

The Intertwining of Theory and Practice: Power, Agency, and Negotiation in Gender Identity within Post-Closet Culture

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamic evolution between sex, gender, and gender performance under individual agency and the social power system. Through case studies as well as the theoretical analysis and application of Michel Foucault's power/knowledge, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and James Joseph Dean's post-closet culture, this research investigates the gender performance practices of both the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexuals in the context of post-closet culture. By analyzing transgender individuals' medical experiences, drag performances, gender norms in the workplace, and changes in heterosexual masculinity, this study demonstrates that the power system is not rigid but a fluid field open to continuous negotiation. The analysis results show that individual agency in sex, gender, and gender performance not only facilitates negotiation with the social power system but also innovatively applies theories in practice, expanding the practical fields and application methods of these theories. However, this study also has limitations, including a Western-centric bias, the lag in case application in the digital era, and constraints in the intersectionality perspective. Based on case and theoretical analyses, this study concludes that individual agency is a crucial driving force for advancing gender diversity and social inclusiveness. These findings can provide us with an understanding of gender practices that is cross-class, non-dualistic, and interconnected.

Keywords

Gender performativity, post-closet culture, individual agency, power dynamics, intersectionality.

1. Introduction

The theoretical development of sex, gender, and gender expression has long been a core research area in gender studies. In contemporary society, the construction of sex, gender, and gender expression is regarded as the result of interactions between sociocultural systems and power systems. However, this process is not a fixed procedure but one filled with continuous negotiation, in which individual agency plays a pivotal role.

This study adopts a case study method to explore the dynamic changes of sex, gender, and gender expression by analyzing the practices and behaviors of both the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexual groups in contemporary society. To conduct an in-depth analysis of the cases, this paper employs a theoretical triangulation framework: it uses Foucault's "power/knowledge" theory^[8] to analyze the social power system, Butler's reiterative practices in gender performativity^[3] to observe the agency demonstrated by individuals in their negotiation with society and combines Dean's proposed post-closet culture as the contextual characteristic of contemporary culture. This multi-dimensional theoretical integration and analysis aim to explain how individuals negotiate with the social power system through their own agency in contemporary sociocultural contexts.

The gender practices of the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexuals presented in this study are not merely passive reflections of theories; on the contrary, these practices reinforce and redefine these theories, enriching their application fields. By analyzing how individuals negotiate with and subtly construct the social power system, this study aims to prove that sex, gender, and gender identity are dynamic processes requiring continuous negotiation, and that individual agency plays a key connecting and driving role in this dynamic process.

2. Case Analysis and Discussion: Power, Agency and Identity Negotiation among the LGBTQ+ Community and Heterosexuals

2.1. Gender, Gender Performance and Gender Identity are Products of Social Power

Michel Foucault established “the power/knowledge” framework in *The History of Sexuality* and criticized the traditional repression of gender, emphasizing that gender, gender performance, and gender identity are not innate but are constantly constructed and regulated by various social power mechanisms such as laws and medical systems (Foucault, 1978)^[8]. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler pointed out that gender is not inherent but is repeatedly constructed through social behaviors and “performativity”, possessing fluidity^[3]. Gender performativity is not merely a simple response to social power mechanisms and norms but is shaped by individuals through repeated sociocultural practices, and it is through such repeated practices that gender identity is established (Butler, 1990)^[3]. James Joseph Dean (2014) emphasized that in the context of post-closet culture, society has gradually become more accepting of diverse gender identities and expressions^[7]. This change is not only influenced by individuals but is more driven by transformations in the social power structure.

The theories of these three scholars systematically demonstrate that the gender, gender performance, and gender identity of the LGBTQ+ community are products of social power. The experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in gender identity authentically reflect how social power affects their gender identity and performance. For instance, the gender identity of transgender individuals within the LGBTQ+ community has been pathologized and deemed in need of treatment by the medical system (Foucault, 1978)^[8]. Berli et al. (2017) and West-Livingston et al. (2021) clearly indicated in their research that gender-affirming surgery is one of the pathways for transgender individuals to obtain legal identity, and many transgender people need to undergo such surgery to gain socially recognized legal identity^{[1][12]}. This process reveals how the gender binary reinforced by social power regulates the gender identity of transgender individuals through medical and legal systems. Although heterosexuals are considered the mainstream in society, they are also subjected to oppression by power mechanisms (West-Livingston et al., 2021)^[12]. Society regulates the roles of heterosexuals through cultural norms, workplaces, and other channels. For example, the gender performance of men and women in the workplace is subject to social gender role norms: men are expected to be unemotional and dominant, while women are required to be gentle and compliant (Bozani, 2021)^[2]. These gender roles are not naturally occurring but are manifestations of long-term social norms and gender stereotypes. This process reflects the operation of power mechanisms, which restrict individuals’ free gender expression and identity, reinforcing and exacerbating gender inequality in the workplace.

The practices of both the LGBTQ+ and heterosexual groups show that gender identity is maintained through repeated social practices, yet individuals still possess agency in these practices. Christian (2020) highlighted that despite the oppression of power, individuals still challenge power mechanisms through behaviors such as coming out, demonstrating their agency and capacity for negotiation with society^[6]. This agency complicates and reinforces Foucault’s theory of power mechanisms, making them more dynamic and flexible.

