

Contextualizing Gender
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Lecture - 33
Undoing Gender I

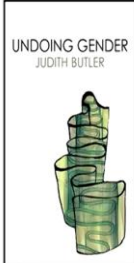
Good morning dear friends and welcome to this module. With this module, we begin a critical analysis of Butler's significant work 'Undoing Gender' which was published in 2004. We will be analyzing this critical work in two modules. In 'Undoing Gender', Butler critiques the norms surrounding gender and sexuality, and advocates for a more inclusive vision of gender.

While many of Butler's books are intended for a highly academic audience, 'Undoing Gender' reaches out to a much broader readership. She questions various assumptions prevalent in the society regarding gender and scrutinizes how marginalized populations attempt to counter these norms.


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Undoing Gender

- Judith Butler's critical work *Undoing Gender* was published in 2004.
- Butler states that the purpose of the book is to connect "problematics of gender and sexuality to the tasks of persistence and survival" (Butler, 2004, p.4).
- She discusses issues affecting a number of communities; including the lesbian/gay, transgendered, transsexual, and intersex.
- This book is a collection of essays on individual topics which describe the experience of 'becoming undone' in good, as well as, bad ways.



Source: Routledge, 2004.




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Butler states that the purpose of the book is to connect problematics of gender and sexuality to the tasks of persistence and survival. She has discussed issues affecting a number of communities including the lesbian gay, transgender, transsexual and intersex. The book is a collection of essays on individual topics which describe the experience of becoming undone in good as well as in bad ways.

The cover picture of *Undoing Gender* is inspired by Butler's finding that the progress towards gender equality has been a zigzag rather than a straight line. So, she acknowledges the positive developments and also takes a critical stand against some of the advances in the context of gender. Throughout the book Butler discusses some of the misguided attempts to regulate gender, and how there are several forms of resistance to go beyond the binary gender categories of the past.

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- Contemporary queer theory separates sexuality from gender -- so there is no assumption that one's gender indicates one's engagement in a certain sexual practice.
- In *Undoing Gender*, Butler revisits her book *Gender Trouble* from 1990 and discusses what she sees differently now.
- As Atticus Schoch Zavaletta mentions, Judith Butler asks how we can undo the restrictive norms of gender and sexuality and considers the various ways in which we are all undone —by grief, gender, desire, and the Other.
- She also briefly investigates the topic of sex re-assignment by studying an account of an individual who underwent physical and psychological treatment for 'gender normalization'.



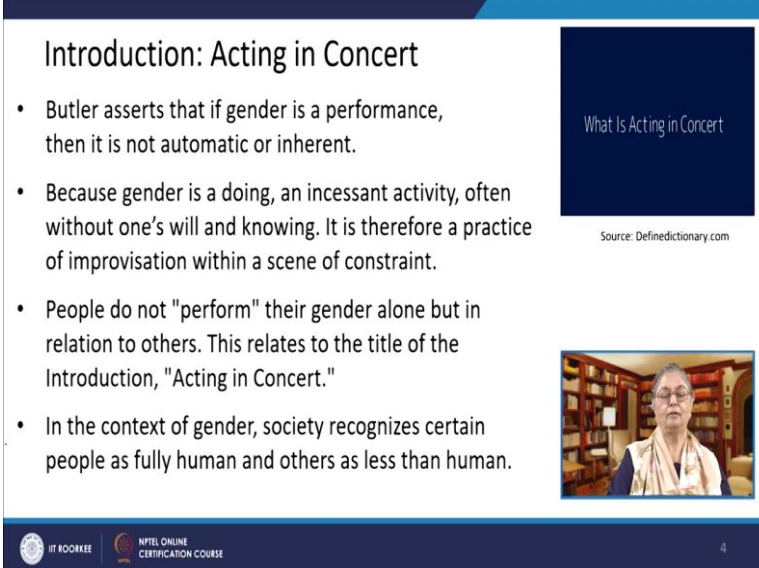
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Contemporary queer theory separates sexuality from gender. So, there is no assumption that one's gender indicates one's engagement in a certain sexual practice. In *Undoing Gender* Butler revisits her book 'Gender Trouble' from 1990s and discusses what she sees differently now. As Atticus Zavaletta has mentioned in a review, Judith Butler asks how we can undo the restrictive norms of gender and sexuality and considers various ways in which we are all undone by grief, by gender, by desire and the other.

