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Gender and Society

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Honors Project: Gender and Society

Since the beginning of human understanding of gender, there have been people who don't fit the mold. Transgender and nonbinary individuals, people whose gender doesn't fit on the male/female gender dichotomy, exist and are as real as folks who do fit on the gender binary. To begin, I must explain the concept of the gender binary. The gender binary is a social construction based on the concept that men have phallic genitalia and women have yonic genitalia. It adheres to the strict binary concept that there are two sexes and two genders, and that they match up. For the purposes of this paper, this adherence will be referred to as being 'cisgender'. Many cultures in the West have prescriptivist gender roles based on a person's physical characteristics that determines their role in society. Anthropology has long argued for this social construction of gender roles and it is based on this premise that I carried out this qualitative study exploring how gender roles and identities are changing (Lavenda and Schultz 417).

For this study, I took the opportunity to discuss gender and gender roles with a few members of the LGBTQ community in a small university town, as well as with a gentleman who offered a viewpoint from outside of the LGBTQ spectrum. I did this through one-on-one interviews where they shared their personal experiences on this topic. What I have found is that to those who find that they have a gendered community, such as the community offered

to women, feel less affected by the lack of a gendered community. For those who feel that they do not fit into those strict social communities, the community offered for their sexual preference, the LGBTQ community, is much more important to them than their gendered community.

The first person I interviewed, who shall be known as “Kate” for the duration of this paper¹, appeared very calm to the first impression. Her hair was cut in a new fashion, with the bottom half shaved, and the top half cut into a very feminine bob. She spoke of her sense of identity as genderqueer when she was younger, explaining that she found a sense of identity in the masculine parts she played as an actress. “I liked looking masculine,” she said, “and I cared a lot about whether or not I could pass.” She goes on to say that her boyfriend at the time had a particular way of misgendering her: calling her pretty when she was trying to be masculine, and handsome when she was trying to be feminine. Kate found that women’s spaces and that being a woman gave her a lot of empowerment. She says that her “sexuality being mistaken as normative is much more upsetting” because her identity as a queer woman is much harder to prove. She does still try to emulate the male characters on T.V. shows that she identifies with, such as the character Sokka from the show “Avatar: The Last Airbender.” I came to think, by the end of this first interview, that perhaps it was not an innate sense of gender that truly brought us to perform gender, but a sense of belonging within a community. For those who do not feel they belong in a community of either binary gender, this may lead to them trying to create their own community.

¹ All individuals interviewed in this study provided their informed consent to participate in this study. For ethical purposes this paper uses pseudonyms for all interviewees.

This leads me to my second interview, with “Alex.” Alex is an agender individual. They prefer they/them pronouns, and their idea of the gender binary is that it is more like a map than a line with two opposing points. They say cisgender men live in a city on the gender map, and cisgender women live in another city on the gender map, and that each nonbinary person is their own little village or town in the countryside. They say about their gender experience that their gender is a “foundational piece that frames a lot of the rest of their life experiences.” I have found in interviews with other participants, such as with Kate, that this gender experience is a huge part of their world-view that influences the ideas they were taught growing up, as well as the social interactions that they notice about their society.

My third interview was with “Tracy.” Tracy’s hair was cut rather short, and she slouched in her chair. She told me about her experience as a little girl, watching the way the adults would discriminate between boys and girls. They would admonish little girls for playing roughly with each other, and for getting dirty, while little boys were almost encouraged to rough-house and experiment outside. She recounted her time in girl scouts, making beaded jewelry, and being angry that she wasn’t learning to whittle and camp the way the boy scouts did. As an adult, Tracy feels that she lives in the space between being feminine and being neutral. For her, this neutrality is almost a private experience. She says that while she does not mind being mistaken for a boy at times, she does mind that no one looks at her and thinks “there is a genderless being” the way she thinks about herself.

Tracy also commented on the way boys and girls are socialized to speak with each other. She said that girls are taught to look for signs that someone else wants to speak, and to allow room for that. In other words, girls are taught to monitor their surroundings for ways to create

a space for those inside this space to get what they need. In this case, this is social acknowledgement and the ability to say their piece. Tracy commented that she noticed that the boys were allowed to interrupt each other when they wanted to speak, and that girls were taught point blank not to interrupt each other. It led to a social consciousness on the part of children raised to be feminine that they should pay attention to those around them, and when they noticed that someone wanted to speak, to make room for them. It is the same nurturing instinct that leads women to have the 'mom' instinct: to want to care for those around them. This is a very feminine trait, whether it is found in men or in women, and exists firmly within the socialized gender binary.

