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Remaking Gender: Non-binary gender identities

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The Research

- How are NB identities being lived and established in everyday life?
- What are the everyday challenges and how are these negotiated and overcome?
- Currently: increasing visibility of NB identities in popular media and formal recognition of NB identities in some countries
- Transformation in understandings of gender - suggestion that space for NB to live socially acknowledged lives being created
- Is this occurring in everyday practice as well as in theory?

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 - All publicly available
- Advantages - lots of data already there, data is 'community' rather than researcher driven
- Data being analysed thematically using Nvivo

Research Framework/approach: Doing Gender

- ‘Doing Gender’ approach (based in ‘ethnomethodology’) - originally devised by West and Zimmerman (1987) – how gender as ‘achieved’ in interaction within everyday life
- Early approaches explored reproduction of gender conformity
- Framework since developed to explore how gender might be ‘redone’ or ‘undone’ in range of people’s lives (Hollander, 2012)
- Approach taken up in trans studies (e.g. Westbrook and Schilt, 2014) - but small numbers of NB people in research samples
- NB people’s agency is under emphasised – e.g. focus on how cisgender people pressurise trans and NB people to conform to gender binary - little attention given to how NB people manage and/or resist this

- Current research –attending to these issues and sharpening concepts
- also exploring how fourth concept ‘remaking gender’ may be applied when looking at NB people’s everyday lives and experiences.
- Today: look specifically (though briefly) at examples of how NB people are exercising agency and can be seen to be ‘remaking gender’ through:
 - NB understandings of gender
 - Labels and terms
 - Everyday visibility and recognition processes - coming out and appearance

Research Findings

- ‘Remaking gender’ clearly seen in NB narratives of self understanding
- E.g. Narratives show how understandings of gender are being reconstructed (as well as deconstructed)
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- Within narratives, typical understandings:
- Sex/gender distinction
- Separation of gender identity from expression
- now permeating broader cultural discourses



“Understanding 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”.

'I embrace categorization as a way of creating places for acts, identities and modes of being which otherwise remain unnamable'. (Halberstam, 1999)

- **Function of NB identity labels:**
- Lots of discussion online: Make feelings/sense of self nameable
- Belonging and community – facilitate making connections and not feeling alone
- useful in exploring, understanding, conveying sense of self and identity
- 'resources' for managing stigma
- developing language and discourse beyond medical model



“I know labels aren't important but they help me come to terms with things internally and make everything less confusing.”

“When I first came to the conclusion that I was non-binary, I figured I was gender fluid. For sure this concept made it a lot easier to explain my situation to my wife and for her to absorb it”.

“It will be "cool". It will be seen as courageous and daring. Not stupid and weird.”

- **Some drawbacks:**

- Can be obstacle of confusion for some as can be adequately described by more than one may label/term

“Labels are just labels and we may identify one way one day and another way the next. Confused?”

“ 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.”

- Confusion as terminology changes

“Oh dear. Now what do I do with this, presenting genderqueer socially because I show both binaries ... genderqueer in bed with wife, but blended non-binary core, female no op body on heavy hormones So the umbrella term Nonbinary fits, but genderqueer fits to, so does NB MTF. Anyone's head hurting?”

- Overall –labels and terms shown to be useful discursive resources for NB people – enable agency, self understanding and also contributing to the remaking of broader social understandings of gender as (inc gender neutral pronouns, too)

Visibility and Recognition: coming 'out'

- Many people are exercising agency by coming out – but most are 'out' only to a select few - show preference for 'strategic outness' (Orne, 2012)
- Main obstacle: lack of understanding/awareness from others (showing time lag in social understandings)
- Issues commonly encountered – being laughed at, disbelieved, ignored, undermined, hostility and transphobia
- Due to this some tolerate misgendering for peaceful life – being out mainly online

"I've found that rather than having people try to argue with me that my gender is invalid, they tend to just pretend that I never came out to them as non-binary in the first place."

"they've had plenty of time to think about it and STILL say all the time that they are just too old to understand the young people saying that gender doesn't exist (despite many explanations that gender DOES exist but is more complicated than the binary ..."

"I came out as genderfluid and posted my pronouns. My boyfriends parents absolutely saw, so they knew for sure. But after that they went above and beyond from just ignoring my identity and instead making sure to insert gendered words all the time ("this is a BOY sweater, I hope that doesn't bother you?" Stuff like that). Very disrespectful and very awkward."

- Better outcomes— largely in context of intimate relationships and immediate family environments

- Also, by coming out gradually and/or less formally, e.g:

“I was out drinking with a couple of friends and the topic of transgender and nonbinary identity came up. Seeing as we were on the topic anyway, I figured I might as well just come out and say that I relate to the idea of being genderqueer and don't see myself as entirely female. I'd had a few drinks at this point and I'm not sure how well I got the point across, but they seemed to get it.”

Marriages – many survive through slow coming out process and slow adjustment for partner

And because NB often seen by partners as more tolerable than binary transition

“Actually, I think it is because I am non-binary that I think my marriage is surviving. If I were to transition, I think my wife would pull out ... the idea of my being bigender has allowed her to realise that she is not losing her fully male/masculine husband, she is actually gaining a girlfriend. There are things that still make her very uncomfortable ... with time she is slowly coping.”

