Differences in the Experience of Identity Agency Across the Spectrum of Intersectional Masculinities

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Individuals interact with each other through a variety of linguistic and behavioral symbols. Social situations are interpreted based on the symbols and the context in which the symbols appear (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 65). Identity is the key filter through which situations are interpreted and made meaningful (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 193). Identities are not harmless attributes assigned to a set of characteristics, but rather socially and politically engaged markers that impact many facets of social life, including something as essential as the experience and assignment of agency (Alcoff, 2005, p. 20). This paper will discuss identity from the perspective of four philosophers, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, Linda Alcoff and Judith Butler, as well as sociologists Peter Burke and Jan Stets through their identity control theory framework.

I will engage with the mentioned authors on the interaction between identity, agency/autonomy and authenticity. This paper will rely on the assumption that identities are social creations and that their sociality permits them to be at least minimally fluid. I will open the paper by discussing identity from several perspectives and also placing identity in the context of society and cultures. I will then briefly describe two different forms of masculinity, a hegemonic mainstream masculinity and a subcultural sadomasochistic masculinity. Through these descriptive accounts I will draw out the roles of agency and autonomy with regard to performing the identity and replicating gender roles. The objective of this exercise is to illustrate that despite the exterior appearance that privileged (hegemonic) identities have the most open exercise of agency, identities

that are less socially valued can experience a broader range of social freedom due to less demanding boundaries. Finally, I will discuss the mechanisms involved for policing gender boundaries and the reasons for the reinforcement of masculine power.

Identity markers in American culture typically include gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality. These components compose an intersectional identity that is the core of the individual including the sense of self. Identity functions both internally and externally. Identity is the way we know how to conduct ourselves in the world and by what standards to gauge our performance when interacting with others. Identity is the way that others know us before they meet us, how they form expectations for our preferences and for how we will act during a social interaction. The internal and external identity forms are not isolated in their function. The way in which we perceive ourselves (internal identity) influences our external appraisal of others and determines what is expected from others (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 61). Some identities, such as those found in the sadomasochist subculture, are considered deviant and as such operate outside of the boundaries of mainstream identities, perhaps to such an extent that they are not intelligible to a mainstream audience. Visibility is a limiting factor of how identity is interpreted by others, but there is choice in the acceptance of some non-visible identities.

Identity impacts how the individual thinks of themselves but there are also visible signals of identity which enable others to assign an identity to the individual as a basis upon which to make assumptions and judgements (Alcoff, 2005, p. 5). Visible identities are important because they carry an intrinsic value of truth in society due to their ability to be directly perceived (Alcoff, 2005, p. 6). Judith Butler also works with the visible, specifically engaging the idea of frame to understand how visual images are conveyed

and understood (2016, p. 1351). Alcoff's statements about visible identity are not medium dependent, but Butler primarily works with the photograph as a method by which the visual is preserved and is able to cross temporalities. The photograph provides a conceptual basis for a narrative, the frame. The frame is both a limiter of how far the viewer can see but also shapes the narrative of the visible (Butler, 2016, p. 1437). Alcoff's concept of identities that are "fundamental to the self" is perhaps unable to be framed as it relies on very simplistic interpretations of bodies based on visible cues to indicate where a person might be male or female or if a person is Caucasian or otherwise raced (Alcoff, 2005, p. 5). While it is problematic that assumptions are made about individuals based on those two basic visible indicators, other components of visible identity do matter as well because of the transformational impact that can occur as a result of the context and additional content of a visible image. As Butler points out with her discussion of embedded reporting, the perception of people and of nations can be impacted by the visual story that is presented. Specifically, Butler mentions the restriction on the showing images of the dead in war reporting because of the potential for negative sentiment about the war (Butler, 2016, p. 1364). There is an interest in maintaining an image of heroic and virtuous soldiers because it supports the narrative most desirable to the institutions of war. In the Abu Ghriab torture photographs, the gender and racial hints of the soldiers are less important and less fundamental to how they are interpreted than the acts that are being carried out in the images.

