

Performativity

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Glossary

Agency Is an ability of the subject to act. In other words, it is a capacity of both human and nonhuman subjects to produce a specific effect.

Discourse Refers to implicit, taken-for-granted, and often unspoken sets of ideas and ways of knowing that are imbued with power. As a set of ideas and ways of knowing, discourse gives meaning to written and spoken language.

Identity Is an articulation of one's social affiliation, both individually and as a group.

Materiality Refers to the objects and substances that constitute matter—human and nonhuman bodies, nature, elements, and things.

Representation Is a process of giving meaning to objects and things through linguistic signs and symbols.

Sociospatial practices Refer to activities such as walking, talking, driving, playing, and numerous other everyday practices that produce and reproduce both society and space.

Space In human geography is not a fixed and bounded physical location, but a set of complex and intertwined social relations that take place in, and shape, the physical dimensions of space. Some authors differentiate between space and place; they define place as a process of ascribing meaning to undifferentiated space. Others, however, use both terms interchangeably.

Spatiality Signifies an attribute or a feature that is related to space. In human geography, the term refers to the way space is implicated in social life.

Performativity in its broadest sense refers to the power of social and spatial practices to constitute subjects and objects. In other words, doings and sayings are performative when they construct the effects they purportedly merely name. For many scholars there is a difference between the terms “performance” and “performative,” although they are not mutually exclusive. While performances are generally roles that we stage and actively play, performativity on the other hand means producing effects, as opposed to merely reproducing. For example, we can think of gender as a series of performances that we play, such as being a mother, father, nurse, pilot, and so on, but thinking of gender as performative slightly differs. It means that gender is brought to being through means of talking, walking, dressing, and moving as forms of sociospatial and often ritualized practices. Saying, for instance, “It’s a girl!” when a baby is born (or even before birth through sonogram) does not simply state the reality of a person’s gender; the act of saying itself, situated appropriately in space and time, initiates the process of ascribing a gender identity. The saying brings the gender into being and continues to do so through its repeated rearticulations.

The concept of performativity was originally developed in the early 1960s by a linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin to argue that language functions powerfully as a form of social action that does not simply portray the world but enacts change in it. Austin gave many examples of performative utterances; saying, for instance, “You’re fired!” is a speech act that does not merely describe reality but which seeks to perform an effect in the world. Philosopher Judith Butler later famously developed the idea in the early 1990s in order to understand the construction of gender, specifically. Butler extended the notion of performativity beyond the speech act to include any form of embodied practice that works to consolidate the impression of a certain gender. Beyond Butler’s theorizing on gender, the theory of performativity has taken a multifaceted life of its own, with scholars drawing on a range of theorists including Gilles Deleuze, Karen Barad, Michel Callon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others. The field of social sciences and humanities, including the discipline of geography, variously and extensively engaged with thinking of performativity as a form of both discursive and material enactments that construct subjects and objects. Scholars widely applied performativity with differing purposes, interpretations, and implications; the following discussion maps the diversity of the field.

Geography and Performativity

The notion of performativity entered the field of Geography in the early 1990s as geographers were grappling with questions of representation as well as questions of social difference. Starting in the 1980s geographers began rethinking some of the core concepts of the discipline in order to move beyond analyses that consider places and/or spaces in terms of their “essences.” Instead, they wanted to understand how spaces and places are produced and represented as key objects of geographical inquiry. The

emerging “new cultural geography” sought to uncover and critically examine the relations of social production of space and the processes through which these power dynamics are hidden in way that make spaces and places appear self-evident and natural. They were also interested in the changing representations of place, and in moments of transformation and experimentation. Related to the question of the social production of space is the topic of social difference and how multiple axes of difference play out in space. As geographers started to move beyond essentialist notions that consider categories of difference as stable, fixed, and natural, they increasingly espoused nonessentialist accounts of difference that focus instead on the social construction of identity. With a long theoretical trajectory, the most important contributions to conceptualizing a nonessentialist identity came from feminist theorists. At the time, questions of political mobilizations of difference were one of the focal concerns for many feminists. Specifically, feminist theory and praxis had extended beyond the realm of “white liberal women” and to account for different standpoints coming from women of color, as well as perspectives from postcolonial and queer feminists. This multiplicity of different standpoints posed challenges to the viability of common, identity-based feminist politics.

