

Gender and Clothing
Sample Research Paper
SOC210 – Fall 2017

Every morning, a person must decide what to wear. While this may seem like a simple task, clothing is one of the most visible ways an individual tells society about him or herself. However, in America, people do not get complete autonomy in how they choose to dress; one distinct element of the presentation is chosen for them: gender. In the United States of America, gender is a strict binary: a person is either a male or a female. It is not the individual that decides his or her gender; gender is assigned based on a person's sex. Sex, as defined by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Kenneth Thompson, and Laura Desfor Edles (2012), is "biological characteristics associated with maleness and femaleness," (284). Sex is a physical characteristic that can be seen and identified, but gender is an ever-changing social construct. However, once a baby's sex is identified, the societal norm dictates that the child has to dress based on the assumed gender for his or her whole life. Malls, stores, and fashion weeks are all separated by gender and people are expected to only ever present in his or her assigned gender. Sometimes individuals go against this norm; sometimes they identify with the opposite gender than what was assigned. Using clothes to present a different gender than the one assigned at birth is transformed into a political statement by society, as seen within the drag community and with the transgender rights movement.

America's decisive view on gender is not a new phenomenon; many modern western cultures only acknowledge two genders. Even in studies and definitions of gender, it is often seen on a bipolar scale: in terms of feminine and masculine. Sociologist Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978) define gender as "the cultural expression of all that is feminine or masculine in a person" (7). Kessler and McKenna's definition reflects the common view held by most western scientists and citizens of the time: gender can only be defined by two, locked concepts. In more recent studies, sociologists have broadened the definition of gender. In Amy S.

Wharton (2005) acknowledges the flaws in the limited binary definition of gender, noting that in the earlier definition “gender is seen as sets of traits or behavioral dispositions that people come to possess based on their assignment to a particular sex category,” (7). By limiting gender to be defined by biological sex, American society has come to tie certain traits to a sex and thus to a gender; this forces gender to be expressed in very limited ways. Traits such as emotional sensitivity and warmth are associated with women while emotional stability and dominance are associated with men. Basing gender around a biological sex has created a barrier for gender expression. Instead of being able to express a range of complex social identities, people feel tied to one definitive gender that he or she is dictated to express for his or her whole life.

This definition also sees gender as a static institution; it argues that gender does not change over time. However, Judy C. Pearson and Shannon B. Vanhorn (2004) talked to 35 participants aged 67 to 97, divided into 13 focus groups, and found that gender identity is fluid over a lifetime. Pearson and Vanhorn stimulated conversation in the focus groups by asking open-ended questions about their gender identity. Pearson and Vanhorn found in their study that individual’s gender identity changed depending on “their predispositions, their interactions with others, their circumstances, and their life stage,” (2004:296). A large number of factors can determine how a person views his or her gender, but American society does not allow for freedom of this complex expression.

In the United States, the idea that gender is binary has become so ingrained in society, that people hold beliefs around gender, whether they are aware of said beliefs or not. In 2006, Debra L. Oswald and Kara Lindstedt tried to quantify gender self-stereotypes. To achieve this, they surveyed 187 university students, asking them to list qualities associated with a gender and if those associations were positive, negative, or neutral. The participants were then asked to rank

the validity of the association on a one to five scale. Oswald and Lindstedt found that most gendered traits were personality based, descriptions such as “emotional” for woman and “aggressive” for men (2006: 455). Although individuals may experience shifts in gender identity over their lifetime, American society sets in certain beliefs about gender that young adults do not even question. The gender norm American society enforces, that gender is only ever two options, is made clear early in socialization and thus children do not consider a fluid gender identity as an option and come to believe in the rigid gender stereotypes.

The affect of this limited view is most visibly seen in the gendered nature of clothing. Clothing plays a crucial part in how a person shapes his or her physical identity. In her book, Diane Crane (2000) looks at how clothing, especially in America during the industrial revolution, was used to symbolize an individual’s identity. Crane notes that fashion is “one of the most visible markers of social status and gender,” (2000:1). How people choose to present themselves via clothing is one of the visibly most ways a society can understand a person’s identity. From choosing to a dress instead of pants to choosing to sneakers over heels, every choice an individual makes changes how the world views them.

People not simply judge themselves, but they judge themselves based on how other people may judge them; this is known as the looking glass self. Charles Horton Cooley (1902) argues that there are three principle elements of how a person views his or herself: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification,” (184). In his argument, the most significant factor is other people’s *perceived* opinion. If a person thinks other people like his or her outfit, he or she will feel pride or confidence, but if a person believes people do not like the outfit, he or she will feel shame and embarrassment. Therefore, when getting dressed

in the morning, a person will pick clothes that he or she thinks *other* people will have a certain reaction to.

