



Performing Genders: A Study of Gender Fluidity

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ABSTRACT

The subjective quality of identity and the relativistic nature of gender continue to bemuse and attract social scientists. In this study I examine gender fluidity – an inconsistent gender identity – within the framework of Western ontology. By analyzing narratives, I note that my informants recognize this gender identity as fluctuating feelings (which I call the *feelings of gender*) that influence how they perceive and interact with their bodies. Furthermore, I found other important elements that may have influenced my informants’ understanding of their gender identities and bodies: upbringing, previous relationships and interactions, communities, and language.

ONTOLOGIES OF GENDER

Peoples across the globe have their own presumptions of what gender is. As this study examines gender fluidity within the framework of Western ontology of gender, it is beneficial to understand the myriad of ways peoples conceptualize gender. By doing so, we accentuate any taken-for-granted characteristics of gender within our own ontology.

Western Ontology

- Many scholars note that Western ontology relates gender to the body (Bolin 1996; Butler [1990] 1999; 1993; Finkler 1994; Herdt 1996a; Karkazis 2008; Lacqueur 1990; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Valentine 2007).
- Thomas Lacqueur (1990) describes that people prior to the Enlightenment era presumed that everyone had one sex and gender that was related to the “perfect” (i.e. masculine) body. Hence, there was the assumption that “[girls] could turn into boys, and men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regress into effeminacy” (P. 7).
- During the turn of the Enlightenment era and the rise of biology, people began perceiving the body and gender as either male and female (Herdt 1996a; Lacqueur 1990). This new definition of gender emphasizes the concept of procreation, a particular focus within biology.

Non-Western Ontologies

While scholars have shown that Western ontology assumes that gender is ingrained within the body, other forms of ontology suggest different assumptions as to what gender is.

- According to particular Native American ontologies, gender is defined by one’s social role within the context of the grand scheme of the universe (Epple 1997; Farrer 1997; Roscoe 1996).
- Don Kulick’s (1997; 1998) study on Brazilian travesties unravels the assumption that gender is related to one’s sexual orientation.
- Gilbert Herdt’s (1994; 1996b) study on the Sambia offers another ontology, which is similar to Western, that assumes gender is biologically fluid between male and female.

THEORY

Identity

When we talk about fluid gender identities, we need to be aware how those identities are established and perpetuated in practice.

- *Identity* implies a preconceived history that is constantly being reevaluated and established, which is important when examining gender fluid identities (Jenkins 1996).
- Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1990) suggests that human beings follow a series of practices that perpetuate and redefine social norms, which influence how we interact with the world and what we view as self-evident.
- Judith Butler ([1990] 1999) describes that the practice of gender is citational. In other words, one cannot “do” or “be” *man* or *woman* without either terms preexisting within discourse.

Attending the Body

Because my literature indicates that under the Western ontology gender is related to the body, it is important to understand how we understand the body.

- Thomas Csordas (1993) mentions that when we attend to people’s bodies, we have a cultural filter that influences our understanding of those bodies. Thus, when we examine the body, our culture influences how we perceive the individual’s gender.
- James Fernandez (1986) describes metaphor as a strategic tool that we use to identify the inchoate, which enables us to appropriately act with the inchoate. This study views the body as a metaphor for gender.

NARRATIVES: REPRESENTATION OF THE SELF

Narratives

- Narratives of personal experiences serve as windows into individuals’ subjective understandings of their gender identities.
- It is important to point out that narratives are interpretations of the self at the moment in which they are told (Kerby 1997).
- The practice of telling one’s story is a process of reflecting and reinterpreting personal experiences (Becker 1997).
- Narrative analysis can help us prevent the issue of over-generalization (Abu-Lughod 1992; Said 1978).
- By analyzing each individual’s experiences, we are able to see an array of perspectives that correlate and challenge each other’s understanding of gender fluidity.

Participants

- I interviewed twelve individuals who identified their gender as fluid in six months.
- Interviews were conducted either in-person, via Skype, or email.
- I recruited my informants by posting an advertisement on a couple of social media websites, announcing my study at a couple of LGBT events, and networking.
- During each interview, I used a set of questions that I thought were essential to explore gender fluidity. However, I also probed responses that I believed needed greater clarification or could offer interesting insights into gender fluidity.
- I recorded each interview for analysis purposes.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Each of my informants described gender as feelings associated with their bodies, which I call the *feelings of gender*. My informants conceptualized these feelings in three distinct manners – the internal sense of self, the biological characteristic ingrained with in the body, and as the external expressions of the body.

