

Don't call me a lady: issues relating to gender identity

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For some time I have been considering why being called a lady creates in me a desperate need to react aggressively. I was socialised into believing that there were two genders, man and woman, and that the male gender was more dominant and more important than the female gender. Social values and language were pivotal in formulating this construction. While I did not accept this formulation, intellectually I was drawn into the norm and socialised into being a woman. I am also a Lesbian and this socialisation has presented me with many negative roadblocks. Reflecting on my personal journey, I am now resisting the idea that language such as "lady" has any bearing on who I am.

Gender identity is a complex and challenging issue that has been socially and culturally constructed into a binary concept. Sexist language perpetuates such gender division and restricts relationships.

In this article, I present my personal experiences as a way of raising gender issues, and highlighting inequities surrounding difference. My aim is that together we develop our ability to create an inclusive society that enhances life-giving relationships. We are supposedly getting closer to accepting difference but I am not sure that I believe this. During the recent debate of marriage equality in Australia, people's opinions about why or why not LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning and queer) people should have marriage equality were many and varied and raised in me the question of what does equality really mean for us all and how can we achieve this living in a society that maintains a strict binary differentiation into man and woman?

I have found that psychodrama is a very effective method for a person who is questioning their gender identity and facilitates self-insight, self-acceptance and change. I pose a number of questions to stimulate your thinking about gender and challenging our social norms in order to create possibilities for wellbeing.

My personal journey

I was born in Australia in the 1950s, a time of strong Christian beliefs, recovery from the cold war, fear of 'the other', and conformity to a

'normal' way of life including that there were two genders, man and woman, the woman at home and the man at work.



I was only little when I started realising that I could not relate well to this world. Something did not fit for me. I did not want to be wearing a dress. I wanted to be wearing my brother's shorts which spelt freedom to me. I desired to inhabit his world as he seemed to be less restricted than me and my sister. But then this did not quite fit me either, as I did not see myself as a boy. Nor did I see myself as a girl, separate from my brother. I noticed inequities between my mother

and my father and I noted that I did not want to be a part of their world. I was not going to marry, that was clear. I was filled with confusion, experienced emotional roadblocks everywhere, but I was also alive with a passion for life.

I noted an imbalance of privilege. My parents allowed my brother greater freedom - he often got out of the household cleaning and was allowed to go out and do more away from the family home. He became an altar boy, something I really wanted to be but women were not allowed to participate in the church like that. Instead, they cleaned the altar. I thought how strange and unfair.

My father was crucial to me at this stage of my life. He commanded attention, he was tall, good looking, vocal and expressive. I admired him and wanted to prove to him that I too was important. When my siblings were throwing up with car sicknesses, he would tell me, "You're a tough little thing. You're a little leather-belly." This made me feel so special and proud.





I would sometimes sneak into my parents' room and dress in Dad's clothes. Although it felt good, I had a sense that such behaviour was not okay and I never mentioned it to anyone. But I knew that I wanted to be a man when I grew up, strong and tough like my dad. It seemed better to be like him than like my mother who appeared to me to be small, weak and compliant, even though in actuality she wasn't at all. Looking back I can see that becoming tough and strong like my father had a cost. Dad's strength was actually anger. He had much to grieve about, but showing his vulnerability was a sign of weakness. I learnt that to be strong and tough meant you could express

your rage but never your vulnerability. I breathed in my father's best and worst traits.

I was also curious as to the female aspect of myself. I had heard that if you were beautiful you were lovable and special so one day I asked my mother if I was beautiful. While I grappled with my femaleness, she grappled with the most tactful way to answer me. "No", she said finally, "But you have something." Although I was perplexed, I noted that Mum recognised something bubbling away in me and I decided to just carry on.

Although distant and often troubled, my mother wanted the best for her children. In her view the best would be achieved in a secure world where girls were girls and boys were boys. My elder sister was the quintessential girl, pretty and amenable, sitting in her bedroom talking, playing with dolls and reading books. Sadly, for Mum, I did not follow suit. I really did see weakness in being a girl, which I now know is a restrictive world view on gender.

My mother continued to persuade me to be more feminine but when I was 14 I gave up the idea of being girlish and persuaded Mum to buy me my first pair of Amco jeans. Putting them on with my sneakers, I felt normal and free. It was the best feeling. I looked and felt good, even knowing that I had shattered my mother's ideal of the way in which I, as

a girl, should appear. I did want to please my mother but I could not fit that mould.

I never really looked like a girl or a boy and this troubled my mother so I started to think about myself as being different. Feeling hesitant about who I was, I began to be more secretive.

Years later, talking with my mother when I was around 30, she told me that she did not mind my 'being what I was', as she now knew I had been born that way. She had read an article on chromosomes and thought that I must have had another chromosome, which explained why I was like a boy, I was born different. I remember feeling then that it was okay as that, at least, explained that I was not at fault. It was difficult growing up different but I did not want to be different. I wanted to conform.

