

Such a Drag...

A Sociological Investigation in Gender Politics



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Introduction

Society is familiar with the rule of there being two and only two genders with which an individual can identify. A large amount of controversy surrounds the idea that gender is predetermined by sex and remains invariant throughout the lifespan. Individuals that bend or break the rules of gender- “gender outlaws”- (Bornstein, 1994) are subject to much scrutiny and debate concerning “true” gender affiliation, particularly in psychological health, and are often victimized as a result of challenging the status quo of gender operation. The purpose of this study is to attain an improved comprehension of how gender transformations are experienced by homosexuals and especially, drag participants, in relation to their personal gender and sexual identification. I also consider the public perception of fluctuating male and female presentations of masculinity and femininity, juxtaposing my data alongside the concepts and ideas proposed by existing sociological research of sexuality and gender display while forming an analysis that utilizes current theory of gender politics.

Research & Methods

Initially, the inspiration for this study came from my own work life. Since August 2009, I have been employed in central New Jersey at a nighttime venue that identifies with the homosexual community. During this time, I have observed the various behaviors, attitudes, conduct, speech, attire, and discourse of the staff and patrons of this club: homosexual and heterosexual men and women, in an environment that ranged between the casual, professional, and entertainment-oriented. The majority of patrons are gay-identifying men and women between the ages of 18 and 65 varying across race and social class. Most patrons are middle class with at least 12 years of education. After observing and interacting with many customers, I have noticed that the conventional behavior for men and women is largely disregarded by most people. Men are more likely to engage in behavior that is considered effeminate in a space where they feel secure and connected to other gender and sexuality ‘non-conformists’. While

typical masculine or neutral men and women occasionally occupy the space, I am interested in the challenges to these codes of expectation. The expressions of masculinity and femininity are for the most part inverted in the atmosphere of the club. While traditional practices are not entirely absent, they are significantly reduced among those who identify as homosexual and even become part of a “pick and choose” phenomenon. Looking around the bar it becomes apparent that this is the case; men will stand in a stereotypical female posture or sit with their legs crossed. Some men will dance very fiercely and as the evening progresses, which is a stark dissimilarity to behavior often associated with men dancing in straight venues. In contrast to straight bars, men will often order colorful, fruity drinks like cosmopolitans or bay breezes, while it is much more common to see lesbian women drinking beer or monopolizing the billiard table than in heteronormative spaces. Furthermore, on nights featuring karaoke many men will try their voice singing a number made popular by female artists- though not always to the pleasure of other patrons. Men are more likely to wear contoured or revealing clothing and will pay more attention to their appearance, often referring to themselves and each other as ‘girl’, ‘babe’, ‘honey,’ and ‘dear’, while equating their homosexuality with femininity. Many women, on the other hand, dress in loose clothing; jeans and t-shirts, caps, smoke cigarettes, and use profanity. There are very few displays of typical territorial masculine behaviour. Physical fights are exceptionally rare, men are more talkative and emotionally sensitive, and less concerned with toughness, dominance, or other alpha-male qualities. Among lesbian women, however, I have actually observed more instances of aggression and territoriality that is consistent with alpha-male behaviour.

Drag performers are another demographic facet that can be seen with regularity at the venue. The club hosts a considerable amount of drag performances- lip-synching and choreography that accompanies dance music. One of the essential goals of dressing in drag is to excite attention through shock value and present oneself with the stereotypical qualities of the other gender. In the case of men they strive to exhibit beauty, femininity, poise, and softness. Drag kings (which I have not observed directly) would on the other hand seek to embody dominance,

masculinity, strength, and leadership. Performers are usually known by at least two names; their birth name and a performer name, which is sometimes a feminization of the birth name. They arrive as an entourage, and commonly more than one lady will perform during the night while their friends or partners help with the technical aspects of the show and aid in the application of make-up or handling attire. The ladies will behave as a group when they are dressed as such. For instance, they will enter the nightclub together, simultaneously make the trip to the bathroom, and prepare in the powder room. Once dressed as men, this group dynamic pervades, but to a lesser degree. As women, the performers will consciously regulate their presentation in aspects such as grooming, body movement and position, and manner of speaking.

When the male performers arrive in female form more attention is paid to their appearance than if they had arrived as men. People will open doors, purchase drinks, and pay compliments to the ladies more so than if they were not dressed in their female garb. Not all patrons embrace the concept of drag, instead regarding the ladies as though they were still dressed as men and generally ignoring or avoiding them. Performances are only done by drag 'queens', but oftentimes men will dress up recreationally instead of as an attraction featured in the name of entertainment. These men are usually treated as though they are women except in cases where they are ostracized and thus referred to as 'cross-dressers or 'transvestites'. Several respondents made a clear distinction that drag is only acceptable by outgoing, attractive, and relatively young individuals. To be shy while in drag merits the derogatory labels of 'creepy', or 'tranny', and these individuals are generally avoided by others. Interestingly enough, there are no women who perform as males. Women who dress in male clothing usually identify as lesbian although they do not consider themselves to be "in drag."

