

Gender as a Socially Constructed Phenomenon

Abstract: In the historical and social landscape that currently exists in America, the concept of gender, and especially the concept of women, has been created and enforced through societal expectations. From essentialism in the past, social and psychological theory has evolved to consider the social impact on gender construction. Foucault's prison theory, Berger's theory of surveying, and Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze can be used to show that gender, though it used to be viewed as inherent to a person's identity, is actually a process of social conditioning. Women are shaped by society but continue to follow their roles because social pressure, as it applies to gender, is perpetual and eventually is imposed by women on themselves. Distinctions in the way that men and women speak and utilize language, ways that women are treated in the media and advertising as nurturing and submissive or as sexual objects, and the way that young girls are marketed sexualized products from a young age prove that men and women are different. However, this difference is a direct result of being socialized into occupying separate roles, a phenomenon that has created a restrictive and limited interpretation of gender.

In today's society, it can be said that women and men have been consistently socialized into the spaces that they occupy and the stereotypes that have been assigned to them. Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*, noted that "One is not born a woman, one becomes one," exposing this formation of gender roles and also the phenomenon of gender itself as a social construct. The experience of being a woman in the modern world is a role accompanied by societal expectations, imposed from a very young age, and it is an experience that depends frequently on a woman's relationship with men. Men view women in an objectified light, and

men look at women as spectators from positions of power, affecting how women act, as they consistently see themselves through the eyes of men. On the flip side, men's socially constructed identities surround their distance from femininity and their relative position of dominance. Berger, Foucault, and Mulvey's theories on media, power, and behavior can be used to analyze the current state of our gendered society. It is physically present in men's and women's language usage, the way they dress, and how people conduct themselves starting in early childhood.

The way that women present themselves is a direct result of societal expectations and attitudes that are placed on them from the time they are born. This is based on a notion that people have believed throughout history, the connection of sex and gender. In this case, sex is used as "the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women" (WHO, 2015). Gender is used as "the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women" (WHO, 2015). The theory of essentialism can be traced all of the way back through Plato's philosophy, creating the expectation that a child's sex characteristics are indicative of its gender (Dunham, 2011). Essentialism favors the theory of a core inner self, the true identity of a person, and that this identity is reflected throughout a person. Utilizing this, it's not very difficult to see the extension from the determination of sex to the determination of gender in a binary system. This theory underlies the societal idea that the essence of a person is biologically determined, but in reality, this is an artificial and social imposition.

It is society that needs to know the sex of a baby so that it can be gendered. From the minute that a child's sex is identified, everything has changed, from how the child is treated to how they are observed. It starts with the most artificial of means, and one that seems simply

harmless: color-coding. Girls wear pink; boys wear blue. Then, as children grow, girls are supposed to play house and boys are supposed to play things like construction or war.

But, the social construction of gender is not just performing gendered actions or wearing gendered colors as children; it extends into adulthood. It includes the way women are watched and presented in their everyday lives. In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, Berger discusses this. He asserts, “she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another” (Berger, 1972, p.46). He simplifies this to: “men act and women appear” (Berger, 1972, p.47).

Essentially, when a woman does something, she is constantly thinking of how she is being seen doing it. Always thinking of herself first and foremost in terms of the judgment of others is an earmark trait of womanhood. Men do not have this self-consciousness, so they are able to act. However, women do not act, they appear; they appear even to themselves. Some refer to this as a form of self-objectification, and it occurs especially associated with the idea of female sexuality. Masters and Johnson in 1970, and Barlow in 1986 formed and explored the phenomenon of spectating to this effect. Trapnell in his 1997 article summarizes spectating as, “focusing on oneself from a third person perspective during sexual activity, rather than focusing on one's sensations and/or sexual partner, can increase performance fears and cause deleterious effects on sexual performance” (Trapnell, 1997, p.267). It is a sexual self-objectification to the extent that it affects the act of sex itself. For the women who experience this, literally, they are ceasing to act and are appearing to themselves. In addition, Judith Butler says that “The identification of

women with 'sex,' ... is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men (Butler, 1990, p.19).”