The understanding and adherence to gender division was limiting me. As life evolved I challenged the notions of what and how I should be. I was Jo, rough, tough, soft, gentle, loving, angry, thoughtful, sad, lost, fearful, rejected, creative, generous, fun, and a lot more. But there was nothing at the time to help me feel okay about who I was and, without a response that said, "You are safe to express who you are, life is ready and waiting for you to explore, and live as you want". I remained confused.

When I was about 15, wearing my jeans and a red flannelette shirt, my hair shiny and shoulder length, I thought I looked great; I felt strong; but when my brother, walked in and said, "Hey Jo. Get your haircut. You look like a drag queen", I felt hurt and ashamed. That sense of 'I am not okay and he could be right' stayed with me for a long time. I thought I could be a drag queen. I was not a he, she, him, her. I was a shim, sham and ashamed. My brother nailed it. I was different. I am grateful for his insight as that moment (and others similar) got me to question who I was, enabling me to challenge norms and gain a broader perspective.



At 17, I had a 'blip year' when I left school and started work. In order to be acceptable to the world around me, I wore dresses and makeup and was suddenly noticed by men. I went out on dates with them, but deep down

I yearned for, but feared, the expression of my true feelings. I did not think of myself as gay at that time. Indeed, I wanted to be anything but.

Then I met Daniel through a gay friend of my brother. Daniel was a soccer player with flaming red hair. He wore perfume and spent a very long time preening himself in front of my mirror. My family would laugh a lot about how Daniel thought he was prettier than me (which he was). How come he spent so much time in front of the mirror? To me Daniel was just Daniel and was a bit of a peacock. My mother was just relieved he was male as having a boyfriend was important for a girl.

Meeting Daniel was pivotal for me as he brought me into the physical exploration of sex and sexuality. I still lived at home and we would have sex after Mum and Dad were asleep. I would sneak from my room into my brother's old room, diagonally across from my parents' room, where Daniel was waiting. We had a lot of sex. It was the most uninspiring and terrifying experience of my life. The thought that Mum and Dad might wake up and discover us destroyed the moment so to speak. Daniel, who was interested in having sex with anyone, also led me to a new world of gay bars, drag queens, women in suits, elegant women in dresses, men in dresses, men in suits, men and women cross-dressing. Lesbians who were prostitutes and high-class call girls, men who thought they were lesbians or hermaphrodites or who had intersex confusion, appeared to reign supreme. It was a revelation. I had been carried to a flexible and uplifting world where life was about expression of self.

I could be who I wanted to be and I loved it. I belonged. I felt safe.

However, the dark side was ever-present. As a group we were isolated, abused, publicly shamed and often humiliated. Public toilets were the worst places and I dislike them to this day. I remember many friends being forcibly ordered to leave the ladies toilets on threat of the police being called, and men following me in to pull me out as I entered. They were hard times for those of us who felt and looked different. It was very difficult to challenge anything. I experienced the shame as overpowering and hid myself in the shadows of my supposed real life.

I decided that I did not want to be part of a world that did not accept me. Craving to express my difference, I left Daniel, my safe world of home, family, church and friends and ventured out. I told no-one who I was or what I did. I was journeying into a new world of new identities. I became angry and despondent at the injustice and cruelty of prejudice. I had no recognised sexuality in this "normal" world. I was made silent, a non-reporter of my own life, a non-existent person of the shadows.

In 1972, when I was 21, again something changed for me. I was at a queer pub in Surry Hills, where our kind would meet. I noticed a woman across the bar who I had not seen before. She was different to the others and had an entourage of similar folk. I think they were making fun of us, but I was curious nevertheless. She seemed the opposite of me, only 17, wild, with the curliest of hair. I was still coming to grips with who I was but she appeared to know exactly who she was. She looked at me and I her, and I instantly fell in love. My life changed from that moment. I was thrown head first into the world of radical lesbians, women who I had never experienced before. I wanted to know who they were and what they were about. She told me that they were just visiting the pub for a laugh, that I was an experiment, that the life I was living was not okay while their life had meaning. They were not butch or fem lesbians hiding and ashamed of who they were. They were going head on against social structures fighting for equality of the sexes refusing to accept old patriarchal doctrines.

From that meeting, I lost my safety net. My newly won freedom to express myself safely was lost again. There was no hiding. We were



young, radical, straight down the line, you were either with us or against us. We were standing for a world where women and lesbians had rights and difference was accepted.

I had to change to fit in. I was excited and scared all at the same time but I was in love so I did whatever it took. The experience led me to new ways of seeing and thinking. I developed a political context to my thoughts. I started to recognise how oppressed I had felt during my growing up, how women and men had been socialised to believe that women were not equal to men and that gender roles had defined how we were expected to present ourselves in the world. I wanted to learn how to

express myself against established norms in this brave new world.