In daily life racial and gender markers may be most salient to first interpretations as Alcoff suggests, but the remaining components of the visual expression or of the interaction with the individual are not as insignificant as Alcoff asserts. "Visibility is both

the means of segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance" claims Alcoff (2005, p. 7). While it is true that this does happen at a simplistic level, such as using visible indicators to segregate groups for a variety of purposes, such as for determining who is socially permitted to use which restroom, it falls short and is not universally true. Unity cannot be established purely based on visible factors as once a group attempts to come together, other individual identity characteristics emerge through dialog which will allow other differences to emerge. Conversely, visual distinctions of difference do not have to limit who can be involved in manifesting resistance. For example, the 'Black Lives Matter' movement is a social formation of resistance that is based more in ideological similarities, an opposition to racially-motivated police violence, than by visible race. Despite the direct invocation of race in the mission of the movement, race does not restrict membership in the movement. Members of groups may use the visual to self-identify and emphasize an identity beyond gender and race, such as a rainbow flag to indicate support of sexual identity diversity or a particular style of headwear to indicate political affiliation.

Identity politics are problematic because of their ability to be reductive and an overly simplistic method for characterizing an individual (Alcoff, 2005, p. 20). Alcoff states "some philosophers express a worry that the very concept of identity presumes sameness and thus excludes difference" (2005, p. 47). While this reductive aspect of identity does commonly occur, the banishment of identity, such as that proposed by post-modern philosophers, only serves to alienate individuals from each other and provide a diminished commonality among people. As Taylor illustrates in his defense of authenticity, dismantling social structures revokes a common bond of society, but in

doing so there is greater individual freedom and the individual is less determined by hierarchies of being (Taylor, 1992, p. 3). The assumption of sameness through identity also disposes of the possibility of multiple social identities. One does not merely exist as their nationality, gender or political affiliation. Identity involves a combination of these attributes. Taylor uses the term "authenticity" to describe the adoption of an individual expression of identity. Specifically, authenticity is a calling to be one's true self and to seek fulfilment through the exercise of individual values (Taylor, 1992, p. 17). Authenticity is the balance between reductive and hierarchical enforcements of identity and the adoption of a selfish or narcissistic exercise of choices. Interpersonal relationships are an essential component of a dialogical life, which is required to exercise authenticity (Taylor, 1992, p. 33).

More dangerous than the concern that identity creates a sameness between individuals is the establishment of a distinction between groups which can lead to distrust of individuals of a different identity background and change the fundamental frame from which the actions of an individual are interpreted (Alcoff, 2005, p. viii). This is especially important to consider because as much as the individual defines their own identity, it is also assigned externally and "the Other" interprets the self through its own horizon (Alcoff, 2005, p. 44). Interestingly, even the definition of personal identity (which feeds group identity) can be influenced by external feedback from others. While social feedback from individuals who share the same identity may be more salient, other social actors have the capability to enact real or social sanctions to change the accepted output of the identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, pp. 67-69).

Bernard Williams describes identity as the capacity to exist within symbolic systems (Williams, 1995, p. 142). From this starting point Williams lays out the relationship between individuality and the social context of the individual. This baseline relationship is central to his description of the role of identity in the exercise of agency. Williams states that "intentional action is individual, and that its explanation involves a consciousness, potential or actual, that refers to the agent" (Williams, 1995, p. 126). This definition removes intentional action from the scope of social roles, describing an explanation for actions that is located entirely within individual consciousness. The reference to social context allows the social roles held by the individual to work through the internal states of the individual (Williams, 1995, p. 127). The social attributes of the individual cannot be completely excluded from the intentional states of the individual and thus are a component of the individual (Williams, 1995, p. 129). Williams highlights the depths to which personal identity intersects with agency by presenting an analysis of the agent asking seemingly universal factual questions. The subject of the inquiry seems to be an external object, but the inquiry is instead revealing of the individual and their social context of the agent making the inquiry. Every statement and every inquiry is a reflection of the individual making the statement or inquiry. This perspective revokes neutrality or universality from the inquiry (Williams, 1995, p. 119). The described individualism is a useful method for illustrating why individuals retain agency despite the impact of social roles. The theoretical capabilities of the individual agent to intentionally act is outside of the confines of their social roles is a functional explanation of individual leadership and to the capabilities of the individual to affect change either in their environment or to their social role. The individualism can be seen in examples such as the changing definition of

