

# A Gender-Non-Conforming Method: Trans\* Methodologies for Trans\* Subjects

By ilia Forkin

**ABSTRACT.** This paper analyses the methodology of sociological studies on gender-non-conforming (GNC) subjects in the context of prominent critiques by GNC theorists who have asserted the necessity of centering the needs, perspectives, and cultural work of transgender (trans\*) and GNC academics and subjects. The paper explains how studies which favor an interactionist model of sociology prioritize notions of gender which uphold heteronormativity and erase the lived-experiences of the subjects they concern. As a solution to this obstacle, this paper proposes strategies to assist in the creation of participatory models of sociology which engage with gender in a way which reflects the diverse interests and needs of GNC people along the entire spectrum of marginalized gender identities. This paper attempts to act as a reference tool for both trans\* and cisgender academics who hope to do work which contributes to equitable treatment and representation of all oppressed subjects.

Recent increases in the visibility and awareness of transgender (trans\*), non-binary (NB), and gender queer (GQ) individuals and communities have led to an explosion of new sociological studies concerning these groups. The increase of interest in pursuing academic inquiries of people of marginalized gender identities (hereafter referred to using the umbrella term “gender non-conforming,” or GNC) has lead theorists and sociologists to expand on the vocabulary and methods they use to locate patterns in GNC communities. Contemporary studies have explored new interpretations of the performance and process of gender, coining terms like “redoing gender,” “doing transgender,”

and even “doing non-binary gender” (Darwin, 2017). It is essential that as the field of transgender studies progresses, sociologists and theorists who engage with it remember to not only build on the breakthroughs in GNC studies of the past several decades, but revisit failures that led sociologists to publish studies which have actively harmed or silenced GNC communities. To this end, I will analyze the methods used in several recent studies that focus on NB youth, as well as some more tangential studies of trans\* and queer communities which contextualize the current academic treatment of GNC subjects.

To inform my position on what I believe are the next steps for these sorts of scholarly investigations, I will also draw on a few guidelines for ethical treatment of GNC people in sociology published in the last fifteen years. Transgender sociologist J. Hale published a numbered list in response to unfair treatment of transsexuals in the field of sociology that emphasized the importance of regarding transsexual people as the ultimate experts on their own experience. Hale recommended incorporating transsexual voices and personal accounts into all scientific studies of their lives and warned against sociological treatments that pathologize or generalize transsexual people by representing them in a “monolithic or univocal” manner (J.Hale, 2006). Because Hale’s suggested rules are rooted in a vocabulary and culture of transness specific to their publishing in the late 1990s, my analysis is also heavily informed by a slightly more recent synthesis of Hale’s work which articulates the importance of giving GNC subjects space to exert their own agency and contribute their own dialogues about their lives and struggles (Shelley, 2008). To broach this issue, I will focus specifically on NB youth in order to lend visibility to an oft-forgotten group, applying Hale’s lens to address the contradictions between some essentialist sociological analyses of young NB people such as Rimes, et al.’s (2017) study, and the desire that many NB people have expressed to be defined in terms that reject or move beyond a binary understanding of biological sex (Darwin, 2017). As a

contrasting example, I will highlight Darwin's (2017) use of an online GQ forum as a data source and articulate how her methodological approach gives way to a more comprehensive understanding of the main struggles young GNC communities face, and how to overcome them. Throughout my analysis, I will reference perspectives from GNC individuals interviewed NC individuals interviewed by CN Lester, a GNC activist and journalist, in order to augment this paper's definitions of 21<sup>st</sup> century trans\* notions of gender with the other GNC individuals' life experience. In discussing instances where sociologists studying NB youth have met, exceeded, or fallen short of the expectations laid out for them by GNC theorists, I hope to create a base from which sociologists can build new strategies for studying GNC people and their lives which conscientiously center their safety and empowerment.

