

Judith Butler's Notion of Gender Performativity

To What Extent Does Gender Performativity Exclude a Stable Gender Identity?

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Abstract

The idea that gender is socially constructed has been accepted as common knowledge for a long time. This raises the question how does the construction of gender work. Judith Butler proposed that gender is performative. What does Butler (1999, 2004, 2011) mean when she uses the term gender performativity and to what extent does her view of gender being performative leave room for gender as a stable identity? In this thesis I argue that Butler's notion of gender performativity implies that that gender identity is unstable. However, since Butler responds to criticism with the explanation that gender performativity does not oppose all identity claims and all gender assignments, there could be some room for gender as a stable identity. It is commonly accepted that gender and sex are different, however Butler criticises this distinction. Therefore I start with explaining the commonly accepted differences between sex and gender and then I give Butler's critique on this distinction. Butler's states that gender and sex would be the same if sex, just as gender, is socially constructed. Moreover, Butler sees sex reassignment surgeries as an example of how people are trying to change their sex to fit the norm, which in her view makes sex socially constructed. Therefore we can conclude that to Butler sex and gender are the same. I assume that Butler's suggestion that sex and gender could be the same is an attempt to deconstruct the terms gender and sex. I illustrate the idea that gender is socially constructed and use it to introduce Butler's notion that gender is performative. She claims that an act which is being done repetitively is performative if it produces a series of effects. Butler emphasises that the key is in the *repetitiveness* of the gendered acts. This way of constructing gender brings us to Butler's belief that gender identity cannot exist prior to gendered acts, because gendered acts and gender identity exist at the same time. Since gender identity is continuously formed by gendered acts, we should not view gender as a stable identity. However, if gender identity is unstable it poses a problem for people with trans-identities, as is explained by Prosser (1998). Butler uses examples of transgender people and people doing drag to support the claim that gender is performative. Prosser and Namaste (2000) explain that these examples are problematic because they are missing context and are misrepresenting the people in these examples. Even though Butler has read and responded to criticism on these points, it did not convince her to change her view that gender is performative and that her examples were wrong. However in her response on the stability of gender identity she explains that it cannot be concluded that gender performativity does not by definition oppose all identity claims and all gender assignments. Therefore it seems possible that there is some space for gender to be experienced as a stable identity.

Introduction

Context

You could look at gender from different perspectives. Individuals have their own personal conviction of which gender (one, several, or neither) gender they identify with. It is not always possible to guess from an outsider's perspective what someone's gender identity is, because it is a personal identity experienced only by that individual. Moreover, how someone expresses themselves through their clothes or hairstyle may not match the way they feel internally, or match what society may expect of them, being a certain gender. Sports such as soccer and ballet and the colour pink are typically associated with a specific gender. These ideas on gender are not stable, they vary over cultures and throughout history. For example, in the United States soccer is considered a girls sport and in Europe it is typically for boys. It is described by many authors that there are differences between what is *now* commonly attributed to a specific gender, in comparison to what was common for that gender a few decades or a few hundred years ago. The colour pink is now seen as a girly colour, but this was not the case one hundred years ago. Hence, *gender norms* are changing. This raises the question: how they are formed and changed?

It has long been thought that *gender is socially constructed* and this has been described by several authors such as Millet (1971), Haslanger (1995), Kimmel (2000) and Mikkola (2017) to name only a few. In 1970 Stoller was the first to make a distinction between the terms sex and gender (Mikkola 2017, 1.2), this distinction became commonly accepted among feminists. Butler expressed the idea that *sex could be socially constructed* too. We might wonder how differences in gender are socially constructed. Judith Butler claims that *gender is performative*. She was inspired by Searle's speech acts and by Austin's description of the term performative. Derrida claimed that the iterability of the performative is where its power comes from, which inspired her even more (Kroløkke 2006, 38).

Research Question

To what extent does Judith Butler's view that gender is performative, exclude a stable gender identity?

To answer this question we need to know how Butler views gender. Furthermore, we wonder what the definition is of performativity. Next we ask what does it mean if gender is performative. Given that gender is performative, we can ask what that implies about gender as a stable identity.