masculinity, one of the most rigidly defined social identities. Gender is performed as a

socially replicating phenomenon (Butler, 1990), and as such requires an intentional

conscious action of the individual to act against. Formal individualism allows for this,

whereas anti-individual perspectives would expect that the social role would be repeated

without disruption. As an ethical framework individualism allows for a single agent to

break from mores and socially imposed roles without necessitating sanction, so long as

the overall standard of the claimed identity is met.

One of the difficulties of Williams' claims about individualism is that to accept it

would nearly require individuals to have their own moral code, which is inconsistent with

the clusters of mores found in same cultures or differences in values in different cultures.

Social patterns emerge and individuals shape their behaviors to conform to their social

environments. Social pressures compel individuals to act in specific ways. To extend the

masculinity example, the rigidity of masculinity is reinforced by social standards and the

expression of that social role is not explicitly governed by an individual's own

consciousness, but rather a socially solidified concept of what is "right" for individuals

possessing that role. Where society ends and where the individual begins in the exercise

of agency (intentional acts) is a problematic subject and the presentation of a conclusive

individualistic perspective does not allow for the amount of nuance involved in the

balance between the individual consciousness and society. Williams does not define

individualism to that extreme, but there is an absence of consideration of the various

impacts on how an individual decides to act. Is the mere *individual decision* to act or not

sufficient to warrant this perspective?

Critics of authenticity, those who favor a "human nature" approach to morality set up hierarchies of lifestyles (identities), assigning more value to some lifestyles over others (Taylor, 1992, p. 19). Taylor establishes difference or diversity as central to authenticity (Taylor, 1992, p. 37) (37). Diversity occurs through the exercise of free choice, and the valuing of the choice itself (Taylor, 1992, pp. 37-38). Taylor presents the example of homosexual sexual identity is presented to demonstrate the difference between a collective morality and a morality based on authenticity. Homosexual identity is to be expressed according to self-determining freedom in the context of authenticity as a social framework (Taylor, 1992, p. 38). A human nature perspective would require that this identity be placed in a hierarchy and be viewed as either wrong or at least of lesser value than a heterosexual identity (Taylor, 1992, p. 38).

If identities are at risk of being reductive or contribute to an unequal distribution of agency, why keep them? From a purely pragmatic perspective, because they are at the core of society and are too deeply rooted to brush away. From an ideological perspective, because identities function to provide intelligibility, a method for forming social groups and linking to a history (Alcoff, 2005, p. 42). The absence of a construction of identity would isolate individuals and detach them from their own histories, and thus from any mechanism for developing an understanding of self or making meaning out of their experience of attributes of personhood.

Alcoff argues that identity is real and salient, not a trivial or disposable construction (2005, p. 5). Williams supports Alcoff's position by demonstrating how social institutions are unable to be removed from individual acts (1995, p. 126). The individual acts, even to the basic act of asking questions, function to reflect the social

context of the individual by drawing attention to what the individual finds to be of value to engage in a dialog (Williams, 1995, pp. 124-125).

