‘Fixed fluidity’

an exploration of agentic acting in essentialist gender constructions

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Introduction

'Nothing is preceding the embodied exterior' (Butler 1988: 521).

This quote is the essence of Butlers (1988) work and it startled me from the moment that I read it. It raised many questions about what I experienced to be my 'self' and my own gender identity. As a child I performed my gender differently for some time, I wanted to be like the boys and so I dressed like them, played the rough games and resisted many 'girly' thing. After a while this period developed into what Butler would call the 'right performance' of my feminine gender. I never experienced any punishment in reaction to this performance, neither did I feel the urge to make a clear statement about my gender identity. I never felt like I was part of some sort of collective experience of womanhood, all other women naturally being my 'sisters'. However, in many feminist articles this idea of universal womanhood or shared feminine experience, is present. This made me wonder how, if gender was only a 'repetitive act', this idea of 'the woman' being oppressed by or subordinated to 'the man', could be so prevalent?

When I came across the Men's Rights Activists Movement (MRA's) last summer, my confusion grew. Why did I never read about a shared universal experience of manhood before? I became fascinated by the construction of gender identity by the MRA's in order to collectively demand rights, a process which I already came across in feminist discourse. I found out that I unconsciously believed that womanhood was something naturally universal, but manhood could not be a shared experience because men were not oppressed by the other gender. Butler (1988) took me further with her argument that is it not men oppressing women, but that gender identity is an oppression in itself, as there is no natural basis for binary genders.

However, in a society where fluid gender identities are finally becoming more recognized, there are still lived experiences of oppression and discrimination (regardless of the existence of the genders that this oppression is imposed upon). This made me realize that it is hard to empower or celebrate a shared experience without a collective essentialist gender identity. Without a fixed gender identity it seems less clear what is needed to move towards emancipation.

Keeping this in mind, I wonder, could there be any differences between people in their possibilities for engaging with an essentialist gender identity? For instance, are MRA's freer to ascribe to being 'men' than 'women' are to being women in other contexts? In short, what I want to know is to what extent structures create the essentialism and collectivity of these shared gendered experiences, both of men and of women.

This leads to asking the question:

'How can ascription to an essentialist gender identity be understood as agentic practice?'

It is important to ask this question, as it explores an interesting paradox of individual ascription to an understanding of their gender as a fixed, collective category. This process has often been overlooked in feminist discourse. Too often I have seen agentic practice only considered in feminist works as means to emancipation through fluid conceptions of gender identity, rather than through fixed notions. I found an inadequate conceptualization of agency prevalent in many works, which I will discuss in this paper. A thorough analysis of agency and structure is necessary, in order to understand how these interrelate and what they comprise within the context of gender identity formation.

From my conceptualization of agency I will be able to argue that engaging with essentialist gender identities is a form of agentic practice. However, in line with Ortner (2006) I will show that structures have different effect on different people, in which I differ from Bourdieu's (2014) practice theory. I will argue that we should consider agency as a 'possibility', which takes a different from as it is formed through not only differences in time and place, but also the positionality of people (Ortner 2006: 136) (Yuval-Davis 2006). Self- ascription is thus agentic to the extent that some actors are more agentic than others, depending on what marginalized group the actors are part of. Through self-ascription to essentialist identities, the structures that people are oppressed by are being reproduced, thus deepening inequality.

Throughout this paper I will work with an understanding of structure from a post-structuralist perspective. I recognize social discourses as structures that can seem rigid, but are not permanent structures that exist outside of social agents (Bettie 2006, Ortner 1996, Bourdieu 2014, Butler 1998). Rather I see structures as structuring principles that are simultaneously productive of and reproduced by social actions. In line with Ortner (1996: 12), I want to make space for an entangled understanding of 'structurally embedded agency' and 'intention filled structures'. Rather than seeing agency as a choice, equally available for everyone, I indicate it to be a possibility for intentional navigation between different discourses on identity (Baumann 1998, Bettie 2006). As we will discover, the 'possibility' for agency is always tied to processes of power (Ortner 1996: 4). I thus argue that we have to think through agency as a spectrum; it is differentiated between people in more or less possibilities for intentional practice. It is this inequality, due to positionality of people, that is too often overlooked in discussions of agency and structure.

I will use gender as the leading social category to understand the construction of essentialist identities. I will follow Butler (1988) in her definition of gender as 'a repetitive act', which is performing rather than expressing an gender essence. However, I will also take Bettie's (2006) notion of performance and performativity to understand gender. This, because my understanding of gender

identity is influenced by Bettie's (2006) distinction between performance and performativity of class. Performativity shows how class is determined by structural discourses on identity, performance being a possibility for challenging these structures (Bettie 2006: xxix). I thus see gender as a performance, that is a repetitive act, which is both structured by discourses on gender identity (performativity), and has possibilities for agency because of its constitution through practices. By this conceptualization I want to set aside Butler's (1988) idea that every individual has equal opportunity to perform their gender differently in every context.

Although the formation of gender identity can be explored on an individual (psychological) level as well and it is important to recognize the diverse experiences and emotions in terms of gender identity, the focus of this paper lies on ascription to social-cultural notions of gender identity. It is the essentialism that intrigues me in my research question, which leads me towards a conceptual understanding of the individual as a part of a collective, therefore as socially produced identities (Bettie 2006: xxviii). As Butler (1988) argues, the act of gender identity is never individual, but doing gender can be individual (Ibid.: 525).

I am inspired by Geschiere and Meyer (1998) as well as Bettie (2006) in my conceptualization of identity. Knowing the problematic implications that can derive from notions of identity, for example assumptions about homogeneity within groups, I deliberately chose to work with this concept. I will use identity as an 'analytical tool' to explore ascription to essentialist genders (Ibid.: 607). Especially these identities are what interests me, as they make me able 'to grasp' the essentialism, the collectiveness and the category of gender that they contain. Following Bettie (2006) I conceive identities as 'narratives in process', without any implication of a fixed nature (Ibid.: 197). However, this process of fixing of identities is what I will be focusing on, as I will explore ascription to essentialist gender identities. Ascription can be understood as a way to intentionally engage with these identities.

Building up my argument, I will start in the first chapter with exploring different 'movements' that construct essentialist identities. From the 'individual to the collective', from 'flow to closure' and from 'top to bottom' will be the main movements that I will discuss that will help us to see the importance of context in collective identity formation (Baumann 1998; Eriksen 2002; Geschiere and Meyer 1998; Fassin 2010).