It was at that juncture that philosopher Judith Butler published her theory of performativity in the books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* The guiding question that the books set out to answer is whether the subject of “women” is a necessary category for effective feminist politics. Introducing poststructuralist theory to feminist politics, Butler questioned the universality and stability of “women” and of women’s oppression, and argued that the system of representation produces the category of “women” as a political subject. Offering no escape from representational politics, Butler presented a critical genealogy of gender as a category of difference. She drew largely on the ideas of Foucault and to a lesser degree on Freud, Lacan, Irigaray, Wittig, and Derrida to develop her account of performativity. For her, gender is an effect of a system of signification based on regulatory mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality. Focusing on nonnormative sexual practices, she exposed the discourse of heteronormativity as a disciplining process that produces not only gender, but also the notion of sex, or the sexed body as a neutral biological substrate upon which gender is inscribed. In other words, for Butler there is no “recovering the body,” or getting back to the “true” feminine, as even the notion of original sexuality is a product of the system of signification. In that sense, and in its most radical form, Butler’s theory of gender performativity does more than say that gender is socially constructed. Rather her theory of gender denounces implied binaries between nature and culture, biology and society.

Going beyond accounts of gender and feminist politics, Butler’s theory of performativity came to be highly influential in considering broader questions about identity and subjectivity. Rather than regarding identity as an internal, psychological construct, something that a person has or comes to acquire, she considered identity as a form of behavior. This theoretical construction of identity as a series of enactments allowed her to push toward examining social powers that operate in embodying a particular notion of identity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. A central characteristic of Butler’s performativity is repetition, as acts and gestures that repeat over time *creating the effect* of an internal self. For her, the subject is not a stable coherent entity that causes behavior; rather the subject materializes through reiterative practices and naturalized gestures. Gender then becomes something a person does, rather than something that a person has or is, thus foregrounding relational and contingent notion of identity. Such performances are not simply freely chosen, conscious doings; rather they are modes of behaving that are ritualized and often unconscious. Situated within the larger “performative turn” in humanities and social sciences, Butler’s theory and its criticisms came to have a significant impact upon Geography’s own struggles with grasping the relationship between space and social difference, as well as ongoing debates in the discipline about the interconnections between materiality and representation. The notion of performativity has been largely incorporated in social and cultural geography with overlapping influences in the fields of economic geography, political geography and geopolitics, cartography, critical geographic information system (GIS), and others.

Identity and Space

In a landmark 1994 article David Bell, Jon Binnie, Julia Cream, and Gill Valentine employed Butler’s theory of performativity to explore nonnormative sexual identities—the hypermasculine “gay skinheads” and hyperfeminine “lipstick lesbians” as dissident sexual identities in the United Kingdom and the United States at the time. They were interested in how these transgressive practices construct lesbian and gay spaces in different and contradictory ways. The relationship between space and identity is of crucial consideration here. Authors used performativity to expose how gay and lesbian spaces are constructed, but also to challenge the notion of a presumably authentic heterosexual (straight) space. Several scholars later criticized this work for focusing on what “gay skinheads” and “lipstick lesbians” do, and how they appropriate straight space in ways that implied gay and lesbian identities exist prior to their performances, thus assuming that straight space exists prior to the transgressions.

Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose articulated this critique particularly well as they sought to emphasize the inherent instability of identities and spaces. They argued that the point is not to study how subjects play out different identities, but rather to explore how identities are conjured through repetitive enactments. In other words, a person does not do something because of their sexuality, but it is through reiterative practices that one acquires a sexuality identity; one becomes gay, lesbian, straight, etc. Second, Gregson and Rose argued we should understand that spaces are performative too. Specifically, in Butler’s initial writings on performativity she reduced space to a context in which the construction of gender occurs. For Gregson and Rose, space is not a passive stage upon which different gender, sexual, and other identities are performed. Rather social space is actively involved in performative practices. Reiterative practices constitute and are constituted by space and place. Therefore, straight space does not simply exist, but it is materialized and subverted as an effect of reiterative practices.

By emphasizing the performativity of space, geographers add historic and geographic contingency to Butler's earlier formulation of performativity, which did not differentiate or discriminate on those grounds. More than that, geographers stress the dynamic role of space as integral to the performative force of practice, as one of the most significant geographical contributions to understanding the performativity of identity. A compelling example of a spatial approach toward studying performativity is the work of geographer Mary Thomas. Her study focused on the practice of racially segregating students in the high school lunchroom of an American high school. She investigated the ways in which students encounter the segregated lunchroom, how they reconstruct this normative space through segregated sitting, and how through this repetitive practice, the students embody and enact racial difference. This repetition is more than a conscious choice; rather it often goes unnoticed and feels compelled. These repetitive naturalized practices are also processes of boundary making and spatial policing that are integral to the (re)production of racial differentiation. Thomas concluded that racial difference is not a cause but an outcome of the segregated lunchroom.

In addition to understanding processes of identity formation in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity (and others), performativity theory has also been used to understand the classed subject, or the subject of the economy, in the subfield of economic geography. An early use of performativity to interpret the subject of the economy was Linda McDowell and Gill Court's research, which investigated gendered performances and the spatiality of economic practices within the finance industry. Another strand of research within economic geography highlights the concept of economic performativity, particularly building upon the writings of economic sociologist Michel Callon. Performativity is used here to understand how the economy is processually deployed, and how markets are constructed through social relations, (expert and lay) discourses, and technologies. A central premise of economic performativity is that the economy does not have an external reality outside the practices through which it is conjured; the economy is not an independent, preexisting entity that economists and others simply aim to describe. Rather, different practices, discourses, and technologies bring the notion of economy into being. Furthermore, for economic geographers JK Gibson-Graham, thinking of economics as performative opened up the possibility of envisaging how economic spaces can be performed differently. JK Gibson-Graham argued there is a diversity of economic practices that we cannot understand only within reference to "capitalism." Instead, they used performativity to consider an assortment of different economic spaces and practices; doing so allowed them to account for alternative economies such as unpaid or alternatively paid wage labor, noncapitalist and alternative capitalist enterprises, as well as alternative market and nonmarket transactions. The work of JK Gibson-Graham thus further points to the relevance of using performativity as a lens to understand change and difference.

Spatial Politics and Agency

Performativity theory posits the inherent instability of identity—such as gender, sex, race, and class—so that it invariably ushers in questions of subversion, resistance, agency, and political action. Butler argued that scholars overvalue the human subject as the center of conscious, deliberate, and intentional political agency. For her, there is no fixed sovereign subject that acts, but rather she gives attention to the enactment of reiterative everyday practices. She emphasized that the political potential of such enactments lies in the inherent instability and incompleteness of performative acts. Therefore, both reinstatement and subversion of norms operate through the same process of repetitive practices; Butler conceived change as a variation of repetition. Her work brought up the notion of "performative slippage" as a moment when things are performed differently, and she used the performance of the "drag" as an example of such slippage and political potential of parody. For her, progressive feminist politics is predicated upon the radical possibility of compelled repetitions as subversive acts. Many scholars and activist alike have criticized Butler's views on political agency. For example, for geographer Lise Nelson, Butler's work allowed no space for conscious reflexivity and intentionality, or for imagining a subject that actively reappropriates and resists dominant discourses. She also argued that Butler's textual approach is ill-suited for geographers and other social scientists who focus on fieldwork theory and practice. Nelson highlights the importance of self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher, but also on the part of research participants themselves with their personal histories and specific historical-geographical embeddedness.

