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### Recommended Citation

McCadden, Ted and Wright, Robin Redmon (2018). "Examining the Embodied Learning Experiences about Gender in Gay and Bisexual Male Actors," *Adult Education Research Conference*.

<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2018/papers/20>

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## Examining the Embodied Learning Experiences about Gender in Gay and Bisexual Male Actors

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**Abstract:** Using the theoretical frameworks of embodied learning and gender performativity, we examine the narratives of nine other-than-heterosexual adult male actors for their experiences of gender identity development through theatre performance.

Actors communicate with each other and with their audiences through their bodies. An actor's body becomes what Gilbert (1994, p. 477) has called a "sign-vehicle"-- the primary channel through which a performer communicates her or his unspoken feelings, intentions, and messages. Just as an actor portrays herself or himself differently to express polar emotions of joy and grief, she or he may embody gender differently to convey traits of a character. The purpose of this analysis is to explore the embodied learning about gender identity in male actors who identify as gay or bisexual. We sought to understand the ways participants intentionally explored gender through acting, and how they made meaning of that process. The data analyzed here, nine narratives of male actors who identify as other-than-heterosexual, were collected in the context of a larger study of sexual identity development (McCadden, 2015). Within that study, a pervasive theme of embodied learning emerged. This analysis revisits those narratives to explore the relationship between embodied experience of gender in performance and the actor's own meaning-making around sexual identity. This analysis is informed primarily by Clark and Rossiter's (2007) framing of theatre as embodied storytelling in a narrative context, and contributes to the literature in adult education that connects adult identity with embodied learning and knowing.

### Research Methodology

As theatre is embodied storytelling, we chose a narrative design for this study of theatre artists. The original data were collected using narrative data collection strategies defined by Chase (2005) and Clark and Rossiter (2007). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provided the framework

for data analysis and co-construction of the nine written narratives. For this analysis, we revisited the theme of embodied learning, present in each of the narratives, to more closely examine how embodied learning contributed to the actor's understanding of his sexual identity.

## **Survey of the Literature**

### **Embodied Learning**

Lawrence (2012) frames embodied learning as the most innate means of knowing. Embodied learning and knowing are, then, foundational to the earliest experiences of development. With the development of language as a means to understand the world, rationality and logic are privileged over the somatic and spiritual experiences of knowing and learning through the body. Michelson (2015) asserts that the body is a primary site of knowing, with much of our learning taking place through lived and embodied experiences. Lawrence (2012) takes to task the separation of the mind and body by re-visiting intuitive, body-based experience as a way of understanding adult learning, pointing out that the separation of mind and body in the framework of adult learning has led many to discount the importance of our lived experiences. Moreover, Michelson (2015) urges researchers to heed the "return of the body to theories of experiential learning" (p. 191). She further argues that we must "acknowledge that there is no final separation between one's own body and the broader socio-material world" (p. 191). People learn through their bodies as they experience the world around them. In the performance arts, it is well-established that the body is one of the primary means of communication. A character is mere words, imagined but unseen, on a page until the performer—dancer, actor, singer—brings the character to life. Even before the actor speaks on stage, the audience has formed an impression of the character from the way he or she moves, emotes, or shares space on the stage. One important facet of character development on stage is the performance of gender, or the way in which the actor conveys gender roles to the audience.

### **Performance of Gender**

At birth, parents and others ascribe gender roles to infants based upon assumptions made from the biological sex of the child, inextricably linking sex and gender (Butler, 1990, 1993). In the theatre literature, sex and gender performance are likewise conflated (Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freillino, 2006; Clum, 1999; Gilbert, 1994; Knapp, 2006). Following Butler's theory of gender as performative (1990), this study presents evidence linking the embodied experience of performing gender on stage with sexual identity development.

By framing gender as the performance of a “corporeal style” through which the individual reinforces (or confronts) social norms, Butler (1990, p. 139) further reinforces the link between the body, acting, and gender. She asserts that, as in the example of the actor bringing to life a character from the script, gender is constructed in language and enacted by the body. Gender can be either performed in accordance with social expectations through dress, mannerisms, movement, and voice, for example, or can be mis-performed (Butler, 1990, 1993). The misperformance of gender, such as drag performance, intentionally frames gender as the unit of analysis and provides a space for the examination of gender.