After that I will move on to a thorough exploration of different theorizations of agency and structure, to conceptualize my own understanding of both (Bourdieu 2014; Bettie 2006; Butler 1988; Ortner 2006). Then I will use this conceptualization to discuss possibilities for agentic practice within the different movements of identity construction. This will lead me to a discussion of more intersectional approaches on gender identity, as the possibilities for agentic practice differ between different positionalities. This will bring me to an exploration of the power relations and inequality involved in gender identity formation (Butler 1988; Bettie 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006; Stout 2006; Nayak 2006).

Lastly I will take this further in the third chapter into a discussion of agentic acting as a reproductive practice of structures, deepening the inequality (Bourdieu 2014; Butler 1988; Bettie 2006; Ortner 2006).

Chapter 1 Formation of essentialist identities

To unravel my topic of interest it is important to understand the ways in which the formation of essentialist identities comes about. Understanding this process of construction is essential to understand what agency means within the formation of identity. I will thus first focus on how essentialist identities are constructed, focusing on the expression of these identities by people. I will not yet focus on gender identity or agentic practice within these theories, as we will first need an understanding of essentialist identity formation, before we will move on to explore agentic practice in essentialist gender identity formation.

I will discuss three 'movements' of creation here, through which the identities are constructed. These comprise the movement from the individual to the collective, which entails the process of self-ascription to an essentialist identity. Another movement of construction is the movement from outward to inward, in which essentialist identities are constructed as a reaction to changing circumstances in the society. The last important movement that I will discuss goes from 'top to bottom' , constructions of essentialist identities through representative discourses and discourses on national identities.
It is important to recognize these movement because these affect, as we will see further on, what agency comprises in the formation of identity.

1.1 Self-ascription, from individual to collective

The first step is to understand Baumann's (1998) perspective on identity formation. This will help us later on to recognize agency in his discussion and to conceptualize agency as an intentional form of navigation between discourses. Despite that Baumann (1998) does not address gender in his argumentation, as we will see, his work is a valuable start to explore the formation of collective identities.

During his long-term fieldwork period in a neighborhood called Southall in Londen, Baumann (1998) researched existing discourses in representation of the social groups (Ibid.: 188). He discovers what he calls 'the dominant discourse' which equates community, culture and ethnic identity in the representation of people (Ibid.: 6). This perspective makes a distinction between groups of people on the basis of culture, and divides them in five different cultures that are identified as homogeneous communities (Ibid.: 72) However, to really understand the local dynamics, Baumann (1998) argues that the dominant discourse is not sufficient (Ibid.: 109). He shows that the equation between culture and community in many contexts is not relevant, because both concepts are often not the same

category of identification. He shows that almost all Southallians form a part of different communities, not only the community that they are represented by in the generalist discourse. It depends on the context to what culture or community people ascribe themselves to. For example, people who are part of the religious Muslim community are divided in several 'cultures' and the Sikh community is divided by caste. Baumann (1998) thus recognizes a second discourse, which he calls the demotic discourse, that is alternative to the dominant discourse (Ibid.: 6). This demotic discourse separates culture and community, leaving space for people to navigate between different cultures and communities (Ibid.: 189). It shows that the meaning of culture and community are constructed through a process of renegotiating meaning in different contexts, which he calls 'cultural contestation' (Ibid.: 195). The Southallians thus develop 'dual discursive competences', which means that they navigate between both discourses on identity. This shows that identity can both be a fixed and a fluid category for people, dependent on the context (Baumann 1998: 34-35).

1.2 Collective identities

The question that I ask is, what are the reasons for Southallians to ascribe to the dominant discourse on identity? Why is the demotic discourse not deconstructing the dominant discourse? This is where Baumann's (1998) discussion becomes really interesting.

He explains that hegemonic discourses on identity create groups that one can easily make policies for (Ibid.: 198). For applying policies it is easier to divide a heterogeneous group in five separate, homogeneous groups (Ibid.: 188). In practice this means that communities will only be recognized as a community and can strive for their rights, if they engage with this dominant discourse. Southallians have an economically disadvantaged position compared to the rest of London, and all have collective needs because of the limited resources (Ibid.: 202). Communities become categories that are targeted for their needs, and this results in a competition between communities to gain the best opportunities from public facilities. Logically, Baumann (1998) argues, there is no reason for disengaging a dominant discourse on (ethnic) identity, if this reified meaning is what will help you to get what you need (Ibid.: 193). People will support these reified perspectives because it is the only way to equal access to resources (Ibid.: 202). Baumann (1998) thus argues that the main reason for a reified understanding of community and culture and engaging with it, is that it gains a possibility for people to collectively meet their needs (Ibid.: 198). If the basis for demanding rights is not ethnic targeting or affirmative action, the competition between communities will be taken away, and according to Baumann (1998) this will result in a less reified meaning and application of culture (Ibid.: 197-199).

From this we can see that in the movement that self-ascription entails, the construction of a collective identity takes place. In the essentialism of the identities is the collectivity enclosed, as the essentialism is assuming the same characteristics for all members of the collective. The collectivity of

essentialist identity thus plays an important role in why people would self-ascribe, as through the collectivity people have more opportunities for competing.

Not only collectivity, also context is of great importance in self-ascription, is what we see in Baumann's (1998) work. It depends on the context if and how people engage with essentialist understandings of their identities. In a context of poverty as he shows, people need to ascribe to essentialist identities to survive. In Eriksen's (2002) discussion of ethnicity we can see the importance of context in essentialist identity constructions as well. He understands ethnicity as a social identity, thus an identity that is constructed in relation to other groups of people (Ibid.: 17). It is a category that is used by people who ascribe themselves to it, with as base their cultural distinctiveness (Ibid.: 5). It is thus the classification of the self and of the other that is really important in self-ascription to the essentialist identity. This classification only comes about in contexts wherein people in relation to each other construct themselves as differently. Mohanty (1988) explains the importance of context in identity formations as well. She shows that collective (essentialist) identities can be constructed as a result of a shared context of oppression or struggles within society (Ibid.: 67). In different contexts it can thus be more or less important to organize as an collective (Eriksen 2002: 17) (Baumann 1998) (Mohanty 1988).

