

Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado

Volume 4 | Number 3

Article 2

January 2015

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Recommended Citation

Otis, Hailey (2015) "Genderqueer: What It Means," *Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*: Vol. 4 : No. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digscholarship.unco.edu/urj/vol4/iss3/2>

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Genderqueer: What It Means

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Abstract: This article explains the term *genderqueer*, presenting a comprehensive, unambiguous, working definition. Getting to a definition of *genderqueer* could be the first step toward tolerance, acceptance, and eventual appreciation of a marginalized group of people. There are three primary ways in which the word *genderqueer* is conceptualized. First, the term can describe a personal identity that exists outside of the gender binary. Second, it can refer to an identity that consists of a particular amalgamation of masculine and feminine traits (or even the rejection of all such traits). Third, the word can represent an identity that embraces a fluidity of gender.

Keywords: *genderqueer, linguistic relativity, definition, gender identity, binary*

THE SAPIR–WHORF HYPOTHESIS AND LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

It may seem inadequate to assign a mere word to something as complex and consequential as someone’s gender identity. In fact, that’s why the words “queer” and “genderqueer” can be so difficult to work with, because these terms represent an attempt at creating an all-inclusive identity (while, at the same time, striving to articulate an anti-identity). The word says, “Here is what I am, and what I am not.” If just one word is so difficult to create, then why is a word needed? What end does it serve? It does meet an important need, and to understand the function that *genderqueer* serves as a term, one must understand the effect language has on human thought.

Language Affects Our View

Language interactively shapes and reflects our thinking patterns. It limits or influences our world view. That’s not just common sense, but also the finding of research throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Two early contributors to

language research were Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941). Sapir was Polish but became a U.S. citizen. His expertise was Native American languages. Whorf was from New England. He was knowledgeable about Mexican and U.S. Indian communication. From these anthropological studies, Sapir and Whorf believed that language impacts our thoughts, a conclusion known as *The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis* (also known as *linguistic relativity*). This theory offers up the idea that “the vocabulary and linguistic structure of one’s native language limits or influences one’s...world view,” (Kaye, 2009). For example, the terms that exist within the Hopi language and the language’s structure affect the way that the Hopis perceive, interpret, and understand the world around them. Whorf showed that Hopis use mostly verbs when discussing metaphysics, while Europeans use nouns. This idea of relativity originated with Sapir, whose primary interest was in “social reality.” The concept was further expanded by Whorf, whose central concern was linguistic categories and “habitual thought” (Pavlenko, 2011, p. 19). Over

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, other researchers tested, manipulated, debated, and improved on Sapir and Whorf's original ideas. Today what remains is the overarching idea that language interactively shapes and reflects the thinking patterns and values of a culture. Contributors to this conclusion were Harry Hoijer (1904–1976), John Carroll (1916–2003), Ernst Koerner (b. 1939), Keith Brown, and Eric Lenneburg (1921–1975) (Jing, 2011, p. 567).

People catalogue and label everything. As professor Keith Allan puts it, “There is an underlying assumption that categorization reflects human needs and motives, which obviously intersects with linguistic relativity” (2010). So not only do humans want a language with which they can construe thought, they long for categories to put their thoughts into. What does this urge to label mean for those people whose gender identity is outside of today's categories of *man*, *woman*, and (more recently) *transgender*? Of course they have a gender identity, and their type of identity exists. But what label applies to those people whose gender identity exists outside the gender binary? (Note that the term “transgender” fails to escape the binary, as it simply characterizes a person who crosses from one side of the binary to the other.)

DEFINING GENDER IDENTITY

To warm up for defining *genderqueer*, let us first review the term *gender identity*. Does the term include genderqueer individuals? The American Psychological Association (APA) defines *gender identity* as a term that “...refers to one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender” (Definition of Terms: Sex, Gender, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation). According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), *gender identity* “...is the individual's internal sense of being male or female” (n.d.). Furthermore, Planned Parenthood provides the following definition: “Gender identity is how we feel about and express our gender and gender roles—clothing, behavior, and personal appearance” (n.d.). These definitions, being simple, do not express the complexity of gender

identity. Notice that APA's definition requires a gender identity to be either male, female, or transgender. This definition does not include genderqueer people. OPM's definition does not recognize any identity beyond male or female, thus ruling out the genderqueer. Planned Parenthood's definition does leave room for identities beyond the binary. However it misses the possibility of fluidity of identity, part of being genderqueer. Plus Planned Parenthood's definition requires that a person *express* his or her gender.

Though these three notions of *gender identity* are obviously not a comprehensive list of all the possible definitions, it is a representative picture of how gender identity is perceived and understood, socially and culturally. Remember that these are the definitions that impact people in the workplace, at school, at play, with friends and family, at their therapist's office, and so on. These too-simplistic understandings of gender identity make it difficult for the binary folks to conceptualize much of anything beyond or outside the binary.

