"DOING GENDER": THE IMPACT AND FUTURE OF A SALIENT SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPT

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Candace West and Don Zimmerman wrote "Doing Gender" at a time (1980s) when a paradigm shift in feminist social science was occurring. The long-standing conception of "sex roles" had earlier suffered fundamental feminist critique for a variety of reasons, none more important than eclipsing interrogations of power and inequality (Lopata and Thorne, 1978). For those second-wave feminist perspectives that did highlight power and inequality—such as Radical feminism and Marxist feminism—serious theoretical problems likewise quickly emerged. Radical feminism was the first feminist perspective to spotlight the significance of masculine power, but eventually it became radically regressive by assuming biological essentialism. Marxist feminism—popular for its emphasis on both class and gender inequalities—became enmeshed in analytical debates over conceptualizing the *intersection* between patriarchy and capitalism. And all of these perspectives—sex-role theory, Radical feminism, and Marxist (and Socialist) feminism—were criticized for ignoring distinct displays of agency: individual social action was viewed by each theory as simply the result of one's "sex role" or the "systems" of patriarchy and capitalism. Thus, by the mid-1980s, feminist social science that theorized about gender suffered an impasse at both the "micro" and "macro" levels.

"Doing Gender" was one of the conceptual breakthroughs that compellingly responded to this theoretical impasse and considerably influenced feminist theory worldwide. The concept of "doing gender" was supported and confirmed during twenty years of intense sociological scrutiny and substantial cogent research. Not surprisingly, this concept became, and remains, immensely salient in sociology, gender studies, and feminist theory.

Over the last eight years my research on "doing gender" has concentrated primarily on white working-class violent and non-violent teenage boys and girls (Messerschmidt, 2000, 2004). Through life-history interviews, I uncovered detailed

accounts of gender interaction in three distinct "sites": the family, the school, and the peer group. This research validates the social processes involved in "doing gender." First, the data shows that these youth do not possess gender but, rather, gender is something they do in interaction with others. Youth accomplish gender in a way that is accountable to interaction, and their specific type of gender construction articulates with particular social situations. Second, youth practices are evaluated by co-present interactants in relation to normative conceptions of gender within each setting. Third, sex category serves as a resource for the interpretation of situated social conduct, as co-present interactants in each setting attempt to hold accountable behavior as a female or male; that is, their socially defined membership in one sex category is used as a means of discrediting/accepting masculine/feminine practices. In short, the concept of "doing gender" provided me with a powerful intellectual tool for conceptualizing gendered behavior and interaction in all three sites. Nevertheless, the accounts also highlight certain features of youth behavior and interaction that suggest ways to enhance further our understanding of "doing gender."

First, most research on "doing gender" has not incorporated fully how "sex category" is an explicit facet of "doing gender." During most interactions "sex" and "gender" are indistinguishable from one another because we recognize their congruence. However, some of the youth I interviewed add a new twist to this perspective: they presented an easily recognized sex category but constructed incongruent gender behavior for that category; that is, the *meaning* assigned to their gender behavior by co-present interactants was influenced by their perceived sex category (see also Dozier, 2005). What this demonstrates is that the perception of "male" or "female" is salient in the interpretation of behavior as masculine and feminine. For example, in the school setting, masculine behavior by girls often was devalued by peers because it was *not* performed in and through a socially perceived male body. In other words, a balance between perceived sex category and gender behavior is essential for validating masculinity (and femininity). During social interaction we see "sex" and "gender" as an inseparable, seamless whole, and this is why incongruency produces a cognitive dissonance in us—for which masculine girls (and feminine boys) often get punished.

Second, most writing on "doing gender" ignores the body. Yet my interview data highlights at least two ways these youth interact with and through their body. First, their body is implicated in more than *doing* gender; it also is embroiled in *negating* gender. Some of the girls in my sample, for example, attempted to nullify femaleness: they did not want to look like or act like a girl. Yet their body is the primary site on which the negation of femaleness is inscribed. In particular, their bodily display was constructed to erase any notion of femininity by concealing socially defined female attributes: they often wore "boyish" clothing that deemphasized breasts, waist, and legs (through loose fitting clothes). Thus, situationally constructed masculine bodily display was utilized to facilitate the erasing of femaleness/femininity. These girls were not attempting to "pass" as "male" but, rather, it is their negation of femaleness/femininity that is central (Ekins and King, 2006). Second, the interview data demonstrates that the body is not neutral in "doing gender" but, rather, it is an agent of social practice: often the body initially constrained, yet eventually facilitated, social action; it mediated and influenced future social practices. Given the social context, bodies could do certain things but not others—the bodies of these youth are "lived" in terms of what they can "do." Consequently, for these youth "doing gender" is experienced in and through the body: eventually they literally constructed a different body and, thus, a new gendered self through their embodied violent and nonviolent practices.

Nevertheless, third, this new gendered self was the outcome of reading and then "doing" certain situationally available gender practices. Yet these youth often accomplished these particular gender practices non-reflexively; that is, they did not consciously intend to act masculine or feminine (see also Martin, 2003). Their practices clearly signified "doing gender" according to situational criteria, yet they routinely did not intend their practices specifically as gendered acts. Accountability encouraged them to act in a certain gendered way within particular "sites," but the ultimate choice to do so often (not always) was a gender non-reflective action.

Finally, particular forms of "doing gender" became in part the interactional scaffolding of social structures in each "site." For example, "masculine girls" often were bullied in school for their "failure" to conform to sex/gender congruence. Indeed, they consistently were defined as the inferior Other because their individually perceived sex

category was interpreted as not aligning with their gender behavior. In other words, masculine practices in and through socially perceived female bodies challenged the exclusive possession of such practices by the hegemonically masculine discerned male-bodied youth. Consequently, the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity in the school setting is in part sustained through the policing and discrediting of masculine practices performed by socially recognized female-bodied youth (see also Schippers, 2007).

In conclusion, as we celebrate the now twenty-second anniversary of West and Zimmerman's significant and influential article, my suggestion is that we are now at a stage to further enhance the concept of "doing gender" through future research examining more closely: 1) the relationship between perceived sex category and the meaning of situationally practiced gender behavior, 2) how both sex category and gender behavior are socially constructed in and through the body, 3) whether doing gender may or may not be consciously intended as a masculine or feminine act, 4) how individuals may both "do" and "undo" gender, and 5) the important relationship between social action and social structure.

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