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From abject to subject: A discourse analysis of the construction of butch identity and the  
sex-gender-sexuality matrix

by

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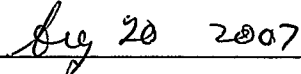
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "From abject to subject: A discourse analysis of the construction of butch identity and the sex-gender-sexuality matrix" submitted by Jocelyn Macdougall in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis is based on the constructionist epistemological foundation that meaning is discursively constructed in social interaction, or conversation. Leveraging Butler's (2004) notion that gender functions as a norm in that it lays a grid of intelligibility on the social, and Giddens' theoretical model of practical consciousness, the author develops the notion of the concentrically definitional sex-gender-sexuality matrix. The author uses this matrix to represent commonsense understandings of gender and how it gets defined.

Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis, textured by examples from both discourse and identity studies, and discourse and gender studies are productively combined into an analytic fabric that alternates between examining the structure of conversation (the how) and the content (the what) found in selections from two focus group interviews held in spring 2005, in Calgary, AB. Ultimately, through an examination of the construction of butch in conversation, this paper finds that when butch is defined using elements within the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, challenge to normativity is difficult and rare; but when butch is discursively constructed as an identity apart from that matrix, it becomes a legitimate subject, independent from the exclusionary power of normative binary gender.

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Finally, I could not have completed this project without the day-to-day support, gentle prodding, cheerleading, and love I received from my partner Danelle. In many ways, it is for her I began this project, and for her I completed it.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to butches of all kinds, whose very existence in the world creates more space in the matrix for the rest of us.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **The bathroom problem**

She is out on the town with her girlfriend, having a lovely evening. Perhaps she is uptown having dinner, wearing a new pair of slacks, pressed carefully with a perfect crease down the front of each leg, a freshly starched shirt, and a Windsor knot atop a stylish tie. Or maybe she is downtown watching a band, in her leather jacket, white t-shirt, well-worn jeans over her favourite black motorcycle boots. Either way, she stands tall and proud, chest out, shoulders back, eyes calmly but attentively surveying the room. Her hair is cropped close to the neck, her chin out, head cocked. Despite the near-grimace on her face, her partner knows that she is having fun, fully embodying her own strength and power.

Eventually, however, the evening's cocktails get the better of her. "It shouldn't be too bad," she thinks, "this is a classy place." Or "This won't be too painful, there are lots of other queers in the crowd." Confronted by a dire physical need, one common to all humans, she passes the threshold from public to private and enters the bathroom.

Upon entering, she is confronted by a woman applying lipstick in the mirror who catches sight of her in the mirror. This woman's face passes quickly from confusion, to shock, to disgust. Safely locked in a stall, she hears the woman and her friend who has just emerged whispering, "I think a guy just came in here! But I'm not sure... I couldn't tell!" There is gasping, and more whispering. Her power wilts. She waits until she thinks it is safe, but when she approaches the sink to cleanse herself of this shame, the women remain. While one looks embarrassedly down into her purse, the other one stares expectantly, and finally blurts out, "Well, are you a man or a woman?"



This is but one example of public humiliation suffered by butches, and any number of other non-normatively gendered people, on a regular basis. By non-normatively gendered, I am referring to any person whose gender is not easily identified as feminine or masculine. The character from the anecdote above is one of these people. She is a beautiful, complex, strong, powerful and complicated creature: she is a butch.



I have provided the above anecdote to give an impression of what a butch is. For the purposes of clarity, I will follow with a more distinct commonsense definition of butch, but only after I offer the caveat that this is a paper about the dynamism and flexibility of definitions, and that I encourage the reader to take my commonsense understanding and use it simply as a guide, remaining open to the exploration of butch identity which follows.

Butches are commonly understood within the gay community to be gay women with a pronounced ‘masculine’<sup>1</sup> gender identification. They often present physically in a ‘masculine’ way, wearing ‘men’s clothing’ and adopting ‘men’s haircuts.’ Butches are also often, by certainly not always, sexually attracted to femmes, who are commonly understood as gay women with a pronounced ‘feminine’ gender identification. Historically, butches and femmes are the grandmothers of the gay movement, having been instrumental in the solidification of gay communities throughout the western world since the 1940s after World War Two. Butch became not only a symbol for masculine-identified woman, but also strong, tough warrior. Butches of that era daily fought for dignity, particularly with the police, who would raid their bars and throw them in jail

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<sup>1</sup> I use scare quotes around words the dominant meaning of which I wish to remain in question.

simply for living and loving in their own way. This kind of harassment has reduced over the past half-century, but butches continue their daily struggles in all kinds of social spaces, such as the public bathroom.

Sally Munt (1998) provides a thoroughly psychoanalytic perspective on the bathroom problem, citing Althusser, Lacan and Freud as explanatory of the kinds of anxieties spawned by a butch's presence in the ladies' toilet. She suggests this hostility comes from the suggestion of homosexuality in a place where bodily waste is discharged; she explores the signifiers of  and  , addresses lavatories as transitory spaces. I, on the other hand, simply offer the bathroom anecdote because it is the most common, most heightened example of non-normative gender phobia that all butches I have ever met experience with considerable regularity.

I offer this particular setting of phobia also to highlight the inanity of it. Our butch, out on the town, is minding her own business, simply trying to relieve herself, and in the process is forced to justify her gender identity. Consider it: you are called to account for some profoundly personal element of yourself as a toll to use the bathroom! But it does not only happen in the bathroom. It happens on the street, in the shops, in the workplace, at the tennis court, on the subway: in short, everywhere.

What is it that incites such anxiety, such disgust, and such outright presumption in people that they feel they have the right to confront a person like that? How has she inflicted offence or obscenity upon her onlookers? What laws has our butch broken?

Clearly the laws of gender normativity, though not codified or written anywhere, are so pervasive and so profoundly embedded in social life that everyday individuals feel

compelled to make ‘citizen’s arrests,’ or perhaps just to enforce the norms via alienating glances. It is these norms that this study seeks to interrogate.

### **Project impetus, approach and thesis statement**

This project was born of a desire to explore, explain and expunge non-normative gender phobia. I use the term non-normative gender phobia because I am not only talking about homophobia, or transphobia, but a phenomenon that includes both and goes beyond both. It includes the feminist fight against the strict definitions of femininity, and the strides feminists have already made in areas such as the domestic division of labour, body image, inequitable employment and remuneration practices (glass ceiling), etc. Fighting non-normative gender phobia includes working toward righting inequalities and violence experienced by transgender and transsexual individuals; struggling against the strictures of femininity that have resulted in the current botox boom; and addressing normative masculinities arising around the globe that are based on making war.

This is a massive struggle, and this project can only chip away at one corner of it. I have a personal interest in butch identity, hence my substantive focus. But it is my academic interest in the construction of meaning that has led me to define the boundaries of this project as they are. Coming from a constructionist epistemological perspective, I argue in the following chapters for a version of reality that is created in discourse. Things become real as we speak, write or read about them.

This project is premised on two fundamental assumptions: firstly, that gender functions as a norm in social life that constricts and excludes the experiences of many people, resulting in sometimes extreme effects; and secondly that meaning generally, and the meaning of gender specifically, is constructed in communicative interaction. These

two elements are related, and it is because of the second that we are able to work toward changing the first. It is because gender is constructed that we are able to examine how it gets reproduced in such a way as to constrict and exclude certain formations of lived experience, in order to pursue a course to change that.

I hesitated above to define ‘butch’ because I will demonstrate how it can be differentially and dynamically constructed, and how the definition is situationally contingent on immediate conversational and cultural resources. However, butch represents a subject position that is decidedly not within cultural norms of gender. Based on the two fundamental assumptions outlined above, I will show how an examination of the construction of butch identity in conversation can lead us to new insights about gender as a whole.

This project focuses specifically on talk, or how reality is constituted in conversation. I examine conversational transcripts in order to pursue questions about the construction of butch identity, and about how the construction of this type of non-normative identity might affect or be affected by normative conceptions of gender, with an ultimate goal of identifying a useful strategy to challenge the normative gender paradigm that results in the kind of everyday violence that I described above, along with all the other kinds of social strife experienced by non-normatively gendered people.

My research shows that **when butch is defined using elements within the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, challenge to normativity is difficult and rare; but when butch is discursively constructed as an identity apart from that matrix, it becomes a legitimate subject, independent from the exclusionary power of normative binary gender.**

### *The sex-gender-sexuality matrix*

Both my literature and participant research, combined simply with my own experience as a sexed, gendered, and sexual being in the world, has demonstrated to me the commonsense links between the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. It is common sense to identify a person's sex category via judgment of their gender identity presentation. A person's gender is often taken for granted if sexuality can be ascertained. In short, within the context of normative common sense, these three elements seem to be discursively and concentrically linked such that information about one results in assumptions about the other two.

This social and discursive 'fact,' combined with poststructuralist theories of normativity (Butler 2004) upon which I will expand in Chapter 3, led me to name the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, an analytical tool designed to facilitate the concept of the normative integration of these three elements. The matrix figures as the trope of normativity throughout this study.

### **Pattern of Inquiry**

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature focusing on butch as subject matter in order to position my study within a broader body of work, and to demonstrate its uniqueness and utility.

I begin by outlining a selection of objectivist studies. At best, most of these studies are heteronormative; at worst, homophobic. Beginning with sexologists Krafft-Ebing (1965 [1894]) and Ellis (1905), these studies show the long history of inquiry into the butch subject. However, these studies all leave butch identity residing squarely inside the matrix, as butch is consistently defined by sex (female) and sexuality (homosexual).

Furthermore, many of these studies leave ‘butch’ discursively tied to ‘abnormal’ or ‘sick.’ My study strives to both re-figure the butch as legitimate, and to explore the potential of definitions outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

I follow with a review of some historical and narrative approaches to studying butch. Many of the works in this section recall what might be called the ‘golden age’ of butches: the 1940s through 60s were golden as it was the galvanizing era for butches and femmes as lesbian institutions and a powerfully non-normative formation of desire and love. Interestingly, in this group there is a strong tendency to connect butch identity development and construction to community development and construction. This is a notable step forward from the previous group of objectivist studies, but still, these historical and narrative works do not interrogate the repercussions, value or benefit of this butch identity construction outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

Finally I review a number of works loosely grouped as LGBT/Queer studies of butch identity. These studies are varied in their commitment to expanding the definitional boundaries of butch, with some remaining deeply reliant on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, and others going far outside of it. Like the section above, none of these studies specifically interrogates the potential challenge to overall gender norms inherent in these alternative discursive formulations of butch identity. This review of the literature demonstrates that there is a gap, specifically of work addressing the significance of defining butch outside of the matrix.

**Chapter 3** provides the theoretical foundations of my inquiry. I begin with a poststructuralist approach to the construction of gender, relying heavily on the work of classic LGBT scholar Judith Butler. Her theories of the performativity of gender (1990,

1991, 1993) and the functioning of gender as a norm and as a grid of intelligibility rendering legible social life (2004) figure prominently in my theoretical exposition of the functioning of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

Butler's theories of gender are enhanced by Anthony Giddens' notion of practical consciousness as it figures in his theory of structuration (1984). Arguing that gender is an example of Giddens' structure, in that it is both the medium and the outcome of social action, I combine Giddens' notion of an agents' practical consciousness with Butler's conception of gender as grid of intelligibility to further enhance my matrix model.

Finally, I rely on ethnomethodology, with particular focus on West and Zimmerman's "Doing gender" (1987), to ground Butler's and Giddens' somewhat lofty theoretical concepts in peoples' daily interaction. West and Zimmerman function especially to highlight the risks we run if we do not 'do gender' appropriately.

This theoretical approach, necessary to address the gap in the literature, requires a specific methodological combination to enact a productive study. **Chapter 4** begins by outlining three specific types of discourse analysis and their methodological necessity for my study. Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PSDA) focuses on the construction of differing versions of reality in the same conversation, at times by the same participant, in order to highlight the discursive nature of social issues and problems. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) begins with instances of oppression and works backward, striving to locate the root of oppression in discourse. Conversation Analysis (CA) differs substantially from both of the above, in that its primary focus is the structure of conversation, and what the instantiation of conversational rules can tell us about the social construction of reality.

These three approaches to discourse analysis have difficulty sharing the page, and to provide context, I offer a brief summary of the debates in the literature of the field. I interrogate these debates on two specific issues pertinent to my study: citing examples from Stokoe and Smithson (2001) and Kitzinger (2000, 2005a, 2005b) I explore how extradiscursive context and participant orientation play an important role in my own analysis.

Being that a discussion of butch is as much a discussion of identity as it is a discussion of gender, I provide some important insights from prominent language and identity theorists, specifically examining the storying of identity, and the construction of varying versions of identity within conversation.

Finally, I rely on Gubrium and Holstein's (2000) approach of analytic bracketing to weave together the various approaches to discourse that will afford me the kind of thorough analysis I require in order to solidly support my thesis.

**Chapter 5** provides my analysis of selected portions of two focus group sessions I held in Calgary in the spring of 2005. To begin, I highlight the two versions of butch identity recurrently constructed throughout my two focus groups: butch as 'self' and butch as 'label.' I explore how each of these elements functions in my participants' overall construction of butch.

Secondly, I provide a selection of examples of the instantiation of the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix in my participants' construction of butch identity, both as self and as label. In some instances, these normative instantiations are partially challenged, but overall, my examples demonstrate that when notions from within the sex-



gender-sexuality matrix are leveraged to define butch, challenge to normativity is difficult and rare.

Finally, I present two examples in which butch identity is constructed using definitional elements wholly outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. The first example does not construct a positive version of butch identity, but it demonstrates that butch can be conceptualized outside of the matrix. I present the second excerpt in this section as an example of the true emancipatory potential existent when butch is re-storied as a legitimate subject in and of itself, not reliant upon the terms of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, that by their very nature, render the butch invisible and abjected, hidden in the shadows of the normative grid of intelligibility.

**Chapter 6** explores the significance of my analysis. I highlight the contribution my research makes to the field of discourse analysis in the way that it leverages Celia Kitzinger's analytic technique of focusing on what does not get oriented to by participants in order to comment on what is taken for granted in participants' shared cultural understanding of social phenomenon.

I conclude with an exploration of the emancipatory potential my work offers to the field of LGBT studies in the form of an alternative approach to combating non-normative gender phobia. Many theorists have suggested remedying the binary, normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix simply by doing away with the words sex, gender, and sexuality. I argue, using Bakhtin as explored in Billig (1997) and Wortham (2001) that due to the history of language, this is an unlikely solution, and thus an unproductive path. Alternatively, I explore directions for further research in the form of new ways to define identities such as butch, femme, and even masculine or feminine, and the

emancipatory potential inherent in exploiting all the elements of gender identity that are not related to sex and sexuality.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will serve to display a rich history of scholarship about butches, but also to demonstrate a gap therein. I will present literature in three categories of approaches to examining butch: Scientific/objectivist approaches, Historical/Narrative approaches, and LGBT/Queer Studies approaches. All of the works selected deal at some point and in some way with butch and/or female masculinity as their subject matter, and while not all of them are explicitly saying something about the relationship between butch and the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, they all do it indirectly. I will demonstrate that there has been very little research done from a discourse analytic approach, and certainly none has deliberately addressed the emancipatory potential in constructing butch identity outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

### **Scientific/Objectivist Approaches**

This section addresses research about butches and butch identity that come from an objectivist epistemological standpoint. I have separated them into heterosexist and non-heterosexist subsections.

#### *Heterosexist Science*

I will begin by discussing several studies about butch that use a scientific approach. I have used the label 'scientific' because these studies all come from an objectivist epistemological stance; further, these studies are all constructed as scientific experiments.

It is not surprising that the first studies of a phenomenon that has retrospectively been labeled as 'butch' took place when science itself was exploding as a discipline. As Foucault has told us, Victorian science actually gave birth to all non-normative sexual

and gender identities due to its profound drive toward taxonomies (Foucault 1976). It was during the Victorian era that sexology as a discipline was born, and researchers such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1894) and Havelock Ellis (1905) began examining and describing the phenomenon of the invert.

Krafft-Ebing wrote *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886, in which he describes four degrees of homosexual behaviour in women: “women who were available to the attention of masculine inverts but not masculine themselves, cross-dressers, fully developed inverts who looked masculine and took a masculine role, and degenerative homosexuals who were practically male” (Halberstam, p. 76). Havelock Ellis picked up on this notion in his essay “Sexual inversion in women” (1895) and emphasized the difference between feminine inverts and masculine inverts. The former were womanly, but had been rejected by men and were thus pushed into the arms of the masculine invert, or the “congenital invert who was born to an essential female masculinity” (Halbertstam, p. 76). According to the dominant medical discourse of the day, the true or congenital invert was a woman who had sexual relations with women, but who also had a masculine gender identity.

The notion of inversion stayed relevant in many ways for homosexual women throughout this century, in no small part because it was picked up by author Radclyffe Hall in her novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which would become an underground lesbian classic from the 1930s until today. It is this notion of ‘inversion’ that Krafft-Ebing and Ellis’ examinations of butch contribute to understanding gender: ‘inversion’ as a concept upholds a normative, binary understanding of gender, but it also creates a space for the transgression of that norm. From a Foucauldian perspective, Krafft-Ebing and Ellis called the invert into existence by naming her; but in doing so firmly rooted this new identity in

the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. The invert is a subject solely defined by female sex, masculine gender, and sexual desire for women.

Terry (1990) describes a significant study conducted in New York City in the 1930s. In 1935, the psychiatrist Dr. George Henry convened the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants, formed to investigate the growing population of homosexuals in the city with the intention of discovering a cause and a cure for homosexuality. The committee consisted of “a panoply of medical specialists: psychiatrists, gynecologists, obstetricians, surgeons, radiologists, neurologists, ...clinical psychologists, an urban sociologist, a criminal anthropologist, and a former commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction” (Terry, p. 319). This list clearly demonstrates the medico/scientific discursive ownership of ‘homosexuality.’ Eighty participants were examined physically and psychologically, and after the collection of all materials from all the specialists, Dr. Henry had to resolve that the physical findings were inconclusive, but that there were patterns in the morphological and experiential elements.

Terry points out that the major, though certainly not the only, stumbling block for the committee was their insistence on remaining within a rigid, dichotomous gendered paradigm. Following the theories of inversion that came before them, they took all similar characteristics in the female homosexuals to be ‘masculine.’ They could not/did not conceive of woman-to-woman attraction as being possible outside the framework of male-female relations, and thus their findings contribute to the maintenance of the normative gender paradigm.

Singh, Vidauri, Zambarano, and Dabbs Jr. (1999) conducted a study investigating gender-discriminating behavioral, morphological, and hormonal measures in self-

identified butch and femme lesbians. Singh et al. confirmed the existence of butches and femmes in so far as they differ based on these 'gender-discriminating' characteristics by comparing butch participants' levels to males and femme participants' levels to females (straight women).

Basset, Pearcey and Dabbs Jr. (2001) use a similar analytic framework as they examine emotional characteristics instead of medical ones. They examine how jealousy functions among self-identified butches and femmes, concluding that while butches and femmes did not differ from each other when considering scenarios of emotional or sexual infidelity, they differed from each other when considering the attributes of the competitor that made them jealous. According to the researchers, the differences observed mirrored differences between straight women and straight men.

Singh et al. (1999) and Basset et al. (2001) attempt to avoid heterosexism by expositing the history of the terms "butch" and "femme" in their introductions, and in such statements as, "these findings make it more difficult to explain butch-femme distinctions as purely heterocentric labels applied to lesbian behaviour" (Basset et al. 2001, p. 162). But difficult or not, these researchers insist on continuing to apply these labels in this heterosexist manner. The findings are not the problem in these studies. It is the methodologies and conclusions that are inherently heterosexist, perpetuating the notion that butch-femme relations are simply a mirror of heterosexuality, and a perverted one at that.

The studies above all share a heterosexist framework. From my constructionist epistemological perspective, the scientific approach to studying social phenomena is misplaced due to its imperative toward categorization, and its need to compare results to

previously ‘known’ facts. Thus these studies, along with those done by Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and Dr. Henry, by their very design are doomed to project the pattern of male/female differences onto their same-sex participants, which not only leaves gender identity discursively rooted in the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, it maintains that matrix as normatively heterosexist.

*Non-heterosexist objectivist studies*

The following selection of further objectivist studies about ‘butch’ have a different relationship to the notion of gender. Kanner (2002) sets out to develop a ‘semiotics of butch’ with the intent of clarifying some common element of the constantly bifurcating lesbian community. She wishes to reduce the distance between subcultural style and the ‘real world’ and “work toward developing a genuine semiotics of butch that reflects both implicit knowledge and lived reality, and, in the process, to examine the nature of subcultures inside the lesbian world” (p. 29). She describes developing flash cards of various butch stylistic elements, and assessing ratings for each element, indicating how butch is butch. The resulting “genuine semiotics of butch” sounds eerily like a measure that could be used by the sexologists described above, representing the objective reality of butch aesthetics. Kanner does offer a new vector for the definition of butch identity: aesthetics. However, she does not explore *how* butch identity may be defined along this kind of vector. She simply states as fact that an objective aesthetic of butch exists, and proceeds to attempt to uncover it.

Smith and Stillman (2003) do not wish to comment on the objective reality of ‘butch’ so much as the objective reality of butch relationships. Conducting a content analysis of alternative newspapers from across the US, Smith and Stillman present us

with convincing statistics about how many lesbians identify as either butch or femme, and of those who do, how many specify partner preference, and of those who do, how many are looking for someone opposite to them, etc. All in all, they conclude that “the notion that butch-femme roles are enjoying a resurgence of popularity was not supported by our research” (p. 18). Smith and Stillman are not explicitly interrogating butch identity here but their objective approach clearly retains sex, gender, and sexuality as the whole story of definition for butches.

Hiestand and Levitt (2005) claim a grounded theory approach to open-ended interviews with women who self-identified as butch in order to “describe the developmental process of butch gender” (p. 65) and extrapolate “a model for butch gender identity formation” (p. 78). The model they derived from their participants is not prescriptive: they state that it “is not meant as criteria to judge whether a woman is butch or not, but rather is meant to highlight some of the unique challenges that many butch lesbians may face” (p. 78).

Hiestand and Levitt use ‘butch’ as one facet or version of gender expression. Furthermore, they are deeply committed to de-pathologizing cross-gendered identification in children and adults, suggesting that such identification may in fact be part of a healthy development into an adult sexuality. Here, we see the notion of butch, or female masculinity, still very much tied to a sexual identity of lesbian, but celebrated as healthy, normal and natural. The goal of the researchers is to construct a model that others may use to reinforce this ‘normal-ness’ that is all too rarely attributed to butch identifications.

However, despite my political and moral affinity to these authors,



epistemologically I group them with the previous studies. Their use of grounded theory belies an objectivism attributed to their participants' responses. Hiestand and Levitt view their participants' talk as reflective of an objective reality. Their study positions butch squarely in the sex-gender-sexuality matrix of definition when they claim to be tracing the development of a normal sexual identity.

The studies in this section are significant if only because they address butch as subject matter at all. Keeping butch on the pages of objectivist journals contributes to and maintains the significance of alternative identities as objects of study. However, these studies do nothing to address what may or may not be achieved from taking butch identity out of the realm of sex, gender and sexuality.