Method

This thesis focusses on Butler's notion that gender is performative. Before we can discuss what this notion means and implies, we need to understand what is meant by the terms *gender* and *performativity*. In literature the word gender is used to refer to different concepts. Sometimes it

refers to acts done by individuals, while other times the word gender is used interchangeably with sex. I choose not to start with giving a commonly accepted definition of *gender* and the related concepts of *sex* and *identity*, neither do I use a definition of gender of my own. Both of these options are risky because those definitions may not match with Butler's definition of gender and that could result in insensible comparisons and conclusions. I realize that there are ways to avoid this, but in this thesis I prefer to keep the focus on Butler and her ideas.

At the time Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* it was commonly thought that sex and gender are different. However, Butler argued that these concepts could be the same. This shows that she has a very different perspective on gender. Therefore in order to understand Butler's view it is relevant to start this thesis with the difference between sex and gender. The next step is to give Butler's critique on this distinction. Butler's reasoning consist of the idea that sex is socially constructed, just as gender is socially constructed.

The next step is to explain the idea that gender is socially constructed. Wondering how that construction works, Butler claims that gender is performative. To understand the meaning of her claim, first the general concept of performativity needs to be explained. Then is discussed what 'gender is performative' means. If gender is performative it is continuously subject to small changes and keeps constituting itself. Gender and gender identity do not exist separately from each other. Gender being performative does not seem to leave room for gender as a stable identity. Since it is impossible to view gender performativity separate from gender as an identity, I choose not to gender identity in a separate chapter.

The conclusion that gender identity is not stable has provoked criticism. Transgender people claim that they experience a stable gender identity and they use the notion of a stable gender identity to explain to others that there is a mismatch between their body and their gender. Butler uses examples of transgender people and examples of drag culture to confirm her idea that gender is performative. Prosser and Namaste take issue with these examples because they are missing context and are misrepresentative. Butler is aware of and has responded to the criticism she received, therefore it is relevant to discuss this in the third part of this thesis. Moreover, it is relevant to discuss the critique in an attempt to find if it brought Butler to change her view. We find that the critique on her examples did not influence Butler to change her view that gender is performative and that gender is not a stable identity. However, the criticism on the idea that gender is unstable did influence Butler to give some more explanation. According to Butler we can't conclude that all identity claims and all gender assignments are by definition opposed. This could mean that an identity claim of a stable gender is not excluded. Therefore to a small extent gender performativity could leave room for gender as a stable identity.

Outline

The first chapter addresses the relation between the concepts of sex and gender. Then the first section explains the difference between gender and sex as it is seen by several authors. The last section describes Butler's critique on this distinction and suggests that sex and gender could be the same. This suggestion is based on the argument that sex is, just as gender socially constructed.

The second chapter starts with a section that illustrates this common idea that gender is socially constructed. Several examples show that the ideas of what is common for a certain gender change over time and vary amongst cultures. The following section mentions that Butler's inspiration for gender performativity came from Austin and Derrida. This section also explains what it means if something is performative. At the end of the section it is explained that Butler's gender performativity implies that gender identity is unstable.

The third chapter explains some criticism from Prosser, Namaste and Bettcher on Butler's idea that gender identity is not stable and on the examples she uses as confirmation that gender is performative. The first section discusses that viewing gender identity as unstable is problematic for people who are trans. The second section explains that transgender people should not be used as an example to confirm gender performativity. The final section states that Butler's example of drag should not be used as an example of the liberation of gender. Each section includes a paragraph with responses from Butler.

In the conclusion chapter I summarize what is discussed in this thesis and answer the research question. Butler's notion of gender being performative implies that gender is unstable. If gender is performative, it can't exist separate from gender identity. Both continuously influence each other. However, Butler states that it would be wrong to conclude that all identity claims and all gender assignments are being opposed by definition. Therefore it is not said that an identity claim of a stable gender identity is impossible. In the next section I describe some implications of gender performativity. Finally I reflect on the method I chose for this thesis and end with some suggestions for further research.