My fourth and final interview is a bit different than the previous. "Cyrus" is a cisgender man. He explains that his experience with delving into understanding his gender came at a time when he wanted to mature. He found that as he explored wanting to date and what meant to be in a relationship with someone, there had to be a balance of nature. He says that "gender identity comes from what makes you feel secure: do you feel secure because of the safe environment you have created for others, or do you feel secure because you are in a safe environment that allows you to nurture others?" He aligns masculinity with the first, and femininity with the latter. Men and women can fall on either side of this argument, but he does argue that women are more likely, due to innate sense of security and through socialization, to want to be made secure.

Cyrus also went on to say that the existence of transgender people proves that gender is a social construct that can be challenged: that there is an innate sense of personality and gender identity that are strong enough to create an intense feeling of social discomfort in the

roles that one has been given to perform. This theory relies heavily on the socialized gender roles that children are taught: girls, like Tracy, are taught to be more self-contained, and to provide safe spaces for each other. Boys are taught to create safe spaces where they can. But that ability to create safe spaces comes from social maturation.

Cyrus tells me how as he was growing up, his mother and grandmother taught him to be socially sensitive, and that he had a fair amount of trouble tying this together with his desire to be strong. He found this difficult without guidance. He points out that LGBTQ communities cannot find guidance offline, and so they find it in communities online. Facebook groups and forums allow for young queer and genderqueer members of the LGBTQ community to find answers to their questions about how to socially and sexually mature: how to transition, how to be sexually safe, how to date. Because cisgender folks have mentors everywhere (fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, grandparents) it is easier for them to reach maturity with the proper guidance.

There are commonalities between three of the previous interviewees in that they find their gender to be truly outside the binary. Two of them, Kate and Tracy, are both genderqueer and femme, and find their genderqueer selves to be a private matter. They don't want to come out as genderqueer, and they'd rather keep their experiences to themselves. Their experiences as women and as sexually queer are much more important to them. Alex, on the other hand, is very much genderqueer, and finds that they do not want to be a part of women's spaces, because their sense of self as not a woman is important. They still find community in sexually queer spaces, but also told me that they struggle with cisgender members of the LGBTQ community not understanding their genderqueer identity.

This brings me to my theory that our social identity, our sense of self within a community, is what creates our sense of gender identity. It is based upon an innate sense of self, an inherent personality with all of the inclinations and desires thereof, and continues on the societal roles we are taught as we mature. The distinction between boy and girl and masculine and feminine are less important than the distinction between who you are and what you have to offer. The rest of our social ties to our community, our professions, our hobbies, our relationships, all extend from this main point. Our identity, both social and our sense of self, is key in figuring out what we have to offer a community. We cannot offer anything until we know ourselves, and until we have reached some level of social maturation. Gender, and the process of exploring and discovering gender, is only the first step. Once we discover who we are, what our gender is, what our place in our community is and could be, we then must continue to mature. To become the best of what we can be. Those who are still struggling with their gender and gender expression are at a different point in life than those who already are comfortable in their gender.

Part of this process includes social acknowledgement of our sense of self. When people fundamentally misunderstand part of our sense of self, such as our gender and gender expression, it leads almost directly to a feeling of social isolation. Kate felt this when her boyfriend would misread her attempts at genderfluidity, and Tracy feels this when she notices that the people around her do not see her as genderless, even though that's how she sees herself. In their article "Beyond the Binary: The Lives of Gender Nonconforming Youth" Sue Rankin and Genny Beemyn outline the process of discovering that one's gender is transgender or genderqueer. One of the subheadings in their article is "Forming new relationships with

family and friends.” This is an incredibly important step for the socialization of trans and genderqueer people: forming new, accurate relationships with the people in their lives. It is absolutely necessary for people to have community. Our communities teach us about our place in society, as well as informing us the things about ourselves that are similar or are different to those in our communities. They offer social ties, and validation. For trans and genderqueer folk, who have spent the majority of their lives only noticing the things that make them feel different and ‘other’, these social ties are even more instrumental than for those who grew up understanding their place in society.

We cannot, as human beings, begin to reach social maturation until we understand our place in society. Gender roles are a part of how we are taught our social standing, but are a bit outdated. There are new spaces being made in LGBTQ communities for genderqueer folk, and the spaces that already exist for transfolk are being modified and expanded. With the inclusion of these gendered spaces within the LGBTQ community, I believe that more will be done to make those spaces extend to Western society in general. For the sakes of all genderqueer folk who are still trying to find their place in their community, that time cannot come soon enough.

Works Cited

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