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Non-Binary Gender Narratives On-line

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Changing times....

- Today - increasing numbers of people now identifying as NB (Richards et al. 2016)
- 'Third' and 'indeterminate' gender identities now legally recognised in a number of countries: (e.g. Australia, Germany, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, New Zealand and Thailand)
- Moves towards gaining legal recognition in UK

Popular culture and the media:

- Facebook: range of gender options for user profile pages, including range of NB identifications
- Increased media coverage of NB
- More visibility in media - but dominant focus on younger generations

- Celebrities (e.g. Jack Monroe, Miley Cyrus, Ruby Rose)
- BBC radio 4's 'Woman's Hour' Marley - 16 year old NB
- BBC Radio Scotland's 'Good Morning Scotland' (2015) two NB teenagers
- The Telegraph, Irish Times and opinion pieces in the Guardian - Articles on NB youth
- USA - how schools, colleges and universities are providing gender neutral accommodation and bathroom facilities NB and trans students

- Beemyn and Rankin (2011) also linked NB identities to ‘younger generations’ in their Transgender survey
- ‘While the older respondents felt limited to identifying themselves as cross-dressers or transsexuals ... the younger individuals envisioned and created a wide range of gender possibilities’.

(Beemyn & Rankin, 2016:3-4)

- HOWEVER: There are NB people of all ages – many contribute to blogs, forums and online resources

Research overview

Internet based study: Strong presence of Trans and NB communities online so a lot of data already out there

Advantage: unsolicited 'naturalistic' data - geared towards concerns, interests and politics of communities themselves

Forums and Blogs - More in-depth interaction than social media

Collected posts and threads from non-private, publicly accessible blogs and forums (between Dec 2014 and Dec 2015)

OVERALL: ten blogs - & five forums
Materials analysed using Nvivo
Forums, blogs and posters anonymised

Research questions:

1. How are NB identities being experienced, understood, and presented?
2. Does being NB have different meanings, involve different kinds of identity journeys and everyday life experience for younger (teens to 29) and older (e.g. 30 – 70s) generations?
3. What stories are being told about how NB identities are being negotiated and managed with others in a range of contexts and relationships – are NB identities being socially established?

Micro- level sociological approach- creation of meaning between individuals at level of social interaction

Narrative approach to identity - identities ‘made up through making a story out of a life’ – not fabricated, but rather ‘creatively produced’ in relation to social context, social interaction with others, and through ‘various raw materials available – notably, memories, understandings, experiences and interpretations’
Steph Lawler (2014: 24)

Doing, undoing and redoing gender

- ‘Doing gender’ approach - originally devised by West and Zimmerman (1987) - continuing to be developed (e.g. Hollander, 2012)
- Early ethnomethodological approach over emphasised ongoing reproduction of gender conformity in everyday interaction
- Recent work has shed light on how gender might be redone or undone through interaction in range of peoples lives (Connell 2010)
- Recently discussions highlight need to consider actor understanding and self construction, as well as interaction with others (Hollander, 2012)
- Useful approach for understanding NB experience and also for NB people themselves to consider interactive practices

One theme:

Self recognition, experience and understanding

Stories self recognition tend to vary according to generation - so younger and older generation stories presented separately

Younger Generation posters (teens – 29): Stories of Self Recognition, Experience and understanding:

Early research highlighting NB experience - narratives of moving away from birth gender 'not what you are, but what you're not' – transition to 'different kind of man/woman'

Today – online narratives show move **towards** a desired alternative identity, rather than away from birth gender

Achieved through development/use of new terms and labels:

Attract bad press – frivolous identity options

But valuable as creating new stories/discourse and making NB experience knowable and understandable. Positive:

Agender
Bigender
Demigender
Genderfluid
Gender neutral
Neutrois
Genderqueer
Androgyne

1. Enables exploration of the self and identity:

“I sort of started out by thinking gender neutral when I didn't know much about any of the terms and identities that existed ... then a little over half a year ago I came across the term gender fluid ... I felt it fit me quite well” (Blog A, Mert)

2. Facilitates the exercise of agency and self-determination:

“I might be genderfluid ... I’ve been questioning my gender since I was about 12/13, since that’s when I learnt there are more than just two genders” (Blog C, Derah)

3. Create a sense of belonging and community: share experience and ideas through forum discussion threads and introductions:

“I didn’t run into the word “genderqueer” until I was about 20. Once I did it was like this instantaneous recognition and rightness: there was a reason neither of the standard options fit, **I wasn’t alone, there were other people like me, there were words to describe me**” (Forum A, Carlin)