This is why we can never understand collective identity formation without understanding the context in which the identity emerged. The context will always affect the movement from the individual to the collective. I will elaborate on this in the second chapter, first I will move on with showing two other aspects of the construction of essentialist identities.

1.3 Flow and closure

Geschiere and Meyer (1998) shed a different light on how identity constructions become essentialist. They argue for a conceptualization of identity as an analytical tool to understand globalization. The homogenizing flows of globalization are always paralleled with a reinforcement of cultural differences (Ibid.: 607). From this uniformization follows uncertainty about identities, which leads to searching for a 'true identity', in an attempt to clarify this uncertainty (Ibid.: 610-611). Thus, in a response to global changes, new boundaries are created and essentialist identities become constructed.

Eriksen (2002) also argues that this process of relying on cultural heritage and common origin can be seen as a reaction to modernization. When societies change rapidly, instead of becoming a 'melting pot', people hold on to their fixed identities, as a reaction to the changes around them (Ibid.: 13). Nayak (2006) as well recognizes the effect of global changes on the 'closure' of identities. His research on the effects of de-industrialization on the formation of masculine identities shows that historical changes affect the transformation from youth to manhood (Ibid.: 813). Before the masculine identities were recognized by their labor, but after de-industrialization masculinities needed new ways to be defined as such. The reinvention of local traditions such as drinking circuits therefore became a

response to the global transitions that changed the former ways of identity construction. These reinventions of traditions can be seen as a 'survivalist response' , which localize and isolate communities in a globalizing world (Nayak 2006: 827). Here we can see how essentialist understandings of masculine identities become a means to resist and react to modern changes.

Through these theories we can see that apart from the movement from the individual to the collective, there is another movement that is important in the formation of essentialist identities. It shows that there is a tendency to create an essentialist identity as a reaction to changes in society which globalizes and becomes more homogeneous. I argue that this reaction is a countermovement to the changes, by the reification of the differences of their heterogeneity and diversity.

1.4 Top to bottom

Not least important is the construction of (representative) discourses, as we have already seen in Baumann's (1998) discussion, by the people who have the power to do so. This is important to note because the power relations involved in defining identities have effect on the possibilities for agency, as we will see in the next chapter. Now we will first move towards a deeper understanding of the construction of identities in the movement from 'top to bottom'.

I first take a look at Mohanty (1988) to further understand my interest in the construction of 'the woman' as an essentialist category. She shows that feminist discourse on 'third world women' produce women that are singular in their experience of oppression (Ibid.: 62). This 'discursive homogenization', works as an oppressive structure that keeps being reproduced by defining women through this discourse (Ibid.: 63). 'Mohanty (1988) argues that the 'third world woman' is conceptualized through a discourse of saviourism. The 'third world woman' becomes a singular category of women, which has to be saved by 'western' feminists.

Here, Butler (1988) agrees with her argumentation. She argues that feminists in their attempt to empower women constructed a category of women that universalizes their experiences (Ibid.: 522). However, 'sisterhood' cannot be assumed because of equal genders, because there is no proof for a universal experience that women have (Mohanty 1988: 67).

Feminist analyses are thus never only theoretical, they are always political in their effect on people (Ibid.: 64). A victimizing discourse will make victims of groups of people, without being sensitive for the differences within these groups. As Yuval-Davis (2006) also emphasizes, social analysis involves 'real' people, the effect of the analysis on these people should never be forgotten (Ibid.: 198).

Stout (2006) calls this political aspect the 'interventionist' attitude of feminist works (Ibid.: 721). She explores feminist discourse in the context of a changing Cuban sex trade. The discourse that sex workers in Cuba need to be saved is existent in the criticism of foreign feminist writers who critique the Cuban scholars for their 'blaming the victims of the sex trade'. However, in this attempt to

'protect' the sex workers from being blamed and by trying to 'save' them, a problematic conceptualization of these sex workers is realized. These women are thus defined as victims and through this victimization an essentialist identity is constructed. This discourse of victimization both generalizes the heterogeneity of experiences between actors and takes away their potential for agentic acting.

Fassin (2010) in addition, helps to further understand the construction of essentialist gender identities. He argues that the formation of a national identity can be a political tool to keep 'others' out. He shows how the construction of a national identity has its basis in anti-immigration attitudes (Ibid.: 510). As Fassin (2010) describes, the populist resentment in European countries shifted from resentment towards 'Europe' to resentment to the 'other' outside Europe after 9/11. Suddenly Europe became a protector of national identities, against influences from non-western (Islamic) immigrants (Ibid.: 515). The rhetoric of sexual democracy that is prevalent in different countries is mostly focused on women, making a distinction between the women that belong to the national identity and the women that do not (Ibid.: 513). Fassin (2010) argues that this creation of identity functions as a discourse of oppression, which justifies anti-immigration attitudes (Ibid.: 509). 'The woman' should be protected from 'the hostile other'. However, this discourse violates members who are supposed to be protected by it, because they are only protected if they stay within the norms of the national identity (Ibid.: 526). In this construction of 'our' women, versus 'their' women something interesting happens. In their initial creation out of 'protective' ideals against the 'other', both categories of women are essentialized. 'French' women in their sexual freedom and 'immigrant' women in their non-sexual freedom (Ibid.: 526). Through the classification of immigrant men as hostile and immigrant women as unfree, they become the 'other' in this essentialism of their identities. As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues: in the formation of homogeneous social categories, boundaries between the self and the other are constructed, with positive or negative natural characteristics (Ibid.: 199).

This classification of the other is what Nagel (2003) points at as well. She helps to explain Fassin's (2010) notion of sexual politics. It is through sexuality, she argues, that the other and thus the borders of the self, are created (Ibid.: 9). She argues that all ethnic or racial boundaries are sexual as well, although sex is a 'silent category' in the construction of these boundaries (Ibid.: 2). This means that this category is not used as a means to explain differences between people, but is unarticulated in its differentiation. This mainly, because sexuality is perceived as a biological feature, rather than a social construct (Ibid.: 7). Nagel (2003) shows that discourses on (sexual) identity create essentialist identities that functions as a form of othering and creates a sense of belonging at the same time.

