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Identity is a Verb (which makes Inclusion a  
Methodological Challenge)

Joke Hermes

Inholland University, Netherlands

[j.c.hermes@uva.nl](mailto:j.c.hermes@uva.nl)

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Congratulations DiGeST on this ten-year anniversary! Thinking about research agendas, I find that decades as a unit of time make me hop scotch back several. For three decades now (cultural) citizenship has been my key concept of choice. In alignment with the core focus of this journal, I have tried to understand and employ 'inclusion' as a key part of the 'doing' of cultural citizenship: the way in which others – like me and unlike me –, use media culture (and especially popular entertainment from sports to TV drama, to games, to social media) to relate to what is going on in the world and to come to implicit and explicit definitions of what is best for the most of us. I do so with a strong investment in feminism, far more than in gender, as such. Don't get me wrong: gender is important, but sensitivity to power and structural inequality is more urgent. Dignity and respect for all matters more than individualizing definitions of core or essential selves. A paradox, obviously, as this is exactly what others may be invested in.

Inclusion, like gender, is not as straightforward a concept as it sounds. When inclusion is mentioned in policy and management discourse, it is less the friendly gesture it seems to be. When government institutions or corporations seek to 'include' groups, they inevitably also reassert hierarchical relations. The rhetoric of inviting 'others' in, and not 'wanting to exclude anyone', underlines the power to be able to do so. The key element to such invitations is to (be able to) identify others. To ascertain what is meant by 'inclusion' in professional contexts, it is therefore useful to turn identity into a verb. Who gets to identify whom, and who is identified? The very different people referred to as 'ordinary citizens' tend to welcome when grounds for exclusion are made clear alongside invitations to feel included. Inclusion comes with expectations. Exclusion is not always a bad thing (Van Hal, Hermes, Koch & Yilmaz 2019). It can mean you are 'off the hook', or that others do not necessarily have a say in e.g., your neighbourhood's car parking rules. Inclusive advertising is an easy example: it will still pertain to particular products, activities or services but it can move away from implied inclusions and exclusions and unclear expectations by portraying characters in its storytelling as engaged in multiple fields across care, paid jobs, leisure (Twohill 2019). To be 'someone who mothers' is different from being a mum. Diversity can be validated even when people are addressed through singular identities when these are linked to what people do rather than to what they are. It becomes difficult when, as 'target audiences', they are reduced to single markers or social roles that lack contexts of time and place. We simply (or not so simply) need to be mindful of whether inclusion is a term that carries and continues the privilege of being able to invite others in (or deny them access) or whether it is a term that prompts reflexivity about hurtful, demeaning and disempowering rather than contextually perfectly fine exclusions.

For the occasion of this roundtable, I would like to suggest we see inclusion as a complex methodological challenge for social and cultural research. After all, we regularly describe and label others. Imagine not asking people to tick a box but simply speak to how they identify. To accept that everybody defines who they are across the stories they have access to. That we understand shared storytelling as the basis of social practice rather than bow to bureaucratic definitions that capture single aspects and suggest that that is all we are. It will, I believe, allow us to understand strong emotions such as anger and anxiety much better. It will enable us to more easily recognize tensions, agendas and the paradoxicality of daily experience. In addition, it will aid the mapping exercises that ethnographers and cultural studies practitioners are so eminently equipped to do. It facilitates understanding and respect for intersectionality while avoiding to reduce diversity to mere differences or engaging in othering.

Inclusion as a methodological concept may well sound like a nightmare. Just imagine someone identifying as a person of color while they present as white. It will depend on context whether or not this can or should be addressed. Often such observational discrepancies do not impede the mapping of meaning-making through shared storytelling, although they might challenge a researcher to review their own definitions and be patient. Rapport builds over time in interviews. Insight and understanding can happen late in a

conversation. Positive opportunities to simply ask for elucidation usually present themselves. The important point here is that ultimately, there is never a necessary or essential relation between what informants say and their identities as we see them. As David Morley wrote a long time ago: it does not really matter whether I lie to you, even when lying I will use the stories and the language that are available to me (in Hermes 1993). People will wittingly and unwittingly lie for any number of reasons to researchers as well as to one another but that does not take us outside of the social contract when it comes to how we make sense of the world.

