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ACCOUNTING FOR DOING GENDER

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We're delighted to have "Doing Gender" and its sequelae as the subjects of this symposium. The serious readings of our work by Professors Connell, Jones, Kitzinger, Messerschmidt, Risman, Smith, and Vidal-Ortiz do us honor, and we welcome the chance to address them. We use our response to reflect on, clarify, admit, and expand on what we said originally and what we have said since. As important as the path taken, however, is the theoretical path ahead, and we will comment on that as well.

REFLECTION

What Raewyn Connell calls our "classic and beautifully constructed paper" (thank you!) was actually written considerably earlier than it was published. The initial ideas for "Doing Gender" came in 1975 and 1976, while we were trying to reconcile findings on the use of interruption in conversations between women and men (Zimmerman and West 1975; West and Zimmerman 1977) with prevailing formulations of sex role theory. We presented "Doing Gender" at a meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1977; we spent the next ten years trying to get it into print.

Between 1977 and 1987, this work was rejected by some of the most respected journals in our field (including *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* and *Social Problems*). In fact, Erving Goffman, one reader of an early draft, passed away in the time it took to get the paper published. During those ten years, we continued to circulate pre-publication versions to friends and colleagues, and we continued to refine and polish the paper in response to their remarks. We were more than gratified to see "Doing Gender" finally published in 1987, but the "responses . . .

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to Stacey and Thorne" (1985) to which Connell refers—and the "paradigm shift" that James Messerschmidt references—had not yet appeared when we wrote it.

In 2008 though, our original idea has taken on a life of its own—a much more lively one than we could have anticipated when it was published. Barbara Risman contends that "the concept has been so integrated into the sociological lexicon that [its] feminist critique sometimes disappears entirely" and Nikki Jones suggests that the use of ideas "in ways that may or may not have originally been intended by their authors" is, in fact, a tribute to them (Risman 2008; Jones 2008). Today, "doing gender" often appears in print without acknowledgment of its source, and some scholars (such as Judith Butler) play on our wording (*Undoing Gender,* Butler 2004) without ever citing our work. Because our original conception has been deployed in so many different ways,[1] we restate it here to provide a platform for what follows.

CLARIFICATION

Our point of departure was, as Connell notes, the story of Agnes, a 19-year-old single white woman who came to the University of California–Los Angeles seeking sexual reassignment surgery in 1958. Harold Garfinkel (1967) employed her story as a methodological device to make observable what, as we phrased it in 1987 (West and Zimmerman 1987, 131), culture has concealed: the accomplishment of what is taken to be one's "natural" or "essential" nature (cf. Goffman 1977). Prior to her surgical reassignment, Agnes faced a number of challenges: (1) She had to convince the medical/psychiatric establishment that she was "really" female; (2) to do so, she had to present herself as such and live in society as a woman; (3) and, given the requirements of "passing," she had to preserve the secret of her penis (for a complete list of her challenges before and after surgery see Garfinkel 1967, 135–36).

To tap the lessons of Agnes's practical circumstances, we analytically distinguished between sex, sex categorization, and gender. A clinician's initial assignment of a newborn to a *sex* (female or male) is ordinarily justified[2] on the basis of the possession of female or male genitalia—although chromosomal and hormonal criteria may be applied when the "facts" of the matter are equivocal. But *sex categorization* involves the display and recognition of socially regulated external insignia of sex—such as deportment, dress, and bearing (cf. Goffman 1956). The relationship between sex category and *gender* is the relationship between being a

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recognizable incumbent of a sex category (which itself takes some doing) and being *accountable* to current cultural conceptions of conduct becoming to—or compatible with the "essential natures" of—a woman or a man. We conceptualized this as an ongoing situated process, a "doing" rather than a "being."

Following Garfinkel (1967), we thereby transformed an ascribed status into an achieved status,[3] moving masculinity and femininity from natural, essential properties of individuals to interactional, that is to say, social, properties of a system of relationships. Moreover, we argued, because accountability is a feature of social relationships, the accomplishment of gender is at once interactional and institutional—with its idiom drawn from the institutional arena where such relationships are enacted (West and Zimmerman 1987, 137). Hence, the political implications: If the gender attributes deployed as a basis of maintaining men's hegemony are social products, they are subject to social change (however challenging such change may be).

