Chapter 2

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DOING GENDER

This piece elaborates the ethnomethodological perspective on gender developed by Garfinkel and Kessler and McKenna (see introduction), revisiting Garfinkel's classic study of Agnes.

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OUR PURPOSE IN THIS CHAPTER is to propose an ethnomethodologically informed, and therefore distinctively sociological, understanding of gender as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment. We contend that the 'doing' of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'.

When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who 'do' gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: as both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. . . .

To elaborate our proposal, we suggest at the outset that important but often overlooked distinctions should be observed among *sex*, *sex category*, and *gender*. *Sex*

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is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males.[1] The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth, and they do not necessarily agree with one another. Placement in a *sex category* is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category. In this sense, one's sex category presumes one's sex and stands as proxy for it in many situations, but sex and sex category can vary independently; that is, it is possible to claim membership in a sex category even when the sex criteria are lacking. *Gender*, in contrast, is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category.

We contend that recognition of the analytical independence of sex, sex category, and gender is essential for understanding the relationships among these elements and the interactional work involved in 'being' a gendered person in society. . . .

Sex, sex category, and gender

Garfinkel's (1967: 118–40) case study of Agnes, a transsexual raised as a boy who adopted a female identity at age seventeen and underwent a sex reassignment operation several years later, demonstrates how gender is created through interaction and at the same time structures interaction. Agnes, whom Garfinkel characterized as a 'practical methodologist', developed a number of procedures for passing as a 'normal, natural female' both prior to and after her surgery. She had the practical task of managing the facts that she possessed male genitalia and that she lacked the social resources a girl's biography would presumably provide in everyday interaction. In short, she needed to display herself as a woman, simultaneously learning what it was to be a woman. Of necessity, this full-time pursuit took place at a time in her life when most people's gender would be well accredited and routinized. Agnes had to consciously contrive what the vast majority of women do without thinking. She was not faking what real women do naturally. She was obliged to analyze and figure out how to act within socially structured circumstances and conceptions of femininity that women born with appropriate biological credentials take for granted early on. As in the case of others who must 'pass', such as transvestites, Kabuki actors, or Dustin Hoffman's 'Tootsie', Agnes's case makes visible what culture has made invisible – the accomplishment of gender.

Garfinkel's (1967) discussion of Agnes does not explicitly separate three analytically distinct, although empirically overlapping, concepts – sex, sex category, and gender.

Sex

Agnes did not possess the socially agreed upon biological criteria for classification as a member of the female *sex*. Still, Agnes regarded herself as a female, albeit a female with a penis, which a woman ought not to possess. The penis, she insisted,

was a 'mistake' in need of remedy (Garfinkel 1967: 126–7, 131–2). Like other competent members of our culture, Agnes honored the notion that there are essential biological criteria that unequivocally distinguish females from males. However, if we move away from the commonsense viewpoint, we discover that the reliability of these criteria is not beyond question. . . .

More central to our argument is Kessler and McKenna's (1978: 1–6) point that genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life; yet we continue through our social rounds to 'observe' a world of two naturally, normally sexed persons. It is the *presumption* that essential criteria exist, and would or should be there if looked for, that provides the basis for sex categorization. Drawing on Garfinkel, Kessler and McKenna argued that 'female' and 'male' are cultural events – products of what they term the 'gender attribution process' – rather than some collection of traits, behaviors, or even physical attributes. Illustratively, they cite the child who, viewing a picture of someone clad in a suit and a tie, contends, 'It's a man, because he has a pee-pee' (Kessler and McKenna 1978: 154). Translation: 'He must have a pee-pee [an essential characteristic] because I see the *insignia* of a suit and tie.' Neither initial sex assignment (pronouncement at birth as a female or male) nor the actual existence of essential criteria for that assignment (possession of a clitoris and vagina or penis and testicles) has much – if anything – to do with the identification of sex category in everyday life. There, Kessler and McKenna note, we operate with a moral certainty of a world of two sexes. We do not think, 'Most persons with penises are men, but some may not be' or 'Most persons with penises are men, but some may not be' or 'Most persons who dress as men have penises.' Rather, we take it for granted that sex and sex category are congruent – that knowing the latter, we can deduce the rest.

Sex categorization

Agnes's claim to the categorical status of female, which she sustained by appropriate identificatory displays and other characteristics, could be discredited before her transsexual operation if her possession of a penis became known and after by her surgically constructed genitalia (see Raymond 1979: 37–138). In this regard, Agnes had to be continually alert to actual or potential threats to the security of her sex category. Her problem was not so much living up to some prototype of essential femininity but preserving her categorization as female. This task was made easy for her by a very powerful resource, namely, the process of commonsense categorization in everyday life.