Authenticity is a "moral ideal", which relies upon the free exercise of choice and in valuing the choice itself (Taylor, 1992, pp. 37-38). Identity boundaries and the limitations of shared meaning can negatively influence the range of agency and as such make authenticity a luxury for those who have recognized and empowered social identities. A challenge to this comes when an individual holding a recognized privileged identity acts on choices which are socially determined to be outside of the identity standard. As an example, consider the differences in social interpretation of a male child who makes the choice that he wishes to play football, compared to that same child making the choice that he wishes to play with dolls. The parents of the child may honor the individual agency of the child to determine for himself the type of play he engages in, but ultimately the greater strain of masculine role boundaries would demand that the child take on either the more masculine form of play or that the masculine identity be given up. In this case many complexities of identity emerge. The sociological identity theory perspective holds that "actors are self-regulating entities whose goal is to verify their identities" (Stets & Carter, 2012, p. 120). Identities are socially constructed based on learned characteristics and the perceptions of sameness with an existing identity classification. Identities can change gradually over time through disruption processes which change the particular context of the identity or activate a different identity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 78). The sociological identity theory perspective does not consider the impact of diversity on identity change or on the capacity to exercise free will in choices. Alcoff notes that some identities, gender and race, are visually inscribed upon the body

and therefore are subject to external verification despite how the individual identifies internally (Alcoff, 2005, p. 190). In the instance of the male child's selection of play activities, the external perceptions will still determine the reactions the child receives regardless of how he identifies himself or what aspects of identity he deems to be important. The masculine regulation guides the selection of play activity and inhibits the performance of an authentic identity if it differs from the social script associated with the visible markers of gender.

Identity and autonomy are linked through the expectations of the performance of identity (Stets & Carter, 2012, p. 124). Identities do not specify an absolute moral code or a definitive list of attributes that must be incorporated. Instead identities share a subset of values which are reflective of the identity itself. For masculinity those attributes may include dominance, physical strength, sexual potency and a desire for competition (Hinojosa, 2010, p. 179). The autonomy of the individual in the context of their identity is directly related to the rigidity of the identity definition and the scope of importance of various identity attributes. Masculinity has a rigid range for acceptable levels of aggression, competition and other factors associated with the masculine social role, so it is therefore not socially acceptable for the boy in the previous example to decide to play with dolls. However, femininity is constructed differently, especially when paired with youth, so while the boy is socially discouraged from playing with dolls with his sister, his sister would be socially permitted to play football with him (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 64).

To this point I have touched on identity boundaries, gender policing and social sanctions in general terms, but have not given specificity to how these are operationalized. The primary way in which identity boundaries are maintained is through

self-policing. This process is engaged in every time a person acts in the world, usually

without their unconscious knowledge but sometimes particularly notable instances do

reach conscious awareness. When a person acts, whether in the witness of other

individuals or only in the witness of the generalized other, the act is compared with the

definition of the identity. If the act is in compliance with the active identity standard (or

the master identity standard), then the identity is reaffirmed. If act is not in compliance

with the identity, either by being too strong or too weak on some dimension, then the

identity is not verified and an error signal is generated in the identity. This error signal is

experienced as an emotional response that is scaled relative to the assessed difference

between the act and the identity standard (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 66). The emotional

response could be experienced as guilt, embarrassment, shame or another relevant

emotion to the act (Stets & Carter, 2012, p. 125). Gender policing is a specific form of

gender identity linked violence in which gender identity is enforced by peer-assessment.

Gender policing may include attempts to shame a non-conforming individual or even

carry out acts of physical violence to compel the individual back to sets of behaviors and

acts that are deemed to be 'natural' for the gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137).

Other social sanctions may include exclusion from activities involving other members of

the identity category or the enactment of identity prejudice as a form of control of the

individual (Bird, 1996, p. 126).

  Hegemonic masculine identity is based on an emphasis on maintaining power,

over the feminine (the "Other", anything not masculine), and emotional detachment

(Bird, 1996, pp. 120-121). Despite a certain level of independence defined by the

masculinity identity standard, deviations from a set of defined behaviors that are typically

masculine are punished in an attempt to bring the identity expression back into conformance with the standard (Pascoe, 2005, p. 330). Masculine identity is primarily maintained by a repetition and reinforcement of behavioral boundaries through homosocial interactions (Bird, 1996, p. 121). The masculine identity standard does not necessarily create a homogenous identity or prevent interactions with other identities, but it does define sets of behaviors that are expected and other behaviors that are forbidden. The identity standard also does not have to be accepted as a rigid construction, as masculinity does slowly evolve over time. The enactment of masculinity is governed by the homosocial context in which the individual is situated, although the general standards for masculinity almost always reference back to the hegemonic identity.