With the publication of "Doing Difference," West and Fenstermaker (1995) extended our ethnomethodological perspective to provide an understanding of how gender, race and class operate simultaneously with one another. We conceptualized difference as a social doing, a mechanism for organizing "the relations between individual and institutional practice, and among forms of domination" (West and Fenstermaker 1995, 19). In brief, we argued that members of society "do difference" by creating distinctions among themselves—as incumbents of different sex categories, different race categories, and different class categories. Invidious in character, these distinctions are not natural, normal, or essential to the incumbents in question. But once the distinctions have been created, they are used to affirm different category incumbents' "essentially different natures" and the institutional arrangements based on these. Ultimately, "patriarchy, racism and class oppression are seen as responses to those dispositions—as if the social order were merely a rational accommodation to 'natural differences' among social beings" (Fenstermaker and West 2002, 207).

Dorothy Smith disagrees with how we translate the political categories of gender, race, and class into the objects of sociological investigation. In her view, these categories are not adequate to encompass actual "social relations," which rest on the structural arrangements and resulting inequalities that facilitate or constrain people's lives. Smith's remedy, following from her reading of Marx, is to transcend such categories and examine the lived experiences of actual people subject to relationships of inequality. While we do not have space for a fully elaborated discussion of her objection, we can outline certain features of it and sketch how we might respond.

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Consider the notion of social relations. Smith touches on the broad categories of history and social structure, including relations of production and technology, "human species being," and the biological/neurological/evolutionary factors in our primate heritage (Smith 2008). Our focus on gender, race, and class as social doings does not contradict the development of a model that integrates these doings into a more comprehensive account.

With regard to the issue of the adequacy of such categories to deal with the actual lives of persons in society, we reiterate our conception of the relationship between categorization and accountability as involving observable practices in interaction. As Jones points out, the young women she studied knew full well that their very survival depended on their accountability as African American inner city girls—they approached men on the street "aggressively" to stop them, but then they behaved "demurely" while advancing their pleas for help. This does not require us to assume that interactions are free floating events unconnected to other features of social life (although the empirical specification of such connections is far from a trivial matter). But interactional organization remains the primordial scaffolding of everyday life, whatever other organizational forces impinge on it. The research challenge is to show how these forces mesh, for example, how history intersects with the interaction order.

Case in point: The meanings people attach to particular gender-, race-, or class-appropriate conduct come from "historically specific institutional and collective practices in the 'natural' (and thus, 'rightful') allocation of material and symbolic resources" (Fenstermaker and West 2002, 213). Thus, for as long as members of U.S. society believed that "girls are no good at math" (i.e., it's not in their nature), schools could counsel white middle-class girls against advanced math classes and counsel working-class girls of color toward vocational training. The former President of Harvard University could then explain the resulting dearth of women in math and the sciences[4] as a result of innate differences in ability between the sexes (Dillon 2005). But once the normative conceptions of appropriate conduct for girls changed, so too did opportunities and funds for girls in math and science—and, as we write, U.S. journalists report that "Girls = Boys" when it comes to math (Krieger 2008).[5]

A more proximate task is to more fully understand how interaction operates to sustain relations of inequality (cf. Kitzinger 2008). To be concerned with that question does not deny the relevance of other questions, but it does insist on a careful focus on the interaction order, and resistance to its assimilation into questions appropriate for other domains of inquiry.

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ADMISSION

Celia Kitzinger suggests that we made a great theoretical advance in "Doing Gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) but missed the opportunity to recommend a method suitable to studying the phenomenon. She pinpoints the implication of our omission: "that the practices involved in 'doing gender' can be isolated and described by relatively straightforward sociological observation and informant self-report" (Kitzinger 2008, 94).

We did indeed miss an opportunity to specify a method for studying gender's accomplishment. Conversation analysis is certainly one method (and theoretical approach) exquisitely suited to such study. Kitzinger's (2005) own analysis of the production of heteronormativity in UK after-hours calls to the doctor is an exemplar of the power of conversation analysis to reveal the mundane workings of the interaction order.

But conversation analysis is not the only method suited to study of the phenomenon. The key to understanding gender's doing is (as we said in 1987, and above) *accountability to sex category membership.* As John Heritage (1984, 136–37) puts it:[6]

> Members of society regularly engage in "descriptive accountings of states of affairs to one another" and such accounts are both serious and consequential. These descriptions name, characterize, formulate, explain, excuse, excoriate, or merely take notice of some circumstance or activity and thus place it within some social framework (locating it relative to other activities, like and unlike).

