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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 be 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 & Connell, 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 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 every day social practices – helpful in creating positive awareness and change

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