Since the nature of this study was to investigate the subjective experiences of gender, I have interviewed a total of 16 individuals, 13 men and 3 women ranging in age from 19 to 65 with the majority of participants ranging in age between 20- 35. The questions take into consideration the birth gender of the performers, their current

gender identity, occupations, a history of sexual orientation, the motivation for redoing one's gender and a description of the process, and their self-perception as men both in and out of drag. Respondents that did not perform were asked about their perception of drag as it relates to gender, masculinity, and femininity.

Ten of the participants identify with “doing drag” at least once in their lives and offered in-depth accounts of their experience of drag and their perception of gender. Six individuals perform numerous times per month and have taken on drag performance as a part-time job in addition to their careers. The other participants did drag recreationally or in very few instances. Eight of the ten that had experimented with drag identified themselves as homosexual men overall and the other two as heterosexual overall with tendencies towards bisexuality. All but one said they used a pseudonym for the time spent in drag. Most of the respondents recall their interest sparking from an innocent curiosity or boredom. Involvement is considered by most to be enjoyable work as a means to entertain people but also for some as a leisure activity; a desire for “the attention and respect” that a beautiful woman receives and the desirable treatment those women are offered for living in a sexist world. For instance, Katrina states that she “gets away with a lot more as a female” and that she is treated differently by her boyfriend as well as by other men and women. This suggests that while in drag Katrina receives certain privileges or leniency that she would not normally get while in his male form. She recounts her experience as “wanting to feel that feeling again”, going on to say “there are days when I’m obliged to dress up because of my performances and there other days when I say ‘I want to go out as Katrina tonight’”.

Most of the drag queens perform to receive payment. As the term “gender illusionist” suggests, drag is a skill to be honed, and one that is difficult to master. Charles and Sophie are a heterosexual couple who have partaken in drag as a part of a photography event. While they have never performed drag before, they used the event as an opportunity for a fun, new experience along with some monetary incentive. Both admit there was some considerable difficulty in playing the opposite sex role; especially since it was the first time that Sophie dressed in

heels. The more frequent performers affirm that drag is not free and that at times it is just as stressful as their day jobs. Respondents were sure to differentiate between drag, cross dressing, transvestitism and transgender. More than one respondent described drag as being glamorous and fun and viewed as outgoing and lively activity. Katrina offers her opinion: “You don’t want to be a cross-dresser, like some weird old guy in a dress that just sits in the corner, creeping everyone out. That’s not pretty. Drag isn’t meant to be sexual or erotic, it’s energetic, it’s about enjoying yourself in a different form... like Spiderman”.

In all cases the performers’ birth gender remained invariant throughout their performance and their lives. The respondents insisted that they are **not** transgendered; they are performance artists; men dressed as women playing a role or portraying a character. Ironically, two of the interviewees were BFA actresses who did not consider themselves to be doing drag when they dressed in and played male roles. Katrina expressed annoyance at her memories of being asked why she would not want to “do the transgender thing”, responding “why would I need to? I can pass as a woman and then take it off before I go to sleep”. His gender identification as a male remains steadfast even though he wore women’s clothing during our interview. Stating that he never wanted to be transgender, Mickey asserted that he couldn’t consider himself to be a man when he “turned on” his counter -part, Nikki. This mental dedication to the part of woman was what enabled Mickey to successfully do drag and pass as a woman. Mickey described his use of drag as a form of entertainment and a way to express a different aspect of himself. Stating that he felt empowered as a woman, he described himself as a sweet and happy person while regarding Nikki as strong and aggressive. This experience of drag resembles the experience of theater characterization or even a sort of alter-ego where he could display the side of his personality that was uncharacteristic of himself as a male. Conversely, the one female who did drag reported *discomfort* as a man. “I feel more masculine when I am dressed in my regular everyday clothes. I’m a strong person and I feel I have more cohonies than most of the men out there. As a woman it’s much harder to earn anything- even respect. If I knew

I'd be treated like a man I would dress like that more often.” Charles is conscious of male privilege and resents the fact that she needs to biologically be a man to be taken seriously.

Analysis

According to the respondents, a similarity I noted among participants is that aside being done for fun, drag is used as means to receive privileges and benefits that would otherwise be unavailable to one in the gender of their birth. These benefits range from attention, free drinks, and a cleaner restroom for males in drag to the prospect of respect, equality, and power for women as the result of male privilege. Interpreting this dynamic of gendered privilege I suggest that drag may function as a vehicle to engage in a form of “Gender Darwinism”, receiving credit for playing up the strengths of one or the other gender by guiding the expectation for interactions. The research and interviews conducted by Connell in “Doing, Undoing, or Redoing Gender” (2010) support this theory of Gender Darwinism by recounting the experiences of transgender people who transition in the workplace. One transman describes his blending of a masculine body with some of the feminine traits that he consciously retained in order to mitigate his male privilege. Transwomen report that co-workers’ behavior and the employers’ assumptions about their abilities as workers changed as a result of obtaining male-to-female reassignment surgery. Therefore, if people are apt to change their behavior and beliefs in negatively gendered ways when perceived gender changes, it is possible and perhaps resourceful to use that system to one’s advantage.

