Beyond the Binary: A Reflective Essay on Language, Gender, and Socialization

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We humans have spent countless millennia differentiating ourselves from each other according to our biological differences. Our biological sex, assigned to us at birth, is expected to inform our gender identity growing up; it effectively affirms itself to be one of many social factors that directly influence the course of our lives (Macionis, 2018). Between the concepts of sex and gender, I have observed that the two have long been regarded as synonymous by many, so much so that the difference between the two is often not common knowledge. These terms, thus, are often used interchangeably in countless contexts, despite their significant differences in meaning.

Gender is a social construct different from one's biological sex, and the latter is not necessarily indicative of the former (Planned Parenthood, n.d.). The two shape a person's perception of themselves and of the people around them, and one of the factors that allow for this is the very language that the individual uses. With this, we are reminded that language exists not in a vacuum. Its use—and, in some cases, its very structure—is closely intertwined with innumerable social factors that determine the lives of the people who speak it. One could say that language is an extension of oneself and a dynamic medium for self-expression, but it is also through language that discrimination among genders and the reinforcement of detrimental stereotypes become possible. Depending on its use, it possesses a capacity to either be a powerful tool or a weapon. While it is mainly seen as an avenue for expression and communication, it is also within language itself that gender-related problems are embedded.

As someone who identifies as non-binary, our current society's perception of gender (and its prescription of how it ought to be) affects how I view and present myself, whether I want it to or not. My relationship with gender is a complicated one; I do not see my gender as a perfect alignment with one binary or the other, but rather a mark within a spectrum that fluctuates over time. I deviate from what is expected of me by simply existing; what I consider to be just one facet of myself is made political, and to simply be is unheard of. Ample conscious calculation is involved in choosing how I conduct myself around others, and I imagine that this may also be the case for many Filipino LGBTQ+ individuals.

Oftentimes, I find myself unconsciously subscribing to how I am expected to act, speak, and look like to fit in better, and to explain which rules or norms are "right" for me warrants an entirely different conversation of its own. It is a complex situation. I do

not feel that I am a woman, and yet it is impossible to detach myself from this identity. To have one's sex assigned as female at birth is to deal with the consequences, scripts, and socialization involved with being a woman, and I have long acknowledged that I am perceived as female regardless of how I feel about it, and I am thus expected to act as such.

As with everything else, everyone's experiences with gender are different and unique to them. The more common case is that there are people whose gender identity do align with their assigned sex and are comfortable with identifying as such. The status quo works for them, and I would understand if they show no interest or motivation in changing it any further. However, by aligning the cisgender heterosexual identity with the definition of what is normal and acceptable, we not only discriminate those who fail to fit into this interpretation of gender, but also discourage people from further examining their own gender identity and sexuality (Reinhard & Olson, 2017). This further suppresses people from assessing for themselves if this standard works for them. In this way, this concept of gender and the expected roles attached to it are held and maintained over time, further perpetuating the problem—one that we have been combatting for decades—right into the succeeding generations.

As I perceive gender to be a social construct, I hold some belief that we may only think the way we do about gender because this is how we have been socialized to view it growing up. Shaping one's views on gender and identity is a lifelong process of sifting through what is deemed appropriate or unacceptable by society (Lindsey, 2015), and to resist these socializations and the current norms is to call for an active and consistent reexamination of our own assumptions and biases.

Perhaps the reason we cling onto gender norms and the characteristics and performances associated with certain genders is because we find value in predictability. Knowing a person's sex gives us an idea of how this person may act, look, or what they may be like; this makes it easier to assume an individual's gender identity based on our perception of their appearance and actions, allowing us to recall and reuse scripts that we may have picked up from previous interactions (Bem, 1981). This way, it is easier to keep track of how to refer to people and what one might expect from interacting with them.

To put gender under a gray area—to view it beyond the binary—demands for a reconstruction of conceptualizations, assumptions, expectations, and the countless other aspects involved with how we live and communicate with each other. If we find ourselves adamant with concerning ourselves with this kind of change, what we need to internalize is the fact that everyone has a gender identity, and that each and every one of us has a preferred way of communicating who they are to other people (whatever this may be). In refusing to acknowledge this, we restrict ourselves and those around us from such options.

I believe that in the process of normalizing unconventional definitions of gender and making conscious efforts to assimilate inclusivity in our speech, we open gateways for people into exploring their own gender identities and getting to know themselves better. It is through this that they might also be able to develop a capacity for empathy and understanding for people who are different from them (Foresman, 2016; Ku et al.,

2010), allowing for progress in our struggle for renegotiating and reconstructing our current dominant concepts of gender.

The concept of gender is one so complex and diverse that it is even perceived differently across various cultures, languages, and groups of people (Macionis, 2018). To shape it into a single, definite way of seeing things proves itself to be a near impossible feat. Instead, we ought to head toward the opposite direction of expanding our definitions and updating our preconceptions of it. It is also important to properly educate the upcoming generations regarding this matter, as these conceptualizations will remain unless we do something to change it. The role of language, literature, and socialization in this regard is a major one, as to demand better views on gender is to demand for an extreme change for many aspects of life, starting with language. I find comfort in thinking of gender as something that is more malleable (like clay) than solid (like concrete). It is a social construct, a spectrum, and is not set in stone. The views on it can be reconstructed and reconceptualized. Same is the case for language.

Language greatly influences how we think, how we converse, and how we view the world around us. It is known to shift and change constantly and is almost never static. Found at the core of its purpose are communication and expression, and it evolves according to what the speakers need from it. Although many modern-day languages remain to be highly gendered, this insinuates possible and inevitable change. The semantics of terms associated with gender have and will continue to change over time, and the meaning we associate with it shapes the relationship between the perception and attitudes towards gender, and vice versa.

It goes without saying that we still have a long way to go from the ideal we have illustrated. However, that discourse like this has been ongoing, that there has been a shift into the acceptance of nontraditional and nonheteronormative identities, that there are better attitudes in recent times toward the identities of LGBTQ+ people, that we now have individuals openly defying gender norms and stereotypes solidified by countless of years of patterns and socialization, that there are people like me who are able to explore and express our truth, shows us that we are doing progress.

One's role in society has always been associated with their sex and gender. Perhaps this notion will never be fully erased even in the upcoming generations, but still, I persist in remaining optimistic. I persist in advocating for a much more progressive and accepting society, one that has successfully resisted (rather than reaffirm) our current conception of what gender is and what it ought to be.

Acknowledgments

me nothing but acceptance and encouragement amidst the toughest of times.

Lastly, I give my thanks to you, dear reader, for your time. May you find the courage to challenge how you are told to view yourself and the world around you.

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