Butler (1993) suggests that theatre can provide an accessible lens to examine the politics of gender and connection between queer identities and gender performance. She admonishes theatre artists to unpack the gendered norms of performance to embody political statements. Similarly, Clum (1999) describes the performative power of mainstream theatre to raise awareness of the politics of gender. Lawrence and Butterwick (2007) also position theatre as an embodied means of examining oppression in the conscious experience and of contemplating alternative perspectives. Anumudu (2017) expands upon this understanding to illustrate, within the practice of adult education, the role that embodied learning through theatre performance can have in personal meaning-making. Likewise, Gallagher (2002) illustrates that the performance of gender can be transformative in the actor’s own understanding of identity. Using this frame, we examined the participant narratives for evidence of learning and gender identity development through embodied performance.

### **Summary of Findings**

Analysis of the nine narratives yielded three major themes around embodied learning and gender performativity: i) links between gender and sexuality, ii) gendered movement, and iii) the voice as an expression of gender. In this section, we will present examples from the participants’ narratives to illustrate each of these major themes.

#### **Links between embodying gender and sexual identity**

Tobin and Tisdell (2015) argue that embodied learning can only be achieved when adults are fully conscious of “the role of the body in what they are doing” (p. 227). Actors automatically do this as part of their craft. Hence, several participants in the original study described an awareness of a significant link between embodying a gender on stage and their perceptions of sexual identity. For some participants, this was a liberatory experience, while for others, it was a marginalizing experience. Within this discussion, two distinct subthemes emerged: dysphoria

between body image and perceived sexual identity, and the importance of embodying the gender of any character they play.

**Body image and perceived sexual identity.** Universally, participants in this study described a link between their bodies and their perceived sexual identity, conflating an embodied masculine experience with heterosexual identity, and privileging masculinity over femininity. Sean, for example, related that “if I’m really going to go for Broadway, I need to go to the gym; I need to have a 6-pack...like those are requisites now” for being perceived as adequate for male lead roles. While, for Sean, this initially resulted in some anxiety about how he is perceived by directors (and subsequently by the audience), he used his acting practice to resolve those emotions. He recalls, “I don’t think I am who I am without theatre training...as a gay man or just as a man in the world. I think the theatre training is what allowed me to construct who I am and my outlook”. Similarly, Ted described a disconnect between his stature as “built like a football player” and his identity as a gay man, as if they were incompatible. He described acting as a way to discover (learn) “how to act more male”.

**Embodying the gender of a character.** Seven of the nine participants in this study described a conscious effort to embody more masculine gender role for a character than they perceived that they lived in their daily lives. Jon, a Latino dancer in his mid-20s, describes the struggle of playing the role of a stereotypical jock, “[it’s] always for me been a struggle to embody being physically a jock...I was trying to gain like 180 pounds in my mind...what’s what I was doing, which was the dumbest thing ever.” In this instance, Jon realized the impossibility of being physically larger; rather, he used this experience to explore who he was and how else to embody that role. Similarly, Sean describes a role that he is currently playing, a man in the military. He states that “I’ve created my own perception that I need to ‘butch it up’ and be less gay for this role.” While he felt that the stereotyped straight role forced him to physically act in a very different way, he framed this as a positive experience, suggesting that “I have to give up some of the flair and class of who I am” to perform the heterosexual stereotype. Exploring the spectrum of gay and straight stereotypes has resulted in a more positive framing of his identity.

Conversely, several participants talked about the experience of playing a gay character, and how they felt as if they needed to act more femininely than they present off-stage to portray the sexual identity of the character, often in dress and mannerisms. Dan, Aundra, Sean, and Lee used the term “flamboyant” to describe how they might approach portraying a gay male character. Aundra framed his acting practice as a space of vulnerability to explore different identities and presentation of identity to see what is comfortable---a liminal space that is less readily available to those who are not actors. While Sean and Aundra described this as a liberating experience, and Dan used neutral language, Lee spoke very negatively of the

experience of playing a gay male character, asserting that “I don’t go out for those roles”. While Lee has explored the performance of gay stereotypes, he views this as a problematic dichotomy and has rejected gay stereotypes, framing men who are perceived as gay to be “acting like women”.

**The embodied experience of gendered movement.** Participants cited movement as an influence on their embodied experience of gender identity almost universally; in particular, the connection between movement and emotional reactions to the gendered experience. Ted most deeply connected on an embodied experience of emotion as he studied and experienced movement. He talked of finding peace in how his body was “grounded” through movement, and it was through the exploration of movement that he was able to come to terms with his sexual identity in a physical way. He recalls, “I was definitely a late bloomer as far as sexuality was concerned, and I do think like going through movement classes and being more grounded and more centered in my pelvis, all the sudden awakened this whole thing that was like ‘wow, what do I do with this?’”. This resulted, for Ted, in “a lot of breakthroughs for myself...because of movement and accessing emotions [through movement studies”. Aundra, Sean, Aaron, and Jon each talked about a more flamboyant style of movement when portraying a gay character, and making a conscious effort to move in a more masculine way when trying to play straight, whether on stage or in their daily lives. For them, the deliberate performance of stereotyped gay male roles provided a dichotomous exploration of gay against straight that they were not able to access prior to their theatre work. Andy describes being more ‘playful’ in his movements when he attempts to embody a gay male identity. He illustrates this dichotomy using the character Brad from the Rocky Horror Show, showing that Brad moves from being “prudish and regimented” in his movement to “flamboyant and playfully swinging with the best of ‘em” in the end.