1. Is There a Difference Between Gender and Sex?

It is important to realise that Butler's views in *Gender Trouble* have been misinterpreted by other authors. After Butler received criticism on *Gender Trouble* (1990), she responded to those critiques in the new preface of the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*. She also addressed criticism in her later works *Bodies that Matter* (1993)¹ and *Undoing Gender* (2004). In my view she did not agree with the criticism that she received. She never wrote that she was wrong before. On the one hand she defends her earlier work by indicating that some of the criticism is based on misconceptions, while on the other hand she mitigates critique by giving more elaborate explanations of her previous statements. She only fine-tunes the points that she made before, hence I don't see a need to distinguish an *early* and a *late* Butler, I am presenting her view as one narrative including the additions she gave in her later work.

Before explaining Butler's view that gender is performative, it is helpful to have some background knowledge of the customary ideas of feminists at the time that Butler wrote *Gender Trouble* (1990): the belief that gender and sex are different. This is relevant because Butler does not completely support this distinction. Her criticism is discussed in the last part of this chapter. Given this context the relation between gender and sex, the next chapter describes Butler's view on gender being performative.

1.1 The Distinction Between Gender and Sex

We grow up with the idea that a person's gender is determined by their sex². Moreover, in general people think that the sex of a person is something stable³ and we develop the idea that sex and gender are binary⁴. However, gender and sex are two different notions: Psychologist Robert Stoller was the first to distinguish between the terms gender and sex (Mikkola 2017, 1.2), according to Stoller the word gender describes how much feminine and masculine *behaviour* an individual displays and the word sex describes *the biological* characteristics of a person. Mikkola (2017, 1.1) gives a similar definition: Gender denotes men and women depending on social factors such as *social roles, position, behaviour and identity* and sex denotes the *biological* characteristics of someone's body. Which characteristics do we refer to when we talk about sex? When we consider the sex of a person, we think about the biological features that we associate with male/female/intersex, such as the genitals, hormones, chromosomes or gonads. From realizing that e.g. people exist who have XY

¹ "This text is offered, then, in part as a rethinking of some parts of *Gender Trouble* that have caused confusion" (Butler 2011, x).

² Even though transgender, non-binary and intersex people report that for them that is not the case.

³ My great-grandmother used to tell my mother when she was a child, "it will all be better before you become a boy". Which I took as a sign that my great-grandmother saw that as an impossibility.

⁴ This is disputed by the experience of intersex and non-binary, genderqueer people.

chromosomes and a vagina, or both XX and XY chromosomes or XX chromosomes but no womb⁵, we have to conclude “that sex is not a single, unitary, easily-determined feature.” (Bettcher 2014, 5.1), i.e. sex is an umbrella term.

The distinction between gender and sex as made by Stoller has been found useful by several feminists. It helped them explain how perceived differences between women and men are changeable because they were socially produced (Mikkola 2017, 1.2). The following section addresses some of the response Butler gave on this distinction between gender and sex.

1.2 Butler’s Critique of the Distinction Between Gender and Sex

The distinction between gender and sex is used to make a separation between the sexed *body* on one hand and the gendered *behaviour* of people on the other hand. Butler says that the distinction between sex and gender intended to show that biological sex does not *determine* gender. “If sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, ‘woman’ need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and ‘man’ need not interpret male bodies” (Butler 1999, 142). This distinction argues that gender is not as stable as sex and that gender is socially constructed (Butler 1999, 9). More on the notion that gender is socially constructed is discussed in section 2.1.

Moreover, Butler suggests that “sex is as culturally constructed as gender” and she concludes that if that is the case, then gender and sex are the same (Butler 1999, 10-11). She calls sex a cultural norm because sex is no longer treated as something that is determined by the body (Butler 2011, xii). In our culture at this point in time it is a cultural norm that everyone should either be of male or female sex, only these two sexes exist. That is why babies who are born with ambiguous genitalia are being operated on to normalize their genitalia, to make their bodies into male or female. Likewise there are transsexuals who themselves want to get operated on their genitals to make them the gender they know they are. Since the sex of people is being changed to fit the current norms, Butler sees sex as socially constructed.

I think that Butler is trying to deconstruct the concepts of gender and sex because in her view the norms of gender and sex are the norms of the ones who are in power. What they view as right, is seen as right by most people in society. Examples of these norms are: the idea that heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is deviating from that norm, or the idea that there are only men and women. Ideas about which traits are associated with each gender are socially constructed, this is explained in the next chapter.

