

## The Social Cognitive Process of Sexed Life

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**Abstract:** In modern societies, medical technologies develop in a tremendous speed and people's aesthetic values change accordingly. Intersexed people now become a solid part of the social group at large and the delineation between male and female becomes even vaguer. As a result, there comes the necessity to analyze the normal and traditional sexed life, so as to obtain a better understanding of genders and sexes, the existing aesthetics of them and how they applied to normal people or influenced social constructs and phenomena. In this passage, I review an empirical case made by the U.C.L.A professor Garfinkel on the intersexed person Agnes and the field study conducted by professor Geertz on the Balinese cockfights, to shed light on the development of social recognition process.

### 1. Introduction

In summary, it argues that normal genders and sexes are formed through social lives and also affect it in return.

### 2. A Case Study of Agnes: Normal Sexed Life<sup>1</sup>

In everyday life, the distinction between genders undergirds social norms for both males and females. Lack of sociological scrutiny, the life of intersexed social groups remained unknown by many. In the fifth chapter of his book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Garfinkel utilizes the case of “passing” of Agnes to shed light on the facts about that mystery.

In the case of Agnes, two aspects ought to be examined carefully.

Firstly, the biological autography of Agnes presents a 19-year-old who made a living via typing. She came to U.C.L.A with her private physician for stable treatment to the castration problem. Raised as a boy before 17 years old for she was “born with normal-looking male genitals”, she nevertheless developed breasts at puberty. To describe Agnes' appearance, Garfinkel uses “convincingly female”, by which he means that Agnes had shape and measurements, dressing style, voice and manner just like normal girls. After some time, she went to live with her grandmother in Midwest City for a month.

Secondly, the definition of “passing” requires another examination. Garfinkel assumes that the obstinacy of normal sexed people's daily life had been taken for granted and we need intersexed persons' experience to look into routinized backgrounds of sexed life. Garfinkel argues that the “passing” resembles “the work of achieving and making secure their rights to live in the elected sex status while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin carried out within the socially structured conditions.” In Agnes' case, Garfinkel explains that a continuous tense shall be used here because Agnes' life was constantly at stake because of her special physiological structure and past social experience.

According to Garfinkel, Agnes believed that intersexed persons share no difference with normal people. During her conversation with Garfinkel, she always portrayed herself as a “natural and normal female”. Agnes constantly emphasized the female characteristics in her minor experience, and that she didn't like fierce sports since childhood, but liked playing with puppets. She always felt

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<sup>1</sup> This part only uses extracts from Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, p116-185

that she was a girl, while her male characteristics were a tumor and “a trick of fate”. She stressed the difference between herself and homosexuals and transvestites, and insisted that her body naturally developed estrogen during puberty, leading to the development of breasts and inhibiting the development of male sexual organs.

Agnes’s case can be analyzed via a game model which features a player’s strategy to utilize existing rules that allow players to “win” prestige. In analyzable cases such as what to wear for beach attire, she found ways of dressing which prevented her genitals from exposure and excuses not to go bathing. Another case was that when she had to “furnish a urine specimen...as part of a physical examination for a job”, she convinced the physician of offering her specimen later and used her roommate’s urine to submit. However, as Garfinkel shows, “there are many occasions which fail to satisfy various game properties”. Because of Agnes’ childhood experience, she lacked the opportunity of interacting with others as a female. Consequently, she didn’t know how to deal with various social scenarios.

Confronted with this problem, she had to live “by acting in the manner of a ‘secret apprentice’”. By “secret apprentice” Garfinkel means that Agnes learned how to behave as a natural woman from several prominent persons. Agnes learned how to cook dishes, what to wear, dressmaking and so on from Bill’s mother. She learned how to behave herself as a woman, giving her man pleasure and comfort from her boyfriend Bill. With her girlfriends she “exchange gossip, and analyses of men, parties, and dating postmortems”. Contrastingly, when it came to Agnes’ turn to express herself, she had to pretend to be modest and inexpressive. Even when conversing with researchers, Agnes sometimes turned to them for their opinions before answering certain questions. In the long term, Agnes had to remain identical to her past and her future. In other words, Agnes’ life is full of passing and improvised performances.

Although Agnes insisted that she was a normal female, “important differences nevertheless existed between Agnes and ‘normals’ in that normals are able to advance such claims without a second thought whereas for her such claim involved her in uncertainties of responses from others.” This is to say, Agnes’ present conditions were actually the progress of her countless efforts. Through this process of facing different difficulties and circumstances, Agnes developed various passing devices such as “euphemism” and “speaking in generalities” and “mapping out possible alternative developments beforehand” and “leading the other person away” to provide her answer to questions. For Agnes, the measure of correctness never comes from certain objective facts, instead, it comes from what “most people” take as correct.

Agnes’s case sheds light on the general definition of gender and sex. To be clear, biological sex irreversibly divides individuals into two groups of sexes by their physiological characteristics, one with penises and the other with vaginas. However, gender is a post-constructed symbol assigned to a person gradually as he or she is being fitted into the normal society without consulting the individual self but by the common standard of society that what male should be like and what female should be like. As a result, the “endowed” characteristic determines one’s fate by the first day. To name a few, males are believed to be muscular, strong and interested in sports while females should be quiet and gentle and more interested in make-ups or jewelry.