We rejected the old values full on. We rejected marriage and thought about new ways of being together, however, being a lesbian had its struggle. We were doubly ostracized, by society at large and also by the

heterosexual norms of the feminist movement which stereotyped us as man-haters rather than women fighting alongside feminists for justice and equality. So, we had two struggles, one against patriarchal constraints and the other to be accepted by feminists. It was a complex time and as a lesbian group, we remained isolated.

As the world fought back I felt like a fugitive more than I had ever experienced before. I was shocked to read in a journal that 'being a lesbian was a mental illness; my family could not understand what I was going through; I was ridiculed for the way I looked; I was spat at in the street; and I was beaten up on a number of occasions by both men and women. Although I did not lose my longing for acceptance of who I was, I began to internalise the anger thrown at me and started to reject myself. I could not sustain myself. I suppressed my grief, took drugs and fought against everything, all of which seriously impacted my ability to stay connected to myself and others.

Isolating myself, I gained a perspective on society and its fringes that enabled me to see the world as it was with its harshness, inconsistencies and inequalities.

Experiencing myself as being unacceptable to the dominant cultural ideals, I stood silent and slowly developed a thoughtful understanding of my identity and that this experience was part and parcel of living in a society that did not accept difference and annihilated my ability to self-love. As a silent observer, although still detached from society, my family, the cultural identity and many times from myself, I became increasingly gentle with myself and others.

Encouraged by a friend, I became a psychiatric nurse and working in this area I was able to genuinely see how life was for some people. I saw both their beauty and their worst functioning and concluded that there was not a lot of difference between the patients and me.

As I reassessed my place in the world, I became more open and creative. Ultimately I left nursing because it became too restrictive and confronting. I started participating in theatre and music which helped me to heal and enrich my life and connections with others.

Just last year I was on a walk with a friend and I went into a public toilet with the word 'Ladies' on the door. There were two women in this toilet, around my age. I noticed them give each other a sidelong glance and then openly announce to each other "What was that? Is this the Ladies?" Partly I was proud that they thought I was not a woman, but intense shame and embarrassment from the past also intruded. I recovered quickly telling myself it is 2017 and gender should not be an issue anymore. Clearly it was for those women and continues to be for

many more. I actually felt proud that I have a different point of view which is a major change for me.

Then a few months ago while out to dinner, the waiter, who appeared to be non-gender specific, addressed me and my friend as “Ladies”. On reflection I think I may have encountered a much livelier response from the waiter if I had responded with, “I am not a lady so don’t bother with any recognition of gender thanks. Hello, can I help you will be just fine. After all, I noticed you from the moment you came up to our table. I noticed that you love to wear makeup and it really suits you. I won’t call you mate, so please DON’T FUCKING CALL ME A LADY.”

When I bring the “Hello ladies” subject forward with family or friends or a person in retail or hospitality, I usually encounter resistance. I then warm up to shame and think I better not mention the subject for fear of causing conflict in the other person, or worse still that they might think of me as an old outdated feminist lesbian whinging about a non-issue.

However, when I am called a lady, I feel cramped, submissive, and become resentful at being forced into a concept that does not fit. Language that has no relationship to me conveys to me that the other person does not notice anything real about me nor do they have any value in deepening a connection with me.

I have also come to the conclusion that rules are restrictive and usually in place to control fear of difference. Constructed socialised binary gender division blocks our creativity and spontaneity and dumbs down life giving relationships making it impossible to create or build truly dynamic connections.

I have come to the conclusion that gender exists on a spectrum, that the gender you are born with or assigned at birth may not fit your own personal understanding of yourself. Psychodrama helps to develop a person’s understanding of emergent roles and responses to identity. I am now proud of who I am and want to create an inclusive society that enhances life-giving relationships by being a thoughtful and provocative change maker.

The ongoing work

So having read my personal journey, here are some questions for you:

- Where do you stand in relation to the issue of gender identity – are there two genders, male and female, with nothing in between?
- What is the space between us that we encounter in our relationships and what might be required to genuinely connect to self and others?

- What are some commonly held beliefs and underlying assumptions that perpetuate inequities based on a binary concept of gender and which of these are you prepared to challenge?
- To what extent do you use language based on a binary concept of gender identity and what could you do to change this to be more inclusive?
- How do we, as a community, keep developing new responses to these questions and dilemmas?

If I have stimulated your thinking about gender and our social norms, I invite you to communicate with me. I am keen to continue to develop.

I have realised that in writing this paper I woke up to how passionate I feel about gender issues, and when thinking about my experiences of growing up, my memories and thoughts flowed out of me. It was truly a healing process. I also hope that my experiences may encourage us to have a lightness and sense of play around this subject, as it has the potential for freeing us all up to consider the difficulties faced by us all when non-acceptance of any difference is present.

