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UNIVERSIDADES DE ANDALUCÍA

I. Artículos

Dichotomous representation of the sexgender system in public toilets. The andalusia case

Representación dicotómica del sistema sexogénero en los servicios públicos. El caso andaluz

Francisco Majuelos Martínez Juan Carlos Checa Olmos Ángeles Arjona Garrido Universidad de Almería

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ABSTRACT

This work shows how certain cultural elaborations about sex are constructed and reproduced in our societies, particularly the dichotomous hegemonic vision of sex-gender is spread in certain public spaces. Methods of Visual Anthropology were used; using digital photography to make an iconographic-iconological examination of the figures shown in WCs. Information was collected randomly in restaurants, bars and cafes in Andalusia (Spain). The conclusions show that these icons clearly reproduce the male/ female differentiating categories of sex-gender assignment present in our society, using cultural, body and role distribution attributes, regardless of their pictorial configuration, thematic content or technical complexity.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo muestra cómo se construyen y reproducen determinadas elaboraciones culturales sobre el sexo en nuestras sociedades, particularmente la visión dicotómica de sexo-género en determinados espacios públicos. Se emplearon métodos propios de la Antropología Visual; utilizando la fotografía digital para el examen iconográficoiconológico de las figuras que indican los WC. La información se recogió aleatoriamente en restaurantes, bares y cafeterías de Andalucía (España). Las conclusiones muestran que estos iconos reproducen las categorías diferenciadoras de asignación sexo-género presentes en nuestra sociedad, utilizando atributos culturales, corporales y de distribución de roles, con independencia de su configuración pictórica, contenido temático o complejidad técnica.

1. THE TWO-SEX MODEL AND ITS ICONIC REPRESENTATION. THEO-RETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (DRAE) [Royal Spanish Academy Dictionary] an icon is "a sign which has a relationship of similarity to the object represented" (Icono, 2020). It is a sign then, which on the contrary of others, such as linguistic signs in any spoken language, includes a certain reference to the object represented such that for comprehension of its most accurate meaning, one must turn to social conventions appropriate to the cultural context.

The analysis of images and icons has a doubtless tradition, especially in the field of art. No wonder Panofsky (1971) established three levels of iconological analysis for any artwork: The first is the pre-iconographic description, which would be the primary content of the artwork. Second, the iconographic analysis, which would deal with thematic content: images, stories, allegories, etc., and third, the iconographic interpretation, which would approach the intrinsic content of the artwork, the symbols, connecting it to its cultural contexts.

Therefore, looking at any picture involves first recognising the type of production, photographs, drawings, advertising, etc., as well as the message, and it is not surprising that Panofsky's procedure is framed in an analysis of the visual language as proposed by Acaso (2014): First visual product classification is necessary, and then its content and context, and finally, attention is given the statement of the final manifest and/or latent message.

Nevertheless, as Hockings et al. (2014) put it, semiotics can provide meaning to the significance of pictures, but their representation and social reflection depend on theories and tools (of anthropology, sociology, literature, linguistics or other disciplines) applied based on researcher experience, orientation and above all, purpose.

In our work, we turned to anthropology, as images have been present since its beginnings, both as a documentary element and recurrent interpretive material. Even more so, with time, images have been acquiring status and more attention as visual anthropology is configured as a discipline, incorporating experiences and elements of analysis from other areas of science and art: photography, cinema, linguistic analysis, etc.

More specifically, Banks (2010) suggested two lines of image analysis and study for the social sciences: the first would use visual materials made by the researcher himself as sources of documentation, such as illustrations to summarize data, etc., and the second would include studies using images produced or "used" by the agents who form part of the study themselves, as "the subjects of the study clearly have a social and personal relationship with the images" (Banks, 2010, p. 25). "Over the years, the idea of visual anthropology has expanded from the use of visual media as a way of studying culture and society to include, more controversially, the anthropology of visible cultural forms" (Hockings et al., 2014, p. 444).

In any case, the different anthropological currents have maintained a relationship with images, whether acquired or produced, according to their epistemological predispositions (Ardèvol and Muntañola, 2004), and are thus incorporated into the study of the culture, and in particular, to analysis of cultural representations and the imaginary¹.