Rebecca H. Holman (1980) sought to empirically prove that clothing is chosen to express something about specific the wearer. She wanted to see if clothing out invoke a specific reaction from people not wearing the outfit and what messages those outfits were conveying. Holman did her study in two phases; the first phase was to gather samples of women's outfits. Holman chose women's outfits over men's arbitrarily; believing that mixing the two would confuse the study (1980). Holman ended up with 392 different clothing ensembles, which were then used to answer the research questions posed in phase two. Phase two asked if meaning attributed to one outfit was different than another outfit, when both outfits are worn by the same person and what message is being sent by each ensemble (Holman, 1980). To answer these questions, Holman asked students on campus about the outfits, specifically what was their first impression upon seeing it, what do they think the girl wearing it is like (1980)? Holman successfully found and identified six different messages transmitting through clothing (1980). Clothing is a critical form of communication and presentation because it is one of the first impressions a person gives the outside world. Individuals take pride in having a unique "style" customized to them that transmits a specific message. However, people may not have as much of a choice in the matter as they think they do.

Individual's options in clothes are limited, largely due to gender separation. Companies will not only market clothing differently depending on gender, but they also physically separate the clothes in stores. Sean Nixon (1996) looked at how store designs in the 1980s encouraged certain masculine stereotypes. Nixon notes that the design of the men's department had "strong references to traditional gentlemen's outfitters," (1996; 54). This is to say, the men's stores were

designed to reinforce earlier perceptions of what it means to dress like a man. The clothes were surrounded by polished wood, metal frames, show cards, and other items are used to visually imply the strong, dominant man (Nixon 1996;61). These store designs constrict the department to only sell items that are traditionally “masculine,” which further ingrains the binary view of gender into society.

Despite society’s view, however, some individuals fall outside of the binary definition. There are individuals who find creative expression through their gender presentation. Drag queens are biological males who identify their gender as “man,” but present as women for entertainment value. In recent years, there has been a surge in the consumption of drag for entertainment value, due to the rising popularity of shows and movies like *Rupaul’s Drag Race* (2009-) and *Paris is Burning* (1991). Despite the rise in media around drag queen, America still views drag queens in a negative light. Lisa Underwood noted this negative perspective in her novel *The Drag Queen Anthology*: “female impersonators in our society are seen as representing an array of disparate, often contradictory cultural values, limitations, and possibilities,” (2013; 3). Drag queens are seen so outside and contradictory to the norm that society does not know how to properly process them.

Society views drag as something radical, something so against the norm that its function must be to inspire political change. Even within the gay community, drag queens are seen as political entities. Betty Luther Hillman (2011) looked at the discourse around the drag community, by the gay community. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, several gay organizations took a hard stance on drag. Some, like Society for Individual Rights (SIR), viewed it as a disgrace to the gay community that further promoted negative stereotypes (Hillman

2011:153). Other, more liberal groups viewed drag as “symbolic statement against gender norms,” (Hillman 2011:158). While some discouraged drag for perpetuating negative, harmful stereotypes, others hailed it as a revolutionary, symbolic act. Both of these arguments, however, fail to view drag as something other than politically motivated. Society agrees that drag queens go against the norm, one way or another, and thus society cannot accept them. Drag queens have to go outside the sphere of society and have to be made political because going against the gender binary is going against one of America’s fundamental values.

While making drag political has hurt drag queens, there is another subculture in America significantly more socially stratified by the gender binary: transgender individuals. Drag queens go against the gender norm for entertainment sake; transgender individuals go against the norm because they personally identify against their assigned gender. Transgender kids have little say in how they are dressed, as parents completely control what the children can wear, and thus, have little control over their presentation. Michelle Dietert and Dianne Dentice studied the harmful affect that the gender binary has on transgender youth in their 2013 article. Dietert and Dentice interviewed 32 female to male transgender individuals, asking about their experiences growing up. They found that even from a young age, children have gender expectations for their peers (Dietert and Dentice 2013; 37). Transgender youth first started to realize their difference from the norm when “they did not identify with their peers when it came to basic interests like clothing, makeup, and play,” (Dietert and Dentice 2013; 37). The key element is that was the physical qualities of gender, clothing, making, and physical interaction that separated the transgender youth from their peers. Clothing and physical presentation is one of the most fundamental ways a transgender youth can express the gender they actually identify with. However, like with drag, American society views any gender transgression as inherently

political. When the transgender children expressed their actual gender identity via clothing, Dietert and Dentice found that “they were harassed in school for not looking and acting like a girl,” (2013; 38). Even before a transgender child can reach adulthood, he or she is pushed into the political sphere, just because he or she does not identify with a previously assigned gender.

While this paper focuses on the importance gender identity being more complex than two genders, the researcher does acknowledge that she uses “he or she” when referencing an individual. The researcher’s academic teaching emphasized that “they” pronouns should only be used when referencing multiple peoples. While the researcher believes “they” pronouns should be applied as a gender-neutral pronoun to a singular person, she has chosen to use “he or she” to follow the current academic standard. Another shortcoming of this research is that it focuses solely on American culture. All across the world, gender is a complex institution in society and future research should look at all systems to truly understand how humans can understand gender, especially in the presentation of gender.

In American society, people assume that gender is the same as sex. When individuals or subcultures go against this assumption, society rejects them, makes them political outcasts, but society is slowly changing. Transgender people are gaining legal recognition; drag is becoming more accepted as an art and entertainment form. However, these are the extreme version of going against the set gender norms. Individuals, over their lifetime, change their gender identity, but are limited in how they can express it. With clothing being such a critical form of communication, individuals should feel free to express their gender via clothing in the most accurate way and not be limited by an assigned gender.

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