On the other hand, geographer Mitch Rose argued that reading intentionality or unintentionality into practices of resistance has always been problematic as intent is difficult to gauge. Moreover, framing social practices in terms of resistance paradoxically reinforces the system of power they seek to undermine. Rose claimed such an approach to resistance assumes a preestablished system of oppression upon which political agency is subsequently enacted. He used the performative framework to argue that what appears as a coherent and fixed system of power, such as patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and so on, is also a result of repetitive enactments. In that sense, both domination and resistance operate within the same performative framework. For Rose, this line of reasoning opened up the space to consider social and political relations in terms of potential, creativity, and multiplicity. Therefore, one does not have, more or less, political agency, rather agency is something that one does. Performative agency, in other words, is a constant process of both constructing and deconstructing social boundaries.

The field of political geography and geopolitics further employed performativity framework to deconstruct the notion of identity in political debate and international relations, such as in a study taken on by Merje Kuus. Kuus presented compelling arguments on how states become subjects and acquire an identity of their own in these debates. The case she analyzed is Estonia in Central Europe and the various features that Estonia acquires in dominant political discourses, ranging from attributes such as "European," to "anti-Russian," "multicultural," "nationalist," and others. She claimed that even though most scholars consider identity to be socially constructed and fluid, such framings continued to presuppose a coherent stable subject, such as the state, that assumes a particular identity. Besides considering questions of national identity and the formation of the nation-state itself, performativity has had

a significant impact in understanding the (geo)political processes of mapping, naming streets, and enacting territorial boundaries. Maps, for example, are not considered as stable objects that simply describe an independent external world; rather, maps are performative practices that actively engage in the very construction of that world. Furthermore, there is a growing body of geographic work that uses performativity to analyze the processes of securitization, policing, and the so-called “war on terror.” These analyses are conducted predominantly within Western European and US contexts. Here, scholars deploy security in processual terms, as a form of social activity. These researchers investigate both mundane and spectacular sociospatial practices of securitization and policing, in airports, city streets, state borders, and other sites, and how such performative practices produce the subjects and objects of security, danger, and threat. Last, geographers have recently turned to the performative accounts of peace as well. These studies foreground the intertwined relationship between the everyday and the geopolitical, focusing on everyday practices of peacemaking and the construction of plural geographies of peace.

Geographies of Embodiment and Matter

The problematic understanding of corporeality and matter is another important strand of critique toward Butler’s approach to performativity. Butler’s primary focus, in the two aforementioned major books on performativity, was on texts and textual analysis. Many scholars argued that such an approach foregrounds representations of people and things in a manner that renders passive people and things themselves. Butler did acknowledge a human body is not merely a fixed material composite. She took account of the instability of matter by focusing instead on the processes of materialization. She investigated these processes primarily in relation to the construction and deconstruction of sex or the sexed body as a natural and immutable object. However, in her works, the body is often rendered a target or a site where processes of gendering, racialization, and socialization are enacted upon. Instead, language is prioritized as the most important and dynamic site of power struggle and contestation. To that end, geographers Nigel Thrift and John-David Dewsbury critiqued geographic scholarship on performativity that focuses predominantly on representation and discourse in ways that are often unproductive, static, and “dead.” For Thrift and Dewsbury such scholarship conceded limited space for analysis of living bodies and bodily practices as vital, playful, creative, and excessive in their own right. Relying mostly on the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, they articulated a “nonrepresentational” approach to performativity focusing instead on moving bodies and ephemeral practices such as dance. Geographer Derek McCormack, for example, turned to Dance Movement Therapy to explore his own kinesthetic sensations of dance movement and the feelings that emerge between dancing bodies as they move through space. Instead of soliciting explanations and verbalizations of the meaning of particular practices that occur during dance therapy sessions, McCormack sought to stay authentic to the affective potentialities that arise in the encounter. Therefore, the focus becomes less on repetition and more on the fluidities of movement and the unfolding of events.

