

# Gendered identity



Self and Society: How has identity been theorized as an effect of performance? Discuss with specific reference to gender.

In this essay I will be exploring the concept of 'identity' with particular reference to 'gender'. I will start by giving a brief account of what is meant by gender in the context of this essay and in 'identity', moving on to explore the possibility that 'gender' could be argued to be a performance, discussing two alternative, but not dissimilar, arguments. Goffman's concept of 'self', and so 'gender identity', as a performance deserves exploration; as does Butler's notion of 'gender performativity', in the creation of a 'gendered identity'.

Throughout I will be drawing on the biography of Brandon Teena, a transgendered teen murdered in America whose story was told through the film 'Boys Don't Cry' (Pierce, K 2000), as an exemplar of the notion of performing gender. 'Boys Don't Cry' tells the true life story of a young man moving to Falls City, Nebraska, to start a new life. His new friends adore him and soon a young girl falls for his affections. However, his short life meets a violent and bloody end when his true identity is found out [Review of the motion picture Boys Don't Cry].

In contemporary western society gender is more often than not seen as a binary division of male or female dependent on individual biology. So fundamental is the biological determination of 'gender' that should a child be born with ambiguous genitalia then often 'gender' is assigned at birth through gender reassignment surgery. However, the biological determination of gender is troubled in the context of people who are transgender,

transsexual, homosexual or who cross-dress; what ‘gender’ could be assigned to these groups? It is within these social groups the idea of ‘gender as performance’ is perhaps most pertinent.

The primary theorist of the ‘self’ as an effect of performance is Goffman who introduces the theatrical metaphor ‘life as theatre’, suggesting that human behavior can best be described as an effect of performance. Goffman argues that the ‘self’ is born out of a performance which is credited by the audience and, in being credited, becomes inextricably digested into the individual’s psyche; “A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation -this self - is a product of a scene...not a cause of it” (Goffman, E. 1959 pp. 244-247).

Although Goffman is not specific in writing of ‘gender’ as performance, for Goffman the ‘self’ as a whole is a performance, I would contend that as most people would identify themselves as being either male or female Goffman’s ideas can be readily used in the analysis of ‘gender’ as an effect of performance.

For Goffman individuals perform a multiplicity of roles throughout their life course entirely dependent on the situation they find themselves in. Be that as a spouse, sibling, scholar or, in this case, male/female. What is important for Goffman is that there is no one true self, just a performance of it. While performing these ‘roles’ Goffman suggests individuals ‘manage’ their performance using a number of strategies of which I will go into more detail in the context of ‘gender performance’ and with particular reference to the example of Brandon Teena. Included in these ‘managerial’ tools are props, regions and audience participation.

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Props, or to use Goffman's term "Personal front", include "...insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like" (Goffman, E. 1959 p. 34). Using my example, Brandon Teena, there are a number of times we see Brandon using props to aid his performance as a male; for example a scene in which he is 'dressing up' or 'transforming' into his role using male clothing, tape to flatten his chest and adding padding to his groin to alter his looks. These can be seen as physical props in his performance of gender, however it is also evident he employs what he considers stereotypically 'male' body postures, speech patterns and gestures; swaggering, bad language and so on.

Regions take the form of what Goffman terms as "front region" or "back region/backstage"; there are also temporal regions such as in a television studio being either 'on' or 'off' air. The "front region" is where the performance takes place, where the audience is observing the role one is playing; "The performance of an individual in a front region may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards". The "back region" for Goffman is where the preparation takes part, where all the construction and 'dirty work' deemed unsuitable for viewing is undertaken in preparation of the performance; "A back region...[is] where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman, E. 1959 pp. 109-140). For Brandon the "front region" could be thought of as any time in which his 'gender' was under scrutiny, where he was in the presence of his audience; whenever there were eyes upon him his 'gender performance'

must be believed. His “backstage” was quite clearly his own private spaces, a bathroom, a bedroom and so on, where his true ‘biological body’ is not seen and where he has the privacy to construct his ‘male’ identity.

The role of the audience is in the main to validate the performance. The performer in playing their part is asking to be taken seriously; they are asking the audience to believe what they are being shown, and in convincing the audience they are seeing the “real reality” the performance is credited as being the real ‘self’. In effect the individual is asking to be judged, in this case as being male/female, and receiving judgment is “...an ultimate end in itself...” (Goffman, E. 1959 pp. 28-32). In ‘Boys Don’t Cry’ there are numerous scenes in which Brandon is seen to be asking for his ‘gender performance’ to be credited by his new found friends, his audience. In one particular scene we see him ‘bumper surfing’, this being a ‘male’ activity in Falls City, and in doing so is not only proving his ‘maleness’ is also seeking a ‘pat on the back’ by his audience, an affirmation of being ‘male’.