### **Historical/Narrative Approaches**

The next selection of research that I offer presents examples of historical and/or narrative approaches to studying butch. I have divided them into third-person historical works and first-person narrative works in order to provide a view to the important record keeping of butch history, a history that was often hidden as it was enacted. This is the primary importance of the following works; however, some of these studies also make important comments on butch identity's reliance on factors outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, particularly community.

#### *Third-person historical works*

Lillian Faderman's (1991) *Odd girls and twilight lovers: A history of lesbian life in twentieth century America* details the evolution of the lesbian communities in the US, from a decidedly liberal feminist perspective. Her description of butches and femmes of the 1940s through 1960s implies that these women identified as such and carried on this

formulation of relationship because they had no choice. Faderman provides an excellent example of how dominant liberal feminist discourses de-legitimized butch-femme identities, ironically continuing to project heterosexuality onto lesbian relationships. While she offers some interesting historical tidbits, her presentation of butch history strongly reinforces a normative, heterosexist, binary matrix and she does not acknowledge any alternative vectors of definition. Furthermore, her book is written as an historical account, claiming to accurately represent the objective reality of lesbian history. Her objectivist epistemology forecloses the possibility that butch may be defined in multiple ways, either inside or outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

Vernon (2000) does a masterful job of exploring the history of female masculinity without presenting that history as ‘reality.’ Vernon goes through details of the life of Colonel Leslie Ivor Victor Gauntlett Bligh Barker (born Liliias Irma Valerie Barker in 1895), who attempted to pass as a man on all fronts, from his working life to his military career to his relationships. But, as the result of a medical check-up in 1929, he was discovered to be biologically female. Vernon explores the details of his life, his marriage to Elfreda Howard, the subsequent perjury trial that arose from his falsely signing the marriage register as a man, and media coverage of the trial.

Vernon does not take as his project simply accounting for Barker’s life. Instead, he asks of these texts a valuable question: how (through what discursive regimes) did Colonel Barker exist? For example, Vernon points out that Barker was tried for *perjury*, not for having a non-normative sexual and gender identity, as these things were not actually criminalized under British Law at the time. However, clearly lawmakers had no

trouble passing normative judgment about Barker's identity through the use of other means.

The following study has rightly been (and continues to be) acknowledged as a classic in 'butch' literature: *Boots of leather, slippers of gold: The history of a lesbian community* (Lapovsky-Kennedy & Davis, 1993). In this book are collected numerous stories from a group of women that loosely made up the lesbian community in Buffalo from the 1940s through to the 1960s. From the end of the war years through to the explosion of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism, butches and fems<sup>2</sup> made up the majority of out lesbians. The stories captured in this book provide a window into an important history that has nowhere been so thoroughly and lovingly recorded.

The project goes to great lengths to explore the many ways that butches and fems defined their community, and through that, their identities. There is a real sense throughout that the participants were highly invested in the maintenance of their community and their identities were produced in and through that community maintenance. They use their participants' contributions to highlight the effect of elements external to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix on the construction of their identities.

The authors conducted a series of lengthy, open-ended interviews with their participants, and thematized their contributions into chapters with titles such as "A weekend wasn't a weekend if there wasn't a fight': The Tough Bar Lesbians of the 1950s," or "Nothing is forever': Serial Monogamy in the Lesbian Community of the

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<sup>2</sup> During the era and in the community about which Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis wrote, femme was spelled fem. In any instance in which I discuss their work, I will spell fem as they did. The definition remains the same.

1940s and 1950s.” Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis leave the description up to their participants, while their contribution is in highlighting interesting and meaningful aspects of the description, such as the role of race and social class in the community, or the relationship between lesbians and gay men in that time and place.

In introducing the chapter in which they explore the connections between the butch-femme image as a code of social behaviour and as a social imperative within the community, they make this particularly explicit.

The concept of the butch-fem image is somewhat misleading because it suggests that we are focusing strictly on the visual, when we are in fact considering personal inclination, social rules, community pressure, and politics. It is our experience that all language for talking about butches and fems is inadequate. For instance, the concept of butch-fem roles reduces butch-fem behavior to role *playing* and does not take into account the depth and complexity of butch and fem as an organizing principle which pervades all aspects of working-class lesbian culture. We, therefore, use the concept of the butch-fem image as a way of entering this complex culture, rather than as a way of simplifying it. (pp. 153-154)

Published in 1993, Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis were carrying out their research at the height of the lesbian-feminist ‘sex wars.’<sup>3</sup> Their book came out as, and remains, a document of unparalleled importance to lesbian history in the United States. *Boots of Leather* highlights and celebrates the complexities of butch existence, and thus the complex relationship between ‘butch’ and ‘gender’.

Marie Cartier writes two very interesting articles (2003, 2004) analyzing texts and narratives from this same era, though her project is analytic rather than historical like

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Sex wars’ is a term used to describe a period of fierce debate in feminist academia and activism in the 1980s about women’s relationship to sex and sexuality, focusing on issues such as pornography, prostitution, and sado-masochism. Elise Chenier (2004) writes that this period “is often characterized as a battle between ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ forces, but arguments over how to address problems of sexual violence and oppression, while at the same time giving consideration to female sexual pleasure and autonomy, were much more complex than such labels suggest.”

Faderman (1991) and Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis (1993). Both Cartier's articles attempt related but marginally different strategies for theorizing spirituality and theology through butch-femme sexuality. In the first she argues that the sexual practices of butches and femmes from the 1940s to the 1960s can be used as a source for a theology of corporeality (2003). In the second, she makes an overt claim that those same butch-femme communities created their own spirituality on the level of the individual or the couple; and further, that the self-defined community made up of these individual members served to function in many of the same ways any religious community functions that is held together by a common faith and/or theology (2004).

Like *Boots of Leather*, Cartier makes claims that pull 'butch' out of the realm of simple gender expression, and presents the far reaching and perhaps unexpected connections between butch identity and community, spirituality and theology. Cartier honours the complexities of gender by honouring the complexities of butch, similar to Lapovski-Kennedy and Davis (1993).

In Kraus' (1996) article, "Desire work, performativity and the structuring of a community: Butch-fem relations of the 1940s and 1950s" the author argues that community and individual identity definitions in the 40s and 50s butch-fem<sup>4</sup> circles were under constant threat. This led to the development of "desire work": the maintenance of an *appropriate* kind of relation between butch and fems, and an *appropriate* manner of signaling identity designed to maintain clear definitions. Kraus concludes that the subversion of failed heterosexual identities combined with the constant failure and

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<sup>4</sup> Please see note 2.

requisite procreativity of queer gender identities manifest a radical social construction of sexuality.

Kraus is using historical texts as sources for theorizing a certain kind of social process occurring in 1940s and 50s lesbian communities. Her article provides a contextualized example of the theory of gender performativity. She goes further, though, and like Cartier highlights the relationship between gender and community.

Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis (1993), Cartier (2003, 2004), and Kraus (1996) all use their historical accounts to highlight the importance of different facets of community in the construction of butch identities, and as such their accounts of butch identity are not wholly defined by the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

#### *First-person narratives*

Another type of important butch history is the personal narrative: stories told by the people who lived them. In the following paragraphs, we will see examples of such narratives.

Joan Nestle is perhaps the most important figure in this category, despite the fact that she herself is not butch. She has been instrumental in initiating and maintaining the Herstory archives in New York City, driven by a profound dedication to keep alive the memory of so many women who have fought to live and love how they want. One example of a story saved from oblivion by Nestle is the story of Mabel Hampton, from whom we get an indispensable look at the kind of community that existed in New York in that decade.

In 1920 I was about 17 years old. I lived at 120 West 22nd Street. ...

Next door, this girl, they were all lesbians, she had four rooms in the basement and she gave parties all the time. And sometimes we would have pay parties. We'd buy up all the food—chicken and different vegetables and salads and things, potato salad, and I'd chip in with them you know 'cause I'd bring my girlfriends in, you know. We also went to rent parties—where you go in and you pay a couple of dollars. You buy your drinks and meet other women and dance and have fun. (Nestle 1993, p. 932)

Here we can see a variety of social activities that were engaged in with some regularity.

She goes on to comment (indirectly) on the masculinity exhibited in these crowds:

Most of the women wore suits. Very seldom did any of them have slacks or anything like that because they had to come through the street. Of course, if they were in a car, they wore the slacks. And most of them had short hair. And most of them was good lookin' women too. There was singles and couples because the girls just come and bring—the bulldykers used to come and bring their women with them, you know. And you wasn't supposed to jive with them, you know. You wasn't supposed to look over there at all. (Nestle 1993, pp. 932-933)

Mabel's story provides details of a time and community that was not documented by mainstream sources. She gives a hint of the social codes of lesbian gender within early lesbian communities, and her references to the community put her narrative in the same class as the authors in the previous section.

Beyond the archives, Nestle has published several works, some of her own collected writings, and some collections of others' work. In *The persistent desire: A femme-butch reader* (1992), Nestle has collected works by self-identified butches and femmes with the express purpose of glorifying that mode of loving. In this collection can be found poetry, stories, personal accounts and essays, all of which come from a place of lived experience.

Sue Ellen Case (1998) writes a textured and nuanced memoir in "Making Butch: An historical memoir of the 1970s." Case describes her involvement in a period of intense change in the lesbian community of San Francisco: the overlap between classic

butch-femme communities and newer, hippie lesbian feminist ones. She writes of both groups, co-habiting the bar space:

It is this shared, but contested gaze that defines the intersection, the historical moment of this memoir. The time when hippie neo-butches encountered the classical ones. At Maud's: where lifestyle politics met ghettoized, closeted behavior; where middle-class drop-outs, students, and sometime professionals met working-class people who had slim, but tenacious hopes of doing better; where the 'sexual revolution' broke the code of serial monogamy; where costume and hallucination affronted sober dress codes and drink...Inside, a new historical moment was being forged whose legacy of confrontations proceeds down into the contemporary scene. (p. 37)

She goes on to describe what life was like in those times: how she and other "hippie neo-butches" were at once learning from and resisting classic butch style; how they identified as butch but strictly dis-identified with 'male,' which was irreparably tied to oppression and war in that time; how the result of this contested terrain was the introduction of the notion of style into the lesbian subculture, in which butch-femme, up until this point, had been simply 'the way we are.'

Case's article is noteworthy within the literature for two reasons. Firstly, it is the only piece (that I have come across) that represents this particular historical moment. Numerous sources refer to the shift in the community, but none explores the intricacies that actually made it happen. Secondly, Case's article explores what it means to be butch while repudiating the masculine, a perspective that is virtually absent elsewhere.

Like Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis (1993), Case's article is an indispensable resource for lesbian historians. Case's construction of butch, both in her experience and in her article, is one that truly opens the notion of butch as gender. Here, she acknowledges how gender identity and presentation can be deeply intertwined with other



identity elements such as class, political affiliation, employment status, educational status, etc.

Another moving personal account is Heather Findlay's (1998) emotional and deeply personal "Losing Sue," in which she tells of her split with her long time partner Sue because Sue decides to transition and become a man. She presents the story in the form of several diary entries over a period of six months between November 1996 and April 1997, beginning shortly after Findlay and Sue have split. Findlay explores the kaleidoscope of emotions she experienced regarding her love, her lesbianism, her feminism, and ends tentatively but hopefully, looking toward her future without Sue (now John). I found this contribution particularly devastating, as I related to the uniquely femme confusion and betrayal Findlay so poignantly described. Findlay, after telling of another former lover who transitioned from female to male, relays a chilling epiphany regarding her sexuality toward the end of her piece:

I feel bowled over by the realization that I've been living publicly as a lesbian for thirteen years, I'm a 'professional lesbian' even, and yet on some deeper (unconscious?) level, I was fucking *straight*. Like I still had one foot – maybe more than that – on the other side, like I couldn't leave or something. And I didn't even know it. I feel so stupid.

...

Looking now at losing Sue in a whole different way: it's not that I was in a lesbian relationship, and then my lover turned into a man, so we broke up because I'm not straight. No, it's something totally different, almost the exact opposite. I was in a fucking *straight* relationship, and it took John becoming John to make that explicit. (pp. 144-145, emphasis in original)

Findlay is not a butch, but her experiences as a femme contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the butch-femme dynamic, specifically of the crumbling/re-

envisioning of what that dynamic means in the face of gender transition from female(butch)-to-male.

While Findlay's story does an excellent job of blurring the lines of gender, sex and sexuality, it does leave the question of gender firmly rooted in that matrix via her reflections on her own sexual identity (queer vs. straight) being tied so tightly to her partner's sex (female vs. trans vs. male).

The historical and narrative works that study butch history and identity vary in their relation to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Faderman (1991) and Findlay (1998) remain fully entrenched in it; Vernon (2000) highlights the discursive regimes beyond sex-gender-sexuality that serve to define Colonel Barker; while Cartier (2003, 2004), Case (1998), Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis (1993) and Nestle (1992, 1993) all highlight the productive effects of community in the construction of the identities they focus on. While many of these studies do explore elements of butch identity outside or peripheral to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, such as community, they do tend to rely on the narrative of their participants as reflective of reality, rather than constitutive of it. Approaching participants' talk as constructive would lead to an entirely different sort of analysis: one from which this field could benefit.

### **LGBT/Queer Studies Approaches**

The works included in this category all could be described as LGBT studies or Queer studies. They are postmodern, critical, literary and cultural in orientation. Each of the following works examines, from a different angle, configurations of sex and gender that are uniquely butch: female masculinity, in its various forms. Beginning with studies of butches in literature, followed by comparisons of butch and trans identities, and

finishing with a variety of approaches to the specificities of butch identity itself, these works offer critical reflection upon the sexual, gender, and other elemental aspects of butch identity.

*Butch in literature: The Well of Loneliness and Stone Butch Blues*

To begin, I will discuss works that deal specifically with two books, both now considered classics of lesbian and/or transgendered literature. *The Well of Loneliness* and *Stone Butch Blues* both have as their protagonists masculine females. Studies written about these novels are pertinent in this literature review as both protagonists have been touted as epitomizing butch identity (among other things). A brief synopsis of each book will aid in the review of the literature that follows.

*The Well of Loneliness* was written by Radclyffe Hall and originally published in Britain in 1928. Set in 1920s Britain, *The Well* is the story of an invert (recall Krafft-Ebbing (1896 [1894]) and Ellis (1905)), the arguable historic precursor to the butch, born to a wealthy family who was expecting a son, so much so that they retained their original name choice for the child: Stephen Gordon. Stephen's is a tragic tale: she goes through life never sure that she deserves happiness, and certainly with no clear idea of how to find it. She is conflicted about her masculinity, feeling at once privately comfortable but socially awkward. She does have several lovers throughout her life, but ultimately her true love leaves her for a man. The novel ends with Stephen in abject despair, wringing her hands and pleading with God for mercy.

Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1991) is an equally tragic tale, but with a somewhat more uplifting conclusion. Jess Goldberg, the protagonist, tells the reader her tale of growing up butch in 1940s-70s north-eastern United States. Jess too struggles

throughout her life: her parents disapprove of her 'difference,' she gets harassed and assaulted by police officers, her true love leaves her in the name of feminism, she fights alongside the union leaders in the factories where she works all her life, and she chooses to take hormones to transition from female to male but ultimately knows that this will not 'fix' her. Like Stephen's, Jess' story is a constant but relatively unsuccessful struggle to find happiness. However, Jess does find a friend in the end and the reader is left with the two of them helping each other toward a better life.

Both novels draw heavily on their author's lives as both Hall and Feinberg identified as invert and butch, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Their characters have been alternately claimed as lesbian and transgendered. Both texts have been widely read, reviewed, critiqued and studied. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that these are the two most important works of fiction for lesbians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, though, I am only interested in reviewing the studies that specifically deal with the butch subject, not those that argue for either novel's place in lesbian history, or how the novels contribute to a positive or negative lesbian identity.

Many of the works that discuss *The Well*, with some notable exceptions, do so only as an example of the uptake of inversion theory into popular culture (Bauer, 2003; Fitzgerald, 1978, Innes, 1992; Taylor, 1998). However, the authors that take Stephen Gordon beyond a simple discussion of inversion theory, (for example, Newton, 1984) do so only as part of a greater theoretical project.

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<sup>5</sup> Leslie Feinberg identified as butch at one time, but now is firmly trans-identified and dedicates her life and work to fighting for trans rights (see [www.transgenderwarrior.org](http://www.transgenderwarrior.org)).

Esther Newton writes an important article in 1984 entitled “The mythic mannish lesbian” in which she “explores and speculates on the historical relationships between lesbianism, feminism and gender” (p. 559). She begins provocatively, questioning the readers of a well known feminist journal (*Signs*) at the height of second-wave, ‘woman-identified woman’ lesbian feminism<sup>6</sup>:

What to do...with that figure referred to, in various times and circumstances, as the “mannish lesbian,” the “true invert,” the “bull dagger,” or the “butch”? You see her in old photographs or paintings with legs solidly planted, wearing a top hat and a man’s jacket, staring defiantly out of the frame, her hair slicked back or clipped over her ears; or you meet her on the street in T-shirt and boots, squiring a brassily elegant woman on one tattooed arm. She is an embarrassment indeed to a political movement that swears it is the enemy of traditional gender categories and yet validates lesbianism as the ultimate form of femaleness. (p. 558)

In this quotation, Newton invokes two extremely stereotypical, and yet extremely realistic visions of masculine women. The former becomes the focus of her essay: the infamous Radclyffe Hall. This book was integral to the self-understanding of a whole generation of lesbians. Indeed, Cook (1979) writes “Most of us lesbians in the 1950s grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon’s swagger” (Cook quoted in note 5, Newton, 1984, p. 559).

Newton locates butch gender identity or female masculinity squarely at the centre of the sex/gender/sexuality matrix. Her central argument is that early feminists such as Radclyffe Hall “embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and the discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they

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<sup>6</sup> A significant offshoot of mainstream, white upper-middle class heterosexual feminism in the 1970s and 80s was lesbian feminism, in which lesbians fought for total autonomy from men. This included the necessity for all women to shed any trace of patriarchy, particularly the kinds of masculinities portrayed by butch lesbians.

desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship”<sup>7</sup> (p. 560).

Newton argues that the phenomenon of the mannish lesbian was required in order to reclaim female sexuality. Newton notes:

For bourgeois women, there was no developed female sexual discourse; there were only male discourses—pornographic, literary, and medical—*about* female sexuality. To become avowedly sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper) or as—or with—a lesbian in male body drag (a butch). (p. 573)

Newton read *The Well* as a text about sexuality, and therefore relegates female masculinity to a position of necessity within female sexuality, rather than a position of choice or celebration. Indeed, her discussion of butch identity remains so deeply embedded in a heterosexist normative matrix of definition that she argues that a woman’s only ways to become sexual at all are to occupy one or the other side of the masculine/feminine gender binary.

The studies of *Stone Butch Blues*, on the other hand, are more closely focused on butch identity. Both Moses (1999) and Prosser (1995) align the protagonist Jess Goldberg’s ‘butchness’ with a transgender identity. Highlighting Jess’ role as a working class butch and a union leader, Moses examines the links between socioeconomic structures, gender identity development and resistance to oppression in the novel.

Prosser, on the other hand, uses Jess’ narrative in an attempt to reclaim the trans-identity from the queers. Prosser argues, quite rightly, that trans subjectivities have become *the* trope of queerness, within both academia and activism, because trans people are living breathing examples of the performativity of gender. Trans identities involve

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<sup>7</sup> Romantic friendships were a late Victorian bourgeois phenomenon involving women developing profound and meaningful relationships, often at school or college, in which sexuality, if existent at all, was silent, secret and hidden.

gender in constant motion, moving through, into, around and beyond stable gender identities; what has been glorified is the unrooted trans in perpetual motion, with no home and no fixed place. Prosser argues that while Jess could easily be viewed as such a subject (for example, Jess begins a hormone transition but turns back, unhappy with the result), Jess' narrative actually contains strong themes of wishing to go home, wishing to belong. This, argues Prosser, is much more representative of many trans people's stories, where the transition is a journey, but there is a desired end result.

Prosser and Moses position themselves in opposite camps. Moses argues that although Jess' character is undeniably built as having an essentialist gender identity, gender itself is postmodern as it is constructed as performative in the novel. Conversely, Prosser demands that we read the narrative in its uniqueness, that,

in spite of the apparent pull toward postmodern hybridity, *Stone Butch Blues* requires that we reconstitute the transgendered narrative, that we re-learn how to read narratives of gender in their specificity and break from our tendency to trace them over and over again onto the same master (anti-)narrative of Queer Theory. (p. 490)

Both of these works offer an interesting perspective on butch and gender, but one that remains defined from within the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Firstly, they both claim Jess' 'stone butch' identity as a transgendered identity. In this case, in the discussion of a literary character, the positioning of her in a trans identity because she experiences alienation from her body (sex) and difficulty in relationships (sexuality), these authors remain committed to the matrix for definition. Secondly, they both highlight different, intersecting identity elements beyond gender as playing a role in the construction of the narrative and the character: Moses introduces class and politics; Prosser introduces emotional positioning (e.g. feelings of belonging or wanting to belong). But at the end of

the day, the butch identity is constructed by Moses and Prosser as a (trans)gender identity within the sex-gender-sexuality matrix of definition.

*Butch vs. Trans identity*

It is not solely in relation to *Stone Butch Blues* that butch is claimed as a trans identity. In transgendered scholarship, there is a constant struggle over the border between butch and FtM<sup>8</sup>. *Gay and lesbian quarterly* published the results of a debate between pre-eminent theorists Judith Halberstam (self-identified butch), and C. Jacob Hale (self-identified FtM) about the so-called butch/FtM ‘border wars.’ In a note on their collaboration in this issue, Halberstam and Hale describe what they had noticed in various queer communities that led them to this project.

FTMs complained that butches (seen unequivocally as lesbian women or as just ‘playing’ with gender) were incorrectly identifying themselves as transgendered or transitioning. Some FTMs felt that their transsexual or male seriousness and uniqueness were being diluted by the presence of butches. Some butches responded by pointing out that their problems with gender ambiguity were worth discussing in transgender settings and that already available lesbian community settings were not safe places for open conversations about their concerns. (Halberstam & Hale 1998, p. 283)

As a result of these, and various theoretical skirmishes that occurred in the mid-nineties around the same subjects, all of which were further compounded by the “highly publicized execution-style murder of a young Nebraskan”<sup>9</sup> (Halberstam & Hale 1998, p. 284), both Halberstam and Hale “have tried to expose the stakes behind the highly

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<sup>8</sup> FtM is a shorthand term used to refer to a transsexual identity involving an individual’s transition from female to male.

<sup>9</sup> This ‘young Nebraskan’ has been called Brandon Teena, Brandon, Teena, Teena Brandon, and various other things. Hale (1998) spends a good portion of his article arguing that we cannot claim a name for this young person because that would lead to the stabilizing of his/her gender identity, which is impossible and immoral since s/he cannot speak for his/herself anymore.



questionable cultural projects...of stabilizing the terms *transsexual*, *transgender*, and *butch*" (Halberstam & Hale 1998, p. 284, emphasis in the original).