This idea of being watched and the way that women respond to being an observed object is expanded on by Foucault’s theories of gender and of socialization, especially when utilizing the prison analogy. If you show and tell prisoners that there is a guard in the security tower in a prison, some prisoners will probably still attempt to escape. However, once they believe that they will always be caught if they attempt to escape, that they are always constantly being watched, and once this habit of being watched by the security guard has been created, something different will happen. The prisoners will eventually not attempt to escape, even if no one is there watching them, because they think that they are always being watched. The socialization of this behavior is procedural and is a result of the constant presence of the stimuli, in this case, the security guard.

This feeling of being constantly watched evokes that performance, and this can be mimicked in the construction of gender identity (McNay, 1993, p. 3). As such, the expectation of a certain presentation can make people present themselves that way. Berger argues that women appear as a surveyed and watched entity (to themselves as well as to others), and Foucault’s theory can be used to show that this is due to a constant socialized expectation of women, of being passive and quiet to gossipy and naggy. That’s not to say that the prisoners wouldn’t initially try to escape or that people would not be able to break out of these expectations, but that the prisoners have been exposed to the consistent pressure that the guard had created in the same way that women have been exposed to consistent societal expectations (McNay, 1993, p. 35).

The idea that women appear and that people are designed to conform to conditioned expectations is extended with Laura Mulvey's theory on The Male Gaze. This set of words, by definition, defaults the man to the one who is active and the woman passive; the man is the 'gazer' and the woman is the object of the gaze (Mulvey, 1975). When Berger posits that observed people behave differently and can be conditioned to behave differently, this is the result. It is interesting to note that, if women are under The Male Gaze for their lifetime, if they are always being observed or appearing as though observed, and if this happens from childbirth for a woman's whole life, then, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests, how can one ever truly become a woman (Mulvey, 1975). Butler questions, "What is the moment or mechanism of gender construction? And, perhaps most pertinently, when does this mechanism arrive on the cultural scene to transform the human subject into a gendered subject? Are there ever humans who are not, as it were, always already gendered?" (Butler, 1990, p.111). Foucault, with his prison analogy, would argue on the contrary, that since the socialization is a result of extended and repeated pressures, that there must be a self and an identity before that socialization, small as that period might be. The perpetuity and constant presence of this specific type of socialization leads to the question if one can ever be the gender that they identify as, since they are constantly being socialized with the evolving ideas of gender roles but with the same underlying themes.

This is how young girls go from sitting in class quietly and playing house, while being considered more lingual and caring, to women who are expected to grow into and fill a similar role in adulthood. The Male Gaze, and its effect on the socialized role of women also exposes the power imbalance between men and women that can readily be seen in advertisements for all sorts of products in modern day environments (Mulvey). Often times women are depicted as being horizontal, sometimes being pinned down with other men that are always vertical and in

positions that demonstrate power. The women will often employ a half-dead look in her eyes. This is the epitome of vulnerability and passivity that the theory of the 'male gaze' describes as a woman's role. But at the same time, advertisements for household products or products that have to do with meal making or childcare will be marketed to women. The comical dad that never knows what to do and the all-knowing mom to the rescue is an all too familiar story when it comes to television commercials.

Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Foucault's prison analogy, and Mulvey's Male Gaze tie together to explain the reason that women are born and not made. Taking Foucault's analogy a bit further, it can be an extended metaphor for the Male Gaze, where the prison guard represents the Male Gaze, and the prisoners symbolize women. The prison guard can be represented by the male gaze and the prisoners display Berger's theory of women appearing under it. This shows the power of socialization that continues to affect the women/prisoners even if there is no one watching them; they still feel and act as though they are being observed. They've changed their behavior completely from the beginning as a result of this pressure.

