



WHAT MAKES A WOMAN A WOMAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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Body, Sexuality and Culture

Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	1-2
Aim and Objectives	3
Methodology	3-4
Findings and Discussion	5-8
Conclusion	9
Notes	9
References	10-11
Appendices	12-14
1. Collated Research Data Responses	12-13
2. Trans? Campaign Poster	14

List of Figures:

Figure 1: Posting to Social Media

Figure 2: Self-Identity

Introduction:

Following the notion that everyone has a common-sense idea about the nature of men and women (Archer and Lloyd, 1985:1), this report will query what actually makes a woman a woman in the 21st century. According to Oxford Dictionaries (2016a), a woman is defined as '*an adult human female*', with 'female' being defined as '*of or denoting the sex that can bear offspring or produce eggs*' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016b). This perspective clearly outlines a strong biological stance, which though historically would have been considered fixed, in the 21st century can be surgically altered and as such questions its distinction. Further to this, other ideologies locate a woman outside of this biological framework, thus opening this definition to scrutiny of its dated stance and limitations. In this context, this report will explore contemporary ideologies which surround a woman, the extent to which biological factors add to our understanding and contemplate other influences that shape our perceptions of what a woman is. Drawing upon existing literature and primary qualitative research, the report will aim to establish a response to the posed research question and pose a more inclusive understanding to the query.

Literature Review:

Largely there are two distinguishable stances on a woman, the first presenting a woman as a construct and the other as a difference. In essence of the first stance, Gunn and Matthews (1979) claim that a woman is an act that is based on stereotypes of what society thinks they should be. This is supported by Haraway (1990: 218-219) who argues that calling somebody a woman compels them to act and be in certain ways, and Butler (1990) who asserts that being a woman is a gendered performance. Halpern (2012: 252) writes that gender is a social construction which encompasses whether one is a woman or a man. What traits are central to these stereotypes and constructions framing this proclaimed act are yet to be extensively outlined sufficiently in any literature. However, Archer and Lloyd (1985: 46) suggest '*affectionate, emotional, tender, understanding, feminine, gentle and warm*' as characteristics that are commonly associated with being female, but these are not definitive nor limited to what constitutes a woman. Further to this, Smart (1992) suggests that a woman is a regulated and subjective construction

within which there is room for manoeuvre. This would indicate that like congenital biology, the very notion of being a woman and what makes a woman, like all social constructs, is relatively fluid and open to interpretation. Examples of these changing constructs are evident in how women can be simultaneously portrayed as powerful and powerless, as sexual agents but also as victims, and as dangerous but also in need of protection (Smart, 1992: 8).

The second stance is principally based on a woman being a binary to a man, not only in scientific differences such as anatomy and physiology, but in role fulfilment and life goals, thus as a difference to the 'other', i.e. a man (Russet, 1989; Burstyn, 1980). Halpern (2012: 160-161) claims that biological differences such as hormones, gonads, internal and external sex organs are only part of what distinguishes a woman, and that sexual identity, sex role and sex of rearing also help make up the criteria of whether one is female or male. Literature makes reference to a woman in the context of both a sex identity and a gender identity, which of course both come with binaries outlining differences, but also highlights the ambiguity behind how a woman is defined. Fundamentally, the differences between men and women are argued to involve a centralisation on female deficiencies, whether they be physical, intellectual and/or emotional (Archer and Lloyd, 1985: 2). However, Butler (1990: 25) asserts that women are a difference that cannot be understood as the negation of the always-already-masculine subject, and from her strong feminist standpoint believes that differences are only highlighted to justify inequalities. Once again, this indicates that the positioning of being and determining a woman extends far beyond examining ones genitalia as an othering process, and encompasses perhaps a more significant socio-political purpose (Halpern, 2012). Taking the limitations in the literature presented above into account, this report will try to uncover a broader meaning to what defines a woman in the 21st century.