Processes of classification of the self and the other are thus political as well. As Butler (1988) argues, the creation of gender categories is needed for political interest (Ibid.: 529). In her opinion, there is no ontological base for assuming that 'the woman' exists, but women can be used as a political tool (Ibid.: 529-530). This is exactly what Fassin (2010) describes: the use of women as political tool

to justify anti-immigration politics. The politics of sexual difference thus creates an essentialist discourse on identity, functioning to reach political goals (Fassin 2010: 513) (Butler 1988: 530).

Collective identities are thus created from 'top to bottom' through discourses. It is really important to see that if collective identities are constructed by (feminist) discourses, these are often constructed by other people than the people who are affected by them. It is important to be aware of this difference in power within identity formation, as these differences are tied to agentic practice as well. I will dive deeper in this process in the second chapter.

As I have shown, there are several movements that can be recognized in the formation of essentialist identities. From the individual to the collective, through self-ascription. From the outside to the inside, through processes of flow and closure and from top to bottom through representative discourses on identity. In the next chapters I will explore what agency compromises within the discussed movements.

Chapter 2 Navigation between identities

In describing processes of essentialist identity formation, in the first chapter I only explored processes of general essentialist collective identity formation without focusing necessarily on gender identity. In this chapter I will start with a thorough analysis of different perspectives on structure and agency, as we will need a nuanced conceptualization of both concepts to be able to discuss what agency comprises within identity construction. Coming from these conceptualizations, I will take a closer look at the discussed works in the first chapter, as this will show how sometimes agency and structure are not that clearly defined.

This will lead us to more intersectional works because, following Yuval-Davis (2006) we will never understand agentic practice within identity construction, without taking an intersectional approach. I apprehend intersectionality as a lens to understand human positionalities as experiences formed by the entanglement of different social categories (Ibid.: 195). I understand this entanglement of different categories as what forms experiences of oppression, because the intersections of these categories structure a person in a certain positionality. We need this intersectional approach to explore ascription to essentialist identity formation, as possibilities for agentic practice are tied to positionality. I will explore navigation of gender identities within these intersectional works, as these will show both the effect of structures and how people position themselves within them.

2.1 Agentic practice within structures

Thinking of possibilities for agency in the construction of an essentialist identity confronted me with assumptions that I had about identity. I discovered that, I was somehow convinced that no one would ever 'choose' for a fixed social category. I was sure that everyone who was an agentic actor, would always choose for a non-essentialist perspective on their own identity. Fluidity in identity, for me, thus was the ultimate goal for an emancipated 'self'. I saw having agency as an opportunity to 'break free' from existing or oppressing structures on identity in the society. But, diving deeper into this theme it became clear to me that what I considered to be 'agency', may had been unconsciously some sort of neoliberalist definition of 'choice'. However, throughout this paper on gender identity formation I will not understand agency in the neoliberalist sense of choice, neither as a form of 'free will'. There is an important distinction to make between free will and agency, which I will explain here to show why I chose to dive into the world of agentic practice.

Free will is conceptualized by Bourdieu (2014) as a form of power that can change things through practices that are 'conscious and deliberate intentions' (Ibid.: 2). The concept emerged in a context in which it became defined by people who had the power to do so, by white privileged men such as Plato, Descartes or Kant (O'Connor, Franklin & Franklin 2021). This notion of free will

echoes the understanding of a liberalist's understanding of agency: having agency as being equivalent for being 'free' to choose. This is a problematic understanding of practice, as it implies that people who are disadvantaged are responsible for their own situation, rather than that their context of structural oppression is being recognized. The concept agency, however, emerged in a context in which it was necessary to define the possibilities to challenge the structures for people that were oppressed by them (Defo 2013). Because of the oppression that is inherent to the concept of agency, I chose to work with this concept rather than with the concept of free will, as I am interested in the power differences that are inherent to ascription to essentialist identities.

To understand what agency compromises we should try to understand structure, as both concepts need each other to be understood. Bourdieu (2014) argues that we should not understand structures as objective realities that are created outside social relations (Ibid.: 332). Bettie (2006) agrees with him as she argues for a less rigid notion of structures as being 'fluid and impermanent processes'. What she means by this is that structures are never 'objective', because they are produced through people's practices (Ibid.: xxviii). Not only are structures produced by practices, these structures are producing these practices as well. This is why Bourdieu (2014) argues that practices and structures have a dialectic relationship. The idea of practice as a 'mechanical' response to static structures is thus rejected within this dialectic understanding. To make this clear, Bettie (2006) argues for an understanding of discourses as structures. Discourses are produced through people's practices, because a repetition of practices form a normative structure on these practices. These practices are structured through this normative discourse in turn, as this discourse defines which practices are the 'right' ones, according to the norm (Bettie 2006) (Butler 1988).

Deriving from this dialectic understanding of structure and practice, I will take a moment here to elaborate on what agency means within this process of structuring and restructuring. Bourdieu (2014) argues that habitus, is the structuring principle behind all practices. Habitus in Bourdieu (2014) should be understood as a definition for the internalization of structures. The habitus creates dispositions that structure the practices before they are acted out. Practices can be understood as products that come from the habitus, while they are forming the habitus at the same time (Ibid.: 332). From this we can take that it is never possible to do a fully agentic act, neither a fully structured act, according to Bourdieu (2014).

Bettie (2006) gives more clarity on how we should understand agency within the dialectics. She argues for an understanding of agency as a 'possibility' for challenging structures (Ibid.: xxix). Or, as Ortner (2006) states, as 'a transformative power' (Ibid.: 136). Agency is in this conceptualization thus considered as an intentional action, in contrast with routine practices, which have little reflection or intention in their action (Ortner 2006: 136). Intentionality however, should not be understood as a fully conscious movement towards an end goal, but as a process that is embedded in structures (Ibid.: 135).

If we consider to what extent intentional practice is possible within structures, we can see that there are possibilities for a non-repetition of practices, that will avoid a perfect loop of production and reproduction of structures (Ortner 1996: 17). This is where I consider that the possibilities for transforming structures lie (Ibid.; Butler 1996: 521). I will thus understand agentic practice as a possibility for transforming structures, while being conscious of the fact that agency is formed by and simultaneously forming these structures.