And as Foucault asserts, if the expectation is there for women to conform to stereotypes (namely being passive and an object of male power), in addition to there being depictions permeating popular media, the external pressure can force women to conform without even realizing that they are. There are so many ways that this displays itself in everyday life, one such example being that of language and communication. In Nancy Bonvillain's 1993 study, spoken overlaps and interruptions were being studied in conjunction with gender relations. An overlap constitutes a mistake in whose turn it is to continue talking in the conversation. An interruption is interjecting while the conversation partner is speaking and taking over their turn (Bonvillain, 1994). When both speakers in the experiment were the same sex, interruptions and overlaps

happened with about the same frequency from each party. However, in conversations with a male and a female, males were responsible for 96% of the interruptions and 100% of the overlaps in the conversation. A simple study exposed that men talk over and interrupt women on a regular basis, whether they mean to intentionally or not (Bonvillain, 1994).

However, in addition to the skewed rhythm that women and men use to speak together during a conversation, there is a difference in their word choice as well. In the 1970's Lakoff hypothesized that 'women's language' was both forced on women through the pressure to conform and also contributed to women not being taken seriously and keeping them from communicating effectively. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, note on this that, "She followed a long tradition in characterizing 'women's language' as different from the standard set by men in being polite, tentative, indirect, imprecise, noncommittal, deferential, closer to norms of grammatical 'correctness' and less colloquial, emotionally expressive but euphemistic, and so on. However, she departed radically from the misogynistic tradition that gave rise to such stereotypes by arguing that this sort of speech was forced on girls and women as the price of social approval for being appropriately 'feminine'" (Eckert 475). This difference in the type of language that Lakoff observes that women use she does not think is a result of less intelligence, but rather a style of diction that is a learned behavior to earn social acceptance. They cite tag questions, those that follow the statement of a fact to couch its assertiveness, and the 'rising intonation' for rote statements as highlighted linguistic strategies that many women use (Lakoff, 2004). However, the way that genders converse with each other and power dynamics also vary across the cultural contexts, so it can be difficult to make broad generalizations about language, men, and women altogether.

Linguistic power is intimately linked to dominance and control in situations and communities. For the most part, the way that we speak is something we have been socialized into, whether it's an accent, particular jargon, or other terms. But language is also how one is perceived just as much as how someone is speaking. Though women may use strategies to have a more typical male discourse, they may not be perceived as strongly as a man's words would be, even if their level of diction was the same. Perhaps this can be evidence of the way that men and women have been socialized to interact and perceive each other. The way that women talk, and the way that both men and women believe that women talk, are a part of this construction of women as a collective identity (Eckert).

This expected passivity of women is not just a phenomenon of language though. It extends to girls at a young age, as is evidenced in particular by the under-diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in girls as compared to boys. In a 2002 medical study, it was confirmed that girls are more likely to have inattentive symptoms rather than noticeable hyperactive symptoms of ADHD during school. These symptoms, daydreaming, and a lack of attention, are not considered out of the ordinary for young girls, namely because that's how parents and adults would like them to act. A girl sitting quietly in her seat at school is typical good behavior. Because of this lower likelihood for girls to manifest something that would be perceived as an abnormal behavior, they concluded that this "could result in gender-based referral bias unfavorable to girls with ADHD" (Biederman 36). The expectation here is passivity and docility.

But if what Simone de Beauvoir argues is true, if women are made, then men are made too. This is because 'men' in the traditional stereotypical sense are expected to only engage in the masculine. Anything they associate with that is not considered 'manly' can be a threat to both

their sexuality and gender identity. Crossing over into differently gendered spaces is easier for women than it is for men. It is a social norm for women to wear trousers or suits while it is not for men to wear skirts or dresses. Even advertisers take this into account, “For example, it is generally considered safer to advertise neutral products to males because females will use males’ products, but males will not use products considered ‘feminine’” (Smith, 1993, p.325). And when small pre-school age children played in mixed gender groups, “boys were unwilling to play with female-type toys while the girls would play male-type toys” (Smith, 1993, p.325). Butler posits on this subject that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” (Butler, 1990, p.22). Therefore, what accompanies a strict interpretation of womanhood is a strict interpretation of manhood. Kaufman says that “Masculinity is a reaction against passivity and powerlessness, and with it comes a repression of a vast range of human desires and possibilities: those that are associated with femininity” (Kaufman, 1987, p.586). In fact, being “not man enough” is probably the worst thing that a man could be. And it’s argued that this process of learning and recognizing the socialized separation of “men” and “women” is ingrained by the age of six, starting from the beginning of a child’s life to teach them the roles they should occupy and those they should stay away from (Kaufman, 1987, p.586).

