

Theorizing nonbinary identity management: Helana Darwin's "Redoing Gender"

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Increasing societal visibility of trans people has been accompanied by a rise in the visibility of trans people in academia, with a growing number of scholars doing research on, and most importantly (but not to be taken for granted), for trans people. Heretofore, the experiences of nonbinary people have not been considered to the same extent as those of (trans) binary people [1]. Helana Darwin replenishes the existing literature on nonbinary people with her book *Redoing Gender: How Nonbinary Gender Contributes Toward Social Change*, pursuing the question of "how people 'do gender' beyond the binary, if they are neither men nor women" ([Darwin 2022: 3](#)). As such, *Redoing Gender* is one of the most extensive studies on nonbinary people.

A reformulation of doing gender

With Darwin's reformulation of doing gender, a theoretical school of thought that is highly influential in sociological gender research, scholars will now likely turn to redoing gender in conducting future research on this topic. In light of this, it is fruitful, timely and relevant to critically assess this concept. In discussing Darwin's understanding of redoing gender, current debates around nonbinary gender can be traced, offering intellectual nourishment on how to frame nonbinary lived experiences and identities theoretically.

The writing style and structure is unconventional, as the book is "academic in one sense and very straightforward in another" (Darwin 2022: viii). Darwin describes her empirical approach in the introduction. A predominantly white, young and middle-class, but otherwise heterogenous group of 22 nonbinary individuals were interviewed about their lived experiences in regard to various areas of their lives such as "identity", "work", "dress", and "sexuality" (Darwin 2022: 9).

In the chapter "Reconsidering the 'Gender Revolution'" Darwin critiques [West and Zimmerman's \(1987\)](#) ground-breaking theory doing gender which is assumed to be "universally applicable" (Darwin 2022: 3), when it is in fact only accounting for normative subject positions. With her reformulation of doing gender, Darwin offers an alternative theoretical perspective that explicitly accounts for nonbinary identities.

Political implications of framing nonbinary experiences

Authors in the tradition of doing gender theorization instrumentalize trans people to explore gender as a general concept, which Darwin does not address in her book. This epistemological violence is harmful ([Namaste 2009](#)), as it objectifies trans people and decenters their interests. By referring to nonbinary people to show how gender is transformed, Darwin partially follows this tradition, believing "that the case of nonbinary gender contributes something new and special to this theoretical project [theorizing

identity management; L. S.]” (Darwin 2022: 129).

While this may be the case in the sociological field, it would have been important for Darwin to reflect more elaborately on the political implications of framing nonbinary experiences as “new” and “special”, as well as the fact that nonbinary lives are as old as the gender binary itself, granted that individuals have used (and still do use) different terminology to describe their experiences. While claiming that we need to center queer social stakeholders in gender research (Darwin 2022: 17), Darwin does not address the issue of utilizing trans people to explore questions related to gender. However, in contrast to her predecessors, Darwin puts nonbinary people’s needs at the center of her research. Her motivation as an ally is to “share the explanatory burden” (Darwin 2022: 129) through her research, amplifying nonbinary voices.

A plea for ally consciousness and advocacy

[Seeck \(2021\)](#) has pointed out classism as a barrier both within and for nonbinary communities to access relevant information. By using straightforward language and keeping the book short, Darwin combats this. Thus, she is making her content accessible for a wider audience, which can be understood as a courageous and refreshing contribution to the transformation of the classist institution of academia itself.

The structure in which the findings are presented mirrors the three levels of the doing gender accountability model: holding oneself accountable, holding one another accountable, and institutions holding individuals accountable for doing gender. Correspondingly, Darwin (2022) shows how nonbinary people rethink sex and gender (27), resignify gender (51), redo relationships (79), resist erasure (97), and how they structurally experience regression and progress (111), which is reflected in the chapter titles. With this discussion, Darwin argues that instead of traditionally doing gender, nonbinary people redo gender, highlighting shared experiences of nonbinary people and showing how they contribute to the transformation of the gender binary. She concludes with a plea for ally consciousness and advocacy on the behalf of nonbinary people (127).

Starting point for the theorization of nonbinary identities

While Darwin is taking steps towards reducing epistemological violence, this comes at the cost of a strong sociological-theoretical formulation of redoing gender. After reading this text I find myself asking if I have really understood what it means to redo gender on a theoretical level. In a previous article, [Darwin \(2018\)](#) argues that Jewish women are redoing gendered Judaism. Hence, the question arises: Who exactly redoes gender? If anyone can redo gender, then why are exclusively nonbinary people used as an example here? While I am not suggesting this is an issue, a reflection on why and how this is done is important in being mindful of the methodological and epistemological history of violence in this theoretical school of thought.

How does redoing gender reimagine the theoretical project of the interactive (re)production of gender? While redoing gender seems to account for subversive moments more so than doing gender, it is, in my reading, similar to [Butler’s \(2004\)](#) formulation of undoing gender which locates transformation in deviating repetitions of gendered acting. In contrast to [Hirschauer’s \(2001\)](#) formulation of undoing gender, redoing gender seems less radical, suggesting that we cannot free ourselves from the shackles of gender when we are all effects of a world constituted by gendered structures. Is this also the case for nonbinary people? While a redoing of gender may be experienced by some, it is not experienced by all. Many nonbinary individuals do experience the absence of gender. To

say nonbinary people are redoing gender is simplifying and perhaps even invalidating the experiences of some nonbinary people. Nonetheless, redoing gender offers a starting point for the theorization of nonbinary identities. Darwin's eloquence in summing up complex experiences of what she calls "managing gender difference" (Darwin 2022: 16), her activist dedication and determination, as well as her efforts in heightening the accessibility of her work (which is not an easy cause in the face of institutional restrictions) makes redoing gender an important contribution to the sociological discourse on nonbinary gender.

[1] The distinction between (trans) binary and nonbinary people is a constructed binary. While many nonbinary people do not identify as trans, these identities are not always mutually exclusive. It is also important to note that within these communities experiences differ significantly due to the members' heterogeneity.

Helana Darwin's book [Redoing Gender: How Nonbinary Gender Contributes Toward Social Change](#) was published in London by Palgrave Macmillan in 2022.

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