In Halberstam's article, she comments tellingly on the 'border wars' and their relationship to masculinity. "The border wars between transgender butches and FtMs seem to proceed on the assumption, shared by all sides, that masculinity is a limited resource, available to only a few in ever-decreasing quantities" (1998b, p. 287). She acknowledges the sometimes blurry line between butch and FtM, in that often transsexual men will begin by coming out as butch lesbians, and then eventually enter into transition. However, she notes that this leads to a continuum of masculinity. Beginning with androgyny at one end (not masculine), the continuum moves through soft butch, butch and stone butch to FtM at the other end (very masculine). She dislikes this model of masculinity because it does not account for the fact that gender dysphoria is experienced in different ways by different people. She quotes an FtM performance artist who wrote into an FtM newsletter saying, "I have a (genetically female) friend who identifies as male and passes perfectly. He's never had a shot [of hormones]. I certainly know dykes who are butcher than I could ever be, but who wouldn't consider identifying as anything other than women" (JordyJones, quoted in Halberstam 1998b, p. 292). Halberstam continually returns to this statement as she spends the rest of the article attempting to re-envision masculinities that are unrelated to essentialisms like bodily manipulation.

Hale (1998) spends a great amount of time discussing the reasons why the living cannot and must not claim ownership over bodies that are dead. That is to say that we cannot claim that someone *was* butch, transgender, or transsexual if they did not identify as such before their death (as was the case with the murdered Nebraskan youth). His

argument is that there are people who live all their lives in the border zones of sexual and gender classification, and that these zones are necessary if we are to acknowledge the specificities of different forms of gendered and sexual existence. He argues, “Any politics based on totalizing, simplifying, binary analysis that mistakes a central position within a category for the totality of the category will, of necessity, be impoverished” (1998, p. 340). It is not empowering or helpful to insist on stagnant definitions of subject positions such as butch or trans, or on stagnant relationships between these positions.

As a queer academic, Halberstam (1998b) moves away from the sex-gender-sexuality matrix in her argument for a re-storying of masculinity in a way that does not involve bodily essentialization. On the other hand, Hale (1998) would identify as more of a trans theorist, and he remains closely tied to the matrix. Indeed, his argument highlights the borders, and his work celebrates those that live on the borders, but those borders are the border of sex, gender and sexuality.

### *Uniquely butch*

If we were to continue along the spectrum of masculine female identities with FtM being at the outside, perhaps the next identity in line would be the Stone Butch, captured all-too poignantly in *Stone Butch Blues*. The stone butch is generally categorized by her sexual or intimate untouchability, her insistence on being the active partner in love-making. A stereotypical view of stone butch identification would see it as stemming from a profound gender dysphoria, in which sexual touching and pleasure remind the stone butch of her female-ness, and this is traumatic for her and thus becomes pathologically avoided.

Anne Cvetkovich (1998) discusses the emotional elements of a butch identity in her article “Untouchability and Vulnerability: Stone Butch as emotional style.”

Cvetkovich explores the stereotypical untouchability (both emotional and sexual) of butchness as a set of conventions for expressing feeling. She makes a series of interesting and compelling arguments, for example the notion that butch can be seen as distinctly feminine, as traditional femininity and stone butchness both involve the desire to give, to give pleasure, to service a lover’s desire. She argues that this perspective on stone butchness can be a strategy for dismantling stereotypes and stigmas, for example that the untouchable butch is somehow pathologic or rigid.

Cvetkovich explores the relationship between emotional and physical untouchability. She asks,

To what extent does the stone or untouchable butch who resists being sexually touched, also resist being made to feel, in part because feeling is associated with vulnerability and femininity? Emotional untouchability can be the public side of sexual untouchability when the butch lesbian’s (female) masculinity depends on and is defined by her refusal to be made emotionally vulnerable or to display feeling publicly or openly. (p. 160)

Here Cvetkovich gives a great and specific example of how butch identity presentation can be intimately and definitively tied to elements that are outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

Robin Maltz (1998) also examines stone butch subjectivity. She discusses stone butch ‘realness,’ and while she begins by stating that her concept of ‘realness’ is to represent both the essential and the constructed nature of this particular identity, she clearly values the ‘fixity’ of the stone butch identity as compared to transsexual or transgender identities, insinuating that the stone butch is strong enough to remain in between genders/identities. She solidifies this perspective when she argues that FtM

handbooks do not posit 'man' as a stable signifier to work toward, but rather 'butch' as a stable signifier to *avoid* in order to pass. Further, she constructs stone butch in opposition to the lesbian category of butch, explicitly valuing the deeper "realness" of the stone butch over the lesbian butch. She does not define the latter, but she insinuates it as less masculine and less real, as the lesbian butch's identity comes primarily from her outward appearance, whereas the Stone Butch's identity comes from 'deeper within.' Maltz remains tied to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, but it is a non-normative matrix in her work. Her discursive construction of multiple butch identities challenges the binary norm of gender that is traditionally found in the normative matrix of definition.

Innes and Lloyd (1995) argue that a butch's realness must be definable, since we know it when we see it. In their article "G.I. Joes in Barbie land: Recontextualizing butch in 20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian culture," Inness and Lloyd argue against the infinite elasticity of the butch identity. They begin by making the all-too true statement, "although few lesbians can agree on the precise definition of butch, most do agree about who is or is not butch, thus there must be some specific, observable characteristics a lesbian must display before she will be labeled butch" (p. 3). Inness and Lloyd present four elements that are commonly understood as butch: masculinity, wanting to be a man, being the 'top' in bed, and a desire for femmes: all elements deriving from the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. They spend the majority of the article constructing an argument for "masculinity, not sexual desire and choice of sexual object, [as] the chief identifying trait of the butch" (p. 19), and while it is indeed important to recognize that butches do not all desire femmes, and do not all want to be the 'top' in bed, Inness and Lloyd's argument maintains the

primacy and exclusivity of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix in their discussion of the butch gender identity and visibility.

Visibility due to masculinity is an element of butch identity that has been defined by some femme academics (for example, Walker 1993) as a privilege, in that butches are visibly queer, unlike femmes whose visibility is often predicated on their proximity to a butch. Shane Phelan (1998) challenges this theory. Phelan argues that in reality, butches are constantly rendered invisible, by the mainstream, particularly by a liberalist/assimilationist homosexual political agenda, and even in queer circles. Liberalist politics work through adopting convention in all other forms save one's sexuality (including gender conventionality). Queer theory, argues Phelan, constructs butch as the quintessential performative, thus making "gender transgression a political action in and of itself, thus relieving the transgressor both from oppression and from any further political obligations" (p. 197). Phelan points out, and rightly so, that the experiences of butches the world over, whether activists or not, would dispute this.

Halberstam (1998c) echoes this sentiment. She begins by pointing out the dubious 'privilege' of butch visibility, arguing that being a visible gender transgressor often leads one to become the victim of violence. Like Phelan (1998), she argues that we need more, not less, writing about female masculinity, but like Walker (1993), she is concerned with the consistent connection between femme and butch. She argues

...perhaps this perverse coupling is precisely the problem; when butch-femme is a coupled subject, butch represents visibility and lends queerness to the femme and the femme is rendered completely butch-dependent. The construction also privileges the couple form and establishes gender as the primary, indeed the only, dynamic of difference at work. Butch, like any other gender identity, also relies heavily upon racial and class constructions and the racial and class identities of the butch and femme in that fabled butch-femme couple may intervene in the primacy of the butch-femme dyad. A couple may

as easily be primarily identified in relation to interracial lines of difference as gendered lines of difference. (p. 60)

Phelan and Halberstam both bring in axes of definition here that exist outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Halberstam steps explicitly outside the matrix, arguing that gender identities are reliant upon constructions such as race and class. Phelan, on the other hand, invokes the notion of politics having the capability to render visible or invisible the butch identity.

Eves' (2004) article "Queer theory, butch/femme identities and lesbian space" takes this notion of visibility, and combines it with ideas of lesbian space to interrogate butch and femme identities. She takes up a constructionist epistemological framework, presenting identities as contingent and shifting, and discourses as constructive and constitutive of meaning. By examining accounts of butch and femme lesbians, she "attempt[s] to situate these accounts in specific social, material and discursive locations and relate the construction of specific subject positions to issues of visibility, power and space" (p. 481). Eves focuses primarily on identifying different interpretive repertoires used by her participants to talk about their own identities and how these are experienced daily.

While there are numerous studies of gender that could be defined as communicational, for example discourse analysis and conversation analysis, very few of these deals specifically with butch gender. Eves' study highlights the discursive nature of butch identity construction, and highlights in her participants' talk elements of their identities that fall outside of the matrix, such as space and visibility.

All the works categorized here as LGBT/Queer Studies approaches to studying butch provide a critical and constructionist view of identity and gender, using a variety of tools to highlight a number of important aspects of butch identity such as butch's unique relationship to masculinity and sexuality; the middle ground the butch occupies between lesbian and transgender; and the emotional, physical and political effects of these specific configurations and how they relate to (in)visibility. While some of the authors highlighted above do successfully raise the significance of elements of butch identity that are unrelated to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix (Cvetkovitch 1998; Halberstam 1998b), none of these works address specifically the primacy of this matrix to the definition of butch, and whether or not this is positive or necessary. Further, all but one of the studies in this section (Eves 2004) rely on intertextual or personal definitions of butch. That is, they do not utilize everyday talk as the basis for their understandings or discussions of butch identity construction.

### **Summary**

This literature review provides a selective window to the various literatures that deal with butch identity as their subject. Studies that approach butch from an essentialist, objectivist epistemological perspective, such as those in my first sub-section, leave butch defined wholly by sex, gender, and sexuality, most often in a normative, binary way. Many of the historical and narrative works about butch identity highlight the way community has played an important role in the formation of butch identity over the years. However, these works often remain essentialist in their treatment of narrative data; that is, the narratives are taken as reflective (rather than constitutive) of reality. Finally, the LGBT/Queer Studies approaches to butch identity can be found to both challenge and

maintain the tight links between sex, gender and sexuality. However, these studies do not address the question of the primacy and exclusivity of the matrix in the definition of butch, nor do they interrogate everyday talk as the significant meaning maker in that definition.

None of the literature I have presented above investigates the significance to the broader study of gender of defining butch in ways that are unrelated to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, be it normative or not. Even Eves' (2004) study, the only one that uses a discursive approach to identity construction, fails to interrogate the possible repercussions *for gender identity* of participants defining their identities using elements such as visibility and space. In order to address this gap in the literature, I argue from a poststructuralist perspective that normative, binary gender definitions lead to exclusion, and it is in this realm of exclusion that butch remains, theoretically speaking. However, structuration theory and ethnomethodology argue that talk-in-interaction is the raw material of meaning making. When I apply this necessary poststructuralist deconstruction of normative gender to an examination of talk-in-interaction, I am able to demonstrate that at times, butch is discursively constructed using elements outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, and it is in these instances that butch becomes a legitimate subject independent from the exclusionary power of normative, binary gender.



### **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

In the following chapter, I will explore the theory supporting the two fundamental assumptions outlined in the introduction: 1) gender functions as a norm in social life that constricts and excludes the experiences of many people, resulting in sometimes extreme effects; 2) meaning generally, and the meaning of gender specifically, are constructed in communicative interaction. These two related principles are essential in order to argue that butch becomes legitimized as a subject when it is discursively constructed outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix; that is, as unrelated to normative binary gender.

To begin, I will present a poststructuralist approach to the understanding of gender, demonstrating how normative gender functions to create exclusion. Secondly, I will use Giddens' theory of practical consciousness to argue for individuals' shared understanding of these specific cultural norms of gender. Finally, I will demonstrate how the ethnomethodological approach to gender marries well with poststructuralism, and provides the necessary attention to individual agency.

#### **A poststructuralist approach to understanding gender**

Poststructuralism arose as a theoretical response to structuralism, in which 'meaning,' 'reality,' and 'truth' resided in a symbolic realm, and elements of this realm derived their meaning through structural relations to other elements. That is, structuralism argued that there was an objective reality, an objective truth, and that if theorists could only figure out the formal, logical relationships between symbolic elements, such as those in language (Levi-Strauss), true meaning would be the reward (see for example Barthes 1973; Levi-Strauss 1969; Saussure 2006).

Poststructuralist philosophy argues the opposite: there is no objective truth, but we believe in objective truth because we collectively construct that as a reality.

Postructuralism asserts that language, or discourse, is constitutive of 'reality.' That which we believe to be 'real' or 'true' is constituted in the ways that we talk/write/read about it. Further, a postructuralist would argue that what we believe to be 'true' is only what the current dominant cultural order deems to be true. Therefore, the perpetuation of the dominant cultural order's discourse about any subject constitutes it as truth (see for example, Foucault 1976).

Postructuralism is interested in power, and argues that power is not something that can be possessed by individuals. Power is an effect of discourse; as the dominant cultural order's discourses constitute 'truth,' they constitute 'knowledge,' and an effect of this is that the reigning cultural order reproduces its power as defining the 'truth.' Indeed, Foucault (1976) has taught us that discourse is power; power is exerted in knowledge or 'truth,' and this 'truth' is discursively produced.

Gender is a particularly productive subject for poststructuralist analysis for the very reason that the 'truth' of the two-gender system is so pervasive, so much so that it hardly makes sense to conceive of a single 'ruling class' that benefits from the perpetuation of this model. Indeed, as I will expand upon below, a two-gender system is a foundational part of a much broader moral order that may have a number of identifiable sources (religion, medicine, law, etc.), but the effects of which can be seen in all conceivable social arenas (Foucault 1976). Foucault and others who have used his historical approach, have done important work in identifying these sources, work that explains part of the puzzle, but not all of it.

A poststructuralist approach to understanding gender argues that the mainstream configuration of gender is discursively produced: it is a story we tell and retell ourselves, one which both ‘explains’ and perpetuates gendered life as we know it. It is the dynamic existence of this ‘story’ which this project seeks to interrogate. Kessler and McKenna (1978), who we shall revisit below, have provided the most succinct summing up of the two-gendered model.

1. Male and female are the two and only two genders.
2. Gender is stable and enduring. That is, you always are, you always have been and you always will be the gender assigned to you at birth (or before).
3. An essential aspect of gender is one’s genitals. Females have a vagina and males have a penis.
4. Anyone who does not clearly belong to one of the two gender categories is a joke or abnormal.
5. There are no transfers from one gender to another with the exception of pretences (e.g. ‘drag’ parties).
6. Everyone belongs to one of the two gender categories – there is no such thing as someone without a gender.
7. Two and only two gender categories is a ‘naturally’ occurring fact.
8. Membership in one of the two gender categories is ‘natural’ and inevitable.

(Kessler & McKenna 1978, pp. 113-114, quoted in Weatherall 2004, pp. 101-102)

The only element that, for my purposes, needs to be added to this list is that a part of each gender’s definition is a sexual attraction to and desire for the ‘opposite’ gender. An inherent result of falling into the category male (due to one’s genitals, as pointed out above) is an expected sexual desire for females, and vice versa. It is the cultural insistence on the links between these various elements (genitals determine sex, which

determines gender and sexuality) that collectively constitute the normative version of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

It is necessary to highlight here that I am not arguing that a vast majority of people consciously believe that all of these 'rules' are true, or that they should be true. Indeed, in recent decades we have seen great strides in mainstream acceptance of alternative 'lifestyles,' particularly gay and lesbian lifestyles, but also in the realm of gender bending. However, I will argue through Butler's theories of gender and Giddens' theory of structuration, that these rules still adequately capture the basis of most people's talk about gender. Though systemic (e.g. legal) and generic (e.g. social/cultural) acceptance has increased, the strictures found in Kessler and McKenna's 8 rules (and my 9<sup>th</sup>) still underwrite everyday talk about gender. This is the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

This version of gendered life is characterized by many individuals unquestioningly and unreflectively (re)producing their gender identities and gender itself over time. It is also characterized by many individuals who are left feeling at best uncomfortable and ill at ease, and at worst thoroughly alienated from themselves and others due to a lack of fit with this model. It is this latter group whose experience of gender calls for a renewed approach at explaining it.

### *The performativity of gender*

What are the precise mechanisms by which gender is discursively produced, and what are the effects of its production? Judith Butler has presented a sustained poststructuralist critique of the two-gender system for almost 20 years, and her assault began with the argument that not only is gender produced discursively, but it is produced

through a certain performativity (Butler 1989). Not only do we repeat the ‘story’ of the two-gender model as a ‘truth,’ but it becomes intrinsic to everything we do, as we go through the mundane experiences of everyday life. The key to Butler’s theory is not only that we consistently reproduce what it is to behave ‘like a girl’ and ‘like a boy,’ but that we also performatively reproduce the fact that there are *only* girls and boys. Thus, the ways that we performatively (re)produce our own gender identities simultaneously reproduce the two-gender system outlined above.

After *Gender Trouble* (1989), the notion of performativity was widely contested. It was largely misread and criticized for suggesting that gender was something we could don and doff at will, or play around with and change for the purposes of activism, pleasure or fun. Theorists from such camps as trans rights and feminism argued that this view of gender laid the blame for gender difference squarely with the differently-gendered individual, and that not all non-normative gender identities were variants of drag, but were often far more serious and not the result of choice.

As this type of critique was based on a gross misreading of the theory of performativity, Butler revised and clarified it in numerous subsequent writings. In 1991, she elucidated the result of the heterosexist imperative by pointing out the often-disguised mode of control exerted by naturalized sexual and gender dichotomies.

Here it becomes important to recognize that oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects—objects, we might call them—who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law. (p. 19)

In this paper she is referring specifically to the hetero/homo binary of sexuality, but in her later work *Bodies that matter* (1993), she echoes many of the arguments from 1991 in

relation to gender. In both cases, Butler presents queer 'imitations' of heterosexuality as exemplary of the performativity of gender. In 1991, she discusses butch-femme lesbian relationships as imitative of heterosexual coupling, and in 1993 she writes about drag performance as imitative of heteronormative gender. In both cases, she argues that to make the claim of imitation is to accord the imitated some a priori status, and thus to naturalize it. But the imitated is only original (i.e. the viable subject) insofar as it is differentiated from its copy (i.e. the abject), and therefore it is not original at all.

However, a simple reversal of positions is impossible, since the imitator only precedes the imitated *as a copy*. Therefore, Butler writes: "...the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term" (1991, p. 22). To speak of butch-femme relationships as imitative of heterosexual ones is to accord heterosexuality a primacy that, when examined further, it logically cannot claim.

Butler goes on to suggest that which is constituted as viable and natural (heterosexuality and the male/female dichotomy) is simply a copy of a copy of a copy, always striving to achieve a cultural ideal that has no origin, but that is kept alive in the social psyche only by its constant repetition; hence 'performativity.' Butler's discussion of drag makes sense as it is an obvious performance of gender, but her point is that an individual doing drag does not only perform gender, s/he performs *the performance of gender*. Gender is always and only the performance of itself (Butler 1991, 1993).

Butler's contribution to gender studies is in her deconstruction of the two-gender model. She argues that not only do we perform masculinity and femininity day by day,

moment by moment, but what makes 'masculinity' and 'femininity' coherent such that we know it when we see it is that we all are striving for the same ideal, which is constantly being recreated in our striving. The key to Butler's argument is that there is no ideal. There is no original 'woman' or 'femininity' that can serve as the model. We think there is, we operate on that principal because part of the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix is that this two-gender system is 'natural,' 'essential,' that it resides within each of us. Emancipation exists in the notion that if there is no ideal, then there is no true 'femininity,' no true way to behave or look that is dependent upon your morphology. Furthermore, there is no 'true' or natural way for your body to be configured.

Fundamental to my argument here is Butler's contention that when we performatively reproduce our own gender identities in a normative fashion, striving after the unattainable ideal of masculinity or femininity, we simultaneously reproduce the whole sex-gender-sexuality matrix, and the definitional reliance of each element therein on the other two.

### *Gender as a norm*

More recently, Butler has written extensively about how gender functions as a norm (2004). She argues that to conflate the meaning of gender with its normative instantiations (masculinity and femininity) is to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender. Butler writes,

To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. (2004, p. 42)

The particularly insidious aspect of the two-gender ‘story,’ the one that Kessler and McKenna so clearly elucidated for us above, is that gender gets wholly and exhaustively defined as including *only* masculinity and femininity. The cost that Butler refers to above is the vast array of identities that are *not* properly defined as masculine or feminine.

These alternative “permutations of gender which do not fit the binary” may be discursively relegated to the “domain of objects,” but there is an emancipatory power to be found here. This domain of objects is discursively and inextricably linked to the normative instantiations of gender, as one could not exist without the other. Therefore, it is simply a matter of searching the discourse for these phantom objects, and drawing them into the foreground.

The norm of binary gender is sustained through the performativity of gender, functioning in such a way as to allow us to recognize it when we see it, but also to recognize when we ‘should’ see it but do not. Butler puts it another way,

The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it. (Butler 2004, p. 42)

When gender functions as a norm, the grid of legibility it creates allows certain practices and actions to become recognizable as masculine and feminine, and all other actions and practices become illegible. However, these illegible actions, these social configurations that reside in the illegible “domain of objects” are still defined in relation to the norm, hence they have life, they exist. There might be a story of ‘abnormality,’ of ‘illness’ of ‘the unnatural,’ but the story exists.



This definitional relationship that exists between the illegible and the norm results in two things that are of particular interest here. Firstly, because the illegible remains defined in relation to the legibility of the norm, the illegible will always be accessible through the norm, and vice versa. This provides the ability to examine the construction of ‘butch,’ illegible within the grid of the norm, in order to comment upon gender as a whole. Secondly, this definitional relationship exists in discourse, meaning that challenge to the norm is possible through the re-storying of the “domain of objects” as legitimate. The illegible’s relationship to the norm has only to be re-cast as a constructive, productive, dialectical relationship rather than a relationship of exclusion and abjection.

The difficulty when discussing norms and performativity, and with poststructuralism more broadly, is it becomes easy to lose any sense of agency, and to end up with individuals being conceived as cultural dupes. The following two critiques highlight what poststructuralism overlooks. Not surprisingly, they both are based in phenomenology, calling for attention to lived experience.

*A call for agency: Critiques of poststructuralism*

In an article discussing the utility of gender as a category of analysis, Young (2002) explores Toril Moi’s argument that the only viable option for queer theorists is to abandon ‘gender’ altogether in favour of a concept of the lived body. Moi recognizes the cogency of Butler’s arguments, but points out that although “Butler successfully calls into question the logic of the sex-gender distinction, ...her theorizing never goes beyond these terms and remains tied to them” (Young, p. 414). The result, argues Moi, is that the

relevancy of Butler's theory to the lived experiences of queer people is called into question.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, Moi wishes to rework Butler's theory with a concept of 'lived body' because it refuses the terms of Butler's debate. "The idea of the lived body...refuses the distinction between nature and culture that grounds a distinction between sex and gender. The body as lived is always enculturated" (Young, 2002, p. 416). Interestingly, Butler also delegitimizes the nature-culture distinction on the basis that the construction of sex, and not only gender, is cultural. However, the process through which her theories have been taken up have certainly retained the terms 'sex' and 'gender,' and it is these terms Moi finds problematic.