2.2 Intersectional analysis of identity formation

Coming from these conceptualizations, I will take a closer look at the discussed works in chapter one on identity formation, as this will show how sometimes agency and structure need a better articulation. In Baumann's (1998) account for example, it seems like he argues that all Southallians have agency, because he describes the process of identification with the dominant discourse as self-ascription. He explains the effect of context, showing influences of structure, but also argues that people have agency to navigate between discourses if they want to. The same goes for Eriksen (2002) who describes identification with ethnicity as a category of self-ascription. He clearly mentions the influences of different structures such as history or global changes on formation of ethnic identity, but at the same time he describes ethnicity as a category of self-ascription.

I argue however that both Baumann (1998) and Eriksen (2002) lack in their exploration of identity formation as they do not consider gender or other social categories rather than ethnicity and race in their discussion. In line with Yuval-Davis (2006) I recognize that understanding whether self-ascription entails agentic practice, can only be understood through an analysis of all important social categories that affect an agent (Ibid.: 203). It is important to note that experiences of oppression through structures differ between people and depend on 'the cross of crossroads a person is located in' (Yuval-Davis 2006: 203). It is thus impossible to understand the movement of self-ascription as Baumann (1998) shows, without considering gender in the analysis. Thus, this is why I will now move on to more intersectional approaches, while setting aside collective identity formation in general, to gender identity formation in particular.

Several intersectional theories recognize class as an important structure that determines identities, without being consciously recognized by individuals. As we have already seen Bourdieu (2014) recognizes habitus as 'the' structuring principle in all practices, as well as in the construction of identities (Ibid.:3).

Bettie's (2006) research on the formation of girls identities in a high school in California takes a slightly different approach than Bourdieu (2014) in her argumentation on class as a structural force. She argues that we should understand identities as being constructed through both 'performance' and performativity' of class (Bettie 2006: 52-53). Her intersectional approach shows how the girls, through class performances, change and react to existing structures. Through making this distinction she leaves

more space than Bourdieu (2014) for navigation between discourses on identity. It explains how identities can be understood as at the same time fixed and fluid, something which we have already seen in Baumann's (1988) discussion of identity formation.

Whereas Baumann (1998) did not explain how we could understand self-ascription to identity as a form of agentic practice, but only implied that it was, Bettie (2006) explicitly shows her perspective on agency and structure. She beautifully takes into account all different social categories that play a role in the construction of the girls' identities, showing the intersections of race, color, gender, sexuality and class (Ibid.: 191). Her definition of agency leaves room for the girls to deviate and act in a different way than their class 'origin' implies. She argues that a girls' class origin is not necessarily always the determinant for her class future. Working-class girls could be performing middle-class and the other way around, showing how class origin does not perfectly correspond with class future (Ibid.: 164). These differences were for example visible in choices of style or more or less 'feminine' behavior, or with their gendered expressions. These performances were exceptions to the rule, as they were consciously moving upward or downward (Ibid.: 191)

However, mostly the girls were not aware of the construction of their futures, through their class performances, which enabled a reproduction of identities. In case of the working-class girls the limited economic and cultural resources being the structure determining this position (Ibid.: 190). I will elaborate on this extremely important point that Bettie (2006) makes further in the last chapter. For now it is important to take from Bettie's (2006) research that gender identity can both be fixed and fluid through performance and performativity, because in her notion of performance, we see possibilities for agentic practice. Agency for the girls, is to deviate from class origin towards a different class future. In this we can see how intentionally is engaged with a different discourse on identity to move towards a different future. This strategy is for example shown by how a few Mexican-American girls find a way to educational mobility, without 'acting white' or cultural assimilation (Ibid.: 158).

It is important to see that Bettie (2006) shows that it is possible to shift in identities with regards to class. She does not describe shifting identities with regards to fluid or fixed conceptions of gender (which is where my interest lies). However, it is interesting how her research shows that gendered expressions are connected to certain class positions through a more or less 'feminine' style. In the various styles of the girls, we can thus see how the categories of class and gender intersect and form the different positionalities of the girls.

Comparing Bettie's (2006) work with Nayak (2006) shows that they address similar themes of identity construction, but that Nayak (2006) is not clearly defining how he understands agency in the constructions of masculinity that he researches. From this he shows that class is an important structure and an unarticulated category in differentiation between people as well (Nayak 2006: 825). Class functions as the structuring force that constructs two different formations of the masculinities: the 'Real Geordies' and the 'Chaves'. Both groups of people have a different history of manual labor, with

accompanying economic status. He shows that, due to the post-industrial time, the identity of white masculinity has no base in labor anymore. It is thus in its performance that a white laborer's identity is constructed. Identities of the 'Real Geordies' are therefore negotiated and reproduced through traditions of past times, such as drinking circuits (Ibid.: 818). The 'Chaves', having less money plus the 'wrong' style, are forced in a different societal position than the 'Real Geordies'. They thus form other spaces and other traditions in reaction to the abjection. This counter reaction is mainly visible in their performance of 'protest masculinities' that is, in their style, their toughness, and in their a rougher accent (Ibid.: 823). Here, Nayak (2006) clearly shows a 'double articulation' of class and race. His intersectional approach shows that several social categories are conflated under the meaning of 'Chaves' (Ibid.: 823). The same process is what Bettie (2006) points out. She argues that there is a conflation between race and class meanings, by which she shows how the intersections of several categories construct ones positionality (Ibid.: 191).

In his notion of performance, Nayak (2006) seems to point as well to agentic practice. Mainly in the possibilities for the 'Real Geordies' to negotiate between old traditions and new times (Ibid.: 819). And for the 'Chaves' in their protest through constructing 'tough' masculinities (Ibid.: 821). However, he does not show any deviations from this idea of class past equates class performance in the present, it seems that he argues that class is the determining structure and that there are no possibilities for disengaging with discourses on class identity.

This is interesting, because it could both be that Nayak (2006) really did not see 'upward' or 'downward' movement between the two groups of masculine identities, or he did not want to focus on the exceptions as Bettie (2006) did. In the first case this fascinating, because this could mean that there is a possibility that among girls there are more possibilities for ascription to different (gender) identities, than for men. From their work we can take that there is a possibility that class as a structuring principle in some contexts oppresses masculine identities more than feminine identities in their ascription to a more fluid conception of their gender.

