



Through the Lens of Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity: Gender as a Destructive Habit

Arpita Ghosal*

Department of Psychology, University of Middlesex, London

*Corresponding author: Arpita Ghosal, Department of Psychology, The Burroughs, Middlesex University, London NW4 4BT, United kingdom

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Introduction

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." - Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949).

This well-known statement from philosopher Simone de Beauvoir regarding the distinction between sex and gender has gained widespread use as a tool for identifying between the biological and sociological definitions of gender. De Beauvoir seems to be saying that a person's social role as a woman or man is derived from a set of behaviors that we, as humans, follow, rather than that a person's assigned reproductive organs have nothing to do with their gender. When thinking about gender and identity, it's crucial to remember this distinction [Butler, 1990] [1]. So, to put it simply, we can think of sex as biological and gender as something that is socially constructed. Deeper analysis, however, blurs the distinctions between the various gender perspectives. Gender is now so deeply ingrained in our humanity that it is extremely problematic to categorize it as either biologically based or constructed. Gender identity is fluid. Gender fluidity is a phenomenon that exists and that we must acknowledge in order to ensure that every individual identity is equally represented. In today's gender identity discourses, the notion that gender is fluid has gained some traction. Among these theories, Judith Butler is arguably the most prominent philosopher. Gender is defined by more than the labels that have been placed on it, according to her theory of gender performativity. Performativity defines gender as a state of being that a person repeatedly engages in. The goal of this article is to dissect Butler's theory and clarify how it relates to conventional gender roles. Before contrasting the theory with other gender approaches, an explanation and history of the theory will be given. I will also provide an explanation of this based on my own experiences and my clinical work in the NHS.

Define Gender Performativity?

The term gender performativity was coined by Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. By means of her theory, she asserts that gender is a perpetually performed social action. Butler notes that characterizing gender as performative and as performed are two different things in an elucidating interview that can be accessed online. When we talk about gender as performed, we usually mean that gender is a role, and that the person is establishing their gender through their actions. On the other hand, characterizing gender as performative results in a sequence of events wherein an individual acts in a manner that solidifies their identity as a man or a woman, and these acts are repeatedly performed. Butler states in the interview that gender identity is "a phenomenon that is being produced and reproduced all the time" [Big Think, 2016] [2]. As its explained, the distinction between the two is extremely thin, and while the theory is somewhat convoluted in certain ways, at its core, [Butler (1999)] [3] states that "gender is... instituted... through a stylized repetition of [habitual] acts." which both establish and convey unique gender identities.

Butler's theory integrates the notions of performative and gender. At that point, language serves as a tool for social action. These roles are known as performative utterances or acts, which are said in circumstances where saying something is acting upon it, rather than reporting or describing something [Longworth, 2020] [4]. Fundamentally, performativity is the ability of language to affect change in the world. Performative acts have a lot of agencies and a lasting impact on the world in which they are performed. These are usually spoken words used in formal settings such as inaugurations, declarations, and other ceremonies [Butler, 1993, p.

171] [5]. This may initially seem fairly self-explanatory-the words we choose to use have specific consequences. The main contention here, however, is that performativity is repeated over and over until it becomes ingrained in our culture and ultimately molds the world around us. Combining gender and performativity, Butler contends that society creates a normative worldview through language and other performative acts. This leads to an imbalance in identity representations because it implies that certain actions or behaviors (masculine or feminine) are more appropriate and desirable than others. Gender is thus socially constructed as a performative act because of the constant repetition and reiteration of what constitutes and does not constitute normal gender behavior. When a doctor determines a newborn baby's gender, for instance, it is a performative act and will shape the baby's sense of self. When a newborn is categorized as a girl or a boy, it is assumed that it will exhibit certain behaviors associated with the gender to which it has been assigned [Mikkola, 2019] [6]. Butler, however, contends that gender is a myth upheld by dominant hierarchies. It is merely a continuous ritual habit that has been established by society over time [Butler, 1999, p. 24] [3].

What defines a man, or a woman is ultimately determined by the performative language's power. Butler states that "action echoes prior actions and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices" to describe the authority of performative actions [1993, p. 172] [5]. This means that the idea of heteronormative gender assignment is preserved through the repetition and ritualization of gender performatives. Gender identities are only real to the extent that they are performed, so performative actions must lose their authority in order to make space for subjective identities [Butler 1990, 278-279] [1]. It is implied that people do not have a gender identity by nature, but rather that gender identity is created through behavior.

Traditional Concepts of Gender and Performativity

Unfortunately, Butler's theory of gender performativity has been oversimplified far too frequently to conform to the sociological theory that views gender as a socially constructed performance [Butler, 1993, p.176] [5]. Asserting that expectations about male and female gender identities are shaped by social forces, which also bring gendered individuals into being and preserve social acceptance. Furthermore, the sociological perspective on gender is typically employed in opposition to biological sex. Where one's biological characteristics are thought to be determined by their sex [Mikkola, 2019] [6]. Butler's theory loses its core when performativity is restricted to one of these conventional methods. Gender performativity encompasses more than just how individuals construct and embody their gender. It indicates that customary language and ritualized performative acts have been used repeatedly throughout history to maintain gender normativity. Gender is not something that was created once and is therefore part of our identity construction. It is a recurring theme in our society. To continually act out and uphold the status of heteronormative

gender to the extent that it becomes deeply engrained in our identity as human beings is known as gender performativity.

