

Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Sexualities:

Essentialism, Social Construction & Performativity

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PSYC305S Critical Psychology
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7 October 2005

“We humans are in a state of...always becoming...”

–Mikki van Zyl

Introduction

Whether applying for a job or getting to know someone new, we are required to formally or informally answer a number of questions about who we are, ranging from our qualities, traits, and weaknesses, to such things as age, gender, and racial categorization. The first three bits of information at first seem to be more subjective, varying a great deal from person to person, and the last three appear to be more standard, objective knowledge that one could relatively accurately determine if in the presence of the person being questioned. However, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that, in fact, gender cannot be reduced to a tick in a box proclaiming male or female and racial categorization does not easily fall into four categories of Black, White, Indian, and Coloured. Though not asked on application forms or by most people initially getting to know another, one's sexuality or sexual preference also cannot be reduced to a tick in a box of either heterosexual or homosexual. People, by nature, are constantly in a state of becoming-discovering and redefining themselves and their transient identities.

This paper seeks to explore hybrid identities and sexuality, looking closely at debates around same-sex preference, namely essentialism, social construction and performativity. Same-sex practice is often referred to as homosexuality; however progressive gender and sexuality discourse problematizes the word “homosexual,” deconstructing it as being more than one common understanding that is thought to include both behavior and identity all in one. Homosexuality, it is argued, should be understood to include both the possibilities of same-sex behavior as well as the option to claim gay identity.

Same-sex practices have been going on since the beginning of time, carrying different meaning and cultural understanding depending on the time and the situation. Around the issue of sexual practice and preference, science and theory tend to try to explain the phenomenon in two ways, engaging in the ever-popular nature versus nurture debate. The nature debate is most closely tied to the idea of essentialism with traits and preferences being inherent in a person, different but similar to the understanding of biological determinism. The nurture debate is easily followed through with social constructionism, creating meaning of an event or understanding of a situation through language between people. Performativity gives credence to the highly fluid and mobile

nature of people and the agency they have in acting as they choose. Although performativity as a theory laid out by Butler is created to explain how people “do” gender, it can also be applied to how people “do” sexuality.

Firstly, identity will be briefly discussed and hybridity as relating to sexuality will be defined. Next a discussion of sexual preference from an essentialist understanding will be looked at, followed by a social constructionist point of view, ending with an exploration of the notions of performativity as laid out by Judith Butler. All of this will be explored with an eye on how these concepts apply or work themselves out in Africa.

“We do not own identities, but engage in them”

–Mikki van Zyl

Hybrid Identities and Sexualities

Hybridity is most often used to refer to racial identity when a person is a mix of ethnicities or ‘races,’ but I would argue that it could also be used in reference to sexuality as something that is “made up of a mixture of different elements,” (Encarta 1999) such as context, time, and situation, among others. Identity in general, and more specifically sexual identity is a very mobile concept, encapsulating many aspects of a persons being. As Mikki van Zyl writes,

Identities express not only our complex personal histories but also our sense of belonging. They are profoundly embedded within broader social and historical relations, and therefore are expressive not only of being constructed but also of our power and agency to construct. Sexual identities and sexualities extend beyond the individual, and shape society (van Zyl, 2005, 20).

The theory of subjectivity talks of identity as “not a fixed ‘thing,’ but rather something that is “negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous” (Jackson, 2004, 674). Through language and relating with others, we come to better understand ourselves and the world around us. Whenever we tell stories or communicate with people, we are essentially constructing how we understand the world to be, showing how we see ourselves and how we understand social life (Tate, 2005, 21). However, as individuals marching toward a better understanding of our multiple selves, we cannot forget that others are on the same journey and it is through their influence that we can continue to form our identities.

Sexuality: behavior vs. identity

The discussion around sex and gender returns now, giving an adequate example to better understand what is written in the literature about homosexuality and gayness.

Sex is commonly taken to be the biological factor making people either men or women, and gender pertains more to the difference(s) between men and women (Shefer, 2004, 188) regarding the more subjective feeling or understanding a person has of their gender identification. With sexuality, same-sex behavior can be seen as the more objective factor, but the choice to identify becomes the subjective factor. It is useful here to quote Weeks in full to get a better grasp the difference between same-sex acts and identifying as “gay.”

Homosexuality has existed throughout history. But what have varied enormously are the way in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who were engaged in homosexual activity viewed themselves... As a starting point we have to distinguish between homosexual behavior, which is universal, and a homosexual identity, which is historically specific (quoted in Lind, 2005, 337).