The notion that poststructuralist analytic methods displace subjective authority even as they decenter oppressive objective regimes is a common critique of queer theory and poststructuralism more generally. In his article "Phenomenology as method in trans studies" (1998), Henry Rubin argues that phenomenological theorizing is essential in assuring that the experiential knowledge of transsexual and transgendered subjects gets valued in queer scholarship.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I would agree with Moi that the destruction of the sex-gender distinction often (not just in Butler's work) remains tied to the terms it seeks to deconstruct. However, I do see the value of Butler's theories to everyday experience, and would argue that they are only inaccessible due to their opaque academic style.

<sup>11</sup> Rubin's particular focus is on the trans subject, and he is part of the significant debate in queer and trans studies about the place of the trans subject. Rubin's concern is for trans subjectivities that are deemed by queer scholarship to be "not radical enough," for example FtM's who identify as heterosexual men. These subjectivities have been critiqued within queer theory, and radical feminism, for taking part in the essentializing of gender. Significantly, Rubin points out that the trans subject has been upheld within queer theory as the vanguard of the radical for the reasons mentioned above. So a trans person who constructs their gender identity in an essentialized manner is a threat to a radical queer agenda. It is for this reason, argues Rubin, that the experiences of 'straight' trans people have heretofore gone unrepresented, inadvertently or otherwise.

Rubin argues that the Foucauldian poststructuralist approach to queer theory requires the infusion of phenomenology in order to restore agency to the trans subject.

Discursive genealogy can historicize phenomenological accounts, while phenomenology can insert an embodied agent-in-progress into genealogical accounts. I have come to believe that phenomenology and genealogy are complimentary methods that augment one another's strengths. The political advantage of this methodological hybrid is the potential to mend the rift that has developed between many marginalized communities and the scholarship that has been written about them. (p. 279)

Rubin's ultimate goal is not to discredit the important work of queer theory, but to acknowledge that while "Subjectivity may be discursively constituted...it remains meaningful" (p. 279), and that the interior lives and authentic experience of subjects cannot be ignored within the queer project.

Moi and Rubin's critiques offer us two important considerations. Poststructuralist understandings of gender require a concerted acknowledgement of the importance of individual subjectivity and lived experience in order to reaffirm agency in the discussion of individuals and culture. The way to achieve this is by consciously combining theories and methods to ensure that all the necessary ground is covered, as Rubin does with phenomenology and discursive genealogy.

Butler shows us the path along which we shall journey with her incisive description of how norms function in the realm of the social. But how do we identify this "grid of intelligibility" that Butler insists is defining the parameters of what will appear within the domain of the social? And equally importantly, how do we do this while retaining a sense of individual agency, and not theoretically allowing this grid of legibility to exist above, outside of, or beyond the individuals who invoke it?

Anthony Giddens provides us with the theoretical explanation we need to see that the grid exists with each of us, and that the understanding of meaning that we share in practical consciousness and daily reproduce in interaction is that which reproduces the grid and leads us to intelligibility in the first instance.

### **The grid of legibility: Structuration and practical consciousness**

It is Giddens' (1984) contention that "In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible" (p. 2), a contention that clearly echoes Butler's performativity of gender. For Giddens, an agent's daily life is dominated by inter-actions, in which all participants are knowledgeable agents, to the extent that they are able to 'go on' in social interaction. That is to say that knowledgeability is that which allows us to communicate with other agents. This knowledge resides in an agent's *practical consciousness*: that which allows her to reflexively monitor her own and others' actions. It is the work of practical consciousness that enables a conversation to continue smoothly. The knowledge accessed by an agent's practical consciousness is all those elements of social interaction that we take for granted. Indeed, two agents that are socially and culturally located with some level of proximity will have a more closely aligned shared social knowledgeability.

In the instance of interactional confusion, the confused agent will have to ask for clarification in order to 'go on.' Then the *discursive consciousness* of the agent is responsible for rationalizing whatever action was cause for confusion. It is not until she is called to verbally account for her actions that an agent's discursive consciousness must engage the practical consciousness. It is through the rationalization of action (provided by discursive consciousness) that agents judge one another as competent social actors.

The most important element of Giddens' model of the agent is the notion of reflexivity. In social interaction, agents are constantly monitoring each others' conduct (via practical consciousness), and reflexively applying the results of this monitoring to their own continued participation in the interaction.

So, agents in interaction with one another are constantly reflexively monitoring their actions by way of the knowledgeability that is accessed by their practical consciousness. But what is the basis of this knowledgeability? According to Giddens, this is structure. Agents judge competency of other agents self-consciously when they ask for verbal explanations of action, but otherwise they are constantly monitoring each other without thinking about it, and the criterion they use for this monitoring is whether or not an agent's actions are intelligible. When actions are intelligible, they are taken for granted, not commented upon, and the interaction continues smoothly. That which makes an action intelligible is whether or not it is understandable as part of a system of social practices. Structure is the properties which allow similar social practices to exist across time/space, lending them a 'systemic' form. It is here that we begin to understand perhaps the most important element of structuration, the duality of structure. That is to say that structure is both the medium and the outcome of social practice. It is that which allows us to read each other's actions as intelligible, but in making our actions intelligible we are reproducing the structure that allows them to be so.

Butler's explanation of norms and the "grid of intelligibility" they place on social action is clearly mirrored in Giddens' theory of the duality of structure. The norm of gender is that which renders certain actions legible as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' but in

reading actions as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine,’ we recreate the norm that allowed us to do the reading in the first place.

Another way that Giddens (1984) gives us to conceptualize structure is the rules and resources an agent instantiates in interaction. Giddens understands ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ quite specifically within his theory of structuration. Rules are the methodological procedures of interaction that reside in the agent’s practical consciousness. They determine the agent’s ability to constitute meaning and they allow the agent to sanction others’ modes of conduct. Resources, on the other hand, are the media through which power is exercised as a routine element of social interaction. That is to say that resources are the structural properties that give agents control over people (authoritative resources), or over material items (allocative resources). Rules and resources are always instantiated together, and they are always used/instantiated in sets.

Again, we can see the application here to Butler’s understanding of the norm of gender. This norm is used/instantiated when agents mobilize resources such as normalized gender presentations in order to exercise the routine power of the binary gender model, while simultaneously sanctioning (or challenging) others’ gendered presentations by recreating the rules by which these presentations may be judged.

Structure, made up of rule-resource sets, is not real, concrete, or codified. Structure exists as memory traces within an agent’s practical consciousness, and becomes real only when it is drawn upon and/or recognized in social interaction between knowledgeable agents. As such, within a social totality, the most deeply embedded structural properties are understood as structural principals. Moreover, within the same totality, practices (as governed by structural principals) that exhibit the greatest

time/space extension are what we know as institutions. Therefore, Giddens explains structuration as follows. “Analyzing the structuration of social systems [made up of institutions] means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction” (1984, p. 25).

Using Giddens’ definitions, the sex-gender-sexuality matrix qualifies as a social system, made up of the institutions of sex, gender, and sexuality, each in its normative and abject modes. According to Giddens then, analyzing the structuration of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix means studying the modes in which this matrix is produced and reproduced in interaction.

I am proposing an analysis of the matrix itself, not simply one or another element thereof. That is, I wish to analyze the implicative definitional relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, in both its normative and non-normative forms, and I intend to apprehend this relationship through a focus on a non-normative gender identity: butch. To use Giddens’ and Butler’s terms, butch would be the abject shadow of the institution of normative gender. Recalling from Butler that the illegible is always paradoxically defined in relation to the grid of intelligibility, an analysis of butch will allow us to gain purchase on the normative and non-normative definitional relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality.

The theorization above of how gender functions as a norm requires grounding, pinning down. Social norms are by their very nature pervasive, and impact all aspects of social life. If we are to explore this discussion in the realm of lived experience, we must select a specific aspect of social life to analyse. Butler (2004) argues, and rightly so, that

“[n]orms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce” (p. 41). As a result, poststructuralist analysis often focuses on these effects, for example law or policy. Poststructuralist analysis often centres on social subjects’ constitution via the regulatory power of codified norms (see for example Foucault, 1976). While subjection to law or policy certainly describes many individuals’ lived experience, often the notion of agency is lost and/or seems out of reach when discussing subjectification via large social systems (government, education, law) as we saw via Moi and Rubin’s critiques. Rather, the realm of social experience that is accessible to all individuals and retains the possibility of agency is communicative interaction, specifically talk. This is the raw material of meaning making, it is the basic element of the social. It is in the fabric of communication, the back and forth of conversation, that norms are perpetuated and contested, maintained and challenged.

While Butler’s assessment may be accurate, that norms operating in social practice often remain implicit and that they are most dramatically found in the effects of these social practices, one might argue that waiting for the ‘effects’ to materialize is not an ideal course of study, as these ‘effects’ are most often adverse. That is, I am interested in taking on the perhaps more problematic task of examining the implicit, the difficult to read, precisely the functioning of the norms of gender in social practice. Though structuration provides the theoretical connection between Butler’s grid of legibility and how this grid is sustained through the interactional reproduction of the institution of normative gender, we are still left without guidelines for a substantive program of study.



Ethnomethodology, which informs and is reflected in both Butler and Giddens, provides the final piece to this theoretical pyramid: it is a roadmap for the study of social practice.

**Ethnomethodology: The willingness to sustain gender**

An ethnomethodological approach to understanding gender was pioneered by Kessler and McKenna (1978), but their work was strongly based on previous work by Garfinkel (1967) and Goffman (1976). Garfinkel worked with a transsexual named Agnes, and with her help he identified the gender rules she reproduced and maintained in order to coherently maintain her identity as a woman. Agnes was successful in maintaining her 'woman' identity, thus proving that these gender rules could be used by a body not born 'female' to achieve the status of woman. Further, Agnes' story demonstrated that there were gender rules at all, that gender did not simply grow organically from a body's sex.

Another contribution of Garfinkel, substantially advanced by Goffman, were his infamous 'breach experiments,' in which his confederates would enter situations with naïve participants (i.e. in public, with individuals who were not affiliated with Garfinkel) and would behave in a manner directly contradicting accepted social custom. The discovery here was that the naïve participants would do everything they could to normalize the behaviour of the confederates, in order to make it understandable within their cultural matrix of intelligibility. The observations from the breach experiments, not surprisingly, contributed to Giddens' theorization of the practical consciousness. The social customs that Garfinkel was testing, which could also be Giddens' rules, or Butler's norms, occupy such a powerful position in individuals' consciousnesses that we give a solidly concerted effort to funnel experience into a pre-existing perceptual structure.

In line with the breach experiments, Goffman (1976) went on to develop the notion of ‘gender displays,’ or behaviours evoked by individuals with the express purpose of foregrounding their gender. Goffman’s observation was that “what characterized a person as a man or a woman was not an expression of biological sex or learned gender. Instead what characterized an individual as being a man or a woman was *their willingness to sustain, and competence at sustaining*, the appropriate schedule of gender displays” (Weatherall, p. 102, my emphasis). This was a major step from earlier social learning theories about gender as it introduced a real sense of agency and choice in an individual’s gender identity maintenance.

Kessler and McKenna built on the work of Garfinkel and Goffman, but added an original dimension of their own: namely that gender work is not only done by the displayer, but by the perceiver as well, making it a joint achievement in interaction. This clearly reflects the discoveries of Garfinkel’s breach experiments, and Goffman’s observations about individuals’ willingness and competence as key elements of gender maintenance.

In my view, one of the most important contributions of Kessler and McKenna’s work was the identification and distillation of the eight ‘commonsense’ rules of gender that we saw above. These rules make up the reigning power/knowledge regime of the binary, normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Kessler and McKenna argue that when doing gender displays in interaction, both the displayer and the perceiver are working from a base of these eight rules, and further, they collectively reproduce them in the doing and perceiving of gender work.

West and Zimmerman (1987) revisit Garfinkel's example of Agnes to highlight "what culture has made invisible – the accomplishment of gender" (p. 131). Despite her lacking the socially agreed upon criteria for membership in the female sex, she attained the categorical status of female by sustaining appropriate identificatory displays. They also acknowledge Kessler and McKenna's (1978) argument that our "genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life; yet we continue through our social rounds to 'observe' a world of two naturally, normally sexed persons" (p. 132). Agnes was able to claim 'femaleness' because of this most powerful social resource, namely "the process of commonsense categorization in everyday life" (p. 132). West and Zimmerman argue that Agnes did not have to achieve ideal femininity, she simply had to preserve her categorization as female.

Sex category and gender are different, as a woman can be seen as 'unfeminine' but this does not mean she is 'unfemale.' However, they argue like Garfinkel (1967), that sex category is omnirelevant, meaning that any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature. Thus, "to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment" (p. 136). I would go further to say that it is not so much a "risk" of assessment as a sure thing: whether that assessment goes unnoticed because there is nothing remarkable in the behaviour, or the assessment is one of failure to live up to the norms, our 'doing gender' is assessed either way. And even further, every assessment of this kind ultimately leads to the maintenance of or challenge to the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Thus to 'do' gender is to 'do' the matrix.

Ultimately, West and Zimmerman are interested in commenting on gender, power and social change. They make the point that institutional arrangements, specifically those in which men are dominant over woman, are powerfully legitimated when they are constructed as reflecting ‘natural differences.’

If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—are called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions). (p. 146)

West and Zimmerman are specifically focused here on equal rights for men and women, but their observation is easily extended to non-normatively gendered people.

Applying West and Zimmerman’s analysis to the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix outlined above, we can successfully argue that if we do gender ‘appropriately,’ we render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on a binary system. If we fail to do gender appropriately, or as Goffman so brilliantly highlighted, if we exhibit an *unwillingness* to sustain an appropriately binary gender formation, we as individuals will be called to account.

Finally, West and Zimmerman argue that gender is embedded in all social interaction; indeed, it is integral. They go so far as to argue, and I would agree, that “the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men *whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production*” (p. 126, my emphasis). As we learned from Garfinkel and Goffman, people try to normalize behaviours or interactions that fall outside of their grid of intelligibility. If they are unable to corral certain experiences into the grid of ‘normal,’ the perpetrators of the ‘abnormal’ behaviour are stigmatized,

shunned, or at worst, made invisible. Their status as competent members of society is revoked.

Analytically and theoretically, this is where ethnomethodology and poststructuralism come together so productively for the study of gender: when a person's status as 'socially competent' is revoked due to their culturally unintelligible behaviour, the behaviour is aligned with any/all other phenomena that are equally unintelligible. For example, historically, non-normatively gendered individuals have been constructed as 'sick', requiring medical and psychological attention to become 'well' (i.e. normatively gendered). The discourse of illness becomes conflated with the discourse of gender, and this subsequently becomes institutionalized in ways such as 'gender dysphoria' being defined as a mental illness in the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic Manual. Or for example, earlier in this century, we saw this type of institutionalization in laws that ruled it illegal to go out in public with fewer than three articles of clothing that were deemed to belong to your gender. These are examples from scientific/medical and legal/judicial power/knowledge regimes.

These power/knowledge regimes result in the perpetration of great violence toward individuals whose bodies/identities fall into this 'danger zone' as they get called to account for their unwillingness to sustain a 'normal' gender identity. We know of multiple examples of individuals who underwent significant and unnecessary physical 'treatments' like electroshock therapy (for example, see Scholinski 1998) by the medical establishment in an attempt to 'cure' them of their 'illness;' and thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of queer people have been imprisoned, not to mention physically and sexually assaulted, by agents of the legal establishment for not conforming to laws

about clothing! And the individuals perpetrating these ‘treatments’ and ‘consequences’ are positioned by the power/knowledge regimes they occupy as ‘doing the right thing,’ ‘protecting these people from themselves.’ They are extended a special social standing and respect reserved for those doing society’s most important work.

The examples of gender dysphoria treatments and clothing laws are the perfect example of Butler’s assertion that norms are most clearly discernible in their effects. However, in order to curb that kind of institutional subjectification, it is necessary to examine the social practices that sustain the belief that ‘abnormal’ gender means ‘illness’ or ‘illegality.’ That is, we must examine how these cultural constructs exist in the social practice of communication: talk.

The following will be an analysis of the structuration of gender in talk. As Giddens suggests above, I will explore the modes in which gender, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction. If we consider that the *knowledgeable activities of situated actors* are accessible to us through ethnomethodology, and that *rules and resources* can be identified through poststructuralism, we begin to see how we might study *the modes in which the matrix is produced and reproduced in interaction.*

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Theoretically, we have established that gender functions as a norm in social life and that it is constructed in communicative interaction. Therefore, in order to apprehend how gender functions as a norm, we must examine communicative interaction for how gender is constructed. Discourse analysis (DA) is the necessary methodological approach, but DA represents a wide and varied field of approaches to examining talk-in-interaction. In order to most effectively employ the particular theoretical approach I have outlined above to the question of butch identity construction in conversation; that is, in order to maintain focus on communicative interaction while utilizing as a filter a poststructuralist understanding of normative gender, a very specific brand of DA is required.

I will follow with an explanation of the three approaches to discourse analysis: Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PSDA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Conversation Analysis (CA). Each of these has something to offer my project. However, they have often been represented in the literature as incommensurable. I will offer a brief overview of some debates in the field of DA, with a focus on extradiscursive context and participant orientation.

Gender is intimately linked to the concept of identity, as we saw in Butler's notion of performativity and in Garfinkel's 'gender displays.' In order to achieve the thorough texture that I seek in my analysis, I will draw on some useful elements from research on discourse and identity. Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) and Gergen and Gergen (1997) show us how identities are constructed to serve a purpose from moment to moment in interaction; Wortham (2001) and Billig (1997) show us how insights from Mikhail Bakhtin function in examining 'inner states' such as identity.

Finally, Gubrium and Holstein (2000) provide an integrated approach to examining discursive practice and discourses-in-practice via analytic bracketing. This allows an analyst to address both what is being said, and how it functions in conversation. It is via this approach that I will alternately be able to treat what is being said and how. It is through this alternating approach that I will apply the insights of discourse analysis of gender and identity to create the necessary and specific discourse analytic approach to my data. Only this combination will allow me to draw out my argument that when gender is defined from within the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, it is difficult to challenge, but when it is defined outside of that matrix, that is a challenge to gender norms in and of itself.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Traditionally, language has been understood as a direct transmitter of meaning. In social research, language, in the form of interview data for example, was seen to reflect internal states of being: emotions, opinions, identities. Researchers used the language of their participants' responses, to access and interpret these internal states (Silverman 2001). A relevant example is research on language and gender.

Traditional language and gender research has been lumped broadly into three categories, described best by Stokoe and Smithson (2001):

“deficit (for example, Lakoff, 1973); dominance (for example, Fishman, 1978; Spencer, 1980) and difference (for example, Tannen, 1990). Within these perspectives, it was argued, respectively, that women's speech style is inferior to men's, that patriarchy is realized at the micro-level of interaction, or that women and men occupy different subcultures and so develop different, but equally valued, communication styles.” (p. 218)

This research was about how men and women speak, and how men and women were spoken about. All three of these approaches looked at language as reflecting some 'truths' about the differences between men and women.



Weatherall (2004) points out, however, that with the advent of constructionism, there was a turn to the study of what discourse was accomplishing. These elements (the differences in men's and woman's speech, and the ways men and women are spoken about) became seen as part of the same process and the 'truth' value was questioned: "According to [a poststructuralist] view, knowledge about women's and men's speech styles may not be objective, absolute truths about gender and language, but rather an effect of a society where men and maleness are valued over women and femaleness" (p. 79). Indeed, this kind of research became viewed as *a part of* the normative discourse of gender and gender inequality.

Because discourse has traditionally been used as a way to access individuals' internal feelings or attitudes, about gender for example, it is not surprising that psychology as a discipline has provided many of the leading thinkers in the field. Potter and Wetherell (1987) provide a succinct explanation of a constructionist perspective from discursive psychology. Essentially, the view is that people use language to do things. People use language to construct versions of the social world, and these versions are constructed in specific ways and at specific moments. A discourse analyst is interested in why certain versions are constructed in certain contexts, how versions are constructed, and how they function/what do they achieve in a given interaction.

Discourse analysts take a discursive perspective on the construction of reality. Reality for them is not static, objective and observable, but dynamic, in constant (re)production in discourse. Accounts or versions of reality can vary between individuals in the same interaction, and even within one individual's contribution to an interaction. Indeed, discursive analysts do not look for constant, enduring 'attitudes,' for example, but

rather focus on how an individual constructs an ‘attitude’ at a given moment in interactional context, and how that construction functions.

While this constructionist perspective informs all forms of discourse analysis, there is a wide variety of analytic approaches that all come to the data looking at and for specific things. Below, I will outline Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (PSDA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), all unique ways of doing research on discourse. Within the field of discourse studies there is fiery debate among all three of these strands, but I will demonstrate that there are elements from each that are necessary for my examination of the construction of butch in conversation.

#### *Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis*

Poststructuralism argues that gender is a discourse “because it is an integral part of social life that is produced through everyday language and talk” (Weatherall 2004, p. 83). A poststructuralist discourse analysis of language and gender will focus on what is being achieved in interaction. Often this type of analysis will focus on the management of an ideological dilemma, examining what contradictory versions are constituting the commonsense understanding of something in an interaction. For example, Kitzinger and Thomas (1995) argue that various constructions and dilemmas associated with labeling behaviours as sexual harassment function to render sexual harassment less visible and more difficult to challenge in practice.

Moreover, a poststructuralist discourse analysis might seek to identify interpretive repertoires, practical ideologies or discourse. These are the “often contradictory and fragmentary notions, norms and models which guide conduct and allow for its justification and rationalization” (Wetherell, Steven & Potter 1987 in Weatherall 2004, p.

91). By Giddens' definitions, the analyst is seeking to identify rules and resources within the practical consciousness of participants. In identifying these, the analyst may comment on what sort of power/knowledge regime is being upheld, perpetuated or challenged by participants in a dialogue. For my purposes, a poststructuralist analysis will serve to render visible a binary construction of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, and to show that its construction achieves the naturalization of gender identities that fit the binary, and the abjectification of other identities.

A poststructuralist discourse analysis does not support any particular 'truth' value; rather, it seeks to "identify the different accounts given (sometimes by the same person) and to consider any inherent contradictions, thus highlighting the discursive nature of the problem" (Weatherall 2004, p. 92). This approach, like the poststructuralist theories of gender outlined above, has been critiqued as positioning participants as simply parroting cultural norms with no agency or choice. Further, a debate exists in the literature about DA regarding relevance and context, and whether it is reasonable to comment on the particular identity of the speaker that may be of interest to the analyst if it has not been explicitly made relevant within the talk. This debate will be examined in detail below.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

CDA is specifically focused on power and oppression as they function in discourse. It can be, and often is, informed by a poststructuralist approach to analysis, but CDA is always focused on tracing ideologies in discourse. Unlike strict PSDA, CDA does espouse a sort of 'truth,' the truth of oppression. As Fairclough puts it,

The starting point for CDA is social issues and problems...it does not begin with texts and interactions. ...The dramatic problems in economy and society...lie, I would argue, at the root of the problems, insecurities of

contemporary social life. If CDA wants to address the latter, it has to have a picture of how language and semiosis figure in the former. (Fairclough 2001, pp. 229, 232 in Sunderland 2004, p. 10)

The critical part of Critical Discourse Analysis is heavily infused with Marxism and Marxist views of ideology. CDA is interested in the dialectical relationship between discursive and extra-discursive practices, including material processes such as the division of labour and the means of production (Sunderland 2004).

