

## CATEGORIZATION IN RELATION TO SEXUAL IDENTITY

**Susanne Freimüller**

In everyday life we tend to think and live in binaries, especially when it comes to describe our sexual identity. There is either the possibility of being “normal” and “heterosexual”, or of being “queer”. In conservative minds, sexual identities seem to be clearly reduced to this binary and this is where the matter of categorization comes in.

In this work, I want to draw a comparison between the idea of categorization and the idea of a fluid identity, an identity that is able to change and constantly in progress. Moreover, I want to focus on some of the problems that the process of categorization can create, especially with regard to the “Masculine Continuum” and the tensions between butches and Female-to-Males.

Stuart Hall suggests a conception of identity which he calls the “post-modern subject”. This perception of identity suggests that identity is not fixed, essential or permanent – instead it is fluid and able to change from time to time. “Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us.” (Hall, Stuart. 1996.) We adopt different identities or different positions during life, which are not “unified around a coherent self”. (Hall. 1996.) Therefore, Hall suggests that there is no stable inner core which is unchangeable and fixed, there is more or less a fluidity of identities which we temporarily identify with.

But if there is the assumption that an identity consists of different subject positions, different categories that make up a subject, it also offers the question if we can be forced into certain subject positions. Althusser explains this through his “concept of interpellation”, which says that we are in fact “called” into subject positions and therefore not free to choose (Cf. Giles. 1999). Sexuality is a great part of everyone’s identity and so it also offers the question if it is fixed, stable and therefore possible to be categorized or if it is fluid and changeable.

Concerning sexual categories people tend to think in binaries, especially in the binary of either being “normal” and “heterosexual” or of being “queer”. David Halperin argues in his book *Saint Foucault*:

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative. (Sullivan. 2003:43.)

This again underlines the common opposition of being normal versus being queer. Also Michael Warner refers to queer as not just being a resistance to the norm, but states that “more importantly, it consists of protesting against the idea of normal behaviour”. (Sullivan. 2003:50.)

One problem is that if we refer to “queer” in the sense of being the opposite of “normality”, it again gets a category which is in addition also a very powerful one. The term “queer” also unifies, it ignores differences between lesbianism and gayness, between “women” or between transsexualism and cross-dressing, for example. Gloria Anzaldúa mentions the differences of class, race and age, which are also ignored when using the term “queer”.

Queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities and classes are shoved under. At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. But even when we seek shelter under it we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences. (Sullivan. 2003:44.)

So the broad category of being “queer” includes lots and lots of different sexual identities people adopt. As a consequence these identities suggest the idea that there are different territories and borders that can be crossed. People who are in-between maybe want to cross from one category or territory to another, which makes other people feel uncomfortable and therefore cause sexual political conflicts. As Gayle Rubin mentions:

In addition to the definitional and legal wars, there are less obvious forms of sexual political conflict which I call the territorial or border wars. The processes by which erotic minorities form communities and the forces that seek to inhibit them lead to struggles over the nature and boundaries of sexual zones. (Halberstam 1998:141.)

This is also the sense of border I am going to use here, border as a metaphor for the boundaries of sexual categories or territories. Another similar view of the idea of “border” and “border war” by Judith Halberstam is: “[...], the idea of border war sets up some notion of territories to be defended, ground to be held or lost, permeability to be defended against” (Halberstam 1998:163.)

There is a strong tension especially between lesbian and transgender masculinities, because the so-called “Masculine-Continuum” suggests categories that look somehow like this (Cf. Halberstam 1998: 151.) :

Androgyny ---- Soft Butch --- Butch ---- Stone Butch--- Transgender Butch --- FTM  
Not Masculine ----- Very  
Masculine

There are just small differences but a lot of overlappings concerning these categories and so it becomes quite easy to cross borders.

I believe that the confusing overlaps between some forms of transsexuality and some gender-deviant forms of lesbianism have created not only

definitional confusion for so-called medical experts but also a strange struggle between FTMs and lesbian butches who accuse each other of gender normativity. (Halberstam 1998:143.),

Overlappings are maybe one of the reasons that cause border wars, another may be the different perceptions of people:

Some lesbians seem to see FTMs as traitors to a “woman’s” movement who cross over and become the enemy. Some FTMs see lesbian feminism as a discourse that has demonized FTMs and their masculinity. Some butches consider FTMs to be butches who believe in anatomy, and some FTMs consider butches to be FTMs who are too afraid to make the “transition” from female to male. (Halberstam 1998:144.)

An obvious question is rather what it is that separates them, which is not easy to answer because there are no hard and fast rules for sexual categorization. It again gets difficult concerning the distinctions between transsexual and lesbian identities. One point of criticism is that many Female-to-Males do come out as lesbians before they come out as transsexuals, another one is that “many transgender men successfully identify as butch in a queer female community before they decide to transition”. (Halberstam 1998: 150.) So the distinctions between transsexual and lesbian identities might become a bit blurred, which makes it possible that a lot of people feel offended and perceive “territory-crossers” as the enemy.

More recently, some lesbians have voiced their opposition to FTM transsexuals and characterised them as traitors and as women who literally become the enemy. More insidiously, lesbians have tended to erase FTMs by claiming transsexual males as lesbians who lack access to a liberating lesbian discourse. (Halberstam 1998: 149.)