Butler briefly investigates the topic of sex reassignment by studying an account of an individual who had to undergo physical and psychological treatment for what is more commonly known as gender normalization. Butler maintains that norms are necessary and yet must be exceeded in the name of the future of the humans. Perhaps, more overtly autobiographical than any previous books 'Undoing Gender' asks what makes a gender liveable.

The title is highly suggestive as through this title she also wants to suggest that a normative conception of gender can limit the understanding of one's personhood and undoing this normative restriction is something that she attempts to achieve through this work.

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Introduction: Acting in Concert

- Butler asserts that if gender is a performance, then it is not automatic or inherent.
- Because gender is a doing, an incessant activity, often without one's will and knowing. It is therefore a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.
- People do not "perform" their gender alone but in relation to others. This relates to the title of the Introduction, "Acting in Concert."
- In the context of gender, society recognizes certain people as fully human and others as less than human.

What Is Acting in Concert
Source: Definedictionary.com


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Butler asserts that if gender is a performance then it is neither automatic nor inherent, because gender is a doing an incessant activity often without one's will and knowing. It is, therefore, a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. People do not perform their gender alone, but in relation to others. This relates to the title of the introduction 'Acting in Concert'. In the context of gender, society recognizes certain people as fully human and others as somehow less than human. According to Butler, the social recognition becomes a site of power by which 'the human' is differentially produced.


A lack of recognition comprises some people's ability to live a full life and this relates to race, gender and other categories. Butler explores the concept of what is a livable life and the importance of recognition and belongingness in her later works.

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- Intersex people are coerced to choose a gender and are even, sometimes, made to undergo surgery to comply to gender binary or to feel belonged in a society.
- Similarly, transgendered people are marginalized. Lesbian/gay people are either denied marriage rights or are compelled to conform to heterosexual marriage norms.
- In Butler's opinion, sexuality is not automatically connected to gender.
- Being a certain gender does not guarantee that a person will exhibit a certain kind of sexual behavior.



Source: Geo tv



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Intersex people are coerced to choose a gender and are even sometimes made to undergo surgery to comply to gender binary or to feel belonged in a society. Similarly, transgendered people are marginalized. Lesbian or gay people are either denied marriage rights or are compelled to confirm to heterosexual marriage norms. In Butler's opinion, sexuality is not automatically connected to gender. Being a certain gender does not guarantee that a person will exhibit a certain kind of sexual behavior.

Butler endeavors to show that if a decade or two ago gender discrimination applied tacitly to women, it no longer serves as the exclusive framework for understanding its contemporary usage. Because for Butler gender now also means gender identity a particularly salient issue in the politics and theory of transgenderism and transsexuality.

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Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy

- In the first chapter of *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes about how society doesn't value all humans equally. Most democracies in the world guarantee rights of equality, but it is often limited to legal and constitutional status.
- She refers to the concept of anthropocentrism, which states that humans are the most valuable beings in the world.
- This approach will lead to questions of what constitutes a 'human life' and what does not. No essentialist notion of 'human' can be all-inclusive.
- Marginalized communities such as those that include intersex, transgender, transsexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, must continue to fight for bodily autonomy.




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In the first chapter of 'Undoing Gender', Butler writes about how society does not value all human beings equally. Most democracies in the world guarantee rights of equality, but it is often limited to legal and constitutional status. She refers to the concept of anthropocentrism which states that humans are the most valuable beings in the world.

This approach will lead to questions of what constitutes a human life and what does not. No essentialist notion of human can be all inclusive. Marginalized communities such as those that include intersex, transgender, transsexual, lesbian, gay and bisexual people must continue to fight for bodily autonomy. At the same time, it is important to note that there are limits to how much autonomy an individual can have because there is a public aspect to an individual's body and being.

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- Butler says that, “sexuality does not follow from gender in the sense that what gender you are determines what kind of sexuality you will have” (p. 16).
- Hence sexuality becomes open to a number of social articulations that do not always imply binding relations or ties. Debates on gay marriage involve a rethinking of both the social and psychic landscapes of kinship structures.
- Butler suggests that marriage and same-sex partnerships should be options for people who aren't heterosexual; but these options should not be held up as an ideal.




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Butler suggests that marriage and same sex partnerships should be options for people who are not heterosexual, but these options should not be held up as an ideal. For Butler, same sex marriage should not become a model or a necessity for sexual legitimacy as this will further create more constraints on the sociality of the body.