2.2. Gender, Gender Performance and Gender Identity are Products of Negotiation between Individuals and Society

Michel Foucault emphasized in *The History of Sexuality* that individuals are not passive targets of social power regulation but active participants^[8]. The process of reconstructing gender performance is linked to changes in social power. The fluidity of gender explains that gender identity is in a continuous process of reconstruction amid the power and control over gender performance, with individuals playing a key role in this process (Butler, 1990)^[3]. Butler (1990) stressed that the fluidity of gender reflects the interaction of power between individuals and society^[3]. Although society imposes norms and requirements on individuals, individuals still possess the agency to resist and even the potential to break traditional gender norms. In post-closet culture, with the growing social acceptance of the gradual coming out of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) groups, the gender performance of heterosexual men has become more fluid and diverse, no longer solely relying on traditional gender roles (James Joseph Dean, 2014)^[7]. Meanwhile, James Joseph Dean (2014) elaborated on the agency of individuals within social power and how they use this agency to challenge gender norms^[7].

In the context of post-closet culture, through a series of social movements, legal reforms, and positive media coverage, the LGBTQ+ community has enhanced social acceptance of their identities, leading to the gradual diversification of gender identities and expressions (James Joseph Dean, 2014)^[7]. For example, drag performance has emerged and evolved within the LGBTQ+ community as a form of expression that transcends the traditional gender binary. It does not merely imitate or perform femininity but also integrates transgender and gay elements, challenging the fluidity and indeterminacy of gender to a certain extent (James Joseph Dean, 2014)^[7]. This form of performance and its associated stages provide a platform for more LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves. The development of such movements is not only a personal choice of the LGBTQ+ community but also a reflection of increased social inclusiveness, representing the outcome of continuous negotiation between individuals and society. Butler's theory posits that gender is socially constructed and fluid (Butler, 1990)^[3], and heterosexual groups have also broken free from the constraints of traditional gender roles through certain practices and actions. For instance, Kubek (2023) found that heterosexual men incorporate some feminine elements into their clothing or accessories to express their emotions and diversity^[9]. In the workplace, many female leaders choose to present themselves through rationality and logical thinking; this leadership style is the result of continuous negotiation and adjustment between individuals and society, as well as a challenge to implicit gender power structures (Nash & Moore, 2018)^[10].

The public coming out and performances of LGBTQ+ individuals (Christian, 2020)^[6] have redefined the reiterative practices in Butler's theory of gender performativity. By coming out publicly and engaging in performances, the LGBTQ+ community has brought their hidden, socially marginalized subcultures into the mainstream, innovatively applying Butler's concept of "reiterative practices" and demonstrating how marginalized groups can subtly expand the boundaries of social inclusiveness through repeated performances^[6]. The transformation of heterosexual men proves that mainstream social culture is negotiable in the post-closet era. Casey's (2016) research further deepened Dean's theoretical framework, revealing that social relationships between men are no longer confined by gender norms but can also encompass emotional and intimate expressions of friendship^[4]. The shift in social recognition of diverse gender identities and expressions has provided individuals with greater space for self-expression, an outcome achieved precisely through negotiation between individuals and society.

3. Conclusion

Through case studies, this study verifies the fundamental theoretical ideas of Foucault, Butler, and Dean, and also demonstrates how real-world gender practices enrich and redefine these theories innovatively. The experiences of transgender individuals in the medical field reinforce the pathological regulation of gender by social power within the medical domain (Berli et al., 2017)^[1]. However, individuals negotiate with the social power system through coming out and take measures to obtain legal identity (Christian, 2020)^[6], proving that the power system is not rigid but dynamic and negotiable. Drag performances challenge the gender binary, and female leaders in the workplace skillfully use socially valued competencies such as logic and rationality to challenge workplace gender power structures (Nash & Moore, 2018)^[10]. These examples illustrate how individuals cleverly leverage social gender norms and role expectations to innovate the application of theories. Heterosexual men incorporating feminine elements into their attire (Kubek, 2023)^[9] and forming intimate friendships with other men (Casey, 2016)^[4] further elaborate on Dean's theory of post-closet culture. These changes indicate that the improvement of social inclusiveness is not only a matter of individual choice but also an achievement attained through individuals' active negotiation with the social power system.

Unlike previous studies that categorize the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexuals as binary opposites, this study adopts the same critical perspective as Cohen (1997) and Dean (2015), arguing that such binary classification fails to recognize the interconnectedness between different groups under the social power system^{[5][7]}. Warner (1994) also noted that the normative pressure of heteronormativity in society acts on both the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexuals^[11]. This dynamic process is further evidenced by the diverse gender performances exhibited by heterosexual men in the post-closet era.

Despite its achievements, this study primarily employs a Western-centric theoretical framework. The theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Butler, and Dean may manifest in different forms and negotiation methods in various geopolitical contexts. Future research should conduct more detailed cross-cultural analyses to explore whether these power dynamics also exist in the gender practices of non-Western societies, and what innovative forms and applications emerge to reflect the negotiation between individuals and social power systems. Secondly, the case application in this study has certain limitations. Although Foucault's and Butler's theories are profound, they mostly focus on offline gender practices and power regulatory institutions. However, the development of contemporary social media has created new power systems and gender norms, resulting in a certain lag in the application of this study's theoretical framework in the digital era. In addition, this study does not fully utilize the intersectionality theoretical perspective, leading to limitations in analyzing the negotiation between individuals from different social classes and regions and the social power system. This study concludes that despite the continuous evolution of the times, the ongoing negotiation between individuals and the social power system remains a crucial factor in advancing gender diversity and social inclusiveness.

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