⁵ Many other biological variations exist.

2. Butler's Notion of Gender Performativity

This chapter starts with explaining the common idea that gender is socially constructed. The next section defines the term performativity. What is important in performativity is not in the first place the *act* that is performed, but mostly the fact that the act is being done *repeatedly*. In the same section I explain what Butler means with the statement that gender is performative and describe what it means for Butler's view on gender as a stable identity. Since Butler claimed that her work has been misinterpreted⁶ several times, I am explaining some misconceptions at the end of this chapter before I draw some intermediary conclusions. Furthermore Butler's ideas as explained in this thesis are based not only on *Gender Trouble* but also to her earlier and later work.

2.1 Gender as a Social Construct

The ideas and norms about which properties (such as clothing, colours, sports etc.) are part of a certain gender, change over time. What in a certain period was seen as typical for one gender, can in a different period in time be seen as atypical for the same gender. For example, a few hundred years ago the colour pink was considered a typical colour for boys, while in recent years that same colour is seen as typical for girls. Also when looking at other cultures, we see differences between gender norms. For example two men walking in public while holding hands is normal in Iran, while in Western Europe that is not common. Several authors write about how these gender roles are formed. According to Rubin, the differences between genders are caused by social interventions in which people are told not to behave a certain way because it does not match their gender⁷ (Rubin in Mikkola 2017, 1.2). Kimmel states that what is part of a gender role depends on the context. "Definitions of masculinity and femininity vary", he mentions variation amongst cultures, time, race, sexuality education and more (Kimmel 2000, 87-88). Millet (1971, 29) says that gender has a "cultural character". For example, the expectations we as a society have of young women or of old men, we share them among ourselves and talk about them, and by doing that we are shaping those genders. Mikkola (2017, 1.1) says something similar, that the behavioural traits we associate with women and men are culturally learned. According to Haslanger (1995, 98) saying that gender is socially constructed in some contexts means the same as saying that the reason women are feminine and men are masculine is socially determined instead of biologically determined.

That gender does not stay the same over time and varies with race, class and region is for Butler (1999, 6-7) the reason that it is impossible to view gender separately from the "cultural intersections" that "produced and maintained" gender. She wonders, if gender is socially constructed how does that construction work? If gender is constructed it is not necessary constructed by people (Butler 2011, xvi). It may even be the opposite, that people are being constructed. According to

⁶ Butler's views are famous for being difficult to interpret because of her word choice and her indirect way of writing. In this chapter I describe Butler's view as complete as possible for as far as it is relevant to this topic. In the rest of the thesis, I take this interpretation as given.

⁷ This is referred to as gender policing.

Bettcher (2014, 5.2), Butler views the agent as performatively constituted by their gendered behaviour. The following section describes the definition of the term performative and explains what it means to say that gender is performative.

2.2 What it Means to be Performative

Butler was inspired by Austin's description of *performative* and even more by Derrida's criticism and claim that the power of the performative comes from their iterability (Kroløkke 2006, 38). "The Derridean notion of iterability, formulated in response to the theorization of speech acts by John Searle and J.L. Austin, also implies that every act is itself a recitation" (Butler 2011, 187). When something is performative, it produces a series of effects. For example when a person says "I promise you" they are uttering this sentence and at the same time making a promise and changing your expectations. An important aspect of performativity is the *repetitiveness* of the acts that are being done (Butler 2011, xii). Butler also compares it to "a ritualized production" (Butler 2011, 60). Imagine that specific acts are being done over and over again. If many young boys would start wearing dresses tomorrow and they would continue to do so for the years to come, then over time our view of what is normal for young boys to wear will change.

Butler states that gender is performative. Gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988, 527). In the new preface of *Gender Trouble*, she explains her reasoning⁸: The view that gender is performative gives an explanation of how gender identity is formed through a set of acts. What does it mean for gender to be performative? Butler says that it means that nobody is a gender prior to doing gendered acts. Butler (1999, 23) states that "*identity* is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality". Which we might interpret as a reference to gender performativity. Butler (1999, 33) writes that "gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed". That sentence sounds like an acknowledgement of gender as an identity, but with the important side note that there cannot be a gender identity before doing gendered acts. This is also reflected by Butler's comment that there "is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1999, 33). That may give the impression that the gender identity becomes a shell, since it does not exist before, but only during gendered acts.