Taking the above as a reference, we recognise icons in different public or semi-public establishments, such as bars, cafes, hotels, communications and transport centres, etc., which distribute users and clients to the toilets by sex-gender. These images are configured as clear and unmistakeable indicators based on representations of sex-gender, which represent the social imaginary which our cultural setting has on this duality. Or in other words, we consider these icons cultural products reflecting a certain meaning in an immediate social context.

Representation of the human body has existed since human prehistory. As evidence, among other manifestations, the profusion of "Venus" figures in the Palaeolithic Period, and its interpretation from Archaeology of Gender has related them to the way in which gender was institutionalised in those societies. In them, as Sanahuja (2002, p. 123) says: 'Apparently, there is no manifest social opposition between men and women based on culturally defined anatomical duality'.

^{1 &}quot;The imaginary is no more than the path along which the representation of the object allows itself to be assimilated and modelled by the driving imperatives of the subject, and in which, reciprocatively, as masterly shown by Piaget, the subjective representations are explained 'by previous accommodations of the subject' [Piaget 1950: 36] to the objective media" (Durand 2006: 44).

Or as suggested by Laqueur (1994, pp. 203-204), the one-sex model was profoundly involved in deep layers of medical thought originating in antiquity. Knowledge and progress in clinical anatomy and its illustration, far from weakening those positions, made representation of the body more and more a single flesh corporeal economy.

In reality, the two-sex schema manifested in the anatomy of man and woman is a phenomenon which is hardly three centuries old. 'In the late 17th century and into the 18th, science provided material substance, acceptable in terms of new epistemology, to the categories 'man' and 'woman', considered incommensurable, opposite biological sexes' (Laqueur, 1994, p. 265). Thus a paradigmatic change began to build up which would continue consolidating to our day and which reflects our current two-sex/two-gender model. The same author delves deeper into it when he affirms: "The dominant opinion, although in no way unanimous, since the 18th century had been that there were two stable opposite sexes, not subject to measurement, and that the political, economic and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are in some way based on those "facts" (Laqueur, 1994, p. 25).

According to Gayle Rubin, this is an essentialist conception because it considers sex as "a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical" (Rubin, 1989, p. 130). In that regard, we could say that we are faced with an essentialism that exports the reproductive scheme to the manifestations of sex and the multiple expressions of human sexuality, as well as its symbolic configurations.

Since anthropology theory assigns the body a relevant role (Turner, 1994), it is worth referring to this tradition in the struggle against essentialism. Mary Douglas, for example, reminds us of the social nature of the body by saying that "the physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society" (Douglas, 1988, p. 89).

However, the greatest challenge faced by essentialism comes from social constructivism, which, in various fields, has revealed the cultural and historical character of many aspects of social life without underestimating the biological constraints imposed by nature. This is the point that Rubin makes, as we have already seen above, in relation to sexuality. Along these same lines, Martha C. Nussbaum goes further by questioning the biologyculture opposition, which has succeeded in interpreting social relations by opposing sex (biological category) and gender (socially learned role, socially constructed category). For this author, the body has a social meaning that goes beyond biological determinations:

Genital organs, in short, do not interpret themselves; they do not announce to their bearers what they are and what is salient about them. On the other hand, they are the objects of cultural interpretation and representation from the time an infant is born; they figure in human experience only as mediated through many representations, and these representations interact in many ways with other representations of gender (Nussbam, 1999, p. 270).

This is reflected, for example, in the insistence of parents and doctors in categorizing newborns according to their external sexual organs, only accepting the binary option of male and female, etc.

Even though in our cultural setting new sexual identities are beginning to open up (Nebot-García et al, 2021; Nieto 2003a; Redacción *El HuffPost*, 2017), although not without considerable difficulties, persistence of the dichotomous male-female, man-woman, masculine-feminine, etc., view is seen to be socially and institutionally resistant. It is therefore not surprising that their ordinary visual expressions continue demonstrating this duality in a multitude of areas of our daily social life. Specifically, the subject of this study, images in the WCs in bars and cafes in Spanish cities.

2. METHODS AND DATA

Information was collected in 2015, using two strategies: One, visiting restaurants and bars in our personal leisure itineraries, and two, random selection of that type of establishment for the exclusive purpose of our research. Information was always recorded by digital photography. The fieldwork was done in the cities of Almeria, Seville and Granada (Andalusia, Spain).

