

Contrasting Subjectivities: An Ontological Framework for Research Practices

I am very pleased to be accepting the Carmi Harari Early Career Award for inquiry. A question I continue to struggle with is how to develop an ontological framework for psychological exploration. By this I mean a mode of conducting research in which I am able to explore the experience of subjectivity within different situations, communities, roles and identities. I conduct research to explore the holistic, time- and context-bound experience of being a person and the ways subjective experiences function and change. Also, my research is meant to explore the ways subjectivities interact with one another and within environments that carry hosts of influences. Today, I wanted to discuss what I see as a step towards such a framework – the strategic use of multiple studies to examine intersections within ontological experience. First, however, let me discuss my basic approach to research.

As a result of my interest in subjective experience, I have been drawn towards human science research, often termed ‘qualitative research.’ This research is interview-based and has allowed me to explore aspects of human experience in interaction with the specific contexts of each participant. What I have loved about my qualitative research is the opportunity to plumb the depths of private experience and access new understandings of the world. I feel honored to talk with my participants, to hear what they share, and to conceptualize aspects of their experience that have been unmapped by prior psychological investigation.

I have developed three programs of qualitative research – studying domestic violence as it relates to faith, the construction of gender, and psychotherapy research. In conducting this work, I have been surprised to learn the degree to which the experience of being a client is one of seeking therapist approval and the degree to which clients are *not* concerned with the interventions that we work so hard to generate (e.g., Levitt, Butler, & Hill, 2006). I have come to understand the tension religious leaders experience when faced with abused women – on one hand wanting to protect the woman, and on the other, feeling charged with upholding the sanctity of marriage (Levitt & Ware, 2006). I have come to understand the centrality of a quest for authenticity in the experience of being a butch lesbian and the complex balance of agency and self-protection within their gender presentation (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

At the same time, when conducting these three studies, each seminal in a new line of research, I have been concerned that the focus on the individual – although it allows for a lovely depth of understanding of what is conscious and able/willing to be revealed in the subjectivity of a person – did not allow for an understanding of what is outside of the person, unavailable to the person, or difficult to communicate. As a result, I have been moving increasingly to conducting programs of qualitative research – in which related forms of subjective experience can be compared and some of these shortcomings can be overcome.

In each program, I have found it useful to look at the intersection of ontological experiences. Not having time to explore the ways the exploration of multiple perspectives have helped across programs, I thought I'd give an example from my gender research to illustrate how these comparisons can be useful. Within this line of research, I have conducted four grounded theory projects - on women who identify as butch or femme lesbians, gay men who identify as leathermen or bears, and I am engaged in a project now interviewing transgender-identified people. To develop an understanding of the content of this work, I will describe some findings from a project I conducted with Katherine Hiestand (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004), interviewing butch lesbians on their experience of their gender. Afterwards, I will move on to illustrate some of the insights I've learned from comparisons of this work with other studies within this research program.

Growing Up as a Butch Lesbian: Coming to Terms With Being Different

Most of the butch women (11 of 12) described similar childhood experiences. Participants described a very early sense of being different from other children in school. Starting from about the age of 5 through their early teens, they were aware of their gender difference. Although many had an early sense of sexual orientation difference, this seemed less pressing until puberty and initially, it was gender expression difference that was most troubling.

Because their sense of gender was felt to be more masculine, dress codes or external pressures that forced them to appear feminine evoked feelings of embarrassment, weakness, and vulnerability—just as many women might feel if made to wear clothing (e.g., pink frilly dresses) that was discordant with their own sense of their femininity. Most respondents described conflicts with their parents who tried to encourage their gender conformity. *“I used to fight with my mom every night over what I had to wear. She wanted me to wear a dress, and I hated wearing them”* (P-01). Parents had different approaches to the issue: some enforced a dress code, or took their daughters to therapy, whereas others allowed their daughters to dress as they felt comfortable. Many of the interviewees described childhoods filled with confusion and shame.

My parents and my family, my grandmother said, “Act like a girl, be like a girl, do like that,” you know. It was always “Like a girl” which meant that I wasn’t like a girl. I was more like a boy, and that was not right. You know the only thing I could identify with was “I’m not like a girl, I’m more like a boy”—But I am a girl. And I like girls, so what does that mean? (P-04)

Some girls believed that they were meant to be boys and worried that they were “a mistake.” They struggled with their self image alone; they had no one with whom they could share their experiences. This isolation was reinforced at times by religious messages,

“I did somehow grab the idea that it was an abomination and I was burning in hell forever... A very fire and brimstone kind of thing. ... It was really scary. How long did I feel that way? Um, until I was 21. ...Til I finally said, ‘Fuck it, whatever. I’m in hell already. Who cares?’” (P-04).

Most of the respondents described themselves as tomboys, and they socialized as boys rather than as girls: *“I lived as a boy ... I dressed as a boy ... I hung out with the boys ... I flirted with the girls”* (P-10). Trouble for these children was often exacerbated at puberty. After this period they could no longer deny that their bodies were female, and others’ expectations that they should be feminine intensified. As gender became more of an issue, previous friendships with boys often grew more difficult, and the interviewees generally either chose not to date or to feign interest in boys.

There was strong pressure to be feminine - often from experiences of harassment from peers and sometimes from teachers. *“They called me queer... and they called me other names, too you know just kinda nasty names that you call, freak of nature kind of stuff”* (P-10). Most women came out to others in their late teens or early 20s. Coming out as a lesbian was reported to be an important experience for the respondents, as it allowed them to be honest about their sexual orientation and to gain acceptance from others. Not all participants came out to their families, and those who did described varied family reactions, from very supportive to completely rejecting.