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- Sexual minorities experience grief on a number of fronts, from losing loved ones to AIDs to violent attacks on members of marginalized communities.
- She believes that the person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief system that the society upholds -- that a sense of the world will be lost if an uncategorizable being is permitted to live in the world.
- Butler wonders if humans can grieve collectively and lean on each other, rather than turning to violence.
- She says that the struggle for realization of certain values which are democratic and non-violent is precisely what is needed for normalizing gender differences.




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Sexual minorities experience grief on a number of fronts from losing loved ones to diseases like AIDS to violent attacks on members of their marginalized communities. Butler believes that the person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief system that the society upholds - that a sense of the world will be lost if an uncategorizable being is permitted to live in this world.


Butler wonders if humans can grieve collectively and lean on each other rather than turning to violence. She says that the struggle for realization of certain values which are democratic and non-violent is precisely what is needed for normalizing gender differences. After 2005, Butler dedicates a considerable amount of work towards understanding resistance and non violence in her critical oeuvre.

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- She says,
 - Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way in which the human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, the way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another. (Butler, 2004, p. 22)



Source: Coursera.org




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This is reflected in this quote where Butler says that “violence is surely a touch of the worst order”. And she also suggests that the will in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another has to be countered. Therefore, when sexual minorities speak of sexual rights they are not merely speaking of their individual desires, but they are also speaking of the need for legal protections against violence.

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Gender Regulations

- In the second chapter, Butler looks at regulations, laws and policies that constitute legal instruments through which persons are made ‘regular’
- Regulations in the context of gender can be “legal, military, psychiatric and a host of others” (p. 40).
- Butler ask questions on how such regulations are imposed and how they have become incorporated and lived by the subjects.
- She refers to Foucauldian scholarship to highlight that regulatory power acts upon a pre-existing subject. It “shapes and forms the subject” (p.40).



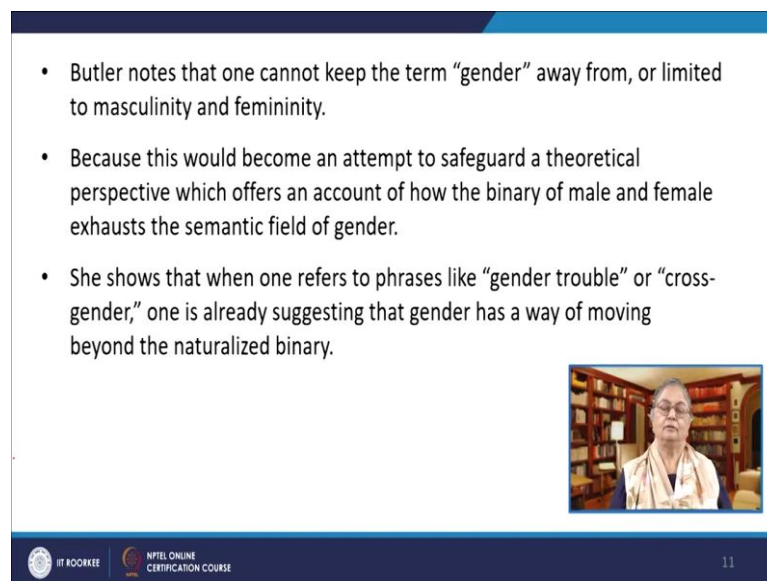
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gender can be legal, military, psychiatric and a host of others. Butler asks questions on how such regulations are imposed and how they have become incorporated and lived by the subjects. She refers to Foucauldian scholarship to highlight that regulatory power acts upon a pre-existing subject. It shapes and forms the subject.

In a regulated society, Butler finds that gender can become a mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized. Inspired by Foucault's poststructuralist approaches Butler notes that gender can also become the apparatus by which such regulations are deconstructed and denaturalized.

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- Butler notes that one cannot keep the term “gender” away from, or limited to masculinity and femininity.
- Because this would become an attempt to safeguard a theoretical perspective which offers an account of how the binary of male and female exhausts the semantic field of gender.
- She shows that when one refers to phrases like “gender trouble” or “cross-gender,” one is already suggesting that gender has a way of moving beyond the naturalized binary.


Butler notes that one cannot keep the term gender away from or limited to masculinity and femininity, because this would become an attempt to safeguard a theoretical perspective which offers an account of how the binary of male and female exhausts the semantic field of gender. She shows that when one refers to phrases like “gender trouble” or “cross gender”, one is already suggesting that gender has a way of moving beyond the naturalized binary.

Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the heterosexual binary performs a regulatory operation of power and Butler believes that there are ways to escape this hegemonic instance.