- Stories of coming out suggest that gender is slowly being remade in context of NB peoples lives. However, while this involves agency it is also involving NB people:
- Engaging in a lot of emotion work with others
- Engaging in continuous management of the self, situations and other people

Visibility and Recognition: Appearance


- Different approaches to role of appearance:
- Some see appearance as crucial in achieving bodily comfort and/or enabling them to personally express their NB identity and to be visible
- Many (but not all) go through physical transition of some kind e.g:
- many have low dose hormones and some surgeries to create androgynous or 'gender blended' bodies
- others go through binary physical transition and then adopt an 'opposite' or mixed gender presentation
- Appearance choices influenced by context and can change

“To put it short I want to look like a female and dress like a guy or more androgynous.”

“Afab NB here :) My goto andro clothing includes heavy boots, either hiking boots or more "goth" military style, army jacket covered in buttons, and heavy silver jewelry ... typically masculine clothing really seems to offset my more feminine features. Also, the coat helps mask my figure a bit more, which I find helps me feel more comfortable.”

“My work presentation.... Yes those are real boobs. Yes the mustache is gray and I am not young. That looks like genderqueer to me ... At home I am far more male and genderqueer. Hard genderqueer in lingerie and an open dress shirt. Outside, the nails get tucked into fists or pockets, and its all male for the wifes needs. Its about her needs, not mine. The kids needs, not mine.”



- NB accounts of appearance show considerable agency, mainly:
- As this involves engaging in 'accountability' processes (Hollander, 2012) – that others will assess them in relation to binary gender expectations
- Again, means engagement in a lot of emotion work with others
- and management of the self, situations and other people, 
- NB appearance can be seen as challenging by others – risk of variety of unwanted responses (inc violence)
- Forums and Blogs spaces for learning various strategies and coping mechanisms

"I feel like I can wear anything that suits me, as long as I can explain what suits me about it to someone who asks and accept the consequences. So, for example, my wearing a top with a pattern and flow common to apparel sold in "women's" departments might lead to an exchange like this: "That's a women's top. You're not a woman. What are you doing wearing that?" [me] "Thank you for noticing I'm not a woman. I'm wearing it because I like the pattern, and how it feels." "But you're a man. Men don't wear tops like that." [me] "Men don't wear tops like that -- you're right. But I'm not a man, so I'm not concerned with what men do and don't wear, thank you."

- **Other appearance Issues :**

- Clothes don't always enable desired effect – 'body matters'

"I'm almost always still read as female, just because of my body shape"

- DFAB NB people can find it harder to be visually visible as NB, or 'stand out' as not conforming to binary gender

"It doesn't take much for an AMAB person to be visually gender-nonconforming, put on a skirt or makeup and BAM you stand out. An AFAB person on the other hand can sometimes get a buzz cut and wear all men's clothes and still have everyone treat them like a "normal" woman. "

- Problems with being NB at work. DMAB people appear to face particular challenges, depending on occupation, e.g. Jacob Tobia Huff post blog 2014

"So, the first morning before work, as I put on my pants, blouse, heels and pearls, self-doubt came roaring back. Would I still have the respect of my boss if I showed up in heels? Would I be treated as a professional if I wore earrings? Would I be taken seriously wearing lipstick?" Would my colleagues respect me for who I am? Jacob Tobia (2014)

- **Politics of appearance re visibility**

- For many –appearance (involving bodily transition or not) is tied to personal preference, should not be seen as evidence or ‘proof’ of being NB
- Most useful strategy for gaining visibility – move away from appearance as a signifier
- Advantages – prevents some cisgender people (e.g. Piers Morgan) undermining NB people by referring to issues of appearance
- Avoids/challenges pressures of ‘not being non-binary enough’ (accountability – being assessed by other NB and trans people too)

"For me, that I am afab female outside both genetically and presentation, even when in total mental guy mode, makes me nonbinary. I don't care that they don't match. There are no rules for nonbinary. "

“I definitely feel that sort of pressure of like "I need to be nonbinary enough". I think it's because our society focuses a lot on appearance and also because nonbinary genders are only marginally and inconsistently recognized, so the external pressure is real.”

- Alternative strategy - educate others to:
- learn to look beyond the gender binary
- not to read off gender from the body
- Both approaches to appearance can be seen to engage in remaking gender, e,g :
- unexpected and creative 'gender' appearances raises questions from onlookers
- uncoupling gender presentation from gender identity challenges and transforms assumptions about the gender binary
- Both involve emotion work and self/other management

Look instead for cues or signals:

“I used to feel doomed to always look like a usually-wrong gender ... A couple weeks ago I went to a party where an 18-year-old came in with a cap that had "boy" written on one side of the brim and "girl" on the other. That alone was enough to tell their gender. That's all it takes to "pass" in a crowd where people don't think the appearance of your body is relevant to the question of your gender. **Once people learn not to assume from your appearance , and actually ask you or don't care, even that won't be necessary.**”

“Sometimes I have rad conversations with strangers because of my gender tag. This one time at work, a middle aged woman was like, “oh my god! I’ve been laughing at a young person in my family for saying they were genderqueer! I totally thought they were making it up; I’m gonna go call them right now!”

Concluding Comments

- Everyday stories and discussions being shared on blogs and forums show that NB people are 'remaking gender' at local as well as cultural/structural levels (e.g. media/policy)
- The blogs and forums are important resources for NB people and enables bloggers, forum posters and readers to:
- Explore their identities and become critically knowledgeable about gender – influence/change existing understandings of gender (and transgender) in everyday practices, and understandings of trans based on medical models
- Learn about and explore options and strategies for NB identity management
- Become aware of potential obstacles and dangers and explore how they might deal with difficult situations
- Build confidence around NB issues and assertiveness in everyday living
- Gender being remade but costs for NB people – e.g. emotion work and management of the self, situations and other people

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