Aim and Objectives:

The aim of this report is to explore contemporary ideologies on what characterises a woman. This is expected to be achieved by identifying how relevant biology is to our understanding of what a woman is and the extent to which other perspectives influence our concept of a woman in the 21st century. The qualitative nature of the research intends to bridge the allusiveness to what a woman actually is according to contemporary viewpoints by posing the thought-provoking question of 'what makes a woman a woman?' Finally, it is hoped that a more pertinent definition of a woman will also be established from conducting the research.

Methodology:

Qualitative research was chosen as the most appropriate method to explore and provide an answer to the posed research question. This was considered to be the most suitable method because it can reveal opinions, reasoning and values that underpin contemporary thoughts, and can allow for greater depth into a subject matter to be uncovered (Snape and Spencer, 2003). The question 'what makes a woman a woman?' was posted across the researcher's social media platforms as evidenced in *Figure 1* as follows:



Figure 1: Posting to Social Media

The individuals' choice to respond to either post was taken as implied consent and as such no formal consent was taken. The total number of responses was capped at 50 as it was believed that data saturation had been reached and any further

responses were considered unlikely to add any further insight to assist the aim and objectives of the research (Matthews and Ross, 2010). 90% of the responses came via Facebook, with the remaining 10% from Twitter. The responses were collected over a three week period, and any responses that required further clarification were either followed up by direct messaging or face-to-face communication. This allowed the correct interpretation and clarification of the data to be made, ensuring the data's validity remained intact (Ruane, 2006).

A significant advantage of digital data collection is that it can save a considerable amount of time (Lee, Fielding and Blank, 2008). Because the researcher does not have to be present to await the data formation, individuals can respond whenever they wish from wherever they please. As the data is then already written out it saves vast amounts of time in comparison to other data collection methods (Bryman, 2012). Additional time was also saved from the informality in gaining respondents, however it could be argued that in this instance, a considerable limitation to this approach meant that respondents were not aware their responses were being used for research purposes, which may have posed ethical concern. As this was later recognised by the researcher, all individuals were later informed of the research and provided the opportunity to edit or retract their responses. Fortunately all respondents were intrigued by the research question and were happy for their responses to be used for this research, with most requesting to read the report following its submission. Whilst this initial oversight may have been of ethical concern, it is now believed this has been sufficiently rectified in appreciation to the British Sociological Association's Ethical Practice Guidelines (2002).

No specific sampling criteria was constructed for this research, however it has since been established that respondents were aged 18-45 and reside within Britain. Although not intentional, 50% of the respondents identified as female, and the other 50% as male, as such the viewpoints presented in the analysis are not biased in this respect. Being that it is believed data saturation was met, and the research sample is quite varied, although the sample is not representative, the conclusions drawn from the analysis may be considered generalizable (Bryman, 2012). The data from both social media platforms were collated into one document [**Appendix 1**] and thematically analysed in order for themes and meaning to be extracted from the data to formulate a response to the posed research question (Matthews and Ross, 2010).

Findings and Discussion:

Five broad themes were established during data analysis: biology, identity, social construction, othering¹ and attributes. Several respondents articulated cross-overs between the themes but most presented a singular stance. The few unique viewpoints that did not inherently link to any of the above themes will not be discussed in detail, however their views will feed into the wider discussion.

Analysis of the biological stance presented a relatively traditional response, which in light of the literature review was somewhat expected. Explicit anatomy associated with the female sex were cited as defining features of a woman, i.e. a vagina and breasts. Further to this, other physical attributes such as extent of facial hair and beauty also contributed to what was considered to make a woman a woman. More critically, but again anticipated, fertility and the ability to reproduce was highlighted as key concepts to being a woman. Perhaps a limitation of the methodology, discussion surrounding a link between anatomy and procreative function was not extracted from the research so it cannot be determined whether or not respondents would consider a female who had undergone a hysterectomy for whatever reasoning, or was otherwise infertile to still be a woman if she possessed the outlined external anatomy.