After the pairs of icons were photographed, we continued the analysis as proposed by Panofski (1971) and Acaso (2011). For this, the images were classified by pictorial content, discarding icons with the same explicit representation and that did not show variety in their pictorial configuration, form, size, style, etc., because the owners had acquired them as standardized market production. Thus for this study, we concentrated our examination on 20 pairs of icons.

Later analysis consisted of identifying the different traits present in the pictures taken: anatomical attributes, gestures and postures of the persons represented, attire and headdress, and any other elements or indications, and attempting to establish the symbolic value of those iconographic elements from the viewpoint of gender assignment.

The most significant trait establishing the difference in gender in each pair of images was selected. We also found other significant elements in the icons that completed or reinforced the sexual assignment, since in each pair of images more than one characteristic could be found in which some differential marker could be recognized.

Finally, the analysis of gender assignments as expressed in our cultural context was completed from a constructivist perspective by placing each of the icons in them and decoding the symbolic value they represent and their function in the sex-gender system preponderant in our society.

3. RESULTS

Among the icons found were configurations of different materials, dimensions, design, etc. Two forms stand out above the rest: On one hand, standardized images consisting of plates – flat or in relief – or adhesive stuck on the doors or near the toilets (see Figure 1, 1). On the other, drawings or photographs made expressly for that establishment (see Figure 1, 2).

We sometimes found reproductions of works of art or historical or fictional characters from audio-visual productions (see Figure 1, 3).

The icons have a varied pictorial content. From objects such as hats, shoes, costume, etc., and more complicated scenic configurations with characters performing a certain activity, in a variety of poses or faces of persons with different attire, to more less simple silhouettes.

A series of traits came out of those twenty pairs of images, which clustered by content and frequency, led to five groups²: anatomical attri-

² This is not an airtight group, nor are the particularities of gender present always isolated. The boundaries traced were chosen to facilitate analysis.

butes, cultural attributes³, distinctive use of body, social roles and linguistic identification.



FIGURE 1

Photo by authors. 1

This having been said, what are the concrete traits making the differences for attribution to one category or the other in the sex-gender system? The first group refers to a multiplicity of traits culturally attributed differentially to men and women. This group of traits was the most numerous, since

3 We share the idea that airtightness of qualities pertaining to nature and culture must be seriously questioned and especially in studies related to gender. However, in this text we use the physical or anatomical and cultural traits in a differentiated way to clarify the description of data and ideas. it is the embellishment of the aspects which usually mark the difference of gender, especially in public spaces, and is indicative of certain roles.

In Figure 2, 1, the silhouette on the left shows a shape that could be considered ambiguous, but it is the other figure that marks the difference with a shape that may be attributed to a skirt and that would orient us toward the women's toilet. As a secondary trait, which reinforces the other, the figure which we attribute to the feminine figure shows the legs together – modesty – in contrast to those of the man who has them open – immodest.



FIGURE 2

Photo by authors.

Similarly, Figure 2, 2 again shows this article of clothing as a differentiating element, in this case reinforced by the differentiated representation of the male physique – wide shoulders – and the woman. And in this establishment, persons with physical disability are assigned to the same toilet as women without any icon for gender at all.

Sometimes, the icons represent different objects, which alone or from their shapes, are attributed separately to men and women: hat or high-heeled shoes (see Figure 2, 3). Even on the same object, the distinction is marked by what adorns or dresses some part of the body (see Figure 2, 4). Flowers on a hat and earrings for the women's toilet, hat with no ornamentation for men.

Other times, the figure combines accessories attributed to the man – hat and cane – and to the woman – skirt and parasol – which, although they may be from another time, still remain in the collective imaginary (see Figure 2, 5).

Or the differentiated representations of apparel are typical of a specific activity, as in Figure 2, 6, where the respective silhouettes of two dancers are portrayed. Again, disabled persons are directed to the women's toilet.

Sometimes such differences in apparel suggest differentiated roles when they include elements typical of an activity. Although that particular object may be used by either men or women, at least in other contexts or periods. Thus Figure 2, 7 shows stereotyped representations of a man and a woman by how they are dressed, where a man's briefcase and a woman's purse accentuate the stereotype even though women executives, for example, may well use a briefcase.

