

Since 1990, the concept of 'gender performativity' has become a foundational way of understanding gender and sexual identity within critical theory. Explain what Judith Butler means by this concept, specially addressing how her under-standing challenges everyday notions of gender authenticity and essentialism. In unpacking this question, make sure to consider how Butler distinguishes her concept of 'performativity' from understandings of 'performance' as conscious and volitional.

Introduction

Judith Butler has been an important figure within the field of critical theory, especially for her work on gender as performative. Critical theory is defined as a field originating with the Frankfurt school, critiquing society and culture to further human liberation. I will be explaining what Butler means by the concept of gender performativity and consider the distinction she makes between her concept of 'performativity' as unconsciously reinforced and acted out, and 'performance' as willingly acted out. The following sections will cover, gender performativity and performance, focusing on the distinction and elaboration on her view of gender being performative. Agency and identity, dealing with how her understanding of gender performativity relates to the agency one has over belonging to various identity categories. Gender essentialism and heteronormativity centres around everyday notions of gender and how Butler challenges these views through viewing gender and heteronormativity as socially constructed and not binary. Gender authenticity and queer theory, aiming to explore how Butler challenges heteronormative assumptions about the authenticity of identity categories. Important terminology will be defined later in the essay. Specific works cited include Butler's (1989), 'Gender Trouble', to elaborate on her criticism of gender as binary. Her essay on 'Imitation and gender insubordination' to convey her understanding of gender not being a conscious performance that one has volitional control over and to demonstrate the limiting and restricting qualities of identity categories. Another work cited by Butler (1993) is 'Bodies that matter', to describe essentialism and 'Undoing gender', where she defines gender and various factors that contribute to her understanding of it. Also, Beauvoir is cited for her well-known phrase on becoming rather than being born as a woman.

Gender performativity and performance

One way Butler understands gender performativity and challenges everyday notions of gender is through contrasting it with her understanding of performance. This is because Butler argues that

gender is performative, meaning that she views gender as something acted out in an unknowing manner, which is replicated through reinforced behaviours, informed by societal expectations and norms. Butler (2004) states that "Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes" (Butler, 2004, p.42). This is because she views gender as a complicated social structure that must consider various factors that lead to the formation and perpetuation of gender. Meaning that gender is impacted by society in various ways, for example through assigning certain colours or behavioural traits with gender, such as femininity being associated with being emotional and the colour pink, whilst masculinity is associated with roughness and the colour blue. Supporting what Butler views as gender performativity as societal expectations are formed and repeated through the acting out of gender stereotypes. Although in various cultures, there exist different norms surrounding gender, the concept of gender performativity still holds true as for instance children, are still raised in a way to act out what Butler views as gender, which then leads to specific norms reproducing themselves through the performance of gendered expectations. This Butler views as being reinforced culturally, ranging from TV shows to clothing and toys, which she views as stemming from systemically internalized notions of gender norms, also perpetuated through advertising such as Barbie dolls being advertised for girls and toy cars being seen as something for boys. This means for Butler that there is no objective gender that one is born with, but rather that gender is reproduced culturally through performativity.

Butler, however, makes a distinction between performativity and performance. For example, she said "I do not mean to suggest that drag is a "role" that can be taken on or taken off at will. There is no volitional subject behind the mime who decides, as it were, which gender it will be today" (Butler, 1991, p.24). This means that she does not view gender as a performance in the sense of individuals freely choosing to act out gender, instead viewing performativity as something systemic that is unknowingly reinforced through society. Butler hence challenges everyday notions of gender through agreeing with the statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir & Parshley, 1972, p.295). This is because she views baby's as being born genderless and through performativity, they begin to adopt what parents, media, other peers etc view as the normative function of what it means to be a man or women. Therefore, one way Butler understands gender performativity and challenges everyday notions of gender is through

contrasting it with her understanding of performance as purposely done whereas she views gender performativity as reinforced by society rather than by individual actors.