Granting too much power to language in research on performativity is also a critique articulated by feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad. She argued, however, that this is not an inherent feature of performativity; rather it has been often used in ways in which discourse becomes a starting and an ending point of all analysis. She developed a “posthumanist” take on performativity that seeks to account for the performative materialities of nonhuman bodies. Most importantly, she highlighted that repetitive performative practices are both material and discursive, and corporeal and representational at the same time, thus seeking to disrupt the persistent binaries that exist between them. Geographic work on the body has often stressed the co-constituted nature of corporeality. For example, Robyn Longhurst’s long-standing work on embodiment highlighted the way that pregnant bodies are shaped by normative discourses on motherhood and the way that bodies can destabilize discourses as well. Posthumanist performativity takes such analyses a step further to consider aspects of dynamic relationality between the body and its representation. An excellent example of such scholarship is geographer Rachel Colls’ work on the processes of materialization of fat bodies. Colls went beyond familiar representations of fat bodies in the media and elsewhere, providing an account that gives agency and vitality to the fat itself. She examined “what fat can do” as it folds and presses, becomes molded, and acquires a force and a momentum of its own. Fat, for Colls, is performative in its own right as it creates and modifies new embodied spatialities, thus exceeding the normative framework that constructs it. Finally, this work on the sensorial, tactile, and visceral qualities of matter advances thinking of emotions and affect as having performative force of their own. Performativity of emotions and affect rejects the notion that emotions are certain hidden internal experiences that need to be uncovered in order to reveal the workings of the “true” self and how one “really” thinks and feels. In other words, rather than considering emotions and affect as either individualized sentiments, or merely reflections of social relations, the performative framework allows the researcher to envisage emotions and affect as productive of the social world itself. Emotions and affect then become material-discursive processes through which the boundaries between subjects and objects, self and others, are continuously drawn and redrawn.

Performative Methodologies

Performativity has also been widely used as part of geographers’ methodological toolkit. The main premise of performativity is that the nature of subjectivity is fractured, unstable, and decentered. Thus the concept posits considerable challenges to understanding the positionality of the researcher as a knowledge producer and the practices of knowledge production itself. Feminist scholars have a long-standing tradition of questioning how knowledge is constructed and legitimized, exposing and interrogating the hegemonic patriarchal and masculine nature of knowledge production, especially within the academy. In order to unsettle such universalist,

all-knowing, and supposedly neutral claims to knowledge, feminist scholars argue that all knowledge is situated, meaning it is a product of specific circumstances. Hence, knowledge is always partial and, indeed, inherent in the creation and recreation of different power dynamics. Given this situatedness, as well as the politics of research as a form of knowledge production, feminist scholars call for increased reflexivity and disclosure of positionality with respect to different power relations within a research setting. As geographer Gillian Rose argued, however, performative and poststructural accounts of subjectivity undermine any notion of transparency and complete self-disclosure with regard to research reflexivity. Instead of attempting to map out and disclose one's distinct and fixed subject position (usually using several identity categories such as white, male, straight, and so on), Rose called for paying attention to how difference is constituted relationally and takes shape in the process of doing research. Therefore, research as a set of reiterative practices of interviewing, observing, analyzing, writing, and so on is performative in the sense that it produces subjects and objects of the research process. Research does not merely describe and analyze preexisting phenomena such as gender, race, and others; rather, it is involved in the very construction of the phenomena of gender and race themselves. Thinking of research as performative also invites the researcher, as JK Gibson-Graham state, to consider ethical questions as modes of enacting the world and field sites differently.

