

Gender Performativity and Objectification

Although “objectification” is an important concept in feminist theory, much of academic work in feminist philosophy focuses on the details of what exactly objectification is and why it is harmful, rather than why precisely it is that instances of objectification so often involve the objectification of women or women-presenting persons. One possible answer to this issue utilizes Judith Butler’s theory of “gender performativity” put forth in *Gender Trouble* and expanded upon in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Feminist Epistemology”. Gender performativity is the theory that gender and gender roles are elaborate social performances that one puts on in day-to-day life, the hegemonic versions of which underlay popular conceptions of “man”/ “masculine” and “woman”/ “feminine”. If it is, indeed the case that “woman” and “man” are performed and reinforced in everyday life, then it is not just our own self-conception, but other’s reaction to our gender performances that shapes gender identification. The constant reduction of women to objects seems to serve as an important mechanism to reinforce the gendering of persons who are or are assumed to be female as “women”- persons who are properly in heterosexual relationships with persons gendered as “male”. Persons gendered as women are also, hegemonically speaking “supposed” to be feminine, and derive self-definition from the way in which they subscribe to feminine norms. Yet those norms frequently relegate them to secondary or submissive roles¹.

Although it is sometimes posited as such, objectification not an isolated instance of sexist expression by an individual person, but a crucial part of the “performance of gender” and the heteronormative assumptions which underlie our construction of gender roles. Objectification- the act of treating a person like an object rather than an agentive being- is often significantly gendered and, further, it is central to the process of gendering a person, and rendering them legible as human beings. This essay will also use Lina Papadaki’s essay “What is Objectification” for an overview of the definition of “objectification”, and use Judith Butler’s theory of “gender performativity”. Since gender is constituted,

¹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999) 10-22.

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not from an “essence” of “woman-ness” or “man-ness” but from a series of stylized acts that the actors come to see as natural and inevitable, objectification serves to codify this divide. Objectification is something, according to this definition, that can only happen to someone who is socially positioned, to have less social power, because they are the party in a position to be treated as an object- less than human. Although, according to this definition, there are undoubtedly various other forms of objectification that center around other social power imbalances, this essay will focus on gendered objectification. It argues that objectification is not a side effect of improperly understanding another person’s humanity, but rather a crucial part of the way “gender”- which is an important part of seeing a person as a person- is formulated in our society². I first review a traditional feminist conception of “objectification” put forth by Lina Papadaki and afterwards give a further explanation of how gender performativity ties into this. I then explain how, in fusing these two ideas together, we can come to a better understanding of how performativity of gendered roles disadvantages women and, finally, I consider an objection.

Lina Papadaki defends a thesis based on a revision of several seminal texts on objectification by MacKinnon/Dworkin (two dominance feminists) and Martha Nussbaum (a humanist feminist). For MacKinnon and Dworkin sexual objectification is systemically enforced, not only through sexual relations, but through the reduction of women to submissive sexual objects through patriarchy and more specifically through hyper-sexualization of the female body³. MacKinnon and Dworkin argue that objectification harms all women, not just those sexually used by men. Unlike MacKinnon, or Dworkin, Nussbaum thinks that objectification does not necessarily constitute a harm. According to her seven criterion - treating a person as an instrument, inert, fungible, violable, owned, denied autonomy, or denied subjectivity - negative objectification involves ignoring or improperly acknowledging a person’s

² Butler, *Gender Trouble*. 10-22.

³ Papadaki, Lina. “What is Objectification”. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 7 (2010) 19-21

humanity, but not necessarily severely damaging to her/his rational capacities, and positive/benign objectification involves seeing a person as an object in a way that does not deny her humanity.⁴

Papadaki argues that all of these conceptions of objectification miss something important. For MacKinnon/Dworkin that is the questionable claim that objectification necessarily harms a person's humanity-defined as their capacity for rational choice, and Nussbaum's theory entails that we objectify almost everyone in our day-to-day lives, making objectification so broad as to hardly be meaningful. Papadaki proposes doing away completely with Nussbaum's positive/benign objectification, as something that detracts from the serious nature of objectification while maintaining her negative conception as the only definition⁵. And in order to further capture some of the complexity of objectification as harmful vs merely ignoring a person's rational capacities, Papadaki proposes a separation between reductive and non-reductive objectification, reductive being harmful to one's rational nature while non-reductive involves simply ignoring/not fully acknowledging their humanity⁶. She then proposes a further separation between intentional and non-intentional objectification.⁷

Although Papadaki's version is very interesting, and an excellent overview of feminist theories of objectification, it seems to miss something important by defining objectification as something that is problematic primarily because it harms "rational capacities"- thus focusing on episodic instances of objectification, rather than viewing objectification as a *system*. Papadaki's focus is on classifying episodes of objectification or objectifying behavior as "intentional/non-intentional" or "reductive/non-reductive" rather than examining what type of systemic conditions would cause this behavior to be so endemic, particularly directed towards women. McKinnon's theories come closer to capturing why it is that objectification of women/women-presenting persons is so frequent and pervasive. In *Only Words* she argues that "Social inequality is substantially created and enforced- that is *done* [emphasis hers]- through words and images. Social hierarchy cannot and does not exist without being embodied in meanings and

⁴ Papadaki, 22.