**The voice as an embodied expression of gender.** For some participants, the voice was a site of embodied learning in their perceived connections between the voice and gender. Sean, for example, felt that a stereotypically gay voice or pattern of speech is limiting to the actor. He recalled that “I have to do lots of work vocally to not sound so gay...some of what I consider to be the class and sophistication and flare that I love about myself that isn’t accepted in heterosexual society.” Ted, on the other hand, describes his voice as “masculine and stereotypically heterosexual”. He recognizes and labels the heterosexual privilege that he enjoys in part due to his overly masculine voice. Conversely, he finds that his deep voice and masculine presentation prevent him from being cast in gay roles.

Lee and Aaron, on the other hand spoke derisively about stereotyped gay male speech patterns. Aaron felt like he didn’t fit in with his theatre friends in college because he didn’t “talk

with a lisp or use the word ‘fierce’’. For Aaron, this amplified the identity crisis that he described in the original study. He felt conflicted because his sexual identity didn’t fit social expectations; it was through acting that he was able to introspect and find comfort in his identity. Several times, Lee used unkind language about men who say “hey girl” or “talk like they don’t have balls”. He also described monitoring his voice as a teen and young adult as an attempt to hide his gay identity from his family and peers. Lee, it seems, has used acting to reinforce problematic stereotypes and believes that others should learn to ‘act’ something that they aren’t.

### **Analysis**

In the original study (McCadden, 2015), each of the participants’ stories were presented as individual narratives, followed by a thematic analysis. Here, we further explore the embodied learning theme, and connect it to literature in both theatre and adult education.

All of the participants’ narratives illustrate Butler’s (1993) notion of gender as performance but some, like Lee, are unable to resist hegemonic norms and make a political statement as Butler suggests (1993). This is evident throughout each theme—from the purposeful performance of gender, gendered movement, and use of the voice to portray male heterosexual gender identity, or the misperformance of traditional male traits to explicitly demonstrate a gay male identity. This further reinforces the conflation of gender roles and sexual identity rife within the theatre (Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freillino, 2006; Clum, 1999; Gilbert, 1994; Knapp, 2006).

Sean, Ted, Lee, and Jon’s descriptions of their physical bodies as a site of sexual identity (without movement or voice) connect directly to Gilbert’s (1994) discussion of the body of male actors as a “sign-vehicle” for the actor to communicate (p. 477). Similarly, most of these men politicized their embodied experiences in reflection of Clum’s (1999) discussion of the body in mainstream theatre as a means of politicizing gender. This is further evident in each of the participants’ narratives, whether describing their bodies, movement, or use of the voice, as they shifted their stories from the personal to the political in describing their identity as gay or bisexual men in their daily lives.

### **Implications of the Study**

This analysis holds significant implications for adult education. As theatre is often employed as a strategy for teaching adults (Bates, 1996), this study provides one example of how adult

educators might use acting strategies and role play to create space for embodied learning to explore a variety of issues around identity and positionality. Through the liminal spaces created in the acting process, adult learners have an opportunity to bring to the surface issues that might otherwise remain unquestioned (Lawrence & Butterwick, 2007).

Following the work of Butterwick and Selman (2012), this study illustrates how acting can be used as a means to explore sexual identity in the study of adult development. This study bridges the disparate literature in acting pedagogy, sexual identity development, and embodied learning to illustrate how the body can be a site of adult identity exploration that might emerge through the practice of acting. Understanding the relationship between identity formation and performance may provide educators with insight on ways theatre can operate to provide a liberatory space for development. The propensity for theatre to impact learning and development suggests that the role of the director could be critical in the learning experiences of the actor.

In the adult education literature, this study provides an additional illustration of theatre as an embodied means of exploring narrative, supporting the work of Clark and Rossiter (2007), and provides an additional illustration of Lawrence's (2012) work on the body as a site of learning about one's self. Finally, this study calls for a revised acting pedagogy in which exploration of the embodied experience is linked to critical reflection for the actor, particularly as the actor explores gender and sexual identity.

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