This is why Butler's (1988) work becomes really important here, to understand how we can see gender identity as a fluid category and what agency comprises in this formation. Butler (1998) takes us out of the binary thinking on gender in her understanding of gender as a repetitive act, or performance, as I already shortly mentioned in the introduction. Gender is not a fixed or stable identity, or a social agent in itself (Ibid.: 519). We should understand it as a 'social temporality' (Ibid.: 520). The performative acts, same as acts in a theatre play, construct gender in such a credible way that it is believed both by the actor and the spectators (Ibid.: 522). We should consider this act as a repeated act, that was already rehearsed before it was performed. This is why we cannot understand gender as either a choice, or as a passive inscription on the body (Ibid.: 526). It is thus not a predetermined structure, but this continuous repetition of acts that construct gender (Ibid.: 523). There is no essence, or true identity that is expressed by gender, rather gender acts constitute gender. This notion that acts constitute a discourse on gender identity shows that Butler (1988) considers practices

as constructive of structures as we already have seen in other practice theories (Bourdieu 2014, Bettie 2006, Ortner 2006).

However, in popular thinking the discourse that gender expresses a true identity, constitutes a notion of falsity of gender as well. This means that if one performs the gender identity 'wrong', there are punitive consequences. This way gender is controlled and regulated in society (Ibid.: 528). Taking in mind what we just saw in Nayak's (2006) work, we could consider the possibility that masculine gender identities have to deal with heavier punishment if they deviate from normative ideas on their gender than feminine identities. This could be a reason for less deviation in gender normative roles among men than among women.

Butler (1988) argues that in this repetition of acts, there is a way of transforming gender identities. If one stops this repetition, or deviates from it, there will be a possibility to perform differently (Ibid.: 521). It is in this notion of performance that Butler seems to show agency by changing structures or reacting to them. She addresses that the constitution of gender through acts means that acts can be the start for an intentional different performance (Ibid.: 522-523).

At first sight Butler's (1988) understanding of gender seems to have a lot in common with Bourdieu's (2014) notion of habitus. As we have seen, Bourdieu (2014) explains the relation between habitus and practice in a dialectic way. The different habitae predisposition individuals in distinctive ways to perceive the world and act in it. Social punishment that reacts to deviations in habitual practice becomes internalized, which means that individuals perceive their practices as the only 'right' way. He explains this by the example of a needle that is 'enjoying to point north' (Bourdieu 2014: 333). The needle is forced by the magnet to this direction, in the same manner as the individual is forced by the habitus to act in a certain way.

Here Butler (1988) seems to disagree with Bourdieu (2014). She argues that because gender is a continual performance, without any memory or determined future, that it can be performed differently by whoever and whenever people want. It seems that she would argue that gender escapes the structuring habitus, as she would otherwise give a bit more weight on how the internalization of social punishment makes individuals forced to perform their gender in a certain way. In my opinion, Butler (1988) therefore leaves more space for agency within normative constructions, than Bourdieu (2014) has in his argumentation.

I argue therefore that Butler's (1988) view on gender as a performance is a bit shortsighted. I understand gender identity, as an internalization of normative structures, equal to the habitus. Just as the habitus is informed by previous practices, gender identity is this as well. It will be possible to deviate from these structure through agentic practice, but gendered acts will form a 'legacy' that informs every gendered act. We can thus never assume that it is possible to suddenly perform gender identity differently, this can only happen through deviations and non-repetitions over a long period of time.

As we have seen, both the context in which the identity emerges, and the intersections of different social categories that form one's positionality, influence the possibilities for agency in construction of identities. This is why I argue that we should place Butler's (1988) argument in different contexts, as it seems that she is assuming that a non-repetition of gendered acts is a possibility equally available for everyone in every context. I disagree with her because I argue that people have different possibilities for agentic practice and thus different opportunities for transformation of gender identity.

It is lastly pertinent as well to recognize that Butler (1988) implies that it is only agentic practice if one transforms the repetition of gender acts. She does not discuss how this repetition can be a form of agency. I argue, taking again Baumann (1998) and Bettie (2006) in mind, that it is exactly this repetition of gendered acts that can be a form of agentic practice, if one engages intentionally with an essentialist discourse.

2.3 Engaging with essentialist discourses on identity

I will move on with exploring several examples that show agency in engaging with essentialist identities, having in mind that we should see these possibilities embedded in a context of lived experiences. I have defined agentic practice as possibilities for transforming the structures that agentic practices are embedded in and partly determined by as well. Through engaging with essentialist discourses, which is a form of intentional acting, these discourses are formed and reproduced.

Firstly, the different movements that construct gender identities, as I described in the first chapter, show agentic practice to a certain extent. As we have seen, Bauman (1996) explains that the main reason why people engage with a reified understanding of culture is because it gives the opportunity to collectively demand rights (Ibid.: 198). Following him, we could understand it as a strategic choice to engage with an essentialist gender identity because through this resources can be gained. We can see this process for example in the Men's Rights Activists movement, the movement that prompted my investigation into this topic. Ascription to a fixed masculine identity is used to make a statement about the rights of men. This is what Yuval-Davis (2006) points at as well. She shows that the construction of a naturalizing discourse can function as a strategy of resistance (Ibid: 199). For example, Baumann (1998) describes discrimination as a reason for ascription to essentialist identities. The construction of collective categories can prevent and counter racism (Ibid.: 199). Yuval-Davis (2006) shows that we can see this for example in movements such as 'black is beautiful'. The identity of people is a naturalized category, with natural attributes, which constructs boundaries between who belongs within the group and who does not. She agrees with Baumann (1998) in that this can be a strategy to access resources for that particular group (Ibid.: 199). In Mohanty's (1988) work we can as well recognize how strategy construct essentialist political identities. Through these identities collectives can organize in a resistant manner and create political unity (Ibid.: 77-78). In short,

collective formation and strategic resistance shows how engaging with essentialist gender identities can be agentic.

In the movement of flow and closure as pointed out by Geschiere and Meyer (1998) we can also recognize a form of agentic practice. Essentialist identity can function as a means to create closure. The fixation of identities is thus not only created by discourses, it is also created through people who react to the flow of globalization (Ibid.: 609). Globalizing or uniforming tendencies construct and reconstruct boundaries, identities can therefore be seen as an effort to counter these tendencies (Ibid.: 602). In case of gender identities we can understand this process of 'grasping the flux' as an effort to construct fixed gender boundaries as a reaction to 'modern' fluid notions of gender identities (Geschiere and Meyer 1998: 610-611).