Moreover, performativity goes beyond phenomenological perspectives on gender in that it is not based on the independence of gender identity. Performativity is concerned with the Other's gaze. According to Butler, this means that when we talk about our sexual orientation or gender, which we must and do, we are referring to a complex topic. Although neither of these is a true possession, they should both be viewed as ways of existing for someone else and of being dispossessed [Butler, 2004, p. 19] [7]. The opinions of others always have an impact on who we are. What I think of myself as cannot fully comprise my identity. My actions in the world will always determine it for me. The continual criticism of others will shape how an individual expresses their identity and presents themselves. The meaning of the judgment need not always be negative. Instead, it's the case that, as unique human beings, we are able to judge the manner in which others conduct themselves and the principles that they hold dear. Butler summarizes this philosophy as follows: "My body is and is not my own" [Butler, 2004, p. 21] [7]. This means that while I create myself, my perception of myself is also shaped by the opinions of others. Furthermore, the evaluations are predicated on persistent heteronormative gender norms. Gender identities shouldn't be centered around heteronormative power, according to gender performativity theory. In other words, the central tenet of the three conventional approaches to gender is whether or not something is heteronormative. Putting someone in a situation where they have to choose between two things. The disruption of established gendering practices—also referred to as a queering of gender norms—must be broken in order to permit acceptance of all identity experience [Butler, 1993, p.173] [5]. It is possible to exercise this queer theory through language and equitable representation. This means that identities that don't fit neatly into one of the heteronormative categories must be represented. Butler further claims that language is the main medium of representation. Since language performs normativity, there is no language that is accepted for falling outside of it, thus there is no such thing as an outsider's identity. Identity "only comes into being through being called," as Butler puts it [Butler, 1993, p 171] [5]. This means that an experience of identity does not exist if it cannot be adequately conveyed through language. The performative theory of gender thus contends that while acknowledging the heteronormative functions of our society is necessary, those functions are restrictive and do not take into account the multiplicity of personal identities.

My Personal and Work Experience about Gender Performativity

The argument presented above is especially pertinent to the idea of gender identity. Since transgender people's experience of a true inner gender identity that differs from the sex, they were assigned at birth is frequently questioned, it has been criticized for invalidating these people. I work in CAMHS and frequently encounter patients who are experiencing mental distress, particularly those with a

neurodiversity background. This is true even though transgender people mirror the self-views of cis-gender children from an early age by viewing themselves in terms of their expressed gender, both explicitly and implicitly [Olson et al., 2015] [8]. Butler has addressed these concerns on several occasions. In a 2015 interview, for instance, she responded to a question about what aspects of her theory are most frequently misunderstood by the public by saying, "I do know that some people believe that I see gender as a "choice" rather than as an essential and firmly fixed sense of self. That isn't actually my opinion. Every person should have the freedom to choose the legal and linguistic parameters of their embodied lives, regardless of how strongly or less firmly they believe their gendered and sex reality to be fixed. Therefore, it doesn't matter if someone wishes to be free to express their "hard-wired" sense of sex or their more fluid gender identity; what matters is that they should be allowed to do so without facing stigma, harassment, harm, pathologizing, or criminalization, and with full support from the community and institutions. [The Conversation Project, 2015] [9].

The interactive model of gender-related behavior is a prominent integrative approach [Deaux and Major, 1987] [10]. This model concentrates on the situational and contextual elements that lead to gendered behavior rather than the distal factors that influence gender stereotypes. The model presupposes that gender performance occurs mainly in social interactions and fulfills certain social functions. Being of Indian descent, I've always been expected to adhere to certain social norms regarding how women should act, speak, and feel in various social and private contexts. Thus, stereotypes, schemata, and knowledge about the particular target that the perceiver holds, as well as the target's self-schema and desire to validate or refute the perceiver's expectations, all play a role in the emergence of gendered behavior. Significant gender differences in behavior, for instance, are likely to occur when the perceiver holds the opinion that men and women are fundamentally different from one another and thus expects stereotypical behavior, which alters how they treat and interact with male and female targets; when male and female targets have highly gendered self-schemata and are driven to validate the perceiver's expectations; and when the environment highlights

stereotypes and facilitates the emergence of distinct behaviors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Conclusion

The primary lesson to be learned from this is that gender and identity are too complex to be solely classified using biological, sociological, or phenomenological approaches. Gender is simultaneously everywhere and nonexistent. In addition to acknowledging that gender is a social construct, we also need to acknowledge that we are continually acting out and repeating ritualized heteronormative gender presumptions. The performative theory of gender aims to subvert the limitations of conventional gender conceptions and asserts that in order to undermine the power of normativity, there needs to be equal representation of the diversity of gender and sexual identities.

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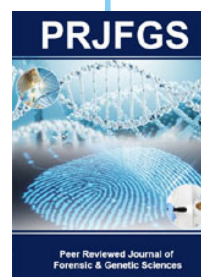
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