

An Exploration of Selected Concepts from Judith Butler: With Application  
to the Understanding of Gender Identity in Social Work Practice with  
Marginalized Female Adolescents

by

Amie Marie Hough

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## **Abstract**

Traditional notions of female adolescent development assume identity formation as a central issue that is achieved or solidified in order to reach a psycho-developmental milestone. While identity is traditionally theorised as being agentic in nature, the concept of identity itself remains in contention as it does not capture the fluidity of the interaction between the person and their environment, particularly if the environment is oppressive and exclusive. Consequently, this paper suggests how social work can incorporate innovative critical and post-structural theory when analysing the marginalised female adolescent, by introducing Judith Butler as a new voice for social work, whose work on gender identity the feminist critique has been argued to be some of the most important advancements in the area of feminist and political studies in the twentieth century (Lloyd, 2007). Butler's contribution to the area of gender politics, post-feminist and queer studies have been argued as groundbreaking and innovative, and thus I argue, should be included in social work practice and education, particularly when considering the impact of structure on the individual. To guide my inquiry, I have selected specific concepts from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) to analyse the marginalised female experience in modern society. In Butler's popular texts, she discusses gender identity and its relation to performativity under regulatory discourse, and how intelligible subjects are formed under the heterosexual matrix and the masculine signifying economy. Furthermore, Butler's concept of subversion imparts important ideas about contesting oppressive structures, and honouring the diversity and dignity and worth of each person in society; principles that are congruent with social work values. I further suggest that

Butler's concepts offer innovative ways to think about enduring issues in social work practice including: (1) social justice, (2) the power of discourse in the formation of oppression and exclusion, and (3) the acknowledgment of diversity. Finally, I seek to apply Butler's concepts to current social work practice with the marginalized female adolescent and to provide the reader with suggestions for future research and practice application.

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## Introductory Chapter

This thesis provides an overview of the social work literature on female adolescent identity development, and offers a critical perspective on the current literature by introducing Judith Butler's work to readers. In the final chapter, the thesis presents an application of Butler's specific concepts to social work practice with marginalised adolescent females and beyond, bringing the theoretically bound nature of Butler's work into the practice realm. The thesis argues that specific concepts from Judith Butler's earlier works, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), can provide critical insight and theoretical innovation to social workers working with marginalised populations, and specifically marginalised female youth.

Current social work research suggests that modern adolescent females experience a variety of psychosocial ailments during adolescence, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as sexual violence and abuse in relationships. Additionally, identity formation is documented in the social work literature as being a central milestone to be achieved during this developmental stage (Santrock, 1995). The literature also supposes that identity formation can be further complicated by those with barriers to optimal choice and freedom, including ethnic minorities, and lesbian youth, as they are socialised within the dominant context of normalcy.



## Research Questions

The social work literature suggests that barriers to identity formation can be linked to psychosocial problems faced by female youth. This conceptualization led me to seek further understanding of the way social work currently theorises identity formation and gender, and whether considerations of oppression and marginalization are considered in its analysis. To expand this analysis, I sought to explore the use of critical, post-structural theory, specifically from Judith Butler, to enhance and expand this conceptualization of gender identity among marginalised female adolescents. Finally, I highlight specific concepts from Judith Butler to apply to social work practice with marginalised female adolescents and beyond, in order to expand and enrich current perspectives, and practice methods. The following synopsis outlines how these questions were addressed in the thesis.

## Thesis Synopsis

The following thesis attempts to reconcile the research questions by first providing an overview of the literature on female adolescents. The current social work literature reveals that the concept of identity formation is a central aspect of adolescent development. The literature also supposes that identity becomes a more complex issue for youth that are marginalised, as discussed in the literature on lesbian and ethnic youth. Literature on marginalised female adolescent populations outline the ‘formation’ of identity as an often tumultuous process, due to the lack of support and nurturing from the dominant culture. It is supposed that as a result of negative or unwelcoming interactions from their environment, intrapsychic problems may occur, as one is then forced to alter,

repress, or reject parts of the self, in order to be accepted by mainstream society.

Traditional notions of female adolescent development all tend to view identity formation as a central issue to be achieved, resolved or solidified, through personal will and choice in order to reach a developmental milestone. While identity has been theorised as being impacted by internal, familial and social forces, I argue that the concept of identity itself remains vague and may not capture the fluidity of the interaction between the person and their environment, including pervasive social discourse. To address the influence of discourse on the individual, I introduce in latter chapters how social work can incorporate innovative critical theory, when analysing the marginalised female adolescent, specifically from Judith Butler (1993, 1999) by deconstructing the notion of an achievable, stable identity and examining the role of discourse in shaping the performances of individuals in society.

Chapter Two introduces relevant ideas from Butler's work, and highlights specific concepts from her work that I found useful in addressing my research questions. I chose to focus on Butler's earlier texts, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, 1999), and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) to inform my inquiry, as they add depth to ideas about gender identity and the power of discourse in shaping behaviour and opportunity. Butler's contribution to the area of gender politics, post-feminist and queer studies have been argued as groundbreaking and innovative, and thus I argue should be included in social work practice, particularly when considering the impact of structure on the individual (Lloyd, 2007). In these texts she discusses important ideas about how one comes to perform gender and various identities under "constrained agency," through the power of regulatory discourse.

Furthermore, Butler's work highlights the importance of social justice, and honouring the diversity and dignity and worth of each person in society in her account of intelligible subjects, which I find particularly applicable to marginalised populations as it highlights the potential impact of operating within an oppressive and dominant context.

Finally, while one can theorize about the potential roots of the problems seen in female youth today, as social work practitioners, we must always utilise theory to inform practice. The final chapter addresses the practice gap that Butler leaves us with in her work, and presents application to social work practice with marginalised female adolescents and beyond. The final chapter uses specific concepts from Butler's (1993, 1999) work to critically analyse two cases of marginalised female adolescents struggling with psychosocial issues.

Finally, it is argued that Butler's theories and concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) can also be useful for the self-reflective social work practitioner, who may want to further examine how dominant discourse can shape practitioners' behaviour and experiences, and how we may be unknowingly contributing to the oppression towards our clients, and ultimately ourselves. Overall, the final chapter highlights Butler's concepts as valuable to the social work profession, and therefore it is argued that the incorporation of her work into social work practice and education should be considered, specifically when working with marginalised populations.

### Conclusion

While I do not seek to find global overarching explanations for the presenting problems experienced by female youth, nor do I suggest that Butler holds all of the

answers to very complex problems, I do believe that her perspective can expand and enrich current theoretical understanding of the marginalised experience, gender identity and the power of discourse.

Borrowing from Foucault's regulatory power, which suggests that we act under the constraint of authoritative power and fear of punishment, Butler outlines the significance of the regulatory nature of dominant social discourses about gender, sexuality and the standard of normalcy. This perspective outlines the socio-historical and political context that drives gender construction, heteronormativity, and gender hierarchies that have become core values of Western society.

Within this series of papers, I will attempt to explain how certain societal values and discourses are harmful to women, marginalised populations and the intersections of both, as individuals internalize the subordinate social position, and come to act out their roles and identities in society. Additionally, I will refer to her interpretation of melancholia and grief in relation to the loss of the opportunity to fully express one's gender.

In summary, by exploring the problems faced by young women today through a unique perspective that utilises Butler's understanding of gender identity, I argue that we can expand our theoretical lenses to include a critical examination of the structural forces that impact the functioning of individuals in society.

## **Chapter One: Current Theoretical Streams of Female Adolescent Development**

### **Introduction**

The social work literature on adolescent females continues to borrow from a variety of theoretical viewpoints. As ethical and competent practitioners, we need to draw from relevant theory to conceptualise our clients' presenting problems, so that we can offer them strategies for coping and change. Therefore, incorporating appropriate theory into our work with clients, particularly with marginalised female youth, enhances our ability to understand and intervene effectively. Traditionally when discussing the adolescent population, the social work literature introduces identity as an important developmental construct. The formation of identity has been defined as how one negotiates meaning and understanding of herself in relation to others within their social environments (Cote & Levine, 2002). Identity formation has been described as a complex process that involves personal, social and political interactions that help to shape one's sense of herself in relation to others (Dominelli, 2002). Such concepts are relevant to social work practice as both intra-psychic and social aspects of a person's life and being are considered, thus encompassing the personal and environmental connection, as identity politics build the framework for collective politics (Lloyd, 2007). Many social researchers have argued that during the developmental stage of adolescence, young people must increase their ability to organise, take action and "direct" their own lives, by creating a viable adult identity (Cote & Levine, 2002; Santrock, 1995). Arguably, the identity formation process can be further complicated for those with barriers to optimal choice and freedom in society; specifically young women, ethnic minorities, lesbian

youth, people with disabilities, as well as the complex intersections of these varying social categories (Malyon, 1981; Ponderotto, Utsey and Pedersen, 2006; Swann & Spivey, 2004). As Dominelli (2002) states, “identity is configured in and through social relations,” which supports the argument that, “oppressive relations have a role in identity formation” (p.10). Therefore, it is important to pay attention to how young women interact within a post-modern context that is laced with media, consumer culture and rigid gender expectations, and how these factors can impact their sense of self. Typically, most literature on adolescent development and identity support the idea of a self-determined identity, suggesting that one creates her own identity through personal will. Finally, many argue that the identity formation process is a crucial aspect of adolescence, and if compromised and obstructed, personal, intra-psychic, and social problems may occur (Cote & Levine, 2002; Keefer & Reese, 2002; Swann & Spivey, 2004). Thus, I want to first to consider how the identity formation process is theorized in current social work literature when conceptualising the presenting problems of female youth today.

The following chapter will analyse current social work literature on the diverse experiences of adolescent females experiencing psychosocial problems, and introduce post-structural theory by Judith Butler (1993, 1999) as a new theoretical consideration for social work practice with marginalised females and beyond. Additionally, I will discuss the difficulties of the marginalised experience of female adolescents operating in the dominant culture, and the possible impact on psychosocial functioning. To conceptualise the connection between a marginalised experience and social functioning, I will offer directions for an expansion of analysis in particular through the work of Judith Butler.

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993,) and *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler presents innovative ideas about the role of discourse in shaping gender identity, the creation of the intelligible subject, and its link to oppression. I will discuss how such discourse may play a role in how marginalised young women experience a heightened risk for psychosocial problems in adolescence. In latter chapters, I will apply her concepts to social work practice, by presenting case analyses of marginalised female youth in order to operationalize some of Butler's key concepts. Conversely, prior to introducing Butler, I will present current theoretical assumptions about identity and development captured in the current social work literature.

#### Literature Review: An Overview of Theory on the Female Adolescent

There are many competing assumptions presented in the social work literature about the origin of psychosocial problems for female youth. Psychosocial dysfunction has been analysed using theoretical foundations that borrow from family systems and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), developmental psychology (Erikson, 1968), feminist theory (Gilligan, 1982), and theories of intersectionality (McCau, 2005). Recently, social work has also begun to propose a post-modern, relational perspective when working with young women due to the complexities of modern society and technology (Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004; Little & Hoskins, 2004). These various theories inform social work research and intervention strategies with adolescent females experiencing issues such as depression, alcohol and drug use, eating disorders, family stress and low-self-esteem. Commonly, such problems have been presented as having varying etiologies, including relational and attachment issues in childhood, larger social forces such as sexism and the mass media, and socio-economic issues, however many consistently argue that gender

dually affects how one experiences such problems (Abrams, 2002; Atwood, 2001; Hoskins and Mathieson, 2004; Little and Hoskins, 2004). Additionally, several streams of practice and research from the social work literature suggest that young women may be at a more difficult crossroads during adolescence as they attempt to create and solidify their adult identity in a meaningful way, thus placing identity formation as a forefront issue in female adolescent development literature (Abrams, 2002; Gilligan, 1982; Lavitt, 1996; Little & Hoskins, 2004; Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004).

### Psychodevelopmental Theory

Psychodevelopmental theories such as stage theory, attachment theory, and family systems theory attempt to explain how individuals are impacted by their immediate environment, such as childrearing and healthy attachments to caregivers, in order to develop and reach psychological and emotional milestones. These popular theoretical perspectives contend that development is a lifelong process, although individuals are heavily shaped by early experiences (Santrock, 1995). This dominant school of thought supports that the environment heavily impacts the individual and affects one's psychological and emotional processes. Therefore, psychodevelopmental theory would assume that relational context and level of support can either impair or support one's well-being.

### Erikson: The Origins of Identity Development

A well known theory of identity that arose out of psycho-developmental theory is Erikson's (1968) stage theory, in which identity formation is considered a central



developmental task of adolescence. The origin of identity studies arguably stems from the work of Erik Erikson, a developmental psychologist who created eight psychosocial stages of identity development across the lifespan; who offered a lifespan development approach to understanding identity formation. Erikson believed that certain developmental tasks occurred at specific stages in one's life, highlighting the resolution of personal conflicts to gain identity achievement. Erikson focused on the development of one's psychological and ego development within a social context of cultural practices and values that influenced the individual.

Central to Erikson's work is the major psychosocial task of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, which involves "developing a viable adult identity," highlighting adolescent identity development as a critical milestone (Erikson, 1968, cited in Cote & Levine, 2002, p.14). Erikson supposed that during adolescence, the young person enters a psychological moratorium, in which he or she experiments with roles and identities that they draw from the surrounding culture. In experimenting and exploring identities, and resolving conflicts labelled as "identity crises," the youth is said to emerge with a unified sense of self and an "achieved identity" (Santrock, 1995, p. 393). However, if youth are unable to resolve conflicts among varying role identities and pressures, he or she may end up in identity confusion and diffusion which can have potential negative consequences, such as social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety. Central to this stream of thought was that identity formation was an agentic, internally driven process, whereby the youth controls and constructs a stable identity during this developmental period.