In drawing from Heritage, we should have spelled out what we took for granted, namely, that *any* method that captures members of society's "descriptive accountings of states of affairs to one another" (Heritage 1984, 136–37) can be deployed for the study of doing gender. Hence, systematic analysis of unstructured interviews (Dull and West 1991, 64), in which people account for having cosmetic surgery—and doing cosmetic surgery—can add to our understanding of gender's accomplishment: Dull and West used such data to show how surgeons and former patients made implicit claims that "what was 'normal and natural' for a woman was *not* normal or natural for a man." Coupled with careful examination of diaries (Fenstermaker 1985), unstructured interviews can also suggest how the division of labor within the household can generate gender relations as well as work relations. Disciplined ethnographic observations (Moore 2001, 2002) of children at summer camp can reveal how youngsters use sex categorization and race categorization to organize their relations with one another. And close inspection of social workers' adoption files on

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lesbian parents (Dalton and Fenstermaker 2002) can provide valuable insights on how gender's accomplishment can be used to effect change in social institutions (see also Jones 2004, 2008).

That said, we also note that accountability to sex category, race category, and class category memberships may not be exhausted by peoples' explicit talk about them. The painstaking observational practices of conversation analysis are not only appropriate but also essential to reveal taken for granted aspects of how power and oppression operate in everyday life (cf. West and Garcia 1988).

EXPANSION

Risman is concerned with how our ideas have been used ("or misused") by others and proposes that, rather than attempting to document multiple femininities and masculinities (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005 for an outstanding assessment of such efforts), scholars should focus on how "we find boys and girls, women and men 'undoing gender'" (Butler 2004).

Yet Risman's remarks appear to treat gender as if it were anchored in a fixed set of specifications. This is what allows her to describe departures from the fixed set as an "undoing" of gender (a doing away with it, as it were). It seems to us that what is involved in the matters she refers to is a change in the normative conceptions to which members of particular sex categories are held accountable. "Undoing" implies abandonment—that sex category (or race category or class category) is no longer something to which we are accountable (i.e., that it makes no difference). That implication is one consequence of drawing from the concept of doing gender, without seeing that accountability sits at its core.

We should emphasize that the oppressive character of gender rests not just on difference but the inferences from and the consequences of those differences. The inferences and attendant consequences are linked to and supported by historical and structural circumstances. Changes in those circumstances can facilitate inferential shifts in the terms of gender accountability and weaken its utility as a ground for men's hegemony (e.g., what happened once newspaper "help wanted" ads no longer distinguished potential employees by sex category membership).

Risman also speaks of a postgender society as "A just world . . . where sex category matters not at all beyond reproduction; economic and familial roles would be equally available to persons of any gender" (Risman 2008, 84). But this implies that members of particular sex categories are

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accountable to (unspecified) reproductive issues. For us, this is a *shift* in accountability: Gender is not *undone* so much as *redone.*

Why quibble over terminology? One reason is that sex category and gender need to be understood, as Smith suggests, against historical and structural circumstances as well as the biology of our species. The normative system involved in gender accountability (including the patriarchal system) cannot be regarded as "free floating" and changes in it involve both changes in persons' orientation to these norms *and changes in social relations* that reflexively support changes in orientation. Furthermore, an emphasis on "undoing gender" deflects attention away from the situational character of gender accountability, and circumstantial modifications such as those to which Jones and Messerschmidt point.

With regard to Messerschmidt, we call attention to his claim that "most research on 'doing gender' has not incorporated fully how 'sex category' is an explicit facet of 'doing gender'" (because sex category and gender are usually congruent, and thus unremarkable) (Messerschmidt 2008, 85). As he notes, sex category incumbency is the ground against which peers evaluate one another's conduct.

We agree that the practices, props, bodily postures, and movements that go into producing a display of sex category incumbency are worthy of greater attention. And as Messerschmidt suggests, what it takes to exhibit (or suppress) a body as male or female is part of the experience of femininity and masculinity. Investigation of sex category production—and recognition—can only complicate and deepen our understanding of doing gender.

This brings us, at last, to Connell's and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz's remarks about transgender people. Vidal-Ortiz calls for researchers to move beyond what's involved in surgical reassignment and toward further examination of everyday lived experiences. He describes "doing gender" as "particularly salient" for transpeople, whose gender identities are commonly characterized alternately as either their "true selves" or as mental disorders. He goes on to explain, "This is not because transpeople 'do gender' more than anybody" (Vidal-Ortiz 2008, 100). Indeed. We suspect that one reason Agnes' (1958) story lives on (in 2008) is its illumination of the assumptions and practices that *all of us* face in everyday life.