All of these theories, of the phenomenon of gender construction and performance, and the reality that genders are social and not inherent characteristics of the self as Plato once theorized, can be demonstrated using evidence readily available today. The performance that marks the current young women of today is the balance of purity and chastity versus sexual promiscuity. This dichotomy is something that starts early. Impressionable minds learn from what surrounds them, and the advertising, the products, and the media that envelops them makes for the over-

sexualization and self-objectification of young girls. In Kirkham's 2012 article, he notes that this can be seen in sexualized underwear and even toys. Tesco, a store in the United Kingdom, even attempted to market and sell a pole-dancing kit to young girls. Granted, some argue that pole-dancing does not have to contain a sexual element, as it is a form of exercise for strength and flexibility, but there's no denying that it has inherently sexual connotations. Kirkham notes that, "Bishop's work emphasizes the key fears that underline these 'moral panics': that a desire to look and seem older drives young girls to happily and readily conform to a warped view of sexuality that positions women as sexual objects" (Kirkham 2006).

Stoltenberg, in his 2006 article argues that sex affirms these relationships between men and women. It compounds on Mulvey's argument, that men are expected to be active and women to be passive, that men are the seducers and women are the seduced. And having sex affirms one's gender, which is socially entwined, created, and reaffirmed with sex as well as the dominant patriarchal and male power dynamic. Judith Butler asks the question, "If 'identity' is an *effect* of discursive practices, to what extent is gender identity construed as a relationship among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, the effect of a regulatory practice that can be identified as heterosexuality?" (Butler, 1990, p.18). This is an overflow effect from the long held belief of essentialism, that there is a binary system of sex, gender, and sexuality. Sex between a man and a woman affirms both the man's masculinity and a woman's femininity, even though these things are arbitrary attributes of people, unrelated to those kinds of actions.

Butler says of gender in general that "...*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler, 1990, p.24). In the grand scheme of society today, this is what matters about these theories. That gender is

inherently artificial and is imposed by the society of the time. Gender can be considered almost as a learned behavior, as a custom that is perhaps more ingrained than anything else that people know. Perhaps that is why many people believe that sex and gender are one and the same, or believe in the essential core of the self, for they themselves cannot remember a time without these gendered behaviors, social views, and actions. They are so entrenched and embedded that people sometimes have to be informed that they exist. Certainly that is one of the reasons that there is so much discourse in even today's society about all types of genders and the spaces they occupy or, more realistically, are socialized into. In that way, Simone de Beauvoir's statement that, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one," is definitely true. And Judith Butler makes the point that, "If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that a *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (Butler, 1990, p.33). As soon as children are born they are assigned a gender based on their sex, and from then on become socialized into their roles, but these roles continue to change for them based on age and society. Certainly women now act different than women twenty years ago. With constant societal pressures apparent, women and men show the way they interact in their language and communication, with women being expected to be and treated as passive and polite rather than assertive. The gender binary attempts to lock men and women into their respective roles, and allows for no exploration, and exhibits its stereotypes in everything from advertisements to expectations. Altogether, gender is a social construct that begins when we are born and serves to change or modify our behavior to conform; however, acknowledging that this is the case can lead people to broaden and break their expectations. Stereotypes and categories can be unlearned and opened up to new possibilities.

Because, to use Foucault's analogy, when we figure out the guard is no longer there and watching, we can be freed of appearing and we can finally act.

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