### Attachment Theory

Building on the concept of the stage theory and interactions with one's immediate environment, Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory has long been used in the social work literature to theorise about adolescent psychosocial issues that may manifest from earlier childhood interactions. Bowlby's theory of attachment assumed that the attachment and bond between a caregiver and child would have lifelong impact on the child's well-being and psychosocial functioning. Lucente (1988) theorises about attachment theory in his account of identity formation in infancy. He supposes that identity formation begins with the mother-child dyad, in which one understands herself in relation to the parent object. In adolescence, it is argued that the female adolescent once again attempts to find meaning and self-awareness while separating and individuating from the parent. Attachment theorists analysing the adolescent stage of development suppose that adolescence is a developmental period in which the child may "re-experience and rework" earlier interactions with parents in an attempt to formulate one's own separate identity, often cited as "second-individuation" (Lucente, 1988, p. 159).

Attachment theory suggests that identity is formed by infants primarily in relation to their caregivers, which is known as "dual unity" (Lucente, 1988, p.158). Thus, attachment theory supposes that as adolescents attempt to pull away from the parents, problems can emerge, as youth will always attempt to individuate. It is further posited that adolescents may express their desire to individuate by engaging in deviant, harmful and even risky behaviours. Therefore, an attachment theorist may assume that if a young woman is experiencing problems or acting out, it can be considered a form of negotiation

or separation from the parent object once again, as they explore their environments and try on new, individual roles.

Additionally, attachment theory has also been used to conceptualise complex mental health concerns as eating disorders in young women (Orzolek-Kronner, 2002). Orzolek-Kronner cites clinical and anecdotal evidence that as young women disclose their eating disorders to their parents, their relationship improves. Thus, Orzolek-Kronner suggest that disordered eating behaviours can be considered proximity-seeking in nature, as they are acted out in order to repair relational problems that may stem from childhood and infancy. For instance, refusal to eat by young women, coupled by attempts to feed the child by parents, acts out a previously unresolved attachment sequence that was somehow impaired in childhood.

This unconscious motivational drive, based on Bowlby's attachment theory, supposes that early impairments in parent-child interaction serve as a catalyst for eating disorders as the young woman attempts to find new ways of relating to the parent such as food restriction, in order to have the caregiver rally around the child in order to resolve past attachment issues (Orzolek-Kronner, 2002, p.422). Consequently, practice with this theory would likely involve family therapy and the working out of such attempts at individuation while negotiating boundaries with parents to allow for safe exploration and mutual respect. The basis of attachment theory in relation to identity also assumes that identity is a process of achievement and driven by the adolescent in a certain stage of development.

## The Family System

The family system is one of the important contexts that female adolescents interact with to gain knowledge about their identity. Unfortunately, the family system can also be a source of inequality and turmoil as well. Atwood (2001) states that often young women are the victims of gender bias in the family system, which can lead to problems such as depression, low self-esteem and relational problems that can persist into adulthood. Stemming from possible underlying social forces, gender bias can leave the young woman feeling like a secondary citizen; a value she may initially learn in her own home and carry with her out into the world, thus internalising the subordinate social position.

Furthermore, the family system can also be a source of stress and even violence for young women. For instance, factors that most often contribute to female delinquency are sexual and physical violence in the home (Bowers, 1990). Young women who experience abuse are twice as likely to exhibit delinquent behaviours, defiance and violence towards parents and peers, and subsequent incarceration or trouble with the law. Bowers further suggests that the subsequent acting out among female delinquents may be an attempt to reconcile discrepancies in the distribution of power, both in the home and in larger society. This unequal distribution of power as a source of one's personal problems is the basis of social and structural theories that examine how larger social forces impact the individual personally. This theory assumes that the family system can impact one's identity by internalising messages and interactions that begin in the home.

### Structural Theory

Structural theories or social theories suggest that larger social rules and forces can impact behaviour, cognition and equal opportunity for individuals in society (Santrock, 1995). Structural social work theory assumes that large social institutions, discourse, and dominant social schemas dictate power differentials and affect the micro and macro systems in society from everyday language and customs, to social policy (Mullaly, 1997). Varying structural theories discuss that power differentials and oppression by larger social forces can be due to gender, race, ability and sexual orientation (Butler, 1999; Henry & Tator, 2000; Keefer & Reese, 2002; Ponderotto, Utsey & Petersen, 2006). In relation to identity, social theories would assume that messages and interactions from the larger environment may shape one's social position and therefore determine one's ability to gain opportunity and inclusion in society.

### Feminist Theory

Feminist theory has frequently challenged the mainstream practices of adolescent development researchers for their focus on male youth, and the assumption of homogenous adolescent identity development (Gilligan, 1982; Abrams, 2002; Sorell & Montgomery, 2001). In response to the androcentric stance taken by Erikson (1968), feminist psychologists like Gilligan (1982) criticised the homogenous account of identity development, citing that females develop identity in a relational context. Erikson's take on identity has also been criticised for its lack of consideration of feminist, multicultural and postmodern viewpoints, and offering limited insight into the experiences of women and marginalized groups. Consequently, Abrams (2002) argues that it is important to

draw from feminist theory, which offers a view of society that attempts to explain the power and material relations that are experienced by those outside of the dominant culture. Feminist accounts of female adolescent development support the idea that young women have unique needs for relational development and closeness, which are best facilitated by a group support atmosphere that promotes affiliation and belonging (Azzarto and Skidmore, 1997; Berzoff, 1989; Gilligan, 1982; Sorell and Montgomery, 2001). Abrams (2003) argues that the female adolescent develops in relation to others, including peers, and the need for attachment to others is central in gaining a healthy identity and improved psychosocial functioning.

The unique need for closeness and belonging differs from Erikson's assumption that adolescent development should focus on separation and individual identity goals, as young women consider belonging and attachment to others as key goals of adolescent identity formation (Abrams, 2003; Gilligan, 1982). In addition to recognising the need for belonging among young women, feminist theory also seeks to link psychosocial problems facing young women to larger social and cultural forces such as gender socialization. For example, feminist theorists link the personal with the political, as they believe that male dominance and female subordination creates inequalities for all women. Abrams (2002) suggests that as a result, "all girls are at risk of psychological dissociation and disorders of internalization," due to the othering of women in society and comparisons to men (p.52). She further states that young women are socialized into femininity and as a result young women "undergo substantial inner turmoil" as they are socialised into traditional gender roles that may undermine their ability to express themselves, due to fear of losing relationships and social status (Abrams, 2002, p. 52).

However, Abrams does suggest that feminism must also consider intersecting variables that affect diverse groups of women, in order to avoid the categorization of women as a homogenous group, equally affected by the social world and its various oppressive structures.

Consequently, feminist social work practice with adolescents has often focused on consciousness-raising efforts, collective support and action, often through the use of girls support groups (Azzarto & Skidmore, 1997; D'Haene, 1995; Steese, Dolette, Phillips, Hossfield, Matthews, & Taormina, 2006). D'Haene (1995) suggests that interventions with female youth should consider the need for affiliation, and feminist-based group therapy that seeks to encourage belonging, competency and empowerment should be employed. Based on feminist principles, D'Haene (1995) found that a psycho-educational group format that focused on affiliation through group exercises, critical thinking discussions that enhanced consciousness-raising about gender, the mass media and sexuality, were effective in increasing a sense of empowerment among young women in the study group. The themes from feminist theory and identity development continue to see identity as shaped by the individual, however, in more of a relational context, considering connections with others as central to one's identity.

### Theories of Mass Media and Modern Western Culture

Beyond immediate attachments and the family, youth operate in a context embedded in technology and media. Consequently, structural theories include the analysis of these social forces. Many argue that the impact of media and modern Western culture is potentially damaging to young women, as it creates a negative sense of self,

internalised shame and low-self esteem by barraging the young woman with beauty ideals and unrealistic images of women (Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004; Little & Hoskins, 2004). Little and Hoskins (2004) argue that making meaning out of uncontested messages, can prove to be difficult and even detrimental to young women as the construction of media messages create a desire to consume and present the image of an ideal woman in order to sell products. In doing so, advertisers create a “state of discontent” and anxiety among young women, in order to keep them consuming and striving to *create* the idealized identities seen in the media (Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004, p. 69).

Little and Hoskins (2004) argue that popular culture and the mass media instructs girls on how to become women, including how to make sense of one’s gender and cultural identities. As a result, young women are in a process of negotiation with the messages they are receiving about how to be, how to act, and how to present oneself to the world in order to be accepted. I argue that this negotiation can be particularly complicated for young women who cannot identify with the White, heterosexual, able-bodied images that dominate in the mass media.

The powerful forces of the mass media, coupled with the developmental stage of adolescence when “media and peers replace family and parents” as main sources of influence, impact how young women shape their identities (Valdivia & Bettivia, 2002, p.162). It is argued that interaction with media saturated culture presents implications for young women, due to the unattainable beauty ideals presented in the mass media and advertising as well as the under representation of minorities and gay/lesbian youth. The argument that the media’s impact on today’s youth can be detrimental is viable, and social workers need to understand how youth use media to inform their daily lives.



Consequently, social workers must also be aware of how dominant discourses disseminated through the media serves as a possible oppressive force that marginalises and reifies current power structures in society.

### Intersectional Perspectives of Female Adolescent Problems

While media, social and familial influences are important considerations in the analysis of problems, social workers must also consider how these variables intersect and overlap. Abrams (2002, 2003) review of the social work literature on female adolescent development found few sources that address the multipositional experiences of female youth operating in modern society. While Abrams (2002) draws from psycho-developmental stage theory, person-in-environment theory, and feminist psychology, she also is critical of each theory's incompleteness when working with female youth. Abrams (2002) criticises Erikson's lack of attention to female developmental and relational needs, and his lack of focus on ethnic and racial groups; however, she agrees with his analysis of adolescence as a tumultuous stage where identity becomes a forefront issue. Furthermore, she contends that although ecological theory is useful in examining the youth within their environment, it does not address gender and how this can impact development. Finally, Abrams supports feminist psychology's attempt to examine gender's impact on development; however, she is critical of homogeneous feminist accounts of the female adolescent that do not examine race, class and social position as factors that may override gender when examining oppression and problem behaviours.

Abrams (2003) further states that there is a lack of clear understanding among social work researchers and practitioners into the causation of psychosocial problems in

females such as depression, eating disorders, alcohol and drug use, and cites that the presentation of statistics based on race, socioeconomic status or gender, does not fully conceptualize how these variables intersect to create and sustain problems for female youth. Furthermore, she cautions social workers to avoid the stereotyping of urban and ethnic young females as ‘at-risk’ due to socioeconomic factors, and calls for the importance of also examining intrapersonal variables such as attachment, family and community relationships. Abrams (2002, 2003) further recommends an examination of the multitude of variables that impact female youth, so that we may open up the opportunity to acknowledge how race, ability and sexual orientation that can impact female adolescent development.

#### What About the ‘Othered’: Race, Sexual Orientation and Gender

Up to this point, we have largely discussed traditional theories of female adolescent development from a dominant perspective. However, to understand how marginalised females experience adolescence, the literature on racial identity development and lesbian identity development suggests that there is a connection between identity and intra-psychological problems. For female youth that are considered outside of the dominant norms in society, factors such as social bias, homophobia, and racism can negatively impact psychosocial functioning.

#### Culture, Race, and Ethnic Identity

The literature on ethnic minorities argues that there is a connection between identity formation and social functioning. Young women who are also ethnic minorities

may face identity crises during adolescence due to social bias, and the discovery of an identity that does not resemble the mainstream. According to DeCarlo (2005), for individuals who are on the margins of the dominant culture defining oneself in relation to the dominant group becomes a “more complicated” part of identity consolidation (p. 36). Additionally, DeCarlo argues that identity stressors are considered to be detrimental to the social functioning of racial and ethnic youth.

Similarly, Turnage (2004) states that for young women who are African American, the “combined effect of her ethnic and gender labels” makes identity formation a complex and intersecting task that requires negotiation among varying social roles and statuses in society (p. 30). The personal and social responses to negotiating one’s minority identity may include conforming to Western ideals and stereotypes, at the expense of self-expression, or acceptance and full expression of her ethnic identity, at the risk of social ostracism. Turnage (2004) further states that both identity formation and self-esteem can be fostered through healthy modelling and “interactions with and acceptance from members of her own ethnic group” (p. 30). Although the literature on racial identity highlights the complexities of a marginalised experience, the literature continues to suggest that the youth creates, shapes and strives to achieve a certain consolidated identity which builds on the foundations of Erikson’s stage theory, with additional complexities due to racial difference.

### Oppression and the Lesbian Adolescent

While the literature suggests that ethnic minorities may face identity crises during adolescence, the literature on lesbian identity formation also considers adolescence to

also be a tumultuous stage in sexual development. As sexuality and sexual desire are often areas of exploration for all adolescents, lesbian youth may have an even greater difficulty with this milestone of psychosexual development (Malyon, 1981; Sullivan & Schneider, 1987). Malyon (1981) states that adapting to a “stigmatized identity” is detrimental to psychological development, and identity formation in homosexual youth as they struggle with expressing authenticity in an unwelcoming environment, and become aware of social disapproval of homosexuality (p. 321). As a result, homosexual youth may cope in various ways including repression of same-sex desire, suppression of sexual development in general, or full disclosure and “coming out,” which may be a drawn-out and emotional process in itself (Malyon, 1981, p. 326).