- *Gender is someone's internal sense of how they relate to cultural norms of masculinity and femininity in their own bodies.* [Cody]
- *It's not kind of anymore something that I just decide. Like 'Oh, this is how I'll express myself.' It's more like a overwhelming feeling of this is who I am. This is how I feel like I should be expressing myself, rather than just a decision. Like it is my decision, but at the same time it feels hormonal. It feels chemical. It feels like something more in my body than in my mind.* [Collin]
- *It feels good to [dress as a woman]. It feels like I'm expressing myself properly, finally, kind of thing. I am very comfortable being a boy too. [But] I need to get out of it every once and a while and express myself in a different way, because I really like clothes. [...] And I feel that just men's fashion is way too restricting to be able to express myself the way I want to.* [Rin]

Because my informants identified their gender as fluid, they described these *feelings of gender* as inconsistent. Furthermore, there was an emphasis that this fluctuation of gender only affected how they viewed their bodies and not their personae.

- *With things like transgender it makes more sense to me. It's like, 'Oh you identify as a girl. You like feminine things. You are girly all the time.' It makes sense. [...] But when it comes to gender fluidity it's always been so hard to describe to other people. I think some people think it's a multiple personality identity disorder, or indecision, or internal crisis, or something like that. [...] If you think of gender as one through ten – one being masculine and ten being feminine – there's days where I am a total one. [...] It almost feels like a trance that I was at any other spot because I am so not in the mood of anything feminine whatsoever. [...] But then there's some days with the idea of putting on guys' clothing is just like why would I want to do anything like that. [...] There's days in the middle where [...] I don't care where I am. And it's hard to describe it when it's changing all the time.*
- *I think the hardest thing for people to understand is that gender is not necessarily your personality. It's not who you are, it's just a part of who you are. I feel that's what people have a tough time understanding with gender fluidity. It's like a mood, almost.* [Alexvina]

As the *feelings of gender* are associated with the body, many of my informants described the issue of gender dysphoria – the unpleasant feeling when gender and the body are not aligned with each other. Here Cody describes two different types of dysphorias: social and physical.

- *Social dysphoria, relating how people see you. So, if I go out in the world people are generally seeing a woman, and that bothers me because I don't feel like what they're seeing matches who I am. I obviously can do things to temper that, like wear different clothes or cut my hair. [...] That's why I'm going on testosterone, so my voice can drop and I'll be able to pass as a guy if I want to. [...] Then there's physical dysphoria, which is how I relate to my body and the gendered parts of my body, like obviously my chest, my hips. For me, I'm really short. I'm 5'3". So my height... my hands are way smaller than a guy's would be, I mean they're smaller than for a woman's hand. I got small feet. [...] Those are all gendered things. [...] So the ways in which I am female bother me. It can be kind of a mild, and it could be like crying, depending on the day. There's different measures I can take for that. I've been trying to lose some weight, because that's the only way to lose curve. I bind my chest, most of the time, when I'm not at work. I put lifts in my shoes so I can look taller.* [Cody]

Finally, language was an important part for my informants to understand their gender identities and how they must go about in the world. This is critical as *gender fluid* was not a common term within the discourse of gender, especially as they were growing up.

- *I suppose it's something that I've just always [known], I just never knew the word before it. Especially as a kid, there were just days when I would feel like a boy. I would make it so I have my hair very short, and I dressed in boy identifying clothes, and I used to like it when people refer to me as a boy. But that wasn't consistent. [...] 'Maybe I'm transgender?' but I always didn't feel like a boy, so I can't be transgender. But why do I feel this way? Why is it some days when I hear someone calling me a boy I'm so happy, and on other days I'm like, 'That's not very correct?' [...]*
- *I read more up on transgender issues because I have friends who are transgender. [...] I saw gender fluid and I was 'that's it! That's exactly what that is! That's exactly what I've been going through since I was a kid! That's exactly it!' I didn't like cry or anything, but it was like a moment of 'I'm not weird!'* [Blythe]

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that my informants conceptualize gender as feelings associated with the body (i.e. *feelings of gender*) that is influenced by their ontological understanding of gender. Because gender fluidity is the fluctuation of those feelings, I argue that gender fluidity should be understood as a constant but inconsistent change regarding how one feels about their body, rather than a constant change between personae. Furthermore, gender fluidity can, and often does, entail gender dysphoria as the feelings one has about their body is constantly changing. Finally, language was a critical for my informants to understand this gender identity, which enabled most them to understand how they ought to interact with the world around them.

As this study offers a new way to describe the relationship between gender and the body under Western ontology, the *feelings of gender*, I hope that this lens will allow future research to understand and address the issue of gender dysphoria.

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