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Non-binary gender identities: challenges and opportunities for re-making gender

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Background: Social context

- increasing visibility of NB e.g.

- Legal recognition in number of countries (e.g: Australia, Germany, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, New Zealand and Thailand).

- Facebook – over 50 gender options for profile pages

- UK & US - some organisations introduced gender neutral titles (e.g. HSBC Bank)

- Change in customer service approaches – e.g. Transport for London has scrapped ‘ladies and gentleman’ announcements

- Changing climate – structural, cultural and discursive levels - but social research on NB people’s experience in this current context is slim
Background: Academic research

- NB identities - particular interest within queer and transgender studies since 1990s. Debates explored gender diversity in trans communities, specifically:
  - how trans and NB experience may challenge existing binaries of gender and sexuality
  - NB identities largely seen as existing (felt, private identities) but impossible to live out in everyday life due to society’s binary gender structure, e.g. Davidmann (2010)
The research

- **Aim of current research**: to assess past claim of impossibility in the current social context of increasing visibility and moves towards formal recognition.

- What are the everyday challenges and opportunities for NB people in establishing NB identities? How are NB identities being lived and established in everyday life?

- More favourable environment being created by policy and legislative changes - but a need for broader social awareness and understanding to bring about social change.

- Aim to contribute towards raising awareness of NB identities within sociology and social sciences.

- Aim to contribute towards the growing body of knowledge that can used by NB and trans activists and also policy makers in bringing about change.
Methods:

• Online Study: personal narratives of NB people found on Internet blogs and forums – accounts of NB identity and everyday experience (10 blogs, 4 forums)

• Blogs and forums found through Google searches

• Advantages - lots of data already there, data is ‘community’ rather than researcher driven

• All data is publicly available

• Data being analysed thematically using Nvivo
Research Framework/approach: Doing Gender

• ‘Doing Gender’ approach (based in ‘ethnomethodology’ - everyday production of social order) - originally devised by West and Zimmerman (1987)

• Early approaches explored maintenance of hetero gender social order. E.g. gender conformity and gender differences in line with hetero norms

• Recent work concerned with how gender might be ‘redone’ or ‘undone’ in range of people’s lives (Walzer, 2008; Hollander, 2012)

• Approach taken up in trans studies - but small numbers of NB people in research samples and focus largely confined to:
• Relationships in the workplace

• Ways cisgender people repatriate NB and trans people into the gender binary (Schilt & Connel, 2007; Schilt and Westbrook (2009); Westbrook and Schilt, 2013)

• In these studies trans and NB people’s agency is under emphasised

• E.g. little attention given to trans and NB people’s management and/or resistance of these and other social constraints – for example, in ‘undoing’ or ‘redoing’ gender

• Connell’s (2010) concept of ‘doing transgender’ in their study of trans people at work has moved towards overcoming this:
The concept ‘doing transgender’ captures trans people’s unique management of situation conduct ... Doing transgender may operate more like ‘doing gender’ or like ‘undoing/redoing gender’ depending on the context” (Connell, 2010, p. 50).

But instances where gender is done, redone and undone are not individually explored and concept of ‘doing transgender’ does not differentiate between these process.

Further Connell does not engage with lack of consistency in meaning/application of the concepts ‘doing’, ‘redoing’ and ‘undoing’ gender across studies that adopt a doing gender framework/approach.

Current research – sharpening the concepts ‘doing’, ‘undoing’ and ‘redoing gender’ - a fourth, ‘remaking gender’ is being developed.
Study findings: brief overview

• Everyday life experience of NB people highlight that there is considerable movement across ‘doing’, ‘redoing’, ‘undoing’ and ‘remaking’ gender processes

• The processes can be experienced both negatively and positively and occur across a variety of social and interpersonal contexts

• NB encounter varying degrees of constraint but also exercise considerable agency in daily life

• Significant factors involved so far identified are:
  • relationships – friends, partners, families
  • life stage, norms guiding social interaction, and social etiquette
Doing Gender – assumption NB person is cisgender and where this is not challenged by the NB person

• Doing gender involves misgendering/ misrecognition by others who are unable to see gender beyond the binary. Being seen as cisgender is sometimes unchallenged by NB people:

• to avoid hate crime and to protect loved ones and families from unwanted attention/behaviour from others
• to prevent loss of relationships with others
• Due to normative interaction and etiquette – not all people and situations the same, e.g. rules around appropriateness of disclosure
• emotional labour – it’s hard work to continually inform and educate others
Redoing Gender – where existing cisgender categories are expanded

• Examples: as people are unable to see beyond existing gender binary, NB people seen as as feminine ‘men’ or masculine ‘women’

• Sometimes gender non-conformity seen by others as expressions of being lesbian or gay

• or as signaling ‘eccentricity’ or ‘oddness’

• Redoing gender – sometimes seen by NB people as safer option to avoid violence and keep relationships
Undoing gender - when NB people ‘come out’ to others or where seen as being beyond the boundaries for cisgender categories

• **Favourable** - NB people ‘coming out’ to others, responding to genuine friendly enquiries and educating others about their identities.

• **Negative** – hate crime, e.g:
  • being bullied, harassed or subject to violence
  • receiving offensive comments and remarks

• Unwelcome actions and behaviour can also include being positioned by others as an object of curiosity – e.g:
  • being stared at and being asked inappropriate questions about body parts
Remaking gender - mixed gendered/ungendered selves enacted/accepted

• Tends to occur mostly in context of intimate relationships, close friendships and families

• Involves - gaining respect for identity e.g. being called name of choice, referred to in chosen pronoun, absence of pressure to conform to gender binary in behaviour or appearance

• With unknown others: use of gender neutral pronouns; adoption of gender neutral title – new norms are attempted to be established

• Wearing a visible NB identity statement badge or clear symbol (which attracts people’s attention and generates curiosity).

• Appearance – non-conforming gender appearance, a complicated feature of being NB and not adopted by all
Concluding Comments

- Approach draws attention to how identities are more than individually ‘felt’

- Facilitates a social, interactive approach - enables a focus on both agency and the social constraints/obstacles involved in establishing NB identities in everyday life

- Rather than the catch all term ‘doing transgender’ - ‘doing’, ‘undoing’, ‘redoing’ and ‘remaking’ gender are useful concepts to:
  - explore the everyday challenges and opportunities NB people face in establishing their identities
  - ways in which gender norms are negotiated, managed and ‘re-made’ in everyday social practices – helpful in creating positive awareness and change
References

- Kristen Schilt and Catherine Connell "Gender, Work and Organization. Vol. 14 No. 6 November 2007 Do Workplace Gender Transitions Make Gender Trouble?