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'Here comes trouble': autism and gender performance

Dr. Damian E M Milton



Introduction

- Drawing upon both Goffman's (1959; 1963) theories of dramaturgy and in particular Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) concepts regarding the performativity of gender and gendered identities – this talk will be exploring the performance of gender in relation to autistic people.
- It is suggested in this presentation that autistic sociality naturally subverts gendered norms. This comes with personal costs to the autistic person however.

My own fragmented gendered experience of life

- At a young age, gender meant little more to me than whether one stood up or sat down to pee.
- Little internalising of gender norms.
- A somewhat 'non-gendered' performance that led to some social difficulties.
- Avoidance of hyper-masculine social encounters.
- 'Not bothering' a somewhat more accepted form of 'masking' for men, whilst heavily sanctioned for those expected to socially 'perform' as women.



Butler's opposition to the traditional split

- Traditional split made between biological sex and socially constructed / culturally associated gender rejected by Butler (1990; 1993).
- The ontological status (reality) of gender only exists through enactments and performance.
- No preceding self outside a gendered 'self' – no idealised notion of a pre-existing being directing its own actions through 'free will'.
- Gender seen as constructed through the stylized repetitive performance of gendered acts – an imitation or mime of dominant conventions. A performance rather than an expression.

Who am I?

- “I know that I exist, the question is: what is this ‘I’ that I know?” (Descartes, 1641).
- Goffman (1959) and the dramaturgical analogy.
- For Butler, there is no pre-existing ‘I’ or ‘we’ that constructs gender, that stands before it in some way.
- No such thing as a pre-discursive (linguistic) self-identity?
- What would a non-discursive ‘self’ be like to experience? Deligny and the Arachnean analogy (Deligny, 2015; Milton, 2016).



Autistic disposition / neuroqueering

- Yet what if someone is not impersonating as such, or doing so from a markedly different positionality and a ‘mismatch of salience’ with dominant cultural norms (Milton, 2012; 2014a; 2017)? An idiosyncratically conditioned ‘neuroqueer’ (Yergeau, 2018).
- “Embodied sociality and the conditioned relativism of dispositional diversity” (Milton, 2014b).



- “The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant...” (Butler, 1990: 135).
- “I think for a woman to identify as a woman *is* a culturally enforced effect. I don’t think that it’s a given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that ‘coherent identification’ has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame” (Butler in interview with Liz Kotz:

<http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKEwigwYjUm5LZAhVnBsAKHSekBqMQFggyMAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fartsites.ucsc.edu%2Ffaculty%2Fgustafson%2FFILM%2520165A.W11%2Ffilm%2520165A%255BW11%255D%2520readings%2520%2FJudith%2520Butler%2520handout.doc&usg=AOvVaw3hV6R7FboPMjHPNk4R21ix>).

Gender policing

- If self-identifications lack ‘central coherence’, or are not ‘cultivated’ (or are ‘hyper-cultivated’), it is suggested by Butler (1990) that sanctions and shaming will follow.
- Goffman (1963) regarded stigma as the disjuncture between the way someone acts and the way others would wish them to. He talked about how one managed social interactions if one carried a visible or invisible ‘spoiled identity’. Not only do autistic people carry stigmatised identities, but may also struggle to manage social interactions (partly because of this stigma and othering though).
- In this sense we all ‘police’ our own gender performance and that of others according to Butler’s theory (although this presumes a ‘self-awareness’ that is discursively constructed).

The ideology of heterosexuality

- Key for enforcement of gender roles for Butler (1993) is the ideology of heterosexuality, an 'idealisation' that is never fully achievable, due to the possibility of that which is excluded for a heterosexualised gender to produce itself.
- Transgressions of heteronormativity such as LGBT fall within culture – yet are outside of the dominant culture.

Subversion

- “...parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities.” (Butler, 1990: 138).
- Butler (1990) saw drag as being potentially subversive – a resignification (or repetition of symbolic significations within an alternative context), both reflecting and imitating hegemonic gender, whilst disputing heterosexuality’s claim to being the only ‘natural’ way to perform gendered acts. Gender is thus exposed as ‘simulcra’ – a copy – a failed ideal that is impossible to embody – an unobtainable ontological habitus.



- Subversive performance not an easy task as not about 'choice' (that would suggest a Cartesian 'I') or some kind of consumerist commodification of gender identity. It is suggested by Butler that acts need to both mimic and displace gendered conventions.

Conclusion

- If it is the case that subversive acts require both miming of dominant norms, but also the displacing of them, are the enactments of autistic people by their very social dispositions ‘subversive’ in their displacement of norms – as I once described “Natures answer to over-conformity” (Milton, 2013)?
- Does the presence of autistic people confound Cartesian fantasies of selfhood to the extent of attracting attack?
- One could also say however, that along with the sanctions and harms comes a subversive power in the disposition of the ‘neuroqueer’ (Yergeau, 2018).

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