Granted, to accept this as a point of departure is easier when working in my nick of the humanities and the social sciences than in other fields. No one would fault cultural texts for 'lying', although they may be critically interrogated for how they represent the world. Likewise, while the shared stories mapped in analysis of interview material or in online discussions can be approached critically, researchers should, crucially, never demonize informants or online posters. What we say is not what we do, what we do is not necessarily who we are. This goes for others as much as it goes for academics themselves. The cultural studies' prerogative is thus that a certain degree of hope is always available because identities are not turned into prisons.

### **Undoing gender**

Of course, for others, identities might be strongholds. Even in such cases I would prefer to understand identity as a practice. To do so goes back to those decades I mentioned above. As an academic feminist, I attend to gender identity and representation, but I have never had a very deep personal investment in feeling a gendered person. For me, 'undoing gender' is where the personal meets the political. Initially, this made women's rights the real issue for me as well as, for instance, the right to gay marriage. Today, I would say trans rights – like all other rights – follow from a society allowing its members to self-define and to be accepted for who they feel they are. At stake in discussion of gender for me is not 'gender' as a social, a biological or a physical category; it is how power works through definitions and intersections of identity markers that involve but do not necessarily have to do with bodies.

It is during my lifetime that married women's legal rights to decide on something as simple as purchasing a washing machine was established formally. Before 1970, the so-called *bonus pater familias* or 'good housefather' principle – which comes from Roman right and was formalized in Napoleonic law in the early 19th century – allowed a husband to return anything his wife had bought to the seller who then had to reimburse him, no questions asked. Women simply were not deemed to be capable of acting with appropriate care. In recent years, lawmakers have sought to find less overtly heteronormatively gendered terms. The struggle for women's rights is ongoing however, e.g., when it comes to the gender pay gap. It continues to exist.

When women's rights are your starting point, focusing on gender can read like defeat. When the Dutch *Journal of Women's Studies* (*Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies* 1980) was renamed *Tijdschrift voor Gender Studies* in 1998, it bowed to changing times which included that 'women's studies' frightened away students. Of course, as a later editorial makes clear: masculinity and queer studies had also become important (Oldersma et al., 2020). Still, using 'gender' as a key term, at the end of the 1990s, was a gesture of pacification and reassurance. To me the title change signaled that the journal had lost its initial political engagement and the excitement of introducing the personal (being gendered as a woman) as political into the academy.

Gender has since become a re-politicized notion. For a long decade, 'gender studies' was synonymous with the avoidance of power as we fought for the recognition that living your life constrained by rules for womanhood or for how to be a man were and are very different things. Today that very difference between women and men has become ground for celebration by an uncanny alliance of conservatives and feminists who in different ways believe in magnifying a binary difference. As a political scientist turned cultural studies

scholar, I would argue that when masculinity and femininity are seen as deserving of our attention in similar ways, the political is emptied out of its progressive content. They are very different categories. Reducing the differences between masculinity and femininity to gender as a biological category, is even worse. It allows for the dividing of individuals into men and women. Descriptive categories are helpful for statistics and thus for governments and corporate enterprise. They can also turn normative on a dime and aid the persecution of those who define as non-binary and those who are transitioning or have transitioned.

From an intersectional perspective, turning to 'gender studies' fares even worse. Contrary to the nuance that an intersectional perspective affords, gender is now always meaningful, a given rather than an identity that is contextually built and rebuilt. Gender studies, from my perspective, made the insidious ways in which power relations insert themselves and form identities in and through regimes of representation harder to understand for newcomers to discussion of femininity (and masculinity). It has become more difficult to make clear that femininity and masculinity are not mirrored concepts. Or how all of us take on feminine and masculine traits regardless of our gender. Looking back, it feels portentous that academic feminists acquiesced in using gender as a key term, that we lost 'sex' as its biological counterpart (not as straightforward a concept as it might seem either) and are now caught in rearguard battles that are invested in exclusionary and absolutist definitions of difference. I much appreciate that in DiGeST, diversity precedes gender to allow us diverse genders and gender diversity, or any other permutations that allows demythologizing the idea that gender in general or anyone's gender in particular is a given.