The literature on lesbian adolescent development highlights the link between identity formation and social functioning, as many psychosocial issues including depression, developmental stagnation, self-loathing, and larger social problems such as ostracism or violence can be linked to the decision to come out (Keefer & Reese, 2002; Swann & Spivey, 2004). Consequently, Swann and Spivey (2004) cite that the earlier one can solidify her lesbian identity through disclosure, seeking support and group membership, the less likely clinical symptoms like depression and anxiety will occur. However, the personal struggle to solidify one’s lesbian identity is undoubtedly complicated by the multitude of factors in the youth’s life, including family support, social environment and community resources. Finally, the stigma and risk of ostracism may outweigh the benefits of the youth to come out, and thus the risk of psychosocial problems may increase as a result due to an inability to express oneself authentically. Similar to all of the theories reviewed, the literature on lesbian identity also suggests that

the solidification and achieving of one's identity is up to the individual to work through and 'achieve,' leaving little consideration to the structural forces that may impact personal agency.

### Discussion

The overview of the literature on varying female adolescent populations attempts to conceptualise psychosocial problems from personal, social and familial viewpoints. Additionally, most of the literature on the female adolescent population discusses identity formation as a central issue and developmental milestone that is complicated by intersecting social variables. Psycho-developmental theories provide useful insight into how early parent-child interactions can impact the development of children and adolescents, as unresolved issues from childhood may create negative teenage and adult coping patterns (Faber et al, 2003; Orzolek-Kronner, 2002).

Subsequently, while much of the general literature on adolescent female populations suggest varying etiologies for psychosocial problems, some of the literature suggests that identity formation plays a central role in the healthy development of young women. The literature on marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and lesbian youth also suggests that identity formation is a crucial milestone to be achieved during adolescence but is complicated by the combination of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. However, underlying these issues may also be a more intricate force that impacts the young female today, as dominant discourses about what is considered an acceptable female identity, come into the consciousness of the adolescent female as they interact with their social worlds. I argue that social work practice with oppressed populations needs to include an examination of how one makes meaning of their social

position and responds to influences, pressures and discourses from the dominant normative context, and how this internalization contributes to personal, psychological and social problems.

For marginalised female youth, it is theorised that adapting to a stigmatised context and interacting in an environment that does not support one's internal sense of self can undoubtedly cause turmoil in one's life. Attempting to cope with the demands of adolescence and the negotiation of a sense of being "different," may prove to have detrimental effects on one's psychosocial functioning, as they are forced to either repress, adapt, or falsify themselves in order to fit in and survive. Furthermore, pressures to adapt to rigid gender scripts that uphold beauty ideals and heteronormative relations as presented in the mass media, may add to the difficulties in solidifying one's identity. The complex task of adjusting to dominant culture's expectations may manifest in a multitude of problem behaviours from drug and alcohol use, to depression and anxiety. Therefore, rather than attempting to pinpoint psychosocial problems on family, relational or cultural forces, we may want to examine how *all* of these factors interact to impact an individual.

Furthermore, while we can begin to see the value of including the social environment and the impact of the multiple variables of gender, race, class and sexual orientation on female adolescents, we must also have an understanding of how a young woman internalises, and extracts meaning from the interactions with her environment, from a psychological perspective.

Additionally, while an intersectional perspective is much more representative of the diversity among female adolescents, it may not account for how marginalised young women experience and make sense of dominant discourse that supports the mainstream

subject. Furthermore, traditional notions of female adolescent development all tend to view identity formation as a central issue to be achieved, resolved or solidified, in order to reach a developmental milestone. While identity has been theorised as being impacted by internal, familial and social forces, the concept of identity itself remains vague and may not capture the fluidity of the interaction between the person and their environment. Therefore, a need to consider theory that examines how one makes meaning out of discourse and in turn acts or reacts to dominant messages, must also be explored. I argue that Judith Butler's concepts of performativity and constrained agency highlights this process of interaction.

On the whole, the literature reviewed continues to view identity formation or consolidation as an agentic process, operationalized at the personal level. This common assumption places identity as a construct at the centre of individual action and suggests that environmental context can shape and influence this process. Furthermore, the literature suggests that the attainment of a solidified identity is the end result of a formation process that somehow 'ends' with the achieved result. This assumption is suggestive of a theory of identity that is somehow concrete, stable and fixed. While theories of diversity attempt to highlight the additional complexities of a marginalised experience, the view of identity remains the same, thus placing the will of the individual at the centre of the identity formation process. This definition of identity has been challenged by post-structural theories of identity, through the work of Judith Butler specifically, which deconstructs the notion of identity as an achievable entity. Butler's account of identity rests on the power of discourse and the fluid and contextual nature of identity itself.

### Judith Butler: A New Voice for Social Work

While identity remains a central concept in traditional social work literature, Judith Butler is critical of how social work and other disciplines have approached the concept of identity. Butler is critical of the notion that identity is an agentic construct, achievable through personal action and input from one's environment. Butler's stance on identity is that it is a repetition of performances, and we come to perform our identities based on the social pressure or normative discourse that governs society. To further conceptualise the many complex, and multilayered issues faced by female youth in modern society, I argue that social workers should incorporate theory that utilises an intersectional view of marginalised populations that also examines power inequalities in society based on gender, and heteronormativity, and normative discourse.

In this vein, Butler's concept of performativity is helpful in understanding how gender is socially constructed via language, symbolic interaction and socialization within a normative paradigm that supports rigid gender scripts and social categories. Performativity, according to Butler is the repetition of acts in time, which are governed by regulatory discourses about normalcy. In turn the subject comes to perform and reiterate social norms and scripts based on the discourse that regulates her. Therefore, the female youth will come to act out her 'appropriate' identity that brings her the most rewards and least harm. Butler's concept of the interpellated subject explains how an individual comes to take on or perform their expected roles, as they internalise social expectations. The process of interpellation is the act of being signified or hailed into a subject position, and then coming to occupy that very position. For example, female



youth are interpellated as passive, heterosexual, feminine, and thus they come to occupy that role by re-enacting this social position over time.

Butler's ideas suggest that the regulatory nature of dominant discourse and its impact on the psyche can interrupt social justice and equality, and can compartmentalise, stereotype and harm individuals. Therefore, Butler's theories and concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) are a must read for the social work practitioner working with marginalised populations and in this case, female youth, as her ideas can help us to better understand the complex relationship between dominant social discourse and psychosocial problems.

The work of Judith Butler (1993, 1999) can also be useful to the social worker that is looking for further theoretical insight into the socio-cultural underpinnings that affect marginalised young women in modern Western society. Butler's (1993, 1999) take on the performative nature of gender, and the intelligible subject, can provide social workers with useful insight into how young women act out or 'perform' their identities under discursive constraint. By internalising messages from their social worlds, including the family, peer and media systems, Butler shows us how this can impact behaviour, self-esteem and social interactions.

Judith Butler offers a post-structural perspective on the socio-historical roots of gender socialization, and how this can impact the personal lives of young women. Her post-feminist perspective also addresses the intersectional nature of women and critiques the vague and often homogenous perspective of modern feminism in relation to sexual orientation. To further conceptualise the impact of modern society on the marginalised female adolescent, Judith Butler's concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999), and

*Bodies That Matter* (1993) encourage readers to closely examine the insidious social forces and underlying discourses about power, gender, and inclusion/exclusion, that may contribute to the problems facing female youth today.

### Conclusion

Current theoretical insight on various issues concerning female adolescents in modern society offers partial consideration to a complex topic. Psycho-developmental theories discuss the impact of early parent-child interactions on teenage and adult problem behaviours, while social theories attribute problems in social functioning in female youth to dominant discourses about gender and power. While intersectional perspectives include the diverse experiences of female adolescents, it does not demonstrate how marginalised young women may react to dominant discourses that support the mainstream subject. Furthermore, traditional notions of female adolescent development all tend to view identity formation as a central developmental task to be achieved, in order to ‘conquer’ the ‘mission’ of adolescence. While identity has been theorised as being impacted by internal, familial and social forces, the concept of identity itself may be flawed, as it is still theorised as a stable and constant entity, and fails to account for the fluid nature of human experience.

While current dominant theoretical approaches are useful, social work practitioners must also be open to new and innovative theory that they can incorporate into their practice with female youth, and other populations to expand their personal and professional lens’. Traditional theories are important to include in our analyses of female youth, however, we must also consider how marginalisation plays a role in development,

and how the youth internalises her social world. Therefore, it may be useful for social work to include critical theory that analyses the impact of dominant discourse, and regulatory social laws that uphold and reify oppression. It is my hope that by introducing Judith Butler's (1993, 1999) works in the following chapters, that we can gain further understanding into how dominant discourse influences, shapes and constructs what is considered acceptable in society, and how this interactive process can impact the development and functioning of marginalised female youth and beyond.

The following chapter will outline and explore specific concepts from Butler that I feel can enrich our understanding of the marginalised female in modern society. The following chapter will discuss Butler's relevance to social work theory and practice by applying specific concepts to the understanding of female adolescent issues. The final chapter attempts to take Butler's ideas one step further, by applying her theories to the analyses of two cases of adolescent females experiencing psychosocial distress. The final chapter also provides direction for future research and applicability to other marginalised populations.

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## Chapter Two: Theories That Matter: Using Judith Butler to Analyse the Marginalised Female Adolescent

### Introduction

Introducing new ideas to academic and practice realms can expand knowledge and create discussion that can influence how we work with individuals, communities and social policy. This paper introduces the theories of Judith Butler as a new voice for social work; one that will allow us to better conceptualise the experiences of the modern adolescent female and the larger social forces that impact gender, identity and behaviour.

Judith Butler is a Maxine Elliot Professor in Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, and has contributed a large body of academic literature to her field of study. Butler is post-structural in her approach to psychosocial analysis, and her work on gender identity, queer theory, and the feminist critique has been argued to be some of the most important advancements in the area of feminist and political studies in the twentieth century (Lloyd, 2007). Largely informed by Foucault's 'regulatory power,' Butler's take on gender, identity and performativity conceptualises how the power of language, symbolism and the force of the status quo, helps to shape one's behaviour and social position, while also shaping and reifying social position through repetition of performances. Butler's contributions to the area of gender, post-feminist and queer studies has been said to be groundbreaking and innovative, and thus, I argue should be considered in social work practice and education, particularly when considering the impact of structure on the individual (Lloyd, 2007). Butler's popular texts on gender and subversion, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), outline



important ideas about social justice, and honouring the diversity and dignity and worth of each person in society, which are ethical principles congruent with the social work profession (CASW, 2009). Interestingly, the work of Judith Butler has seldom been used in the social work literature, despite its powerful contribution to feminist studies and the political debate of identity politics, queer studies, and human rights (Lloyd, 2007).

For the practitioner working with adolescent females, Judith Butler offers a post-structural perspective on the socio-historical roots of gender socialization, and how this can impact the personal lives of women and other marginalised populations. As social work practitioners often work with female youth around varying psychosocial issues, including sexuality, self-esteem, and the negotiation of media, the work of Butler can be useful in understanding the socio-political foundations of many of our clients' presenting problems, and how surrounding culture and dominant discourse can impact the individual.

Undoubtedly, Butler's work can contribute to social work practice and research, specifically in the area of feminist studies, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) issues, and racial and gender identity. I find her concepts useful and important in the understanding of how both women and men are socialised in our society, which may have been overlooked by feminism, and how dominant social discourses about normalcy and viability can shape one's gender, image and sense of self. As identity politics have become central to human rights debates, anti-discrimination legislation, and the challenging of group stereotypes, social work researchers and practitioners must consider how identity impacts and is impacted by larger social structure (Lloyd, 2007)

To guide my inquiry into the relationship between oppression and female adolescent development, I have chosen Butler's concepts of the masculine signifying economy, performativity, heteronormativity, and the intelligible subject to discuss the underlying social forces and discourses that may contribute to the problems facing female youth today. Pervasive dominant discourse about gender, sexuality, and acceptable identities, I argue, acts as socializing agents that negatively impact the development of young women; specifically youth on the margins of society as they may internalise unhealthy messages about what is valued as acceptable as a woman.

### Butler on Identity

Butler's take on identity differs widely from traditional notions of agentic identity development and achievement. Butler prefers to view the concept of identity as the performance of a repetitive set of acts that women and men come to express "in agentic but constrained terms" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 56). Butler (1999) suggests that the idea of a gender identity is a social construction, politically charged and informed by a socio-historical context of patriarchy and other social laws like heteronormativity. Butler believes that gender is the "cultural meaning that a sexed body assumes," and is shaped and constructed via cultural traditions, norms, laws and language that we internalise and come to repeat over time (p. 57). She argues that gender identity is an "agentic process of achievement" that we come to create only as a result of social pressures (Butler, 1999, p. 50). The repetition and recycling of such gender performances is what "enables a subject" to become, as a result of the forced citation of norms (Butler, 1993, p. 95). According to Butler, the recitation of gender norms, behaviours, dress, and demeanour is

considered necessary if a person is to “count and persist as a credible gendered subject” in society (Lloyd, 2007, p.64). Thus, we are compelled to act out our expected gender identities in order to become signified in society.