Displays of power and social dominance are features of hegemonic masculinity (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 126). Sadomasochism is a sexual (and social) practice and a collection of identities which incorporate practices of power exchange into sexual interactions and socio-sexual interactions. Sadomasochism can be paired with any sexual orientation, but typically functions as a distinct dimension of sexuality (Newmahr, 2010, p. 316). For the purpose of this paper I will focus on homosexual sadomasochistic identity as it permits controlling for the gender identity in discussing power relationships as well as permitting a closer examination of the function of masculinity.

Mainstream or hegemonic masculinity relies upon a degree of stability of identity. It is not acceptable to enact a particular macho masculinity in one situation and then to enact a masculinity that displays more vulnerability in another situation. This inconsistency would be read as weakness in masculine identity (Hinojosa, 2010, p. 184). Staci Newmahr notes that role fluidity is valued in sadomasochistic groups (2010, p.

316). This ability to switch between sadist and masochist or top and bottom provides an interesting insight into the differences in expectations for conformity to a particular identity standard between mainstream masculinity and its subcultural counterparts. The subcultural identity affords a broader range of acceptable behaviors to remain consistent with the identity without negative judgement from others holding the same identity compared to normative identities.

Sadomasochistic identities are not unavoidably visible identities and therefore may be concealed, which Alcoff would argue makes it a less fundamental identity than the underlying gender identity. I do not agree with this assessment and instead propose that the strength of the identity to the self is dependent upon how socially invested the individual is in the identity. Individual preferences determine the importance of the identity and thus the authentic performance of the identity is based upon those preferences. Due to the perception of gender as a binary of the masculine and feminine the external judgement of male presentation as a proxy for masculinity may be unavoidable.

The addition of other identities on top of the gender identity can be accomplished through the application of symbols to the visual appearance. For a submissively identifying individual participating in the sadomasochistic subculture the wearing of a collar would function as a symbol to differentiate their internalized identity from the externally interpreted gender identity. The difficulty of course is that the addition of the symbol does not erase the gender identity or even function to modify it based on the gender standards of the dominant culture. The additional information provided by the symbol is added to the visual assessment of the identity but is still subject to the

assessment of the primary visible identity. The addition of the collar may convey the

submissive sadomasochist identity that was intended, but in the context of mainstream

masculinity, which does not value submissiveness as a virtuous trait, it is seen as a failure

to adhere to the identity. This failure could result in a variety of social sanctions ranging

from subtle exclusions to more active policing such as name-calling or physical violence.

While this may seem to be a way in which the agency of the subcultural identity is

limited, it is more reflective of the restrictions imposed on the mainstream identity, which

insists on being defended for the purpose of its own replication.

In the example I provided, the sadomasochistic (SM) submissive male makes the

choice of whether or not to present the identity visibly. That choice can be made or

retracted based upon social context or fluctuations in desire to present the identity (and

willingness to accept consequences of the presentation). The risk in exercising the choice

to not present the identity, and therefore not visually be associated with the identity, is

alienation from an authentic self. Choosing to 'pass' allows the individual to shed an

identity or to take on a different identity at their leisure for its social convenience. Burke

and Stets (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 77) do not directly engage with the concept of

authenticity, but they do provide for the possibility of an identity being activated or made

inactive based upon the social context. While the identity process is continuous and there

is no situation in which an identity is fully irrelevant, the relevance of the identity to the

situation does determine if the identity is actively engaged (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 126).

Utilizing this perspective, removing the symbol from view does not make the

presentation less authentic unless the submissive SM identity is incorporated into the

person's master identity. This becomes more challenging however if the submissive SM

identity functions on the sense of self by way of being incorporated into the way in which gender is enacted.

