

Adopting a global perspective, explore how being trans can be understood.

“Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?” This question sums up, by its simplest definition, what is meant by “trans”. UK census data from 2021 reveals that 262,000 people answered “no” to this question (ONS, 2023). This included individuals who identify as a trans man, a trans female, non-binary, or another gender. Whilst this is only 0.5% of those who answered the question, a considerably small percentage, it is still a large number with regards to individual experiences. There is a present perspective on the trans experience which regards it as being a trend or a case of social contagion (Ring, 2022). Many see it as a new phenomenon which has spread through Europe and North America. It is precisely the presumption that it is something new that many feel allows them to discredit the reality of the trans experience. On the contrary, trans identities in some form or another have existed throughout the colourfully diverse history of human existence.

Exploration of the trans experience in other cultures could offer further insight and a more informed perspective on the trans experience more locally and generally; this is the purpose of this discussion. Firstly, relevant terminology such as “trans”, “sex”, and “gender” is defined for clarity, and some theories relevant to gender studies are explored to provide a theoretical framework. Next, the kathoey culture of Thailand and the Miss Galaxy pageant in Tonga is explored, compared, and analysed to gain understanding of the trans experience in a different cultural context. There are

numerous examples of gender non-conforming practices around the world which would be invaluable to this discussion, however only two are focused on to allow for deeper analysis and insight.

Trans experiences are varied. The word 'trans' is a clipping of the term 'transgender' which describes any individual whose gender identity conflicts with their birth sex (Diamond et al., 2011, p.630). Many people understand this to mean transitioning from conventionally male to conventionally female, or vice versa. However, trans is an umbrella term which covers an array of different identities, for example non-binary identities which describe an individual who identifies as both male or female or as neither. In this way, the term 'transgender' has the capacity to challenge and deconstruct societal gender norms.

It is a prerequisite, in order to understand being trans, to understand what is meant by "sex" and "gender". The former is a biological term describing whether a person is male or female, which is typically discerned by one's external genitalia at birth. Gender is a psychological, sociological, and cultural term describing whether a person is a boy or a girl, a man or a woman (Diamond et al., 2011, p.630). It is a more complex concept than sex, and not so easily discerned. French philosopher and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir (1949) famously said "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". In this quote, she suggests that society creates women, as it does men, and that this aspect of one's identity is not innate or biological.

Gender is commonly understood as a social construct. Judith Butler is an American philosopher who has written extensively and influentially on the topic of gender. They identify as non-binary and elect to use “they/them” pronouns (Fisher, 2020). Perhaps one of Butler’s most influential theories is that of gender performativity. They suggest that gender is not something one is, but rather something one does, and that it is precisely the expressions of gender which are the identity. The theory asserts that gender is a social construct, which exists solely because of social convention which categorises things into either masculine or feminine. Thus, people are not born as gendered beings, and our gender only becomes a reality when we act in ways which are conventionally masculine or feminine (Butler, 2011, p.9-33).

It is important to clarify the difference between “performance” and “performativity”. To perform is to act, such as an actor does on stage. However, it would be inaccurate to presume Butler is likening gender to playing a character on stage. In order to understand performativity, it is perhaps beneficial to first explore linguistic performativity, which describes language which goes beyond simply describing, but instead has the power to function as a social action. For example, to say “I promise...” is performative language, as the act of making a promise is enacted by speaking the very words. More than a mere phrase, it is a meaningful action (Cavanaugh, 2018). Applying the same idea to performative gender, it becomes easier to understand what Butler is theorising. Essentially, gender is something that is constructed through performative acts and social practices, just as a promise is constructed when the act of speaking the words

transpires. A promise does not exist until we verbally announce it, just as our gender does not exist until we act in ways that assert it.

Butler's theory of gender performativity could explain why many transgender individuals go through a process of transition. This could be either a social transition, such as in using a different name and pronouns and presenting in a way that aligns more accurately with one's gender identity. Some choose to medically transition with the use of hormone treatment and surgery. There is also legal transition, in which a person might legally change their name and gender (Diamond et al., 2011, p.630). Transition is a significant process for transgender individuals, as it allows them to validate their gender identity both to themselves and to others who perceive them. It is worth noting that not everyone who is transgender chooses to transition in the same way (Diamond et al., 2011, p.632). Some may choose to take hormones or seek to change their legal status whilst others may not. The process of transition could be described as a rite of passage, as it follows the three stages of a rite of passage as proposed by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in 1909. The first stage is separation, which entails leaving the familiar, such as one's previous expression of gender. The second stage is the transition itself. The third stage is incorporation and reintegration, during which a trans person reintegrates themselves into society in alignment with their true gender identity (Van Gennep, 1960).