This conceptualization of identity differs from the traditional explanations of identity formation, as it encompasses both agency and structure in its account of the performative and repetitive nature of identity that is ultimately guided and coerced by social law and discourse. For Butler, the traditional concept of identity is too rigid, too stable. Butler rather sees identity as a contextual performance that is fluid, and thus capable of change, which will be discussed later in the discussion on subversion. For Butler, “performativity is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,” thus taking cues from culture that one in turn reiterates and maintains via the process of interpellation (1993, p.13). This take on identity challenges traditional assumptions about the ability to “form” and create an identity in adolescence as a developmental achievement. As I will discuss later in these pages, Butler’s concept of performativity is the result of the social pressure to conform to some sort of intelligible subject (read: able, attractive, heterosexual, feminine, able-bodied) in order to fit in.

Butler assumes that gender is ‘appointed’ and in turn acted out by us, and upheld by dominant discourses, and social schemas passed on through reinforced by our family systems, the mass media, and everyday social relations. Therefore, it can be argued that the attribution of gender is somewhat unconsciously transmitted to the individual via dominant discourse, and as a result, the individual acts out or ‘performs’ their appropriate, socially acceptable roles. It is further argued by Butler that over time, men and women come to reify their cultural patterns and roles, (arguably unconsciously)

through gender “performances” and acts, under the pressure of such structure, while repressing or suppressing other opportunities for self-expression and desire, which will be discussed later in this chapter in regards to the melancholy of heterosexuality.

While Butler (1999) argues that gender precedes the temporal stages of adolescence and adulthood, I suggest that the dominant focus on identity in adolescence may be due to the fact that during this developmental stage, female youth begin to become more self aware of personal changes such as sexuality and social position. However, identity *creation* in adolescence and beyond is argued by Butler as being a myth, as one is not the conscious creator of an identity. Butler subsequently argues that identity itself is merely a repetition of acts, discursively produced and embedded within the structures of male, heterosexual dominance. Therefore operating in such a context may prove to be difficult for marginalised young women. Therefore, the dominant discourse that young women begin to internalise is that they must abide by certain social laws, and project an image of feminine, passive, sexual but not powerful, in order to be signified as a viable subject.

### The Masculine Signifying Economy and Heteronormativity

Butler (1999) supports a “culture is destiny” standpoint, when discussing gender and identity (p. 9). She argues that gender is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon that is supported by a masculine, heterosexual hierarchy within society. Therefore, it can be argued that oppressive structural forces such as patriarchy, rigid gender roles, and the subordination of women’s psychosocial needs to males, may impact how young women perform their genders, by succumbing to dominant discourse about

what constitutes an acceptable or intelligible subject. The female adolescent may perform this socially acceptable identity by repressing, rejecting, or subverting themselves in ways that may not be the most healthy, internally congruent or pleasurable, in order to avoid social ostracism, shame or violence.

Butler (1999) explains this phenomenon in her account of the “masculine signifying economy,” which describes women as the negative of men, the othered sex, which is body-oriented and subordinate, while males are the marked sex, the mind-oriented, existential subject within the societal context (p.17). This masculine signifying economy is no doubt internalised by both men and women, which limits the opportunities for full expression of one’s self, as women and men are compartmentalized and divided within a binary division of power relations.

Butler (1999) argues that through coercive power and force, “intelligible genders” or subjects, are created (p. 24). By intelligible, Butler (1999) is referring to the socially acceptable gender roles that individuals come to perform, that fit nicely into the binary gender categories of masculine and feminine, and heterosexual. Therefore, only those with “intelligible genders;” or those which maintain the heterosexual, male dominant relations among sex, gender and sexuality are recognised and rewarded in society (p.23). The internalization of the intelligible subject undoubtedly can have an impact on marginalised young women, as they do not resemble the norm, or signified subject in society. Beyond gender, the concept of intelligibility can be applied to other social categories such as race, class and disability, as subjectivity is given only to those who fit into and reiterate the dominant norm.

### The Binary Categorization of Subjects

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler outlines the process of binary gender construction, via socialization within the “masculine signifying economy” (1999, p.17). She argues that the binary categorization of male/female subjects produces dominant social discourses about normalcy, which sets up power disparities among men and women. The construction of male and female categories allows us to recognize the male as the norm, the power holder, and the female as the other, signified only when in context with a male subject. In addition to male and female categories, the structure, or the masculine signifying economy always assumes heterosexual desire, and thus, Butler argues that gender construction is deeply rooted in historical forces that serve to compartmentalise men and women into rigid categories to uphold certain social laws, including heterosexual desire. Butler (1999) argues that gender is largely a social and cultural construction that is not necessarily tied to biology. Rather, she believes that gender is a politically charged construct, that is formulated within a “field of power” referred by Butler as the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (p. 9).

Butler (1993, 1999) argues that power is established and maintained through the categorization of male and female markers that act as symbols of social position and intelligibility. The categories that one is socialised and forced into, according to Butler, are based on the socio-political concept of heteronormativity and rigid gender norms that serve to exclude those outside of the dominant sexuality paradigm. Therefore, within the “heterosexual matrix” where heteronormativity is created and upheld by various social practices, the individual is not free to honour their multifaceted gender identity without experiencing social consequences and even punishment, which Butler (1999) discusses as

“normative violence” (xx). The confinement of binary gender categories, and the socialization of men and women within the masculine signifying economy, which supports male as the signified subject and female as the othered subject, sets up the power structures within the society in the form of gender hierarchies which are reinforced via language, discourse, mass culture and the media.

Butler supposes that the formation of clear binary gender categories create social markers or symbols that represent social position, which in turn maintains power relations over time. She argues that we read such symbols as we read language, and thus we come to internalise these structural symbols or schemas that have been passed down through generations. Butler (1993) presents the argument that perhaps psychosocial problems can stem from the rigid construction of heterosexual, male/female binary gender categories that constitute the “intelligibility” of subjects, which set up power hierarchies that set the tone for all facets of our economy. For marginalised female youth, problems with social functioning may then be created if the individual does not identify with the rigid categories she has been socialised into, or when the symbols or ideals are not congruent with her sense of self. This can have implications lesbian youth, young women with disabilities, or female youth that are also ethnic minorities, as they may not identify with what is considered acceptable, or ‘intelligible.’

#### Gender Performativity: The Performance of Intelligibility

Butler (1999) argues that as we internalise our socially acceptable, intelligible genders, we come to perform our genders with the practice of “repeated stylization of the body” within the “highly rigid, regulatory frame,” that is the masculine signifying

economy (p. 43). For female youth, these repeated performative acts may include passive personality traits, repressed speech, feminine clothing, and hairstyle and focus on the body in the creation of the overall 'image' that is feminine. These gender performances then act to reify and perpetuate the dominant discourse of femininity, and masculinity as acting feminine reifies the masculine subject position as well. In reading this concept of gender performativity, gender then becomes a "dynamic and corporeal process" which one comes to achieve through "appropriation, interpretation, and reinterpretation of cultural terms of embodiment that define gender" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 38).

For the young woman entering adolescence, a certain gender performance may look like repressing one's voice, dressing in a gender appropriate way to perform feminine, and follow the rigid gender scripts that she is hailed into. This type of behaviour and stylization has become so natural and normalised in our media-saturated, consumer culture that a new discourse has been created about the importance of buying into and creating an image that will enhance your femininity, and thus your success. Therefore, it can be argued that the gender performances of young women can not only be impacted by peers, and families, but also the mass media and advertising industries which have become powerful mediums of discourse in themselves.

### Butler's Critique of Feminism: Beyond Biology

Butler's (1999) groundbreaking work in *Gender Trouble* challenges the feminist notion of unique male and female development, biological determinism and corporeality, by suggesting that we are socialized into our male and female binary genders with no room for grey or expression of alternative or integrated gender possibilities that nurture



both the masculine and feminine aspects of oneself. Butler (1999) argues that male and female gender categories are derived from much more than differences in reproductive anatomy; and she posits that theories based on biological determinism fail to encompass the larger social and cultural context that women and men operate in.

While many feminists believe that the body is materialized beyond discourse and that biology cannot be denied when analysing and studying the experiential subject, Butler (1993, 1999) believes that the focus on biological sexual markers such as reproduction and the body restricts women to certain roles and functions that uphold and reify the heteronormative regime, as there is an assumption of heterosexuality when analysing sex, and gender.

Butler's critique of feminist theory boldly challenges the notion that gender is tied to one's biology; she believes that gender is a process of becoming that is largely shaped and controlled by discourse. Butler reaches beyond feminism and argues against the idea that sex and gender are one and the same, as she feels that gender is politically, socially and culturally charged and is not determined by biology. Similarly, Butler argues that desire and sexuality are not tied to sex, or gender, and she attempts to open up pathways of identification and intelligibility of subjects that fall outside of the heterosexual matrix, by deconstructing typical notions of normalcy in regards to sexuality and gender.

### Repression of Expression of the Same Sex Object

Butler believes that socialization within the masculine signifying economy can have detrimental impacts to the unconscious psyche. Butler suggests that the normalization of heterosexuality is so insidious that it has become an accepted part of

psychosexual development and modern psychological theory. Butler (1999) explains this phenomena in her critique of Freud's Oedipal Complex, which we understand as a natural way to explain the process of working out one's sexual desires (first with one's opposite sex parent) to set the tone for their gendered lives. However, Butler criticises Freud in that he explains this theory under the precept of heteronormativity, which again limits the opportunities of gender to be expressed, and sets up heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual identity. Butler, (1999) suggests that as a result of Freud's Oedipal theory that assumes the child must resolve their feelings of heterosexual desire and repression of heterosexual desire; young women experience a melancholy and grieving process, as they mourn their repressed, same-sex object formed in infancy and childhood. I argue that the melancholia of gender may manifest as depression and anxiety in adolescence, and repression of arguably masculine characteristics like confidence, and assertiveness.

Subsequently, socialization into the heterosexual matrix and compulsory heterosexuality, creates a melancholy in young women, as they mourn a part of their selves (their sexuality, desire, and primary bisexual nature), as we lose the object in which to identify with (i.e.) the same-sex parent. Therefore, heterosexual desire is undertaken at the "price of denying other opportunities of desire," including homosexuality, bisexuality, and arguably, the expression of masculine and feminine traits within the same subjective identity. The concept of repression of the same sex object can be useful in understanding how young women (and arguably men) deny the feminine and masculine attributes of themselves, and uphold rigid gender scripts, which tend to become heightened during adolescence and adulthood and has been documented by other

social researchers (Pipher, 1995; Lavitt, 1996). This social pressure to conform and act out acceptable identities is so ingrained into our psyches, beginning from childhood socialization. Consequently, the underlying force behind conformity may stem from the need for personal safety, as one is internally driven to belong, and to avoid harm.

### Normative Violence: The Force Behind Constrained Agency

Butler's concept of normative violence can be useful in understanding how we come to continually reify and maintain our cultural and gendered patterns of behaviour. As Butler (1993, 1999) believes that gender is created by the dominant ideological constructs and discourses that govern our society, such as heterosexuality and patriarchy, she posits that we come to perform under constraint, acceptable genders that will bring us the most rewards and the least amount of pain and discontent. Butler (1993, 1999) states that one of the ways in which such norms are upheld is through the threat of normative violence in our everyday lives, which serves to maintain power and a certain social order. Forms of normative violence can be considered hate speech, racial and sexual orientation jokes, racial slurs or language that denotes othering by use of pejorative speech. Other less obvious forms of normative violence can be seen in the way that race, disability and sexuality are portrayed or excluded in the mass media by displaying the norm as White, able-bodied, heterosexual male and female subjects. This type of normative discourse has become part of a cultural system that creates and maintains dominant social messages that in turn regulates our behaviour out of fear of ostracism, ridicule or harm. This fear of ostracism then reifies the notions of the intelligible subject and maintains the dominant social order over time.

### Subjectivity and Abjectivity: Bodies That *Matter*

Butler proposes that subjects are signified only when they fit into viable, intelligible social categories. Arguably, the White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied subject acts as the standard of normalcy that all other subjects in society are compared to. These subjects are considered viable, intelligible beings that are materialised through dominant discourse, and thus granted the rights and privileges of subjectivity. Therefore, those who do not fit into such social categories due to their gender, sexual orientation, or racial and ethnic backgrounds, are marked off and “abjected” as unviable, unintelligible subjects that cannot be recognised within the matrix of normalcy (Butler, 1993, p.3). The term abjection is defined as “excluding what is unclean, repulsive or improper” in order to signify and recognise the proper subject (Lloyd, 2007). To be considered ‘abjected’ is to be denied “subject status” and to be considered somehow deviant, or pathological (Butler, 1993, p.3). This concept of Butler’s is so cohesive with social work values as it recognises the political and oppressive nature of discourse and how we come to honour certain subjects and discount others in society. Furthermore, I argue that the concepts of abjection and intelligibility are applicable to social work practice, as we strive to challenge oppression and enhance opportunities for inclusion and self-determination of all individuals in society.

### Discussion

My supposition is that the internalisation of dominant discourse about intelligible genders and psychosocial functioning are inherently linked. Butler (1993, 1999) enriches this perspective with her account of socialization within the masculine signifying

economy, which can potentially create problems in these areas for young women, as young women have historically been “marked off” or “othered” within the structure of society. I argue that if one is unable to express herself fully, and feels forced to subjugate her own needs to please others through image creation, repression of authenticity and subordination; psychosocial functioning can surely be impaired. Furthermore, young women even further outside of the margins of the normative paradigm such as lesbian, disabled or ethnic minorities, may end up with fragmented sense of self, low self-esteem and anxiety as they cannot identify with the dominant norms they are being hailed into.