Agency and identity

Other ways Butler and her concept of gender performativity challenges everyday notions of gender authenticity and essentialism is through diminishing the importance of agency and rejecting the universal applicability of identity. This relates to gender performativity as Butler views the acting out of gender as not consciously thought about, whereas everyday notions of gender authenticity view identity categories as fixed and that choices within these identity categories are done so freely. Butler, however, disagrees and applies her concept of gender performativity through viewing agency as partially illusionary. This is because Butler views various societal and cultural factors as contributing to specific societal and cultural trends, conditioning the agency to such an extent that it cannot be referred to as having made a free choice. For example, the speech act that “boys will be boys” in childhood may contribute to men being more comfortable showing aggression and more reluctant showing sadness. This means that Butler views heteronormativity not as a product of agency, but to some extent as a product of culturally and socially reinforced heteropatriarchy.

Butler’s concept of gender performativity also relates everyday notions of gender through her understanding of identity. For example, she rejects the view that there is a universal category of womanhood. This is because she views what it means to be a woman as performative and hence varying from different cultures and societies. This means that gender performativity also impacts Butlers understanding of identity as it contradicts everyday notions of gender authenticity and essentialism which views being a man and women as universal categories that have some intrinsic quality shared by all peoples. Butler rejects this view as she views identity categories as learned behaviours that conform to a given time periods conceptions of what an identity category is and how it should function. However, this may also have debated implications within everyday discourse surrounding gender authenticity, because if womanhood is a social construct that anybody can identify as, is there still authenticity and meaning to the identity category of being a woman and to what extent does her conception of gender performativity challenge gender authenticity in the context of feminism? Butler does not view the fact that gender is a social construct as entailing a loss of meaning or significance, as, although descriptively she views it as true that gender is a social construct, society viewing it as an essential feature may still lead to

harm towards people that identify themselves as a woman. The implications for the feminist movement, entails an acceptance of individuals that identify as being a woman regardless of preconceived notions of authenticity. Therefore, other ways Butler and her concept of gender performativity challenges everyday notions of gender authenticity and essentialism, through viewing agency as of minimal significance in contrast to social and cultural reinforcement of heteronormativity and through the rejection of supposed universality of identity categories.

Gender essentialism and heteronormativity

Another way Butler's understanding and concept of gender performativity challenges everyday notions of gender is through viewing gender essentialism and heteronormativity as inaccurate, instead viewing gender as a social construct. Butler defines essentialism as the view "that there is a set of necessary features that describe a given identity or constituency and that these features are in some sense fixed" (Butler, 1993, p.210). For example, Robert Stoller argues in favour of gender essentialism by ascribing innate differences to gender categories of masculinity and femininity. Although, Butler acknowledges certain biological and hormonal factors that may differ between groups of people that identify themselves as being a woman or man. She would argue that this does not refute gender performativity or prove gender essentialism as there would be no determining fact of the matter proving that gender is binary and why these non-environmental factors take precedence over the performativity of gender. Butler argues in favour of social constructivism, which is refers to the view that what a thing is, is determined by society and culture. Butler, understanding gender as performative, hence rejects gender essentialism as she believes that what gender is and what it constitutes is arbitrary and dependent upon societal and cultural expectations.

Butler's concept of performativity has also been influential in how her understanding challenges everyday notions of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the view that heterosexuality is the default sexuality and thus that differing sexualities are deviations from an innate norm. Butler's concept of gender performativity challenges heteronormativity for its essentialist assumptions. It views sexuality as biologically defined and determined meaning that gender and heterosexuality are an expression of a fundamental innate reality. Butler argues against this by viewing heteronormativity as socially and culturally enforced through discursive acts such as the stigmatisation of male homosexuality through acting in a way deemed as 'gay' or effeminate. Butler views heteronormativity explainable through gender performativity, as the systemically

reproduced acting out of gender, led to legal and cultural discrimination of non-normative sexuality and other forms of gender expression. Setting up the false dichotomy of either being straight or gay, man or woman, ignoring the various performative functions of gender such as individuals not conforming to either categories. Therefore, another way Butler's concept of gender performativity has impacted her understanding of everyday notions of gender is through viewing gender essentialism and heteronormativity as inaccurate, instead viewing gender as a social construct constituted through performativity.