In Chapter 2 of *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler mentions that there are various ways in which gender is regulated. She raises the question whether a gender could exist prior to regulation or if a gendered subject arises from regulation (Butler 2004, 40-41). "It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in way" (Butler 1988, 527). Butler can imagine that certain acts of people are seen as an expression of a gender identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler wonders what is meant by *identity*. She states that it is assumed that the term *women* for

⁸ "The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body." (Butler 1999, XV).

example, refers to a common identity, which she calls problematic. This is problematic because the group that consists of all women contains so many different people that it makes it impossible to find a common denominator. Butler (2011, 86) calls “‘being a man’ and ‘being a woman’ internally unstable affairs”. She also writes that gender “ought not to be construed as a stable identity [...] gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” (Butler 1999, 179). Both of these sentences state clearly that to Butler gender identity is unstable. It is probably with that in mind that we should interpret Butler’s claim that it is impossible to *be* a sex or a gender (Butler 1999, 22-25), (Butler 2004, 42). Since gender is performative, it only exists *while* it is being performed. “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.” (Butler 1999, 174).

Two possible misinterpretations of Butler’s view on gender are contemplated here. Butler’s view on gender should not be generalized to the claim that gender is equal to behaviour. In that case, when a person goes into a men’s bathroom that would make that person a man and when the same person is wearing a skirt at that moment that person would be a woman. This would make gender completely fluid, which is a claim she does not make. Butler suggests that such a person would treat gender as a choice and “fails to realize that its existence is already decided by gender.” (Butler 2011, ix). Butler is questioning if properties that precede gender exist, by doing that she is not suggesting that there is a loop between gender and gender identity. It is not the case that there are people of a certain gender, who behave in a certain way, which influences the norms of what is appropriate for that gender. Butler suggests that that people can’t be of a certain gender beforehand. “the I neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.” (Butler 2011, xvi).

In conclusion, Butler says that gender identity does not precede gendered acts. It seems that gendered acts and gender identity exist at the same time. Gendered acts are continuously constituting gender as an identity. From Butler’s statements about gender identity it follows that gender identity is unstable. The next chapter discusses criticism based on Butler’s description of gender identity and on the way she uses examples of transgender, transsexuals and drag culture to confirm that gender is performative. Also Butler’s reaction to criticism is given. From her response we find that there could be a little room for gender as a stable identity.

3. Gender Identity is Unstable

Bettcher (2014, 5.3) describes that Butler's work has created a tension which "involves her account of gender identity as socially constructed as well as her account of subversion (on the one hand), and the importance of gender identity and gender realness to some trans people (on the other)". Butler claims that gendered acts and gender identity do not exist without each other. Gender is an identity that keeps constituting itself. She writes that gender should not be interpreted as a stable identity (Butler 1999, 179). In his critique Prosser focusses on the way Butler interpreted the formation of the self while Namaste criticises the way Butler uses transsexuals and queers as examples (Bettcher 2014, 5.3). The first section of this chapter discusses criticism by Prosser on the implication that gender identity is not stable. The second and third section discuss criticism on Butler's description of transsexuals and transgender people and people who perform drag. Each section includes a paragraph on Butler's response to that critique.

Butler wrote *Undoing Gender* after she received criticism on *Gender Trouble*. In this work she aimed to give a more refined approach to the importance of identity because of the "tension that arises between queer theory and both intersex and transsexual activism' which 'centers on the question of sex assignment and the desirability of identity categories'" (Bettcher 2014, 5.3). Butler is aware of criticism and responded with explanations. The critique did not influence her to change her notion of gender performativity, however her response does give a little room for gender as a stable identity.