In the third movement that I described we see a different kind of process emerging. As we have seen, Fassin (2010) shows how this national essentialist identity justifies keeping others out who have a different identity (and supposed natural attributes and values). This French national identity however is, according to Fassin (2010), disadvantaging specifically the women who are supposed to be protected by it (Ibid.: 526). He shows that the construction of a homogenized identity only benefits those who are a 'right' member of the group. In his example he shows how women in France are only right members of the nation if they are 'French, heterosexual and loving a French man' (Ibid.: 529). Thus, while identity creation is supposed to be protective for women, the most vulnerable women in France are disadvantaged by it. Baumann (1998) agrees with Fassin (2010) by pointing out that in the end the most disadvantaged people within the constructed ethnic identity groups benefit the least from social policies that act on the dominant discourse (Ibid.: 200).

Yuval-Davis (2006) as well explains that essentialist categories reflect hegemonic discourses on identity. These discourses construct a 'right member' of social group and thereby silence the experiences of people within that group (Ibid.: 195). The problem with essentialist categories is that they reduce experiences of oppression to one single category like 'being women' or 'being black', but these experiences cannot be reduced to each other nor understood separately (Ibid.: 200). As Mohanty (1988) explains: 'homogenizing categories erase all marginal and resistant modes of experience' (Ibid.: 80). This means that although ascription to essentialist identity categories can be agentic in its intentionality, this does not mean that all people have the same opportunities for agentic practice.

Following Yuval-Davis (2006), I argue that the more social categories intersecting in a disadvantaging way, the more a person is influenced by these structures. I thus disagree with Bourdieu (2014) here, as he argues that all people are as much influenced by structures and thus have equal possibilities for agentic practice. I however, argue that due to different positionalities, people have different chances for intentional practice. Ortner (2006) explains this by her argument that people have the same 'capacity' for agency, but that it depends on the context in which people are (such as time and place) what form agency takes place. Agency is not uniform; it various in form and extent,

because structures empower individual social agents in different ways and oppress them in a different way as well (Ibid.: 136-138).

In addition, I want to point out that not only between groups, but also within groups of essentialist identities, possibilities for agency differ. It may be agentic practice if groups of people engage with a certain gender identity to gain resources or to make a statement about their identity as a reaction to developments in society. However, within these collectives there will always be people who have less opportunities to not- ascribe or to ascribe to essentialist perspectives than others. The most disadvantaged people, who do not fit into the collective identity perfectly have the least possibilities for agentic practice. For example, in Baumann's (1998) research we could see how the Muslim community was a marginalized group within the local dynamics. Islamic people needed to ascribe to the reified understanding of Muslim to compete with other groups. However, within this Muslim group the experiences between people differ enormously, according to their age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other social categories that form their positionality. This affects the possibilities for agency between people within this groups as well. It is thus extremely important to recognize that we can never assume that both constructions of binary genders, but also people within categories which are defined as masculine and feminine, are in the same way influenced by structures (Mohanty 1988: 70).

I have thus shown, through examination of several theories on identity formation, how an intersectional approach is necessary to understand how the combination of several social categories influence the possibilities for agency in the construction of an essentialist gender identity. I moved on to explore differences between case studies on masculine and feminine gender identities, discussing to what extent people had possibilities to ascribe to different identities. I argued that just in the repetition of acts lies the possibility for agentic practice within gender identity construction. However, the positionality of people influences the opportunities that people have for repeating or non-repeating gender acts. This is why, although in several cases engaging with an essentialist identity can be agentic practice, the 'degree' of agency differs within the groups of people that engage with essentialist identities. This, as we will see in the last chapter, is why agentic practice always is paired with inequality as well.

Chapter 3 Reproduction of essentialist identities

Having in mind how different structural positions affect possibilities for agency, I will finally move on to a deeper analysis of this process. Following Bourdieu (2014) and Butler (1988) I will argue that practices may be agentic to a certain extent, but that this does not lead to reduced inequality between groups of people. Rather through agentic acts, structures, as well as power inequalities, are reproduced. In line with Ortner (2006) I will show that forms of agency vary between social agents.

Bourdieu (1988) argues, as I have shown, that all practices are produced by the habitus. However, he argues that these practices are producing the structures that they are produced by themselves (Ibid.: 330). We should understand every structure as 'a production through practices' (Ibid.: 332). The practices that follow from the habitus can seem conscious in calculating effects of their actions, with past experiences as basis, but they are always structured by the habitus (Ibid.: 333-334). In short, the practices that are produced through the structuring habitus, produce regularities, that reproduce the practices (Ibid.: 334). The dialectic relationship between structure and agency helps to understand that acting in Bourdieu (2014) can never be fully agentic, neither completely non-agentic. This process is also seen in the social sanctions that are the consequence of having a different habitus in a different group of people (Ibid.: 334). Through these sanctions the practices are controlled and regulated, which makes them reproduce the structures that they are punished by.

Butler (1988) likewise, considers the project of gender as a 'strategy of survival'. She recognizes that punishment occurs if people perform their gender 'wrongly'. The gender acts construct an idea of gender, that is so credible, that it's construction is not revealed. Because of the credibility of the performance, the right performances are reproduced and the wrong performances are punished (Ibid.: 522). The norms that are constructed produce even a 'natural sex' (Ibid.: 524). This creation of an essence is part of the strategy to conceal that gender is a construction with reproductive interests (Ibid.: 528).

I have argued that exactly in the repetition of gendered acts, the possibilities for agency lie, because we can see it as a conscious strategy. However, following Bourdieu (1988) I argue that the repetition of acts is in a dialectic relationship with the structures that oppress this repetition. The repetition of acts reproduce the structures that they are produced by. This means that ascription to essentialist gender identities means that oppressive binary discourses on gender are reproduced.

To exemplify the reproduction of structures, I will use one of Bettie's (2006) beautiful illustrations. The example of Kate shows how agentic acting with regards to performances affect her future. Kate's middle class 'origin', her economic and cultural capital that was available to her, would normally make her be part of the 'preps' (the middle class origin people who performed a middle class identity). However, Kate's choice to perform a different identity than her class origin applied, made her become part of the working-class group. Her performance meant that she was not taking the classes that were taken to prepare for college, as all 'preps' took. This had consequences for her future,

as she was not going to be able to go to college. In this example we can see how an 'agentic act' to perform a different identity in fact reproduces the structures that are existent. Her performance caused downward mobility, the structural inequality being reproduced (Ibid.: 132). Bettie (2006) argues that the girls were mostly headed towards a future that equated their class origin, however with the exceptions to this rule she thus shows how agentic acting can reproduce structural inequality as well.

