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Remaking Gender: Non-binary gender identities

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Inspiring tomorrow's professionals



Background

- Non-binary gender identities (NB): people who do not feel male or female, feel a mix of both, or feel they have no gender at all.
- Genderqueer, gender neutral, gender fluid, neutrois, non-gender, agender, bi-gender and more.
- Visibility e.g.
- Legal recognition of NB in number of countries (e.g: Australia, Germany, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, New Zealand and Thailand).
- UK & US some organisations introduced gender neutral titles (e.g. HSBC Bank - Mx, M and Misc)
- Facebook – over 50 gender options for profile pages

Academic research

- Lack of social research of NB identities in current climate
- NB identities –within queer and transgender studies since 1990s. Debates explored gender diversity in trans communities, specifically:
 - how NB experience may challenge existing binaries of gender and sexuality
 - NB identities largely understood as impossible to live out in everyday life, e.g. Davidman (2010)
- Definition of NB – sometimes different to NB currently being articulated.

Present Study: How are NB identities being lived and established in everyday life?

- Aim: to assess previous claims of impossibility in current context of more visible NB identities
- Internet Study: Personal narratives of NB people found on Internet blogs and forums – meaning of NB identity and everyday experience (10 blogs, 4 forums)
- Data is publicly available and analysed thematically using Nvivo

Framework/approach: Doing Gender

- ‘Doing Gender’ approach – based in ethnomethodology - originally devised by West and Zimmerman (1987) and continuing to be developed (Hollander, 2012; Connell 2010)
- Recent work concerned to shed light on how gender might be redone or undone in range of people’s lives (Walzer, 2008; Hollander, 2012)
- Doing Gender approach taken up in trans studies – but focus largely concerned with ways that NB and trans people are repatriated into the gender binary by those around them (Schilt & Connel, 2007; Schilt and Westbrook (2009); Westbrook and Schilt, 2013)
- Focus mainly on the workplace

Key Issues in taking the framework forward

- Queer focus - over emphasis of agency involved in trans people's gender constructions
- Doing gender focus - under emphasis of trans agency— emphasis placed on how trans people's gender is shaped/constructed by others
- Conceptual elements – sex, sex category and gender – based on cis-gender (non-trans) assumption of alignment
- Lack of consistency in meaning/application of 'doing', 'redoing' and 'undoing' gender concepts

Is the 'Doing gender' framework useful? Study findings

- Useful as it provides focus on everyday processes at the micro level
- In exploring NB experiences the analysis is sharpening the concepts 'doing', 'undoing' and 'redoing gender' - a fourth, 'remaking gender' is being developed.
- NB people are moving in and out of doing, redoing, undoing and remaking gender across a variety of social and interpersonal contexts - varying degrees of constraint and enablement upon their agency
- Significant factors so far identified are:
 - relationship – friends, partners, families
 - life stage, norms guiding social interaction, 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 – as they are often unable to see gender beyond the binary.
- Being seen as cisgender is sometimes unchallenged by NB people :
 - to avoid hate crime
 - to protect loved ones and families from unwanted attention/behaviour from others (e.g.stigma by association)
 - to prevent loss of relationships with others
 - Due to social norms of interaction

Redoing Gender –where existing cisgender categories are expanded

- Examples: NB people seen as as feminine ‘men’ or masculine ‘women’, as people are unable to see beyond existing gender binary
- Sometimes gender non-conformity seen by others as expressions of being lesbian or gay
- Redoing gender - safe option to avoid unwanted attention
- Way of reducing gender dysphoria

Undoing gender - 'coming out' to others – or seen as beyond socially accepted 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 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 – establishing ‘a new normal’
- Wearing a NB gender badge or symbol (which attracts people’s attention and generates curiosity)

Conclusions

- Doing gender framework useful in guiding focus on everyday gendering/degendering processes at the micro level
- Study is engaged in revising Doing Gender framework for use in researching NB peoples lives (and to contribute towards broader discussions)
- Findings highlight the need to move away from cisgender assumptions built into original framework - e.g. alignment of sex, sex category and gender as this restricts analysis
- Need for analysis to be sensitive to circumstances of both agency and constraint
- Need to attend to significance of broader interaction rules, norms and etiquette in shaping possibilities for doing, redoing, undoing and remaking gender

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