3.1 Gender Identity being Unstable is Problematic

According to Butler, gender performativity explains how gender identity is formed through a set of acts. Gendered acts are iteratively constituting gender identity. Therefore gender is not a stable identity. This poses a real problem for transgender people and transsexuals since they need the term *gender identity* to explain the mismatch between the gender that they know they are and the sex of the body they were born into⁹. "Prosser (1998) takes issue with Butler's view [...] of identity and body" (Bettcher 2014, 5.3). He uses an analogy to explain how it is possible for a transsexual person to feel a mismatch between their body and the image they have in their mind of their own body (Bettcher 2014, 5.3). In this analogy Prosser compares the neurological inability to track parts of one's body, called bodily agnosia, to transgender people who feel like they should not have breasts, or should have a penis. The point that Prosser is making here is that transgender people who want to undergo surgery, want their mind and body to match. This is a contrast with Butler who gave the impression that transgender people want to have surgery to fit the norm that all women have vagina's and all men have a penis.

Butler responds in her later work *Undoing Gender* (2004, 7). She shows that she understands that there is a tension between queer theory and both intersex and transsexual activism. She describes the contradiction as follows: "If queer theory is understood, by definition, to oppose all identity claims, including stable sex assignment, then the tension seems strong indeed". Butler suggests that

⁹ This is a political argument.

queer theory is only “opposed to unwanted legislation of identity” and she explains that it cannot be concluded that queer theory would cast doubt on the gender assignment of for example intersex children, or that queer theory is opposed to all gender assignments. It might be possible that an identity claim of a stable gender identity is not excluded by Butler’s view that gender is performative. The following section discusses critique on Butler’s description of transgender, transsexual people and on drag culture.

3.2 Butler’s Example of Transgender People is Problematic

Prosser sees as an area for discussion “the (mis)representation of the transgender body within queer theory as a privileged example of gender performativity” (Halberstam, 2000, 313). I think this argument applies to Butler’s description of Venus who was assigned male at birth (Butler 2011, 91). Venus has expressed “her desire to become a whole woman, to find a man and have a house in the suburbs with a washing machine”. Butler describes Venus as an example that confirms the notion that gender is performative. She sees Venus as a person who is performing drag and denaturalizing¹⁰ gender. This description raises the following question: does Butler view Venus as a person who is trying to *change* gender norms? Venus expressed the desire to live life as a woman, which could indicate that she is transgender and would be perfectly happy with fulfilling a traditional female gender role. Possibly Prosser thinks Venus is being used here to serve as an example, without considering her as a subject¹¹. Prosser feels strongly about “the importance of autobiography by transsexuals”¹² (Halberstam 2000, 313). To Butler this may not pose a problem. She wrote about transgender and transsexuals without identifying as one. Clearly Butler does not feel like she is forbidden to write about transsexuals without identifying as one.

Butler (1999, xxvi) responds to general criticism by saying in the new preface of *Gender Trouble* that if “I were to rewrite this book under present circumstances, I would include a discussion of transgender and intersexuality, the way that ideal gender dimorphism works in both sorts of discourses, the different relations to surgical intervention that these related concerns sustain”. This is a general response. Including a discussion on transgender does not reject or admit to criticism.

¹⁰ “We may well question whether the denaturalization of gender and sexuality that she performs, and performs well, culminates in a reworking of the normative framework of heterosexuality. The painfulness of her death at the end of the film suggests as well that there are cruel and fatal social constraints on denaturalization” (Butler 2011, 91).

¹¹ “Prosser finds that queer theory in particular has made use of the transsexual as figure without considering the transsexual as subject” (Halberstam, 2000, 314).

¹² Both Butler and Prosser have confided their personal experiences in the introduction of their books.

3.3 Butler's Example of Drag is Problematic

Butler also received critique on her description of drag queens, because she describes drag as being submissive. "Butler missed to provide the context of the drag gay bars example to show that it is NOT an example of 'gender liberation'" (Namaste 2000, 10). Butler suggests that "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler 1999, 174). Here Butler uses drag as an example to suggest that a notion of a true gender identity does not exist. Prosser demonstrates an inconsistency, in *Gender Trouble* Butler uses "transgender figures of the drag queen" and butch lesbians as examples gender performativity, while in *Bodies That Matter* transsexuals represent a limit to performativity (Halberstam 2000, 314).