Gender authenticity and queer theory

Butler's concept of gender performativity also challenges everyday notions of gender authenticity through her contribution to and understanding of queer theory. According to Bickel (2021), "gender authenticity is the right to express our orientation and our personal identity, whatever that may be, without fear of coercion to conform to social stereotypes." (Bickel, 2021). However, viewing it in the context of everyday notions, this may also refer to the view that only cisgender people are authentically the gender that they identify with, also viewing transgender people as not being authentically the gender that they identify as. Meaning that authenticity would be something only attainable through conforming to the sex assigned at birth. Butler, through gender performativity challenges the practise of determining someone's gender at birth, as she views gender as not being inherent but rather acquired through performance. This means that it is incoherent to speak of a baby as authentically being a boy or girl as it has not yet engaged in the discursive acts that define gender. Butler, goes further and views sex also as a socially constructed category, created through gender rather than gender being a result of biological sex. This stems from an opposition to the gender/sex distinction that came about in the 1950s and 60s. She understands sex as being arbitrary as from a binary perspective, one may be chromosomally male yet hormonally female, or possibly intersex, challenging the essentialist and binary account of sex. Butler argues in favour of Bickel's conception of gender authenticity, viewing transgender people as being the gender that they identify as and rejecting the view that gender is or ought to be a binary, saying "there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex" (Butler, 1989, p.10).

Butler's understanding of gender has been influential in the establishment of queer theory, which originated as a critique of the academic status quo at the time, critiquing heteronormativity and

essentialism, instead favouring social constructivism. Although Butler view's identity categories as not something to be fully embraced saying "I'm permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble" (Butler, 1991, p.14). Queer theory relates to gender authenticity as it originated in the 1990s as a reaction in gender studies due to argued assumptions of heteronormativity, now positively contributing to everyday discourse through, for example arguing for and embracing recent changes that view being transgender as not a mental illness. Butler's concept of gender performativity also relates to gender authenticity through questioning what it really means to authentically be a gender. As for example, certain cisgender men may be culturally viewed as more feminine than a butch lesbian. Supports Butlers understanding of gender as performative, as it demonstrates that rather than masculinity and femininity being an authentic experience only available to a cisgender person, it is primarily social and cultural where signifiers such as hairstyles and dress can shift the way a person is seen and engages with society whilst still maintaining an authentic notion of gender. Therefore, Butler's understanding of gender performativity has also challenged everyday notions of gender authenticity through her contribution to and understanding of queer theory.

Conclusion

To conclude, Judith Butler concept of gender performativity has been revolutionary in its impact on everyday discourse through its contribution to the normalization of terminology such as heteronormative and conversations surrounding the validity of the supposed gender binary. I have aimed to outline four main ways Butlers understanding of gender as performative challenges everyday notions of gender authenticity and gender essentialism. Through understanding her distinction between gender performativity, which is systemic and not consciously chosen, and performance as a deliberate and volitional act. By looking at how Butler's understanding of gender performativity relates to agency and identity, including important insight such as her view that gender is not the product of agency but rather a reinforcement of societal and cultural expectations, arguing that identity categories not universally applicable and subject to traditions and cultures. Challenging gender essentialism and heteronormativity through arguing that there is no intrinsic quality that makes someone a man or women, viewing heteronormativity as an unfounded assumption perpetuated historically through stigmatization against people belonging to the LGBT community. Butler has also challenged everyday notions of gender authenticity through her understanding of queer theory as she views

it incoherent to speak of being an authentic woman or man as it ignores the subjectivity of the subject involved in making that determination and that cultural femininity and masculinity often don't align with alleged biological sex.

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