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Gender 'Norms'

- According to Butler, “the field of reality produced by gender norms constitutes the surface appearance of gender in its idealized dimensions” (p. 52).
- In other words, the norm is actively conferring reality only by virtue of its repeated power to confer authenticity.
- Such ideals are historically formed and reproduced in society. They are invoked and cited by bodily practices.
- These bodily practices also have the capacity to alter the norms in the course of their citation.



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According to Butler, and I quote “the field of reality produced by gender norms constitutes the surface appearance of gender in its idealized dimensions” unquote. In other words, the norm is actively conferring reality only by virtue of its repeated power to confer authenticity. Such ideals are historically formed and reproduced in society. They are invoked and cited by bodily practices.

These bodily practices also have the capacity to alter the norms in the course of their citation to further elucidate this idea Butler reflects on the views of American feminist scholar Catharine Mackinnon, to discuss the codes that sexual harassment tend to assume.


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On Sexual Harassment

- Following the reasoning of MacKinnon in her work *Feminism Unmodified* published in 1987, harassment consists of a systematic sexual subordination of women at the workspace.
- This means that men are generally positioned as the harasser and women as the harassed.
- These regulations, which are meant for constraining sexually demeaning behavior, also contain within them tacit 'norms' of gender.
- "Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women" (MacKinnon, 1987, pp. 6-7).



Catherin MacKinnon.
Source: Curie Kim, The Dartmouth Inc.



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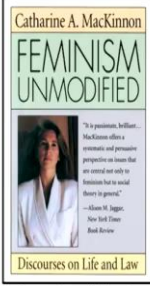
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If we follow the reasoning of Mackinnon in her famous work 'Feminism Unmodified' which was published in 1987 and became immediately popular in academic circles. Harassment consist of a systematic sexual subordination of women at the workplace. This means that men are generally positioned as the harasser and women as the harassed. These regulations which are meant for constraining sexually demeaning behavior also contain within them tacit 'norms' of gender.


"Gender emerges as Mackinnon has commented as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women". For Mackinnon, the hierarchical structure of heterosexuality in which men are understood to subordinate women is what produces gender misconceptions in culture.

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- Butler demands for a broader approach than MacKinnon's understanding of heterosexual subordination.
- She notes that MacKinnon's approach reduces gender to sexuality and offers no insight into non-heterosexual relations, like the possibility of same-sex sexual harassment.
- In contemporary queer theory, one does not presuppose sexuality to a given gender. Queer theory seeks to separate sexuality from gender.
- Butler argues that "gender itself is internally unstable" (p. 54).



Source: Harvard University Press



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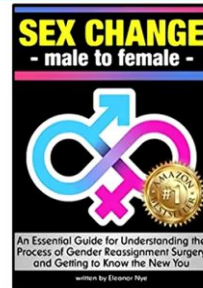
Butler demands for a broader approach than Mackinnon's understanding of heterosexual subordination. She notes that Mackinnon's approach reduces gender to sexuality and offers no insight into non-heterosexual relations like the possibility of same sex sexual harassment. In contemporary queer theory, one does not presuppose sexuality to a given gender. Queer theory seeks to separate sexuality from gender.

Butler argues that gender itself is internally unstable. In this context, Butler gives the example of how transgendered people are the evidence for the breakdown of any lines of causative determination between sexuality and gender. In the context of regulatory gender norms Butler discusses the case of surgical correction for intersexed children.

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Gender Correction Surgery

- Children born with irregular primary sexual characteristics are sometimes “corrected”, in order to enable them to have a better fit, or to make them feel more comfortable.
- Corrective surgery is sometimes performed with parental support and in the name of achieving normality.
- Butler argues that the physical and psychic costs of the surgery has proven to be enormous. For her, these persons “have been submitted to the knife of the norm” (p. 53).



Source: Eleanor Nye, 2016.



Children who are born with irregular primary sexual characteristics are sometimes so to say “corrected” in order to enable them to have a better fit or to make them feel more comfortable in the society. Corrective surgery is sometimes performed with parental support and often in the name of achieving normality. Butler argues that the physical and psychic costs of the surgery has proven to be enormous. For her, these persons “have been submitted to the knife of the norm.”

The bodies produced through such a regulatory enforcement of gender are, according to Butler, “bodies in pain”, they bear the marks of violence and suffering throughout their lifetime.