Concerning her description of drag, Butler (2010, 85) defends herself by explaining that she does not necessarily see drag as an example of subversion. According to her drag can be used to idealize current gender norms and drag can also be used to destabilize current gender norms.

Conclusion

Research Question

This thesis explains what Judith Butler means by her notion that gender is performative. The main question of this thesis is: to what extent does gender performativity exclude gender as a stable identity?

In queer theory it is commonly accepted that gender and sex are different. Several authors agree that sex refers to the biological characteristics of the body, while gender refers to social behaviour, gender roles and personal gender identity. Judith Butler is critical of this distinction between sex and gender and suggests that sex and gender could be the same. She states that if sex is also socially constructed, then sex and gender must be equal. Then she argues that people who have sex reassignment surgeries are trying to fit the norm that only two sexes exist. Which means that sex is a cultural norm and that implies that to Butler, sex and gender are the same. In my view Butler is trying to deconstruct the terms gender and sex.

That gender is socially constructed is commonly accepted. When looking at gender norms in different cultures and in different periods in time, it is clear that definitions of gender norms vary. One can question how these gender norms are socially formed. Butler says that gender is performative. This idea is inspired by Austin's description of the term *performative* and by Derrida's claim that it is the *repetitiveness* that gives the performative its power. Butler explains that an act is performative if it produces a series of effects. That gender is performative means that there can be no gender identity before the gendered acts, because the acts are continuously constituting the identity. Butler wrote that nobody can *be* a gender *before* doing gendered acts. She also wrote that gender should not be seen as a stable identity. This suggests that the notion of gender performativity leave to no extent space for gender as a stable identity.

Butler received criticism on her notion that gender is performative and that gender is not a stable identity. Prosser explained that transgender people use the term gender identity to explain a difference between the gender they identify with and their assigned sex and the gender that others perceive them to be. That is why Butler's notion of gender performativity poses a real problem. She suggests that gender performativity is not opposed to "all identity claims" including stable sex assignment. She also writes that it cannot be concluded that gender performativity is opposed to all gender assignments. These statements could be interpreted as leaving a little bit of room for a stable gender identity. Other critique from Prosser and Namaste is based on the way that Butler uses examples of transsexuals, transgender people and of drag. Butler responds to the received criticism by saying that if she would write *Gender Trouble* under the present circumstances, she would include more text on the topic of transsexuals and intersexuality, which is a neutral statement. Butler also explains drag is not necessarily always an example of subversion. The criticism about the way that Butler wrote about transgender people and people who perform drag is did not influence Butler to adapt her view of gender performativity.

To what extent does gender performativity exclude a stable gender identity? At first it seems that there is no room for gender as a stable identity. Gender identity cannot exist prior to gendered acts.

Both gendered acts and gender identity exist at the same time because gender identity is constituted through the repetition of acts. However, if we look at the criticism on gender identity that Butler received and her response, then there could be some space for gender as a stable identity. Butler writes that queer theory is not opposed to all identity claims, and that it is not opposed to all gender assignments. It is possible that an identity claim of a stable gender might not be excluded. This leaves a possibility that to a small extent there is space for gender as a stable identity.

Implications in a Broader Context

What are some of the implications gender performativity? The view that gender is performative and that there is no stable gender identity raises a problem. People who are transgender use the term sex to refer to the body that they were born with, or the gender they were assigned at birth. They use the term gender or gender identity to refer their internal gender identity. This helps them to explain to others the mismatch between the way they are perceived by others / their sexed bodies and the way they feel internally.

Method

The method I chose for this thesis was to rely on the definitions as they are used by Butler herself. I did not choose to use a general definition of gender and compare how Butler relates to that definition. Even though that could have been a legitimate choice if I approached it with care. My choice was in part an attempt to avoid misinterpreting Butler's ideas and in part to keep the focus of this thesis on Judith Butler's notion. I tried to give as much body to her ideas as I could, but it is impossible to be sure that Butler's view as presented here is completely accurate.

Another approach I contemplated is to respond to Butler's definitions within each section by discussing critique of others and myself. However, in order to keep the focus on Butler's notion of gender performativity, I chose to discuss critique in a later chapter to avoid distraction.