In the second group, we find the anatomical structure and or body attributes – strong shoulders, wide hips, body hair, etc., as differentiating elements as shown in Figure 3, 1. In this pair of figures we also observe as a secondary distinctive trait, the haircut, in a clear cultural use of body attributes to mark the difference.

In Figure 3, 2, in addition to the different physiques of the man and woman, the volume of the woman's bust is emphasized. In fact, as a secondary trait, as if there were any doubt, a linguistic sign reinforces the categories assigned.

However, these representations may be extremely stylised, reducing the iconic figure to a contrast between feminine curves to show the ladies' room, and straight lines in men to direct us toward the men's room (see Figure 3, 3). On this occasion, the indication is reinforced by language, reaffirming the categories.

FIGURE 3

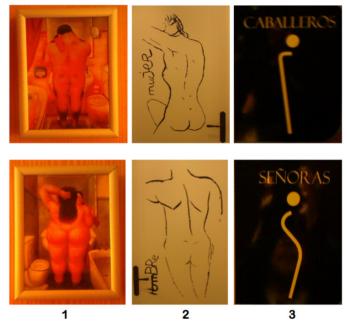


Photo by authors.

The third group of icons includes those in which the dichotomous expression is mainly manifested through culturally assigned social roles. Even though in certain population groups the differential assignment of such roles has become blurred or declined, what is determining is that those activities are usually recognisable for each of the two and only two sexes. Figure 4, 1 is an example of this dual character of gender assignment. Although the icon on the right appears a little ambiguous, the one on the left shows the figure lifting an object over its head, a traditional activity of women in a domestic environment, marking the difference from the man.

The dichotomy is even more obvious as expressed in the roles in Figure 4, 2. It seems clear that the assignment, housework for the woman and farm work for the man, are rooted in the traditional rural cultural context from which the characters represented come.

Something similar may be seen in Figure 4, 3. The icon on the left shows the legs of a man in what seems to be sports clothes up on the driver's

seat of a horse-drawn buggy, while the icon on the right shows the same part of the body of a woman, nude, with an insinuating gesture that she is undressing. It is clear that the differential trait is given by the icon assigning the women's toilet. The seductive woman and the sportsman represent opposite roles widely accepted in different cultural contexts, although somewhat more buffered in today's setting. It is not unnoticed that in this assignment the roles also show a differential use of the body by men and women: the woman's bare legs to seduce men.



FIGURE 4

Photo by authors.

The recourse to stereotyped representations, although it may well seem anachronistic in today's society, are present in a diversity of cultural expressions, such as cinema, television series, the works of famous artists, etc., revealing the evocative power of the image and its importance in reproduction of roles and archetypes. Thus they are perfectly recognizable in the current cultural setting.

The following classification is by cultural patterns set for the differentiated uses of the body for each sex-gender, especially, in different contexts of daily life. The different uses of the human anatomy are presented as related to certain physiological activities or posing in certain contexts. These uses and poses even appear associated to differential roles, such as certain housework opposed to work requiring physical strength, or dissimilar social descriptions for men and women.



FIGURE 5

Photo by authors.

Figure 5, 1 show the different ways traditionally assigned to men and women for urinating: standing – men – or seated – women. At the same time, as a secondary element, the different haircuts and hairdos may be observed for one icon or the other: Although the one on the right may be considered ambiguous, the one on the left shows a ponytail, usually worn by girls and therefore making the assignment unmistakeable.

Poses, different ways of wearing hair or stereotyped gestures are also used to distinguish and distribute persons by their sex and direct them differentially to one toilet or the other. Figure 5, 2 is a good example: the man appears with hands in pockets and leaning on one leg, a very position, while the woman is dynamic and in motion. They also wear their hair in different ways, his short, hers long. Moreover, the presence of her purse and feet simulating being raised on high-heeled shoes in the woman, accentuate those marks and differential recognition of the two genders.

The last group includes icons that contain the exclusive or at least the main way linguistic directions are given as a relevant differentiating element. As seen in Figure 6, 1, the dichotomous representation persists and persons with a disability are again directed to the women's toilet.

