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 narrators, 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 (Bell 1996; Butler 1990; 1999; 1993; Finkler 1994; Herdt 1996a; Karkazis 2008; Laqueur 1990; Schepet-Hughes and Lock 1987; Valentine 2007);
• Thomas Laqueur (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 “[g]irls 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).

Non-Western Ontologies

• According to particular Native Americans ontology, gender is defined by one’s social role within the context of the grand scheme of the universe (Eplee 1997; Farrer 1997; Roscoe 1996).
• Don Kaluhi’s (1997; 1998) study in an Indian community unravels the assumption that gender is related to one’s sexual orientation.
• Gilbert Herdt’s (1994; 1996b) study on the Sambas another ontology, which is similar to Western, assumes gender is biologically fluid between male and female.

THEORY

Identity

When we talk about fluid gender identities, we need to be aware how these 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 interact with these bodies.

• Thomas Cuarda (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 inciting. 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 bring to the forefront the issue of over-generalization (Alb-Luis 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 through 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 associated with their body. 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.

• It’s not of anyone’s mention of what I just describe. Decide. To be you, I’ll be expressing myself, and someone reacting to the feeling of this who I am. This is how I feel like I should be expressing myself, rather than just a decision. Like is my decision, but at the same time it feels hormonial. It feels chemical. It feels like something more in my body and in my mind. [Elaborates]

• 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 bit brash. [laughs] I tend to get it of every once and a while and express myself in a different way, because I really like clothes. There’s always a middle road where [.] I don’t care where I am. 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 isn’t necessarily your sex []. The sex is just the body. It’s just a part of you. It’s just that what’s more fluid is the way of not being restricted to be able to express myself the way I want to. [laughs]

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

• With things like transgender it makes more sense to other people. It’s like, ‘Oh you identify as a guy. Someone who dresses like a woman, what’s that?’ It makes sense. [.] But when it comes to gender fluidity it’s always been a hard to describe to other people. Some people think it’s a multiple personality disorder or indecision, or internal crisis, or something like that. [.] I’m not thinking of gender as one through sex— one being masculine and the other feminine—there’s a day when I am a real one. [.] It almost feels like a trance that I was at any other spot but because I am not in the mood of anything feminine then I feel like it’s a day when I am a real one. I felt like putting on guys’ clothing is just like why would I want to do anything like that. [.] There’s always in the middle where [.] I don’t care where I am. It’s hard to describe it when it’s changing all the time.

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 Cady describes two different types of dysphoria: social and physical.

• Social dysphoria is an issue that you carry. 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 is me. I am, however, by putting on a clothing of another gender, I think that there’s physical dysphoria which is less I relatives to me to my body and gendered parts of my body, like obviously my chest. It’s my self for me. My really short. [.] I’m not tall. My hands are smaller than a guy would be. I went they’re smaller than for a woman’s hand, I got small feet. I have all the small goods. [.] It’s the way to express to which I find female better. It can be a kind of wild, and it can be like, being able to express, on the day when you are feeling good. [.] There are days in the middle where [.] I don’t care where I am. It’s hard to describe it when it’s changing all the time.

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 personal development was not a common term in the descriptions of gender, especially as they were growing up.

• I suppose it’s something that I just always found it [.] I just never knew how the word was going to be used. I didn’t know if one day when I would feel like a boy, well it would be a day like I have to wear very short, and I decided in boy identifying clothes, and another day I feel like I should be expressing myself as a but that wasn’t consistent. I don’t feel like I’m transitioning but I always felt like I wasn’t this. I can be transgender but it’s one of my days I feel like [.] 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?’ […]

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