To confirm that gender is performative, Butler used examples of people who are trans and examples of drag to confirm that gender is performative. She received critique on those examples. Moreover, Butler received criticism on the idea that gender identity is unstable. Therefore it seemed relevant to discuss both the critique and Butler's responses. Since the main question was already answered in chapter 2, this discussion may seem unnecessary. Investigating the critique and Butler's response was an attempt to find out if it influenced Butler to nuance her view that gender is performative or to admit that gender identity is stable as Prosser argued. The critique on the examples of transsexuals and drag only convinced Butler that if she were to rewrite her work, she would use more words to explain why the examples of drag and transgender people are valid confirmations of her earlier work. However, from the extra explanation Butler provided after receiving critique that gender identity is unstable, we could conclude that an identity claim of a stable gender may not be excluded. This tells us that to some small extent gender performativity may not exclude gender as a stable identity.

Further Research

It would be interesting to investigate the relation between *gender roles* as they are seen by society, *gender identity* as a personal identity and *gender expression* as the conscious acts of people of certain genders. These three terms can be seen as completely separated from each other, however that is a very different approach to the way that Butler writes on gender.

Both in Butler's books and in other literature, examples often contain women or the relation between male-female, which gives the impression that there are only two genders. There are several cultures that recognize three or even five different genders. Therefore another suggestion for further research is to focus on other genders than male and female.

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Appendix 1 – Form Cognizance Plagiarism

VERKLARING KENNISNEMING REGELS M.B.T. PLAGIAAT

Fraude en plagiaat

Wetenschappelijke integriteit vormt de basis van het academisch bedrijf. De Universiteit Utrecht vat iedere vorm van wetenschappelijke misleiding daarom op als een zeer ernstig vergrijp. De Universiteit Utrecht verwacht dat elke student de normen en waarden inzake wetenschappelijke integriteit kent en in acht neemt.

De belangrijkste vormen van misleiding die deze integriteit aantasten zijn fraude en plagiaat. Plagiaat is het overnemen van andermans werk zonder behoorlijke verwijzing en is een vorm van fraude. Hieronder volgt nadere uitleg wat er onder fraude en plagiaat wordt verstaan en een aantal concrete voorbeelden daarvan. Let wel: dit is geen uitputtende lijst!

Bij constatering van fraude of plagiaat kan de examencommissie van de opleiding sancties opleggen. De sterkste sanctie die de examencommissie kan opleggen is het indienen van een verzoek aan het College van Bestuur om een student van de opleiding te laten verwijderen.

Plagiaat

Plagiaat is het overnemen van stukken, gedachten, redeneringen van anderen en deze laten doorgaan voor eigen werk. Je moet altijd nauwkeurig aangeven aan wie ideeën en inzichten zijn ontleend, en voortdurend bedacht zijn op het verschil tussen citeren, parafraseren en plagiëren. Niet alleen bij het gebruik van gedrukte bronnen, maar zeker ook bij het gebruik van informatie die van het internet wordt gehaald, dien je zorgvuldig te werk te gaan bij het vermelden van de informatiebronnen.

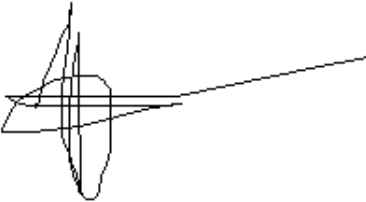
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- het parafraseren van bovengenoemde teksten zonder (deugdelijke) verwijzing: parafrasen moeten als zodanig gemarkeerd zijn (door de tekst uitdrukkelijk te verbinden met de oorspronkelijke auteur in tekst of noot), zodat niet de indruk wordt gewekt dat het gaat om eigen gedachtengoed van de student;
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- het zonder bronvermelding opnieuw inleveren van eerder door de student gemaakt eigen werk en dit laten doorgaan voor in het kader van de cursus vervaardigd oorspronkelijk werk, tenzij dit in de cursus of door de docent uitdrukkelijk is toegestaan;
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In de Onderwijs- en Examenregeling (artikel 5.15) is vastgelegd wat de formele gang van zaken is als er een vermoeden van fraude/plagiaat is, en welke sancties er opgelegd kunnen worden.

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