Subsequently, young women may choose to ‘subvert,’ challenge, or overthrow such rigid expectations, by engaging in other performances that may or may not lead to increased ostracism, pain and violence. Therefore, one is forced to engage in some type of performance in order to conform, be accepted, and gain rewards in a society that honours the performance of “intelligible subjects” or, choose the alternative and potentially suffer increased psychosocial tension (Butler, 1999).

While Butler (1999) argues that gender is largely a social construction that is defined and shaped through socialization and interaction, it is dually important to consider how this process is internalised and reinforced over time. Gender can be argued to be an ongoing, ever-evolving process, rooted deeply in socio-historical contexts and tied to political and social relations. The socialization of one’s gender begins very early in life, and Butler (1999) believes that one is not “fully recognised as a human until they are gendered,” thus reinforcing the importance of the masculine and feminine binary categories from the very moment a life comes into this world (p.12).

This process of gender is then highlighted and exacerbated in adolescence as one begins to explore sexuality, relationships and negotiation of the social realm on their own, while pulling away from and possibly mourning their childhood, freedom and androgyny or “primary bisexuality” (Butler, 1999, p. 76). When analysing the experiences of young women, it is important to consider how the individual internalizes messages and interactions with their social world, to create, modify and cope with such information, and what institutional and societal forces may impact this process.

Butler (1999) supposes that we cope in a variety of ways; through conformity via gender performativity and image creation to fulfill the intelligible obligations of our genders. Subsequently, this response may deny by our natural desire to encompass our full spectrum of sexuality and multi-gendered aspects of ourselves. Furthermore, messages about gender identity, normalcy and intelligibility are further perpetuated and reified and driven into the young psyche via language and the mass media. It is plausible that young women may end up internalising these messages; that they are the objects of desire, the secondary sex, signified only against the male subject, whose purpose is to be quiet and conforming in order to gain rewards in society.

As a result of years of social conditioning and socialization within heteronormative, masculine signifying structures, Butler argues that we come to perform our compulsory heterosexual, feminine gender expectations that act to signify ourselves as female, thus expressing a socially acceptable subject position. Butler (1999) argues that if one deviates from this compulsory norm through the expression of an ‘alternate’ sexuality (lesbian) or through rejection of such standards, (i.e. refusing to perform their gender through the application of makeup, clothing, attitude), or are excluded due to race,

and dis/ability, one becomes at risk for facing normative violence such as social ostracism, ridicule, and social exclusion. Young women on the margins of society are at even greater risk for ostracism, and psychosocial impairment as they learn that their identity is not acceptable by dominant society. Arguably, the marginalised female may suffer intra-psychically about how to express and perform their sexualities and gendered selves (Swann & Spivey, 2004; Ponterrotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006).

Additionally, because youth interact heavily with information technology and the mass media, which arguably transmits “dominant society’s cultural standards, myths, values, roles and images,” young women on the margins of society, outside the definition of what is portrayed as normal may be at higher risk for self-esteem issues and psychosocial problems (Henry & Tator, 2000, p. 254). It is for these reasons that social workers should expand their ecological analysis to include the mass media.

To summarize my argument, the experience of marginalised female youth in late modern society, can be understood through Butler’s (1999, 1993) account of the masculine signifying economy and the creation of intelligible genders through performative acts to sustain a viable personal and social image that is accepted by society. To Butler, gender is viewed as a regulatory act submersed in the power structure of a heteronormative, patriarchal society. Furthermore, in late modern society where communication technology, the Internet, visual media and television dominate the lives of adolescents, these discourses, images and messages are continuously reinforced, through interactions with one’s environment.

When considering how female youth are impacted by structural forces, it appears that young women are faced with an ultimatum; follow the prescribed rules of how to

perform ‘feminine,’ or embrace the alternative and suffer. Furthermore, it may be difficult for a marginalised young woman to negotiate self-expression within the dominant constraints of society which can undoubtedly impact self esteem, and social functioning.

### Limitations of Butler’s Work

While Butler offers innovative ideas about political and social relations and the gender socialization of women in society, her analysis does not reach into the practice domain where front line social workers are situated. Although Judith Butler has made some groundbreaking and provocative contributions in the area of gender studies, feminist, and gay and lesbian studies, her work has come under criticism for her lack of focus on the corporeal aspects of the female body, as argued in feminist literature, and for her lack of attention to the intrapsychic, agentic possibilities of the individual.

For example, feminist critics challenge Butler’s vague description of the materiality of the body (Kerin, 1999). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) describes the body as the materialization of performances which are highly influenced by historical social forces and discourses, thereby challenging the notion that “a woman’s biology determines her sexuality/desire/psychology, and thus her role in life” (Lloyd, 2007, p.28). Butler challenges the feminist assumption that women are a homogenous category with similar identifications, status, and sexual desire, by suggesting that one’s “sex, sexuality, desire, gender and the body are all discursively and socially constructed,” which highly contradicts the feminist idea that women and men have unique and signifying sexual differences (Lloyd, 2007, p.30). Butler (1993) however, views the sexed body as being



“conceived as an effect of the heteronormative regime that regulates it,” thus moving away from the biological and sexual gender differences purported by feminism, including biology, and turns her focus to the power of discourse in shaping the body (p. 69) .

Traditionally, feminist theories support that the female body has always been the subject of objectification, violence, oppression, reproduction/maternity, and a marker of sexual and biological difference. The idea that gender is solely a social construction and not tied to sex has been criticised by feminist theorists as it does not address the lived experience and subjectivity of the female subject, in that women *are* bodies, and more than just discourse (Lloyd, 2007; Kerin, 1999; Keane & Rosengarten, 2002).

Lloyd (2007) cites that feminist critics of Butler’s work argue that she “denies the natural and biological reality of the human body” and the male and female differences within them thus, challenging her concepts as being philosophical and vague in relation to the materiality and corporeality of the female body (p.70). Furthermore, Kerin (1999) argues that Butler’s failure to engage with ontological debate and the natural sciences and her assumption that language drives materiality is too vague and overgeneralizes the human (female) experience.

Secondly, Butler’s work has been criticised for a lack of focus on the psychoanalytic, intrapsychic element of human beings especially in relation to agency and how individuals may interpret their realities and shape their identities (Lloyd, 2007). Additionally, her ideas can be criticised for being overly focused on the power of language and discourse in the shaping of human behaviour. However, as Butler’s background is in philosophical and linguistic studies, her aim is not to provide practice direction or psychoanalysis. Rather, her focus has been on the sociocultural and historical

forces that shape society and gender relations, which are useful and innovative concepts that can be applied to social work practice in analysing client, family and community problems. Overall, Butler has provided her readers with ideas that can be useful in the understanding of how historical and social structures and discourse have created gender patterns, norms and hierarchies that largely influence the daily lives of individuals.

While she can be criticised for her lack of practice direction, Butler (1999, 1993) does provide some provocative suggestions for social change, albeit vaguely in her discussion of subversive tactics to challenge the status quo, including her concept of ‘drag’ which extends beyond the traditional definition known to most as ‘cross-dressing,’ and refers to more of a subversion and rejection of gender norms, by causing ‘trouble’ or contesting the acts, rules, laws and discourses that uphold the heterosexual matrix (Lloyd, 2007) . The tactics outlined by Butler offer suggestions for social action that can include contesting the norms that sustain heteronormativity by virtue of rejecting the norms/ideals and subsequent gender performances via dress, speech, acts that we uphold everyday. Additionally, Butler, (1999) suggests challenging heterosexuality as the only natural act, thereby allowing for a free and open expression of one’s gender and sexuality. These subtle yet powerful suggestions for social action can be useful for the social work practitioner when working with clients and communities, as her theories and concepts can be applied to a variety of social justice issues. The application of Butler’s concepts to social work practice is discussed in the final chapter of this manuscript.

Finally, in addition to theoretical critiques, Butler has been disparaged by the linguistic and philosophical community for her “lamentable” prose and writing style (Dutton, 1998, p.1). While Butler’s style can be challenging to read at times, and her

colourful use vocabulary requires attentive concentration, this style also adds to the unique nature of her work. However, her work should not be abandoned due to the difficulty of reading; rather it should be an opportunity for more social work scholars to interpret and present her innovative concepts in a manner that can be applied and conceptualised for the larger social work audience, including students.

### Conclusion

Butler's overall aim in her work in *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) is to give "cultural legitimacy and intelligibility to those who are presently denied it," which speaks to her relevance to social work practice and her desire for social justice and human rights (Lloyd, 2007, p.54). I argue that the socialization of females in modern Western society has a negative impact on marginalised young women, as they are socialised into the subordinate role in society as the objects of sexual desire, and as the 'othered subject' within the "masculine signifying economy" (Butler, 1999).

Under the illusion of empowerment and liberation facilitated by early feminist crusades, the modern Western woman is being set up for failure unless the dominant male-heterosexual matrix can be deconstructed. Subsequently, young women are further at risk for psychosocial impairment if they continue to internalise the subordinate position in society. Subsequently, this may place young women at risk for impairments in social functioning as they negotiate their environments under social constraint. Therefore, it is of utmost important to look at how we can connect with and support young women and girls to hone and honour their unique gifts, goals and desires before they succumb the

skewed internalization of the othered sex, which is reified via mass media, and mass culture.

While Butler (1993, 1999) offers a dynamic and spirited critique of gender and how we come to encompass or prescribed roles, her analysis ceases before offering suggestions for social change and individual treatment. Butler (1993, 1999) does call for the deconstruction of gender and the subversion of compulsory heterosexuality, and heteronormativity, however she fails to provide specific direction for intervention and action in this vein. Translating her theories and concepts into suggestions for social work practice may be a daunting task, however this is not to say that Butler's ideas and theories cannot be useful in informing practice and research possibilities, specifically her ideas around the mourning of the lost object or gender, and deconstruction of dominant paradigms whether by social action and subversion, or consciousness-raising and deconstruction of media messages, which are useful practice methods that can be addressed and applied therapeutically.

Finally, while we can use Butler's ideas about intelligibility, performativity and the masculine signifying economy to inform and conceptualise client problems. Through Butler's lens, social workers can draw from her innovative ideas to provide critical insight and guidance for future research and practice. The final chapter of this thesis will introduce and discuss how Butler's theories and concepts may be applied to practice with the marginalised female adolescent and beyond. The final chapter also offers direction for future research direction and applicability to other marginalised populations.

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### **Chapter Three: The Application of Specific Concepts from Judith Butler to Social Work Practice with Marginalised Female Youth and Beyond**

#### **Introduction**

While current social work theory on the female adolescent can assist the social worker in the understanding of the various personal and social causes of psychosocial problems for young women such knowledge can also be enriched through the expansion of ideas from other disciplines. Judith Butler, an American philosopher largely informed by post-structural ideas, has introduced some very interesting concepts about the performative nature of gender and identity, the roots of dominant patriarchal discourse, and the social implications of operating within a heteronormative regime in society, which adds to the academic debate around the potential psychosocial effects of the marginalised young woman operating in modern society. Butler contributes to the identity politics debate, which has come to the forefront in modern society, with the emergence of “civil rights and gay and lesbian liberation movements” that attempt to bring about change and equality in the political sphere of human rights (Lloyd, 2007, p.2). Through her discussion of gender performativity, Butler explains how social discourses about normalcy dictate one’s behaviour, as we conform to an intelligible gender image that will be rewarded by society. This interaction highlights the agency vs. structure conquest that has been of tireless debate in the social sciences. Furthermore, Butler reconsiders feminism, and its traditional notions of binary gender categorization, calling for a breakdown of rigid gender categories to allow for freedom of expression and contesting of dominant norms of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Consequently, I argue that such innovative concepts can complement the assessment and intervention strategies that we currently use with marginalised adolescent females. Issues such as the influence of the mass media on gender performativity, socialization within a masculine signifying economy, and the pathologizing of unintelligible subjects are useful theoretical concepts that can help to inform our practice with marginalised female youth, as well as many other client groups.

Finally, Butler's theories and concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) can be useful for the self-reflective social work practitioner, who may want to further examine how dominant discourses can shape one's behaviour and experiences, and how we may be unknowingly contributing to the oppression of our own clients, and ultimately ourselves. This chapter will examine how Butler's concepts and theories from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) can be translated into social work theory and practice with the marginalised female adolescent population and beyond. Suggestions for future research and educational possibilities will be discussed.

#### Structural Implications: The Masculine Signifying Economy and the Heterosexual Matrix

Butler's concept of the masculine signifying economy can be useful to social workers as it allows the practitioner to understand how young females may unconsciously inherit the subordinate social position. When considering the experiences of marginalised young women in modern society, it can be argued that the internalization of discourse around female subordination, or othering, can impact the self-esteem and social functioning of young women during adolescence, as one begins to become aware of their



status within the masculine signifying economy. In late modern society, young men and women are socialized with images of gender appropriate roles, occupations, bodies and images via the mass media and other social contexts. Butler's concept of the interpellated subject allows us to understand how one comes to occupy this rigid definition of 'female.' She argues that if one is hailed or identified in a certain way they in turn come to re-enact this identity or subject position. As young women are socialised into a culture where they understand men as the power holders, while women are marked off as the othered sex, they may internalise such subordination.