Rimes et al.'s quantitative study of NB youth attempts to assess and locate the source of mental health issues in NB people through a comparison along two axes: comparing the experiences of NB youth with binary transgender youth, and the experience of "female sex assigned at birth" (SAAB) and "male SAAB" GNC subjects (Rimes et al., 2017). This study's dependency on SAAB as a key variable strays from Hale and Shelley's guidelines significantly by emphasizing some elements of the subjects' lives while leaving out others, enforcing a monolithic view of NB identities. For example, it fails to acknowledge factors such as the age at which the subject transitioned or the fluidity or stability of their gender identity and expression. Rimes et al.'s methodology also excludes any mention of the diversity along the spectrums of biological sex and gender identity embodied by NB people, leading to a dichotomous view of all people as either biologically male or female, and either cisgender or transgender. In order to analyze the effects that this approach had on Rimes et al.'s interpretation of their data, I have isolated two significant trespasses against NB agency which their methods engage in: physiological essentialism and intersex exclusion.

Rimes et al.'s study shows that "female SAAB" participants (binary and NB) were significantly more likely than their male SAAB "counterparts" to report a current mental health condition, a history of self-harm, and childhood sexual abuse. Their choice to divide their subjects by SAAB did reveal a statistically significant pattern, but one which has already been well explored (ONS, 2016), and one which leads them to name biology as the most significant influence on the health of NB youth. Their decision to emphasize biological maleness or femaleness in their method diverts attention from the lived experiences of NB people and is antithetical to many NB peoples' understanding of sex and how it interacts with gender. This practice reifies a physiological essentialism which defines GNC people's identities by how they deviate from a supposedly static and essential assigned sex category, rather than recognizing their expressions of gender as unique, fluid, and complex beyond a separation from their biology. As GQ writer Hel Gurney puts it in an interview with Lester,

As for sex – well, I believe... that 'sex' (as commonly understood in my cultural context) is a discursive construct that's used to make sense of bodies, but one that is frequently erasing of their variety and complexity. Humans are not uncomplicatedly divided into 'male' and 'female.'  
(2013)

Just as the Rimes et al. study situates NB peoples' identities within a biological binary without their consent, it also erases a demographic within the NB community that has a non-binary relationship to their own biological sex. The practice of excluding all intersex interviewees from data collection (Rimes et al.), while simplifying data interpretation, produces an incomplete picture of the physiological diversity within GNC communities, rendering the experiences of some NB people, for whom the "...relationship to [their] gender is informed by [their] experience of physiological difference" (Kermode, 2013), invisible.

Avoiding the precarious terrain of creating surveys which might include inherently cis-centric or essentialist biases, some academics have chosen instead to analyze already available first-hand narratives from NB and other GNC people. Aviv's (2012) construction of a narrative of queer homeless youth in New York, for example, explains the circumstances of these young people from the perspective of a queer woman, using quotes from her and members of her chosen family to ground the story in the authentic voice of the people it involves. This strategy is especially potent in that it allows the researcher to play the role of arbiter, organizing and contextualizing the information they have gathered, while still leaving space for them to step aside and let subjects use their own words to articulate sensitive and personal topics like identity, intimacy, abuse, house insecurity, assault, and the impacts of HIV and AIDS on their community.

Following suit, Darwin's qualitative study (2017) gathers its data from comment threads on the GQ subsection of Reddit.com, a forum created by GNC people to be a supportive environment to host dialogues about identity and expression. Darwin draws on Goffman's (1959) sociological concept of a "backstage," to describe this subreddit as a location where marginalized people who share common experiences are free from the gaze of the normative structures that enforce their oppression and can openly express themselves. Despite its significant lack of ethnic/racial diversity (Darwin, 2017), this backstage is an exemplary site of genuine, unedited GNC voices describing their own experiences. Their accounts reveal the key issues preoccupying GQ youths (gender identities, gender expression, and coming out), elucidate an understanding of what the interactive process of "doing gender" means for GNC people, and reveal the vast gender diversity within those subjects who identify on the GNC spectrum. These revelations may serve as useful tools to clarify NB people's understanding of their own gender, and may also help gender conforming individuals who have never been

exposed to the idea of a person who identifies as “...a big mish mash of gender” (p. 8), understand what their GNC child, friend, employee, or relative might be trying to articulate.