In summing up Goffman’s ideas of the ‘self’ as an effect of performance I have shown that ‘gender’ has to be performed and credited by the audience. Whether or not an individual is biologically male/female or transgender/transsexual it is still evident that props, regions and audiences play a role in the performance of ‘gender’ and in imputing a sense of ‘gender identity’. In a similar vein to Goffman Butler also sees ‘gender’ as a performance, although more radically suggests ‘gender’ does not exist; there is only one body and that is the human body, ‘gender’ is a construction.

What Butler introduces into the 'performance of gender' is "performativity", the notion that words have associated actions behind them; words do not just state a fact, they perform an action, moreover Butler's contention is that without language there would be no 'gender', 'gender' would be meaningless. To understand this argument is to understand that Butler troubles the notion not just of sex as biological male/female, but also the social construction of sex/'gender'.

In speaking of the social construction of 'gender' Butler argues that biological 'sex' is not what constructs 'gender'; in being biologically 'female' it should not follow that 'gender' is also 'female'. In Butler's words "Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of 'men' will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that 'women' will interpret only female bodies" (Butler, J. 1999 p. 10). In this Butler goes a little way to acknowledge 'male' and 'female' bodies but challenges that these bodies will be 'men' and 'women' respectively. For Butler it is 'gendered language' that creates 'gender'.

As an example we can look at an event happening every few seconds all over the world, the birth of a baby. Butler would argue that this baby is just that, a baby; it has no gender identity and despite its biological body could be a 'man' or could be a 'women'. For Butler it is the language used from its very first appearance into the world that determines whether it will be a 'man' or a 'woman'; for example the very first utterance most common at a birth is "congratulations, you have a beautiful baby boy". This utterance, Butler would argue, performs an action, hence Butler's term "performativity"; it is not just a statement of fact, moreover it determines

what color the nursery will be, what clothing will be bought and whether a ' male' name is given or ' female' name.

To use the example of Brandon Teena there is a particular sequence of scenes towards the beginning of the film that see Brandon ice skating. He catches the eye of a young girl and before long they skate together. This leads on to moving outside where they start to become intimate before the young girl discovers that Brandon is in fact biologically ' female'. Brandon is then chased by a group of males back to a trailer park where he is staying with his brother and whilst hiding the group of males are shouting abuse. Brandon's brother turns to him and says " You're a dyke, why can't you just admit you're a dyke" (Pearce, K. 200). In saying " You're a dyke" Brandon's brother is not merely stating the perceived fact that Brandon's a lesbian. Butler would argue that that statement performs actions; what Brandon's brother is really saying is " You are a lesbian, act like a lesbian. Date girls as a girl, dress as a girl and talk as a girl". In the same way there are numerous scenes in which Brandon's new found friends would make comments such as, " You're one hell of a guy" or " You're one crazy guy", and again those statements would perform an action or actions, for Butler the noun ' guy' becomes the verb ' guy'. Clearly in these examples it could be argued that ' gendered language' determines identity; without language gender would indeed be meaningless, in Butler's words " performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate " act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, J. 1993 p. 2).

In conclusion I have shown that the idea of a biologically determined 'gender' is problematic outside of the context of the binary sex model; sex does not equal 'gender'. If we take Goffman's argument the 'self', or 'gender identity', is an effect of performance; the audience imputes a sense of self as a result of performance. In my example I demonstrated that Brandon's 'gender identity' could be seen as the effect of his performance as a man; should his performance not have been credited then it is probable that he would have re-invented his sense of 'self', his 'gender identity'. Similar to Goffman's contention Butler also argues that 'gender' is 'given' to an individual although not by crediting performance but in the more generalized 'gendered language' of day to day discourse. To weave Butler's arguments into my example Brandon's 'gender' was given to him first by his family as a 'woman' and then in his chosen 'gender' by his friends as a 'man'. This fluidity of gender, the ability to invent 'new' gender categories, can be summed up by Butler as she explains "...dissonant adjectives work retroactively to redefine the substantive identities they are said to modify and, hence, to expand the substantive categories of gender to include possibilities that they previously excluded" (Butler, J. 1999 p. 33). In this Butler is referring to the way in which 'gender' reinvents itself as new 'labels' or categories come into popular discourse such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, hermaphrodite and so on. The only aspect of 'gender' that can be clear for both Goffman and Butler is that 'gender' is merely an illusion; the only true fact is that we are all human.



**Bibliography.**

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