Consequently, as young women enter adolescence, they may become more aware of their inherited social status as the subordinate, othered sex, and under such discursive constraint, play out or perform over time the predetermined gender identities they have been prescribed, in order to feel accepted and avoid ostracism. This discourse, according to Butler (1999), regulates one's behaviour and over time, reinforces rigid gender patterns and social law.

Butler (1999) further argues that as gender is shaped and controlled within a masculine signifying economy, where the male subject is signified and the female subject is marked off, othered, and only acknowledged within the presence of the male subject. This process of othering may negatively impact the self-esteem of young females, as they are under pressure to conform to feminine gender ideals while suppressing other gendered aspects of themselves. The heterosexual matrix, Butler's term for the overarching discursive regime that qualifies intelligible subjects as being male, female and heterosexual, sets the foundation for the creation and maintenance of socially constructed gender norms, roles, and stereotypes. As a result, this matrix serves to uphold

and reify accepted gendered behaviours, through language, law, and social policies, which maintain the power structures and gender roles for men and women.

### Psychological Implications: The Melancholia of Gender and Repressed Opportunities of Expression

As young women come to understand themselves within the masculine signifying economy, and perform their gendered 'identity' in constrained terms, they may have adverse conscious and unconscious reactions to the social pressure to abide by dominant social laws. Through the discursive power of the mass media and the larger social context, young women learn to stylise themselves and create acceptable female images, and in doing so may repress a side of themselves that is perhaps more genuine, more whole; a part of themselves that was open to express itself in childhood, but swept away in the fury of adolescence, peer culture and mass media. Pipher (1995) touches on this transitional loss in her short but powerful statement that young women "all die at fifteen," referring to the death of the androgynous childhood spirit when entering adolescence (p. 19).

It has been argued by social researchers that young women begin to repress certain aspects of themselves and begin to self-monitor and become more passive as they enter adolescence and learn that their male counterparts hold the power (Pipher, 1995; Lavitt, 1996). Lavitt (1996) conducted a study on young girls and boys aged 8-12 who were involved in psychotherapy and found that young girls were more likely to report a decline in self-esteem as their age increased. Lavitt further proposes that gender and psychopathology are interrelated and states that as young women enter adolescence, they

experience problems with negotiating self-perception, and tend to internalize personal struggles more often than boys.

Butler has also made a contribution to this argument in her account of the melancholia of heterosexuality. Butler (1999) uses Freud's explanation of the Oedipal Complex to make her point about "primary bisexuality" or androgyny as referred to by Pipher (1995) on her account of female children being free to express their full and carefree behaviours prior to adolescence. Butler's idea that we are primarily bisexual beings, enriches this concept of preadolescent androgyny, in that as infants and young children we do not purposely intend to 'be' either masculine or feminine, but rather human, and thus we are less constricted and more open to our full experience of life. However, as females age they are taught to "perform" or act out their genders; highlighted by a subdued demeanour, feminized behaviours, and the internalization of their acceptable gendered identities.

Lavitt (1996) further suggests that self-esteem in young women diminishes with age, and maintaining a positive self-image is difficult for young girls approaching adolescence due to cultural pressures and values that support the sublimation of young women (p. 511). Similarly, Pipher (1995) attributes the pervasive depression and anxiety that she has witnessed in her clinical psychological treatment of adolescent girls to the mourning of the inner child; once androgynous, exuberant and free from the shackles of misogynistic gender roles and female subordination.

Butler (1999) critiques Freud's Oedipal Complex with her concept of the melancholia of gender, which explains the mourning of a part of one's masculine possibilities, which represent personal power, self-esteem, assertiveness, and confidence.

As a result, Butler argues that young women may grieve this loss of the same sex object and may end up depressed, anxious and ambivalent as one learns to “perform their gender, while concealing and subsequently grieving other gender possibilities” (Lloyd, 2007, p.83). This concept among others in Butler’s work can be applied clinically in the analysis of the female adolescent in relation to gender expectations and coping with social pressures.

### Psycho-social Implications: Constrained Agency and the Social Functioning of Marginalised Adolescent Females

Central to my argument is that there is a connection between oppression, gender and psychosocial problems among marginalised female youth. When one cannot identify with the dominant norms due to race, sexual orientation or ability, they will undoubtedly be impacted. As a result, marginalised young females must find ways to cope with the demands of dominant discourses in order to gain social rewards and acceptance. I argue that the constraints of dominant and regulatory discourse can have negative consequences for marginalized young women, as they must find ways to cope with the pressures of being different.

Therefore, as a marginalised young woman performs an intelligible identity, within the certain social limits and rules that govern her behaviour, the young woman may conform to the dominant norm even if she does not identify with them. Butler (1999) refers to the performance of one’s gender identity as a process in which “bodies are trained, within a set of social regulatory ideals,” in order to maintain power relations among genders and to preserve heteronormativity as the ideal (p. 54). This concept

draws from the socio-historical and political discourses that binary gender construction. As a result, acceptable categories or identities or 'intelligible subjects' have become reflections of the dominant values of Western society, such as heterosexuality, thinness, beauty, and Whiteness which continue to be reinforced through a variety of mediums, including the educational and family systems, and the mass media.

### Gender Performativity: The Creation of Intelligible Subjects

Butler's (1993, 1999) concept of gender performativity can be very useful in understanding how one comes to occupy their female (and male) identity and image. As outlined in the previous chapter, young women are linked more than ever to many forms of mass communication, advertising, and visual imagery that perpetuates the messages of appropriate, intelligible gender performativity. Little and Hoskins (2004), state that young women today operate in a "complex, media saturated world that does not accept those who fall outside of the often rigid scripts of gender, and gender expectations" (p. 76). As a result, young women may feel pressure to perform the ideals of normalcy even if they do not identify with the norms and gender expectations.

Rigid examples of gender scripts are depicted in the mass media daily, and young women will likely look to messages, images and ideas presented in the mass media to inform them on various ideas about sexuality, beauty and appearance, relationships, expectations, and of course image. As Butler (1999) may posit, through the media, young women are hailed to perform their genders appropriately, and thus they come to iterate or occupy the very images that they are bombarded with. This process of interpellation can be applied clinically when we work with youth who come to occupy a

social position or image that may or may not be coherent with internal beliefs. Labels such as ‘delinquent,’ ‘promiscuous’ or ‘disabled’ are great examples processes of interpellation that individuals often come to reify because they come to internalize and then act out the society’s definition of them.

Butler’s (1999) concept of gender performativity and performative power in the formation of gender and sexual identities can be informed by the power of the mass media in the construction of gendered identity performances. She states dominant social discourses like heterosexism influence the individual to buy into their socially constructed gender categories, and to act out or occupy their socially constructed gender roles based on the normative discourse. Where better than to reinforce these roles than the visual media which is chock full of images of women in highly sexualised submissive positions, awaiting male gaze and approval. These types of suggestive and ‘performative acts’ are considered forms of authoritative discourses that exercise a binding power over social relations. These heteronormative, misogynistic discourses, undoubtedly are upheld and reinforced via the mass media, language, global communication and news media, and in music and other entertainment mediums (Gauntlett, 2002; Jeffreys, 2006).

Because social work professes to take the stance of viewing the person within their environment, it is also of utmost importance to understand how modern individuals, specifically young women, are impacted by their social contexts, including dominant social discourses. Media in its many forms is a central element of modern society, and is a new medium in which discourse is disseminated. Today’s youth are likely the most technologically savvy generation ever, and expose themselves to a wide variety of media texts on a daily basis. As modern individuals within Western society, it is arguably

impossible to escape the multitude of powerful and highly influential media messages that we are exposed to everyday. When considering the marginalised female adolescent then, it seems likely that mass culture can impact how a female could compare herself to the standard of normal and how this can impact the internalization of social location in society (Gauntlett, 2002; Hall, 1996). For example, the cosmetic and beauty industries make a living off of teaching young women how to ‘perform’ their genders, via makeup, hairstyle, clothing, and control of the body through weight loss, diet pills, exercise programs and even cosmetic surgery. While young women may not be passive recipients of such messages, they do interact with systems like media that perpetuate dominant discourse about how to look, act and be feminine, and attempt to make meaning out of themselves within the dominant constructs of society. With respect to Butler’s concepts, I argue that media is another powerful medium in which discourse is disseminated, however not entirely responsible for the reiteration of normative performances.

As Butler (1999) suggests that there is an incessant focus on the body in women or imprisonment of the female body, woman is defined in relation to man, as the inferior other, she becomes sex, or “she *is* sex,” and thus her freedoms of expression and power become limited to heterosexual fantasy (p.13). Consequently, women learn that they are the “negative of men,” and therefore, their signification as a viable female subject relies on their ability to perform their gender in a culturally and socially acceptable manner that pleases men (Butler, 1999, p.14). This complex interaction between the young woman and her environment should be considered when attempting to understand how one makes sense of their gender, and its possible link to personal, psychological and social problems.

### The Effects of Binary Categorization of Subjects: Beyond Gender

It can be argued that our cultural and social practices of socialization, mass media/communication, language and the normalization of compulsory heterosexuality are discourses in Western society that allow the construction of binary categories of heterosexual desire. Butler (1993, 1999) argues that through the creation of the heterosexualization of desire, the repression of primary bisexuality, and the binary categorization of gender, the production of a gender hierarchy is enforced and power relations between men and women are maintained over time. Binary categorization is in alignment with Western thought, which is based on antagonism and the polarized divisions of subjects. I argue that this compartmentalization and splitting of the human spirit into compulsory heterosexual, masculine and feminine categories is harmful, as the individual is not given the opportunity to explore and develop their various gender possibilities.

In modern Western culture, the heterosexual norm is created by the heterosexualization of desire and the creation of binary/polarized gender subjects where women become objects of desire, to be enjoyed by men constituting a “fetish of representation” thereby replacing their own personhood (Butler, 1999, p.33). This of course has implications for young women, as they learn that they are not persons within their own right, but signified only within a male dominated construct.

For young women and marginalised groups, or the intersections of both, healthy self-esteem can be seriously compromised if one’s social environment does not provide inclusion and opportunities to flourish. For young women, this process can be difficult



due to societal, media and peer pressure, within the developmental stage of adolescence. For young women, the intersections between being female and 'different' can potentially create problems in both personal and social functioning.

Implications such as a fragmented sense of self, internalised shame and oppression, and inauthentic self-presentations are examples of the effects of needing to fit in and cope with the demands of society. Informed by dominant discourses disseminated through the media and other social contexts, young women are challenged to manage their impressions and present themselves in such a way that will give them the most rewards, including safety, belonging and security. Examples of the responses to such pressure may involve rejecting one's ethnicity and identifying with the dominant culture, repressing or one's sexual orientation, and/or altering and changing one's appearance to fit into the gendered ideals presented in the media.

For marginalised youth, this coping response may lead to internal conflict, self-hatred and shame, when interacting with their social world. In an environment where youth are responding to media and social pressures telling them what is normal, this can be confusing and harmful, especially if one does not fit the dominant definitions of intelligibility. Therefore, quite often one is called to act out the identity that brings them the most rewards, and least amount of violence, even if it means internal conflict and pain.

## Social Justice Implications: Performativity, Intelligible Subjects and Normative Violence

Judith Butler's stance on performativity under the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality and the masculine signifying economy are important concepts that can be useful in analysing and informing a variety of social justice issues. As Butler (1999) suggests, when one 'performs' their compulsory gender roles, actions, attitudes and appearance, she is conforming to the standards and status quo of dominant society. Members of a marginalized or oppressed group stand to face complex and diverse obstacles in relation to developing a coherent sense of self due to the added complexity of being outside of the dominant standards of normalcy. Butler (1999) states that we are "trained within a set of social regulatory ideals," that instruct us to perform our genders in a social acceptable, intelligible way (p. 54). This dominant paradigm is upheld by the mass media and advertising, social policy and law, as well as informal methods such as language, and day to day interactions with one's immediate environment.

Butler's concept of intelligible subjects or 'bodies that *matter*' lends itself to the understanding the social forces behind oppression, as she argues that unintelligible subjects, or subjects outside of the heterosexual matrix often face "normative violence," which can be in the form of ostracism, ridicule, or physical violence (Lloyd, 2007, p. 74). For example, for heterosexual girls, adolescence can be characterized by a sense of increased feminine behaviour and gender intensification which involves a decrease in self esteem, increase in self-consciousness, as they operate in a society that often devalues and sexualizes women, and rewards beauty and passivity (Swann and Spivey, 2004). However, for lesbian adolescents, the trying on of sex roles and subsequent evolving sexual identities differs greatly from their heterosexual counterparts. If one is unable to

consolidate their own sexuality, internal confusion and anxiety may result, and one can experience internal conflict and shame.

Furthermore, because Western society is based on the cultural norm of heterosexuality, most lesbian youth experience a sense of othering and a marginalized experience (Keefer and Reene, 2002). Butler's concepts of heteronormativity and the creation of intelligibility illustrates how the lesbian youth may struggle with operating in a constrained context that adds pressure and conflict in to her personal world.

Similarly, many young women may feel the pressure to "perform" their genders as prescribed by the mass media, which perpetuates unhealthy, unrealistic body types, beauty ideals, and images to the developing female adolescent (Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004; Little & Hoskins, 2004). This pressure to perform a certain image may have implications for a young woman's self-esteem, and mental health, as striving to achieve the unachievable can be stressful, oppressive and conflicting for female youth, especially when they cannot identify with the ideals presented.