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Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality

- In chapter 3 of *Undoing Gender*, Butler expresses the idea that justice is not just connected to how people are treated in a society. It is also connected to social norms and whether or not people are accepted as fully human.
- It is concerned with consequential decisions about what a person is and what social norms must be honored for personhood.
- Butler asks, “What it is to live, breathe, attempt to love; neither as fully negated nor as fully acknowledged as being” (p. 58).



In chapter 3 of *Undoing Gender*, Butler expresses the idea that justice is not just connected to how people are treated in a society. It is also connected to social norms and whether or not people are accepted fully as human beings. It is concerned with consequential decisions about what a person is and what social norms must be honored for personhood.

Butler asks and I quote “what it is to live, breathe, attempt to love; neither as fully negated nor as fully acknowledged as being” unquote. This relationship between intelligibility and being human carries a certain theoretical urgency. The criterion by which we judge a person as a gendered being justly or unjustly governs the recognizability of the human.


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The Joan/John Case

- Butler discusses the instance of David Reimer whose situation was famously referred to as the “Joan/John case.”
- David was born with XY chromosomes (male) and at the age of eight months, his sexual organ was accidentally burned and severed in the course of a subsequent surgery. A year later, the parents of the baby boy were advised a to transition him to be a girl.
- The psychologist John Money oversaw the sex reassignment procedure. The baby was renamed from David to Brenda.


JOHN/JOAN CASE

- Bruce Thiessen/Brenda Thiessen/David Reimer
- Dr. John Money
 - Born a genetic XY male
 - Reassigned in infancy because of damage to phallus
 - Re-Reassignment



David Reimer - August 22, 1959 - May 1, 2006

Source: Chelsea Azevedo



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Butler discusses what popularly came to be known as the “Joan/John case.” David Reimer was born with XY chromosomes (male) and at the age of 8 months his sexual organ was accidentally burnt and severed in the course of a subsequent surgery. A year later the parents of the baby boy were advised to transition him to be a girl. The psychologist John Money oversaw the sex reassignment procedure.

The baby was renamed from David to Brenda. The parents were convinced that if the child underwent this transition surgery to become a girl, the child can socialize develop normally and can also adapt perfectly to the new gender. On the insistence of the medical

professionals and due to the pressures expected from the society the parents also agreed for the surgery.


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- At the ages of 8 and 9, Brenda started showing signs of a boy and underwent traumatic experiences at school.
- Doctors suggested dubious psychiatric treatment and medical supplication of estrogen; none of which worked.
- A very frightened and disoriented human was the result.
- A different set of medical professionals and psychiatrists intervened in the case, and eventually considered the whole procedure as a mistake.

At the age of 8 and 9, however, Brenda started showing signs of a boy and underwent traumatic experiences at school. Doctors suggested if I can say dubious psychiatric treatment and medical supplication of estrogen and none of it worked. What resulted was a very frightened and disoriented human being. A different set of medical professionals and psychiatrists intervened in the case and eventually considered the whole procedure as a mistake.

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- The new set of psychiatrists and doctors offered her the choice of changing paths, which she accepted. She started living as a boy, named David Reimer, at the age of fourteen.
- Suffering from extreme depression, David committed suicide at the age of 38.
- Butler vehemently argues that surgery performed on intersex children to look "normal" may leave them mutilated and scarred.
- She says that, "the norms governing what is a worthy, recognizable and sustainable human life did not support his life. Life for him was always a wager and a risk" (p. 75).




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The new set of psychiatrists and doctors offered her the choice of changing paths which she accepted and she started living as a boy named David Reimer at the age of fourteen. Suffering from extreme depression, David committed suicide at the age of 38. Butler vehemently argues that surgery performed on intersex children to look normal may leave them mutilated and scarred.

She says that "the norms governing what is a worthy recognizable and sustainable human life did not support his life. Life for him was always a wager and a risk." At later stage of his life Reimer decided to go public with his story to raise awareness and to help discourage similar medical practices.

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2000

David Reimer's Interview

- David Reimer and his mother were interviewed by Oprah Winfrey in 2000. Before this interview, he remained anonymous for public and media.
- The interview shows how traumatized his childhood was.

[David Reimer's Interview at The Oprah Winfrey Show \[YouTube Channel: OWN\]](#)

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Reimer and his mother were interviewed in 2000 by Oprah Winfrey. Before this interview took place, Reimer had remained anonymous for public and also for the media; this interview showcases how traumatized his childhood was.

“For years this case was called the medical triumph, but in truth the case was a failure devastating the lives of just about everybody involved.

