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 baffle 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’ understandings 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 Ontologies

• Many scholars note that Western ontology relates gender to the body (Belin 1996; Burle 1999; 1993; Fondier 1994; Herdt 1999a; Karkasis 2008; Laquerre 1999; Scheper-Hughes and Luck 1987; Valentine 2007).

• Thomas Laqueur (1998) describes people to which the Enlightenment era presupposed that everyone had one sex and gender that was related to the “perfect” (i.e. masculine) body. Hence, there was the assumption that “[he|she] could turn into boys, and men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regression to effeminacy” (P. 7).

• According to particular Native American ontologies, gender is disregarded within the body, other forms of ontology suggest different assumptions as to what gender is.

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 disregarded within the body, other forms of ontology suggest different assumptions as to what gender is.

• During each interview, I used a set of questions that I thought were essential to explore fluid gender identity. However, I also probed responses that I believed needed greater clarification or could offer interesting insights into the fluid identities.

• I recorded each interview for analysis purposes.

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 persons.

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 interacted 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.

The Play of Tropes in Culture


RESEARCH

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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 fluidity was not a concept commonly understood by the informants and their respective gender identities. Therefore, understanding their gender fluidity was a key part of the research.

I interviewed twelve individuals who identified their gender fluid in six months.

• Interviews were conducted either in-person, via Skype, or email.

• I recruited my informants through traditional forms of social media websites, announcing my study at a couple of LGBT events, and networking.

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