## **Kessler and McKenna - the subjective categorization of gender**

Jul 15th, 2020

*This post was originally published on Apr 6th, 2018 as part of a larger work titled* [*“Gender: Flip the script”*](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2018/04/06/gender-as-a-performance.html)

Kessler and McKenna in “The Primacy of Gender Attribution.” Discuss the significance and importance of determining another person’s gender in encounters with others.

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| **When meeting someone:** |
| 1. Assign the other person's gender |
| 2. Make assumptions based off of our assignment |
| 3. Retroactively justify the attribution of gender |

They argue that we assign gender and make assumptions about people based off of our assignment before all other actions, and that we retroactively justify our attribution instead of making the attribution based on a defined criterion.[1](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:defined-criterion)

Part of being a socialized member of a group is knowing the rules for giving acceptable evidence for categorization. [2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:gender)

*(Kessler and McKenna, Gender: an ethnomethodological approach, pp6)*

Identification of another’s gender is key to defining a social encounter as it shapes how we interact with others, what to expect from them, and how to interpret their actions.

These roles and the primacy of gender attribution are taught through a variety of social institutions, including religion, school, parents, etc. and inform our actions from an early age. Kessler and McKenna note that when an individual’s gender is perceived as ambiguous, other people often showed signs of unease as they tried to place the individual into a gender category.[2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:gender)

The primacy of gender attribution becomes obvious when we recognize that assignment and identity can be seen as special cases of attribution, and, even more importantly, that in order to meaningfully interpret someone’s assignment, identity, and role, and the relationship among them, one must first attribute gender.[2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:gender)

*(Kessler and McKenna, Gender: an ethnomethodological approach, pp17)*

Notably, there is [some evidence](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/%5Bhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfYbgdo8e-8%5D)[3](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:1)[4](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:2)[5](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:3)[6](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:4)[7](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:5)[8](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:6) that many (if not all) of our thoughts/actions are retroactively justified.

## **Objectivity is a lie**

Many people subscribe to the idea that all things have an objective truth, including the human experience. This notion uses the gender binary as a tool to categorize people’s experiences in an objective way. However, making these assumptions and attempting to construct other experiences within an objective view of reality is inherently flawed, since experiences are by definition subjective and require interpretation from the perceiver.

“A defining feature of reality construction is to see our world as being the only possible one.” [2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fn:gender)

*(Kessler and McKenna, Gender: an ethnomethodological approach, pp18)*

1. By defined criterion, I mean having some set guidelines in mind to determine someone’s gender. For example, seeing a beard and attributing manliness. Instead, Kessler and McKenna’s work demonstrates that we instinctively attribute gender (that person is a man) and then justify it later (“I attributed them as a man because of their beard”).  
     
    Think about what your thought process is when you see someone who’s gender is ambiguous. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:defined-criterion)
2. Kessler, Suzanne J., and Wendy McKenna. Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach. University of Chicago Press, 1985. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:gender) [↩2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:gender:1) [↩3](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:gender:2) [↩4](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:gender:3)
3. R. W. Sperry, [“Cerebral Organization and Behavior,”](http://people.uncw.edu/puente/sperry/sperrypapers/60s/85-1961.pdf) Science, vol. 133, no. 3466, pp. 1749–1757, 1961. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:1)
4. V. Mark, [“Conflicting communicative behavior in a split-brain patient: Support for dual consciousness,”](https://books.google.ca/books?id=86KyIsdi8D8C&lpg=PA189&pg=PA189#v=onepage&q&f=false) Toward a science of consciousness: The first Tucson discussions and debates, pp. 189–196, 1996. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:2)
5. R. W. Sperry, [“Hemisphere deconnection and unity in conscious awareness,”](http://www.holah.karoo.net/sperrystudy.htm) The American psychologist, vol. 23, no. 10, p. 723, 1968. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:3)
6. M. S. Gazzaniga, J. E. Bogen, and R. W. Sperry, [“Observations on visual perception after disconnexion of the cerebral hemispheres in man,”](http://people.uncw.edu/puente/sperry/sperrypapers/60s/111-1965.pdf) Brain, vol. 88, no. 2, pp. 221–236, 1965. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:4)
7. R. W. Sperry, E. Zaidel, and D. Zaidel, [“Self recognition and social awareness in the deconnected minor hemisphere,”](http://people.uncw.edu/puente/sperry/sperrypapers/70s/210-1979.pdf) Neuropsychologia, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 153–166, 1979. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:5)
8. M. S. Gazzaniga, J. E. Bogen, and R. W. Sperry, [“Some Functional Effects of Sectioning the Cerebral Commissures in Man,”](http://people.uncw.edu/puente/sperry/sperrypapers/60s/91-1962.pdf) Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, vol. 48, no. 10, pp. 1765–1769, 1962. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/07/15/kessler-mckenna.html#fnref:6)