The Agnes case successfully validates the breaching experiment because it demonstrates that the normal bisexual structure of our society should not be taken for granted. Although Agnes never tried to break the existing orders and struggle to be part of it, from the perspective of deviant studies, we can still take a closer look at the social facts that we have taken for granted.

*“In the conduct of his everyday affairs in order for the person to treat rationally the one-tenth of this situation that, like an iceberg appears above the water, he must be able to treat the nine-tenths that lies below as an unquestioned and, perhaps even more interestingly, as an unquestionable background of matters that are demonstrably relevant to his calculation, but which appear without even being noticed.”*

### 3. Clifford Geertz's Studies on Bali Cockfights<sup>2</sup>

When Geertz and his wife arrived at a Balinese village, they were treated like “ghosts”, ignored by local residents. But the cockfights and zeal surrounding this activity greatly troubled them. Through active participation, they made their way into Balinese life.

Geertz observed a resemblance and even unmistakable identification between males and cocks In Balinese culture, “cocks are viewed as detachable, self-operating penises” . From a linguistic perspective, Sabung (the word for cock) can be used to portray a “hero, warrior, champion, political candidate, lady killer...” which are related to male temperaments such as masculinity, courage, power, eroticism. Males also cultivate an intimate relationship with their cocks, feeding and bathing them carefully. However, in Geertz's view, the cocks are not merely used for pastime or “expressions or magnifications of their owner's self”, they are animal inversions of the males, unconsciously inspired by “the powers of darkness” rooted in their aversion towards all kinds of animals. When the winner of a cockfight “takes the carcass of the loser ... home to eat”, Geertz interpret the sentiment that dominates this behavior as “social embarrassment, moral satisfaction, aesthetic disgust and cannibal joy” while the loser might implement” an act of metaphysical suicide.” Here, the process and result of a cockfight are explained as a representation or imaginative fact of barbarous competition between males.

The larger amount of money the bettor risks, the more of his “honor, dignity, status” is at stake. It should be stressed here, however, that this doesn't imply that money doesn't matter, but money and status are at risk in the ring simultaneously. The distribution of people around the cockfight ring is also intriguing. On the verge of the cockfight area, “only women, children, adolescents, and various other sorts of people who do not (or not yet) fight cocks - the extremely poor, the socially despised, the personally idiosyncratic...” play gambling games like roulette, dice throw, coin-spin, pea-under-the-shell which are too shameful for the cockfighting men to play. People with a slightly higher status “bet on the smaller matches around the edges.” Then comes people who fight in small and medium matches but are not qualified for large ones though they can bet for them. Finally, are the “substantial members” who fight in large matches and bet on them. As the scope reduces, players' status rises significantly. The larger the match is, the higher status is required to participate in it. This is why Geertz called the play “deep”: “the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight.” The cockfight is “a simulation of the social matrix” because the social network and prestige are fully displayed in it. When people bet, they are more obliged to bet on the cocks of their kin and against their social opponents. Geertz thus assumes a complicated system of connection undergirds the matches and the whole society: the cock is another form of individual and the match in the ring is another form of society, analogically. Nevertheless, cockfights are only an expressive form of society because whatever the results are, no one's social status is altered while in the activity they see “themselves, their social order, abstract hatred, masculinity, demonic power ... the archetype of status virtue...the ksatria prince.”

Geertz ultimately endeavors to interpret the cockfight's aesthetic value. He describes the cockfights as “disquietful” whose nature arises from the “conjunction of its immediate dramatic shape; its metaphoric content; and its social context.” Every single play remains in its own period and has no meaning afterward. This leads to Geertz's deduction of the psychological states of the Balinese: “an on-off pulsation of meaning and vacuity, an arhythmic alternation of short periods when “something' is happening and equally short ones where “nothing” ...” That is to say, the cockfights in the Balinese life can be seen as a special period for them to turn “wild and murderous” while they have always remained “shy to the point of the obsessiveness of open conflict.” The cockfights serve an interpretive function rather than the functions of rites and ceremonies. To put it in another way, it is “a story they tell about themselves.” Participating in cockfights is just like reading texts, which helps to promote the participant to understand his culture and reveal his subjectivity to himself.

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<sup>2</sup> This part only uses extracts from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p435-473

#### **4. Conclusion**

The two studies above give brand-new understanding upon sexes, genders and social lives. With Garfinkel's delicate breaching experiment and Geertz's symbolic theory, we are able to interpret sexual aesthetics from both individual and social scales. Hence we can conclude that the meanings contained in genders and sexes are formed and learned by people through social activities. Participating in social process helps people integrate into their society and culture, and in the reverse way, social constructs can be observed through daily lives. All these analyses drive us to acquire new comprehension about normal life, and to decipher societies and facts in a novel perspective.

#### **References**

- [1] Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, p116-185
- [2] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p435-473