⁵ Papadaki, 32

⁶ Papadaki, 32

⁷ Papadaki, 32

expressed in communications”⁸. MacKinnon’s focus is primarily on the over-sexualization of women, through pornography and sex work, which is certainly a frequent site of objectification, but, I argue, still not the core of the issue. To look at this issue, I think one must first understand what gender is, and what purpose it serves in society, and to do that, this paper will employ Judith Butler’s theory of gender.

Butler’s conception of gender differs radically from what one might refer to as the common-sense view of gender. Called “gender performativity”, it is the view that:

gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time [. . .] an identity instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self”⁹.

It is in the repetition of these gestures, movements and enactments that gender is constituted- albeit misleadingly- as a stable, essential identity or structuring principle. I use the term “constituted” to reference the ways in which gender is a social construction, thus constituted or put together by broader social mores, as opposed to merely “expressed” as an external indication of an internal truth. And, although gender is a performance, it is not an entirely voluntary one- gender does not express an “essence” hidden somewhere deep within the body or psyche but Butler also argues “Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished”¹⁰. In other words, gender is a performance because it is not something we possess (as a hormonal make-up, a body structure, or even a mindset) it is something that we *do*- a constant performance of binary opposition between masculinity and femininity, often conciliatory sometimes disruptive.

⁸ MacKinnon, Catherine. *Only Words*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 26.

⁹ Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” *Feminist Theory Reader* 462

¹⁰ Butler, Performative Acts. 464

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If gender is, in fact a performance and one located in the various acts that constitute it, then an “act” performed with the frequency and gendered under- and overtones that sexual objectification carries needs serious investigation. What I (and Butler mean) when I say “gender is located in the acts that constitute it” is a brief summary of performativity. Gender performativity posits that gender is made up of the acts that mark a person as “man” or “woman” (dress, mannerisms, ect) and it is through the repetition of those gendered acts that the illusion of a stable gender identity is created. As stated above, the stakes for not performing gender “right” are punishments of various sorts and those punishments exist because gender is an important way we “read” people- a way we make them legible as human beings who have subjectivity and are worthy of being treated as such. We “read” people for all sorts of things- social cues, personality traits, race, ect.- and use these characteristics to fit the person in question into categories within the larger schema of “human”. If readers think back, many can likely remember a time when they couldn’t quite read a person’s gender, and the resulting confusion. The very structure of our language all but necessitates knowing a person’s gender in order refer to them with a pronoun. Persons who do not easily fit into “he” or “she”, start to fit more neatly into “it”- a category usually reserved for non-subjects. So gendering becomes a way to humanize persons in our culture, but if gendering is a way to mark persons as subjects deserving of respect, there is something strange going with women and objectification. Objectification serves to dehumanize women, even those who properly perform their gender according to hegemonic standards. Thus, ironically, they are dehumanized for doing the very thing that is supposed to make them legitimate as a valuable and agentive human being.

If objectification is treating someone as an instrument, inert, fungible, violable, owned, denied autonomy, or denied subjectivity in a way that is harmful (as Papadaki defines it), then it seems like it would be a very episodic occurrence- after all, there is not usually someone whispering in the ears of various persons to treat women as though they are merely instruments for cis-gender males’ emotional or sexual satisfaction. In a way, it is episodic- recall that gender is constituted in the repetition of acts- but those discrete acts only make sense because there is a larger discourse about what it is that certain bodies,

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appearances and gestures are “supposed” to mean. For example, if wearing short skirt equals a sexually available woman, then making very aggressive sexual advances on public transportation makes sense, particularly if the person making those advances also assumes that the person is heterosexual and female. However, if a person who looked less “female” wore a short skirt in public the response would likely range from odd glances to transphobic violence. The two individuals in question were performing the same behavior- wearing a short skirt on public transit- but the response is completely different because of explicit social assumptions - skirts should only be worn by women, women should have certain physical characteristics, people with “woman” physical characteristics who wear short skirts are clearly signaling sexual availability, ect. There was likely no voice whispering in the ear of the person who decided to make sexual advances on the short skirt wearing woman on public transit telling them to do so, but the action makes sense within a particular, gendered framework that our society has in place. Remember that gender here is a performance- men become and are constantly becoming men by properly performing masculinity and women by properly performing femininity. Popular opinion has it based in all sorts of physiological, hormonal and otherwise biological factors, and these factors frequently influence the way persons see their own gender identity- if they were labeled male at birth they tend to see themselves as men- but that performance of masculinity is what has a man continually “made” a man.