Homosexuality is significant, showing up across culture and time (McKnight, 1997, 4). It is important that it does not get ignored in the telling of history. Often, homosexuality has been labeled as an unAfrican thing. This idea is upheld by Leatt and Hendricks, but they go on to add, “homosexuality existed and was accepted within traditional constructions prior to the arrival of European colonialists. ...Whereas culturally, a gay lifestyle is un-African, situational same-sex activity is not. In fact, situational same-sex activity forms an institutionalized part of traditional African culture” (Sanders as quoted in Leatt and Hendricks, 2005, 313).

We now move on to essentialism as affecting hybrid sexual identity.

Essentialism

Essentialism as a concept and an idea posits that identities are fixed and unchangeable (Kiguwa, 2004, 306), placing traits of people within them as inherent and stuck. Essentialism is not biological determinism, but bears a resemblance in pre-determination to explain aspects of people. Hollway cautions “against an essentialising practice when theorizing any form of identity” (Kiguwa, 2004, 309) because it locks people into universalist claims and fails to take context and diversity into consideration (Bohan, 1997, 40-41). It also rationalizes gender roles, which often if not always oppresses women. In relation to Africa, van Zyl writes, “discourses which construct sexualities in Africa as *exclusively* located within broadly-defined gendered social relations, essentialised into ‘the African woman’ or ‘the African man’, and which do not give recognition to the immense diversities which emerge when we pay enough attention to personalized performances or identities...it reproduces sexualities as heteronormative,” (van Zyl, 2005, 24) which is what gives such problem in trying to make way for

alternative sexualities or even alternative ways to “do” a particular gender located out of the norm. In South Africa, the view that “heterosexuality [is] the only acceptable, normal pattern for human sexual relationships,” (Nel, 2005, 286) leads to deeply felt homophobia, which in actuality “exists as a tool of policing masculinity and femininity” (Leatt and Hendricks, 2005, 317), which maintains sexism and its production of “a ‘proper’ man and a ‘proper’ woman and their relations to each other” (van Zyl, 2005, 32).

Although science has proven that there is little difference to no significant differences between males and females biologically, claiming that no person contains perfect XX or XY chromosomes—those determining a person’s sex—or a perfect balance of the hormones estrogen and testosterone, it will be a great while before the idea takes hold that biology and our “essence” is not and cannot be perfect and there is no person who is perfectly male or female and perfectly heterosexual (Muthien, 2005, 53).

Language and the use of language have been more recently looked at as forces of change, which can give people agency to “create meaning and transform the world through action, destabilizing tired and often oppressive signs that have a long history of fixing and essentializing meaning” (Jackson, 2004, 674). It is through language that social construction finds its place.

Social Construction

Moving away from essentialism and understanding relations and identities through the idea of social construction opens up a whole new area of agency for people, allowing a more fluid a mobile identity through interaction with others. It also allows for a constant reworking and ability to engage in performativity, which will be talked about further on.

One way sexuality and sexual preference has been looked at in South Africa under the guise of social constructionism is through three categories of homosexuality, laid out in a book entitled *Male Homosexuality in South Africa: Identity Formation, Culture and Crisis* by Isaacs and McKendrick, who claim there is 1) transient homosexuality-someone who is just experimenting, 2) situational homosexuality-found amongst men who are removed from a sex-integrated society (work situations or prisons), and 3) accidental homosexuality-an unclear category. These categories assume a very strict separation between those labeled homosexual and those labeled heterosexual (Leatt and Hendricks, 2005, 313-316). It leaves little room for people to find themselves represented, but does offer more room for movement and definition than essentialism creates.

A more popular way sexuality has become understood, which also can claim more acceptance of a variety of truths and experiences, is along a continuum, with homosexuality at one extreme and heterosexuality at the other, giving people the opportunity “to occupy any (number of) position(s) along the gradation from gay to straight... [with the possibility] to move somewhat along the gradation at different times in a lifespan” (Leatt and Hendricks, 2005, 316). A fun quote by Kate Bornstein provides great imagery on this, saying, “Instead of imagining gender as opposite poles of a two-dimensional line, it would be interesting to twirl that line in space, and then spin it through several more dimensions. In this way, many more possibilities of gender identity may be explored...” as well as sexual identities (Quoted in Mutheir, 2005, 49).

Leatt and Hendricks also write that, “Only those currently located towards the extreme homosexual end of the continuum are likely to benefit from labeling themselves gay. All people are however capable of same-sex desire and affection, although to differing degrees” (Leatt and Hendricks, 2005, 316). The last line takes the most radical view of sexual preference as completely nonessentialist, placing a great deal of power in culture and history in constructing a person’s sexuality (Vance, 2005, 20). Most people writing of sexuality as a continuum do not mention the last point, but concur that this model provides a way of understanding sexuality that does not ignore the myriad possibilities sexuality plays itself out in each person.

