## **Michael Foucault – who decides the categories?**

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When discussing the power of [characterization](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/characterization) and [categorization](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/categorization), Michael Foucault is a key philosopher that has well established his insights on this subject.

A French philosopher primarily known for his ideas around categorization and how power manifests itself in our interactions with each other. Foucault’s work on categorization and its relationship to power structures is used in many fields including psychology and sociology.

An exploration of gender intersects with Foucault’s work when considering how gender is a categorization of behaviour. As we’ve [seen](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html) in [other works](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html), the categorization of gender also influences how we expect people to act and how we act around others.

## **Categorization as communication**

Without the concept of categorization, no mechanism of classification or description would be present, which would prevent us from being able to describe anything, and without the ability to describe, we lose the ability to communicate, even possibly to think.[1](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/10/foucault.html#fn:multiplicity)

To summarize:

* Categorization is important as a method of describing differences and communicating concepts.
* There is a relationship between power and the categorizations used in a society.
* Gender is a system of categorization.

Therefore, Western ideas of gender are related to the power structures in Western society.

## **The Western context**

Historically, Western society recognizes two genders, which are rationalized using naturalistic arguments.[2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/10/foucault.html#fn:define-naturalism)

The factors and power dynamics that lead Western society to settle on only two genders, and the ways naturalistic arguments were constructed to support this idea, are [easy to find in our historical literature](http://127.0.0.1:4000/projects/gender-history.html). However, contemporary researchers also have records of other societies that use more than two categories, providing a counter-example to any naturalistic arguments.[3](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/10/foucault.html#fn:counter-example)

We know gender isn’t a biological trait; the way gender categories are formed in different societies is complicated and unfortunately not well understood. Despite this knowledge, Western society continues to frame its populations in terms of two genders, despite [growing research](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/10930654/Facebooks-71-gender-options-come-to-UK-users.html) on and [support](http://time.com/4703058/time-cover-story-beyond-he-or-she/) for intersex, trans\*, and gender queer people who do not fit into these categories.

## **Back to Foucault**

The story of Western gender constructs is largely informed by the power dynamics of society. The individuals in positions of authority influence the categorizations we use, whether they be church officials like [St Thomas Aquinas](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/12/st-augestine.html), educators and philosophers like [Aristotle](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/11/aristotle.html), or even the people around us who may relay our actions to an authority figure or someone whom we respect.

Not only influential leaders and thinkers enforce gender but we all enforce, attribute, and assume each other’s gender. While these effects may not be equivalent to those in power we are all implicated in perpetuating and normalizing Western ideas of gender.

## **Book Reference**

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* 1st American ed.-, Pantheon Books, 1970.

1. Foucault uses a thought experiment of a language or system with too many or too little categories, hypothesizing that such a language “does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think.” *(Foucault, The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences, XIX)* [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/10/foucault.html#fnref:multiplicity)
2. Naturalism in this case is referring to metaphysical naturalism, which is the argument that a trait [“related to consciousness and the mind are reducible to, or supervene upon, nature.”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism_(philosophy)) In this case, the specific theory is [bio-determanism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biological_determinism). [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/10/foucault.html#fnref:define-naturalism)
3. Naturalistic arguments rely on the idea that a trait is inherent to all people regardless of their culture or society (i.e. the trait is inherent to human biology). Since there exists at least one society that does not have only two genders, we know that this isn’t a trait that is solely biological. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/10/foucault.html#fnref:counter-example)