Finally, CDA also concerns itself explicitly with human values, interests and understandings. Whereas in traditionalist social research, as well as much of PSDA above and certainly as you will see in CA below, the analyst is cautioned to remain neutral, seeking insights only where they can be identified in the data. CDA eschews this convention of neutrality, and values analysts' subjective insights into the data (Sunderland 2004, p. 11). Not surprisingly, much feminist discourse analysis would fall under the CDA umbrella. This deviance from traditional social research extends to participants' voices as well. CDA often takes a more realist approach to participants' data: while always tracing the function of ideologies throughout, a CDA will also be more likely to interpret a participant's talk as reflective of reality.

Ultimately, CDA has a powerful and engaging vision of a necessary political commitment in scholarship and academia. A Critical Discourse Analyst is an active force in society and politics. Always working toward changing the mechanisms of social oppression, the goal of CDA is to feedback research findings into the political process in a way that is the most likely to bring about desired changes. (Wetherell 2004, p. 384)

This is precisely how my own research benefits from an infusion of CDA: I do not hide my political engagement or my contention that there is a reality of oppression that exists

in the lives of non-normatively gendered individuals. Furthermore, I relate strongly to the CDA imperative to do research for the primary purpose of changing oppressive social circumstances.

While it is clear that CDA differs markedly from PSDA, it is even farther removed from CA. The following explanation of CA will clarify the epistemological and methodological dilemmas that exist within discourse research as a whole.

### *Conversation Analysis*

CA is a direct descendant of the ethnomethodology described in the previous chapter. The difference between Conversation Analysts and Ethnomethodologists is simply that they focus on investigating language in social interaction, rather than the broader focus on generally how individuals understand their worlds.

A conversation analyst approaches discourse on a micro level, examining the joint achievements of talk in interaction. CA is concerned with the ‘rules’ of talk, and it has a whole repertoire of such rules. These rules are not invariant, but are normative and interpretive, and simply provide a guide for the analyst to identify moments in interaction as unremarkable or deviant (Weatherall 2002).

An important element of CA is the identification of forms of conversational organization, such as adjacency pairs: greetings, question-answer, requests-consents/rejections, invitations-acceptance/declination, etc. These are normative, as we can see if they are breached, for example if a question goes without an answer. It is common for the speaker (the questioner) to force a response in this case by re-repeating the question until a response is forthcoming (Weatherall 2002). This is the conversation

analytic way of codifying the results of Garfinkel's breach experiments: that is, codifying the specific conversational strategies individuals use to normalize abnormal interaction.

A further example of this with respect to adjacency pairs is the concept of preference structures: responses are either preferred or dis-preferred, depending on the context. For example, often, the preferred response to an invitation is an acceptance, the dispreferred response is a declination; however, in some cases the preferred response is a declination (e.g. if the responder knows that the invitation was only made for the sake of politeness). Either way, a dis-preferred response will always have a far more complicated structure, while a preferred response will usually be short and straightforward. Also, the normative structure of a response is inherently affiliative. That is, it demonstrates a sensitivity to the other speaker. "Thus, the normative structure of preferred and dis-preferred responses promotes a sense of social solidarity. This is one illustration of how conversational organization and social processes are intricately linked" (Weatherall 2002, p. 111). The latter half of that statement is key to an understanding of CA: that the point of studying conversational organisation is as a tool to understand the social. Much CA gets extremely technical, and transcripts can be prohibitively unrecognizable due to profuse notations. Conversation analysts often keep track in their transcripts of things like interruptions, aspirations, length of syllables, etc., but quality CA goes beyond the logical dynamics of adjacency pairs; it connects the way we speak to the way our lives are structured.

Being that my research relies on the ethnomethodological premise that gender is a *joint* achievement in interaction, I see no way to carry out an analysis that does not include attention paid to conversational organization, such as can be found with CA. In

order to provide a well rounded argument regarding contrasting ways that gender is constructed in relation to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, I will include a conversation analytic approach to examining how the definitions get done interactionally, as well as analyzing what the definitions themselves have to say.

*Debates in discourse analysis*

While PSDA, CDA and CA all share the umbrella classification of Discourse Analytic approaches, there are clearly some glaring differences between them. Wetherell (2004) provides an excellent overview of the important debates between discourse analytic perspectives. She begins with the one that is perhaps most glaring, the question of an analysts' political engagement. Clearly, CDA advocates a highly engaged, politicized stance. With this comes a view of the world that pre-exists the data. That is, Critical Discourse Analysts come to the data already with an idea of what kinds of problems and what forms of domination they will be looking for.

This is in direct conflict with CA, which argues for an analysts' neutrality. The most vocal critic of CDA from the CA camp is undoubtedly Emmanuel Schegloff, who argues that a critical stance on discourse research is not just bad scholarship, but bad politics. The issue for Schegloff is the analyst imposing her/his view of the world on the data.

However well-intentioned and well-disposed toward the participants...there is a kind of theoretical imperialism involved here, a kind of hegemony of the intellectuals, of the literati, of the academics, of the critics whose theoretical apparatus gets to stipulate the terms by reference to which the world is to be understood – when there has already *been* a set of terms by reference to which the world was understood – by those endogenously involved in its very coming to pass. (Schegloff 1997, p. 167 in Wetherell 2004, p. 385)

This quotation demonstrates CA's strict commitment to participants' construction of the world in interaction. He has been a vocal critic of CDA, and his critiques have sparked significant debate in the literature (Billig, 1999a, 1999b; Schegloff, 1999a, 1999b; Weatherall, 2000; Wetherell, 1998).

Schegloff's quotation above also hints at another, closely related debate in the literature: the question of context. From a CA perspective, the only context available to the analyst is the immediate text surrounding the particular excerpt under scrutiny. Strict CA argues that while an analyst may think that a subject is relevant in an interaction (gender, for example), unless the participants directly orient to this subject, the analyst is barred from commenting on it.

This is clearly not the case in CDA, nor in PSDA. Both of these approaches rely on a broader context than that which can be seen directly in interaction. For CDA, as mentioned above, the focus is on discursive ideologies at play in a text. For PSDA, expanded context is achieved by reliance on the concept of intertextuality, or the lack of defined boundaries between discourses. PSDA examines discourse at a macro level, and while it is always rooted in a text (whether written or spoken, contemporary or historical) it goes beyond that text, often linking it to related discursive regimes.

#### *Contesting CA: Extradiscursive context*

These dilemmas are often faced in research on discourse and gender. The following examples demonstrate how they have been addressed in productive ways.

Stokoe and Smithson (2001) explicitly take on these debates in their article "Making gender relevant: conversation analysis and gender categories in interaction." They invoke a conversation analytic warning against attempting to identify gender



‘indices’ in talk, pointing out that often this results in reproducing gendered stereotypes (for example, claiming that femininity is being indexed when lipgloss is discussed by participants). In order to avoid this, they commit to treating gender only when it appears as a category in participants’ talk.

They demonstrate through a review of conversation analytic approaches to gender in talk that what counts as ‘orienting to’ or ‘indexing’ gender has shifted “from a restrictive definition comprising explicit gender references to much broader but contestable indexes such as the use of sexist language particles, pitch of voice and intonation, references to sexuality and gendered activities” (p. 225). This leaves them, however, with a conundrum: can indexing gender be recognized without the analyst using their own background knowledge and culture?

Stokoe and Smithson argue from a clear feminist perspective for the reflexivity of the analyst. They make the point that gender is a cultural phenomenon and cannot be identified or discussed at all without the analyst using her/his cultural understandings about gender. Ultimately, their work shows that if the analytic stance of CA is challenged, namely that the analyst must leave their cultural knowledge out of analysis, then CA is indeed compatible with a feminist agenda.

In her article “Doing feminist Conversation Analysis,” Celia Kizinger (2000) clearly delineates the difficulties feminists (and other critics) have had with CA, but through an examination of excerpts of talk regarding date rape and coming out stories, she demonstrates that “the alleged ‘troubles’ are in fact strengths which enable the development of a clearly feminist analysis” (p. 188).

She highlights the ethnomethodological social theory behind CA that positions participants as active agents, instead of “victims of heteropatriarchal structures” (p. 188). She also resists the trap of bringing categories to the data by not framing her studies as being about sex (or sexuality) difference.

Instead of subordinating the data analysis to already existing a priori categories of gender, sexuality or other dimensions of social power, the aim was to explore how genders, sexualities and power are accomplished in interaction. ...In feminist CA, oppression and resistance are not simply abstract theoretical concepts but become visible as concrete practices.... (pp. 188-189)

This is where Kitzinger’s study truly shines: by utilizing the tools of CA but with an explicitly feminist agenda, she is able to demonstrate that the domination that Schegloff deems to be so extradiscursive is in fact instantiated practically in concrete discursive practices.

*Contesting CA: Studying what does not get oriented to by participants*

Kitzinger offers another challenge to the strictness of CA, specifically challenging the rule that an analyst may only comment on what has been oriented to as relevant by the participants in interaction, in her study “Heteronormativity in Action: Reproducing the heterosexual nuclear family in after-hours medical calls” (2005a). In this article, Kitzinger analyses excerpts from after-hours calls made to doctors on call and demonstrates how callers mobilize nuclear family reference terms in order to produce themselves as having the right to be calling the doctor on behalf of someone else, thus using and reproducing heterosexism simply in conducting the business of their ordinary lives. Kitzinger analyses instances of interactional trouble to show how assumptions are made and treated in conversation. But interestingly, she also points out the importance of instances in which there is no interactional trouble. Her analysis demonstrates,

heterosexism can be produced and reproduced, even—and perhaps especially—where there is no sign of trouble in social interactions. It may be particularly important to target for analysis precisely those everyday interactions which seem unremarkable, where nothing special appears to be happening, because what is always happening on such occasions is the reproduction of the normal, taken-for-granted world, invisible because it is too familiar. (pp. 495-496)

Although she does not explicitly address the CA rule I am referring to here, she gives the precise argument against it. In her call for more attention to be paid to instances in which “nothing special appears to be happening,” she is implicitly contravening the rule that only that which participants orient to as relevant can be commented upon by analysts.

Kitzinger makes this even more explicit in her article “‘Speaking as a heterosexual’: (How) does sexuality matter for talk-in-interaction?” (2005b). Here, Kitzinger analyses a number of now ‘classic’ CA data sets, collected and analysed by other researchers for other purposes between the 1960s and 1980s. Kitzinger’s purpose here, however, is to demonstrate the ways that heterosexuality is routinely deployed as a taken-for-granted resource in ordinary interactions. She writes, “a distinctive feature of these ‘displays’ of heterosexuality is that they are not usually oriented to as such by either speaker or recipient. Rather, heterosexuality is taken for granted as an unquestioned and unnoticed part of their life worlds” (p. 223). This notion of looking for the taken-for-granted in data is particularly applicable to my project.

By definition, the matrix I am discussing is the one primarily defined for us by Kessler and McKenna’s eight rules (and my own ninth) and this matrix is profoundly embedded in our practical consciousness. While I will be able to draw attention to some gender norms that are contested in interaction, I will also need to demonstrate how the definitional connections between sex, gender and sexuality implied by the matrix concept

exist in a taken-for-granted fashion in the talk of my participants. This involves highlighting what does *not* get oriented to, that which is taken for granted.

Kitzinger encourages conversation analysts to treat the everyday world as problematic and to explore how, and in the service of what other actions, taken-for-granted elements such as heterosexuality are assumed and deployed.

More broadly, we might ask what is happening when nothing special is happening: when the second is in a preferred relation to the first; ...; when presumed ordinary experiences are treated as ordinary—what is happening *then*, how is *that* done, and what kind of world must we be living in that these things run off smoothly? (p. 259)

When things “run off smoothly,” then they are as they should be, and it is this ‘should’ that gives the analyst pause. This approach is applicable to so much more than the study of heterosexuality. That is the goal of this project, to use the examination of how butch is constructed in conversation to make evident the definitional functioning of the taken-for-granted sex-gender-sexuality matrix of meaning.

Indeed, if we employ Giddens’ theory of practical consciousness, we can see that Kitzinger’s approach is entirely appropriate. Furthermore, we can rely on the argument of Stokoe and Smithson (2001) that analysts share cultural resources with their participants, particularly in the case of talking about the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, as it is so deeply prevalent among all levels and sectors of society.

Recall Giddens’ model of an agent’s practical consciousness in which a social agent is only able to go on in social interaction due to a shared understanding of the elements of communication that comes from practical consciousness. An agent’s practical consciousness is made up of all the elements that allow her to *go on* in social interaction, and this includes a shared cultural understanding of elements such as turn

taking rules in conversation, as well as cultural understandings about things such as the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. By this logic, as analyst I would be unable to interpret the conversation of my participants (in which I was also a participant at the time) unless on some level I shared elements of my participants' practical consciousnesses. This is, of course, the basis of what makes a culture. The more closely agents' practical consciousnesses are aligned, the more culturally fluent they are with each other.

Thus, the fact that I am able to analyse or interpret the conversation of my participants at all suggest that I share with them a certain level of understanding of cultural rules. My job as a critical analyst is to be sensitive to and aware of these shared elements. And by their very nature, many of these elements remain hidden from immediate view due to their existence at the level of practical consciousness. Kitzinger (2005a, 2005b) has argued successfully that in order to approach critical subject matter, such as heterosexism in her case, and non-normative gender configurations in mine, an analyst is not only permitted, but is indeed responsible for using her own cultural knowledge to paint a picture of what is not immediately evident in the conversational data in order to wrest meaningful analysis from it.

I will demonstrate in my analysis that it is often precisely the instances in which nothing is oriented to that provide the best evidence of shared cultural understandings residing at the level of practical consciousness.

We will return to these insights below in a discussion of how a combination of discursive approaches will allow me to examine how butch identity, constructed in conversation, shows us that when gender is defined from within the sex-gender-sexuality

matrix, challenge to normativity is difficult, but when gender is defined outside of this matrix, this is a challenge in and of itself.

My final addition to the collection of insights comes from discourse research with specific focus on identity. This work is relevant to my project as butch is understood not only as a subset of the cultural category of gender, but it is also understood as a specific variety of identity. For reasons I will expand upon below, the lessons learned from research on identity are widely applicable to my study of gender.

### **Relevant insights from discourse and identity research**

Recall the theoretical concept introduced by Butler, and echoed by West and Zimmerman, that the performativity of gender means that when we perform our gender identities in a normative way, we also construct and maintain the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Therefore when we discuss the matrix, we are also positioning ourselves within it. That being said, it makes sense that approaches to examining identity in discourse would be applicable to analyzing gender in discourse, as gender is a form of identity, whether subjective or objective. There is a whole sub-field of research on discourse and identity, but I would draw your attention to certain approaches that compliment my theoretical foundations.

Wortham (2001) and Gubrium and Holstein (2000) make some interesting observations about ‘storying the self’ that quite smoothly can be transferred to storying gender. This concept readily reflects both Butler’s performativity and West and Zimmerman’s ‘doing gender.’ Also, Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) offer an explicitly CA approach to studying how identities function in talk. Much, if not all, of their approach will be useful to my analysis. Both of these approaches are based on the notion

that participants construct versions dependent upon immediate conversational resources. When discussing versions, however, one must recognize that these immediate resources are tempered by two things: intersubjective meaning making amongst participants, and the unfinalizability of meaning. Bakhtin, through Wortham (2001) and Billig (1997), turns our attention to this. His theories of meaning are consonant with the discursive study of gender, and clearly remind us of Giddens' theoretical models of communicative interaction and practical consciousness.

### *Storying the self*

In his book *Narratives in Action* (2001), Stanton Wortham argues that through the telling of self-stories, the self is constituted both by the story's representational content (what the story is about), and by the story's interactional positioning (how the story is told). He argues that this is particularly the case when there is a parallel between the two. For example, if the event narrated in a self-story is a vulnerable time in a person's life, the person may also position herself as vulnerable with respect to the audience (i.e. looking for sympathy) in the context of the storytelling event, thus constituting her self as vulnerable and passive. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) echo this idea. For them, self-stories are composed as they are enacted and are thus dependent on interpretive circumstances-at-hand. Therefore, the self is constituted through the process of telling stories, not just in the stories we tell (p. 104).

Holstein and Gubrium's concept of the narrated self goes a long way to bridging the gap between individual agency in self construction and social and cultural discourses that get taken up. They put it succinctly: "We can view the storytelling process as both actively constructive and locally constrained. Put differently, our approach is concerned

with the activeness and spontaneity of performativity ..., on the one hand, and attending to the narrative resources and auspices implicated in storytelling ..., on the other” (p. 104). In other words, individuals make choices about what to include in their self-stories and how to tell them, but these choices are always constrained by social situations and cultural expectations.

The concept of self stories can be analytically applied to the study of gender. My participants will be discussing the gender identity butch, and in so doing will be sharing narratives, storying themselves and others with a focus on gender identity. When they do this, we can examine both the representational content (what they have to say about gender) and their interactional positioning (how what they say about gender positions them vis à vis their co-conversationalists). As Gubrium and Holstein do, we can examine the narrative resources from the immediate conversational context that are selected by participants, and look at how they are utilized and to what effect within conversation.

#### *How identities function in talk*

Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) address accounts in their volume entitled *Identities in Talk*. They turn away from a traditional approach to analyzing talk about identities in which the respondent is seen as an ‘informant,’ reflecting the ‘reality’ of their identity in their talk. They orient to the different accounts of identity that may appear in a given interaction and ask questions about how identities function, and how they are used to achieve specific ends in interaction.

They offer five general principles they see as central to taking a conversation analytic approach to studying identity:



- For a person to ‘have an identity’ – whether he or she is the person speaking, being spoken to, or being spoken about – is to be cast into a *category with associated characteristics or features*;
- Such casting is *indexical and occasioned*;
- It *makes relevant* the identity to interactional business going on;
- The force of ‘having an identity’ is in its *consequentiality* in the interaction; and
- All this is visible in people’s exploitation of the *structures of conversation*.

(Antaki & Widdicombe 1998, p. 3)

Relying heavily on Sacks’ work on people’s use of categories in talk, Antaki and Widdicombe proceed to explain these principles in detail. Walking through the details here will allow us to see what I can use in my study of gender, and what I will leave behind and why.

In examining how specific accounts of gender function in talk, we can see that gender (similar to Antaki and Widdicombe’s ‘identity’) gets cast into particular categories of things at particular times and for particular purposes, and each category will imply particular things about gender. Equally true is the corollary that if an account of gender is constructed such that it has certain features, then it becomes conventionally associated with the category(ies) that shares those features, and other things in that category. This point goes a long way to explaining how the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix gets maintained, in that when a certain gender category gets constructed, often there is a discursive connection to parallel or appropriate sex and/or sexuality categories.

Indexicality and occasionedness refer to the fact that accounts of gender will mean different things depending on the context in which they are found, and the occasion

in which they are uttered. Indeed, according to Antaki and Widdicombe, “a good part of the meaning of an utterance can be found in the occasion of its uttering” (p. 4). For example, gender may be indexed in the middle of a conversation that has little or nothing to do with it, or so it may seem at first, but upon deeper analysis, gender is being constructed throughout.

Orienting to and relevance were touched on above. Certainly, it can be useful to examine what is oriented to as relevant by participants in conversation. However, Kitzinger (2000) reminded us to be aware of that which is taken for granted as well. Also, my approach to examining gender in talk does not rely heavily on the concept of procedural consequentiality, as I do not believe that we can only comment on an account of gender that is oriented to in a specific manner by participants, and only when it can be shown to be consequential in the interaction.

Finally, the medium we have to determine what is going on in interaction is conversational structures. Some of these were explained above such as greeting/response or question/answer, but there are many more, and they vary from simple to extremely complex. For example, Kitzinger (2000) demonstrates the conversational structure of ‘coming out’ to be far more complicated than request/refusal. These are the ‘rules’ that Giddens’ speaks of, residing in practical consciousness, that allow us to go on in social interaction. But depending on the version of gender or gender identity that we may be constructing at a given moment in conversation, we may choose to use different rules. An analysis of conversational structures can say a lot about how the participant is positioning their account.

*Bakhtin: intersubjectivity and the unfinalizability of meaning*

A participant can only position their account as far as their co-participants will allow them to. That is, any narrative, of the self or of gender, is dialogic: it involves intersubjective meaning making on the parts of the speaker and the audience. Wortham (2001) uses Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogic meaning to illustrate this point. Bakhtin suggests that the meaning of an utterance is based on the innumerable potential positions that the speaker might take up with respect to the audience, and the audience interprets the meaning of the utterance in the same way. These potential positions are any and all contextual considerations that surround any utterance: they include relations between the speaker and audience, relations between the speaker and those who have used the words and spoken on the subject before her, relations between the speaker and any responses she may anticipate receiving as a result of what she says, and so on. Thus the meaning of any utterance is created between the speaker and audience as it is uttered, enabling the conversation to continue, but this meaning is never final. For example, a speaker and audience may be conversing and understanding each other, but at some point in the conversation, an utterance may occur that changes the meaning of one that came before. Bakhtin refers to this as the unfinalizability of meaning.

One of the constraints that individuals cannot escape is that language is not static, nor is it specific to their experience in the world. Bakhtin reminds us that not only do words possess an 'unfinalizability of meaning,' words can never be uttered without calling forth a particular history, culture, and ideology, or at times, more than one of each (Billig, 1997 in Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2002). But as Billig (1997) points out, ideological utterances are rarely straightforward, but are more likely to show up in a

dilemmatic manner. That is, ideological or common-sense understandings show up via sometimes conflicting accounts of a subject, often uttered by a single participant.

Wortham parallels the meaning of an utterance to the meaning of a self-story, and thus the self. The self can be pragmatically and conditionally understood in the telling of a story, but the self is always open to changes in meaning. We can stretch this theory further and use Wortham's move to examine the meaning of a story, or account, given about gender, and we can add Billig's consideration that sometimes one participant's accounts in a single conversation about a specific topic will differ or conflict, thus belying the instantiation of a common-sense ideology, for example about gender. And in examining the multiple conflicting accounts about gender, we can implement Antaki and Widdicombe's five principles outlined above.

Here we see the beginnings of a functional, well rounded methodology to approach the study of gender in discourse. I have at my disposal the useful portions of PSDA, CDA, and CA, with some useful analytic examples provided by Kitzinger (2000, 2005a, 2005b). Further, I have highlighted the necessity to come at my data armed with some tools from the study of identity in talk, tools which are useful for PSDA, CDA and CA. What is still necessary, however, is a way to knit all these analytic approaches together. Each on their own could produce a very specific, but perhaps narrow analysis of my data. A combination of approaches is necessary to allow me as much breadth as possible in my analysis; however this requires structure. Using Gubrium and Holstein's analytic bracketing approach (2000) will allow me to implement different analytic approaches as deemed necessary by my data.