Additionally, as media can often present the White hetero-norm as the ideal, female youth with varying ethnic backgrounds can be affected by these dominant discourses, and can begin to question the "intelligibility" of their ethnicity as well (Butler, 1999; Henry and Tator, 2000). Individuals who are visible minorities who operate within a socio-historical context of oppression and marginalization, therefore, the performing of an ethnic identity may not be a viable and socially rewarding option, especially for those who are living in Western society that is dominated by White values. As a result they may internalise their ethnicity as 'unintelligible' and inferior (Ponterrotto, Utsey & Pedersen, 2006). Therefore, under the dominant paradigm, those

considered “unintelligible” for varying reasons including race, ability, and sexuality, can be considered at risk for normative violence, internalised shame and conflict and social exclusion (Butler, 1993, 1999).

Those who fail to comply with the dominant norms through repetitive performative acts may face what Butler (1999) refers to as ‘normative violence’, which has important implications for social justice and human rights issues in the realm of social work practice and education. Often we hear stories in the mass media and in our own offices about hate crimes, racial violence and oppression against othered, “unintelligible” subjects such as gay/lesbian hate crimes, and racial discrimination (Henry & Tator, 2000; Keefer & Reese, 2002; Swann & Spivey, 2004). However, normative violence can also be understood as the everyday discourse about being different, or outside of the dominant established norm, as seen in exclusive language that damages and marginalises diverse groups, the lack of ethnic and sexual diversity in television and mass media, and the presentation of the White heterosexual as the norm. Such exclusive discourse can act as violent and oppressive forces against an individual in a more subtle way.

Subsequently, Butler’s concepts of the masculine signifying economy and the creation of the intelligible subject can be applied to a variety of social justice concerns and diverse populations. As the White, male operates as the signified, existential subject all other social categories are marked off, othered and placed in comparison to the intelligible subject. This concept illustrates the power of structure in the creation of intelligible and unviable subjects, which serves to oppress and ostracise those with

varying ethnic backgrounds, persons with disabilities, and women, as well as the many complex intersections of all of these social categories.

#### Practitioner Reflexivity: How Do We Participate in Oppression?

Butler's concepts may help us to reflect on how we may participate in our own oppression, and the oppression of female youth. Butler encourages us to look at how we are impacted by discourse, and how normative discourses inform all of our social interactions, including our clinical work with clients. By understanding intelligibility and gender performativity, we can ask of ourselves: how do we perform our own genders in intelligible ways? Are we dually impacted by the oppressive social structures of the heterosexual matrix and the masculine signifying economy? How do we make assumptions about our own clients based on the dominant discourses that we too, are socialised with?

Furthermore, Butler's concepts of the performance of gender and the normative discourse of heteronormativity presses us to examine how we may assume heterosexuality as the norm when working with teenage girls who present with relationship issues. Butler's critique of the normalization of heterosexuality allows us to expand our ideas about sexuality and sexual development, and remain open-minded about sexuality with our clients. Consequently, the intersections of gender with sexual orientation, race, class and other social variables are important to consider when analysing client problems, as these variables undoubtedly complicate the development and social functioning of adolescent females.

### Case Analysis: Applying Butler's Theories to Social Work Practice

As discussed, Butler's concepts fall short of suggestions for application to practice. I have argued that Judith Butler's concepts in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* can enrich the assessment and intervention strategies of social workers working with marginalised female youth. Therefore, the following case examples will be analysed using Butler's ideas as suggestions for practice, in order to translate her innovative ideas into work with marginalised adolescent female clients. The following cases are examples of how social workers can be presented with challenges related to the experience of operating on the margins of modern society, and how this can impact the psychosocial functioning of female adolescent clients.

#### Case One: "Tia"

Tia is a 20 year old White female college student who has sought counselling with the clinical social worker at the University for resolution for what she calls an "internal struggle" that has been plaguing her for as long as she can remember. Tia is an outgoing, bright young woman who is pursuing a career in biology. She comes from a middle-class, nuclear family, which she identifies as being quite a "traditional, play-by-the-rules type family." Tia's internal conflict surrounds her decision to come out to her parents as a lesbian. Tia has always struggled with this decision, as she believes her parents and extended family members would not support and accept her if she were to be honest with them. Tia is fearful of the backlash and possible ostracism she may receive from her family, especially her parents. Tia, as a result, has presented to her family what she refers to as a "false identity," as she has always hidden her sexual orientation to her parents. Tia

even attempted to bring boyfriends home to her parents during high school, to reduce any suspicion that she may be gay. As a result, Tia has always felt as though she was being “inauthentic” as she was constantly lying to her self and to others. As a result, Tia states that she battles with depression and low self-esteem, as she finds it difficult to lie to herself and those she loves.

#### Case Two: “Molly”

Molly is a 16 year old high school student. Molly’s parents have sought counselling from a Youth Services social worker as they are having trouble with their teenage daughter. Molly is an only child from an affluent family; both of her parents being successful professionals. Molly is biracial. Her father is Chinese-Canadian who immigrated from Hong Kong as a teenager. Her mother is Caucasian. Growing up, Molly’s parents have attempted to integrate both Chinese and Irish-Canadian customs and traditions, however they both admit that these activities ceased as Molly got older, and life “got busy.” This year Molly’s parents have noticed major changes in her appearance/dress, behaviour and interests. They have noticed that Molly is dressing more provocatively, and has become very focused on her outward appearance. Molly hangs around with girls her age, who are predominantly White. She spends a lot of time on the Internet, in chat rooms and other social networking sites, when she is not at the mall or watching television. With her parents’ busy schedules they are often unable to monitor her media consumption, and do not approve of the amount of time she spends engaging in these activities. Of noted concern is that her parents seem to think that Molly is ‘rejecting’ her Chinese heritage and refers to herself as White around her friends and on

her profile on her social networking site. She has dyed her black hair blonde and spends large amounts of time fixating on her image and clothing, although never seems satisfied with her appearance. Molly's parents finally decided to seek counselling as they report being shocked that Molly has expressed a desire to get cosmetic eye surgery to reduce the "Asian" appearance of her eyes. Molly's parents report that Molly isolates herself from her parents and seems to be avoiding them. They have asked for intervention in communicating with their daughter, who appears to be 'drifting' from them.

### Discussion

These young women are engaged in an ongoing process of interaction, and the negotiation of their personal selves within their broader social contexts. Butler (1993, 1999) would likely argue that these young women are being influenced by dominant discourse about how to perform acceptable, "intelligible" identities. According to Butler, acceptable, intelligible subjects are those that uphold dominant social norms, rules and regulations. Therefore, those considered outside of the dominant norm due to race, disability, or sexual orientation, are considered 'unintelligible' and are at risk for violence, ostracism and othering. Butler (1999) states that a life is only liveable, viable and considered legitimate if one circumscribes to the normative gender and identity scripts provided for them. If one deviates from the "norms determining viable subjectivity," then their lives will be unliveable, unintelligible, and they will not *matter* (Lloyd, 2007, p.33). Therefore, being female, lesbian, and of mixed racial heritage places these young women outside of the matrix of normativity and viability thus, rendering them unintelligible.



As noted in the cases, both young women are impacted by the regulatory discourse about what constitutes intelligibility and are both experiencing residual effects of pressure or constraint to perform their genders appropriately. Tia even goes so far as to act out an alternate identity, by performing 'straight,' out of fear of ostracism and violence should she present her unintelligible sexual orientation to the world. This act signifies Butler's concept that gender is performative in nature and that sexuality cannot simply be 'read' off of the body (Lloyd, p.55). It also highlights the concept of the interpellated subject, as one comes to occupy the identity in which they are hailed or coerced into. Therefore, Tia was able to perform a heterosexual identity via her performances in various contexts, thus highlighting Butler's argument that heteronormativity is always assumed and naturalized, and as a result pathologizes and delegitimizes other sexualities.

In Tia's case, she is obviously struggling with her sexuality and coming out as a lesbian as she has for years, suppressed her sexual orientation (desire) to conform and please others, and to avoid conflict and ostracism. Keefer and Reese (2002) argue that adolescence is a time when an individual experiences a "second individuation" of Oedipal drama, in which one gains consolidated notions about love, affection and sexuality. Butler's (1999) take on such Oedipal drama would likely describe Tia's inability to identify with the same sex love object, and the internalization of the taboo around homosexual desire. For lesbian adolescents, the trying on of sex roles and evolving sexual experiences differs greatly from their heterosexual counterparts. The individuation for lesbian adolescents is convoluted by the norm of heterosexuality, as discussed by Butler's critique of the Oedipal complex and the normalizing of

heterosexuality. Butler may further argue that Tia is unable to openly express her sexuality, as she operates in a context that values and rewards heterosexuality. This may be harmful to Tia, as she cannot be validated socially, as she is unable to openly express who she is. Constrained by regulatory discourse, and to avoid 'normative violence,' Tia continues to repress and hide her sexuality.

Molly's struggles appear to be around her ethnic identity, as she appears to be experimenting with performing "White," perhaps to gain the rewards and avoid the conflicts of being a person of mixed racial heritage. As minorities are often underrepresented in the mass media (abjected), or negatively represented and stereotyped in society, this can lead to negative internalizations of one's race (Henry & Tator, 2000). Once again, Butler's theories would lead us to assume that Molly is performing her current gender and racial identity under constraint, as a means to cope with internal conflict about her biracial ethnicity, to also avoid pain and social exclusion. Butler (1993) states, identities are performed and,

reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death, controlling and compelling the shape of the production (p.16).

Unfortunately, various coping mechanisms for marginalised youth include internalized racism or marginalization, assimilation, or withdrawal from the dominant culture, in order to deal with the conflicts about their differences (Ponderotto, Utsey & Pederson, 2006:63). Butler (1999) argues that we perform our genders under "constrained agency," in order to become accepted and reduce risk of shame and harm. Conversely, these young women are left with a choice of having to either perform the norm, or face

discrimination, oppression and possibly violence if they choose to perform an alternative and more internally congruent identity, and risk the effects that come from being outside of the dominant norm.

Therefore, in Tia's and Molly's cases they are displaying various coping mechanisms related to their personal struggles. Both girls appear to be performing dominant culture's expectations of what is 'normal', or intelligible, as we see in their various self-presentations. For Molly, she is coerced to conform to the dominant norm and displays this with her appearance and the performance of White, in order to gain social rewards. For Tia, she has been constrained by dominant social discourse about heteronormativity to conceal her sexual orientation out of fear of ostracism, discrimination and violence. Consequently, if one does not conform to the normative ideals, one is then "pathologised/othered," setting the path for internal conflict, depression and possibly low self-esteem (Butler, 1993, p.24).

These young women, both struggling with scaling the margins of the dominant paradigm, face great difficulty in the negotiation of their sense of difference within the dominant context. Both of these young women have unique social, cultural, economic and ethnic backgrounds, yet they all appear to have personal struggles related to be a young woman who is labelled as different or "unintelligible" in society (Butler, 1999). As adolescents in late modern society, despite their varying backgrounds, they both appear to be impacted by dominant discourses that influence their ability to become a viable subject.

### Subversion: Butler's Account of Social Action

When analysing the experiences of marginalised female youth in modern society, we can utilise Butler's concepts to understand how women are forced to perform intelligible genders and identities under social constraint, to escape the effects of normative violence, and social ostracism, in order to survive the adolescent years and beyond; however in social work, we must always consider how we can apply such theories and concepts to practice. As a call to action, Butler asks her readers to throw out gender labels, and deconstruct our ingrained notions of compulsory heterosexuality, as a means to dissolve gender and sexual hierarchies and disparities. Butler's (1999) concept of subversion, highlighted in *Gender Trouble*, is her call to social action for individuals and groups, to contest, confuse and reject heteronormativity and female and male categorization as natural and normal by refusing to buy into the norms prescribed to us.

Butler (1999) suggests that we use subversion to contest the pressures of our gender expectations, through acts that may not conform to the dominant expectations required of young women. This subversion could manifest in conscious coping patterns such as simply choosing to dress/act/socialise in a typically 'masculine fashion. Subversion may also manifest unconsciously through self-harm or sabotage. While subversion is the act of contesting social norms, it may or *may not* bring about positive personal or social change. As Lloyd (2007) summarises Butler,

when those practices are performed against the norm, at least one of two results can ensue: either a subversive denaturalization takes place where gender norms may be reconfigured in such a way as to contest and partially transform

heteronormativity; *or* the person who performs them is punished for behaving unnaturally (p.64).

It is this space between natural and contested acts that Butler supposes real social action may take place, albeit taking risks in the process. Additionally, Butler assumes that consciousness-raising around gender norms is where social action may be possible, as she believes that once one is “subjected to gender norms,” one is then able to resist and reject them (Lloyd, 2007, p.65). To highlight this, Butler also proposes the subversive act of drag.

Drag is an interesting concept that Butler uses to describe subversion of gender norms. Not to be taken entirely literally, the concept of drag can be understood as a denaturalization of feminine and masculine subjects, and honouring and performing in means that are true to our inherent nature, rather than what is expected of our genders, based on normative discourses, which are always based in heteronormativity. The use of drag in our everyday practice and interactions is meant to expose the imitativeness or performative nature of gender – or the parody of the performance.