As a methodological framework, the concept of performativity has brought attention to the ebb and flow of daily life, to the patterns of doings and sayings that constitute the very stuff of social and political life. This way, performativity enriches and complements Geography's core concerns over issues of who does what, where, and with which effects. Moreover, the attention to research performativity has broadened the scope on ways of doing Geography, and social science, in general, and it inspired transformations in how researchers use methods to make claims about the world. In the past two decades, scholars have continuously experimented with new modes of gathering and interpreting data. For example, geographer Linda Lapiņa used the method of autoethnography to interrogate her own processes of "becoming" in relation to her field site, and the discomforts and constraints of experiencing multiple, fluid, and emergent subject positions with regard to nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and other processes. Expanding on queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's approach to performativity, Lapiņa advanced the field site not as a static location, but as a process through which different elements, including animals, things, people, technologies, buildings, and emotions, come together. This approach, thus, foregrounds the embodiment, materiality, and affectivity of fieldwork. Other methods informed by performativity include the rising interest in various exchanges between artists and geographers, either through art-science collaborations or through using the performance art itself as a research method. Performative methods also include diverse and imaginative academic writing strategies, ones that seek not to solidify the meaning of objects and practices but to embrace indeterminacy and creatively engage in the co-construction of the social.

Conclusion: New Directions in Performativity and Space

To conclude, the geographic scholarship on performativity is a diverse and broad endeavor. Within the performativity approach in Geography, researchers draw on a range of scholars and employ the concept of performativity for different purposes with often diverging and sometimes contradictory implications. On the one hand, we have scholars using performativity to investigate the reproduction of social norms, and on the other hand, performativity is used to envisage political transformations. Some researchers foreground speech acts while others highlight kinesthetic acts. Moreover, a performativity framework raises a series of questions and unresolved tensions: Is there a conscious agent that directs the performance? Where do we locate power? What about nonhuman agency?

New directions in the work on performativity are increasingly embracing these series of tensions that mark the concept. In other words, rather than trying to stabilize the meaning of performativity and set boundaries on the proper way of engaging with it, scholars find inspiration in its potentiality, dynamism, and indeterminacy. In Geography, there has been a tendency to construct separate, or even oppositional, approaches to performativity—as "representational" and "nonrepresentational." Recently, however, many scholars attempt to build bridges between different approaches to dismantle the rather obstinate, yet persistent, binaries between discourse and materiality in research on performativity.

Moreover, Butler's recent work has been gradually turning to issues of corporeality, affect, and emotions with respect to rethinking the notion of political performativity. Geographer Lise Nelson commented that Butler's recent writings signal an ontological shift in theorizing performativity, relative to her earlier aforementioned work. Here, Butler addressed issues of ethics and responsibility using an approach that highlights their affective and lived dimensions. She posited the notion of bodily vulnerability and ethics of grieving as the basis of progressive political transformations. By taking the performative beyond the linguistic domain, Butler expanded upon the performative potential of public space as she gave account of the recent spate of large protest movements, mostly in the United States and during the so-called "Arab Spring." The notion of performative space lies at the center of such political contestations, in contrast again to Butler's earlier largely aspatial writings.

Last, a geographic approach to performativity foregrounds social transformation and social stasis as both the unfolding and folding of space. Such spaces are simultaneously materially and discursively performed. With respect to questions of social difference, this means research is moving forward from investigating merely the representations of identity categories, such as race in media, film, and written documents, into paying a closer look at what happens, at the very unfolding of events and encounters between bodies and things that recreate the becoming of race. Scholars extend performative power beyond the speech act to include emotions, affect, body parts, materials, signs, texts, technologies, plant and animal life, and the processes through which these elements come together and dissociate to create an ontological effect, to stabilize meaning, and to enact change in the world.

See Also: Becoming; Discourse; Feminism/Feminist Geography; Feminist Methodologies; Gay Geographies; Identity Politics; Lesbian Geographies; Nature and Gender; Nature, Performing; Performance, Research as; Poststructuralism/Poststructuralist Geographies; Relationality; Sense of Place; Space and Spatiality; Subjectivity.

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Relevant Website

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