Highlighting queer voices in sociological studies regarding GNC people is essential for producing work that serves GNC communities. To grant them genuine ownership over work which uses their experiences as material, sociologists must also be wary when they extrapolate their studies’ conclusions for the greater field of gender. Sociologists foreclose on their research’s potential as a conduit for delivering information and insight between different GNC communities when they project their own formulations of what is potent or useful back onto GNC experience. This practice obfuscates the social changes GNC people are actually looking for, and possibly reinscribes binaries or terminologies that constitute the structures of oppression that the GNC subject’s interventions seek to problematize. It is likely true that people who have an untraditional relationship to gender identity think about gender in exceptional ways (Darwin, 2017), but that alone does not justify the appropriation of their experiences. By simplifying GNC people’s experiences into rhetorical mantras about NB peoples’ “...potential to redo gender” (p. 15), for example, sociologists no longer play the useful role of a conduit for delivering information and advice between different GNC communities, and instead project their own concept of what is potent or useful about these experiences, obfuscating what social changes GNC people are really looking for in the process. This practice is accentuated by sociologists who treat GNC lives as sensational oddities and, in their excitement, reduce their subjects’ worlds and interactions into specimens. Studies like Pfeffer’s (2012) analyses of trans families, by choosing only to interview the cisgender female partners of transgender and transsexual men, silence GNC voices. Furthermore, by claiming to be working towards centering marginalized voices while failing to include the words of any of the GNC people they purport to study, sociologists speak in their stead, proclaiming that

GNC peoples' experiences with intimacy will "work to usefully reconfigure the very notion of "family" itself" (p. 4) without asking if that is what GNC communities intend, want, or need.

Sociologists like Darwin and Pfeffer are engaging with an interactionist model, which derives qualities of society from the practices of individuals and communities (Mead, 1934). Essentially, these academics are suggesting that the behaviors and lifestyles of GNC people have the potential to shift widespread social understandings and gendered interactions, framing GNC practices in terms of what they can do for those who are gender conforming. By using their own terminology to propose how GNC people's experiences might interact with society at large, and by framing that interaction in terms of "success" (Darwin, p. 15), while failing to provide first-hand opinions from GNC people about what successful social change looks like to *them*, these studies have placed themselves at odds with Hale's insistence that researchers refrain from "imagin[ing] that you can write about ... [trans] discourse ... without writing about [trans] subjectivities."

The cultural spotlight which once completely eclipsed GNC people has expanded to include a more diverse spectrum of identities. But as visibility for diverse gender identities and expressions increases, the degree to which sociologists and other researchers reflect on their own practices must remain apace to the challenges inherent in studying marginalized subjects. Not only does the exclusion of GNC perspectives increase the risk of disseminating pathologizing or misleading vocabulary, it also seriously affects data interpretations. As the results of Darwin's study has shown, studies which give space for GNC people to speak for themselves produce data which is respectful, relevant, and accessible to GNC communities and theorists who wish to expand on the concepts most important to those communities. To conduct future studies which emulate the supportive treatment of queer and GNC people in some of the research discussed here, sociologists should engage in the

following practices: (1) using first-hand narratives from the subjects; (2) looking for qualitative data in “backstage” locations; (3) coupling interactionist interpretations with GNC voices; and (4) using language that acknowledges the diversity within GNC identities and respects the subjects *own* interpretation of the significance of gender, identity, expression, SAAB, and biology. Above all, it is essential that researchers both revisit critiques like Hale’s and Shelley’s to inform an ethical methodology and use institutional resources to search for other, new editorial pieces like theirs. In Hale’s own words, “If [GNC people] attend to your work closely enough to engage in angry, detailed criticism, don’t take this as a rejection, crankiness, disordered ranting and raving, or the effects of testosterone poisoning. It’s a gift.”

**ilia Forkin** is a transfeminine Women’s & Gender Studies and Theatre major at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. Her academic and artistic projects are focused on creating alternative trans\* narratives, mythologies, and modes of embodiment, and exploring ways to corporealize them through performance and collaborative storytelling. She recently facilitated and acted in Willamette University Theatre department’s first main-stage performance to feature openly trans\* actors in roles which reflected their gender identities.

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