The trans experience varies globally. "Kathoey" is a local word in Thailand and an umbrella term which describes transgender women, effeminate gay men, or those

identifying with a third gender. Whilst some transgender women dislike this word and do not identify with it, others reject the term “transgender” on the basis of it being “too western” (Chen, 2014). The term “kathoeay” will henceforth be used as it is arguably the most appropriate and least offensive to describe this particular rich and multifaceted gender non-conforming culture.

Performance is a prominent aspect of kathoeay culture, which includes performances in cabaret clubs in Thailand’s major cities such as Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai, as well as beauty pageants. Transgender beauty pageants are a growing trend in Southeast Asia, and can be credited for providing a platform for kathoeays to feel empowered and to gain visibility as well as social acceptance and respect (Wuen, 2017). However, these beauty pageants also encourage expectations and ideals of hyperfemininity, and their focus on the superficial may be distracting from the struggles kathoeays face outside the bubble of the beauty and glamour.

The visibility of kathoeay culture in Thailand’s top tourist areas has contributed towards earning the nation a reputation of being a “gay paradise” (Statham and Scuzzarello, 2023). However, the idealistic inclusive and accepting atmosphere experienced by tourists is not reflective of the discrimination and struggles experienced by Thai natives. There are few legal rights granted to transgender people in Thailand, which results in barriers in accessing work, education, health services, and overall social acceptance (Knight, 2021). Discrimination and oppression is especially prevalent for transgender individuals living in rural areas, and many choose to relocate to Thailand’s larger and

more tolerant cities in order to access opportunities to work and for social acceptance. For this reason, becoming kathoey is not only an expression of one's personal and individual gender identity, but also a social act with many socio economic and cultural implications (Statham and Scuzzarello, 2023).

It seems that beauty pageants are a meaningful way for trans feminine individuals to express their femininity, as is also the case for those competing in the Miss Galaxy pageant held annually in Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga. More than a beauty contest, it is an opportunity for socially marginalised individuals to escape from their everyday poverty and social exclusion (Besnier, 2002, p.534). Although there are trans women in all the levels of Tongan social hierarchy, it is predominantly the younger and poorer trans women who make themselves visible by competing in the pageant. This is because contestants are likely to be ridiculed and heckled during the event, something which those in high social standing dare not risk (Besnier, 2002, p.539). Conversely, the audience usually consists of middle-class Tongans, as poorer Tongans are typically unable to afford the entry fee. Tourists also attend, and Tonga's Director of Tourism states that the primary objective of the pageant is to attract tourism (Besnier, 2002, p.541). However, considering the risk involved in partaking, it seems unlikely that this is the main objective for those who participate. In a sense, the dynamic surrounding competing in the pageant is that you have to have nothing to lose in order to have something to gain. This highlights an interesting class divide between performer and observer.

Something that is interesting about the Miss Galaxy pageant is that there is a prominent aspect of nonlocality. For example, the pageant is in English, and there is an event during which the contestants dress in the national costume of a foreign place which the contestant usually has no connection to (Besnier, 2002, p.548). Even the title, Miss Galaxy, is ethereal and fantastical. It makes no claim that the winner is representative of the Tongan identity, but rather something distant and exotic. This sense of exoticism is also prevalent within the kathoey culture and in particular the allure it has to tourists. It raises the question, with drag culture becoming increasingly popular in the UK and the USA, why would people from those countries travel to Tonga or Thailand to watch trans women compete in pageants? Perhaps it's because people still find the blending of genders unusual and fascinating, so much so that it could still be considered a taboo, and the transgender people of the global south amplify the sense of alluring exoticism. This brings into question morality surrounding travelling across the world to see a transgender pageant. Does tourism increase visibility and help transgender people to gain acceptance and respect in their communities? Or does it emphasise the idea that there is something worth spectating, something different and unusual, seemingly deserving of discrimination?

