

Some Key Points from Lucal

Betsy Lucal is a woman who doesn't present herself in a conventional feminine manner and is often mistaken for a man. In this article she describes her experiences and reflects on their theoretical implications.

Gender is something we all "do." (The earliest example of this conceptualization in sociology is Garfinkel's study of Agnes, a man passing as a woman.)

"Successful social relations require all participants to present, monitor, and interpret gender displays." We don't know how to interact with someone who isn't a man or a woman.

When we encounter a new person, we make a gender attribution. People generally cooperate with other's attempts to attribute gender to them by using standard signs. In general, people assume someone is a man unless signs of femininity are presented.

People have a gender self-identity, a presenting gender and a perceived identity. Part of being a competent social actor is having these be the same. Competent social actors also correctly identify other people's gender.

The purpose of the two-and-only-two gender system is the maintenance of gender hierarchy, i.e., to oppress women.

Lucal decided not to participate in femininity to contribute to dismantling patriarchal gender constructs. She wants to be perceived as a woman and wants "woman" expanded to include her. However, Lorber suggests that moving between categories (the result of the misattributions Lucal faces) doesn't question the categories themselves. (Our ability to do gender is limited by how gender is institutionalized in our society.)

Lucal suggests that more effective gender rebellion may require more blatant rule-breaking (bearded men in dresses) or more active responses to misattribution. (This would provide "visual evidence of the nonmutual exclusivity of the categories.")

Most of us go along with path of least resistance.