**It may not always be clear what feminism is**

Refusing gender as a categorical identity inscription is to refuse the essentialism of radical feminism. Radical feminism, together with liberal and socialist feminism defined the feminist landscape of the 1970s and 80s (Van Zoonen 1994). In the early 1980s, I was involved in the Hilversum Women's House as an editor for its monthly newsletter. At some point we had decided to do an issue about pleasure and popular culture. Doing the lay-out for the cover, we decided on a 1950s pin-up picture of a woman. Clearly politically 'wrong' but also, perhaps, an image that we could re-appropriate and own by discussing what subversive options popular culture might offer us. This was the decade in which cultural studies discussed 'left populism' using the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. It combined left-wing politics with anti-elitist rhetoric that, among other things, defended popular culture which up till then had been looked down on as 'trash' and bad for people. Respect for common sense and everyday meaning making were two of its other defining characteristics (Hall 1980).

The newsletter was printed and distributed by another group who tended to lean to a more radical feminist viewpoint. Our cover shocked and deeply angered them. Without consultation they changed it to a Sandinista fighter holding an automatic weapon that almost dwarfed her. With no little irony phallic imagery was used to obliterate our apparently disgusting pleasure in a woman serving the patriarchy with her good looks. As among the radical feminist group, there were those who insisted on political lesbianism, looks were of course anathema in any case.

As a feminist I have continued to believe that understanding gender politically rather than in personal terms will serve us well - even though this viewpoint has landed me in many an unpleasantly fierce debate. Looking back, I see how Ien Ang and I argued in favour of gender as a partial identity in a range of identifications in 1991 (Ang & Hermes 1991). At various moments thereafter I reiterated that gender is best understood in a relativist way (in relation to a variety of contexts) rather than in absolute terms (as always, by definition, important and present as a means of identifying a person) (Hermes 1997). It speaks of deep misgivings rather than foresight that I had hoped to see the radical feminist position wane. History has shown the exact opposite.

For DiGeSt, I hope it will continue to see deconstructing the ideologization of gender as its foundational task. Gender is not something to be 'believed' in, neither is it always an important part of personhood or lived experience, which is what gender ideology would have us believe. It is a concept, one of the many tools we can use in academic research and in everyday life, to think about who we are. Cabral Grinspan and co-authors (2023) rightly point to how the recent vigor of anti-trans-feminism needs to be understood as counter-pressure to the weaponization of gender by conservative forces (2023, p.4). Gender has become a battleground that makes it less and less easy to isolate the moment of the political. In addition, the whole Special Issue this introduction is part of makes clear that there is neither a well-defined movement nor a unitary body of knowledge that buttresses the current task of a truly intersectional, politically sensitive feminism. To my understanding that task is to understand how the gendering of bodies as much as femininities is being tooled for conservative, anti-liberal forces that are built on interests rather than solidarities or, for that matter, respect and regard.

Stuart Hall offered useful reflection on this conundrum that those of us engaging with gender from a liberal left-wing perspective are facing. Arguing against essentialism in theorization and in political practice, he suggested we do need 'arbitrary closure' (Hall 1983). While the world keeps changing, we need to hold still from time to time to take stock, to think, to theorize and retheorize. Jennifer Daryl Slack explains really well:

Theory is thus a practice in a double sense: it is a formal conceptual tool as well as a practising or 'trying out' of a way of theorizing. In joining these two senses of practice, we commit to working with momentarily, temporarily 'objectified' theories, moments of 'arbitrary closure', recognizing that in the ongoing analysis of the concrete, theory must be challenged and revised. 'The only theory worth having,' Hall maintains, 'is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency' (Hall, 1992:280). Successful theorizing is not measured by exact theoretical fit but by the ability to work with our always inadequate theories to help us move understanding 'a little further on down the road'. A commitment to 'the process of theorizing' is characteristic of the project of cultural studies; it is 'the sign of a living body of thought, capable still of engaging and grasping something of the truth about new historical realities' (Hall, 1983, p.84) (in Slack 1996, p.114/5).