### **Analytic bracketing: Discursive practice and discourses-in-practice**

Gubrium and Holstein (2000) give us a distinctive vocabulary for discussing the focus of ethnomethodologically-informed analysis on the one hand (CA) and poststructuralist analysis on the other (PSDA). They use the term ‘discursive practice’ to denote the traditional focus of CA and ‘discourses-in-practice’ as the subject of PSDA. They explore the many ways, as I have above, that these two projects are at odds, but argue that the two elements (discursive practice and discourses-in-practice) are mutually constitutive.

This is reflected in structuration theory’s main tenet: the duality of structure. Recall that within structuration, structure is both the medium and the outcome of interaction (Giddens 1984). Gubrium and Holstein (2000) use the term ‘interpretive practice’ instead of interaction in order to highlight the duality inherent in the interactional discursive production of social life. ‘Discursive practice’ for them is the how of interpretive practice, while ‘discourses-in-practice’ are the what. This belief leads them toward an analytic approach that does not privilege one over the other. They call this approach ‘analytic bracketing.’ This involves alternately treating with indifference both the mechanisms of conversational interaction (‘discursive practice’) and the cultural and institutional power/knowledge regimes at work in social life (‘discourses-in-practice’) in order to adequately attend to the other.

They go to great lengths to explain the benefits of the analytic approach they propose. Primarily, they highlight the importance of not privileging one side to the detriment of the other. Also, they explore the critical benefits of being forced to switch

back and forth, thus being “continuously jerk[ed]...out of the analytic lethargies of both endeavours.” (p. 503)

One problematic area with this approach is the privileging of analytic interplay over theoretical integration. Gubrium and Holstein (2000) argue at length that theoretical integration could only possibly lead to losing one or the others’ specificities and lessons. However, their version of integration is really assimilation of one approach into the other. Consider the following quotation:

...we echo Schrag’s warning against integrating an analytics of discursive practice with an analytics of discourse-in-practice. ...Reducing the analytics of discourse-in-practice into discursive practice risks losing the lessons of attending to institutional differences and cultural configurations as they mediate and are not ‘just talked into being’ through social interaction. Conversely, figuring discursive practice as the mere residue of institutional discourse risks a totalized marginalization of local artfulness. (p. 499)

I am not prepared to allow one facet of my analysis to become “mere residue” of another facet of my analysis. I see a way to theoretically integrate a focus on discursive practice and discourses-in-practice. If we use structuration theory as a framework to view the whole endeavour of examining the construction of gender in social interaction, we can theoretically pull together all the useful elements of the previous two chapters. Let us retrace the high points of structuration.

To begin, we have the knowledgeable agent whose knowledgeability resides in practical consciousness and allows the agent to ‘go on’ in social interaction. For Gubrium and Holstein, the agent would be engaged in ‘interpretive practice.’ All the conversational structures we saw in our examination of CA above (and all the ones we did not cover) reside in practical consciousness. We can think of these as the rules Giddens describes: methodological procedures of interaction.

Also in practical consciousness can be found commonsense understandings of how the world works. These are the power/knowledge discourses that will be instantiated in practice, taken up as discourses-in-practice. Also, recall Bakhtin's assertion that utterances all have a history, culture and ideology. These can also be found in practical consciousness. We must recall here that practical consciousness is made up of memory traces, and among agents there will be similarity but not exact duplication. Furthermore, these traces provide the context for communication and for shared understanding, but I am not suggesting that they are prescriptive. Agents take up these traces, although not in a conscious manner necessarily, in ways that allow them to construct particular versions of reality. All these elements that can be taken up as parts of 'discourses-in-practice' can also be thought of as Giddens' resources: the media through which power is exercised as a routine element of social interaction.

Let us not forget that rules and resources are always only instantiated in sets. Augmenting Gubrium and Holstein's argument (2000) that discursive practice and discourses in practice are mutually constitutive, we have Giddens' rules and resources which make up structure, and demonstrate its duality. They can only go together, as discursive practice cannot exist without discourses in practice and vice versa.

Within my model of structuration, agents are engaged in interpretive practice with one another, their practical consciousnesses are providing them with the ability to understand one another, and also to reflexively monitor each others' actions/utterances. Though we can certainly never claim to fully verbalize another individual's practical consciousness, let alone our own, we can make inferences based on the type of analysis suggested by Gubrium and Holstein in their analytic bracketing methodology. By

alternately analyzing discursive practice with tools such as Antaki and Widdicombe's five principles and Kitzinger's approach to examining what gets taken for granted, and discourses-in-practice with tools such as a poststructuralist understanding of gender, we can weave together the results of this alternating analysis to arrive at a meaningful story about how butch gets defined in interaction. In fact, as I will demonstrate, it is *only* through using this combined approach that I am able to prove my thesis. I will show that when speakers discursively link butch gender identity to sex and/or sexuality, commonsense notions of gender are almost always maintained; whereas, when speakers define butch outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, that definitional approach is in and of itself a challenge to normative notions about gender.

### **Collecting Data**

In order to obtain data for this project, I obtained ethics approval to host two 'conversations,' or focus groups to talk about 'butch.' I selected the focus group method not simply because it would provide me with the kind of data I am interested in examining (conversational talk), but because focus group interviews in which I as researcher am an active participant aid in breaking down the barrier between researcher and subject. That dichotomy is one that I do not wish to support or maintain, specifically because of my constructionist epistemological approach to research. Montell (1999) suggests that focus groups offer the potential for overcoming this binary. "Because knowledge and meaning are collective rather than individual productions, focus groups can be an effective method for getting at this socially produced knowledge" (p. 56-51). My participation in these conversation has allowed me to make visible my involvement and investment in the collective meaning making at hand.



My participants were all known to me as friends or acquaintances before beginning the project. My participants were eight women between the ages of 25 and 40 and lived in the Calgary area. All of my participants had strong ties to the gay community in Calgary, all but one of my participants identified as lesbian, and only one of my participants identified as butch at the time the focus groups took place. The focus groups were carried out in the spring of 2005. The first took place at my apartment, and the second took place at the home of one of the participants, both in the evening, and both with a very casual friendly atmosphere.

As I have mentioned above, I take a constructionist epistemological approach to language, so was not interested in carrying out my focus groups in any sort of traditional sense. I was not looking to obtain answers to questions from my participants in order to utilize them as a reflection of reality. Rather, I was interested simply in eliciting conversation, in as natural a form as possible. The only question I asked deliberately at the beginning of each conversation was “What does butch mean to you?” I say deliberately because I too was a participant in these conversations, and I asked several other questions throughout each one in order to keep the conversation going, but these were not scripted; they were born of the immediate conversational subject matter at the time they were asked.

I obtained signed consent from all participants allowing me to tape both conversations on audio tape, and I transcribed the material myself over the next several months. To begin my analysis, I scanned the material broadly for recurring themes using an iterative process that allowed me to cycle through the material numerous times, refining my points of interest and my thematizing each time. After much reflection, I

distilled these themes down to the analytic categories found below, ultimately allowing me to demonstrate that when speakers define a gender identity from outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, they achieve a challenge to normative notions about gender, whether they mean to or not.

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

In the following analysis of my data, I will use analytic bracketing to move back and forth between examining the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ (Holstein & Gubrium 2001). When looking at the ‘what’, I will employ a predominantly PSDA approach to examining the versions of butch being constructed. When examining the ‘how’ my approach will have a distinctly CA flavour, as I focus on conversational positioning of categories, when and how gender is indexed, and what kinds of conversational structures are used. Throughout both types of analysis, I am supported by Stokoe and Smithson (2001) in that I rely on extradiscursive context: the cultural knowledge that I share with the participants. I am also propelled by Kitzinger’s (2005a, 2005b) call to look at what is taken for granted in the talk. Indeed, I must use extradiscursive context if I am to identify and comment on elements that are not oriented to by participants. But rather than this reducing the power of my analysis, I argue that it enhances my analysis, allowing it to have far greater texture.

Throughout the two focus group conversations I hosted, butch was consistently constructed as an identity, alternately constructed as ‘self’ and as ‘label.’ There are instances in my focus groups when butch is constructed as a profound way of being, an internal organic state, part of or all of ‘who one is.’ There are also instances when it is used as a label to identify a category of people, or when the category ‘butch’ is outlined in such a way as to allow it to function as a label for a certain class of persons. These are certainly not the only two versions of identity residing in the practical consciousness of my participants; nor are they the only versions of identity to be found in my data. They

are, however, the two most conspicuous. These examples give us insight into the ways that understandings of identities shift and reform, depending on conversational context.

In the literature examined in the above chapters, butch is predominantly referred to or understood as a gender or sexual identity, or both. This understanding can be demonstrated in my data as well. There are numerous examples, which I will develop below, of my participants relying on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix for their definitions of butch identity. In these examples, butch is defined by relying on some part of that triangle; more specifically, participants invoke commonsense notions of sex, gender, or sexuality in order to define their understanding of butch. In my data, there are examples of reliance on normative notions from this matrix, and there are examples of challenges to normative notions. There are also examples where both creation and challenge, maintenance and disruption are occurring simultaneously. Analysis will focus on how the participants orient to different versions of this matrix, as well as instances when participants do *not* orient to certain things. This analytic approach, demonstrated by Celia Kitzinger (2005a, 2005b), will aid in demonstrating what parts of this matrix are so deeply rooted in the practical consciousness of my participants they do not even warrant agreement, as well as what parts are tenuous and open for debate.

Finally, I will provide some examples of talk in which the construction of butch makes one question whether it is a gender or sexual identity at all. I have selected two fragments in particular in which butch is constructed in a manner that is markedly separate from the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. These fragments both involve primarily one participant who is offering their perspective on the meaning of butch, and these will be analysed in detail. Also important, though, is the participation of the co-

conversationalists, as it is their input that allows the primary speaker to continue, or forces her to change direction. Again, by invoking Kitzinger's approach to considering both what is and is not oriented to by participants, I will comment on how the conversational situation furnishes the resources for these constructions of butch unrelated to sex-gender-sexuality.

### **Identity: Label vs. Self**

I have identified two versions of identity in my focus group conversations about 'butch', one in which identity is chosen for oneself, deliberately applied to others, and is changeable; and one in which identity is that which is a part of you, staying with you throughout your life, residing somehow inside of you. For analytical purposes, I have termed these versions 'butch as label' and 'butch as self.'

The following excerpt comes right at the beginning of Focus Group #1, and is MW's first offering of what 'butch' means to her:

FG 1, Fragment 1

MW: Well, because I, I grew up being self identified as very hard, very strong, very butch. And that for me was a defense mechanism because I came out early early on. [0.2 s unintelligible tape] like through grade school. And I used um my that identifying marker knowing full well that I looked what everyone else in the world considered to be butch. So, well maybe that's my own perception of it um so I had like shaved head, lots of like tattoos, and I wore muscle shirts, and mostly it was a defense mechanism

AI: exactly.

MW: So I wouldn't have to say 'yes I'm gay.' People would just, I just assumed in school people would know and I wouldn't have to do that step. However, having grown out of that need for that defense mechanism because now I just I don't care... its interesting so when you ask that question in terms of what butch means, like what's the definition of butch, I'm not sure that I know to be honest. I mean its...

Here, MW constructs a version of identity that is very conscious: she tells a story of a conscious choice to identify a certain way to achieve certain goals (to avoid verbally coming out). This version of identity involves perceptions, both MW's and other people's. MW has constructed here a story in which she is fulfilling others' perceptions of what/who she is; however, the likelihood is not great that children she went to grade school with even knew what butch was, let alone that she, their childhood peer, was butch. Ultimately, MW's goal in this fragment is to construct her childhood version of 'butch' as 'a defense mechanism', and thus she constructs something/someone from which she had to defend herself, and her defense manifested itself in choosing 'butch' as her identity at the time.

Also, by constructing 'butch' as 'a defense mechanism,' it is something outside herself that she adopts for a specific purpose. MW is constructing butch as a specific persona that she selected deliberately. It is necessary to bear in mind that whether or not this is 'true', and whether or not her young mind was conscious of making this choice, MW is constructing a specific version of her own use of 'butch' in her life. This is a version involving deliberate choice.

This version also constructs identification as something one might grow out of, in this case because it is no longer needed. This is another element of the 'butch as label' version of identity that is re-used throughout this conversation. This identity of butch is something that has been actively chosen, but has been discarded over time as it ceases to be valuable.

An example from the second focus group, we see an almost identical construction of the identity 'butch.'

FG 2, Fragment 1:

SE: but it's like I told Joshy before, you know what, when I first came out I think I was, I totally identified with being butch because to me that was the way of coming out or whatever but I certainly didn't, I didn't, like yer saying, I didn't dress the role of it, I came across as I was totally butch, it was all about women, it was all about this--

PA: [overlapping] that's what you thought you'd be in--

SE: that I'm a butch, my haircut, my everything was based on the fact that when I first came out these were the women that were in the clubs that I was going to so okay, this is who I should be then [...]

Here, SE tells her version of using the identity 'butch' as a tool for coming out of the closet. Like MW above, SE's version here clearly involves choice. SE tells us that she made this decision based on the women that she saw around her in social situations. At the beginning of the fragment S says that she 'identified with being butch' and later that she 'came across as [she] was totally butch', suggesting that she herself was not 'butch' in some inherent, organic, internal way, but only 'identified' with it, and 'came across' to others in that way. The story she tells is of her equating 'butch' with coming out of the closet. So again, we see evidence of choice.

Further, SE identifies for us specific characteristics that she relates to 'butch' in her construction of how and why she used to appear as butch. Firstly, of course, it was related to 'coming out' as a gay woman; secondly it was 'all about women,' a second reference to female homosexuality; thirdly she refers to her haircut; and finally she says her 'everything' was based on what she thought she should be like in her new environment. The final component she offers, reference to 'my everything' is clearly vague and meaningless to the uninitiated, someone who does not already share an understanding of everything butch might mean. However, at the end of this turn where I

have noted an ellipsis, SE goes on to change the subject, and no question arose from the other participants about what she meant by her ‘everything.’ This indicates that if questions did indeed exist, and they may not have, they were not pressing enough to bring up once the subject had shifted and the conversation had turned a corner.

This outlining of characteristics, in addition to SE’s explicit statements about ‘identifying with’ and ‘coming across as,’ together produce an identity that was thoughtfully figured out, then selected. SE constructs a version of butch here much like a new suit one would have tailored if one was beginning a new line of work. Based on the behaviour of those she found around her in her new surroundings, and in an attempt to come out of the closet, she made the choice of how to portray herself. This is another example of the ‘butch as label’ version of identity.

The notion of ‘butch’ as a label is explicitly treated in the following example. In it, AI is giving her understanding of ‘butch.’

FG 1, Fragment 2

A: For me butch always meant uhhhh a lesbian who knew she was a lesbian.

J: butch, that’s what butch meant

A: That’s what butch meant to me at the beginning. Cuz all the butch women that I knew were women who were really comfortable and secure and confident in their sexuality. Nowadays I dunno so much. Like it could still be, it could still be that kind of thing, that kind of confidence or whatever, you know, but again, I think it was also part of wearing a label that could be a defense, that could be a way to uh belong, that could be [a need to] identify yourself until you can figure out who you are, as every label is.

Here, AI uses the term ‘label’ and explains it as something one uses “until you can figure out who you are.” Like MW’s and SE’s versions, ‘butch as label’ is something



one adopts at will. The version of 'butch as label' continues to be constructed with choice as a primary component.

But AI goes a step further than MW. MW's version ended with her not needing the 'defense mechanism' that is butch, leaving implicit what she has grown into once she has grown out of 'butch.' AI, on the other hand, constructs 'butch as label' as that which gets used "until you can figure out who you are." In this instance, 'who you are' is constructed as something real, it is a truth that is covered over and needs to be 'figured out.' Labels such as butch, are simply elements that one 'wears' in the mean time. She provides several ideas of why one might utilize the label 'butch', but ultimately, one will move beyond labels when they figure out who they are.

Further, in opposition to 'butch as label' where choice is a main component, the version of identity in which one has to figure oneself out is not constructed with any kind of choice involved. The use of the word 'until' implies that figuring oneself out is something one will ultimately do, and perhaps one may choose to do the figuring out, but one does not choose the end result. 'Figuring out' implies that there is an objective reality, an existing puzzle of some kind that with enough effort, will be able to be apprehended in its truthful, real entirety. Interestingly, in this version of 'butch as label' there is an eventuality of discovery, but this discovery of 'who you are' does not include 'butch' as an option, as 'butch' is simply a label worn on the way to 'who you are' and discarded once you get there.

'Butch' as label is contested by DP in the following excerpt. She is by no means explicit in her contradicting of this previous version of identity, however the difference is pronounced.

## FG 1, Fragment 3

DP: I definitely used it as, in the same way as [MW], in a defense mechanism and, and in the same way, I made sure I was in a muscle shirt, my tattoos were showing,

AI: right

DP: hyper masculine to a certain degree

AI: Right

DP: but with age and becoming more comfortable with myself I'm not that way, I have no problems I comfortably wear makeup and "femme up" to a certain degree,

AI: Yeh

DP: but I very much identify as butch.

Here, DP begins by echoing the same version of butch constructed by MW in the first excerpt; however, DP's version concludes slightly differently. DP's version is similar to MW's throughout most of this excerpt: she refers to age and increased comfort with herself as being reasons why she is now "not that way." Both MW and DP construct 'butch' as being a form of 'defense mechanism' which ceases to be 'needed' later in their lives. But ultimately, DP finishes with the assertion that she remains "very much" identified as butch.

In this version of identity, DP sheds certain elements that at one time defined 'butch' for her, elements such as hyper masculinity and 'defense mechanism.' However, she retains 'butch' as an accurate identifier of who she is. If we consider the co-construction that is occurring in this conversation, DP begins by adopting the version of 'butch' constructed by MW (tattoos and muscle shirts). She also incorporates the variability built into AI's version of butch: that is, the fact that the signifier butch can change over time. She uses these versions, and co-opts them into her own version, in

which she produces 'butch as self,' as something real that resides inside an individual. Here, DP discusses becoming more comfortable with herself, a statement that implies the same as AI's statement above about figuring out who you are. The difference in DP's construction is that 'butch' is treated as analogous to 'self.' That is, 'self' is something DP has become more comfortable with over time, and 'butch' is an identification that she has used over time, and both have changed, but she retains both. DP's version of butch begins with a set of elements that change and/or disappear over time, but she retains the identity 'butch,' therefore in this version, butch is constructed as self rather than label.

We also do not see choice figuring as prominently in DP's version of 'butch as self' as it did in both MW and AI's versions of 'butch as label.' This is further evidence of co-construction. Just as AI constructs 'who you are' above as not involving choice, here DP has constructed 'butch as self' not involving choice.

We see both of these versions of identity circulating throughout the rest of this conversation. Evidence for the conversational construction of meaning can be found in the fact that participants will invoke different versions of butch as self or label at different times, as a result of different conversational circumstances/contexts.

For example, the conversation in Focus Group #1 turns at one point to a discussion of stereotypes. In the excerpt below, we can see 'butch as label' has become a common conversational resource, as it is now picked up by DP in order to argue that not everyone uses stereotypes:

FG 1, Fragment 4

DP: for instance, there's a woman that we met at Money Pennies one time, who I think anybody on the planet in their right mind -- , ex-army girl very butch short hair spiked every thing about her very butch. You ask her what she

identifies as; she just chooses not to. It's the type of person that chooses not to use a stereotype.

AI: Right.

MW: Mmhm

DP: You know not everybody uses stereotypes.

AI: I agree.

DP: in her mind, no. Stereotypes are wrong. I don't identify as femme, I don't identify as butch, I don't identify in the middle, I don't identify.

In order to successfully argue her point, DP relies on the 'butch as label' version of identity. As we saw SE doing in Fragment 1 from Focus Group 2, here we see DP *using* butch as a label, and constructing it as such by listing a series of characteristics that she attributes to the label 'butch,' characteristics that her subject (the woman at Money Pennies) happens to embody: "ex-army girl very butch short hair spiked every thing about her very butch." These are examples of commonsense descriptors of 'butch,' particularly within the gay community. DP selects these descriptors deliberately to enhance her argument about choosing not to "use a stereotype," even though this woman clearly embodies one. As in MW's and AI's versions of 'butch as label' above, DP uses 'butch' in a way that involves choice, in that her subject *chooses* not to identify as such.

This version is somewhat contradictory to the version she employed above, and this is not lost on her co-participants.

FG 1, Fragment 5

AI: do you use a stereotype of butch in your identification?

DP: yeah, we-, yes and no I mean to label myself in any way shape or form, to box label myself is to use a stereotype.

?: Yeah

DP: I'm aware that I'm doing it

AI: Yeah

JM: Yeah

DP: but to make people understand who I am and how I feel... I feel like butch is recognized

?: Yah

DP: and and

JM: it has a purpose

DP: what its meanings are. So if somebody says how do you identify I'll gladly say I identify as butch cause it gives them an understanding

?: and it has a purpose

?: it helps them figure

DP: Yeah. In a perfect world if I didn't have to identify in any way would I necessarily? No. but it does help people to understand me.

This excerpt is a beautiful example of how immediate conversational context provides the resources and the reason for the creation of certain versions of reality. Here, we see DP bridging the gap between the two versions of identity mentioned above. Firstly, she implicitly acknowledges the contradiction by way of her unsure response “yeah, we-, yes and no” and she proceeds to give a justification over the next few turns that honours both what she said earlier, and the argument she just made about the use of stereotypes. She constructs a ‘use value’ for labels or stereotypes in that they “help people to understand.” In the same statement, she also manages to further entrench her construction of a stable self that resides within her, the ‘me’ that the label ‘butch’ helps others to understand. Here DP bridges the gap between ‘butch as self’ and ‘butch as label’ by relying on immediate conversational resources.

The examples above demonstrate the two versions of butch as identity being constructed by my participants. Each one of these versions serves a purpose. Both MW and SE used the ‘butch as label’ version in order to describe how they identified as butch earlier in their lives. AI echoed that notion, contrasting ‘butch as label’ with ‘who you are’, which is what one ultimately is trying to figure out. DP, on the other hand, utilizes ‘butch as self’. The fact that she is the only participant who currently identifies as butch cannot be ignored here. Interestingly, later in the conversation when the discussion turns to ‘stereotypes’, DP is pressed to justify her identification of ‘butch as self’, and does so by trying to bridge the gap between ‘butch as self’ and ‘butch as label.’

Finally, it is important to note one acute difference between these two versions. Constructing ‘butch as self’ adds an air of authenticity and reality to it, whereas ‘butch as label’ is something which can be chosen, discarded, etc. and thus is ephemeral, changeable, and not real. This will be explored in further detail throughout the examples that follow.

### **Normative notions of gender: The sex-gender-sexuality matrix**

These two versions of butch as identity persist throughout the conversations. Both versions are constructed in a number of different ways, with different kinds of resources. While there is the dichotomy between identity as self and identity as label, there is also the question of what type of identity is ‘butch.’ An underlying assumption of this research inquiry has been that butch is a gender identity. This perspective has been heavily informed by the literature; however, when discussing gender, it is difficult to get away from also discussing sex and sexuality. Indeed, often each of those three elements is defined in terms of the other two.