So before we can start to understand the word *genderqueer*, we must find a better definition of *gender identity*. To do so, let us look at identity from a more sociological and communicative standpoint. The following definition of *gender identity* delves a little bit deeper into the intricacies and nuances of labeling:

...[gender identity is] a sense of self associated with cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. Gender identity is not so much acted out as subjectively experienced. It is the psychological internalization of masculine or feminine traits. Gender identity arises out of a complex process of interaction between self and others. (*The Collins Dictionary of Sociology* online, 2006)

At least this definition of *gender identity*, while not ideal, does remind us that the sense of self must be differentiated from the traditional, cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity.

An ideal definition would posit masculinity and femininity not as ends of a binary, but as subjective pools of traits that can be experienced and internalized. A successful definition would highlight the critical interactions between the self, others, culture, and the world.

GENDERQUEER: THREE DEFINITION TYPES

After achieving a better definition for *gender identity*, it is easier to define *genderqueer*. What is genderqueer? Who is genderqueer? Is genderqueer a gender identity or the complete lack thereof? All of these questions and more can be answered by having a good definition of the term *genderqueer*.

As previously mentioned, the word *genderqueer* defies most of the restrictions of gender identity. Nevertheless, a genderqueer identity is commonly categorized, labeled, and understood as a gender identity. It is accurate to think of it as an identity. It is a way of expressing one's self, a way of understanding one's self, and a way of interacting with one's self and the world.

There are three distinct ways to look at the term *genderqueer*.

1. *As outside the binary.* To many people, the world is divided into the masculine and feminine. Being genderqueer puts a person outside this tradition and outside the gender binary.

2. *As trait amalgamation (or not).* Genderqueer can be a combination of masculine and feminine, or opting for neither. Genderqueerness is a blend of masculine and feminine traits into one, distinct combination. Or it can be the rejection of masculine and feminine traits altogether. This way of looking at the identity focuses on the way masculinity and femininity are traditionally defined, and what an amalgamation of those traditionally defined traits contribute to a person's genderqueerness.

3. *As fluid and flexible.* Genderqueer people are capable of changing. Genderqueerness

can lack definition and, instead, embrace a fluidity.

To better understand these three ways of looking at a genderqueer identity, let us review each with examples. Keep in mind these questions: How do the three ways of considering the term *genderqueer* complement each other? How do they clash with each other? How can they work together to provide a more cogent conceptualization of what it means to be genderqueer?

1. Outside the Binary

Genderqueerness does not exist—it cannot exist—within the male/female or masculine/feminine dichotomy. What it means to be outside the binary is well described by the following example from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. It makes reference to a third type of identity, that isn't male or female, or the result of crossing from one to the other.

Genderqueer: A person who blurs, rejects, or otherwise transgresses gender norms; also used as a term for someone who rejects the two-gender system. Terms used similarly include gender bender, bi-gender, beyond binary, third gender, gender fluid (moving freely between genders), gender outlaw, pan gender...Some genderqueer people don't identify as male or female, and don't consider themselves trans, either, because they're not crossing from one to another but are existing in a third place altogether. (*Our Bodies Ourselves*.)

Another illustration is this excerpt from *The Advocate*, a national gay and lesbian magazine. Notice that this example alludes to fluidity and to a lack of concrete definition, using language such as “blending and blurring.”

If bisexuals defy the notion that a person can be attracted to only one gender, gender-queers explode the concept that a

person has to be one gender. “People who identify as gender-queer,” says Lydia Sauss, a trainer at the California STD/HIV Prevention Training Center, “are blending and blurring and living outside of gender dichotomies.” (Rochman, 2006, p. 44)

2. Trait Amalgamation (or not)

The second way of looking at genderqueer identity is as an amalgamation of male and female traits (or as a rejection of both). Of course grasping this concept requires an understanding of what is masculine and feminine. One must also understand how those different classifications have impacted the characterization of the individual.

The *North American Lexicon of Transgender Terms* gives a two-part definition of *genderqueer*: “1. A group of people who reject heteronormativity, the traditional two-gender role system. 2. The feeling of being a little of both genders or no gender at all” (Usher, 2006). Note that the second part of this definition says that genderqueerness involves either selecting and claiming certain traditionally understood gender traits, or throwing out that system altogether. Similarly, *The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society* (2009) and *The Handbook of Social Justice in Education* (2009) also define *genderqueer* as an identity composed of an amalgamation of traits (or lack thereof):

[A term] first widely used in the late 1990s, genderqueer is an identity adopted by individuals who characterize themselves as neither female nor male, as both, or as somewhere in between. (O’Brien, 2009, p. 370)

A person who identifies as a gender other than “man” or “woman”; or someone who identifies as neither, both, or some combination thereof. (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009, p. 299)

These two definitions use very similar language, such as “neither female nor male, as

both, or as somewhere in between” and “neither, both, or some combination thereof.” In terms of daily life, genderqueer people decide what aspects of being male or female fit within their identity and sense of self. They may feel partly male, partly female, any combination of the two, or dismissive of the cultural traits of either.