The categorization of members of society into indigenous categories, such as girl or boy, or woman or man, operates in a distinctively social way. The act of categorization does not involve a positive test, in the sense of a well defined set of criteria that must be explicitly satisfied prior to making an identification. Rather, the application of membership categories relies on an 'if-can' test in everyday interaction (Sacks 1972: 332–5). This test stipulates that *if* people *can be seen* as members of relevant categories, *then categorize them that way*. That is, use the category that seems appropriate, except in the presence of discrepant information or obvious features that would rule out its use. This procedure is quite in keeping with the

attitude of everyday life, in which we take appearances at face value unless we have special reason to doubt them (Bernstein 1986; Garfinkel 1967: 272–7; Schutz 1943).[2] . . .

Agnes's initial resource was the predisposition of those she encountered to take her appearance (her figure, clothing, hair style, and so on) as the undoubted appearance of a normal female. Her further resource was our cultural perspective on the properties of 'natural, normally sexed persons'. Garfinkel (1967: 122–8) notes that in everyday life, we live in a world of two – and only two – sexes. This arrangement has a moral status in that we include ourselves and others in it as 'essentially, originally, in the first place, always have been, always will be once and for all, in the final analysis, either "male" or "female"' (Garfinkel 1967, p. 122). . . .

Gender

Agnes attempted to be '120 per cent female' (Garfinkel 1967: 129), that is, unquestionably in all ways and at all times feminine. She thought she could protect herself from disclosure before and after surgical intervention by comporting herself in a feminine manner, but she also could have given herself away by overdoing her performance. Sex categorization and the accomplishment of gender are not the same. Agnes's categorization could be secure or suspect, but did not depend on whether or not she lived up to some ideal conception of femininity. Women can be seen as unfeminine, but that does not make them 'unfemale'. Agnes faced an ongoing task of *being* a woman – something beyond style of dress (an identificatory display) or allowing men to light her cigarette (a gender display). Her problem was to produce configurations of behavior that would be seen by others as normative gender behavior.

Agnes's strategy of 'secret apprenticeship', through which she learned expected feminine decorum by carefully attending to her fiancé's criticisms of other women, was one means of masking incompetencies and simultaneously acquiring the needed skills (Garfinkel 1967: 146–7). It was through her fiancé that Agnes learned that sunbathing on the lawn in front of her apartment was 'offensive' (because it put her on display to other men). She also learned from his critiques of other women that she should not insist on having things her way and that she should not offer her opinions or claim equality with men (Garfinkel 1967: 147–8). (Like other women in our society Agnes learned something about power in the course of her 'education').

Popular culture abounds with books and magazines that compile idealized depictions of relations between women and men. Those focused on the etiquette of dating or prevailing standards of feminine comportment are meant to be of practical help in these matters. . . .

Agnes could perhaps have used such sources as manuals, but, we contend, doing gender is not so easily regimented (Mithers 1982; Morris 1974). Such sources may list and describe the sorts of behaviors that mark or display gender, but they are necessarily incomplete (Garfinkel 1967: 66–75; Wieder 1974: 183–214; Zimmerman and Wieder 1970: 285–98). To be successful, marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occa-

sion demands. Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or purposefully gender-inappropriate, that is, *accountable*.

Gender and accountability

As Heritage (1984: 136–7) notes, 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, 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).

Such descriptions are themselves accountable, and societal members orient to the fact that their activities are subject to comment. Actions are often designed with an eye to their accountability, that is, how they might look and how they might be characterized. The notion of accountability also encompasses those actions undertaken so that they are specifically unremarkable and thus not worthy of more than a passing remark, because they are seen to be in accord with culturally approved standards.

Heritage (1984: 179) observes that the process of rendering something accountable is interactional in character:

> [This] permits actors to design their actions in relation to their circumstances so as to permit others, by methodically taking account of circumstances, to recognize the action for what it is.

The key word here is *circumstances*. One circumstance that attends virtually all actions is the sex category of the actor. As Garfinkel (1967: 118) comments:

> [T]he work and socially structured occasions of sexual passing were obstinately unyielding to [Agnes's] attempts to routinize the grounds of daily activities. This obstinacy points to the *omnirelevance* of sexual status to affairs of daily life as an invariant but unnoticed background in the texture of relevances that compose the changing actual scenes of everyday life. (emphasis added)

If sex category is omnirelevant (or even approaches being so), then a person engaged in virtually any activity may be held accountable for performance of that activity *as a woman or a man*, and their incumbency in one or the other sex category can be used to legitimate or discredit their other activities (Berger *et al.* 1972; Berger *et al.* 1974; Berger *et al.* 1977; Humphreys and Berger 1981). Accordingly, virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature. And note, to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment*. Although it is individuals who do gender, the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, because accountability is a feature of social relationships

and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted. If this is the case can we ever *not* do gender? Insofar as a society is partitioned by 'essential' differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable.

Notes

1 This definition understates many complexities involved in the relationship between biology and culture (Jaggar 1983: 106–13). However, our point is that the determination of an individual's sex classification is a *social* process through and through.

2 Bernstein (1986) reports an unusual case of espionage in which a man passing as a woman convinced a lover that he/she had given birth to 'their' child, who, the lover, thought, 'looked like' him.

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