How have my participants come to 'butch'? As I shall demonstrated below, butch is constructed alternately as a gender and/or sexual identity by my participants. A reliance by my participants on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix is evident. Also, the following examples will demonstrate how my participants leverage commonsense notions about gender, specifically masculinity and femininity, to construct butch as a gender identity, both as 'label' and as 'self.'

In the following fragment, AI relies on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, while also utilizing a very recognizable, commonsense version of femininity.

FG 1, Fragment 6

A: Yeh. But its funny because in the straight world of women, you could definitely see butch and femme,

M: Yeh

A: it exists. You know. There are still going to be women who are a little less feminine, and women who are a little more comfortable being feminine.

?: Mm

A: and that doesn't make them gay, it just, I think it still, within the lesbian world, I think that those labels still are a way of identifying, you know, different levels of femininity,

In this fragment, reliance on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix is glaring. Firstly, the words "and that doesn't make them gay" make the connection between specific types gender and specific types of sexuality. Here AI is implicitly linking levels of femininity with levels or types of sexuality: specifically, a lower femininity quotient is linked to homosexuality. This is related to the commonsense notion that 'normal' women are feminine, and 'normal' femininity involves the attraction to the 'opposite sex', or heterosexuality.

Notice that this statement “and that doesn’t make them gay” does not appear to be relevant in the context of the rest of her commentary on the subject. Recalling Antaki and Widdicombe (1998), this mention of sexuality does not appear to be occasioned by the logic of AI’s argument, ostensibly, that ‘butch’ identifies differing levels of femininity in women. It is occasioned by the subject matter in general: levels of femininity index levels of sexuality. Furthermore, directly after those words, AI’s clarity falters with “it just, I think it still” but she still ultimately relies on the connection between femininity (or lack thereof) and female homosexuality, despite her disavowal of this reliance.

The second commonsense notion about gender being leveraged here is more subtle, but nonetheless present. AI argues that butch and femme are about differing levels of femininity in both straight and gay women. This is leveraging the notion that femininity (and only femininity) is the property of women (and only women). Nowhere in this fragment does AI bring up the notion of masculinity, though many would consider the very definition of ‘butch’ to be a woman with a masculine gender identification. According to AI here, women may have varying levels of femininity, but to some extent they will be feminine.

AI implies that feminine is a comfortable thing for a woman to be, further relying on this cultural linkage between women and femininity. Initially, she does not set up an opposition between women who are less and more feminine, she sets up an opposition between women who are less feminine and women who are more *comfortable being* feminine. This oppositional structure suggests that the women who are less feminine are actually less comfortable being feminine, less comfortable in their ‘natural’ state.



This notion of femininity being a woman's 'natural state' also supports the 'self' version of identity. So although elsewhere in the conversation (FG 1, Fragment 2), AI was actively and explicitly constructing the 'label' version of identity when discussing butch, in this fragment it is clear that she is constructing the 'self' version of identity when discussing femininity. She does not refer to women 'choosing' to label themselves as feminine, but instead she says "There are still going to be women who are a little less feminine, and women who are a little more comfortable being feminine." As mentioned above, the 'self' version of identity carries with it a sense of reality and authenticity. We are compelled to see the differential way that AI constructs identity with respect to butch on the one hand and femininity on the other: she is constructing femininity as real, and butch as a label that obscures 'who we really are', and indeed is only applicable to people who are not 'comfortable' with their natural state.

AI's use of 'feminine' is questioned by her co-participants:

FG 1, Fragment 7

MW: Now when you say feminine, are you referencing feminine like long hair long nails makeup dresses

AI: no I, well I'm

MW: or are you talking

AI: Well I guess as a stereotype

What is interesting in this fragment is that only part of the commonsense notion of women and femininity is questioned by AI's co-participants. MW inquires about AI's use of 'feminine' and in doing so provides a partial challenge to a commonsense understanding of it. She challenges AI to explain if the 'feminine' she is referencing is "long hair long nails makeup dresses," all elements that index femininity in a very

mainstream, normative sense, or if she means something else. Simply by making this inquiry, MW challenges that the “long hair long nails makeup dresses” femininity is not the only version of femininity there is; however, she does not actually articulate an alternative. The reason MW provides only a partial challenge to normative notions of femininity is that she does not create another version of femininity to challenge the dominant version. Coming from a constructionist perspective, MW has only opened the door to an alternative, but by not verbalizing what that alternative might be, she does not create it.

The other commonsense element in this fragment, the relation of lower femininity levels to homosexuality in women, is not questioned by any of the other participants. It is not oriented to as relevant, and is generally passed over unnoticed. This is evidence that this is a more deeply rooted, less likely to be contested element of understandings of gender and sexuality. Indeed, while MW above was content to challenge what kind of femininity AI was talking about, no one chooses to challenge the links between femininity and women, and between gender and sexuality. The normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix of definition remains intact.

This normative matrix of definition is relied upon throughout the conversation in Focus Group #1, and the following is a telling example of how it is collectively maintained by the affirmation of all participants.

FG1, Fragment 8

JM: certainly within the lesbian community

AI: there is a commonality

JM: There is a butch. People understand. Like you say, you go into a bar and you say she's butch, omigod look at that butch, you know

AI: Like she's more male identified than female identified, yes

JM: people understand that

MW: mmhm

DP: yep

In this fragment, JM is making the point that within the lesbian community, 'butch' is commonly identifiable by participant members. In AI's second turn, she offers a succinct verbal description of what it is that allows community members to identify butch on sight: "she's more male identified than female identified, yes." This statement is interesting on a number of levels. Firstly, whether or not butches are male identified is a contentious point within queer literature and politics, as some are and some are not. However, the point here is not to discover the truth or falsity of AI's statement, but to examine how it is received and treated by the co-participants in this conversation. Every one of them offers an affirmation to this statement. In this context, these are indications that they share an understanding of how AI is using this notion to clarify what it is that people see when they see butch.

The connection between sex (male identification), sexuality (lesbianism) and gender (butch) goes entirely undisrupted in this segment. In fact, it is corroborated and sustained by all participants in the conversation. Interestingly here, JM utilizes 'butch' as both a noun and an adjective in the same turn in her second turn in the fragment above. This is not oriented to as relevant here, but just seven turns later in the same stretch of conversation, it comes up again.

FG1, Fragment 9

DP: [...] say that woman is butch, like BUTCH,

AI: right

DP: not labeled butch, but butch

MW: yah

DP: People know what you're talking about

MW: Yeah

DP: like, so I mean we're talkin', we're talkin', its rare nowadays

JM: She's butch or she's A butch. Is there a difference between those two things.

DP: There is. And I think that its, nowadays with younger generations it's really tough to come across somebody who is BUTCH

AI: Its true, see [...]

Here we see DP making the clear, explicit differentiation between butch as label and *butch*. She does not verbalize what the alternative to butch as label actually is, but the conversational context indicates that she does not need to verbalize it as her co-participants share an understanding of what she means. Both AI and MW give affirmations of DP's differentiation, and MW also agrees with DP that "People know what you're talking about" when it comes to that difference. This is significant evidence of a shared understanding within the group, not only of what this ostensible difference is, but that there is a common belief that this understanding is shared in the wider community. This segment shows us that, at least to these four participants, there is an understanding that does not require verbalization within 'the lesbian community' what butch is. Here again we see the functioning of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, as it is specifically the lesbian community that shares this understanding.

Toward the end of the fragment, JM asks if there is a difference between being butch or a butch, and DP quickly answers in the affirmative, but then moves on to a new

subject (the frequency of butch in younger lesbians) which is picked up by AI and the differentiation between butch as a noun and butch as an adjective is dropped. The quickness with which that question was dispatched is evidence that the answer is obvious and taken for granted, as far as the participants are concerned.

These two fragments together are evidence of the ambivalence around the nature of butch identity. In earlier fragments of this conversation, we have seen AI specifically constructing the ‘butch as label’ version of butch identity. But in these two fragments, all members of the conversation are co-constructing through affirmation of shared understanding the two distinct types of butch identity, most clearly evident in DP’s statement, “not labeled butch, but butch.” But regardless of this ambivalence, we still see an undisrupted and unchallenged reliance on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix as a resource in the construction of this identity.

I also saw this reliance on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix in Focus Group #2. In the following example, SE provides a historicization of butch identity.

#### FG 2, Fragment 2

SE: And you gotta give ‘em credit for fer one thing. Again, they started this for us. When when lesbians first started to come out, they were the ones that got beat up. They were the ones in the old school, back way back when, they were the ones that took all the bumps and the hits for us to be what we are today, know what I mean. Lookit, when they came out they needed some sort of signal to tell other lesbians that they were lesbians. Lookit now, lookit the young lesbians like Joshy. Right. There’s tattoos, there’s piercings, there’s whatever. There’s a certain haircut, there’s all that stuff, right. It’s not butch, but it’s a sign of hey I’m gay and that’s their signal. Way back when, their signal as butches, cuz that’s what they were, whether they knew it or not, was those significant, the way they dressed the way they acted, [...]

The “they” that SE is referring to here is butches of yore. In this passage, SE seems to be simultaneously constructing both butch as label and butch as self. She is

clearly defining butch as a category of persons, as the group that “started this for us.....the ones that got beat up.” She subsequently constructs ‘butch’ as a signal that lesbians would use as an indication of gayness. Similarly to the fragments we saw above in which ‘butch as label’ was constructed, this use of butch as a signal involves the element of choice.

In the same fragment, however, we see SE attributing the butch identity to the women she is talking about regardless of how they may or may not have identified themselves: “that’s what they were, whether they knew it or not.” This statement constructs butch as an objective reality that is visible and attributable from the outside (the other) whether or not the inside (the subject) is aware of it. This echoes DP’s construction of butch as something that resides inside a person, butch as self.

What is notable here is that butch is not only constructed as a lesbian identity, but perhaps as *the* lesbian identity. SE positions butches as having “started this for us,” through taking “all the bumps and hits for us to be what we are today.” This is a common construction of butch, and is a common collective story of butch history, but gets retold here by a lesbian to a group of lesbians, serving the dual function of answering the question at hand (what does butch mean to you) and of serving as a reminder and homage.

Further along in the fragment, SE heightens the construction once more, escalating ‘butch’ to the level of sign, the signal of lesbianism. So now, not only is SE relying on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix as a resource to define butch, she has made butch synonymous with lesbianism.

It is clear in the talk of my participants in both focus groups, there is a strong reliance on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix when defining and describing butch as an identity. This is so common, so taken for granted, in fact, that it is not questioned or even addressed anywhere in either conversation. It is fully taken for granted everywhere it appears, demonstrating how deeply held is the shared understanding that gender can be explained by sex and sexuality (and that the corollaries are also true).

### **Leaving the matrix**

Despite the fact that nowhere is the matrix addressed or openly challenged, we can see evidence that, as far as my participants are concerned, it is not enough to fully encompass the definition of butch identity.

In the following passages, I analyze my participants' talk about what 'butch' means to them in which they mobilize concepts outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. I will show that there are significant elements that can be shown to be taken for granted by all participants, thus demonstrating the complexity of gender as a subject.

In Focus Group #2, VG offers a fairly vehement perspective on what butch means to her. Below is her first foray into the conversation.

FG 2, Fragment 3

VG: you know what butch means to me?

PA: tell me Ver

VG: a lower class, um, non-educated, non-professional and something that I'm absolutely not and don't hang out with many.

SE: ...a really interesting view point.

VG: it is, you know what? I feel like cuz I'm professional, like you are,

SE: yeah

VG: and like paige and like andrea and like you josh, that every time you see a lesbian show on tv,

SE: yeah

VG: you get these people that you only see, that like look like crocodile Dundee,

SE: yeah

VG: at the bar

PA: yeh

VG: that you absolutely know you don't know.

SE: yeah

VG: you never see any representation of a professional, outgoing,

SE: I totally agree with you

VG: normal, lesbian

To begin, VG is not deliberately constructing butch as any form of identity. In none of the talk above does she make claims or construct a version of butch with a view to commenting on identity. However, she is clearly constructing a class of persons with a certain set of characteristics. Therefore, I would argue that VG is *using* butch as a label. She is identifying the elements that one would use to determine if the label butch was applicable or not.

VG does a number of notable things in this fragment. Firstly, she does not rely on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix in her definition of butch, other than inferring that butch is a lesbian identity. To begin her definition, she evokes the characteristics 'lower class, um, non-educated, non-professional.' These are the first words out of VG's mouth on the subject, and none of them relate to sex, gender, or sexuality. Here, VG is constructing 'butch' as an identity far more related to socio-economic class than to gender. Certainly



scholars have made many important links between socio-economic class and gender, and sex and sexuality, for that matter; but while they may be related, they are separate. I will return to this point in the discussion.

Secondly, this fragment is characterized by VG's construction of 'us and them.' She goes to great lengths over a number of turns to construct an 'us' that represents her and her immediate circle of friends, and a 'them' against which the 'us' can be defined. She constructs the 'us' as "professional," later as "outgoing," and finally and perhaps most interestingly as "'normal.'" She constructs 'them' or 'butch' as "lower class, um, non-educated, non-professional," she indicates that butches "look like Crocodile Dundee," and "at the bar" they are people "you absolutely know you don't know." There is a lot here, so let us proceed to treating each element separately.

One method that VG uses to construct the boundaries of the category 'butch' is by overlapping it with the category 'like Crocodile Dundee.' To an observer of this conversation who had no shared understanding with these participants, this statement would be totally oblique. However, we can see simply by virtue of the fact that none of the participants question V's characterization here (in fact, S encourages it with "yeah"), that they all must know what V is referring to. As the Crocodile Dundee comment passes unproblematically in the excerpt, there must be some shared understanding among the participants about qualities that are shared between Crocodile Dundee and butches, and this is an example of how the boundaries of 'butch' are defined by claiming similarities with other categories. The elements of similarity often remain implicit, but the similarity itself is confirmed by the lack of orientation to it by participants.

Also, the ‘Crocodile Dundee’ comment is the only way that the matrix enters into this fragment at all. The implication in this statement is that the butches on television resemble a guy from the Australian outback who wrestles crocodiles for a living. VG could be constructing ‘normal’ in opposition to ‘Crocodile Dundee’ along a number of axes: Crocodile Dundee is a rough, crass, rugged man from the Outback, so ‘normal lesbian’ is not rough, not crass, not rugged, and definitely not a man. None of this is made explicit in the talk. Indeed, the use of the image of Crocodile Dundee in this passage is not problematic at all, as far as the other participants are concerned.

With respect to the opposition that VG is constructing in this fragment, the Crocodile Dundee comment, along with the socio-economic characteristics raised, work together as the abnormal against VG’s construction of ‘normal lesbian,’ a class in which she includes herself and her friends, particularly those in the immediate vicinity (i.e. in the focus group). This invocation of ‘normal’ is notable: within mainstream culture, arguably ‘lesbian’ is constructed as an ‘abnormal’ identity. Here, VG is explicitly struggling with this normative characterization of her own identity as ‘abnormal’ by insisting that ‘lesbian’ can be bisected into ‘normal’ lesbians, including herself and the people she surrounds herself with, and ‘abnormal’ lesbians, including butches, who are lower class, non-educated, non-professional, and look like Crocodile Dundee.

It is also interesting to look at how her co-participants contribute to this construction. Both SE’s initial response to the notion that butches are lower class, non-educated and non-professional is ‘a really interesting view point.’ Here, SE is certainly not shutting VG down, but she is also not wholly agreeing with her either. This is not surprising as VG’s statement is very unequivocal and quite negative, so SE gives VG

enough encouragement that she should continue and clarify what she means, but not a full fledged endorsement. Over the course of VG's next five turns, both SE and PA continue to give VG encouraging 'yeah's' and 'yep's'. In this case, these responses come frequently throughout the excerpt, and many of them come unbidden by conversational conventions such as pauses in the main speaker's talk. Hence, I would argue that these responses function more to let the main speaker know that the co-participants are following her thought, rather than signaling necessary agreement at every turn. Furthermore, in letting the speaker know that they are on the same page, they are also contributing to her construction of the subject matter, by encouraging rather than challenging or questioning it. Finally, SE provides VG with a resounding 'I totally agree with you,' which clearly solidifies her co-operation in VG's construction of butch and of the common representation of lesbians.

Finally, VG presents a completely disassociative construction of butch, beginning by a double distancing, both "something I'm absolutely not" and "don't hang out with many," and later by indicating that when she sees butches at the bar, she "absolutely know[s she doesn't] know them." Not only does she not place herself in the category, but she also cannot allow anyone in her inner circle to occupy that category in her construction, because even that would be too close for her.

Beyond the construction of 'normal,' 'abnormal,' and 'Crocodile Dundee' in this excerpt, the version of 'butch' we see here is based on elements outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. This version of butch is conversationally permitted to circulate as a result of VG's co-participants' encouragement of her construction and implicit understanding, if not full-fledged endorsement, of her argument. Though VG presents a

very interesting substantive version of butch, I am not preoccupied by judging it as accurate or otherwise. My point is simply that these elements exist outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix of definition, demonstrating that an identity such as butch exists in practical consciousness as not entirely or solely bound to questions of sex and/or sexuality.

In Focus Group #1, we see a different example of the use of elements outside the matrix. Within the Focus Group #1 conversation as a whole, there is a recurring theme of 'butch' as 'a defense mechanism,' 'a wall,' and 'emotional baggage.' The passage below is rife with these references. It begins with DP referencing the main character of the novel *Stone Butch Blues*:

FG 1, Fragment 10

DP: um. When she starts describing herself in the way that she, y-, can't really, she's very withdrawn, very

AI: right

DI: you know, to herself, very tough to get to know, her lover describes her as somebody that she can't reach out to, you know just

AI: right

DP: That's how I feel butch is. Like, in every lover I've ever had, I'm not communicative enough, I don't, I don't give. I don't, like [laugh], I am an enigma [laugh] you know. That's what I feel is butch.

AI: so you're, you're looking at it as kind of like a

DP: it's all the ways you were hurt in your life and how it scars you and

AI: a mental, yeah

DP: it's a wall

AI: it's a way of being

DP: butch is a wall

MW: Mmhm

AI: so it's a way, it's a way of being an' its dependent upon what, the way we're raised, or the experiences that you had that

DP: Gen,

AI: [overlapping talk]

DP: generally, you meet all the people who identify as butch, like really truly identify, they all

AI: Yeah and they're kinda

DP: have had a hard life, you know, [laugh] you know like

AI: So it is what she said earlier then, its kind of like a defense mechanism

DP: It's a complete defense mechanism

AI: You don't wanna get hurt so you're gonna have the tough exterior to protect yourself

DP: the tough which can be your tank top and tattoos showing, or, or another form, but in any way, it's a wall that's between you and the rest of the world.

MW: Mmhm

DP: you know, I mean, most people that identify as butch you know were young at a young age, were um

AI: and you had to protect yourself

DP: picked on as children, were boyish as children, you know

AI: [?]

DP: had to protect themselves in some way, um, were very alone generally, didn't have a lot of friends, their parents, they weren't close to their parents usually, um, all that sort of stuff that would make somebody open to society

AI: right

DP: didn't exist to them

AI: right right

DP: and the wall goes up.

This is a long excerpt, but I have included it in its entirety so that readers could see the extended nature of the construction occurring here. DP comes at this construction from a number of angles. She begins by drawing upon the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues* and that character's qualities; she moves then into first-person accounts of experience; and finally she mobilizes a kind of psychologist-speak, talking about "all the ways you were hurt in your life and how it scars you," providing third person examples of this kind of experience or 'hurt' that affect butches ostensibly throughout their lives.

The only part of this fragment that could be attributed to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix arises as part of this list of experiences. DP notes that often butches are "boyish as children." This is the only reference to gender anywhere in this excerpt; however, childhood transgender identification (girls being boyish) is conversationally positioned next to things like being picked on, having to protect oneself, being alone, having few friends, and not being close to one's parents. Though DP does not explicitly present these in a causal fashion (i.e. being a boyish girl leads to being picked on, etc.) the proximity of these elements within this single turn of conversation implies a connection between them.

As far as definitional elements outside the matrix are concerned, there are many in this excerpt. We can begin by analyzing the first part of the fragment in which DP references the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess. She uses descriptors such as "withdrawn," "to herself," "tough to get to know." These are personality traits or emotional states, but not typical gender characteristics. Also interestingly, DP references Jess' lover description of her as someone she cannot reach out to. This certainly functions to echo her earlier statements, but it is interesting on another level as well.

Sometimes what is left out of a conversation says as much about a subject's construction as what is included. In this case, what is left out is a reliance on sexuality. Just before this fragment, DP has asked the group if everyone has read *Stone Butch Blues* and AI responded 'no.' Despite this, DP does not identify the sex of Jess' lover. Further, not only would a reader have known that Jess' lover was a woman, she would also have known that Jess' lover was a femme. In her careful and deft construction of butch identity here, DP is avoiding altogether any reference to the matrix, even when those references are easily accessible, as is the case with Jess' story.

DP moves swiftly into her own identification with Jess, and into defining butch identity through a description of characteristics she sees in herself. She continues along the same lines, listing "not communicative enough," not giving, and "an enigma" as descriptors of herself that she is applying to butch. Again, she invokes her lovers as witnesses to these qualities, while not invoking their sex. AI jumps in directly and attempts to engage DP in co-construction here, however DP is not engaged. AI attempts to co-opt DP into her idea of what DP is trying to say, but DP is not to be co-opted. Over the next 12 turns of talk, the back and forth between DP and AI, AI is repeatedly trying to use the conversational resources DP has just provided her with to co-create a meaning that she too can support but DP resists and continues along her own conversational path.

They finally agree on meaning with the leveraging of the 'defense mechanism' concept, which was first introduced by MW at the very beginning of the conversation. DP and AI take a turn each to verbalize what 'defense mechanism' means to each of them, thereby co-constructing a version of butch in which she has to come across as tough in

order to protect herself from the world. Again, this characteristic is arguably outside the sex-sexuality-gender matrix.

D then leverages what could be characterized as lay-psychology. Butch is constructed as experiences related to social relationships (with parents, friends, and lovers), experiences related to social alienation (being picked on, the inability to communicate, being alone), and experience of pain (hurt, scars).

Butch is metaphorized as a ‘defense mechanism’ and as ‘a wall.’ Both of these metaphors related to an inside/outside binary of self and other, me against the world. Here we can see gender being constructed as the experience of that boundary, as a way to cope with that boundary. Specifically in this construction of butch, coping relates to protection.

Furthermore, this metaphor is collaboratively constructed between DP, AI and MW. What is taken for granted here is not the specifics, the ‘facts’ offered by DP as definition of butch. The implicit, shared understanding exemplified in the excerpt above is that gender is an experience, not a stagnant property of individuals. It is necessary to be explicit here: I am not advocating that this is the ‘truth’ about gender or butch, but rather that this is a shared understanding that is perpetuated in the conversational example above.