3. As Fluid and Flexible

A third way to look at genderqueer identity is as fluid and flexible.

Genderqueer: The term genderqueer represents a blurring of the lines around both gender identity and sexual orientation. Genderqueer people embrace a fluidity of gender expression and sexual orientation. (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 6).

Genderqueer is a term that is growing in usage, representing a blurring of the lines surrounding society’s rigid views of both gender identity and sexual orientation. Genderqueer people embrace a fluidity of gender expression that is not limiting. (Gender Diversity, n.d.)

Genderqueer people often feel that their identity does not fit within traditional boundaries or restrictions. As the definitions just shown imply, such people seek absolute freedom from the constraints of gender identities that rely on the gender binary.

A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION

As mentioned, there are three distinct ways that a genderqueer identity is recognized: it is outside the binary, it is comprised of trait amalgamation or rejection, and it has fluidity. What would an accurate and complete definition including these three factors look like? The following definition meets all of the aforementioned criteria while staying clear and concise.

Genderqueer: A person who has a gender identity that exists outside or beyond the gender binary by embracing a fluidity of gender that is not limiting. Someone who identifies as genderqueer may identify as neither male nor female; both; a combination of the two; or somewhere in between.

DISCUSSION

Why is it necessary to accurately define *genderqueer*? It is essential because definitions are crucial to human understanding; in fact, defining words, concepts, feelings, and relationships is one of the most fundamental ways humans create meaning. Sky Marsen, in her article on the role of meaning in human thinking, asserts that “classifying an object according to selected criteria, attaching value to it, and judging its aesthetic appeal, are all mental operations that, in one way or another, give meaning to the phenomenal world” (2008, p. 45). On one hand, definitions are hardly perfect or imperturbable. But on the other hand, definitions are an integral part of the process by which people discern a meaning for life. Society relies on definitions; such classifications help shape the interactions people have with others. Definitions also aid us in understanding ourselves.

A comprehensive definition may help people who feel that their identity matches those characteristics. A definition provides a language with which they can more holistically understand their sense of self and their relationship with the world. A definition is helpful because human perceptions are directly influenced and reinforced by language. Furthermore, accurate classifications help because human thought is largely “embodied.” As cognitive linguist George Lakoff (b. 1941) explains, “The structures used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it” (1987, p. xiv). Thought that is beyond being embodied is creative, meaning that concepts that go beyond bodily experience are structured in the

mind through metaphor, metonymy, and imaginative capacity to form less literal, abstract thoughts (p. xiv).

Perhaps people who do not identify as genderqueer can also benefit from a comprehensive definition of the term. An inclusive definition can aid in their imaginative process, helping them to conceptualize an identity that is very different from their own. A strong definition of *genderqueer* gives everyone more than metaphor and mental imagery with which to conceptualize the identity. The meaning-making function of this definition helps to remove some of the abstractness of the term by construing reality through words.

Having a word for the identity makes the identity easier to grasp. For a moment, consider the term within the system of linguistic relativity. There are three facets to the term’s linguistic relativity. First, recognizing that there is an idea of genderqueerness that encompasses all of what it means (and could mean) to be genderqueer creates a need for a word in order to label and refer to the idea. Second, the conceptualization of genderqueerness is determined by the existence of the term *genderqueer* and that term having a conclusive definition. Third, having a definition for the word *genderqueer* validates the term.

What is so important about validation? Having a valid term for what it means to be genderqueer ensures that genderqueerness becomes something that everyone can conceptualize (one identity in the realm of possibilities of identities). Therefore, validating the term authenticates the identity and the idea of genderqueerness. Authenticating the identity, in turn, helps society to validate individuals who feel they are genderqueer. Once society knows genderqueer people exist, society can begin to understand how this group identifies and experiences the world. If nothing else, having a conception of genderqueerness (further legitimized by a solid, unambiguous definition) means validating a group of people who are often marginalized, dismissed, and rejected by society. Ideologically, a “validation through definition” could be the first step toward tolerance and acceptance for genderqueer people.

When society has a clear definition of genderqueer, there may be less anxiety about this group. Psychologist Wallace Wilkins says that “we create our own fears by projecting our own frightful images, anticipations, beliefs, and thoughts onto the blank screen of the unknown” (1998, p. 60). Some of society has projected bizarre, generally inaccurate stereotypical images onto the “blank screen” of the genderqueer identity. For example, society might think that genderqueer individuals are gay, sexually deviant, drug abusers, or even prostitutes. Any identity that exists beyond the widely-held binaries can be difficult to understand because of the inherently pervasive nature of binaries. A clear definition provides the groundwork for society to drop these stereotypes. This definition changes the blank screen to a screen painted with the reality of individuals who live beyond the binary. Once the screen begins to be taken up by realities and experiences (rather than by fears, stereotypes, and anticipations), real people start to appear on the screen. Could a good definition lead to an appreciation of each other? At the least, having a succinct definition could lead to a more humanistic way to think about a family member, work colleague, or a classmate.

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