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This is David who has remained anonymous until now only known in the medical journals as John Joan. And this is Janet Reimer, David's mother who made the agonizing

decision to change the sex of her son and to raise him as a girl. And what you all at home did not see during the taping of that piece we could tell Janet you are you know moved and probably disturbed by. What you are saying and David you comfort her.

It is a ... she is hurting right now. Mothers all over the world are all alike there is guilt it is darned if you do and darned if you do not.

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[David Reimer's Interview at The Oprah Winfrey Show | YouTube Channel: OWN |](#)

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Hm hm.

You know with things that were done were done out of compassion out of love for your child.

Hm hm.

And how can I hate my mother for that?

Hm Did you think he would hate you?

Yes I did.

Hm hm. Did you hate yourself?

Yes.

Hm hm.

So, you talk on the tape about the day you first put the dress on. Did you have agonizing feelings about it even when the doctor or were you of that generation or kind of person when the doctor said this would be best, did you all believe that it would be best?

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[David Reimer's Interview at The Oprah Winfrey Show | YouTube Channel: OWN |](#)

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Yes, I had complete faith in the doctor.

Hm hm.

I believed it would be best, but when he started to rip it off I started to have doubts.

Hm hm

And during the whole journey of trying to create a feminine being there were doubts along the way.

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But I could not afford to contemplate them because I could not afford to be wrong I could not have faced the alternative.

And the alternative being what that you had made this horrible mistake.

Yes.

Because then what could you do.

Right.

Since you since your earliest memories you never felt like you are a boy a girl.

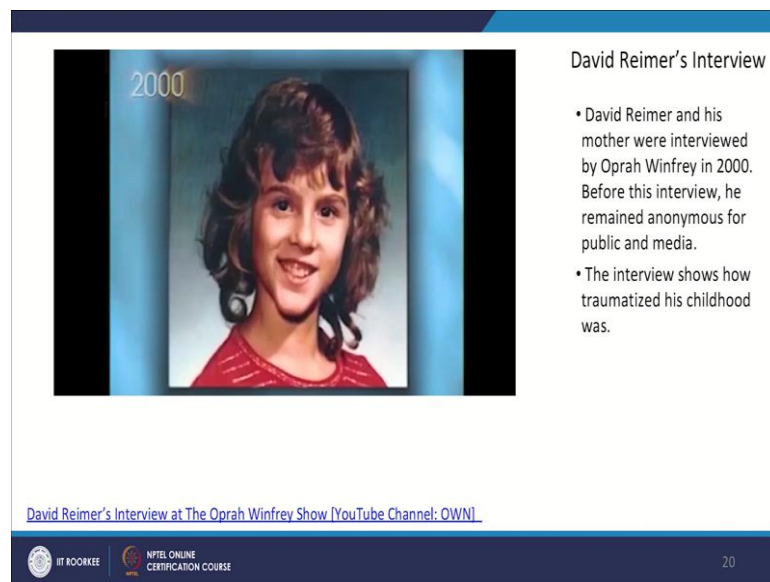
I never quite fit in well the girls would do their things with their barbies and things like that and that would not interest me.

Hm hm.

And things such as trucks and building forts and you know getting to the odd fist fight.

Hm hm.

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[David Reimer's Interview at The Oprah Winfrey Show \[YouTube Channel: OWN\]](#)

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Climbing trees that is the kind of stuff that I like, but it was unacceptable. So, I.

As a girl.


As a girl I had no place to fit in.”

David could not live according to the gender decided for him by the doctors. In this interview, David explains how when he was young, he could never fit in with other children. Although the doctors and the societal norms gave him the identity of a girl he would go back to his natural inclination of being a boy. Not only his childhood, but also his adult life and his family were deeply affected by such a terrible scientific experiment. This is why Butler argues against the act of forced sex reassignment surgery on children.


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Un-diagnosing Gender

- In chapter 4, Butler enters the debate on the removal of the diagnosis of *GID* or Gender Identity Disorder from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. This manual is published by the American Psychiatric Association.
 - It is the authoritative text which defines and classifies mental disorders in order to improve diagnoses, treatment, and research.
- Some medical professionals wanted to keep the *GID* diagnosis in the manual because insurance companies would not cover certain medical procedures for transitioning gender without a diagnosis.



Source: American Psychiatric Association



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In chapter four, Butler enters the debate on the removal of the diagnosis of *GID* or Gender Identity Disorder from the ‘Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders’. This manual is published by the American Psychiatric Association and it is considered to be the authoritative text which defines and classifies mental disorders in order to improve diagnosis, treatment and research.

