder words like “um” to keep their audience engaged because they are usually talked over. Language is something that can also change overtime. Gender is just another way to take away any universal traits and unity between people. Everyone could use “I” when or “they” instead of he or she. Gender doesn’t have to exist at all but is just another way to separate people.

This article “‘See Me! Recognize Me!’ An Analysis of Transgender Media Representation.” looks at how transgender people are portrayed in the media. It looked at the Fosters and Orange is the New black. The study generally found that these shows are showing a more accurate portrayal of trans people when compared to how trans people were shown in the past. More shows continue to include transgender people like Glee, and Degrassi. This is important because people are educated through these shows. The shows, although are better than before, still don’t accurately show the realities of being trans, such as someone going through medically transitioning or getting gender affirming surgery. A lot of the time we see these characters when they are passing. It is important to have all types of trans representation in the media.

These shows also show that trans people need hormones and surgery and need to pass to be happy, when that is not the case for everyone. Some trans people do not feel the need to medically transition but are still valid. Another problematic storyline is that trans people are always victims of violence, it's important to show trans people happy and not just sad and abused. Some of these shows also push the need for trans people to come out and be proud about their gender. The intent behind that idea is good but in reality, these shows should be promoting safety over authenticity.

Also a lot of trans people don’t get romantic storylines and are in need of “fixing” with surgery. What we see on tv is what society thinks about gender but can also influence and change the way we think about gender. Representation in the media is a way to give people who have no power some visibility. It suddenly turns the invisible visible again to society. Since ignoring trans people doesn’t make them go away.

Aaron in the fosters is a great character in my opinion because we don’t know he’s trans at first and it becomes just another part of his identity. The show also talks about how as a cis person one shouldn’t spread that someone is trans to everyone even with good intentions. In this study 6 main categories were used: casting, visibility, identity, relevance of character, embodiment, and social interaction. In terms of casting every

character was played by a transgender actor. Aaron's genitals are not discussed at all, which is different compared to every other transgender character. Only mentioning a trans person's genitals is a form of objectification since cis characters' genitals are rarely talked about. Aaron is also supposed to be a hot character which is nice because it gives the idea that trans people can be attractive. In *Orange Is the New Black* the transgender representation is used as more of a comic relief which shouldn't be the case. I hope in the future society continues to progress and works on transgender representation in the media.

Gender stereotypes we use are deeply ingrained in society and it all starts at a young age. When children grow up their gender identity is shaped by their family. For example a daughter may grow up and feel similar to their mother. Sometimes women joke that men are in love with their moms. Freud actually proves this theory as correct but men learn to run from those feelings because they are heavily stigmatized. Many boys will try to mimic their dad's behavior as a way to get into a deeper relationship with their mothers. This can turn into a competition of sorts between the father and son for the mother, again objectifying the women in the situation. This shows that these gender roles are not something people are born with.

Butler states that "the young boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him" (21). P.110 Butler. Another reason why a son may try to act like their father is because they are scared to be seen as too feminine. Being seen like their mother would make them seem "weak". Girls on the other hand try to act more like their moms because they are wanting to fit in. Freud is unsure about what makes someone a boy or girl and wonders if it has to do with something unexplainable deep within. Like a feeling that certain trans people get when asked to explain what gender they are. He says that being straight reassures someone that they are extra feminine or masculine. He says that people are drawn to those who are different to them and we are all born with feminine and masculine traits and tendencies. He also says that our moral compass is determined by the way our parents raised us. Parents will tell their child what is right or wrong, which is why lots of people have different definitions of what is right or wrong. This is similar to how we see ourselves as a boy or as a girl. If someone's parents say that boys only show one type of behavior then a child will think that must be the way things are.

Society also shapes gender identity by identifying what is acceptable for each gender. The societal rules we have in place only survive for as long as we agree and need them. This is related to Foucault's idea of power and how power serves the people that are higher up.

In conclusion everything is involved with gender. Deconstructing the way society views gender is necessary to make marginalized groups feel more comfortable and included. By breaking down societal views of gender, one can gain the freedom to be who they want to be. This is important because transgender suicide rates are disproportionally high when compared to cis people. The world is necessarily cruel towards transgender people and losing our youth is not the solution. Many transgender people are not mentally ill because they are trans, but are mentally ill because society continuously ostracizes them. Learning that gender is not a natural way of being is the first step to fixing this. Uneducated people fail to realize that everyone is constantly performing gender all the time, and there is no way to become the stereotype everyone aims to be.

Bibliography:

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