The doing of drag negotiates gendered resources in a way that allow for its boundaries (Gerson & Peiss, 1985) to be traversed without the commitment of sexual reassignment surgery. Indeed, it is the intimate knowledge of these boundaries that permits one to be a successful drag performer and doer of gender. As West and Zimmerman (1987) clarify, gender is done as a result of identification with one of two sex categories. Drag performers are accepting of their own biological sex and sex category but practice changing their awareness to

‘redo’ the gender of the other consciousness. Thus, success in “Gender Darwinism” only requires the ability to pass as a man or a woman in order to reap the benefits inherent in each. The participants’ responses corroborate West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theory of doing gender that allows for variation in gender display at different times while providing actors with the agency to choose whether to do masculinity, femininity, or some mixture of the two. Even though all patrons of the bar are able to pick and choose among the aspects of masculinity and femininity they wish to express, their gender orientation is never called into question unless they are in drag. Upon offering the participants the chance to add their opinion to this research I was told repeatedly that drag performers are not transgender. While some people do experiment with drag to test the waters of sexual reassignment, I heard that is usually not the case. As evidenced by the common misunderstanding of their gender that drag queens report, a much greater amount of weight is attributed to gender identity when the physical appearance of the individual changes- even though no hormonal or surgical change has taken place. As Valentine reports in *Imagining Transgender* (2007), sexuality is experienced independently from gender identity. While he discloses an account of transgender as “being” another gender in one’s mind, the performers insist that drag is the “doing” of gender; a distinction that both parties are adamant about maintaining. My research supports Valentine’s (2007) findings of “transgender” as an umbrella term that envelops the differences between individuals. We have found that neither homosexuality, transgender, nor drag are ontological; they are produced through discourse. Even the term “drag queen” implies a female form. Although the desired *effect* is to create that illusion, the *intention* of drag may be better communicated through the language I have been using: the word “performer” to emphasize the aspect of theatrics.

Contrary to Pascoe’s (2011) analysis of displays of masculinity in high school as rigid and oppressive, my observations in the nightclub depict masculinity as a versatile and highly negotiable trait for both men and women. The majority of gay men engaged in at least some behavior characterized as feminine; in fact, masculine tendencies often provoked comment with the humorous faux-disdain of being “like a straight guy” or typical of heterosexual

conduct. Since homosexuals have a history of being persecuted, the gay bar is a place where usually ‘marked’ people find themselves in the majority and may thus shift the power structure to mark those who do not fit into a uniquely reconstructed set of norms and expectations. Analogous to the research findings of Schilt and Westbrook (2009), the equation of homosexuality with feminine or non-masculine behavior institutes a system of homonormativity. Even in this homonormative environment ideals of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005) are still prevalent. Though it is expected for men and women to display feminine and masculine behavior that is usually unconventional, there are limits to what is considered acceptable. Men who are excessively effeminate often get labeled as “a Mary” and are routinely gossiped about, and women who are exceptionally aggressive or confrontational are referred to in a disparaging manner. Additionally, a man who is very masculine (aggressive) is generally perceived by others to be unpleasant and perhaps in denial of his [homo]sexuality. Heterosexuality and traditional masculinity become marked traits, even giving rise to discourse about “breeders,” which is a version of Pascoe’s “fag discourse” that is intended without malice but still harbors negative connotations.

Conclusion

While drag is not embraced or understood by all bar patrons, the “doing” of masculinity and femininity by people in drag is largely accepted, intuitive by the presence of an audience. In fact, only one of the sixteen individuals I interviewed claimed that drag was an expression of incongruent gender identity and an attempt to “cover up psychological issues”-- the very misconception that this article seeks to correct. However, this study is limited by a very small nonrandom sample size, and is representative only of people that are already comfortable and familiar with the LGBT community. Through observation and interviews of drag participants, I have shown that the “micro” gay bar becomes a homonormative space where hegemonic ideals of the “macro” society are still present, although to a lesser and varied extent. Masculinity and femininity can be chosen and swapped at the discretion of the individual while people in drag understand themselves as performers of gender; not usually

identifying with a separate biological sex than that assigned at birth. The homosexual world largely understands this; based on my observations in contrast to how gender and heteronormativity are maintained by heterosexuals, homosexual men acknowledge and embrace femininity as a part of their presentation of gender and as an aspect of their homosexuality. Future research might aim to ascertain the opinions of more female drag performers and female patrons in general in order to better represent the demographic and the possibility of gendered differences in drag consciousness. Henceforth, the variability of gender in a homonormative context along with a set of new paradigmatic gender ideals further illustrates the extent to which gender is constructed in society.

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