Gender is a means of humanizing, of making people legible as people and marking them for according treatment. But for women, gendering serves as a strange double-bind- to “improperly” gender oneself is to risk some form of retribution, sometimes violent, for not following the gender binary, but to “properly” gender oneself does not open up the possibility of full humanity either. Objectification serves as one background against which the gender binary pulls a type of bait-and-switch on women’s gender performance- doling out humanity based on the proper “performance” of gendered norms but then taking it away by function of the constant treatment as merely tools for the sexual and emotional gratification of other people. And this objectification is not just sexual- when a woman properly performs the role of motherhood, she is constantly required to put the needs of her child above her own, thus treating herself

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as an object through which the emotional and physical needs of the child are met. This is not to say that mothers get nothing out of the experience of raising children, but rather that it is a very gendered experience (fathers are hardly expected to give the same level of care to their children) and that on top of being quite gendered, it is demanding, in a way that requires putting the needs of another person constantly ahead of one's own. Although the instances themselves are episodic, their constant reoccurrence and the background discourse of "the good selfless mother" provide a framework to make these seemingly episodic occurrences into a system that continually treats mothers as objects that raise children into maturity. The same could be said of the earlier example of the woman in wearing a skirt that a man on public transit perceived as short- as an episodic occurrence it is annoying but as a reoccurring trope it becomes a way to reinforce the constant policing of women's bodies- women who wear short skirts deserve to be sexual harassed because they are "acting" in a way that telegraphs sexual availability. The performance of sexual objectification in the form of harassment serves to establish a power dynamic- the objectifier has a right to "read" the objectified as a sexual object whether she likes it or not. This situation is easy to see because it involves an obvious actor-act- mediator relationship and involves an imposition of this relationship against the objectified individual's will, but gendered objectification is not only important in cases of sexual harassment. The power dynamic in the mother-child relationship above may seem less obviously problematic- after all, the mother is providing for the child, who (presumably) cannot provide for themselves and the mother seems to be treating herself as an object rather than allowing another person to impose that reading on her actions. But, in considering both what objectification is and why it happens at such a systemic level, one must consider why it is that person would seemingly objectify themselves- why would a mother put her own needs so far behind that of her child, as to treat herself as nothing more than a means to fulfilling that child's needs? This is partially because social mores around motherhood dictate that "good" mothers look after their child(ren) before they look after themselves, and failing to properly perform proper motherhood carries a range of penalties from social ostracization to state intervention and loss of parental rights. Self-definition and identity are also caught

up in the ways we perform our identities, and if one of those identities is that of a mother, it is likely important that that role is performed well.

One might object that we all have “roles” which come with normative pressures- men have them, women have them and there is nothing uniquely problematic about the ones that women face. After all, under this theory, everybody performs gender all the time- men have to “perform” as properly masculine subjects which could itself be a form of objectification. It is true, that performing a very stereotypical version of masculinity in which one was independent, high-performing, and competitive seems like a very lonely existence. Women, although they are compelled by the various sources listed above to constantly give their emotional and sexual labor to others, get to having meaningful connections with other persons, that masculinity does not offer. But consider, first, the great social/economic value on placed labor that takes place within the competitive economic structure in the US- even more care based jobs, like teaching and nursing work that are part of the traditional, paid economy (as opposed to something like a stay-at-home mother, which is uncompensated labor) are much less financially lucrative than a job in the competitive and un-ironically male dominated tech sector¹¹. Masculine performances get the financial rewards, social recognition as valuable, and can depend on feminine performances of care and self-sacrifice. Women get no such reciprocation for emotional and sexual labor provided, besides perhaps a tenuous financial security that could be revoked if the relationship ends. Proper performance of femininity makes open competitiveness less acceptable but more individualistic and competitive attitudes are rewarded in society at large.

Although most feminist theories of objectification have acknowledged that objectification is a systemic problem that primarily effects women, they tend to focus on defining it based on episodic occurrences (whether or not a particular action “counts” as objectifying and why) rather than considering why it is a systemic occurrence that tends to break down along gender lines. In using Butler’s theory of

¹¹ Scherer, Pat and Anjuan Simmons “Tech’s Troubles with Women: Interaction” *Harvard Business Review* 92 (2014) issue 12, 26

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gender performativity to analyze the very structure of gender- one that serves to make legible and thus humanize persons- it seems that we can reframe objectification as a systemic occurrence that is significantly gendered and also important to the very process of constituting gendered categories.