But while Connell describes our (1987) view of Agnes's central task as gender conformity, we would have described Agnes's central task prior to surgery as preserving her secret: the unwanted penis. As we noted then (1987, 134), "Women can be seen as unfeminine but that does not make them 'unfemale.'" Agnes may have told her nearest and dearest about her pre-operative condition but she certainly did not tell strangers or mere acquaintances. And they would be the very people who might have discredited, beaten, or

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killed her if her secret became known—as in the cases of Tyra Hunter (in 1995), Stephanie Thomas and Ukea Davis (in 2002), Tina Brandon (in 2002), Gwen Araujo (in 2002), and Angie Zapata (in 2008). Hence, producing actions that would be seen as those of a bona fide female served to preserve her secret and, arguably, her life.[7]

CONCLUSION

We close by noting that the political problem of what Connell calls recognition of social solidarity also stems from accountability. Thus, radical feminists in the early 1970s used to view men who called themselves feminists with great skepticism—*because* they were men (and therefore, presumably, male). Moreover, the demonstrated hostility of lesbian feminists toward male-to-female transsexuals (yes, like Raymond's 1979 work) arose from the view that "male-to-female transsexuals remained men, despite their transformed genitalia" (Rudacille 2006, 168). Even newspaper coverage of the 2002 beating and death of Gwen Araujo showed that journalists accounted for what happened in relation to her possession of a penis (West 2006). Whether the contemporary feminist movement has learned solidarity from all this—and will embrace transgender feminists with open arms—remains to be seen.

What can be seen already is that the feminist revolution in sociology is no longer "missing" (Stacey and Thorne 1984; Connell 2008). Fought in part on the pages of *Gender & Society,* this upheaval continues to transform the study of sex and gender as well as the discipline of sociology. To future research we leave three tasks generated by our own small part in these transformations: (1) exploration of the theoretical and empirical consequences of continuing efforts to divide the social world into "micro" and "macro" levels of analysis, (2) analysis of how assignment and categorization practices mesh with the doing of gender and difference, and (3) advancement in our understanding of how historical and structural circumstances bear on the creation and reproduction of social structure in interaction, and how shifts in the former result in changes in the latter (Fenstermaker and West 2002, 218–19).

NOTES

1. See, for example, Bird 1996; Britton 1987; Cassell 1997; Clawson 1999; Cook and Stambaugh 1997; Dryden 1999; Gilgun and McLeod 1999;

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Gottburgsen 2000; Martin and Jurik 2007 [1996]; Pyke 1996; Tallichet 1995; Yoder and Aniakudo 1997—and, of course, Jones 2004, 2008; Kitzinger 2005, and Messerschmidt 1997, 2000, 2004.

2. We use "justified" to emphasize that clinicians' initial sex assignments are themselves social doings, as Suzanne Kessler later demonstrated in her wonderful study of clinicians' case management of intersexed infants (1990).

3. Of course, Garfinkel (1967) did not distinguish among sex assignment, sex categorization, and gender. Although his was a brilliant and thoroughly sociological analysis of the workings of Western cultural assumptions about sex, it stopped short of spelling out how these related to gender. Kessler and McKenna (1978) moved us forward via their studies of how the "gender attribution process" worked in everyday life. But Kessler and McKenna generally described the gender attribution process as a one-way determination (in the eyes of the beholder, if you will). So their formulation left out an important feature of accountability where sociologists are concerned, namely its interactionally situated character. As Heritage (1984, 179) observes, this is what allows people to structure their conduct "in relation to their circumstances so as to permit others, by methodically taking account of those circumstances, to recognize the action for what it is."

4. . . . with all that it entailed; for example, the chilly classroom climate for women science majors, the lack of women faculty to mentor women math students, the lower salaries of women mathematicians and scientists, the control of key scientific questions by men, ad nauseum . . .

5. This brief synopsis does not even touch on the long hard work of so many to unseat the normative conceptions in question.

6. Garfinkel (1967), of course, was the one who formulated the original notion of accountability in sociological terms (cf. 1967, 1–34). But we drew on Heritage's description for its succinctness.

7. From this vantage point, the "Benjamin Standards" (requiring that pre-operative transsexuals successfully "pass" for a year before clinicians approve their surgery) pose an extreme threat to the health of would-be patients.

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