In Figure 6, 2 two icons are shown in which, along with words, the respective symbols publicized by the feminist movement in the second half of the 20th century are inserted to allude to one gender or the other in a conception of sex-gender system still anchored in a dichotomous representation.

To summarize, as observed, on no few occasions the same icon may be identified with traits pertaining to all or several of the five groups the images are organized in. Specifically, both those that show a differential cultural use of the body and those providing different gender roles also had some more or less emphasized distinctive cultural attribute.

Likewise, when the toilet was shared with persons with a disability, the indication associated it almost without exception with women in a clear correspondence of their physical-bodily imperatives with the cultural patterns attributed exclusively to women, as shown in Figures 2, 6 and 6, 1.

Finally, it should be mentioned that we found some single toilets for both sexes. However, in that case, the indication showed the dichotomy, indicating by means of different representations the only two user categories possible (see Figure 1, 1).



FIGURE 6

Photo by authors.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What is usually considered a daily activity, going to the toilet in certain contexts of our life, has a special cultural load. The images that guide us and facilitate the choice when we go to a public toilet are loaded with symbolic content. Not only do they direct the users' destination for their biological necessities, in what Lacan (2009) calls "urinary segregation" but to the

extent that they contain meanings strongly rooted in a good part of the population, reproduce those categories and oblige us to make choices that we propagate in other spaces and contexts. In others words, "public toilets fulfill a function of panopticism within the heteronormed sexuality device, dividing and sustaining categorical divisions that are as artificial as they are everyday" (Díaz, 2020, p. 231).

The expression in our cultural setting of gender, in the two-sex/twogender model, widely spread in Western Europe, is demonstrated in a multitude of spaces, activities and human productions. And it has serious disadvantages and consequences for those who do not fit that norm: "Anyone who does not fit into the dichotomous image of the two sexes, two genders, two orientations/sexual identities covers up or is pushed to the side, stigmatized and marginalized, making any "dissident" corporal existence into a set of socially inexistent morphologies" (Nieto 2003a, p. 96).

In spite of the amount of ethnographic evidence of the existence of more than two sexes in different regions around the globe (Nieto, 2003b), developed countries that recognize more than two genders are few. In recent years there has been some legal and/or governmental recognition of a third sex in countries such as Germany (Redacción *El HuffPost*, 2017), Australia, Nepal, the United States and India (Abundancia, 2013). Also, some institutions, especially school or university institutions, have made some recommendations to facilitate access for people of non-binary sex to public toilets in their respective institutions (Hermosilla, 2019; Ormazabal, 2017).

Thus in places such as University of the Basque Country (Spain) (see Figure 7, 1) or the University of Hawai'i (Figure 7, 2) the man/woman dichotomy has been overcome.

However, a large part of our societies remains resistant to that change. It should not be surprising then that some claim be made by groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersexual (LGBTI) persons, who in some countries petition authorities for their recognition as a sex separate from the two considered the norm, for indications for a third gender or single signing not distinguishing sex in public toilets (Redacción *Alerta Digital*, 2013), either by a simple written expression or an asexual icon (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 7



Sources: 1, Ormazabal (2017). 2, UH News (2016).

FIGURE 8



Source: UH News (2016).

Especially, when signs on toilets show us as an expression of that dichotomous view, and at the same time, a mechanism for its reproduction.

The icons on WCs guide us, assigning us to one of the two categories without prior consultation. And to do this, they use the organs of our anatomy, which are established as differential and absolute for each sex, of the stereotyped work of our corporeal nature, of the representation of different social roles assigned to each sex, and uses the different clothes we wear and the objects we use to cover ourselves and adorn our bodies, depending on the current hegemonic role. Finally, language is shown to be a privileged medium for that dual conception of gender, at least in the domain of the Spanish language. At the same time, we question our own gender and sex and make ourselves choose between the only two options in a dichotomous system clearly insufficient for societies where multiple gender identities are emerging. In brief, we join Martínez (2005, p. 110) in saving that "the paradium of the WC shows the distance between the binary gender scheme and the multiple experiences of gender there are (...). Public toilets are only for use by those who clearly adapt to one of the two categories, masculine or feminine "

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