As the women entered the lesbian community in their cities of origin, they began to become more comfortable with themselves as butch women. Learning the social rules of how butch- femme and androgynous women interacted within this lesbian community was not always easy. *“Butch girls would not dance with me, and the femmes did. I thought, ‘phooey’ but I didn’t know it was a butch–femme thing. ...And somebody said, ‘Well, she’s butch, girl, she’s not gonna dance with you.’ And it never occurred to me. It was just like an awakening”* (P-06). Similarly, realizing that they were sexually desirable to many lesbians they found attractive because they were butch was an important turning point for some women in terms of their self esteem.

It made me feel comfortable to be who I was. Because that’s who I was, but I never felt like it was okay. And so, once I thought it was okay, was given permission, to be me, everything just fell into place. I kind of came into myself, as soon as I decided this is who I am and who I’m going to be and I’m tired of pretending to be somebody else. It all felt very natural for me. (P-04)

Seeing other butches helped them to reconcile their gender with their sex. One participant described her reaction to meeting other butch women:

“Wow. She’s a woman.” You know, she was—but she also was a woman who would get mistaken as a man. ... But when I looked at her, I was like, “Yeah. She’s a woman though. She’s a woman.” And that meant something. It wasn’t like sexual or anything of that nature. It was just like, “Wow. I can be a woman and be who I am. I always thought that being who I was meant that I was trying to be a guy; and I get mistaken as ‘sir’ often. But it doesn’t bother me like it used to. Because I know that I am a woman. Just a different kind.” (P-04)

At the same time they reported increasing harassment in the outside world – for some daily experiences. Meeting other women with these experiences made this easier to bear and allowed some of them to develop a sense of pride in that they helped to increase lesbian visibility despite their great personal risks.

Comparisons with Other Gender Identity Research

These findings provide a sense of some of the findings about the ways butch gender identity develops. At this point, I'd like complement this research by contrasting findings with other studies I have conducted on GLBT identities such as femme lesbian identity and two gay men's identities, leathermen and bears. Instead of presenting those other bodies of research, I'll present here the patterns I have identified across these data sets.

Gender as a Sign of Power Compromise. Within each identity group, genders were constructed that claimed some traits that are stereotypically masculine, alongside others that are stereotypically feminine – creating genders that have distinct compositions and meanings. Due to their sex or sexual orientation, these men's and women's communities could not automatically claim the full power that masculinity affords (e.g., Carli, 1999; Collins, 2000), nor could they claim a traditional female role.

It was important for the men in the gay communities, for instance, to claim this power of masculinity, but at the same time, it was not a traditional masculinity that was claimed, but rather a version that shifted the designation of power to traits included under this rubric – encompassing traits such as intimacy, nurturance or affection.

Within groups of women, however, neither the words 'masculinity' nor 'femininity' could be easily retained within a strong positive identity as masculinity implied a male biological status and femininity implied powerlessness. The term 'butch' allowed those women to have their gender was read as masculine and so signified power, but was distinct from heterosexual masculinity in many ways – notably a self consciousness around gender enactment. In contrast, femme women claimed power by the creation of gender of femme-ininity that included stereotypically masculine traits such as pride, assertion, confidence, strength, and conviction. It seemed significant through these studies that the construct of femininity, which symbolizes a lack of power in our mainstream culture, tended to be avoided or reconstructed, while the term masculinity was retained within the male communities.

Gender as Political: Understanding Gender as Contextually Bound. To understand gender constructs, these studies question how a need came to arise for that ontological gender category. Across these analyses, gender constructs were developed in response to an experience that was *not* being recognized within a particular cultural context.

Modern day butch-femme communities have arisen in response to feminist lesbianism in the 1960s, which problematized gender difference. In contrast, within the butch-femme community certain traits were coded as types of femme-ininity while others were encoded as butch – in keeping with the thrust of their community emphasizing gender diversity and also reclaim the sexual attraction that was lost when lesbianism was thought to be an ideological stance.

In contrast, the male gay communities I explored developed as an alternative to a mainstream gay culture that emphasized femininity – permitting options for men who experienced themselves as more essentially masculine. As the thrust of the movement was focused on the claiming of masculinity for all members, the differences *between* individuals in the community were not emphasized. Although interactional patterns were signified using subordinate gender systems (e.g., dominant-submissive, etc.), these within-community differences did not receive the same emphasis as gender differences within butch-femme community. Instead, these different forms of strength (e.g., the strength to be dominant versus the strength to be submissive) were encoded as *forms of masculinity* within the community – in keeping with the communities’ orientation to celebrate masculinity. In other words, the political meaning of an identity in relation to its contextual community at the time of origin can help us to understand its emerging ontologies and the ways genders were labeled.

Conclusion

I have presented these examples to show how conducting qualitative research from multiple perspectives has been helpful in conceptualizing a phenomenon, ‘gender,’ that functions in our society in many different forms and guises. Strategically conducting projects aimed at understanding differences in perspective has allowed for a broader understanding of the phenomenon than the sum of individual studies as the comparisons between the studies can lead to insights as well. Although I have conducted quantitative research to augment this program of study (e.g., Levitt & Horne, 2002) as well, I have focused more on the qualitative comparisons of identities as there is more writing on the generation of multi-methods designs than on the development of qualitative programs of research. In conclusion, let me restate that I am very honored to have received this award from Division 32 and thank the members of the division.

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