- Labels used often multiple or shifting. They span across de-gendering, gender pluralism, gender expansion models of understanding:

“I use trans, non-binary, queer and tomboy in **various contexts** to define myself as needed” (Forum B, Brooks)

I can describe myself in several ways: I’m a non-girl; an androgyne; a feminine boy; an FtA or even FtM; queer or genderqueer or transmasculine.” (Blog A, Gray)

I don’t see myself as a third, non-feminine, non-masculine, neutral gender, **to me not feeling feminine or masculine means not having a gender at all, thus, genderless**” (Blog B, Kit)

Younger generation – ‘weak constructionist’ narratives of NB. E.g. Labels and their meanings resources that help create stories of alternative and shifting identities – undoing and redoing gender, **but against an ‘essential’ NB self**

Older Generation posters (30+): Stories of Self Recognition, Experience and understanding

- Different journey toward personal recognition - through reconstruction of past histories, experience of bodily limitations
- None considered they were limited to self-identify as cross-dressers or transsexuals (as Beemyn and Rankin 2016, 3-4)
- Two narrative types:
- **Narrative of NB by design** - Many initially self-identified/assumed/suspected they were binary trans
- but constructed alternative identity or way of thinking in the process.

“I am a gender fluid MAAB ... I have fundamentally shifted in my understanding of my gender and in my journey. Along the way I realised that I was not MTF, managed to keep my marriage, family, friends and career together while progressively moving towards a more nuanced and honest understanding and presentation of me” (Forum B, Rayde)

Understanding and connecting with my soul required me to unpack years of socialisation and assumptions then reassemble myself, piece by piece... In doing this I realised that I had access to all of the gendered qualities and experiences that I desired if I let go of binary thinking and an illogical need to conform or fit with the expectations of others. ... I started down the path buying into the popular story line of binary transformation, however I put down this book when I realised that I could and should write my own story. (Forum B, Teal)

- Narrative of NB by 'default' – e.g. unable to 'pass' or not wanting to deny history
- Coming to identify as non-binary - a more 'honest' and 'authentic life'

“I find that **I want my social contacts to be aware and to acknowledge that I used to live as a man and to understand those experiences.** This also contrasts from what I hear from a lot of binary trans women who seem to need to leave the whole male experience behind them” (Forum B, Switch)

“Eventually it became very clear to me that to seek an authentic life is to recognize my own humanity - all of it. **For decades I denied being a woman, now that I live in the body I so crave, I should discard and deny all I was before? ...To live authentically is to accept conditions as they are**” (Forum B, Krupe)

- Construction of 'authenticity' - source of tension between older NB and binary trans people - continuing debates in the 1990s on being 'out' and 'passing' – but legitimises need for self determination and enables agency
- Older generation use various labels for themselves but do not spend time negotiating their 'fit'.
- Range of identity terms seen as confusing, unhelpful in aiding understanding

Multiple terms might 'fit' - but also can assume fixity

The trouble with these terms is that so many of us fit none, some or other terms. I guess that is why I like FTX, MTX or M2ME. (Forum B, Storm)

Labels are just labels and **we may identify one way one day and another way the next.** Confused? Right now I'm not. **I am me.** (Forum B, Zia)

Can create sense of outsidersness

"Sometimes I feel like sort of an imposter among non-binaries. ... **For me, the non-binary part is more of a political statement and declaration of gender freedom than part of my actual identity**" (Forum B, Lakin)

- Older generation – 'strong constructionist' narratives of NB . E.g.
- A rejection of the gender binary as being able to contain/express their 'truths' (pre, during or post binary transition), and a conscious 're-design' and 'reconstruction' of the self (self determination) – undoing and redoing of gender. But rejection of labels in this process.

Increasing visibility and activism of younger NB people enables them to understand and present their NB identities in more positive ways - offers the potential of improved futures

"the young generation will be open to [our] presentations that are nonconforming, for nonconforming is in sync with their young paradynes. It will be "cool". It will be seen as courageous and daring. Not stupid and weird" (Forum B, Rane)

Conclusion

- Blogs and forums provide insight into the concerns and daily experiences of being NB (across all ages). Are both sources of information AND resources for people to use to explore and establish their identities – both online and offline
- Stories being shared suggest binary understandings of gender are facing change, – development of language and broader NB ‘identity frameworks’ helping NB become a more socially viable identity
- Generational differences in NB identity narratives, but both highlight agency, self determination and an undoing and redoing of gender across de-gendering, gender pluralism, and gender expansion models of understanding
- Exchange of stories and interaction online - helping people explore and create alternative gender identities, gain confidence and become more assertive

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