More interestingly, chromosomes were a factor that were encompassed in the biological stance, but were not anticipated. For the purposes of this discussion, this line of thought is stimulating because whilst contemporary advances in biotechnology and plastic surgery etc. present the ability to alter hormonal balances and physical attributes, this is not yet entirely possible for genetic material (Pritchard and Korf, 2013). As such, if a woman was to be defined by her XX chromosomal make-up, as opposed to the XY make-up of her male counterpart, then this indeed at present would still be fixed and unlike other biological attributes is not presently able to be amply manipulated (ibid). The expressed fluidity of the biological stance is therefore somewhat constrained depending on what factors are taken into consideration, however still evidently questions its definitiveness on what constitutes a woman in the 21st century.

The most prominent theme that emerged from data analysis, was that of individual identity. This standpoint may arguably be reflective of the individualism that is

thought to enshrine contemporary society (Halman, 1996), however is indicative of society being more open and inclusive to the fluidity characteristic of liquid modernity in which we presently reside (Bauman, 2000). As evidenced in *Figure 2*, self-identifying as a woman regardless of how this belief is conceived was the most substantial viewpoint shared by respondents.



Figure 2: Self-Identity

This stance is essentially underpinned by the recognition and social acceptance of transwomen, and is indicative of a move away from the biological stance to incorporate this possible non-congenital state of a woman in the 21st century. The ‘*Trans?*’ campaign founded by the Proud Trust in conjunction with the National Health Service [**Appendix 2**] reifies such movements towards inclusivity and is again representative of the individuality that bolsters contemporary society. In light of this, it can reasonably be debated that repressing one’s self-expression and identity desires is fast becoming history in modern westernised societies (Freud, 2003), and the freedom to identify as one wishes is now being advocated if not encouraged. As such, the simple claim to being a woman, whether this is supported by any other attributes or not, is acceptable and is increasingly being less contested by governing laws which are often forced to inhabit the individuals’ identity belief regardless of surrounding constructs (Transgender Europe, 2016). The extent to which this stance may prove to be problematic within society is yet to be determined, however it is likely to create many controversies amongst different fields of thought on the matter.

A woman's identity in itself is a construct, which as one respondent knowledgeably posted '*is an intersection [...] based on ethnicity, age, culture, religion, social class etc.*' Thus because this identity is socially constructed it is subject to change over space and time (Dillon, 2010). In this positioning of social construction, any respondent who made reference to it, wrote of a woman in essence of a gender identity, no respondent suggested a woman was a sex identity, which for the purposes of this report clarifies the ambiguity outlined in the literature review. As Butler (1990) argues, gender is a performance which is constructed to meet the expectation of hegemonic societal ideologies. Therefore, if identifying as a woman is taken as a gendered proclamation, it affirms its' positioning as a flexible construct and thus what makes a woman a woman is prescribed by contemporary societal norms, values, pressures and '*lifestyles*'. At present, we currently reside in a highly sexualised society (Duggan and Hunter, 1995), which is perhaps most evidently expressed as part of the biological viewpoint, in so far that it is a woman's physical attributes such as her breasts, and her sexual ability that were predominantly reported to make her such. In this respect, a woman may therefore be argued to be a bio-political construction that to varying extents relays contemporary social ideologies. For example, the historical change in idealised body shape and size etc. may have suggestively formed how a woman was primarily identified by others outside of her self-belief and identification as such.

An important factor to consider in what makes a woman a woman is perhaps that the distinction may be two-fold, in that there could be an individual perception as presented above which is completely accepted, and then the external perception of the other, also mentioned above. The external perception however will also hold significance for visual identity, as opposed to the inner-belief which may be expressed by transwomen. As such, it could be contested that it is the visual expression, i.e. the performance, which is definitive in identifying a woman in the eyes of others. For example, the binaries which are created to distinguish the other. Similarly, the othering process is based upon differences and setting out what one is in relation to what they are not (Bradley, 2007). These differences assist in creating distinguishable identities, which may be beneficial, but feminists argue also contribute to establishing inequalities (ibid). Some respondents formulated their concept of a woman based upon their differences to a man, which is highly valid, and