Another similarity between the pageants in Tonga and Thailand is that both of these examples examine trans feminine culture, and exclude the trans masculine experience. The term kathoey refers to trans women and effeminate gay men, whilst transmen and androgynous gay women don't appear to be given a particular label. One can only speculate as to why this is, but the answer likely lies in the dynamics of institutionalised

sexism and misogyny. The patriarchy creates a system in which anything masculine is the norm, and anything feminine is a deviation from that. Consequently, it is easier for a biological female to adopt certain typically masculine traits (such as wearing trousers or playing sports) without it drawing attention or criticism, whereas it is more difficult for a biological male to adopt certain typically feminine traits (such as painting their nails or taking up ballet) without it being seen as weird or odd and drawing a lot of negative attention. This could arguably mean that it is easier for trans masculine individuals to blend in and therefore be accepted within society, which may seem like a good thing, but it also means they don't have the same platform and opportunities to express and assert their gender identity and to gain visibility as those who identify as feminine.

A struggle that is fairly universal for the trans community is transphobia, which can be defined as a strong dislike or prejudice towards transgender people, and can result in institutionalised discrimination as well as personal, verbal, or physical attacks. In some cases, people are even killed simply for being trans (Bandini and Maggi, 2014). One theory for the prevalence of transphobia is that it is rooted in oppositional sexism, which is the belief that male and female are rigid, separate and opposing categories with no overlapping qualities or attributes. This causes discomfort and disdain in some people who feel that deviation from gender norms threatens this belief (Serano, 2007).

This is very apparent in the discussion surrounding women's sports, in which it is heavily debated whether individuals who are biologically male should be allowed to compete in women's categories (Roan and Falkingham, 2022). The perceived

distinction between man and woman is emphasised in sports, which divides the two in accordance with the belief that men and women possess distinctly different attributes and abilities. The primary argument against allowing biological males to compete in women's categories is that they possess an unfair advantage. The argument is rooted in the belief that men are fundamentally stronger and more physically capable than women. Of course the issue with this argument is that it suggests that all men are stronger and faster than all women. In reality, it's not so black and white, as different people have different levels of strength and abilities regardless of age, sex, gender, race, etc. Perhaps the debate shouldn't be about whether or not biological men have a place in women's categories, but whether we can make changes to the categories that would be fairer for all. For example, perhaps athletes should instead be categorised by physical attributes such as weight and height, rather than their sex.

It is not only sports that perpetuates the categorization of male and female, in fact it is extremely prevalent in society, however there are examples of this practice being questioned and addressed. In 2021 popular music awards The Brits made the decision to remove their gendered categories of best male and female artists. This choice seemed indicative of progress and inclusivity, however it highlighted gender inequalities in the music industry when in 2023, all nominees for the best artist category were biological men (Snapes, 2023). This reflects an important issue that institutionalised gender inequalities still exist, and must be addressed before we can live in a society that is fully gender inclusive. The issue, with regards to the Brit Awards, is not the

gender neutral categories, but the inequalities and barriers for women and nonbinary people in the music industry.

Being trans isn't about a man becoming a woman, or vice versa, it is about bringing into question what a man or a woman even is. It urges people to question the gender norms they've passively accepted since childhood, and promotes liberation from the confines of gender expectations. In this way, being trans is a social action that has implications beyond the individual experience. The trans experience is incredibly diverse and varied. There is not one uniform trans identity, and so to summarise what it means to be trans is like trying to summarise how food tastes. The fact that there is such variety in how people transition or choose to present their gender, or in the labels that people identify with, highlights how being trans means something different and unique to every individual who identifies as such.

Butler's theory of gender performativity asserts that gender is socially and culturally constructed, and it exists in the ways that it is expressed. This explains why most transgender individuals go through a process of transition to affirm their gender identity, though this experience varies. One way in which gender is expressed is through literal performances, such as in beauty pageants. Such pageants which encourage and reward expressions of conventional femininity seem like the perfect place for trans women in Thailand and Tonga to express themselves. However, these tourist friendly events may be concealing difficulties and discrimination experienced by transgender

individuals. Further to this, the voyeuristic dynamic present in these pageants relates to a sense of exoticism which could be further marginalising transgender individuals.

It must be addressed that the examples in this discussion focus solely on the experiences of trans feminine people. This highlights how gender is so intertwined in social stratification and how sexist and misogynistic perceptions permeate institutions. Because we live in a patriarchal society, it is seen as a more radical act for a biological male to express his femininity than for a biological female to express her masculinity. This is why transgender beauty pageants are such a powerful force for challenging expectations of gender. Oppositional sexism fuels transphobic beliefs and sentiments which can be fatal. Such views spark heated debates about who should be allowed to compete in women's sports or be allowed in women's spaces, although such debates rarely bring into question whether it is necessary to segregate people by gender in the first place. However, instances in which gendered categorization has been eradicated reveal a deeper issue of institutionalised misogyny which must first be addressed before we can live in a gender inclusive society.

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