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FROM DOING TO UNDOING: GENDER AS WE KNOW IT

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This symposium honors the importance of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) as a conceptual contribution to social thought. I offer a critique not of the original concept but of how it has come to be used or, as I argue, misused. First, the concept has been so integrated into the sociological lexicon that the implicit feminist critique embedded within it sometimes disappears entirely. Second, the feminist use of doing gender has become so diffuse that we have created a tautology: whatever groups of boys and girls, or men and women, do is a kind of gender. I argue that the language of doing gender ought to be used carefully and that as society changes, we begin to document the ways in which we find boys and girls, women and men, “undoing gender.” Undoing gender is a concept first introduced by Butler (2004) and recently offered with a slightly different twist to *Gender & Society* readers by Deutsch (2007). I build on Deutsch’s work by showing how doing gender research would be improved by more attention to undoing gender.

The full incorporation of doing gender as a core concept in sociology has sometimes stripped the concept of the intended feminist implications. I illustrate this with a quote from a *Social Forces* article by Wilcox and Nock (2006, 1327). They write,

The gender theory of marriage suggests that men and women are considerably invested in “doing gender” even when they embrace an egalitarian role ideology. . . . The dispositions acquired over the life course are reinforced by a range of ongoing cultural and social pressures—e.g. cultural conventions, gendered inequalities in the labor force, etc. . . . For these reasons, women and men face strong internal and external pressures to produce gender in their marriages. . . .

Thus, women may be happier in marriages where they are able to successfully produce gender. Likewise, men who are married to more traditional wives may be happier. . . . The *gender model of marriage would*

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predict that marriages that are strongly gendered make women happier and make men more likely to engage in marital emotion work. (emphasis added)

Notice how the feminist concern with inequality is totally absent in this use of doing gender. Wilcox and Nock cite the concept as if it validated a gender model that supports women's and men's separate spheres. The doing gender model has here morphed back to the future to become a functional sex roles theory. The paradox is that while Wilcox and Nock claim that traditional wives were happier (and such claims made headlines in the popular press), the actual regression equations presented in their article showed clearly that the most important predictor of wives' marital happiness was husbands' emotion work (Springer 2007). Thus, the real story in this research is that as men move beyond traditional gendered scripts (e.g., the sturdy, silent, nonexpressive, hegemonic male), wives are happier. When men undo gender, marriages thrive.

Ubiquitous usage of "doing gender" also creates conceptual confusion as we try to study a world that is indeed changing. The finding that we all do gender, even when we do not do it in easily recognizable ways, is deceptive. Fundamentally, we must know what we are looking for when we are looking for gendered behavior and then be willing and ready to admit when we do not find it. Why label new behaviors adopted by groups of boys or girls as alternative masculinities and femininities simply because the group itself is composed of biological males or females? If young women strategically adopt masculine or feminine behaviors to fit the moment, is this really doing gender, or is it destabilizing the taken-for-granted personae that were in the past assumed essentially to match sex category? As marital norms become more egalitarian, we need to be able to differentiate when husbands and wives are doing gender traditionally and when they are undoing it—or at least trying to undo it. Similarly, as more opportunities open for girls to be athletic and success oriented (Risman and Seale forthcoming), we need to be able to discuss the new world they inhabit and how they are making their lives within it rather than inventing a label for a kind of femininity that includes the traits and behaviors previously restricted to boys and men. This is not to suggest that we ignore the evidence of multiple masculinities and femininities that do exist and vary by class, ethnicity, race, and social location. Nor should we underestimate those instances when doing gender simply changes form without diminishing male privilege. Instead, we should pay careful attention to whether our research is documenting different kinds of gender, how doing gender may be changing, or whether it is being undone.

Perhaps a criterion for identifying undoing gender might be when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged (Joey Sprague, personal communication, 2008).

I would like to suggest that feminist scholars take seriously the real impact of our work during the past few decades. Giddens's (1984) structuration theory is a useful framework with which to understand the complicated effects of the feminist movement on today's world. Structuration refers to the notion that social structure both constrains behavior and is created by it. Individuals are the products of their social worlds yet are not determined by them. There has been more than a half century of conscious feminist mobilization around gender inequality and, at least for the past few decades, critique of the social construction of gender itself. Feminist academics have been teaching for a generation, and today's young woman is in fact likely to identify the college classroom as the place where she first adopted a feminist identity (Harnois 2005). Feminist cultural influence exists everywhere from girl zines to feminist presidential candidates. Backlash to women's advances exists, but so too do critiques of that backlash.

As I have written elsewhere, it is very useful to think about gender as a structure (Risman 1998, 2004). Every society has a gender structure, in the same way that every society has an economic structure. The gender structure has implications at the level of individual analysis, in shaping interactional expectations that are at the heart of doing gender, and at the institutional level in the organization and policing of social groups. Gender structure may be consistent across individual, interactional, and institutional levels of society, but it is not necessarily so. At the present moment in history, we inhabit a gender structure that has been influenced by the reflexive work of feminist activists and intellectuals. Does that mean the gender structure does not exist or privilege men? Of course not. But gender structure is not static. Young people today, especially girls, are much freer to develop their potentials beyond the cage of traditional femininity than in the past. To label whatever a group of boys or men do as a kind of masculinity, or whatever new norms develop among girls or women as new kinds of femininities, leads us to a blind intellectual alley. It is perhaps often the case that at the same moment people are undoing some aspects of gender and doing others (Anna Guevarra, personal communication, 2008). But why is it that any group of human beings with vaginas should have their collective norms called a type of femininity?

Deutsch (2007) suggests that feminists highlight when changes in our gender structure happen by accurately noticing when boys and girls, men and women, do not follow traditional scripts, when they undo gender. If as feminists we believe that gender is socially constructed and used to

create inequality, our political goal must be to move to a postgender society. Perhaps the defining feature of gender from a sociological viewpoint (Lorber 2005) is its deployment in the service of inequality. A just world would be one where sex category matters not at all beyond reproduction; economic and familial roles would be equally available to persons of any gender. No one should have to identify as female to appreciate silky fabric and ruffles next to one's skin. No one should have to identify as male to be allowed to be tough or domineering. Why categorize innovative behavior as new kinds of gender, new femininities and masculinities, rather than notice that the old gender norms are losing their currency? I suggest that we take seriously, and take some credit for, what Giddens (1984) calls the "double hermeneutic." The reality is that feminists have been changing what we have been studying. Is this not the goal of feminist sociology? We can honor West and Zimmerman (1987) no more than by moving beyond our reliance on a doing gender framework, because the very existence of that language has helped change the gender structure itself. We stand on the shoulders of giants, and we are changing the world.

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