closely links to the biological stance, however also includes emotional and personality traits. Further to this the othering theme supports literature on gender roles and the differences in expectations and presentations between men and women (Halpern, 2012; Butler, 1990). It was also suggested that othering was fashioned for the benefit of politics, media, and peers, i.e. wider society, as opposed to the individual themselves. This is plausible in so far that it is evident through transwomen for example, that the othering process and labelling is restrictive to the individual and somewhat forces distinctions to be made. Labelling in this context however does not necessarily inhibit fluidity in identity but forces individuals to choose one; perhaps why there has been a rise in queer theorists in the 21st century, as a bio-political retaliation to being forced into identifying with hegemonic identity binaries for societal satisfaction.

In line with othering but classed as a separate theme comes 'attributes'. These were classified separately as it was thought that these attributes could either be transcended easily or even be shared between both men and women to varying extents. As such, it is believed these potentially subjective attributes lie outside binary positions and are possibly better explained on a spectrum in relation to what is considered to be masculine and feminine. Such attributes which link to Archer and Lloyd's (1985) characteristics, are personality traits, maturity, physical expression/behaviour (body language etc.), mental strength and emotional expressions. Interestingly, whilst surrounding literature suggested many attributes were thought to be deficient in females (ibid), thus used to differentiate men from women, superior mental strength was portrayed as a highly valuable asset attributed from respondents to the making of a woman. Further to this, greater levels of maturity were also accredited to women, thus, perhaps pleasing for feminists, indicates a shift away from viewing women as an inferiority in the 21st century.

Taking all the themes discussed above into account, it is clear that a woman is a matrix of constructs, many of which are clearly based on stereotypes (Brooks-Gunn and Matthews, 1979: 21). The analysis supports Halpern's (2012: 252) claim that a woman is a social construction associated with gender and Smart's (1992: 8) assertion that a woman is a fluid, subjective construction. However it is clear that biological attributes contribute considerably to society's overall understanding of what makes a woman in the 21st century.

Conclusion:

The findings and discussion suggest that biology certainly plays a significant role in the external perception and identification of women, however it does not necessarily 'make' a woman a woman. Our understanding of what constitutes a woman in the 21st century is highly influenced by very individualistic ideologies and perceptions of self-identity. A contemporary woman could therefore be defined predominantly as a self-identity with possible additions of female associated anatomy and characteristics. A woman can emphasise her identity through her physical expressions such as body language and how she dresses, but this is not necessarily defined by her femininity and is open to interpretation and change. In conclusion to the posed research question, what makes a woman a woman in the 21st century is her self-identity as such, regardless of her congenital biological state, in relation to her psychological and socially portrayed gender. More pragmatically, a woman is therefore a socially constructed intersection of her own internal perception and beliefs with a displayed external response that assists a stereotypical gendered performance. In the words of two respondents, a woman is a woman '*if she thinks she is one, it is not dependent on having (female) bits and bobs*', '*only women have the right to judge what makes a woman a woman as only they can identify what makes them such*'. However being a women is recognised as '*a personal individuality statement, influenced by external sources and social pressures*'.

Notes:

1. Othering in this context is not taken with the traditional negative connotations that are usually associated with the term such as prejudices and discrimination, but simply to express the labelling of another/different/separate entity.

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Appendices:

1. Collated Research Data Responses

What Makes a Woman a Woman?