Laying the two fragments above side by side allows for some substantive comparison. One element of difference here that plays an important role is that DP personally identifies as butch and thus is speaking from a place of ownership and pride; whereas VG is explicitly *disowning* a relationship to butch. She is going out of her way to outline all the ways she is unlike butches. DP presents a version of butches in the



media through her use of *Stone Butch Blues* and the character Jess, but DP uses this as an example of accurate reporting. On the other hand, VG argues that butches occupy the spotlight in the media as far as representations of lesbians go, and that this representation is inaccurate.

The point here is not to determine whose version is more correct. Rather, it is to demonstrate that DP and VG are doing two completely opposite things in their talk in the fragments above; the one element they have in common is their reliance on constructive resources that are not predetermined by the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

My analysis shows that my participants construct butch as an identity, alternately as 'self' and as 'label.' Further, much like the literature on butch, my participants demonstrate a reliance on mainstream, commonsense notions of gender and particularly on the sex-gender-sexuality matrix for the definition of butch, constructing it as a gender and/or sexual identity defined by any one or a combination of sex, gender and/or sexuality.

Despite this reliance, my analysis also shows that there are instances in which butch is constructed using elements outside of that matrix of definition. In Focus Group #1 we can see butch constructed as a result of experiences and emotions in an individual's life. In Focus Group #2 we can see butch defined by social class, education and employment levels. In the discussion that follows, I will comment on the significance of these findings, and how they come together to prove that if the construction of gender identity remains within the realm of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, challenge to normativity is unlikely and difficult; whereas when it is discursively constituted outside of that matrix, the potential for challenge increases.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### Limitations

Before I continue, it is necessary to outline the limitations of my approach to studying gender identity. Certainly, as with most qualitative research, my sample size is small. In total, this study only involved nine participants. There is very little variety in my selection of participants. Because I selected participants from my immediate network, they have far more in common than they have differences between them. Culturally, my participants are closely linked, being all white, all middle class, and all gay or strongly tied to the gay community. They all lived in Calgary, AB at the time of the interviews, many of them shared a similar social network, and they were all between the ages of 25 and 40. If I were interested in making a general statement about a population, this sample would not allow me to do so.

However, my constructionist epistemological approach does not require me to, nor am I interested in commenting on lesbians, or lesbians in Calgary, or white lesbians in Calgary. A more diverse group would have afforded me a diversity of perspectives, but this would simply have changed the landscape of my data, not my approach to it. A more diverse selection of participants may have led to a different outcome, but it would not have been more correct than the outcome I have here. I am commenting on a phenomenon that can happen, that has happened, at least once. I am demonstrating that one instance of a phenomenon captured in my data is enough to suggest that it happens. And if it happens, I may comment on what that means.

Furthermore, being that the impetus for my research working toward a world where non-normatively gendered people do not have to face the kind of discrimination

that I outlined in the first chapter, the composition of my focus groups begs another question. Why did I not select 'ordinary people' for my focus group, the kinds of everyday people who's talk restricts the cultural space in which butches have to exist? Why did I select almost exclusively lesbians to contribute my data? The answer to this question has multiple parts. Firstly, my snowball sampling method of recruitment led to recruiting people in or closely related to my own social network, many of whom are lesbians. But more importantly, because of my specific focus on the construction of butch, I needed to select participants who were familiar with this subject matter and some facility with the term. I could have put together a completely random sample, but I wanted to ensure at least some shared understanding, some sense among the participants that we knew what we were talking about.

I based my participant selection on the assumption that my participants would have greater familiarity with the specificities of butch existence and the history of butches in lesbian communities, greater than a random selection of people. It is possible that this assumption was false, but this decision was based on my own experience discussing butch identity in a variety of different social scenarios. Furthermore, due to the nature of the qualitative research process, in which the analyst is led by the data, a different group of participants would have led me through a completely different project.

Engaging in qualitative research prevents me from making sweeping, generalizing statements about my subject matter. However, it does allow me the notable luxury of commenting on possibilities, the possibilities that just one instance of a phenomenon not previously noticed can produce. Above, my analysis shows that when we examine how butch identity is constructed in conversation, we can see that when gender is being

defined from within the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, challenge to normativity is spotty, if there at all. However, we can also see that at times, gender is defined outside of this matrix, and that this is a challenge to normativity in and of itself. I will discuss the implications of my analysis below, beginning with a comment on the possibilities offered by a discourse analytic approach to gender studies. I will finish with suggestions about the possibilities for further research and activism offered by my findings.

### **Discourse Analysis: Analytic Bracketing and the Kitzinger Approach**

My project utilizes Gubrium and Holstein's method of analytic bracketing in order to facilitate the use of both DA and CA approaches to my data. I have demonstrated that analytic bracketing, if approached in a deliberate and focused fashion, can allow the analyst to compare and contrast the medium and the message, the content and the conversational approach, or as Gubrium and Holstein put it, the 'how' and the 'what' (2000).

I have chosen to address substantive questions about the sex-gender-sexuality matrix (the 'what') while concurrently examining what and how things do and do not get oriented to by participants in conversation (the 'how'). The latter approach of addressing what does not get oriented to, the Kitzinger approach (2005a, 2005b), allows the analyst to comment on what is taken for granted, so deeply embedded in a participant's practical consciousness that it does not even require acknowledgement. This is particularly effective in examining the sex-gender-sexuality matrix and Kessler and McKenna's eight rules (1978), as one of the premises of this research is that these are the rules that require attention if non-normative gender and sexual identities are to achieve greater levels of acceptance. Indeed, in a study of rules so deeply embedded in individuals' practical

consciousness – rules about gender and sexuality – this approach to digging up what is taken for granted is the only method that leads to productive results. Otherwise, this research would simply be supporting the dominant status quo.

Further, the bracketing technique designed by Gubrium and Holstein allows me to comment also on the ‘what’ by itself. The ‘what’ of my project is the meaning of ‘butch.’ My analysis shows three things: that butch is constructed as an identity, both as ‘self’ and as ‘label’; that the construction of butch identity involves elements clearly derived from the sex-gender-sexuality matrix; and that the construction of butch identity can involve elements wholly outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

Upon examining the two varieties of butch as identity that I expanded upon above, namely butch as ‘label’ and butch as ‘self,’ it is evident that each of these versions is used purposefully by participants at given times in the conversation with a view to accomplishing something specific. This is highlighted nowhere better than the example in which DP bridges the gap between the two versions in order to successfully construct her argument about the use of stereotypes. As Gergen and Gergen (1997) have pointed out, stories require continuity in order for co-participants to play the roles into which a speaker casts them, and in order for co-participants to help maintain the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ of a given story or argument. DP was faced with the challenge of continuity, and thus had to utilize immediate conversational resources to link the two versions of ‘butch as identity.’

This example supports the claim that meaning is conversationally contingent. Whether identity is ‘truly’ one thing or another is not relevant. The meaning of butch as

an identity is wholly contingent on the conversational situation and resources that a given group of participants have on hand to make meaningful one or another version of it.

This same point can be seen in the examples dealing with commonsense notions of sex, gender and sexuality. I was not surprised by what I discovered with respect to the use of and challenges to commonsense notions of gender. Indeed, butch is a phenomenon predominantly defined in the literature as a masculine gender identification in homosexual women. What was interesting in those examples was the ways in which commonsense notions about gender specifically could be only partially or marginally challenged while simultaneously being re-created and maintained.

It was here also where the Kitzinger approach proved profoundly useful, in that it allowed differentiation between what was oriented to and challenged, and what was not oriented to and thus what remained part of the flow of practical consciousness. For example, in the case of AI discussing butch as being indicative of differing levels of femininity and MW's questioning of her use of 'feminine,' we were able to see MW orienting to the use of the term feminine, and constructing the possibility of a contrast to a normative notion of femininity. But using Kitzinger's approach to finding what is taken for granted, we were also able to see the link between women and femininity implicit in AI's talk. Recall that in her discussion of the meaning of butch, AI never raises masculinity as an issue, but rather proposes differing levels of femininity in women. The commonsense notion being maintained here is that femininity is the sole property of women, and thus the corollary is also true.

This particular example leads directly back to the original debate in CA and DA studies regarding the role of context in analysis. A purist such as Schegloff would have us

believe that the analyst is not to bring any outside context into the analysis, relying only on the immediate context of the conversation. My project, and this example particularly, demonstrates that this approach would only allow us to tell half the story.

The Kitzinger approach combined with Gubrium and Holstein's analytic bracketing approach, allowed me to show that in my participants' talk, challenges to normative notions of gender were made, but were only partial, and often existed simultaneously with maintenance of those same norms. I was also able to demonstrate that the links in the sex-gender-sexuality matrix were never questioned or challenged throughout both focus groups.

Where this analytic approach became particularly indispensable was in the identification of constructive elements of butch identity not related to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. The Kitzinger approach allowed me to identify in two particularly fascinating segments that there is a shared understanding of butch, existing on the level of practical consciousness among my participants, in which it is a 'self' or a 'label' that is based on elements such as social relationships, social alienation, social class, employment or education. This is perhaps the most significant finding of this project, both in immediate terms, and in what it means for future research.

### **Gender Studies: A new approach to fighting phobia**

At this stage, it bears repeating the original intent of this project: to make some small contribution to understanding the roots of non-normative gender phobia and how to dismantle it. I want to work toward a world in which butches do not feel threatened to enter a public bathroom. I want to work toward a widespread understanding of different, non-normative constellations of sex, gender, and sexuality. My analysis above of the

conversational construction of butch shows that sometimes, butch is defined using elements that exist outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. This finding allows for the possibility that perhaps a broader understanding of gender identity, an understanding that goes beyond the matrix, already exists within the practical consciousness of everyday language users. If this is the case, then this broader understanding can be exploited in a manner heretofore unexplored, allowing for a new approach to fighting non-normative gender phobia.

There is a vast amount of literature discussing ‘gender difference’ that reinforces the normative rules of gender that Kessler and McKenna outline for us. There have also been hundreds of approaches to deconstructing these rules, all from a wide variety of disciplines. While this project of deconstruction is admirable, it often remains tied to the same terms of debate. That is, attempting to deconstruct binary sex/gender/sexuality while retaining the terms ‘sex,’ ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ (particularly homosexuality and heterosexuality) is fraught with difficulty. I would argue that this is because these words have a specific history of meaning.

Relying on Bakhtin’s understanding of meaning as explored in Billig (1997), it becomes obvious that even if and when cogent arguments for deconstruction are made in academic and political circles, the history of meaning tied to words such as ‘gender,’ ‘sex,’ ‘masculine,’ ‘feminine,’ ‘male,’ ‘female,’ ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ and in this case ‘butch,’ will not disappear simply by virtue of having been exposed. Bringing such histories to light in the form of a deconstructive project is the first step, certainly. However, if it is the mundane talk of everyday folks that reproduces the mainstream meanings of sex/gender/sexuality, and particularly the binarism of each, then this academic and



activist deconstruction must somehow take the next step to working with the actual medium that reproduces these meanings.

One approach proposed by radical gender theorists such as Toril Moi (in Young, 2002) has been to move beyond the terms sex and gender in favour of, for example, a concept of the lived body. This is an ideal solution to solving the problem of binary gender in talk (simply discard the term gender), and certainly this kind of solution can function productively within a theoretical context, as Moi has demonstrated. However I would argue that it is unreasonable to expect that within everyday talk the terms gender and sex will be abandoned, primarily because the history of meaning of these words and associated concepts is also a history of experience, at both the cultural and individual levels. I would argue further, that because the terms gender and sex are repeatedly constructed as binary and interdependent within everyday, mundane talk, and because the terms sex and gender will never be abandoned in everyday talk, if real progress is to be made in the project of reducing different-gender phobia a new strategy must be sought.

I propose that an examination of the construction in talk of alternative gender identities, such as butch, can offer some insights into a new strategy. I would argue that part of the problem with the tight hold binarism has on sex/gender/sexuality is the concentric nature of explanations about each one that only leads to the other two. There is no denying that the three are related, but perhaps they need not have such a chokehold on one another. [The talk of my participants demonstrates that there is more to sex than gender and sexuality, more to sexuality than sex and gender, and more to gender than sex and sexuality.]

The term 'sex' will always relate to the human body, and the term 'sexuality' will always relate to desire between bodies. But gender is much more ephemeral. What is gender and how is it defined? Normatively speaking, it is consistently defined as the social projection, presentation or performance of one's sex and/or sexuality. Normative, mainstream literature on subjects related to gender, particularly binary gender identity, often represents it as having exclusively to do with sex and sexuality. Also, much postmodern and poststructuralist gender theory retains the tight sex-gender-sexuality link. However, if we go back to examining talk, in an attempt to gain purchase on the 'raw' material of meaning making in the world, we can identify some interesting differences in the mundane construction of some gender identities from the theoretical constructions.

An examination of the conversational construction of butch shows us two things: firstly, butch is constructed simultaneously as a 'self' identity, or one that exists organically within an individual, and as a 'label' identity, or one that individuals may externally apply to themselves and others deliberately; secondly, we see that butch is constructed with elements other than sex and sexuality. Both of these elements can be found, certainly, and examples of talk that both support and challenge mainstream notions of gender can be found. But these do not exhaust all the elements of the construction of butch that can be found in my data. Elements such as class, personal relationship, and emotional status can also be found.

Let us treat each point separately. When we examine how butch is constructed as identity, we find that it is used to mean an organic 'self' or facet of the self that 'just is' and that exists within the individual. We also find that it is used to mean a deliberate labeling, both of the self and of the other. This is evidence that gender is intimately

related to notions of identity in the practical conscious of my participants. Further, my analysis shows, as with MW in FG 1, Fragment 1, that both gender and identity can simultaneously be understood/constructed as both 'self' and 'label.' In that fragment, MW constructed a version of butch that was her 'self' in a past tense, but now is no longer an accurate identification of 'who she is.'

Looking at butch as 'self' and as 'label,' we can see how the normative links between gender, sex, and sexuality function in constructions of both, for example in FG1, Fragment 6, AI's explanation of butch as 'differing levels of femininity,' or in FG1, Fragment 8 in which JM refers to the common understanding of butch within the lesbian community. In the examples, we can see how normative notions of gender are sustained and/or challenged, and how the links within the matrix of sex-gender-sexuality are not addressed at all.

However, we can also look at examples in the data in which gender as self and gender as label are constructed using elements that are outside the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, such as FG 2, Fragment 3 and FG 1, Fragment 10. If we were examining how 'the self' was constructed in talk in FG 1, Fragment 10, or how 'identity labels' were constructed in talk in FG 2, Fragment 3, these examples would simply be evidence of how 'the self' gets done in conversation. However, because we are examining how gender is being constructed, in particular how non-normative gender, i.e. butch, is being constructed, these examples serve a more interesting purpose. They serve to demonstrate how in the practical consciousness of everyday speech users, gender is more than just sex and sexuality; it is history, emotions, class, etc. Perhaps this fact is easier to see in an examination of butch, easier than for example in an examination of masculinity or

femininity, perhaps because butch's non-normativity allows the analyst to more easily break away from the normative structures of meaning for gender, that is the sex-gender-sexuality matrix.

My argument is that this matrix certainly exists and is maintained in everyday talk, but it has been further entrenched in theoretical and academic debate, such that it becomes difficult to see beyond it. Hence we get calls to move beyond the terms gender, sex and sexuality, in the hopes of also leaving behind the difficulties of their related binarisms. But as I argued above, this notion of 'moving beyond' is very unlikely in any wholesale fashion at the mundane level of everyday talk.

Instead of moving away from the terms sex, gender, and sexuality, let us build on the openness that already exists in the practical consciousness of everyday people with respect to notions of gender identity. We see from the examples above, that butch can be constructed along vectors that have little or nothing to do with sex or sexuality. Here we have the seeds of a practical expansion of gender regulations.

I offer FG2, Fragment 3 and FG 1, Fragment 10 to demonstrate that conversationally, we can see examples of butch identity being constructed using elements unrelated to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. It is clear that in FG2, Fragment 3 the version of butch being constructed is not particularly positive, and is certainly not emancipatory. In fact, one could easily argue that VG is discursively cementing the 'butch's' place in the domain of abjects. However, what is noteworthy here is that this is done along axes that are unrelated to the matrix. VG constructs normal vs. abnormal along axes of class, education, employment status. She is specifically and deliberately not using the axis of sexuality, as her 'normal' is actually 'normal lesbian.' I used this

example to demonstrate that VG's co-participants's practical consciousness allow for this kind of definition. Collectively, they can conversationally construct butch as an identity that exists outside the matrix.

FG1, Fragment 10 on the other hand, goes much farther toward the emancipatory potential I am arguing for here. DP re-stories butch as an identity significantly separate from the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, using definitional elements such as emotional experience, social experience, pain, etc. Here, DP discursively relies less on the ties between 'butch' and the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix and more on elements outside the matrix, which allows 'butch' to exist independently from the matrix. This is evidence that a non-normative gender identity such as butch can be discursively constituted no longer as an object, existing only in the shadows of the grid of legibility created by the normative instantiations of gender (masculinity and femininity). When storied in this way, butch is rendered as a legitimate subject in its own right.

The positive effects on the lives of non-normatively gendered individuals of theoretical gender work done in academia cannot be overstated. Having said that, I sometimes feel that we have come to a crossroads in terms of academia and activism. We are reminded in the example of 'third wave feminism' that the gender activism of today takes on a much more individualistic form as a result of the postmodern and poststructural deconstruction of mass movements such as the feminist and civil rights movements of the last century.

The crossroads I am specifically referring to here deals with gender activism. Gender outlaws have made great strides, but in many corners we see those strides landing one-time radicals squarely in the lap of conformity. And there is certainly something to

be said for this. There are many gay people (whose gender non-conformity is rooted predominantly in their desire for same-sex love) whose quality of life has been improved dramatically as a result of this type of conformity, opening their doors to things like marriage, spousal rights, parental rights, healthcare benefits, not to mention simply lack of discrimination in the work place. However, the true gender outlaw remains: the person whose gender is neither easily identifiable as masculine nor as feminine. This person still suffers daily the slings and arrows of an ignorant mainstream. Not only that, but those that do conform (the vast majority of us) are still daily haunted by the strictures of an ideal definition that we may never attain, but that we will sometimes kill ourselves in striving for.

This is the secondary benefit of my research. Not only does it demonstrate the potential to legitimize abject gender identities by re-storying them outside of the normative sex-gender-sexuality matrix. It also suggests that if butch as gender can be co-constructed with elements unrelated to sex and sexuality, then so can other varieties of gender, even mainstream normative ones such as masculinity and femininity. The potential here is that individuals with all kinds of gender identities may experience a reduced imperative to meet some impossible ideal, and even perhaps an invitation to express their gender identities in ever more creative ways.

Academic theorizing will always serve the purpose of pushing boundaries to levels previously unheard of, and this continues to clear the way for development. However, on a practical level, we have to address the profound phobia of gender non-normativity at its most basic level. I see this as needing to happen simultaneously from within and without. By this I mean that on the one hand, non-normative genders need to

become normalized such that they are no longer stigmatized. But on the other hand, normative genders need to become far less strict, such that it is not so difficult to fall into a given category. Also, with a reduction of strict boundaries will come a reduction of harsh consequences for not fitting into them.

### **From theory to action: It's just common sense**

The big question, of course, is how. How does one translate this imperative into activism? My study is predicated on everyday talk being the stuff that 'reality' or meaning is made of. As such, perhaps the most obvious way to translate my findings into activism is to encourage the type of individualistic activism characteristic of third-wave feminism. There is a definite social imperative here to combat oppression where it lives in everyday talk. If meaning resides in conversation, then so does change. Individuals can certainly work toward normalizing gender non-normativity at the level of everyday talk, their own and among their colleagues, families and friends. By this I am simply suggesting that in a variety of social situations, individuals have the opportunity to question some of the assumptions used to inform opinions about non-normative gender. Of course, this does not only apply to non-normative gender. This brand of personal activism is possible for any kind of social change.

While I have successfully argued here that the potential for change already exists in the practical consciousness of everyday folks, I believe this fact can be leveraged further, that left to individual activism results will be too slow in coming. While I have demonstrated that my participants constructed butch identity along a vector of definition outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, there was no evidence that this was being done deliberately, out of a desire to divorce gender identity from sex and sexuality. On

the contrary, it was done as a matter of course, in a manner that was entirely taken for granted.

The taken for granted needs to be brought to light, in a manner more deliberate than individual conversational monitoring and questioning assumptions. While this can be extremely effective, it is a more reactive approach, as individuals must wait for transgression to occur before doing something about it. A more proactive approach to highlighting what is taken for granted in the human condition is through art. Theatre, music, and literature are all poignant ways to communicate taken-for-granted elements of life. Take, for example, the novel that inspired my work, *Stone Butch Blues*. Though perhaps not the most exceptional piece of literature ever written, the story is so poignant in that it brings to life a specific human condition that can easily go disregarded by people who are not touched by it every day. In my view, the most effective activism is through art because great art can not only demonstrate the intellectual impetus behind a particular movement, it also causes audiences to relate on a number of other levels, not the least of which is emotional. When logic/intellectualism and emotion can be woven together, the results can be profound, inspiring, and motivating.

What would this kind of art look like? I envision interactive art, such as theatre, that takes as its subject matter specifically the dynamic, non-objective nature of meaning generally, through the lens of gender specifically. While the tools for change do exist already in the practical consciousness of everyday people, meaning is commonly understood as being fixed and static. Art that highlights the constructed nature of meaning would serve as fodder for conversation and potential realization that the way we talk about things determines meaning.



Again, this kind of approach could be applicable more broadly than just with gender, but I believe it would be particularly useful in this specific arena. Gender is a constant tension between being a personal identity and a social category, it is pervasive and highly emotional. The interactive art I am envisioning will inspire people to begin to question this profoundly personal but highly regulated cultural phenomenon in such a way as to open new spaces for gendered existence.

### **Directions for further research**

In order for any art to adequately portray the emancipatory potential that already exists in folks' practical consciousness, more research needs to be conducted to enhance what I have proposed here. I suggest that a place to begin is found in the construction of butch in my data. We can see that butch is constructed with elements outside of the sex-gender-sexuality matrix, so directions for further research would include examining the elements outside this matrix used in the constructions of other masculinities and femininities. This kind of question could be asked of media products such as film and television, but could also be further examined at the level of everyday talk.

Further, the connection between a tight adherence to the sex-gender-sexuality matrix and strictly enforced boundaries of sex categories, gender categories, or sexuality categories must be more thoroughly examined and theorized. Would it indeed be the case that a loosening of the connections between the three would result in greater acceptance of identities that do not fit strict normative modes of being? Further, how could that be measured? What would a more open version of femininity look like, for example, and how could we gauge its effect on non-normative identities such as butch? On a theoretical level, we continue to struggle with the same issue queer theorists have been struggling

with all along: namely, how do we normalize the abnormal in order to destroy the boundary between the two? This continues to be grounds for further research.

People are already equipped to re-story their gender identities independent from the sex-gender-sexuality matrix. Our common sense already contains the tools to expand the boundaries that socially exclude so many of us. There are many directions in which to take the evidence found in this project, but the paths all lead to the same future: one in which butches, and everyone else, can look, live and love however they desire.

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