An example of contesting the naturalised act of heterosexuality and the performance of rigid gender scripts was recently highlighted in a local story from an Elementary school in Kelowna, B.C, Canada. A movement of social action was created out of an experience of abjection in the form of bullying on the school ground. A young boy happened to be wearing a pink shirt and was tormented and accosted physically and verbally by his male peers, as the act of wearing pink was considered feminine to some, as it falls outside of the rigid gender script of masculine intelligibility. To contest the act of exclusion, the school created “Pink Shirt Day,” in which every student and teacher,

both male and female, wear pink to stand up against normative violence and create a culture of inclusion. Through Butler's lens, this act would be a consideration of denaturalization of the heteronormative regime that regulates what colour boys and girls can wear. It is through these acts of subversion that the larger social psyche can be transformed, by challenging the status quo and making room for varied existence of subjects.

The Pink Shirt Day is an example of how subversion and social action can be operationalized at a community level. However, as individuals also operate within a family system, it would be useful to consider intervention with the family as well, as normative discourse impacts both the family and the individual. Possibilities for family intervention in Tia's case may involve psycho-education and support to the family around the harmful effects of heteronormative discourse, and specifically how harmful attitudes about homosexuality are formed and reinforced in society. Using Butler's theory of gender identity by highlighting that gender, sex and desire are not always congruent, may help to normalise Tia's identity for her parents. Furthermore, discussing the detrimental effects of lying and concealing her sexual orientation out of fear of violence should be addressed, as Tia will need support in coming out to her family and community. Offering a safe space for Tia and her family to work out their struggles and to express themselves may be healing for both the client and family.

For Molly's family, they are assuming that by signifying herself as White that she may be 'rejecting' her Chinese heritage. Addressing normative discourse around race may be valuable to discuss with the client and family, to open up the conversation around Molly's behaviours and choices. Again, education around the pressure to conform to

dominant ideals may help Molly's parents in understanding why she is signifying herself in a certain way, under discursive constraint. As cultural tradition appears to be important for Molly's parents, perhaps a re-connection with Chinese cultural practices may encourage expression and honouring of a multifaceted racial identity for Molly.

Other subversive tactics that we can incorporate into our practice with youth is engaging in critical discussion of the mass media. As media can be a powerful source in which dominant discourse is disseminated, the deconstruction of media texts can be an effective response to deconstructing social bias, gender stereotypes, and the ideal images of men and women. Teaching youth critical skills to filter, analyse and deconstruct and denaturalise media imagery and discourses can be empowering tools that can encourage the use of subversion and contesting of oppressive norms. This clinical application of Butler's theory can complement traditional feminist practice principles of consciousness-raising techniques that often involve discussion and psycho-education about traditional gender role practices and their potential harm to women and other minority groups.

Finally, Butler's overall call to action is to bring "cultural legitimacy and intelligibility to those who are presently denied it" under the social laws of the heterosexual matrix and the masculine signifying economy (Lloyd, 2007, p.54). This quote sums up the congruency between Butler's theories and the overarching values of the social work profession. This concept compliments the social work practice of advocacy, contesting oppressive social policy, and giving voice and intelligibility for those who are most vulnerable in society.

### Application to Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice

While Butler suggests drag and subversion as applicable tactics to contest dominant social laws like heteronormativity and intelligible subjectivity, social work can also look to Butler to inform anti-oppressive social work practice with individuals, communities, and social policy. Anti-oppressive practice involves working to eliminate inequalities and social hierarchies that people interact in, to bring about personal and political change that benefits clients (Dominelli, 2002). In order to practice with an anti-oppressive lens, one must be able to view her client within the structural context that influences one's actions, and opportunities. Butler's concepts of intelligibility can assist us in understanding normative violence, as in the case of Matthew Shepherd, who was subjected to violent acts as he simply existed outside of the normative regime. Acts of personal violence can turn to political fuel to lobby for social change: for example, in human rights for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) individuals, and beyond. Furthermore, Butler's account of abjection is explanatory of the lack of recognition for gay and lesbian couples to be granted marital status in society. This exclusive social policy is another example of how personal and political rights are heavily influenced by longstanding social laws and taboos.

While the concept of subversion remains vague, this idea can be translated into social work practice by examining how we may hold on to our own prejudice and paradigms about sexuality, and entering our client relationships with an open mind, specifically when it comes to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Butler's theories and concepts are a useful critique of psycho-developmental theories, as it allows the



practitioner to re-evaluate and contest the heteronormative nature of traditional notions of psychosexual development and the Oedipal Complex.

Finally, to engage in critical and anti-oppressive practice the practitioner must be willing to throw out labels or explore the power that labels have in categorizing, devaluing and stereotyping individuals; in order to disrupt the interpellation of subjects, and create space for diversity and inclusion.

### Conclusion

As social workers working with marginalised female youth and beyond, we must always consider the relationship between social context and human development. For clinicians working with marginalised female youth and their families, one must be able to understand how one negotiates and responds to the contextual environment, especially when the context is influenced by dominant, normative discourse. For young women, the intersections between being female and 'different' can potentially create problems in both personal and social functioning. Therefore, expanding one's ecological analysis to include how one is impacted by dominant, regulatory discourse, can add to the understanding of the adolescent's presenting issues and responses to their environmental constraints. It is also important for clinicians to consider that young women that present with affective, behavioural, familial, or social dysfunction may be struggling with issues around identity, particularly if they are on the margins of dominant society due to race, sexual orientation and/or disability. For these youth, dominant discourses about gender, power and intelligibility, influence young women to manage their impressions, and present themselves in such a way that will give them the most rewards and bring them the

least amount of ostracism and violence. Consequently, this may involve identifying with the dominant culture, hiding one's sexual identity, and altering and changing one's appearance to fit into the dominant images presented in the media.

Therefore, innovative and inclusive theory that examines how these forces interact to impact the individual is essential to the social work practitioner. I chose the work of Judith Butler to add depth to the understanding of how dominant discourse around heteronormativity, performativity, and intelligible subjectivity can potentially impact the social functioning of marginalised female youth. Judith Butler's theories and concepts encourage us to look at how we are impacted by discourse, and how this normative discourse informs all of our social interactions, including our clinical work with clients. Butler's concept of gender performativity can help us to understand how we come to act out under constraint, the prescriptive rules set out by dominant society. She also helps us to conceptualise the link between the personal and social, by discussing the psychological and social implications of operating within a heteronormative regime. While Butler's concepts are merely introduced in these chapters, it is my hope that more of her work will be included and expanded on in social work practice and education in years to come, as her innovative theories compliment and uphold core social work values such as social justice, equality, and respect for diversity - key tenets of both her composition and the social work profession as a whole.

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## Concluding Chapter

### Summary of Thesis

This manuscript-based thesis examined the traditional conceptualization of identity and the experience of the female adolescent in modern society and introduced the work of Judith Butler to enhance this conceptualization. The initial chapter outlines and reviews the current social work literature and draws the conclusion that traditional notions of identity in among female youth tend to view identity as a central, agentic process, determined by free will and internal control, and that identity formation can be challenging for marginalised populations. It is argued in the first chapter that the traditional notion of identity ‘formation’ may not fully conceptualise the complex interaction and symbiosis between an individual and their environment.

In the second chapter, Judith Butler is introduced as a new voice for social work, and a new lens by which to view identity, structural influence and discourse in shaping the individual. I chose specific concepts from Judith Butler’s earlier works, *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993,) to enrich the conceptualization of the marginalised female adolescent in modern society. I argue that specific concepts such as the masculine signifying economy, gender performativity, intelligible subjectivity and normative violence, add depth to the understanding of how one comes to occupy the social position that is expected of them or by which they are hailed into. Butler introduces us to the idea that normative regulatory discourse about sexuality, gender, race and ability are naturalised in dominant society. She argues that as a result we come to act out and perform certain acceptable or intelligible identities based on normative

constraint. Under the threat of violence and ostracism, Butler states that one comes to repeatedly perform an identity that keeps up with social standards in order to avoid being marginalised and othered, or less commonly, act out subversively to challenge and denaturalize the status quo.

In the final chapter specific concepts of Butler's were applied clinically to cases of two female adolescents experiencing psychosocial problems and arguably, identity-related issues. This application to case material itself is innovative, as Butler's work has yet to be applied to clinical social work practice, as her theoretical work does not offer ideas for practice application, as she comes from a linguistic and philosophical point of view. The application of specific concepts like intelligibility, performativity, heteronormativity, subversion, and the constraint of normative violence to case material, highlights the value and importance of her work in understanding marginalization and the oppressive nature of discourse.

Finally, the thesis discusses the clinical and theoretical application of Butler's concepts to populations beyond the female adolescent. The application of such concepts as intelligible subjectivity and normative violence extends to other marginalised and oppressed populations as we can understand how longstanding social discourse affects not only personal experiences but social policy as well. The application of Butler's theories and concepts are highlighted in the final chapter not only in the cases presented, but in local and international stories about how abjection and normative violence set the tone for exclusion and oppression in our society. Overall, this thesis contributes to social work research by highlighting the applicability and relevance of Judith Butler's concepts to practice with specific populations.

## Discussion and Conclusions

While identity in adolescence remains a central concept in traditional social work literature, Judith Butler offers a critical stance on how social work and other disciplines have approached the concept of identity. Butler is critical of the notion that identity is an agentic construct, achievable through personal action and input from one's environment. Butler's stance on identity is that it is discursively produced, and we come to perform our identities based on the social pressure or normative discourse that governs society. The thesis has presented the argument that social workers can utilise Butler's theories and concepts when working with marginalised populations that operate in a context shaped by dominant, normative discourse. Judith Butler's perspective of the power of discourse and naturalisation of certain social practices highlights how individuals and larger society come to occupy, perform and reiterate subject positions.

The application of Butler's concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) to social work practice with female adolescents has proven to be useful in understanding how female youth may come to perform their identities in socially acceptable ways. Such performances can also be shaped by discourse in the mass media, and this theory can be complimented by theories of media that suggest that imagery and media messages can be suggestive and powerful. Certainly, the media does portray and uphold the norm, which can be considered another medium of dominant discourse. Furthermore, Butler suggests that the regulatory power of normative violence and the discourse around intelligible subjects informs one's performance and shapes the way one interacts in society. This power is exemplified in examples of hate crimes,



bullying, homophobia, racial prejudice, and violence against others, as highlighted in the Matthew Sheppard case, and the 'Pink Shirt' anti-bullying campaign.

Butler's ideas suggest that the regulatory nature of dominant discourse and its impact on the psyche can interrupt social justice and equality, and can compartmentalise, stereotype and harm individuals. Therefore, Butler's theories and concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) are a must read for the social work practitioner working with marginalised populations including female youth, as her ideas can help us to better understand the complex relationship between dominant social discourse and psychosocial problems.

Likely one of the most significant contributions that Butler has made in terms of relevance and applicability is Butler's account of 'intelligible subjects,' and the abjection or othering of unintelligible subjects. Butler clearly outlines the status quo of heterosexuality as the dominant norm in her texts, but the concepts of intelligibility transcends sexual orientation alone. The applicability of this concept can enrich the understanding of the experience of other marginalised populations that are oppressed by the dominant discursive regime. The concept of intelligibility can be applied to future social work research with ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) population, as those who do not fit into such social categories due to their gender, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic backgrounds, are marked off and "abjected" as per Butler (1993) as unviable, unintelligible subjects that cannot be recognised within the matrix of normalcy (p. 3). Consequently, it is argue that Butler's aim is to "give cultural legitimacy to those who are

presently denied it,” under dominant social laws (Lloyd, 2007, p. 54). This sentiment holds true to social work practice at its core.

### Research Significance

As highlighted throughout the thesis, Judith Butler’s ideas and concepts can provide theoretical depth and clinical significance to our work with marginalised populations. When considering the marginalised female adolescent, Butler’s ideas about gender identity, performativity and intelligibility provide a rich, innovative and critical lens by which to view and intervene with female adolescent clients. Furthermore, Butler’s work can add depth and richness to anti-oppressive social work practice as it considers how individuals come to occupy, perform and reify marginalised and dominant subject positions in society.

The case analyses provide the reader with a clear sense of how a social work practitioner can view client problems from Butler’s theoretical viewpoint. Subsequently, although Butler does not provide specifics for practice direction, the case analyses provide significant practice applicability in terms of guiding intervention strategies with the marginalised female adolescent clients presented. The application of Butler’s work has yet to be considered in the social work literature and thus, the thesis provides a foundation for practice applicability and future research possibilities in this vein.

### Strengths and Limitations of Research

As mentioned, Judith Butler’s voice has yet to be heard in mainstream social work literature, despite its relevance and applicability to social justice work with marginalised

populations. This thesis provides original analysis and practice suggestions for future consideration in the field. However, this work is merely an outline of the potential contributions that Judith Butler's large body of work can provide the social work profession.

Because of social work's sparse use of Butler's work, this undertaking of bringing Butler's work into the social work realm was limited to the presentation of a few selected concepts from Butler's earlier texts. In order to maintain specificity and practice applicability, I have left out a large body of Butler's work that may also have political and practical application to social work practice. It is my hope that interest may be generated so that more practicing social workers may begin to explore her large body of work, including *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

### Conclusion

In closing, the following research attempts to overview the current literature on female adolescent development and identity, while highlighting, contrasting and introducing specific concepts from Judith Butler, to enrich our understanding of the marginalised female adolescent in society. This introduction to Judith Butler's early work has shown to have theoretical and practical application in the field of social work. It is my hope that by introducing Butler in this thesis the reader may gain further understanding into how dominant discourse influences, shapes and constructs what is considered acceptable in society, and how this interactive process can impact the development and functioning of marginalised female youth and beyond.

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