1. I don't know - just being opposite to a man
2. A person born with the necessary anatomy to potentially procreate and carry a baby
3. I don't think there's an answer. Everyone is an individual
4. Others (media, peers, politics etc.)
5. I suppose an inner sense of femininity. But it's different for everyone, isn't fixed and ultimately is self-determined
6. A woman is a gender and therefore a social construct
7. If you identify as a woman, you can have the ability to express your gender identity in the way you wish, to make yourself a woman. Whether that makes you a woman in the eyes of society, where there are constructs that imply womanhood is a certain image/position/lifestyle. There is also a social pressure that being a woman is based on their fertility, as well as not being called a woman until they have lost their youthful looks and have had children, until then someone can be given their identity by still being called a 'girl' which then too creates power and control over an individual who is dismissed from womanhood until their 'girlhood' has ended regardless of age but because of life choices, which I feel causes ever more pressures for young girls to grow up not to be women but sexy girls who remain young and full of life and are faced with issues of over sexualizing, body image and mental health
8. It is an intersection. Women can't be so easily generalised, there is a variety of different answers based on a woman's ethnicity / age / culture / religion / social class etc... And it is often that, when generalised, there is only the (white) normative or stereotypical (according to the categories above) version of what makes a woman a woman
9. Only women have the right to judge what makes a woman as only they can identify what makes them such
10. Nothing but your own perception, it is a social construction
11. It is something you are told you will be from birth, but not necessarily you will grow up to identify as
12. You are a woman because you say you are woman, it is your identity and life
13. Women and men are the same, their hearts beat as one, not a beat more or less
14. Confidence and determination. It is what separates a girl from an adult, the auto-proclamation of maturity
15. Something that is achieved regardless of sexual activity and is regardless of gender or sexual identity

16. It is a common standard, a socially constructed identity which separates from other entities something that can be distinguished
17. It is a personal individuality statement, influenced by external sources and social pressures
18. A vagina
19. Her beauty, no facial hair and physical features
20. Sensitivity and vulnerability
21. Her natural body, her physical expressions, her characteristic attributes and what she has learnt from her female heritage
22. Her appearance
23. A man – not as a binary opposite but as a justification for her being
24. Her love
25. If she identifies herself as such
26. Boobs
27. Self-identifying as a woman
28. A gender identity
29. Not being a man
30. Identifying as a woman even if they are born in a man's body
31. Strength – they are rooted in the world
32. Her femininity
33. Her strength and inner resolve
34. A vagina
35. If she thinks she is one, it is not dependent on having bits and bobs
36. Individuality as an expression rather than conformity to beauty ideals on the body
37. Mental strength
38. Mental and physical state
39. Nothing but their self-identity as such
40. Self-identity makes a woman a woman, but could include sexual organs, emotional behaviour and the opportunities they are presented with
41. Her values and physiological differences
42. A mix of psychology, biology and societal norms/pressures
43. Anatomy or choice to be so
44. Not female anatomy, just the feeling of femininity mostly
45. Gender is so complex, if somebody feels like they are a woman and chooses to identify as a woman then they are, e.g. transwomen.
46. Life experience
47. The way you dress
48. Biological attributes
49. How you identify and define yourself.
50. Someone who identifies themselves as a woman, but it could also be defined the subjective assumed traits that are attributed to women within society. It could also include physical and emotional strength but they don't necessarily go hand in hand with being a woman. The biological view of XX and XY chromosomes is an additional issue, but womanhood isn't always boobs and a vagina. It can be used as a binary to understand inequalities faced in society.

2. Trans? Campaign Poster



KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AT YOUR GP SURGERY

* Trans = someone whose gender is different to the one they were given at birth. Trans is an umbrella term which can include people who identify as transgender, non-binary, no gender, gender-questioning etc

YOU CAN
use whatever name,
pronoun, title you want



YOU DON'T
need any documentation
to prove it

YOU HAVE
the right to be referred to a
gender identity clinic of your
choosing by your GP



YOU DON'T
need to go through local
mental health services

YOU HAVE
the right to be taken seriously

YOU HAVE
the right to accurate
information from your GP

If your GP doesn't know
answers to your questions,
they should research
the NHS guidelines
for what to do next



GPs can also get free e-learning training here
<http://elearning.rcgp.org.uk/gendervariance>



the PROUD TRUST
home of LGBT+ youth | theproudtrust.org
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