

Performativity
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Abstract

Performativity is an interdisciplinary theoretical concept that originates in the philosophy of language in the work of John L. Austin but has been more recently and influentially elaborated by feminist philosopher, Judith Butler. It can be understood as discursive practice that engenders or brings into being its very referent, including the embodied subject.

Performativity is an interdisciplinary theoretical concept that originates in the philosophy of language in the work of John L. Austin but has been more recently and influentially elaborated by feminist philosopher, Judith Butler. Austin (1962) is concerned with how words “do things.” He theorizes performative speech acts as utterances that do or enact the very things that they say, and distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary performatives. Illocutionary performatives are utterances that do what they say in and by being said, such as the pronouncement of marriage by a duly sanctioned subject. Perlocutionary performatives are utterances such as promises or warnings that do what they say if there are ‘felicitous’ intervening conditions.

Butler (1990, 1993, 1997, 2010) extends Austin’s notion of performativity beyond speech to refer to discursive acts, that is acts citing culturally intelligible and sedimented meanings and norms. She further reformulates performativity as a theory of the production of naturalized ontological effects that include the embodied subject. In this formulation, premised upon a Foucauldian view of power and discourse as constitutive, performativity is mundane discursive practice that engenders or brings into being its very referent. The power of a performative to do so lies in the accrued and sedimented power of its citationality. That is to say, a performative ‘works’ because it is a recitation and reiteration of discursive convention, not because it is subjectively intended or, as Pierre Bourdieu (1991) proposes in a brief critique of Austin (1962), because it is socially authorized – although it may also be, as in the example of a marriage which cannot be pronounced with binding social effects by simply anyone. To work, a performative must also be ongoing or repeated. Thus performativity is not to be conflated with performance as bounded, intentional, dramaturgical acts. It is ongoing discursive practice that engenders effects. Butler (2010) emphasizes that a performative may fail or misfire or produce unintended effects, however. Indeed she suggests that most performatives are perlocutionary, contingent on external conditions for their success.

This theoretical elaboration of performativity has radical implications for understanding the embodied subject and agency, as in Butler’s (1990) initial application of it to gender. She theorizes gender as a culturally compelled, performative stylization of the body. This means that it is in the iterative and embodied “doing of gender” that gender is constituted, and that gender is never ‘done’ in the sense of completed or achieved. That the gendered subject and body appear both prior to the doing of gender and abiding are performative ontological effects. According to this theoretical view, agency arises from the subject’s constitutive need to repeatedly enact itself. Agency is the capacity of the subject to repeat *differently*; to enact and signify its discursive constitution in new, unexpected and possibly subversive ways. Thus agency is understood as immanent to power, and the performative, agentic subject is understood as neither determined nor voluntaristic.

For the discipline of sociology a theory of performativity entails a rethinking of certain core concepts and epistemological, methodological and analytic assumptions. It also raises new

questions for empirical consideration. For example, an understanding of the subject as performatively constituted departs from longstanding sociological notions of the subject as gradually socialised, or as agentially rehearsing or performing socially-scripted roles. Instead it turns attention to how the subject is continuously made and remade in and through mundane discursive and embodied practice, and how this practice reiterates but possibly also interrupts culturally dominant norms of identity. Methodologically and analytically this entails a qualitative focus on practice and meanings in their various discursive, material, interactional and institutional contexts. It also entails consideration of how practice is (re)constitutive of its social contexts and of institutionalized power or, where it is resistant, how it does not escape power but constitutes new sites and deployments of it, such as potentially producing new identities, norms, institutions and stratifications.

Although now most widely applied to identity, to gender and sexuality especially, a theory of performativity has applications to other sociological questions and concerns. It has been developed in the fields of economic sociology and the sociology of science and technology, building on Michel Callon's insight (2007) that the discipline and technical tools of economics are performatively constitutive of "the economy." It can be applied to institutional speech acts, including the law, to consider how they do or do not reproduce social inequalities (e.g. Ahmed 2006; Butler 1997). A theory of performativity also has implications for research practice and its representations, pointing reflexive attention to the fact that the very "doing of research" contributes to the constitution of the things with which it is concerned.

SEE ALSO: Agency (and Intention); Discourse; Gender, the Body and; Poststructuralism.

References and Further Reading

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