Nayak (2006) makes a similar argument in his discussion of actions that the different groups of men do. Both different masculine identities perform their identity differently through actions that Nayak (2006) calls 'body reflexive practices'. For the 'Chaves' , these are for example their 'toughness' their cool way of walking, their accent or reckless actions that show their bravery. Nayak (2006) shows how these body reflexive practices are formed by structures (such as masculine toughness formed by labor) but that they are forming structures themselves (Ibid.: 819). So it can seem that it is agentic acting to deviate from the 'Real Geordies' in style, actions or language, but this acting reproduces structures that produce these actions. Taking these examples we can see that to a certain degree we can still consider ascription to essentialist identities agentic, but because of the reproduction of structures, this acting does not necessarily lead to an reduced inequality, 'emancipation' or a better future.

I emphasize here, that as I have shown, essentialist gender identities are only existent in social relations, because there is no 'coherent group identity prior to entry in social relations' (Mohanty 1988: 78). This is important to note as, however ascription to these identities may be agentic, we can only understand essentialist gender identities within the social structures that they reproduce and are reproduced by. This means that we can never assume that having possibilities for agentic acting means that people have 'free chances' to improve their situations structurally. This is why according to Bettie (2006) a political discourse on gender identity is needed, to understand how gender identities are politicized. A wider understanding of the construction of identity within the intersections of social categories is needed to understand positionality not as a result of individual choices or aspirations (Ibid.: 190).

However, in line with Ortner 1996 and Butler 1996 I want to end with a positive note, as I do see possibilities for avoiding a reproductive loop of oppressive structures through intentional practices. Not only can ascription to essentialist gender identity be an agentic act, through 'slippages' in reproduction or 'non- repetitions' of acts, there are possibilities for intentionally disengaging this essentialist identity as well. This means that the social agent, however always embedded in social structures, does have possibilities for agentic acting to a certain extent. These intentional practices both reproduce structures and inequality, but in long term are the means for transforming these oppressive structures as well (Ortner 1996: 17) (Butler 1996: 521).

In conclusion, I have shown how ascription to essentialist gender identity can be agentic, but that this is not a means to 'change' structures. Rather, disengaging with essentialist gender identities will be a possibility for transforming oppressive binary gender discourses. Engaging with essentialist

gender identity will always mean a reproduction of these structures, through which these understandings of gender are reified. However, during daily life of people the engagement with essentialist gender identities will be a means to improve their situations, as this is often the only way to gain opportunities as a marginalized group. This means that I can argue that it is indeed agentic practice to engage with essentialist gender identities, but that the degree to which people have this agency is dependent on the positionality. Moreover, I argued that the effect of agentic practice on the inequality that it reproduces will differ between people as well.

Conclusion

The puzzle that I explore here, is the paradoxical relationship between on the one hand the individual and on the other hand the essentialist discourse of gender that this individual is ascribing themselves to.

I position myself, following Bettie (2006) and inspired by the work of Ortner (1996) (2006) in the post-structuralist perspectives on structure and agency. I understand structure as discourses that are reproduced through agentic practice. I define agentic practice as possibilities for intentional practice. I argue that the individual is reproducing these structures, but is also, through agentic practice, able to slightly change oppressive structures over a long period of time. This conceptualization helps to explore the question of whether there could be possibilities for agentic practice in ascription to essentialist gender identities.

Deriving from the different movements that I discovered in essentialist identity construction, I argue that the collectivity of essentialist identities are a big part of why people will ascribe to them. Collectivity is a way to gain opportunities, counter discrimination and strive for emancipation. However, the various movements of identity construction that I analyzed, clearly show how different contexts distinctively affected these constructions. In contexts of oppression and discrimination, people are forced to ascribe to essentialist identities as strategies of resistance or survival.

It is pertinent to recognize the different contexts in which essentialist identities emerge as they affect the possibilities for agency that people have. This is why an intersectional approach to understand essentialist identity formation is crucial, as this lens will make us able to see humans in their various positionalities.

I argue that the possibility for agency in gender identity construction is always affected by the positionality of an individual, because the more social categories intersecting in a disadvantaging way, the more a person is oppressed by these structures. This is where I differed from Butler (1998) and Bourdieu (2014) as they both did not consider agency as a spectrum that is unevenly distributed according to positionalities.

To take this further, I do understand ascription to essentialist gender identities as agentic practice, because I recognize possibilities for intentional engagement with essential categories. However, we should take into consideration that the effect of this engagement on the (dis)advantaged position is context dependent.

I argue that through intentional ascription to essentialist gender identities, oppressive binary gender constructions are being reproduced. Ascription to essentialist identity, however, though may be agentic, does not mean an ‘improvement’ for one’s situation. Although it seems paradoxical, positionalities are thus being reproduced through agentic practice. This means that disadvantaged positions are reproduced, thereby also reproducing inequality between groups.

I want to add to this, that although I argue that there are possibilities for deviation in gender identity formation, agentic acting does not necessarily mean a movement towards a more fluid conception of gender identity. I have shown how we should be aware of unconscious implications regarding agency within gender identity construction. Having possibilities for agentic acting does not necessarily mean that people will act in a way that anthropological or feminist discourses regard as emancipatory. We should keep being open to the fact that some people do not want to understand their identity as fluid, even when they have the possibilities to intentionally do not.

It is important to see that processes of 'closure' and or 'resistance' through essentialism are as much part of gender identity formation, as processes of fluid identity constructions. We should recognize that between the lived realities of people there are differences in possibilities for agency, due to different positionalities. In theory Bourdieu (2014) can argue that everyone is as much determined by structures, but in practice we will see that marginalized people have different possibilities for agentic acting than dominant groups in society. Ascription to an essentialist gender identity will be more or less an agentic act, due to positionalities and the reproduction of the essentialist discourses having different effects on people people's lives.

This is why it is important to take questions of agentic practice within oppressive discourses in several contexts, which will show how agency is always tied to positionality and thus to issues of power.

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