The incorporation of the SM sexual identity into the masculine gender role is done similarly to the way that a military identity may be overlaid on masculinity. Due to the social institutions involved the definition of masculinity changes. For military masculinity the mutation involves a more solidified capacity for emotional control, overt expressions of sexuality and a sense of self-reliance (Hinojosa, 2010, p. 180). Incorporating the military identity can be seen as emphasizing and making more dramatically visible the traits of masculinity that are already valued in society. In SM masculinities there is no predictable or culturally defined change to the performance of the identity and no 'essential' identity to police. Instead there is an array of available identity models which may be enacted, either as an authentic presentation of how the individual perceives themselves or as a particular role that the individual wishes to enact in a particular situation. To a certain extent the SM community encourages 'play' with gender and with identity (Weinberg, 1987, p. 52). This playful approach permits participants in the community to enact forms of masculinity that range from hyper-masculine, like those found in military masculinity, to a subordinated masculinity that is pushed almost to the edge of femininity (Weinberg, 2008, p. 22).

Can a masculinity that is based upon such fluid definitions be accepted as authentically masculine, if it does not reference a concrete standard? I believe that it can because despite not having a concrete position or fixed reference, it does function in concert with cultural definitions of masculinity and extends from the inscription of masculinity upon male bodies by society. Sadomasochism incorporates themes of

dominance/submission, pain tolerance, endurance, trust and loyalty which are consistent with general themes of masculinity, while not being implemented in the traditional way (Weinberg, 2008, p. 23). Newmahr notes that sadomasochism can be enacted as a leisure activity rather than as a core concept of identity (2010), which could imply the type of self-indulgent enactment of behavior against a moral ideal that Taylor is concerned about. However, the individual enactment of identity that occurs in the sadomasochism culture is based upon values that match Taylor's description of respectful liberalism. Organized groups in the sadomasochistic culture in general adhere to a shared moral code that emphasizes individual expression, the necessity of consent, respect for privacy and concern for safety of all involved in the community (Newmahr, 2010, pp. 325-326).

Why are some expressions of masculinity more rigid than others? Alcoff and Burke & Stets would likely point to the external expectations of others and the impact those expectations have on the experience of the self. Individually and individual choice are prized as traits of masculine identity, but only as far as the choices are enacted toward the masculine identity standard. While the choice is individual, it relies on a shared horizon of meaning to be intelligible to others. In masculinity the performance of an individual holding the identity is a reflection on others that hold the same identity. Deviations in the identity are viewed as threats to the collective power of the hegemonic identity and therefore a threat to the power of each individual's identity. While a visual identification may locate an individual as male and therefore eligible for the masculine identity, the hegemonic role can cast out unwanted others, such as black masculinity, gay masculinity or other intersections that are considered undesirable to the hegemon. The unwanted intersections are redefined by the mainstream masculinity to be excluded and

therefore not subject to the boundaries of masculinity. Masculine identity holders that are not otherwise marked are subject to boundary policing of their identity presentation.

Identities are social constructions that have a real impact on the way a person perceives themselves in their environment and on the way that they perceive others. It is a way in which meaning is given to symbolic information. Some identities, such as those ascribed through the reading of the body, are mostly outside of the control of the individual. The expression of non-visible identities is something that can be chosen by the individual. Non-visible identities can be operationalized visually through the addition of visible symbols of the identity. The free choice to operationalize the identity in that way is a component of the authentic expression. The limitations of acceptable behavior vary between identities, but hegemonic masculinity is particularly restrictive in its acts and severe in its correction of failures to adhere to identity standards. Subcultures, especially those that are chosen by the individual, have the potential to increase the amount of agency available to the individual inside the identity. In sadomasochism, the definition of gender is much more broadly constructed. Men are permitted to show weakness and to accept a subordinated position without the shame and social sanctions found in the hegemonic form. The increased agency permits a more authentic presentation of identity by way of not artificially restricting the boundaries of performance. This specific alternative form of masculinity is limited in its performance only in the requirements of the group ethos, which generally demands respecting the individuality of others, and thus the individual construction of an authentic gender identity is not discouraged.

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