Some medical professionals wanted to keep the *GID* diagnosis in the manual because insurance companies would not cover certain medical procedures for transitioning gender without a diagnosis. Gender Identity Disorder or *GID* refers to a condition in people who experience distress because of a significant incongruence between the gender with which they personally identify and the gender with which they were born.

Diagnosing a gender is a necessity for medical insurance. This technicality is a serious consideration in a country like the US, where medical costs are very high. So, getting covered by the medical insurance is the only way people who are seeking treatment will be able to afford it.

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- Furthermore, the LGBTQ community wants to keep the diagnosis because it offers certification for a condition and facilitates access to a variety of medical and technological means for transitioning.
- It is important, for these reasons, not to understand sex change surgery or hormonal usage as an 'elective surgery'.
- There are other consequences revolving around the diagnosis. Butler says that to be diagnosed with gender identity disorder (GID) is "to be found, in some way, to be ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal, and to suffer a certain stigmatization" as a consequence of the diagnosis. (p. 76)




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Furthermore, the LGBTQ community wants to keep the diagnosis as it offers certification for a condition and facilitates access to a variety of medical and technological means for transitioning. It is important for these reasons not to understand sex change surgery or hormonal usage as an 'elective surgery'. There are other consequences revolving around the diagnosis. Butler says that to be diagnosed with GID is "to be found in some way to be ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal and to suffer a certain stigmatization as a consequence of this diagnosis."

Such a stigma around the medical condition is what led many people arguing for an elimination of the diagnosis from the manual altogether.

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- The diagnosis subscribes to a form of psychological assessment which assumes that certain gender norms have not been properly embodied, and that an 'error' and a failure have taken place.
- Through a closer analysis of the definitions in the manual, Butler shows how a diagnosis of GID, in most cases, is equated with a diagnosis of homosexuality.
- This means that homosexuality is also implied as a gender disorder which Butler strongly condemns.
- Additionally, the diagnosis may cause emotional damage by injuring the self-esteem of a child who has no mental disorder.



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The diagnosis subscribes to a form of psychological assessment which assumes that certain gender norms have not been properly embodied and that an error and a failure have taken place. Through a closer analysis of the definitions in the manual, Butler shows how a diagnosis of GID in most cases is equated with a diagnosis of homosexuality. This means that homosexuality is also implied as a gender disorder which is strongly condemned by Butler. Additionally, the diagnosis may cause emotional damage by injuring the self esteem of a child who has no mental disorder.


Butler suggests that parents have to be supportive of what Dr. Richard Isay calls “gender atypical traits” that is early parental admonitions and interventions to curb or replace those traits which are considered as feminine in conventional societies, with more typically known male behaviors. This may be harmful to the child’s development particularly to the emotional resilience of a child.

As a result, some gay adults have lost their capacity to recognize and express a variety of effects and some attempt to avoid intimate relationships that evoke these and other repudiated feminine traits. Butler agrees with this view and notes that such an approach would help for a reconceptualization of gender attributes.


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Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?

- In chapter 5, Butler looks at how the definition of kinship is linked to marriage, and how it is often perceived in terms of heterosexual marriage.
- For Butler, kinship is not a fully autonomous sphere distinct from community and friendship, and regulations of the state.
- She says,
“Kinship is a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death” (p. 102).



Source: Getty Images



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In chapter 5, Butler looks at the question of kinship and ask whether it is always already heterosexual. She looks at how the definition of kinship is linked to marriage and how it is often perceived in terms of heterosexual marriage only. For Butler kinship is not a fully autonomous sphere, distinct from community and friendship and regulations of the state. And she says “kinship is a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death.”


Kinship practices emerge to address fundamental norms of human dependency which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support generational ties and death.

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- In recent sociology, conceptions of kinship have become disjoined from the assumption of marriage.
- Butler takes the example of African-American kinship. She refers to the new studies conducted by Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten.
- The enduring history of slavery of African-Americans shows the dispossession of kin relations.
- This set of kin relations offers a continuing legacy of “wounded kinship” within African-American life. It has been a site of state surveillance, normalizing pressures and political delegitimization.



Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten
Source: San Francisco State University



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In recent sociology conceptions of kinship have become disjoint from the assumption of marriage. Butler takes the example of African-American kinship and she refers to the new studies conducted by Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten. The enduring history of slavery of African-Americans shows the disposition of kin relations. This set of kin relations offers a continuing legacy of wounded kinship within African-American life.