An example which shows how small the differences in-between the lesbian community are, is stated in the collection *Dagger: On Butch Women*, which focuses on an urban butch scene and therefore includes a chapter of interviews with Female-to-Males. In this particular chapter, the limits of lesbian identification are put into question. Billy, for example, speaks about the great problems pretransition transgender men have when they identify as lesbians. Billy remembers: “I’ve had this problem for ten years now with women being attracted to my boyishness and my masculinity, but once they get involved with me they tell me I’m too male” (Halberstam 1998: 154). Lots of Billy’s lovers get confused by his strong masculine part and think that he crosses the line because, for instance, he wants a real moustache and a real beard. “Billy’s experience testifies to the ways in which masculinity within some lesbian contexts presents a problem when it becomes too “real”, or when some imaginary line has been crossed between play and seriousness” (Halberstam 1998:154). This underlines the idea of lesbian masculinity as a “matter of degree”, where lines can easily get crossed and in consequence maybe upset other people.

Categorization involves two different processes: the process of being categorized by others, from the perspective of the outside-world and of being categorized by oneself. Often these perceptions contradict each other, like Mario Martino shows in

his autobiography *Emergence*. He presents the problem of “pretransition identification”, which means that he distinguishes himself from lesbians and from butches in particular. Before his transition Mario falls in love with Becky and he tells her: “You and I are not lesbians. We relate to each other as man to woman, woman to man” (Halberstam 1998: 154). But one day Becky comes home from work and asks Mario if he knows the term “butch” and in effect she wants to know the difference between Mario and a butch. Mario gives her a simple answer: “A butch is the masculine member of a lesbian team. That would make you the feminine member. But, Becky, honest-to-God, I don’t feel that we’re lesbians. I still maintain I should have been a male” (Halberstam 1998: 154). In truth, Mario feels absolutely offended and confused because he had never seen or referred to himself as a woman. “The word butch magnified itself before my eyes, Butch implied female – and I had never thought of myself as such” (Halberstam 1998: 154/155). So Mario’s experience shows that one’s perception often contradicts with the outside view of one’s identity. But how is it then possible to categorize? Can there be strict rules that say which category one belongs to, even if the inside perception of the person contradicts with the outside view?

A great problem is that many transsexuals do not have the possibility to cross borders, they live somewhere in-between two territories and can never be “at home”. “Some bodies are never at home, some bodies cannot simply cross from A to B, some bodies recognize and live with the inherent instability of identity” (Halberstam 1998: 164). Prosser mentions in *No Place like Home* his model of “home”, which symbolises “the place in which one finally settles into the comfort of one’s true and authentic gender” (Halberstam 1998: 163). Moreover, he underlines the problem of transsexuals who have to live in-between:

[...] such a move leaves the transsexual man with no place to go and leaves him languishing in the ‘uninhabitable space – the borderlands in between, where passing as either gender might prove quite a challenge’. (Halberstam 1998: 163.)

Halberstam also comments on this problem:

It is true that many transsexuals do transition to go somewhere, to be somewhere, and to leave geographies of ambiguity behind. However, many post-op MTFs are in-between because they cannot pass as women; many FTMs who pass fully clothed have bodies that are totally ambiguous; some transsexuals cannot afford all the surgeries necessary to full sex reassignment. (Halberstam 1998: 163/164)

People who are in-between try to pass in society, they try to look as normal and acceptable as possible. Therefore they try to avoid for example, typical clothes or looks for not being mistaken.

In some bulletins, transsexual men send each other tips on how to pass as a man, and many of these tips focus almost obsessively on the care that must be taken by the transsexual man not to look like a butch lesbian. Some tips tell guys to dress preppy as opposed to the standard jeans and leather jacket look of the butch; in other instances, transsexual men are warned against

certain haircuts (punk styles or crew cuts) that are supposedly popular among butches. These tips, obviously, steer the transsexual men away from transgression or alternative masculine styles and toward a conservative masculinity. (Halberstam 1998: 156.)

Crossing borders does not just have the result of disturbing some people, it has social and political consequences, especially when it comes to Female-to-Males. Halberstam mentions the same question concerning the effects of crossing borders: “If some female-born people now articulate clear desires to become men, what is the effect of their transitions on both male masculinity and on the category of butch?” (Halberstam 1998: 142). Nowadays, the technological availabilities of surgeries to reassign gender have made the option of gender transition available and especially for Male-to-Female transsexuals these surgical transitions have been embraced by an increasing number. But the discussions get much more complicated with surgeries of Female-to-Male transsexuals, who “access male privilege” (Cf. Halberstam 1998: 143). So, in conclusion, there is a great difference in-between the category of transsexuals, which means that the transition of Male-to-Females is more accepted than the transition of Female-to-Males and therefore “gender reassignment for FTMs does have social and political consequences” (Halberstam 1998: 143), as said before.

I have now pointed out some of the problems categorization creates, especially in relation to the categories unified under the term “Masculine Continuum”. I want again to stress that it gets easy to cross borders or to be in-between two categories and therefore not being accepted by the outside world. There are, of course, two different perceptions: at first the perception that it is necessary to categorize and secondly the perception that there is a fluidity of identities that cannot and need not be categorized. To conclude, my work I want to quote Gayle Rubin who says:

the border between these two modes of identification (this refers to the tensions between butches and Female-to-Males which she calls “frontier fears”) is permeable at least in part because ‘no system of classification can successfully catalogue or explain the infinite vagaries of human diversity. (Halberstam 1998: 172/173.)

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