So, what do we need most, in a world that demands arbitrary closure? A light hand, it seems clear, when we apply, build and repurpose theory. We need to be relativists who dare to believe that it matters how we connect with others with whom we share this globe. The most important thing, to me as a feminist and an audience researcher, is to practice what David Scott (2017) has called 'receptive generosity' (p. 17). It is a radical version of listening well. In a series of letters to his friend Stuart Hall, written after Hall's death, he tells us that organic intellectuals who have been touched by Hall's essays and co-authored work can bring understanding and translation to the world, to smoothen the painful impact of colliding traditions (cf. Scott 2017; p. 132/3). In order to do so, he writes, we need to move beyond the conceit of omniscient Western knowledge production that thinks of itself as context-free, tradition-free and having unfettered access to the contexts of others (ibidem Scott).

This will, at times, result in a weird cocktail. Asking others how they identify is also to impose 'woke' jargon. Many people find it weird and want to know what I mean when I ask them. Mostly, though, they do not mind as it is also a lead-in to talking about politics and feeling worried or unrecognized. The trick is to build up to this part of the conversation and to respect critical answers. Ultimately, it is only a minor break with convention. Its importance is in stopping me effectively from assuming I know what anyone's identity is and who they feel they are. Generosity thus becomes an epistemological and a methodological means rather than an ontological given. It helps gaining access to the world across

perspectives and experiences. It opens research up to dialogue and exchange and better ways of mapping stories, practices and possibilities.

This takes me to my ongoing cultural citizenship research agenda. Its two building blocks refer to popular culture and to citizenship. The first is a shared domain that does not privilege the researcher (or not as much as many other fields that allow speakers to reflect on the world). It is more of a level playing field than many others in which fans and 'ordinary' viewers often have far more knowledge than this academic researcher. The second is to citizenship, the rights and obligations that we feel we have to one another which we relate to the nation-state but also to neighborhoods and other communities, whether material or virtual, we feel we belong to. In my work, cultural citizenship is the grid that structures belonging, identity-as-practice and practices of representation which can be reconstructed by attending to ongoing discussion about what is right and wrong in the world and how it could be a better place for most of us.

Researching diversity and gender from such a practice perspective can be done in a range of ways. I use comments on popular texts, whether television series, sports, the news or novels, to trace practices of identifying. This allows me to follow how identity categories are negotiated and representation is taken for granted or critiqued. It also allows me to not categorize people but to map ways of making meaning of the world. An example might be useful; hate speech seems to be ubiquitous these days and it suggests binary identity categories, often reproduced as part of rants and attacks. Interestingly, much more happens. Looking at popular culture, examples are manifold. Hate, it becomes clear, can be expressed through vicious personal attacks as much as via disdain. Attacking or vilifying television characters and the actors who play these roles is an unsavory practice that nonetheless also tells us about the kinds of fears and anxieties that make the rounds. Sorting through remarks about Skyler White, a female lead character in the series *Breaking Bad*, or through reactions to the first woman actor to play Doctor Who can be read as misogyny being alive and well. They can also, however, be read as indications of deep anxiety over a changing world. Notably, it is not just men and those using male identifying names who spout hatred, women and those using women's names do so too. Secondly, many commenters are savvy viewers who also attack the venerable institutions that are letting them down by changing what had been felt to be traditions overnight. Gender from this perspective becomes a stand-in for change, for lack of co-ownership, for not knowing what the world is turning into. I thus return to the importance of understanding identity as a political practice and to trans rights as a symbol, surely, of progress.

While my own solution might seem incongruous: to understand all identity and representation multiply through citizenship, it offers a smooth transition into discussion of gender and diversity as they are lived. Here is where I connect with DiGeSt. I love that the journal invites me to chew on gender and/in/as diversity. Hopping ahead another decade, I can only hope that gender will no longer be about distinctions that a conservative frame of reference could take as clear-cut, as trans has become a field of discursive excess.

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