It has been a site of state surveillance normalizing pressures and political delegitimization. Therefore, it is not possible to separate questions of kinship from property relations and frictions of blood line as well as national and racial interests by which these lines are sustained.

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- Butler studies the ethnographic descriptions of lesbian and gay kinship relations that emerge outside of heterosexually based family ties.
- The state may offer legitimacy to people who are not heterosexual and desire to marry as heterosexuals in the traditional form, but it will not sanction people who enact sexual agency outside of established norms.
- This lends itself to the formation of a hierarchy of legitimacy and illegitimacy among queer people.
- The petition for marriage rights seeks to gain state recognition for non-heterosexual unions.




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Butler studies the ethnographic descriptions of lesbian and gay kinship relations that emerge outside of heterosexually based family ties. The state may offer legitimacy to people who are not heterosexual and desire to marry as heterosexuals in the traditional form, but it will not sanction people who enact sexual agency outside of established norms.


This lends itself to the formation of hierarchy of legitimacy and illegitimacy among queer people. The petition for marriage rights seeks to gain state recognition for non heterosexual unions. The normalizing powers of the state are made especially clear when we analyze the quandaries about kinship and limits in marriage.

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- Butler says,
Marriage has also been separated from questions of kinship to the extent that gay marriage legislative proposals often exclude rights to adoption or reproductive technologies as one of the assumed entitlements of marriage.
(Butler, 2004, p. 103)
- She says that the sexual field is circumscribed in such a way that sexuality is already thought of in terms of marriage.



Source: Inter Press Service



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Butler says, and I quote this longish passage from her, “Marriage has also been separated from questions of kinship to the extent that gay marriage legislative proposals often exclude rights to adoption or reproductive technologies as one of the assumed entitlements of marriage.” She says that the sexual field is circumscribed in such a way that sexuality is already thought of in terms of heterosexual marriage.

The default marriage privilege extended to heterosexuals is not comprehensive of all unrepresentable or unthinkable sexual possibilities. When she was writing this book in 2004 countries like Germany and France only had included such rights like adoption in their proposals of gay marriage.

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- Butler also highlights some of the problematic concerns associated with state legitimization of gay marriage.

To be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there, and to find that one's public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation. The sphere of legitimate alliance is established through the producing and intensifying regions of illegitimacy. (Butler, 2004, p. 105)
- The same-sex marriage debate may transform the current understandings of gay and lesbian identity. The claim that marriage is about love and offers recognition of gay and lesbian love is vital to the pro-same-sex marriage position.




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Butler also highlights some of the problematic concerns associated with the state legitimization of gay marriage. And she says that to be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there and to find that one's public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation. This fear of legitimate alliance is established through the producing and intensifying regions of illegitimacy.

The same-sex marriage debate may transform the current understandings of gay and lesbian identity. The claim that marriage is about love and offers recognition of gay and lesbian love is vital to the pro same-sex marriage position. Michel Foucault's insistence on the importance of love friendship and affection explains perhaps why same sex marriage has become so central to lesbian and gay politics. Butler shows that a fundamental sense of occlusion is exercised by the state while establishing the discourse of legitimacy.

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- It can be said, to conclude, that Butler wonders why marriage or domestic partnership is the only way to allocate things like health care benefits.
- She believes that there should be ways of organizing health care entitlements in such a way that everyone, regardless of their marital status, should have access to them.
- Such exclusionary nature of health care benefits leaves behind “the community of the nonmarried, the single, the divorced, the uninterested, and the non-monogamous” (p. 109).





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It can be said to conclude that Butler wonders why marriage or domestic partnership is the only way to allocate things like healthcare benefits. She believes that there should be ways of organizing healthcare entitlements in such a way that everyone regardless of their marital status should have access to them. Such exclusionary nature of healthcare benefits leaves behind the community of the non-married, the single, the divorced, the uninterested and the non monogamous.

Such state laws which disable the non-heterosexuals from securing their rights are representative of prevalent homophobic discourses. This also shows the importance of revising and reworking the social organization of friendship and community, to produce non-state centered forms of support and alliance.



So, in this module, we have looked at certain topics from the initial chapters of Undoing Gender such as the medical diagnosis of gender identity disorder, gender correction surgery, the relation between kinship, human rights and marriage.

In the next module we shall examine the second part of Butler’s Undoing Gender. We will focus on chapters from 6 to 11, which deal with areas such as sexual differences, bodily confessions and the question of social transformation.

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Thank you.