With regards to sexuality shifts in Africa over time, Craig Lind writes that, “An African sexuality seems unlikely to have required a binary division between same- and opposite-sex sexual conduct. A fluid sexuality seems more likely to have been the defining characteristic of African sexuality... Whatever remnants there may have been of a fluid African sexuality may be being destroyed by the legal and political insistence on the existence of a dual sexuality” (Lind, 2005, 349). So although socially constructed understanding of sexuality originally created great room for agency and possibility, it was upon the imposition of a dual and more essentialist claim that blocked off that fluidity, causing a start back at the beginning and a greater struggle for those wanting to find a place. The social construction of the self became “tied directly to social, economic, and institutional changes in Europe from the late eighteenth century” (Leatt and Hendricks, 2005, 309), dragging down the concept of sexuality already in place.

However, Butler argues that “we are not so socially constructed that we have no agency” to act as we would like or feel is appropriate. (Jackson, 2004, 681).

“It is not who you are, but what you do with who you are”

–Zimitri Erasmus

Performativity

Performativity is talked about by Butler as a “process by which we create our genders by *doing* them” (Shefer, 2004, 202), which causes the subject to emerge (Kulick, 2005, 61). Performativity always leaves room for a person to rework and resist positionalities (Jackson, 2004, 682) and discover the “I” through repetition of *doing*. Sexuality can also be repeated, which Butler talks about as heterosexuality being in constant repetition, “[imitating] an ideal of itself...to [produce] particular types of heterosexual men and women... Heterosexuality is not the origin or the normative measure of the real but an *effect* of its performativity, its repetition” (Jackson, 2004, 679).

Performativity testifies to the fluidity of identity and the possibility each person has to oppose or go along with socially constructed roles. By performing, one is also inadvertently naming themselves, and if going against the grain, are showing that identity cannot be essentialized. Along the lines of race, Tate writes, “I...construct myself in opposition to discursive otherness by asserting my position on the margin through becoming an-other Black in the hybrid moment in talk” (Tate, 2005, 138), which gives her the possibility of naming her identity outside of the options created in common discourse and situation. It is the ability to name and the possibilities to act that give a person positionality and agency. “To name oneself, is at one and the same time to locate oneself politically, socially, intellectually, philosophically, culturally, ‘racially’ and emotionally” (Tate, 2005, 138).

To be able to “perform queer,” as the title of the book by van Zyl declares, is to be able to understand “gender and sexuality as performance” and realize “the inescapable fluidity of identities...asserting the multiplicity of discursive possibilities, keeping ‘seats’ even for those that have not yet been named” (van Zyl, 2005, 20). The continuum and spectrum can remain open and even without a name, people can find a place to locate themselves. Locating oneself pulls in factors from so many arenas, and in realizing that, we can better understand the importance of hybrid identities of sexuality and the necessity of being able to move between and around in seas of confusion.

Talking about identities, Tate writes, “Identities aren’t ‘just anything’, they are positionings that are constantly being transformed. As such, they are never complete as ideas, world-views and material forces interact with each other and are reworked” (Tate, 2005, 69). People position themselves in a number of ways that allow them to perform

different aspects of the identity they imagine for themselves. This positioning and repetition of identity “works to establish the coherence of an identity category, [but] this same repetition makes the category vulnerable to change” (Jackson, 2004, 685). This could be viewed as a positive or negative thing, but most positively it does not allow for any essentialist claims to ground themselves when there is always that possibility for variation and trial in becoming who one wants to be.

Conclusion

Many aspects of hybrid sexuality can be scrutinized and looked into through the theories of essentialism, social construction and performativity. This paper has delved into the difference between same-sex behavior versus gay identification, as well as looking at how the above theories contribute to the sexuality debate. Everyone is affected by sexuality, making this issue of study so prevalent, but there is still a great deal more theorizing that can be done. It is only recently in the past century that sex and gender have really been picked apart, where science is abandoning its essentialist claims and bearing great credence to situational factors. Sexuality, especially those sexualities that are found in the grey areas of the continuum model have interesting possibility for study across cultures, since Western understanding of sexuality has been dominant in all discourses, and through careful reading it becomes clear that there is actually an abundance of understanding of sexuality in other cultures that could help theorize sexuality much better.

Possibly in the coming years, applications and forms will have a line next to such questions as sex and sexuality if it ever needed to be asked, where people would be able to place a line of where they felt they located themselves. Or even better, measurements such as these would be unnecessary as people begin to really understand that “we humans are in a state of...*always becoming*” (van Zyl, 2005, 19).

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